



SM OLIVIER

HOARDS & HARBORS

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SANCTUARY

BOOK FOUR

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# CHAPTER ONE

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SANCTUARY:  
HOARDS AND Harbors  
Book Four  
Part One

Author: SM Olivier

TITLE: SANCTUARY: HOARDS and Harbors

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Sanctuary: Hoards and Harbors Book 4

S.M. Olivier

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**Editing by: Tonya D'Water**

## **SYNOPSIS**

NAVIGATING OUR new world has its ups and downs. The relationships I have with my men and family continue to grow. We've made it our mission to help those who are unable to help themselves. We hope to reset the balance so evil doesn't continue to prevail. The infected are still our number one threat. They've banded together to create hoards. Yet, they're not the only ones we should be wary of. They're not the only ones hoping we will fail.

\*\*\*Due to the length of the original manuscript, this book will be released in two parts. This is part one of two.

\*\*\* Trigger Warning since this is a post-apocalyptic, why choose romance; violence and all that entails are mentioned.

\*\*\*Part One, ends in a slight cliffhanger.

## THE SANCTUARY FAMILY

### Avery Harrison (main character) Family.

Axel: Alpha Team Corbin: Alpha Team Wyatt: Alpha Team

Easton: Alpha Team Kingston: Alpha Team

Zeke Isa (r) \* Foster (r) Dani (r)

### The Youngs

Pop-pop Young (d)\*

Nana Young (d)

Bryan Harris-Harrison: adopted son

Scott Cavalier: adopted son

Mitch Eden: adopted son

### The Harris-Harrison Family.

Bryan

Isabella: (d) Bryan's first wife, mother of Avery, Emery, and BJ

Avery: daughter

Emery: daughter identical twin

BJ: son

Stephanie: Bryan's current wife

Miller: son of Stephanie, stepson to Bryan

Mikey: son of Stephanie, stepson to Bryan

Ben: (r)

Bella: (d) daughter of Avery and Trevor

### The Cavalier Family.

Scott  
Pam: wife of Scott  
Corbin: son  
Trevor: son

### The Eden Family

Mitch  
Carol: wife of Mitch  
Wyatt: son  
Katie: daughter  
MJ (Fletch): son  
Bethany: (d) daughter  
Gloria: adopted daughter  
James: adopted son

Sylvia: best friend to Avery; adopted into family and her family.

Chad: Team Bravo Joe: Team Bravo Cal: Team Bravo

Simon: TKD teammate to Ave and Sylv  
Phil: (r) Jenny: (r)

### Other Characters of Note

Rhys: former police officer single father of Elsa and Christopher

Jessica: Trevor's new friend

Mike: aka Michaela older teen and guardian of her three younger siblings

Amy: Team Alpha Josh: Amy's boyfriend and Team Bravo

\*(d) means deceased

\*(r) means rescued



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## CHAPTER TWO

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### CHAPTER 2



“THIS brings back so many memories,” Sylvia sighed as she leaned back into her seat on the UTV.

Sylvia had come knocking on our door right after I had gotten out of the shower. She had a late start this morning since she was up late last night, ensuring everyone had something to swim in. She said Wyatt told Cal to let her sleep in and catch a ride with Easton and me to the lake.

Sylvia, Lisa, and Mikhail had busted their tails getting the gift shop up and running. They had successfully turned the old gift shop into a place to get clothing, soaps, shoes, and other “luxury” items. One of the reconnaissance teams had also transferred three connexes for their use, so they maintained, secured, and inventoried all our luxury stock. By Katie’s recommendations, everyone was given a weekly “pay,” even the older children and teens that worked.

For now, it seemed to appease everyone, and they seemed to understand that they couldn’t take stuff at will. They had to

work for what they wanted since all their needs were met and then some.

“So many,” I agreed as I slid my sunglasses on.

We had just finished dropping off Easton at the clinic and crested the hill where we had a perfect vantage point of the festivities below. Over half the children and adults were already enjoying the hot day and playing in the inflatable water park. In comparison, others were using kayaks and canoes on the other side of the lake.

The day almost promised to become unbearably hot, and I knew we had picked the perfect day to enjoy the water. However, not everyone seemed ready or interested in the water events. I could see that some teachers had engaged the uninterested children in other activities. Although, they technically had the day off. I smiled and waved at our preschool teacher overseeing the toddlers in the foam pit Zeke had constructed yesterday. One of the other teachers supervised a group of older children painting rocks. And some teens and younger adults seemed keener on working on their tans.

“Even that.” I pointed to the group flirting in the sand on one side of the lake.

A flashback of our teen years hit me. I recollected the times when Emery, Katie, and their friends did the same. Their hair and makeup had been meticulously done, while any of the guys hanging around did their best to impress them.

“Did you remember when Em and Katie were crushing on what’s his face?” Sylvia began to giggle.

I groaned, remembering one of the lifeguards Nana and Pop-pop had hired one summer. He had been a college student that clearly liked the attention. The lifeguard hadn’t done anything with the girls but had outrageously flirted with them. They both thought they had a chance with him even though he was nineteen and they were barely sixteen.

“Eduardo,” I said with a fake Latin accent. “Nana, Aunt Pam, and even Aunt Carol had to tell them to wear more

clothes, more than once. He was so embarrassed when he found Emery in his bed. I'm sure she would have been grounded for life if not for his kindness, his friend being there, and Uncle Mitch being so embarrassed and hiding it from Dad. Then we had to stop Katie and Emery from slashing his tires when his girlfriend visited."

"I nearly forgot about that!" Sylvia shrieked with laughter as I put the UTV in park.

"How could you forget?" I inquired as I pulled the beach bag of towels from the back seat.

"There are just some things I had to block out," Sylvia cringed. "Remember I saw Uncle Mitch dragging her out of the cabin mostly naked."

I'm sure Sylvia remembered how she had convinced Uncle Mitch it wasn't me. Emery had nearly persuaded him into believing it was me and not her. If Sylvia hadn't seen Uncle Mitch dragging Emery back out of the cabin, I'm sure she would have gotten away with it too. It was so out of character of me, but he had just seen me down by the cabins. She was wearing the same exact clothes I had been. Something we had grown out of as kids.

"She's been too quiet lately," Sylvia added.

"I know," I winced. "I want to believe Emery's growing up, but somehow I doubt it."

Since Emery had entered my room and seen me with Zeke, I had expected her to strike by now. I knew she was beyond furious and pissed at me. And it wasn't like her not to retaliate in some way.

"Watch your back," Sylvia sympathetically hummed as she grabbed her bag.

"Sadly, I must," I scoffed as we approached the food prep areas.

I looked around and noticed Sasha was steps behind me. However, the puppy was distracted by a scent and was wandering off. He was a good boy, and stuck around, but I didn't want him getting underfoot. There was a lot going on.

“Come on, Loki,” I whistled toward the pup.

I didn't need to tell Sasha. She was already by my side, looking up at me. She and Bane seemed forever trying to gain my attention or affection. Bane, our pit/ mastiff, was a passive dog and didn't understand when our Alpha female dog could only take so much of his hovering. She didn't attack him but was very vocal about her displeasure when he showed me too much attention. Bane generally accompanied Axel while Sasha stayed by me to keep the peace.

Sasha was clearly a one-person dog, and I was her person. Don't get me wrong; she would allow the others to pet her or love on her. However, Sasha seemed to tolerate the other people in our household but was glued to me. The only other person she seemed to show just as much loyalty was Mariah. Kingston found that out the hard way when roughly wrestling with Mariah. Mariah loved it, but Sasha wasn't a huge fan of it. One afternoon, I came out of my bedroom to Kingston yelling for me as he stood on top of our counters. I had to call her to my side, and Mariah had to reassure the dog that she was okay. Needless to say, Kingston never wrestled with Mariah in Sasha's presence again.

I could smell the pig and turkeys they were smoking, and my mouth salivated. I had missed breakfast, and the fruit I had grabbed out the door barely curbed my hunger.

“Maybe she's too busy scheming against Jess,” Sylvia skeptically hummed.

Jessica originally had her eye on Zeke. She had taken his leave of the single market remarkably well. I fully expected her to hate me or be slightly upset. However, she had taken it in stride when I let her know we were seeing each other. I really liked her; we worked well together on the recovery team. I didn't want any bad blood between us. She had been slightly disappointed, but then she had accompanied groups with Trevor in them.

She was aware of Trevor's baby mama drama and still befriended him. They had grown close, especially after they had been separated from a team on one of our missions. A

horde of zombies forced them to lay low for a little while. They had found a housing development and holed up in a mansion overnight until they were recovered.

They were interested in architecture, scary movies, cold pizza, and sneakers. Their bond had been forged, and even though they had kept their interactions platonic, it was apparent that it could grow to be more. They had helped our engineer in constructing our bridge and often hung out with each other outside of the workday.

I was happy for them. I was delighted for Trevor. But I think we all realized Emery wasn't taking it as well. Even though she had no qualms hooking up with a couple of the guys here, in her deluded mind, Trevor was still hers. Plus, it didn't help that Emery was clearly on the outside of our friend group. She had a royal meltdown when she found out Trevor and Jessica had been invited to our game nights.

We tried to have a game night every week. Typically, our gatherings included BJ, Rhys, Alec, Trevor, Jessica, Alaina, Mikhail, Sara, Sylvia, her guys, me, and my guys. Occasionally the parental units would come as well. It was fun and drama free, and we wanted to keep it that way. Emery hated games of any sort; honestly, we didn't want her bringing down the vibe.

"Maybe," I said, matching her doubtful tone.

"Hot damn," I heard Corbin whistle as we approached the table where the kitchen crew was shucking corn.

I felt my cheeks warm when I realized he was standing with BJ, Rhys, and Chad. Each of them was holding a baby or toddler. He was holding a napping Isa while Rhys had Nova, Chad had Jenny, and BJ had Mike's baby brother Carson.

"I forgot how good you looked in a swimsuit," Corbin huskily drawled as he embraced me.

I had chosen to wear a simple yet sexy-ish, white one-piece swimsuit. The straps were nice and thick. And even though it was a one-piece, it had a cut on one of my ribs and exposed my toned stomach.

Sara, Alaina, Toni, and Sylvia insisted I get it after I tried it yesterday. They said the white material looked terrific against my tan skin, and I had to admit I liked how it looked and felt on me. I could still swim and enjoy the water today without worrying about the girls falling out or my bottoms riding up my ass. And I still felt sexy.

“Thank you,” I demurred as I looked him up and down.

He was shirtless and wearing a pair of board shorts. They were primarily black, with red, blue, and pink hibiscus flowers adorning them. Of course, they were low on his jutting hip bones and showcased his delicious abs. Yes, I was a pervert, where my guys were concerned. It was like Christmas every day when I saw their pretty packaging. I was damn lucky that the gifts inside were just as gorgeous as the outside.

“Damn girl, get a room,” Sylvia laughed before kissing the top of Jenny’s head and then across Chad’s pecs.

Without him bending over, that was as far as she could reach. Sylvia was pocket-sized, and Chad... well, wasn’t. The tall African American man was over a foot taller than her.

“As if you have room to talk,” I scoffed, running my fingertips along Corbin’s tattoos and then going up on my tiptoes, brushing my lips across his.

“Were you not satisfied with Easton’s performance this morning,” Corbin husked in my ear. “It sounded like you were.”

“Eww, stop,” BJ groused as my cheeks turned. “Keep those bedroom eyes for each other in the bedroom!”

I forgot how loud I had been. Typically, I was mindful when the house was full. Sure, we had group play, but that didn’t mean I wanted them privy to my one-on-one times with them. I playfully punched Corbin in his chest before I mockingly glared at him.

“Shut it. I was more than happy with Easton’s performance this morning,” I pointed at Corbin before turning on BJ. “Sir, I walked in on you last week with one of those twats going

down on you in the garden shed, so keep those stones in your pocket.” I scoffed.

My brother was a man-whore. He had steady girlfriends in school, splattered with casual hookups. Since he got here, he didn’t want to commit to any one girl. And the women he had at his beck and call were aware of it. Out of the four girls he was hooking up with, I only liked one of them. The other three had a lot of growing up to do if you asked me.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I saw no wrong in them casually hooking up if everyone was clear of the “rules.” However, these three girls in question attempted to coax my brother into unprotected sex, used other men, hoping my brother would get jealous, and attempted to use my kids and my close relationship with him to get on his good side.

The men laughed while BJ tried to look innocent. “She fell. I was helping her up.”

“On your dick?” Chad snorted, shaking his head.

BJ merely smirked. “She thought she saw something in the shed, so she asked me to follow her there. There was no funny business going on. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”

“I’m sure she was so frightened,” Sylvia scoffed. “She must have been scared when she thought a garden snake was running loose in there.”

A surprised laugh left me as the others guffawed in laughter.

“More like an anaconda,” BJ smirked.

“Eww, now who’s being gross,” I rolled my eyes. “More like one of those Barbados thread snakes.”

I snorted out a laugh as the others joined me.

“Got ‘em” Chad covered his mouth as chest-deep laughter erupted.

“Ouch,” Rhys agreed, laughing.

Carson chose that moment to smack BJ on the chest and point towards Stephanie as she walked past with a large

serving pan of fruit. It was hard and loud, which caused us to laugh more at my brother's expense.

"Bro, we talked about this," BJ groaned, rubbing his chest. "Use words. Are you hungry? Do you want a snack?"

BJ folded his fingers until they touched and tapped them against his lips. "Eat? Eat?" he inquired.

Carson wiggled excitedly and repeated the movements. "Eat!" he loudly exclaimed.

Lately, Mike had gotten more relaxed with the care of her siblings. Between our family and Sylvia's, we started taking turns watching her siblings so she could enjoy her teen years. We had her siblings once or twice a week, and since BJ hung out with us often, the littlest one, Carson, had taken a considerable liking to BJ. He was nearly two and had a minimal vocabulary. The early development teacher had been teaching all the younger one's sign language to improve their communication skills. In turn, we adults were learning the basics such as; eat, milk, drink, and sleep.

"I'll get him somethin'," Mike drawled as she approached us.

I had to do a double take. Mike had done a total one-eighty since she first got here. She no longer dropped the tone of her voice to mimic a boy dressed in over-sized men's clothing. She had started growing out her hair, wearing makeup, and dressing more femininely.

Her white, blond hair had grown to chin length in an even bob now instead of the pixie cut Toni had initially given her. She had some mascara and lipstick. It enhanced her gorgeous blue eyes and full lips. And today, she had chosen a modest but still flattering halter-top ice blue bikini. Her jean shorts were left open, showing off the top of her matching blue and white bottoms.

"What the hell are you wearing," BJ nearly growled out. "Get back up to your camper and put on some damn clothes."

"Beej," Corbin sighed. "She's fine."

BJ and Mike had an interesting relationship. They seemed like best friends when BJ's women weren't hanging around. And when they were, Mike barely spared him a glance. When other guys flirted or hung out with Mike, BJ became overbearing. Most of our close family and friends believed they had a crush on each other. However, Mike had just turned sixteen, and BJ was nineteen. We thought BJ was still in denial and cognizant of their age gap. And Mike didn't like being sidelined when other women were around.

Mike smiled at Corbin before she rolled her eyes at BJ, taking Carson from his arms. She casually looked over her shoulder where two of his hookups were approaching.

"Tell ya what, suga', tell your thots to change, and I will," she sniffed before turning on her heel and leaving.

Sure enough, two of BJ's women were approaching wearing little triangle bikinis that were seconds from exposing their nipples, and their bottoms weren't much better. Tiny little strings adorned the sides, and when one of them turned, I noticed they were thongs. They were super cute for places like spring break or some tropical vacation. However, they were highly impractical and almost indecent for today. Judging by the slack jaws of some teen boys and even glances from the men, they didn't care. They loved the attention. Only further reiterating my claims for not liking them.

Again, women shouldn't be ashamed of their bodies and should embrace them fully. Boys and men needed to control their reactions to females. They should respect them and refrain from subjecting them. In a perfect world, men and boys would stop subjecting women and girls as sex objects. Unfortunately, we weren't in that kind of world. In addition, in my opinion, too many children were around wearing the tiny pieces of fabric.

"Why do you care, man?" Chad smirked.

"He's still in denial," Corbin laughed.

"She does have a knockout body. Why hide it?" Sylvia added fuel to BJ's flames.

It was true. Mike clearly filled out since she first got here. When we met her, she had been tall and almost painfully thin. She was high-energy and worked a lot, but it was clear that she couldn't eat much when she lived with her grandparents. They never let the children go hungry, but they were rarely full. They ran a ranch, and they barely made ends meet between their daughter stealing from them and dropping off her unwanted children.

She was just as active, but now she actually ate to gain much-needed weight. She was still slim, but her hips had rounded out slightly, and her breasts had gone up at least a cup size. If modeling was still a thing, I knew plenty of agents that would sign her up immediately.

“Would you let Elsa or Nova wear that in a few years?” BJ whirled on Rhys.

It was clear he was looking for an ally. Rhys seemed to understand this and shook his head.

“No, but—” Rhys began before BJ gave us a triumphant grin.

“Ha!” BJ exclaimed.

“But Elsa,” Rhys spoke over him. “Is only four. A few years from now, she will be seven. So, no, I wouldn't allow her to wear bikinis at that age. However, when she's fifteen, sixteen years old, and I feel like she's a responsible young lady that understands boundaries and expectations, yes.”

Chad, Sylvia, Corbin, and I exchanged smiles. Apparently, this only further infuriated BJ. Mike hadn't gotten too far. She had just gotten Carson a honey corn cake and turned towards her group of friends. I couldn't help but notice the extra sway in her step as if she knew BJ was watching her.

“Michaela Renee,” BJ yelled after her. “So, help me,” he seethed.

“Junior, watch ya gonna do about it?” she sassed back.

In true Mike fashion, she was out to push buttons. She knew BJ abhorred the nickname, Junior. He had been

attempting to get us all to call him B or Bry for ages. Sometimes we called him B, but Bry hadn't stuck.

"Uh oh, what did he do now?" Aunt Carol chortled.

Aunt Carol wasn't as shy about voicing all our opinions. She already foretold their relationship eventually. But unlike most of us, Aunt Carol wouldn't care if they started dating now. She loudly proclaimed how sixteen was the age of consent and told anyone that would listen how she knew Uncle Mitch would marry her one day at fourteen. They may have dated other people, but she had finally convinced him to start dating her the day after her eighteenth birthday. They had been faithful to each other from that day forward.

Mike stopped and saucily planted one of her hands on her hip, Carson propped on the other. Aunt Pam and Stephanie had stopped to eavesdrop on the conversation. They seemed just as amused as we were. Then she turned to the middle-aged women.

"Aunt Pam, Aunt Carol, Aunt Steph," she feigned demureness batting her lashes. "Junior here thinks I'm dressed like a," she caught herself noticing the older adults and children nearby. "Streetwalker," she corrected. "Since you are my parental units, am I dressed, okay? Are there any problems with what I'm wearing?"

Aunt Pam, Carol, and Stephanie had all taken to mothering Mike. It was clear they had a huge soft spot for her. And the feelings were reciprocated. They were becoming more mother-figures to her than her own had been. She often sought them out. I found her baking bread with Aunt Carol. She was learning herbal remedies with Aunt Pam. And sometimes, I saw her just hanging out with Steph doing yoga or reading.

I could tell her referencing them as parents to her had touched them more than Aunt Carol—our more sensitive aunt.

"More than okay," Aunt Pam spoke up first.

"What's wrong with what she's wearing?" Aunt Carol bristled towards BJ, narrowing her gaze on him.

“She’s covered up more than some of the younger girls around here,” Stephanie huffed as she pointedly eyed a group of giggling tweens that had just walked by.

“I’m just saying—” BJ began to bluster as his girlfriends approached him.

“I mean, at least she’s mostly covered,” Aunt Carol nearly sneered as she eyed his *friends*.

She had already made her opinions known on them. However, she didn’t judge them for their clothing or loose morals. She didn’t like them because one of the girls had just rotated through the kitchens and whined and complained the entire time. And the other one had attempted to steal makeup and a hair straightener from the gift shop. She claimed she thought Mikhail had “charged” her for them, but she knew full good and well that she had already spent all her credits on other things.

“I’m just saying, isn’t she too young to be parading around in a bikini and shorts,” BJ blustered.

“She’s sixteen,” I laughed. “Not six. And she looks great,” I winked at Mike.

She smiled at me in appreciation before smugly smiling at BJ. His *friends* finally reached his side and draped themselves over his body.

Mike looked at the girls with a barely concealed sneer. “You dropped somethin’,” she pointed behind them.

The blonder and slightly denser one quickly turned. “What?” she frowned.

“The rest of your clothes and your dignity,” Mike snickered as she walked away.

It took a full minute for understanding to dawn on the other female as the rest of us laughed.



“Ready to swim to mama?” Kingston smiled as he held Foster in hip-deep water.

“Yeah!” Foster excitedly exclaimed.

We were pleasantly surprised to find out that our children loved the water. Isa had been contented for over an hour in her little floaty. She had started to take a nap when Axel informed us, he would change her, put her down for a nap, and then check on the pig.

Dani was our little daredevil. She had spent every minute with Wyatt and Zeke on the inflatable water park. I thought my heart would leap from my chest the first time she went by herself down the fifteen-foot or so water slide. And lastly, Foster seemed very determined to swim without the Puddle Jumpers we had him and Dani in. Finally, Kingston relented to his pleas to remove them, and we attempted to teach him to swim without them.

“Come on, big man,” I coaxed with a smile.

I had to laugh as Loki paddled beside him the whole time. Loki was well and truly the kid’s dog. He followed one or all of them everywhere most of the time. He was also the only one of our dogs that liked water. Bane waded in but wouldn’t swim, and Sasha had taken residence on the beach area, watching us with eagle eyes. I couldn’t leave her line of sight for long.

“Watch me!” Foster demanded as he came towards me.

“We’re watching,” we all chorused in return.

The water might have been hip-deep for us, but Foster was unable to stand flat-footed in it. Kingston put him down, and he valiantly attempted to swim the eight feet to me. He was almost to me when I noticed him struggling to keep his head above water. I saw the fear in his eyes and immediately swooped him up.

“Good job, big man!” I praised him and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re doing so well!”

He wiped a tiny hand across his face, water sloshing everywhere, and laughed. “Gain!” he demanded.

“Again?” I smiled at him.

“Yeah,” he eagerly nodded.

“Are you gonna swim to Daddy King, Daddy East, or Uncle Alec?” I inquired.

Alec had grown on me, despite my initial reservations. It was clear Alec had done a lot of growing up. He wasn't the same man who betrayed his brother. And since Axel had forgiven his brother, I could no longer hold a grudge against him. Plus, he had brought Mariah back into Axel's life, and I could see how happy Axel was now.

Foster turned in my arms and looked at the other adults that made our circle. He made a great show of tapping his finger on his lips— a habit he had gotten from Mariah. Axel and Alec rubbed their fingers across their bottom lip when they were deep in thought. Mariah had adopted a similar inclination of tapping her pointer finger against her lips. In turn, Foster now did it.

“Dada E!” he proclaimed.

I had to laugh because I knew he had chosen Easton. After all, he was the furthest away. His fearlessness made me so proud at times. Other times I swore he aged me ten years, like when he attempted to use a sheet to jump off the loft at the house. He watched a cartoon where one of the characters did it and thought he could do the same.

“Come on, spider-man,” Easton encouraged him as I set Foster into the water.

“Comin’,” he chirped before he took off towards Easton.

I watched with pride as he made it to him. We all clapped and cheered him on. In Easton's warm embrace, he turned and beamed at all of us.

“Mama! I'm hungry!” Mariah yelled as she came swimming towards us, followed closely by Ben and Mikey.

I looked around, frowning. I hadn't noticed Gianna joining us in the water. In fact, the last time I saw her, she had taken court on the beach and was with her current flame Graham

Bay. Bay was from the bunker. He also was the man I knocked out when he attempted to hit Bane. It didn't shock us when he and Gianna began hooking up.

The agreement we came to with the bunker facility had us rotating people here to train with us. They couldn't deny our skills after seeing our accomplishments at the amusement park. They wanted Axel's and Zeke's training, so they came to us instead of us going to them. They participated in recoveries with us. And so far, they didn't have a mission they wanted us to accompany them on. It appeared as if Raphael, Natalie, Becca, and others who managed to escape were hiding. So, until more intel could be gathered, we were on standby.

"Mama, I'm hungry," Mariah repeated, plaintively crying out.

I looked up to the beach and saw Gianna practically dry-humping Bay on land. My lips curled in distaste. I really couldn't stand those two.

Bay was just as depraved as Gianna. The only thing that seemed to work in our favor was that he wasn't crazy about kids. We believed he was another reason Gianna was on good behavior as far as Mariah went and wasn't pushing for more time with her. She only wanted Mariah when it benefited her. Gianna wasn't dumb enough to cut complete ties with her daughter, but she did the bare minimum recommended by her therapist and the play therapist. After all, she would have no tool against Axel and Alec if it wasn't for Mariah.

Mariah patted my leg, and I blinked down at her in surprise. I realized then that she was talking to me. I looked over at Alec and noticed his confused look.

"Me?" I asked her in surprise.

She nodded eagerly. My wide eyes locked onto Alec's. He seemed just as mystified as he held up his hands and shrugged.

"We're hungry," Mikey piped up beside her.

"Mama," Mariah said in exasperation. "Can you please feed us?"

"Avery," I said gently.

I didn't know how to handle this. I had a feeling we had a visit to the therapist soon. I understood that Foster called me Mama because the memories of his own mother were quickly fading. However, Mariah had a mom, and I knew Gianna would flip a switch if she heard Mariah calling me mom. I also didn't want the little girl to think I wanted to replace her mom.

Don't get me wrong; I loved her like she was one of my own. I never treated her differently than the others and I never would. In Axel and Alec's eyes they were her dads, and I was her "stepmom." As a result of that decision, in my heart she was mine. However, I didn't want to incur Gianna's wrath. I had no doubt she would claim we were encouraging Mariah to call me mom. We were enjoying our drama-free existence with her current indifferent attitude.

"No. Mama," she stated mutinously. "I have two daddies and two mommies," she explained. "And you're the mama that loves me more."

Understanding dawned in Alec's eyes as he waded over. "Hey Ri, umm, Avery loves you like a mama, but you have a mom. With me and Daddy Axel, it's a little different. We explained this to you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "You don't want me to be your daughter? Don't you love me like a daughter? Foster, Dani, and Isa didn't come from your belly either, but you say they are your children. Foster calls you mama."

Her logic made sense. Foster did call me Mama. However, Dani hadn't called me mom yet. We didn't want to pressure her into saying it, either. The therapist already told us we were doing the right thing and allowing them to give us our titles.

I bent down, lifted her, and cradled her cheek with one of my hands. "Of course, I love you like a daughter," I gently reassured her. "I just—" I floundered for the right words.

We were cautious not to talk badly about her mom in front of her. We didn't want to poison her against Gia. We realized she had the right to formulate any opinion of her mom when she got older.

Mariah was a very inquisitive child. We never wanted to lie to her. So, we were always honest with her when she addressed her concerns or questions. We just gave her age-appropriate answers. For instance, with the innocence of a child, she couldn't understand how Dani was ours if she was darker than all of us. She commented how Dani's hair differed from ours, including the twins with an African American father. We had to explain to her how we had adopted Isa, Foster, and Dani into our family because their mommies and daddies couldn't care for them anymore.

"How about," Alec soothingly explained. "You just call her Avery for now. She loves you like a mama, but that would hurt your mom's feelings if she heard you call Avery mom. We'll ask Ms. Abby what she thinks about it, though."

Ms. Abby was the therapist. Abby had already explained to Mariah that she was trying to ensure Gianna could be the best mom possible. Abby had been such a godsend throughout this whole ordeal. She had already helped Mariah cope and provided her with tools to continue helping her.

"Can I call you Mama if Ms. Abby says it's okay?" Mariah's lower lip trembled.

"Of course," I kissed her forehead. "I love you lots, Mi girl," I crooned. "Like Dani, Foster, and Isa you are a child of my heart. just want to ensure it's okay first, understand?"

She was silent for several beats before she nodded. "Can you feed me now?"

"Me hung hung, too," Foster chirped.

I looked up and noticed Kingston and Easton had swum over to us. I was glad for their silent support. We knew raising children that weren't biologically ours came with their trials. I guess we all assumed that we had a while before we were faced with them all. Apparently not, but that was okay too. We just strived to be the best possible parents we could be. As a family, we have already begun seeking resources to assist us in this endeavor. Our children already had a tough enough life ahead of them, so we were determined not to be one of those obstacles.

“Let’s eat then,” Easton said in a cheerful voice.

However, as we gathered the children, our eyes met. We all knew another conversation would be held over this new turn of events.

### **CHAPTER 3**



“WE got intel back from General Gypson,” Dad informed us as we sat down. “He would like our assistance dismantling a ring of disturbing individuals.”

The food was finally done late in the afternoon. By then, I was more than ready to sink my teeth into the smoked meat. Snacks were available all day, but I was prepared for real sustenance. I felt like I had been running about all day.

After swimming with the kids, I relieved the preschool teacher in the arts and crafts area. After arts and crafts, I assisted the kitchen staff. Then I headed to the clinic to help with one of the rounds. After the clinic, I helped operate the water park. Not long after that, Mikey, Ben, and Mariah begged me to go horseback riding with them. They didn’t have to beg too much. I loved riding, and Wyatt and I had taken them, and a few others on a trail ride Pop-pop used to take us on.

Our herd had grown, thanks to one of our recovery teams. We had over fifty horses spread out in five different stables now. They have become instrumental in our transportation issue. They allowed us to open and distribute more of the cabins that were further away. We even had a few older teens that had volunteered to make “runs” for the community. Their jobs were transporting people down to the main part of the camp or taking them to other areas.

“Traffickers?” Corbin inquired with a frown as he cut up some pork into smaller bites for Foster.

We had chosen a larger table that accommodated all my aunts, uncles, guys, my dad, Stephanie, Rhys, BJ, Trevor, Jessica, and the littles. Gloria and Mike took Mikey, Miller, Ben, and James to another table. That left us with just our younger children, Madeline and Nova.

Uncle Mitch sighed. “Not quite, but they’re almost just as corrupt.”

“How so?” I inquired as I picked the tomatoes out of Dani’s pasta salad.

Dani could be picky at times. She was very particular about what vegetables she would eat. Generally, I would coax Dani into a bite or two of the foods she claimed she didn't like. However, today I wouldn't fight with her if she chose not to eat tomatoes. She had carrots and cucumbers on her plate; I knew she would eat them at least.

"They've been 'rescuing' people and taking them to one of the air bases they've commandeered. Once the people get there it's no better than an internment camp. They force any man, woman, or child over twelve to work in their fields or tend their animals from sunset to sundown. Sometimes they'll force these untrained people into infested infected zones to salvage stuff for them. They're barely fed or properly clothed at all."

"So how many enemies are we looking at versus the amount we need to rescue?" Zeke inquired as he ate with one hand and held Isa with his other arm.

She was gnawing on his fingers, and I could tell from his slight grimace the sharp edges of her teeth had caught him. It must have pained him, but he made no move to remove his fingers from her mouth. She wasn't as fussy today, but she was definitely not back to her happy self yet.

Easton must have also noticed his predicament because he hopped up and retrieved a small cooler. "Sorry, can you hold that thought? I think I have something that can help Isa out."

He removed a jar from it, and I looked at him in confusion.

"It's a clove mixture I made," he explained ruefully. "Several books I've been studying say it's a natural remedy for teething babies."

"My mama used to use that for us," Grandma Betty explained as she sat beside Uncle Scott.

Easton handed Zeke the jar. "Just put a little bit on the tip of your finger and rub it in."

"I'm sure there's a lot of mamas that would love to have some of that," Aunt Pam smiled at Easton.

“I left some up at the clinic. The jars are clearly labeled, and the proper usage is displayed. I figured we’d see how our little empress takes to it first before advertising its existence,” Easton gave a bemused smile. “I hope I got it right. I followed the recipe in the herbal remedies book.”

He sat back down and pulled Foster’s tray in front of him. Then he proceeded to cut Foster’s meat into smaller pieces.

“Knowing you,” I smiled fondly at him before leaning over to kiss his cheek. “It’ll work amazingly. There isn’t much you can’t do.”

He blushed, and my smile grew wider. I loved how humble he was. He blushed at the tiniest compliments. He also tended to brush aside any praise sent his way.

“What about that time—” Kingston began.

“Shut it!” I immediately cut him off, knowing he would insert a lot of sexual innuendo.

Kingston was proud of his brother and super supportive of him, but the sibling rivalry could be real at times. He was so used to being the center of attention that sometimes, he insisted on getting the spotlight on him. I didn’t think it came from a place of jealousy, more like teasing East.

“Anyways,” Wyatt chuckled with a knowing grin. “As you were saying, Uncle Brian. What do we know about these people and their victims?”

“They counted thirty-five men and women that seem to be lording over roughly sixty-eight victims,” Dad informed us.

“How?” Jessica asked, mystified. “Can’t they overpower them?”

“In a perfect world, they could,” Uncle Scott ruefully answered. “However, these individuals have taken their younger children or threatened them with death if they don’t do as they’re told. The captors are all heavily armed and intentionally chose passive groups to ‘rescue’. From what the general gathered; these people barely had knives to defend themselves with. They were vulnerable and easy to pick up and deceive.”

“When will we be heading out?” Axel inquired. “And who’s going?”

“The day after tomorrow,” Uncle Mitch stated. “And the General wants everyone that was involved with the Amusement Park. Plus, ten more.”

“I’m in,” BJ stated.

“I think you all will be,” Uncle Mitch stated.

I couldn’t help but notice Dad’s look of ire. He still wasn’t keen about me leaving the gates. However, he also understood that I couldn’t stay put. As much as I adored my kids and loved spending time with them, I got my version of cabin fever. There was always something to do around here, and amazing views surrounded us. However, I still itched to get out and do something good or helpful occasionally.

“Carol, Stephanie, Grandma Betty, and I will be watching the children for ya’ll,” Aunt Pam stated, gently patting Christopher’s back.

He barely ate a few bites before climbing into “Grandma” Pam’s lap. The sun, water, and fresh air had tuckered out most of the children. And from the looks of it, Dani and Foster weren’t too far behind him. They were inordinately quiet and seemed to have to concentrate on eating.

“I don’t want you guys to go,” Mariah pouted. “Mom says you guys like to go on runs to get away from me.”

I frowned. I hated it when Gianna attempted to turn Mariah against us. It seemed like every time she spent time alone with Mariah, all she did was try to poison her against us. Whenever Axel, Alec, and Mariah had an appointment with the therapist, they raised the concern. Of course, Gianna denied it and said Mariah was making stuff up or they were lying. Needless to say, it caused more issues, and the therapist began catching onto Gianna’s lies.

“You know that’s not true, right, Ri?” Alec gently inquired before handing Elsa one of his honey corn cakes.

Mariah wouldn’t look up from her food as she sullenly stabbed at a piece of meat and shrugged. “No,” she reluctantly

said.

“Of course, it’s not true,” Axel reached over and gently pulled on one of her pigtails. “You know we love you lots. Sometimes Mommy...” he paused, seeking a diplomatic answer.

“Likes to tell not nice stories,” Aunt Carol bitterly stated. “And I already told you sometimes people like to make up a lot of stories that aren’t true.”

The therapist already advised us what we should and shouldn’t say to Mariah. Aunt Carol had no such qualms. Unsurprisingly, none of the women in my family liked Gianna. Aunt Carol more so because she had to work with her day in and day out. We attempted to assign her to other work areas, but as Axel predicted, she disappeared if left unattended.

“Like Pinocchio,” Mariah giggled, seemingly snapping out of her gloomy mood. “But,” she looked over to the table where Gianna sat with her ‘boyfriends’. “Her nose isn’t growing yet.”

We all began to laugh at her candor, and I couldn’t help but look up at the topic of our conversation. As unaffected as Gianna pretended to be it didn’t pass our notice how she attempted to keep us in her line of sight at social gatherings. I didn’t know if she endeavored to make Alec or Axel jealous, but it wasn’t working. They barely took notice of her.

“Sometimes it takes time,” Aunt Carol sniffed.

“How far is the place we’re heading?” Axel inquired, bringing us back to the topic with a wry twist of his lips. “And who will be our liaison from the bunker?”

“Their team is flying in tomorrow morning, and we’ll go over the intel they gathered. We may have to divide into teams,” Dad explained.

Madeline decided to start stirring. Her little grunts made us aware that she was hungry. Kingston stood up and wiped his mouth since he was closest to her portable swing. He extracted her from the swing cooing at her as he did so. I smiled, loving

how everyone cared for all the children without hesitation or thought.

“Thanks,” Stephanie smiled at Kingston, taking Madeline from him. Then she turned back to Dad with a look of ire.

“They,” Stephanie corrected him.

Dad gave her a look of chagrin. “Us,” he stated.

I paused a fork full of food near my mouth. From the look on Stephanie’s face, this was news to her. It was evident he failed to fill her in on this information. I swallowed my sigh. Mom loved Dad dearly, but communication was never his strong suit. It was an area he knew was lacking, yet sometimes failed to work on.

“When were you planning to tell me this,” Stephanie asked as she put Madeline on her breast. “When was this decided?”

We were lucky that she could produce enough milk for Madeline, Isa, and Nova. She didn’t have quite enough milk for Nova exclusively, but luckily a few of our other nursing mothers were able to stock up on our milk supply as well, so no baby went hungry. We hadn’t been able to get formula for weeks.

“Today,” Uncle Mitch began to say.

“Not only no, but he—” Aunt Carol caught herself. “Heck no!”

I couldn’t stifle my laugh of disbelief that time. It was evident all the women were unaware of the men’s planning. It was as if they thought sliding it into dinner conversation surrounded by an audience would prevent the blowback. For such intelligent men, they could be dense at times. It was as if they didn’t know their spouses. I knew them a lot less longer, and I wasn’t naive enough to believe Stephanie, Aunt Carol, and Aunt Pam, would curb their reactions.

“Come on, sugar plum,” Uncle Mitch huffed. “We can’t stay behind the walls all the time.”

“Wrong move,” Wyatt coughed into his cup.

Some of the shit-stirrers chuckled. Uncle Mitch gave him an annoyed look. Wyatt shot him back an unrepentant smile.

“Don’t you think you guys should have discussed this with us before you made the decision?” Aunt Pam crossly stated as she looked at Uncle Scott. “Want to tell me something, Scott Corbin Cavalier?”

Uncle Scott looked like he suddenly found an exorbitant amount of fascination with his mac and cheese. It was no secret that he hated conflict. I would forever say that this was a trait Trevor had adopted from him.

“Uh oh, he got all three names,” Corbin snickered into his pasta salad.

“Accompanied by her death glare,” Trevor looked up to the sky. “Nobody make eye contact. Suddenly, she’ll remember the time *you* forgot to take out the trash, February 27th, 2011 at 7:52 pm.”

My mouth dropped open. I thought too soon! Evidently, Corbin and the guys were rubbing off on him. Trevor of old would have attempted to blend into his surroundings knowing Aunt Pam was known to call everyone out when she was peeved with her husband or sons.

Again, laughter ensued, amidst yelps of pain from Corbin and Trevor. Aunt Carol had reached over to flick Corbin’s ear, while Aunt Pam pinched Trevor’s arm.

“You’re no longer technically owned by Uncle Sam,” Stephanie crossly stated, ignoring everyone’s antics. “You have children and a very young daughter that still needs you,” she pointed at Dad. “You—” she indicated at Uncle Mitch. “Are in a middle of a project with the solar team. And you—” she pointed at Uncle Scott. “Are scarcely with us since your return. You’ve locked yourself in the lab for hours. I know Pam would like to spend more time with you.

“We have plenty of able-bodied men and women that are quite capable of handling themselves out there. You don’t need to run off any longer. Your guidance and presence are needed here.”

I could understand where my aunts and Stephanie were coming from, but I also understood how my dad and uncles felt they couldn't permanently hide behind the walls. They hadn't gone out for some time, and I'm sure they were getting restless.

"Baby," Dad attempted to cajole Stephanie. "I understand where you're coming from, but you know we can't stay behind the walls forever. And," he cast a look towards Uncle Scott. "We need to collect more samples from the infected."

Stephanie was generally very passive and understanding. In fact, I don't think I had ever seen her argue with Dad. However, I could tell she wouldn't make this easy on him. She had already taken care of four children without him, and I'm sure she wasn't relishing doing it again.

"Excuse me! What?" Aunt Pam glared at Uncle Scott.

Again, I could understand Aunt Pam's objections. But on the other hand, their research could possibly help us in the future. Uncle Scott and Dad were brilliant scientists, and if there was any hope out there, I was confident they could find it.

"Uh." I finally cleared my throat as I noticed Foster and Mariah looking at the adults with concern. "Maybe we can continue this discussion later."

"Avery's right," Aunt Carol reluctantly agreed. "We'll table this discussion for now."

From Dad's and my uncle's expressions, I could tell the prospect didn't enthuse them. I'm positive they assumed the women would have relented once they realized the importance of their insistence on going.

"Umm, East, is there any way you can get Emery into the clinic sooner?" Trevor hesitantly inquired after a moment of tension.

It took me a moment to realize why. Emery was supposed to have another scan this week. The last two times they attempted to have a gender scan, the little guy or girl acted shy. I knew he was excited to see his child. He might not want

Emery in his life any longer, but I knew he was starting to get excited about his child. They had already passed the ‘danger zone,’ and the baby was progressing nicely, albeit on the smaller side.

Emery was still watching what she ate. She only had a slight baby bump, which caused her to melt down. She couldn’t fit in her size two jeans any longer and started eating only cabbage and putting herself on a liquid diet. It was concerning enough for Dad to force her to see the therapist. We all knew she was struggling with her eating disorder once more.

“That can be arranged,” Easton readily agreed.

“I still think it’s a girl,” Sylvia said brightly, trying to lighten the mood further.

“And yet you still won’t take my bet,” Simon teased her.

They exchanged a look, and I made a fake retching noise. They made no secret about their bets based on sexual favors. And Sylvia wasn’t shy in telling us girls and Mikhail about their exploits. There was only so much I could listen to. My imagination was a little too overactive at times.

“Are you sure Emery will be okay with changing the day?” Jessica skeptically inquired.

She was still getting comfortable with my dad. The first few times Dad and Trevor discussed Emery; she had politely excused herself. Aunt Carol had insisted she stay for the last time. She said if Jessica and Trevor were friends and decided to get serious later on, she should understand how ‘difficult’ Emery could sometimes be.

“There isn’t any reason for her to decline it,” Dad firmly stated. “Emery should want to know what the baby is.”

*Should* is the key word. Other than what the baby could get for her, Emery showed no interest in them. We prayed that her maternal instincts would kick in before the baby came. Because as of right now, it was evident she hated pregnancy. She had already been overheard saying she wished she never got ‘knocked up’.

“What’s going on?” Emery drolly inquired as she came up to the table.

Damn! Sometimes she was like Beetlejuice. Say her name three times, and she appeared.

“We’re changing your ultrasound and appointment for the baby to tomorrow,” Aunt Pam stated.

“Why?” Emery stated as she glared at how close Jessica and Trevor sat beside each other.

Honestly, they hadn’t even held hands—that I was aware of. They sometimes bordered on flirting, but they both seemed to understand that they couldn’t rush anything. Trevor seemed to realize he shouldn’t jump from one relationship to another. And Jessica understood that progressing things with Trevor could be a treacherous path.

“I’m going on a mission,” Trevor calmly explained.

“I’m not changing the appointment so you can go gallivanting around,” Emery hissed.

Corbin snorted. “Rescuing those more unfortunate than us and getting comfort items for the community is hardly indicative of gallivanting around. Plus, I haven’t heard you complain when he brought you back that spa set and facial creams you so desperately *needed*.”

“We shouldn’t ignore the evidence that he’s also gotten so many things for your child, you’ll never want anything else. Despite the fact you keep telling everyone he abandoned you because he never wanted a baby. You also love to tell anyone who will listen that he still wants you to abort the baby. Do you not realize a lot of your lies don’t match up?”

Emery’s hypocritical ways were so bizarre it was almost comical. Unfortunately, some people still ate up what she fed them. It had gotten severe enough that people began harassing Trevor. Most of that abated once Corbin, Wyatt, Kingston, and Zeke made a great show of bringing Emery her items in front of an audience. They typically made deliveries in the dining hall ensuring everyone knew they were from Trevor.

“Mind your own, Corbin.” Emery huffed, knowing another one of her evil machinations came to light.

“What’s the big deal, Emery?” Dad said with a long-suffering sigh. “Other than being petty, there’s no reason you can’t get the ultrasound done a day early.”

“My body, my choice,” Emery huffed.

“Emery,” Dad began sternly before Aunt Pam cut him off.

“You know what, Bryan, forget it.” She looked over at Trevor and gave him a sympathetic smile. “I’ll have an ultrasound picture for you when you return.”

“Those are my pictures too,” Emery immediately retorted, obviously raring for an argument.

“Of his child,” Dad’s jaw ticked. “Enough, Em. You’re being vindictive for no reason.”

Trevor sighed and rubbed his eyes. Emery had had two other ultrasounds since her initial one, and she wouldn’t allow him in the room. I could fully support it if I didn’t know it was just a manipulation tactic for her.

I knew Trevor wanted to be in there. He had been for each one of ours. However, Emery was using the pregnancy to attempt to control Trevor. Unless Trevor retrieved or used all his credits on her for her materialistic desires, she refused him entrance. Her audacity knew no bounds.

“So be it,” he said with a weary sigh. “I’ll find out when I get back what our child is.”

“See, it’s like you don’t even care about me,” Emery sneered. “You rather go running off when I might need you at the appointment. For what?” She looked at Jessica. “Her? She’s not even pretty.”

“I nev—” Trevor began to say before Corbin spoke up.

“Nothing’s ever good enough for you, Em,” Corbin huffed. “You refuse to let him in the room, which is your right. You’ve moved on from Trevor. We’ve all seen you slink from the mens barracks. And Jessica is an attractive girl,” he shot me a look, and I smiled, confident in us, knowing he may think she

was attractive, but he wasn't attracted to her. "It's just your jealousy talking. Come on, Trev," he said, standing up. "Let's get movie night set up."

He bent down to kiss my cheek before whispering in my ear. "But you're the hottest one of them all."

I laughed and playfully smacked his chest. "Get to work," I shook my head.

"That's it?" Emery huffed when Trevor stood with his tray. "You're just leaving?"

"What else can I do, Em?" Trevor wearily sighed. "I'm done begging. I'm done groveling for what I want."

He turned to leave.

"Don't walk away from me," Emery said after a beat of stunned silence. "See what I have to deal with?" She turned on Dad.

Dad looked at her long enough for her to squirm uncomfortably. "I see a man wanting to be involved in their child's life. And a woman throwing a temper tantrum because she is not getting her way. A woman I didn't raise to be this way."

"Once again, someone else is more important than me," Emery teared up before storming off.

I saw the hurt in Dad's eyes, but I also knew she needed this tough love. She needed help and coddling her wasn't helping her.

I, for one, was thankful I hadn't had to deal with her theatrics much nowadays. I was at a point where I had to stop regretting what could have been and let her go. If she sought help and was genuinely remorseful, I could possibly forgive all the atrocious acts she had done to me, but for now, I was content in knowing I didn't need or want her in my life.

## CHAPTER 4



“SOMETIMES it’s hard to believe that the world is in shambles beyond our gates,” I hummed as I leaned back into Wyatt.

“We are among the lucky ones,” Corbin agreed as he lay down on my stomach.

After the day’s festivities, Fletch and his motley crew had set up the projection screen by the lake. Speakers had been installed so the sound carried far. As the sun went down, people wandered down to the lake. They planned a children’s movie first followed by a twenty-minute intermission before the adult movie started.

Most of the kids hadn’t even made it through their movie. Aunt Pam, Aunt Carol, Uncle Mitch, and Uncle Scott volunteered to take all our children to the cabin. Mariah and Foster had been ecstatic to have a sleepover with their ‘grandparents’. It took a little more convincing Dani, but eventually, she was coaxed into going.

“Today has been such an amazing day,” I sighed. “We need more days like this.”

“I agree,” Zeke climbed in beside us, handing me a drink.

Several cabanas had been erected around the lake after dinner. It almost seemed bougie, but I had to admit I loved the feeling of seclusion. I knew others surrounded us, but it gave us some privacy. The guys had found and claimed several outdoor daybeds with overstuffed, comfy cushions. Kingston and Easton brought down some blankets for us to complete the amazing experience. It was no wonder that the kids fell asleep so quickly. Our little haven felt like a cocoon, a nest even.

“It’s the first time we’ve *all* been able to have a true day off with no emergencies popping up in a long while,” Kingston remarked from the day bed he and Easton were sprawled on.

We had all been busy today, but it was the first time in a long time that we were all together to wind down. It was nice. I understood I should be happy that we were thriving here and

slightly spoiled and be thankful for that blessing. However, I was human, and it was rare that we were in one place together. If the community didn't have us in all different directions, then one or a few of us would be at the bunker helping them out.

I still didn't understand why they wanted or needed us so much. Besides their medical staff, they seemed to have a good handle on everything else. They had been training, albeit differently than us, but they hadn't been lazy by any means.

"Knock on wood," I moaned as Wyatt ran his fingers through my hair.

"Hey," Kingston jokingly piped up. "I thought we all agreed on no nookie until we returned to the house."

"I'm just playing with her hair," I could hear Wyatt's smirk as he continued his ministrations.

Soon Corbin was joining the assault and tracing his fingertips along my bare thighs. Before the movie, Axel, Corbin, and I had taken all the kids back up to the cabin. We had changed them into their pajamas, and I had also taken the opportunity to change. I had slipped on a pair of sleep shorts and a hooded sweatshirt.

The day had been hot, but once the sun fell, the temperature dropped, taking the humidity with it. It was a little bit chilly for me. I thought the teens and adults that elected to float and watch the movies were insane. It seemed like a really cool way to watch a movie, but no thanks. There was no way I was going back into the water.

BJ insisted that the water was still warm, but he was also the type to wear shorts in the winter. There was no way I could trust his judgment.

"*We*," Axel spoke up from the hammock chair he was sitting in. "Decided we can relax with our woman and watch a movie before we pounced on her."

I stifled a laugh. Kingston had pulled me into the canoe and boat shed when I'd run to get popcorn for the kids. He would have been deep inside me if Axel and Corbin hadn't interrupted us. And it was lucky they had stopped us because

less than a minute later, a couple of the teens had the same idea. Not only would they have caught us in a compromising position, but we wouldn't have been there to stop the sixteen-year-old boy from taking advantage of a newly turned thirteen-year-old girl. Needless to say, they had been given a stern talking to, and the teen boy's dad had been apprised of the situation.

We had to locate the couple who agreed to foster the orphaned girl. They were mortified and promised to keep an eye on her. I hated embarrassing the girl, but teenage pregnancies weren't something we wanted to run rampant in our community. And there was no way you could convince me the sixteen-year-old boy was interested in a thirteen-year-old beyond sex. I mentally added a sex talk with all our teens sooner than later. I'm sure many of them had the "talk" by now, but better safe than sorry. Plus, we had enough condoms to go around for a while.

We didn't have many other forms of birth control. We tried to give the pills, IUDs, and more scarce types out to younger adults and married women on an almost lottery-like basis. It was definitely something we were going to keep an eye out for. Hopefully, other scavengers and groups out there weren't also looking for them. We knew pain pills and antibiotics were currently like gold. We were lucky the bunker was stocked with many medications, but they didn't have ample prescription contraceptives.

"I don't remember being part of that conversation," Kingston jokingly griped.

"Because we knew you would never agree," Wyatt threw a bag of candy at Kingston. "Now, shut up so we can watch the movie."

I let out a contented sound and burrowed closer to my men.



“Alpha’s?” was loudly whispered outside of the cabana.

Immediately everyone went on alert, and I groaned when I noticed one of the guards enter the cabana. Couldn’t we get one day, one moment where we weren’t putting out any hypothetical fires? Dad, Uncle Mitch, and Uncle Scott had told the gates several times to come to find them when they had questions beyond their job parameters. Yet, they still seemed to hunt down one of us every time.

“What’s up?” Corbin inquired as he stood.

“They couldn’t wait five minutes,” I mock pouted as I turned my head into Wyatt’s chest.

I knew there had to be less than ten minutes left in the movie. Even though it was an older movie, I’d never watched it. I knew I was being silly because I could finish it at another time at our house. However, I had really been enjoying my day.

“It’s all Kingston’s fault,” Wyatt joked.

“Yeah,” Kingston grumbled as he stood and stretched. “I had to open my big mouth.”

“There’s a group of people at ECP3,” the guard ruefully stated. “It looks like a cavalcade of nine or ten. They seem friendly enough, but they have a hoard of infected surrounding them. They have a radio and specifically asked for Mitch.”

I exchanged looks with the guys. It could be someone Uncle Mitch knew, but it was hard to say. “Did you get a hold of Uncle Mitch?” I inquired.

The guy was roughly my age. He was a tall and lanky man. During our morning workouts, we learned he was a great runner but lacked the coordination and ability to use weapons and guns. He seemed perfectly content to guard the gates and didn’t mind the long, tedious hours. I knew he had worked stocking shelves at a local retail store, so he was glad he hadn’t been allocated to supply organization or delivery.

He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. “Umm, no, I didn’t want to wake them up, and I knew you guys were out here.”

“I’ll go get Uncle Mitch,” I carefully hid the exasperation in my voice.

If the people at ECP3— Entry Control Point Three—expressed the desire to talk to Uncle Mitch, then it was to be assumed only Uncle Mitch knew who this person was. It wasn’t like any of us could visibly verify this person’s identity. It seemed legit. However, most people learned to lay low once the sun went down. It seemed ridiculous to risk your entire traveling party to travel at night. Not only had the hoards gotten larger, but they seemed to have become actual predators at night.

Almost everyone in recovery had witnessed their ability to evolve. It was eerie and unsettling to realize how some infected seemed to be deteriorating while others had evolved. They were creating these packs and became far more dangerous than they had been initially.

“I’ll come with you,” Zeke offered.

“I’ll have the medical staff on standby just in case,” Easton volunteered.

“I’ll see who I can rustle up to throw something together, food-wise, just in case,” Wyatt added.

It had become second nature for us to have food, toiletries, and a change of clothes for every group that we brought in. It had been a while since we accepted new groups. Most of the people we found on recovery went to the bunker. General Gypsum hoped to have more people help them get the bunker up and operational. The variety of people that they initially harbored weren’t as eclectic and versatile as our community seemed to be.

“King, Corbin, come with me,” Axel stated. “We’ll get a change of clothes and our protective gear. We’ll meet you at the gates.”

As he turned to leave the cabana, Bane stood with a long stretch. He yawned, and a little whine emitted from his throat. He trotted after Axel without being told. He was transitioning

well with accompanying Axel everywhere, since Sasha refused to shadow anyone but me.

We all nodded and headed toward our destinations. Zeke weaved his fingers through mine and guided me towards one of our side-by-sides.

“Why do you always smell so good,” he playfully nipped my shoulder as he helped me into the vehicle.

It was unnecessary, but one thing I learned about Zeke was he was over-the-top chivalrous. He always ran up to open my doors. He would remove anything heavy I may be carrying around camp and other similar actions.

“It’s one of the new soaps,” I smiled. “Yours should be ready by next week,” I informed Zeke.

I had already given the other guys their soaps and was pleased by their reactions. They really liked them, and I was happy to have done something else for them. They were constantly looking out for me. And although I knew it wasn’t a competition, I liked giving back when I could.

“I can’t wait,” Zeke laced his fingers through mine again and kissed my hand.

I looked back to verify Sasha had jumped in the back. She was highly trained, and I knew she would and could catch up with ease, but it was a habit for me to ensure she was always nearby. I reached into the tiny glove box and praised her as I gave her a treat. Carrying treats in our flack vest and all our vehicles had become a routine.

It didn’t take long for us to reach the big house. For a moment, I vacillated if I should knock or walk in. I knew where they kept the extra key. With them having children, there was no way I was risking waking them up.

“I think we should just let ourselves in,” I informed Zeke.

“Yeah,” Zeke grimaced. “It’s probably best we don’t wake the children.”

I walked to the side of the porch and found a statue depicting two little fairies sitting on top of a mushroom. One

of the fairies was reading while the other appeared to be dancing. A sad smile touched my face.

Nana liked to collect and paint yard statues. There had been plenty of summers when Emery, Katie, Gloria, and I would help her paint them. The boys occasionally painted, but that was more of the tradition we shared with Nana. I remember the summer she had painted the fairy piece. I was seven. It was right after a huge photo shoot Emery, and I landed with a popular children's clothing brand. It had been a whimsical photo shoot full of fairies, unicorns, and other fantasy creatures. Nana said she had to buy the statue since it reminded her of the photos Dad and Mom had gifted her of us.

"Pop-pop had a horrible habit of forgetting where he set his keys," I explained to Zeke. "There was a time he lost them for almost two weeks. One of the camp counselors found them in the bottom of a box of Goldfish while she was restocking the snack shack." My quiet laugh was filled with bittersweetness.

I will forever regret not seeing them on the last Fourth of July celebration our family had gathered at. I should have sucked up my pain and hurt and spent time with them. That was the funny thing about life. We never knew what the future held, and we would all face regrets in one way or the other. Sometimes we wished we could have a crystal ball or a warning light to warn us of impending misery. Regrettably, there was no such thing. So, we needed to spend every moment possible with the ones we loved and make every minute count.

"Nana learned to make copies of his keys and hide the house key for when he forgot where he last placed them." I inserted the key in the lock. "He was just as bad with his sunglasses, reading glasses, and wallet."

Zeke seemed to understand the struggle I had talking about them, so before I pushed open the door, he pulled me into his arms and kissed my nose. "You realize I have a horrible habit of laying my hats or sunglasses down too. Will you be the one helping me find it long after we turn old and gray?"

I stifled a laugh before I leaned up and brushed my mouth against his. “I plan on it. Between you forgetting where you placed your hats and sunglasses and Kingston forgetting to hang up our keys, you’ll both keep me on my toes.”

“Our plans are working,” Zeke teased, opening the door.

“Sasha, stay,” I bade the Belgium Malinois. She obediently sat, and I knew she would be in the same spot when I returned.

We barely took five steps when I thought I heard something fall, followed by a feminine giggle. Then we heard a low male moan. The creaking of the washer or dryer against the hardwood floor had Zeke and me looking at each other. It didn’t take us long to reach a conclusion. Someone was hooking up in the laundry room right off the kitchen.

My first assumption was it was Emery, but then I remembered that she had moved into a hunter’s cabin. She was sharing accommodations with Lisa and another chick I wasn’t familiar with. Apparently, the grouping of cottages they stayed in was known as the party side. Only young and single people lived there, and it was no secret that they spent a lot of their credits on beer and wine.

My father and uncles didn’t care that they partied all the time, just as long as it didn’t interfere with their duties. And so far, it hadn’t. We had only received a few complaints from some of the families when they got too loud, and their music, laughter, and screaming could travel across the lake to the other side where the family units were.

“Yes,” I heard Aunt Pam’s breathy sigh. “Right there.”

“I know,” I heard the male voice respond. Loud thump, thump, thumps followed his words. “How. You. Like. It. Honey.”

It took me a second to realize that the man’s voice wasn’t Uncle Scott’s but Uncle Mitch’s. It felt like someone had punched me in the chest and knocked the wind out of me. I shook my head silently in disbelief. I felt Zeke’s arms embrace me in comfort, and I felt the trembling in my limbs. My legs had turned to jelly.

My heart was trying to convince my mind that there was no way my Aunt Pam and Uncle Mitch were betraying their spouses. My parents, Aunt Pam, Uncle Scott, Aunt Carol, and Uncle Mitch were the standards I based all relationships by. Their love and devotion to each other made me realize I could never settle for anything less. They had set the bar so high that even after Trevor, I knew it would be difficult for anyone to meet my expectations.

Yes, they fought. No, their life wasn't filled with sunshine, rainbows, and unicorns. However, they had perseverance, trust, and determination. They weathered storms together. They fought for their relationships. I thought they were "relationship goals."

My panicked eyes met Zeke, and tears filled them. I shook my head back and forth. My head was like a Polaroid picture. Maybe if I shook it hard enough, another image would appear more than I imagined.

"Come on, siren," Zeke bade me with a whisper. "We'll figure something else out."

I knew he was attempting to get me away, but my shock and horror were quickly being replaced by anger. A part of me wanted to confront them and ask them what they were doing. I wanted to let them know that the secrets they shared in the dark now had a blinding spotlight on them. I wanted to ask them why they would cheat and hurt their significant others!

Eventually, I allowed Zeke to pull me towards the door as I realized I couldn't confront them just yet. Corbin and Wyatt should know what their parents were getting into as well. Not that I knew how I could possibly break the news to them. They would be just as gutted and devastated as I was.

We were almost back out the door when my foot caught one of the bar stools tucked under the center island. The stool crashed down with a loud bang, and the laundry door opened before Zeke, and I could run out the door. The lights under the counters were switched on. Uncle Mitch came out of the room, adjusting the waistband of his boxer briefs, and Aunt Pam exited the laundry slipping her silk robe over her shoulders.

The slight smile around her lips died, and her eyes widened. Uncle Mitch cleared his throat, the pink on his cheeks visible on his face across the distance that separated us.

He opened and closed his mouth several times. I saw the shock and his attempts to find the right words, but no guilt. Hot tears burned the back of my eyes as my surprise was replaced with fury once more.

“Avery,” Aunt Pam hesitantly began.

And I vigorously shook my head. I didn’t want to hear it. Aunt Pam had never lied to me, and I didn’t want her to start.

“No!” I exclaimed as my fingernails dug into my palms. I vaguely registered Zeke gently unfurling them and putting another comforting arm around my waist.

“Avery,” Uncle Mitch gently started. “It’s not what—”

“Don’t!” I nearly shouted, barely catching myself. At the last second, I reminded myself that the kids were sleeping upstairs. “Don’t say it’s not what it looks like,” I let out a humorless laugh. “Please be more creative than that.”

The whine of the screen door warned us that someone else was coming in. I turned my head and saw Wyatt step through. “Hey, Dad,” Wyatt jovially stated as he walked in. “I’m glad you’re awake.”

I felt my heart stop again when I realized Wyatt would see the compromising position, I had just caught his dad and Aunt Pam in. However, when I whipped my head back around, I noticed she was no longer visible. She must have heard the screen door open and slipped back into the laundry room. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted... I wanted to pretend I hadn’t seen and heard what I just had.

Wyatt stopped short as if he just realized the tension in the room. “What’s going on?” he tentatively inquired.

I was so tempted to spew my vitriol, but then I thought better of it. We were potentially walking into danger. My head was going to be screwed up enough. I didn’t need Wyatt in the same head space. I didn’t need to shatter the illusions he carried for his dad. Now was not the time or place for this.

We needed clear heads, concentration, and focus, especially if we had to fight the infected before allowing the group into our holding area.

“I—” Uncle Mitch began before I interrupted.

“Please go get dressed, Uncle Mitch,” I attempted in a neutral tone. “The people at the gates are waiting for you. They claim to know you.”

I hated lying to Wyatt. A lie of omission could be just as deceiving. I hated keeping this from him, but it was for the greater good. We had time later for me to confess what Zeke and I had just witnessed. As if Zeke understood my inner turmoil, he gently squeezed my hand. Looking up at his eyes, I saw that I had made the right decision. He kissed my temple, and I closed my eyes.

“Is everything okay, Ave?” Wyatt asked with concern.

“Everything’s fine,” I feigned a smile. “Just a little shocked to catch Uncle Mitch with his pants down.”

Zeke inhaled his breath as if he was about to laugh but then realized the gravity of the situation.

Wyatt let out a short bark of laughter. “It’s not your first time seeing him in his skivvies. Do you remember how many summers Nana yelled at him for walking around the house in his boxers? Let’s get a move on, Dad.”

Uncle Mitch cleared his throat once more, and I could see him attempt to catch my eyes, but I refused to look at him. Instead, I turned on my heel. I needed to get out of there.

“Speaking of getting dressed,” I explained. “I’m going to see if Axel, Kingston, and Corbin have our gear.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt still seemed mystified. “Good idea. We’ll meet you there,” Wyatt called over his shoulder as he joined Zeke and me on the porch.

My steps faltered slightly as I remembered Zeke stating he had witnessed Uncle Mitch and Aunt Pam embracing. We had all laughed at him. Yet, he probably had seen them. How long had they been sneaking behind their spouses’ backs?

## CHAPTER 5



TREVOR, Jessica, Murphy, and a handful of others had been busy the last few weeks. Security measures and areas were created to protect us from the infected and the living. Sheds had been built in three different locations. The first one was camouflaged into its surroundings. Their primary job was to notify whoever was operating the radios and the other control points if anyone was approaching. It was the closest to the road and was known as ECP4 or Entry Control Point 4.

Another ECP, ECP3, was erected right before the drawbridge. The guards that manned that building had to vet

and ensure that the people who stumbled upon us meant no harm. So far, we haven't had anyone outside our recovery teams make it to that point. So, we knew it was a possibility and had prepared for it.

ECP2's job was to operate the thirty-foot drawbridge. If anyone passed the first two check-ins, the bridge would be lowered. After that, we realized the fencing at the front of our community wasn't enough. We had to think about possible situations that may occur. We had to plan for the worst-case scenarios.

We remembered how Fletch and his group had come in surrounded by the infected. We needed to consider the best way to protect ourselves while assisting anyone seeking harbor. Murphy, Dad, and Trevor had devised our first solution to the possible problem.

Luckily, they had just finished that project. Steps and platforms had been mounted twenty-five feet up into the sides of the mountain. In addition, the stand of woods opposite the mountain had wood and rope bridges suspended approximately twenty feet in the air between the trees. With this security measure, we could remove our enemies or the infected from a safe elevated distance.

"Do you know who that is, Dad?" Fletch inquired as he pulled up the camera feed for ECP3.

From what I had just witnessed and the sheer amount of infected that surrounded the ten vehicles, my body was buzzing with adrenaline. The waiting game was killing me. I needed Uncle Mitch and Axel to tell us what they wanted to do.

By the time I had suited up, Kingston and Corbin returned with twenty or so of our trusted recovery team members. Looking around our circle, I couldn't help but realize that I trusted most of these people with my life. We had all worked together in one capacity or another beyond our gates. We had experienced things together that forged a bond most people could never fathom.

Once Axel briefed Uncle Mitch on the situation, we proceeded to ECP2. Some of our techies, including Fletch, had expressed the desire to leave the Sanctum from time to time. They believed if they could witness the environment and situations our guards may encounter, they could develop additional solutions to prevent any guards or community from getting injured or worse.

I decided I couldn't stand in the shed and wait any longer. I was jittery. A pot of coffee couldn't compete with the energy zipping through me. I was still fuming and deciding what to do while I hoped to be unleashed on the unsuspecting infected. I needed to work off this toxic energy.

I took a few steps forward to one of the mountain bases. I slipped off my pack and then slipped on my gloves. I climbed up about ten feet before pulling myself onto a ledge. The ledge was approximately fifteen feet across and six feet deep. It also gave me a better vantage point of the road coming in.

Motion-detected spotlights were mounted on telephone poles, the mountain face, and taller trees, giving me a clearer image of the situation. Unfortunately, the little monitor in the shack didn't do the scene in front of me any justice. My eyes widened as I finally computed what I was seeing.

Our visitors arrived in ten heavily modified vehicles. Their engines were running on the dirt-packed road as they waited for our decision. Each vehicle was equipped with items to protect the transports and the people in them. There was a snowplow that once belonged to the state of Delaware with pieces of the infected still in the curved blade. An MRAP— Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected— with barbwire wrapped around it had attached spiked steel rods with the infected impaled on them. Some infected struggled to remove themselves, while others seemed to have been affixed to them for some time.

“I don't know if I should be impressed or disturbed,” Chad quipped.

I jumped as I realized that Chad, Zeke, Kingston, Easton, BJ, Jessica, Trevor, Amy, Josh, and Simon had followed me.

Kingston gave me a smirk before he placed an arm around my shoulders.

“Disturbed,” Jessica, Simon, and Josh said simultaneously.

“Impressed,” BJ, Kingston, and I countered.

BJ laughed and held a fist up to Kingston and me. We bumped it, and I smiled. What did that say about us?

“O.M.G.,” Amy giggled behind her hand. “Check out the bus in the back.”

I moved so I could get a better view and gasped. “Kickass,” I breathed as I noticed the modifications on the large yellow school bus. We espied three or four buckets typically attached to Ferris wheels with armed people occupying them. They were throwing down Molotov cocktails as chainsaws sliced down the infected. I watched as an infected man over three hundred pounds and buck naked was cleaved nearly in half.

I felt my snacks from the movie threaten to come up even while I was awed by the ingenuity. It was an effective method to dispatch the infected. Moreover, it kept whoever was occupying the vehicles safe.

“Are they?” Jessica began with a horrified whisper.

“Yup,” I laughed.

I don’t know why I was laughing. It was disturbing, to say the least. However, I felt like I was wound tighter than a guitar string. I was valiantly attempting to forget what I had just witnessed with Aunt Pam and Uncle Mitch. But instead, I had to focus on what was before me. My life depended on it, the people surrounding me, and those seeking sanctuary. My preoccupation could mean life or death.

“Dad confirmed that the group leader is a man he used to serve with,” Wyatt stated as he joined us. “He came here and hunted with Dad and Pop-Pop last fall, and Dad, him, and James went hunting this fall. He’s seeking sanctuary after he heard rumors about our community. Are they—” he paused as he noticed what we were all fixated on. “Cutting down zombies with chainsaws?” He finished in awe.

“Yup,” Amy said right before she turned, rushed towards the trees and bushes, then vomited.

Jessica and I immediately went to her side. I pulled her hair back while Jessica began to rub soothing hands across her back.

“Are you okay?” I inquired in concern.

“Please don’t laugh,” Amy groaned once she stopped puking. “The smell is so strong.”

I frowned. The smell of the infected was pungent. Even from this distance, I could easily detect the cloying scent of death, burning hair, and flesh. However, it wasn’t the worst that Amy and I had smelled.

I had been on several missions with Amy. Just two weeks ago, we stumbled upon a clinic where it appeared as if people had squatted for some time. The whole place reeked of feces and rotten food. We had to play rock, paper, and scissors to determine who was scouting the place. Four of us had to go in there to check for medical supplies. The stench still assaulted us even with Vapor rub under our noses and perfume-sprayed gaiters. Amy and I had gotten close to throwing up a few times but hadn’t.

So, in other words, the odors from the infected were strong but not nearly as invasive as what we had already experienced. Amy and I had found a community pool and washed and conditioned our hair thrice before we felt the scents were gone. We had to put our clothes in trash bags and put them in the cattle trailer. When we returned, we ran them through the wash two times with scent booster beads. If that hadn’t worked, we would have thrown them out. We didn’t like to waste anything. It wasn’t like our tactical gear was easy to replace.

“No one’s laughing,” I reassured her, handing her a bottle of water tucked in my flak vest.

I hadn’t completely converted to the cargo pants and fitted tops the men preferred. I still favored my pleather pants and leather jacket. However, I added a flak vest and arm guards after BJ nearly got bit a few weeks ago. Luckily, he could

grasp and place a thin board over his arm at the last second. It gave him the idea to find something to protect his extremities. So, when he stumbled across a sporting goods store, he had taken all the shin and arm guards off their shelves. Then he advised us all to wear them—they had come in handy since.

“Got any spray,” she queried as she held up her gaiter.

I nodded and took it from her as she put Vapor rub below her nose.

“Not that one,” she immediately protested when I pulled out the small aerosol can of body spray.

“Josh put a lavender trash liner in our trash can at home,” She wrinkled her nose. “I was never crazy about the smell, but it’s much worse lately.”

I looked down at the can and realized it was lavender. Then I frowned as comprehension dawned. “Umm, Amy,” I softly spoke, aware that the guys were still looking at us. I was trying to think of a discreet way to question her.

I knew Amy and Josh had pulled the goalie— so to speak. She already told us that Josh had been trying to get pregnant. Amy confided in us that she knew that she wanted to marry him and have kids the moment she met Josh. Their fall wedding wasn’t a possibility any longer, but that didn’t deter them. They still wanted kids.

Some people may think they were crazy bringing babies into our world. Some even thought it was selfish of them to do so. However, they saw that life was too short and wanted pieces of themselves to carry on regardless of our current environment. They knew we were lucky in Sanctuary and believed one day, we could reclaim the land beyond it.

“When’s the last time you had a period?” Jessica leaned in to whisper as she handed Amy a stick of chewing gum.

“I’m not—” Amy began to say, then her eyes widened. “Shit.”

I could see the fear in her eyes, followed quickly by hope and joy.

“Ames?” Kingston called. “You, okay?”

“All good.” Amy clapped her hands. “What’s the game plan?”

“Amy?” I tentatively inquired.

She stopped and grasped my and Jessica’s hands. “If I am, I’m five or six weeks along. I’m okay. I’ll be okay.” She gave us pointed looks.

I could see the determination in her eyes. I didn’t know if it was reckless of her or not, but in a way, I could understand her reasoning. Physically, she felt like she could assist the refugees. She couldn’t base her decision on a possibility.

“Can we keep this to ourselves?” she quietly pleaded, before looking at me. “When we get back can you sneak me a pregnancy test? Josh loves surprises, and I would love to think of a cute way to break the news to him.”

Jessica and I exchanged looks. I didn’t want her to go, but I had to respect her choices. I had to support her in the way she wanted me to.

I was the first to nod before I squeezed her hand back. “Be careful, please, and I’ll sneak a test to you.”

“As your friend,” Jessica slowly stated. “It’s not my job to judge you but to support you, so your secret’s safe with me.” Amy gave us a relieved smile, but Jessica gave her a stern look before continuing. “However, if that test comes back positive *and* after Josh finds out, I will have to support him too. I’ll agree if he wants you to remain in the gates after this.”

“Fine,” Amy sighed.

I was positive Josh wouldn’t want her to leave the gates again until well after the baby was born. And once it was confirmed, I’m sure Amy would agree with him. She already told us that she planned to take it easy after pregnancy. We all knew our lives were in danger any time we left the gates.

“Rev,” Axel called.

“Let’s bow our heads,” Chad commanded before he said the prayer.



“The chainsaws are jammed,” I yelled to my left and right.

I don’t know where they came from, but the infected had grown in numbers. From our communications with ECP4, they had been surrounded. They had been advised to take cover and were safely ensconced in the eight-by-ten bunker we had placed under all the ECPs. We had commandeered additional cargo containers and buried and ventilated them before stocking them with a week’s worth of MREs for ten people, games, cots, a table, and a sofa. The sheds were erected above them with a hidden trap door to access the panic spaces.

For the safety of ECP3, they had also been told to retreat. Their security was necessary, and they couldn’t assist us from the ground. We were able to help the refugees with no danger to ourselves.

With the chainsaws no longer operating, it didn’t take too long for the infected to realize that the bus was vulnerable. A group of them began to climb on one side of the bus and it began to tip precariously.

Even from our considerable distance, the sounds of children screaming echoed off the mountainsides. My stomach sank, my heartbeat sped up, and my palms turned sweaty. Until now, the refugees were essentially faceless beings that needed our help. Now that I heard the screams of children, all I could imagine was my stepbrothers, cousins, and children screaming in terror.

“The bus is going to tip!” Kingston screamed out at the same time Corbin bellowed. “They have kids.”

“Alpha 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, Prophet, Little Warrior, Smokey, Boy Wonder, on me,” Axel yelled in our headsets over the din of infected screeches, children screaming, and the alarmed voices of our people. “Team, stand down, but cover us. We’re going in.” Axel depressed his mic once more.

“Copy that,” we all echoed in response as I fell in step behind Axel and Corbin.

The bridge made of wood and rope swayed slightly beneath our booted feet. I tried not to freak out when it dipped and came within four feet of the infected that had converged on us. They seemed to have given up on reaching the people strategically spread out on the mountain’s face. They made a valiant effort to get them but soon realized that there were no grip holds to grab onto to reach them. Even though we had trimmed and cut back the bottom of the trees, they seemed to find other ways to cling to the tree trunks mere feet from us. I grasped the spear attached to my back and began to aim toward their open maws and heads.

Looking around, I noticed the others had also reached for their long-range weapons and began to dispatch the pack of infected that had taken residence beneath us.

“They tipped the bus!” Uncle Mitch yelled into our comms.

I knew I wasn’t the only one that felt my pulse speed up. A sickening feeling entered my stomach. I would hate to lose anyone, especially since it was a mystery what those people had encountered on their way here.

“Alpha 3 and 4, upfront and do the sweep,” Axel called back.

“Copy,” Wyatt and Corbin responded.

Wyatt and Corbin maneuvered to the front. A clicking sound hit my ear moments before I saw the flames burst from the flamethrowers the general had gifted us. Wyatt, Corbin, and Kingston had behaved like children when we first acquired them. Unfortunately, they couldn’t utilize them until tonight, so I’m sure they were stoked to test them out finally.

Soon the sounds of the infected bellows of rage and screeches filled our ears. The smell of burnt flesh and hair filled my nostrils. The flamethrowers probably wouldn’t kill them, but they definitely slowed them down and, in most cases, caused the infected to go blind.

I could hear Amy making retching noises, and when I slightly turned, our eyes met. She held up her thumbs. I gave her a pointed look as if to tell her she could turn back. She interpreted my face perfectly because a look of resoluteness and determination filled her eyes. She emphatically shook her head *no*, and I finally understood how Wyatt, Axel, and Easton initially felt about me leaving the compound. If I had my way, I would force Amy to return to base or at least stay out of direct harm's way.

"Release the dogs," Axel commanded as we descended the ladder Wyatt and Corbin had cleared for us.

The perches they built for us weren't easily accessible; therefore, we couldn't bring the dogs without putting them in danger. Murphy and Chad were devising a design to lift them to us or create a backpack for us to carry them in similar situations. Axel and Zeke had already integrated it into our training to have us prepare. I ran with a fifty-pound backpack. It was brutal on my body, but it was getting easier each day. I had been trying to work up to seventy-five pounds since Sasha was a little over sixty.

Axel and Corbin had been training to carry Bane. Our Mastiff-pit puppy was already tipping the scales at eighty-five pounds. The vet warned us he would be well over one hundred pounds when he reached maturity. However, it hadn't deterred them, and they were determined to get to the point where they could easily wear him like a backpack.

Bane, Sasha, Roscoe, and a Staffordshire terrier Athena were released from the ECP. Athena had been one of the dogs rescued from a local shelter. Kingston had taken an affinity for her and was eager to work with her. Rhys and Mike were training with Roscoe, even though Mike had restrictions to join us in recovery.

Axel and I blew into the whistles that we had taken to carrying. We had trained the dogs to come to us by several methods, and it was the one they seemed to respond to the best when chaos surrounded us. Immediately they flanked our sides, circling us.

The pack, like us, worked like a well-oiled machine. The canines trained nearly as hard as we did. An older teen, Devon, had been assisting us in training. Apparently, before the crap hit the fan, his dad had trained military and police canines and search and rescue dogs. He was like an encyclopedia and gave us additional information on adequately utilizing our dogs to the best of our abilities. Of course, Sasha would only “work” when I was around, but I didn’t mind. It only strengthened our bond, in my opinion.

Devon had also discovered Athena’s abilities for us. With over twenty dogs in our community, we found that not all could work alongside us. It took a special dog not to get spooked or anxious by the chaos around us. We also relied on them to use their instincts, and not many of them had the natural inclination to assist us.

I held up my hand and made a circular motion before chopping forward. The dogs encircled us, and we began to move forward. They snarled and circled us, giving us the time and ability to strike out at the infected that had converged on us. Most of the infected still seemed suspicious of our four-legged friends, but a few seemed undeterred by their presence. They were the ones that we kept our eyes on.

I pulled out my sais and cut down the infected that posed the most significant threats. The fury I kept bottled inside me caused me to strike out with abandon. My blood sang, thirsty to seek revenge the best way I could. The bloodlust that I typically abhorred was now a balm to my soul. I generally compartmentalize my feelings, but this release was cathartic.

With my release I had severed the little bit of guilt and pain I felt for cutting down the infected. I separated their apparent humanity from the monsters they had become.

Typically, I was filled with apathy. The desire to kill the infected was a way to keep the people I loved and cared for safe. Tonight, I was using them as an outlet. I took all the pain and hurt I felt towards Uncle Mitch and Aunt Pam and used it to fuel me.

It didn't take us long to make our way toward our destination. I was finally able to see the bus on its side. The screams of the people trapped inside reached my ears, causing my heart to stutter. Movement to my left caught my attention and I realized some of the refugees were exiting the MRAP.

I saw their determination to make their way back to the bus. Then, I watched as someone lifted a hatch from the top of an RV. Two older teen girls, a teen boy, and an older man, pulled out hatchet-looking weapons. They stood on top of the RV as they threw the hatchets at the nearest infected, clearing a path for the two men that exited the MRAP.

Our group steadily made our way toward the bus. I kept my head on a swivel as I dispatched a woman no older than me with an empty baby carrier. I shuddered and prayed that the baby was safe wherever it was. Another man who reminded me too much of my seventh-grade history teacher advanced toward me. His screams made chills run down my back. The glasses he wore on his thin face were askew, and one of the lenses was utterly shattered and coated with blood and gore.

I heard a blood-curdling scream after I dispatched a man who was probably a player or a ladies' man when he was alive. Even with the blood coursing down his cheek and the foam spewing from his mouth, I could see he had been handsome once upon a time. I barely turned my head in time to fend off a woman who looked like she had been out partying. She, too, had been gorgeous. The rage I saw in her eyes further supported our claims. These... things... these infected had some level of awareness. The look she gave me was one of a raging lover, or someone bent on revenge.

Once I realized that my sai had hit its mark and I had severed her brain of all motor functions, I again turned my head to assess the situation. Out of my peripheral, I noticed a man with unnerving speed advance towards Rhys. I immediately realized that he was unaware of its advancement. The dogs seemed preoccupied with protecting Axel, Amy, BJ, and Easton. I saw Bane begin to break formation, but I knew he shouldn't.

“Rhys, duck,” I screamed at the same time I dropped my sais to my hip holsters.

Rhys didn't hesitate or acknowledge he even heard me before bending down and striking out at the older teen infected that had him in his grasp. His machete sliced through the infected neck, detaching his head from his body.

Bane stalked toward the fray, and I feared he may get caught in the line of fire. I unclipped my throwing blades from my vest.

“Bane, stay,” I commanded, releasing my first knife.

Throwing blades now came second nature to me. I barely released my first knife with a flick of my wrist before I reached for another one and launched it. My first blade connected with the infected's left eye, and the second landed in his open maw. Neither seemed to reach its brain, but it slowed it down. Then, before I could release a third one, Kingston ducked and weaved from an infected reaching for him, landing the Kama into his temple. And in one fluid, graceful movement, he spun and stabbed his other Kama into the infected he had been attacking.

“Thanks, Ave and King,” Rhys called out before he was sparring with another infected.

“Anytime,” Kingston chuckled.

I didn't have to see his mouth to know he was smiling. I swear that man was always jovial. It was infrequent that he didn't have a grin on his face.

“I have your back,” I commented, returning to the skirmish.

After several minutes I realized that the end was in sight. It didn't seem like any more were coming. We just had to deal with the infected that surrounded us. And after several more moments, the only sound encompassing us was the vibrating and rumbling of the cavalcade's motors.

“All clear?” Corbin inquired into the mic; his breathing labored.

I looked around and could see no more infected converging on us. So, my group did a circle, our hands on our weapons, always ready.

“Clear,” Trevor responded from the perch of the wooden bridges.

“Clear,” Uncle Mitch spoke next from the mountain platforms.

I lifted my gaiter enough to blow one short breath into my whistle. “Bane, Sasha, Athena, and Roscoe, search,” I commanded.

Their training kicked in once more, and they all began to stalk in separate directions. Their heads swiveled left and right, occasionally lowering to a twitching infected, ensuring it wouldn't get back up.

“Okay, let's move in,” Axel spoke in the mics. “Walk with care and annihilate the twitchers.”

Axel's eyes were on us as he casually stuck a spear into a woman attempting to drag her torso toward us. Her legs were nowhere to be found, and her entrails were trailing behind her. I indifferently watched as she grew still.

“I need a team with me to do a sweep, gather the infected, and drop them in the gullies,” Uncle Mitch stated.

Trenches had been dug and strategically placed along the roads. The idea was that a clean-up crew would come in once the infected had been dispatched. It was their job to drop the bodies into the ditches and incinerate them. After that, the ECPs and a few additional people would continue to monitor the fires until nothing, but ash remained. Then quicklime would be added to cut down the scents and ensure the smells didn't attract flies and other natural predators.

And just like that, my anger at my uncle rose back up. I angrily snatched my gaiter off and stuffed it into a pocket in my vest. Then I pulled off my sunglasses and slid them into the pouch on my left hip.

Zeke moved next to me, removed a packet of wipes, and gently began wiping my face and hands.

“It’s going to be okay,” he gently murmured to me. “You did well. Just keep your head in the game.”

I nodded as my blood boiled below the surface and turned to advance towards the bus.

“Are you okay?” Wyatt asked in concern as he fell into step beside me.

My mouth opened and closed as I debated divulging what Zeke and I had witnessed. The battle was over. The news wouldn’t distract him any longer. Yet, a small part of me still wanted to protect his feelings. Why should Corbin, Wyatt, BJ, and Trevor experience the sense of betrayal I felt? I knew the truth would come out. However, I wanted to protect them just a little longer.

“I’m fine,” I said with a weary sigh.

Zeke hooked his fingers through mine and squeezed, silently lending me his support. Wyatt gave us a puzzled look. I could see him preparing to press me more when Axel called him over to assist him. I nearly sighed in relief at the brief reprieve.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” Wyatt probed before turning away.

I nodded before I embraced him. “I know, honey, just give me a little bit, okay? I promise you it’s nothing about you or anything you did.” I fervently insisted.

“Okay.” Wyatt squeezed me back, giving me another puzzled look before he loped off in Axel’s direction.

Zeke gave me another reassuring squeeze before pulling me in the direction of an area in need of assistance. The other refugees must have believed it was safe because they began pouring out of the vehicles. I could see a group of people attempting to enter the bus in any way that they could.

“Everything’s okay. We’re coming for you,” I heard a man say, as he used the tire to climb onto the side of the vehicle.

With the bus tipped over, the windows were facing up towards the sky. The door was trapped against the ground. The

only options available were the rear emergency door and the windows. The man stopped when he reached the first window. He knelt and attempted to open a window.

At the rear of the bus, another group of men were attempting to pry open the emergency exit. I wondered if we had a tool to shatter the glass. We could direct the passengers away from the areas we needed to smash through.

“I’m here. I’m here. I’ll get you out in a moment. Take deep breaths.” The man reassured the trapped passengers.

I could hear the fear, resolve, and devastation in his voice. Yet, the muffled cries of children could still be heard. And a scream from a toddler rang in my ears. Having Dani, Foster, and Isa, I could quickly distinguish the cries of a child, toddler, and infant.

I jogged up to the bus knowing Easton and I were the most qualified to offer medical care. I vaguely computed that the drawbridge was being lowered, and vehicles from Sanctuary were riding out to meet us. I’m sure, by now, someone had been sent to gather back-up.

As we reached the bus, they managed to wrench open the emergency exit at the rear. The windows had been shattered, and soon children were being handed out and down to waiting arms.

“I’ll get your med bags,” Zeke volunteered, as Easton and I reached the bus simultaneously.

“Thanks.” I attempted to smile at him as I focused on the task at hand.

Once again, I needed to put my feelings on the back burner. The people trapped in the bus with possible injuries needed my sole attention. It wasn’t fair to them for my mind to be elsewhere. The situation I had witnessed earlier couldn’t be helped, whereas this one could be. I owed it to them to be in the best possible mind frame.

“If it appears like someone is immobile, do not move them,” Easton yelled over the din. “We have neck braces and gurneys coming.”

“Only move or grab a child that appears to be uninjured,” I echoed his sentiments as I stationed myself by a man attempting to extricate the children.

“You can hand them down to me when you’re ready,” I offered.

“Okay,” he threw over his shoulder.

I vaguely realized that Trevor jogged up beside me. “Your bag, Ave,” Trevor murmured, grasping my shoulder gently.

I briefly wondered where Zeke had gone then noticed he was assisting another injured person down the way. I opened my bag. It had almost everything I would need to do basic first aid. The patients would still have to go to the clinic, but at least some things could be addressed now. The bus wasn’t going anywhere; it would probably be some time before some of these people were transferred.

I looked up at Trevor and attempted to smile at him. Sometimes it was easy to forget he once held my heart. Sometimes, it felt like my relationship with him was in another lifetime. There had been a time or two when I saw regret cross his features, but we were slowly becoming friends again. For example, we built nesting boxes for the chickens a few weeks ago without mentioning our past. Instead, we joked and talked as if our history was firmly in the past.

“You, okay?” he murmured.

Moments like this demonstrated that he was my best friend before becoming my boyfriend. In many ways, he knew me better than most. There were things he knew about me that Corbin and my men were learning. The familiarity brought me comfort from time to time. However, I wish he wasn’t so astute in instances like this.

“I will be,” I answered honestly before turning back around.

I realized I was disgusting and in no shape to provide medical care in my condition, so I decided to strip down to the basics. First, I removed the straps over my shoulder that held my sais and bo-staff. Then I carefully set them down, so they

were within my arm's reach. Next came my tactical vest. Again, I laid that down before finally removing my leather jacket and arm guards. That left me in my sleeveless compression top, pleather pants, thigh holsters holding additional weapons, and combat boots.

The whole time I stripped down, I knew Trevor still hovered. I wanted to confide in him, but I was still processing everything. He continued to stand and watch me as I walked over to the bus.

“Hand them here,” I bade the man on the bus.

“Okay,” Trevor hesitantly stated. “Well, I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks,” I didn’t turn back around.

Then I realized how short I was with Trevor, which wasn’t fair to him. He saw my tumultuous emotions and was attempting to relieve some of the burdens. It wasn’t his fault I couldn’t hide my feelings better. He was trying to be a stand-up guy and offer his ear.

“Hey, Trev?” I called out guiltily.

He turned and looked at me expectantly. “Thanks for asking.” I gave him a crooked smile.

He nodded and smiled at me before helping one of the refugees towards the transport vehicles.

“Ready?” the man inquired with a sardonic drawl.

“Yes, sir,” I carefully concealed my sarcasm.

I was barely hanging on to my sanity at the moment. I was on the verge of releasing my anger. However, I needed to tamp it down or wait to release it properly. This man had probably had harrowing experiences out here. He probably had a loved one trapped on the bus. So, he had every right to be annoyed that I was busy chit-chatting instead of helping.

“Are you sure?” he poked as he leaned down to hand me the child.

At first, it was hard to tell whether the child was a boy or a girl. They wore shorts that reached down to their knees and a superhero T-shirt. However, the boy or girl had long hair in a messy bun on the top of their head. I noticed a wicked-looking cut above the child's eyes. Blood flowed freely, but head wounds always seemed to bleed the worst.

"I said I was," I snapped as I carefully cradled the crying child to my chest.

I was unable to see the man grow still. However, I was unable to see his response. The lights illuminated the bottom of the bus, leaving the top cast in shadows. I could only see his silhouette outlined from my angle.

"Shh, I got you," I crooned to the child. "You're safe now, and I'm going to help you feel all better."

I carefully set the older toddler on my lap as I pulled my bag closer. I soothingly patted their back as I assessed their injuries.

"I want my sissy," the boy whimpered.

I assumed he was a boy by his speech, but it was still unclear if they were a boy or girl.

"I know, baby, I know." I gently pushed back black hair that had escaped its top knot and fallen over their wound. "Let's clean and patch up this boo-boo, then we'll look for sissy," I soothed.

"Sis...ssy," he sobbed.

"It'll be okay." I pulled out alcohol wipes and bandages.

As I looked for the tape, I grasped a plastic baggy and smiled. I'd impulsively grabbed lollipops the last time I stocked my first aid bag. From my experience with children and some adults, a distraction was sometimes needed.

"What's your name, pumpkin? My name is Avery," I stated, placing a cloth on his head to stop the bleeding.

I briefly looked up and noticed Dad, Aunt Pam, and a few other troops with medical or SABC— Self Aid Buddy Care—

training was helping children, toddlers, and adults out of the bus.

“Ihaia,” the child whimpered as they gazed up at me with large dark eyes.

I confirmed that Ihaia was a boy who appeared to have an Asian heritage. His golden-brown skin was a shade or two darker than my own. Plus, he had a tilt to his eyes, the color of coffee grounds.

“I love that name,” I said, examining the wound which appeared to have stopped bleeding.

I could see that the injury was very superficial. I would have him reexamined, but I imagined the bandage I would place on him would be enough.

“It’s unique. What’s sissy’s name?” I continued to build a rapport with him to set him at ease.

“Hahana,” his breath hiccupped on a sob as he courageously attempted to stem his tears.

“That’s pretty, too,” I stated as I pulled out the needed supplies. “How old are you and your sister?”

“Me, four,” he gulped. “Hana is six.”

I felt some tension leave me as I observed several people exiting the bus. Some of our people appeared to be leading them to our waiting vehicles. It gave me hope that the injuries weren’t terribly bad.

“Well, Ihaia,” I ripped open the alcohol pad. “This is going to sting, and I’m very sorry, but if you’re a brave boy, I’ll give you a lollipop. Do you like lollipops?”

He nodded, his sobs slowing as tears rolled down his face. “Me a big boy,” he resolutely stated.

I smiled. “I see that! Did you know we have a huge playground that way,” I pointed toward camp. “And I have kids around your age that would love to play with you.”

“Me can play on it?” he inquired with wide eyes.

“You can!” I exclaimed as I pressed the alcohol wipe to the wound. “We have lakes you can swim in, a water park, horses to ride, animals to feed, and I so happen to know,” I dropped my voice conspiratorially. “Soon a trampoline park will be put in.”

One of the recovering teams had come back with a skid full of trampolines. No one would admit to grabbing them, though. It wasn't a necessity, and the kids had a lot of things to entertain them as it was. Cal and Joe asked if they could erect them for the children. After a brief discussion, Dad and Uncle Mitch decided it would be a good idea but wanted to dig the pits first. The idea was that the trampolines would be dropped in to them, and foam mats would surround them with netting. The assumption was that no child could fall off it, and fewer injuries would occur.

Ihaia let out a little whimper as the alcohol seeped into his wound but didn't flinch. “Good job,” I praised him. “Maybe tomorrow morning I'll let you meet the kids. They'll be so excited to meet new friends.”

I looked up, observed our surroundings again, and noticed most of our people were loading up who they could onto the bus and ambulance that had been brought out. I saw someone on a gurney being loaded onto the ambulance and noticed Easton close the rear doors after climbing in. Aunt Pam was approximately twenty-five feet away, splinting a younger teen's legs as he cried and held onto them. My heart sank, remembering what I had attempted to forget.

I continued to look around as I finished bandaging up Ihaia. The fire had already started as the infected were loaded into their final resting place. Uncle Mitch, Dad, and Uncle Scott animatedly talked to three men. I assumed one of them was the man who worked and hunted with Uncle Mitch. But, again, he was a topic I rather forget.

Few people were left by the bus doing basic first aid on the wounded. I hoped that meant the tip-over wasn't as bad as it looked. So far, all the children that walked past or were carried with our people seemed okay.

“How are we looking?” I asked Corbin as he walked by, assisting an older man.

The man held his wrist gingerly, and I could tell it was swollen. I imagined he had a fracture since he seemed to have some movement in his fingertips.

He looked over at me and attempted a smile. “I’ll walk the rest of the way by myself, sonny,” he patted Corbin on the shoulder.

“Just got the last man out,” Corbin smiled and pointed a thumb toward the man’s retreating form. “A few seemed unconscious, but their pulse was steady, and their vitals looked good. Easton just left with the ambulance. Kingston and Wyatt are riding back on the bus for a quick inspection.

“Axel and I are preparing to do a final sweep and see how ECP 4 is doing. They informed us that everything looks good, but we want to verify it visually.”

“So, no casualties?” I inquired, hoping and praying there wasn’t any.

Corbin hung his head for a moment. “They lost three people that attempted to assist the people in the bus before they were given clearance.”

“I don’t know if I could have waited either,” I admitted as Ihaia leaned his head onto my shoulder.

I looked down and smiled. Ihaia looked close to falling asleep. I gently rubbed his back and embraced him closer. “He looks well-fed,” I quietly murmured.

We weren’t recovering people at the rate we once were. And when we did, a majority of them looked close to starvation. Typically, those people had been searching for a safe location from the beginning. They scavenged and carried the items they could, and sometimes they would have to ensure the food they recovered lasted for days.

Corbin smiled and nodded. “Their leaders are talking to the ‘rents right now, but from the sounds of it, they had found and secured a safe location after the collapse. I’m not sure if the infected or the living made them risk their escape.”

I frowned and nodded. I had a feeling it was the living and not the undead.

“Okay, baby girl, I’m going to check on the others. Are you okay? Do you want me to take the little tyke?” Corbin reached over and fondly tugged on the end of my ponytail.

“It’s okay,” I gave him a tired smile as I looked down at my little patient.

Ihaia was sleeping soundly. Now that my adrenaline was wearing off, I was exhausted. I longed for a shower and bed. “I’m going to clean up my mess and carry him to the transport.”

“Okay, love you.” He winked before turning away.

“Love you too,” I impishly blew a kiss at him.

I gathered the trash and stuffed it in the side of my med kit. I would clean it out later. Then I stood. The sturdy boy made my tired limbs wearier, but I knew I could power through. It was good practice for carrying Sasha.

“Hey, Hai,” I heard a vaguely familiar voice call out. “Look who I found.”

Ihaia startled awake and blinked owlishly. “He was asleep,” I grumbled.

I hated being testy to perfect strangers but was exhausted and could feel the filth coating my skin.

Ihaia popped his head up and looked around. As the tall man approached, I didn’t even look at him. Instead, my focus was on the pretty little girl in his arms. I immediately knew who she must be.

“Hana!” “Hai!” Two very excited children’s voices exclaimed simultaneously.

I smiled as I realized Hahana seemed to have her arm in a sling but seemed otherwise healthy. The resemblance between the two was evident. They both had a riot of thick dark curls, brown skin, and large dark eyes. Side by side, I would have thought Hahana was younger than six, and Ihaia was older

than four. He was tall and sturdy, whereas his sister was petite and lean.

Ihaia struggled to escape my arms as Hahana wiggled from the man's grasp. Tears sprung to my eyes; glad they were reuniting. Their sibling bond was prevalent.

I couldn't help but imagine myself in their places. I couldn't even fathom losing my brother or worrying about his safety. He was my best friend, and from the looks of it, so were they. I finally looked up from their happy reunion to see the man who had rescued them, and the breath left my lungs.

Holy shit! The man was roughly six feet tall. And I knew he was Māori. He had the top half of his black curls pulled back into a man-bun, and the sides and bottom half were shorn close to his scalp. His nose was a tad on the larger size and flat, but it didn't deter from his attractiveness. His brown eyes were the color of cognac and were very expressive. His bone structure rivaled Axel's.

The collapse had changed him physically in some ways. He had lost some of his bulk, although he was still cut. He had the whole bad-boy vibe going on with his piercings and tattoos. He had tunnel plugs roughly the width of my pinky in both ears. His black sleeveless T-shirt showcased the many tribal tattoos he had decorating both arms. He didn't need to introduce himself because I knew exactly who he was. He was Ari Wa Timoti, the lead singer of one of my favorite alternative bands, Unfiltered Euphonies.

He smirked at me as if he realized I had recognized him. I was getting ready to be flippant and roll my eyes when I heard a low rumbling growl approximately fifteen feet away from me. I recognized Sasha's warning growl. I trusted her enough not to hesitate when her instincts kicked in. The hairs on the back of my neck immediately rose. Goosebumps pebbled across my skin. A sense of foreboding struck me. I quickly but gently guided Hai to Ari's side.

"Hide," I hissed, bending down to pick up my vest.

I swung my head left and right until I located Sasha. She was prowling toward the other side of the road by the stand of

woods. The lights mounted by the road barely reached the figures sitting there. It took me a moment to realize Amy was administering first aid. It looked like a teen was lying down as Amy appeared to be picking something off the boy with a pair of tweezers. From this distance, I assumed glass had shattered on the boy's skin. But I knew that wasn't what had Sasha on alert.

“Hey, what's going on?” Ari grasped my arm.

My eyes narrowed as I saw movement behind Amy's back in the trees. It took me a moment to comprehend what I was seeing. I saw something in motion that could easily be mistaken for bushes or leaves swaying in the wind. I tilted my head to the side, hoping the spotlights could illuminate what I saw in the shadows. The closer I advanced, the more the picture became apparent, especially when the silhouettes separated from the trees. I realized then what I was seeing. Infected!

I shook Ari off as Sasha sprang into action. “Amy,” I screamed as I realized six infected were sprinting towards her and the teen.

I don't think my feet touched the ground as I raced towards her, pulling my weapons.

## CHAPTER 6



CHAOS erupted around me. I heard my name being called. Then the plaintive cry from Ihaia. Out of my peripheral, I saw Bane and Athena flank my sides. Yet, my focus was on the infected. I saw fear and indecision strike Amy's features for the first time ever. She looked around wildly, and then I realized she had no weapons.

The first infected was within feet of her, and instead of running or attempting to save herself, she protectively curled herself around the teen boy. I ran, leaped over a few infected, and extended my leg to strike the first infected with my steel toes. His head snapped back, and he fell back. I knew it was

only a moment's reprieve. I took advantage of his temporary stunned state and whirled on the next infected with my sai. The infected slumped over, and as I withdrew the blade from his temple, I heard Amy cry out. I spun around to see one of the infected had reached her and was attempting to drag her to his open maw.

“Not today,” I gritted between clenched teeth and struck my blade up into the underside of his jaw and up into his brain.

I attempted to free my Sai, but something impeded it from withdrawing. I tried to kick out and push his body with my foot simultaneously. I pulled with all my might, but it was stuck. Unfortunately, I hadn't been paying attention. I hadn't noticed Amy's medical kit and stumbled over it. I felt myself falling and saw another infected leaping at me now.

Sasha and Athena went to attack it jointly, but with concerning speed and power, the former six foot six or so infected backhanded Sasha with one fist. I watched in horror as she fell head over feet with a loud yip of pain.

The infected didn't even pause to see the damage he had caused and managed to get a hold of the vest Athena was wearing and tossed her like she was nothing but a sack of flour. Athena let out an ear-piercing yelp. Bane came from nowhere, snapping his teeth at the infected and running circles around it. He seemed too suspicious to advance. And the infected seemed undeterred by the snarling canine.

For a moment, fear left me immobilized. Then, someone screaming my name broke me from my trance, and I grabbed my other sai just as the giant infected leaped onto my back. He picked me up into a bear hug and squeezed. The air was expelled from my lungs. I could hear the pounding of my pulse in my ears. I attempted to scream but was unable to.

I vaguely computed guns going off and watched two infected crumble beside Amy and the teen. I twisted and bucked against the infected. He let out a loud bellow. His mouth opened, and he leaned toward my exposed throat. A cry of revulsion escaped my lips as I experienced something cold

and wet coat my neck and pool down my shirt and jacket. I could feel whatever he expelled from his mouth and nose, mere millimeters from my skin.

I could barely breathe as he squeezed harder. My vision began to blur on the edges. I saw my life flash as my dad, Ari, Axel, and another man I didn't recognize coming closer. Memories of my guys, my children, joys of my youth flashed like photographs.

"Avery," Axel yelled with panic. I had never heard from him.

And that's all I needed to continue my fight. Today was not the day for me to give up and die. I brought my feet to my chest and braced myself against the tree before us. When I dropped my weight and felt his body go off balance, I used every muscle in my legs to push against the tree. He began to fall backward, and I continued running up the tree like I was doing parkour. It went against my training, but my instincts kicked in. I knew I would still be in a perilous situation if I fell with him. I had to use my Tae Kwon Do and gymnastics training and essentially do a backflip over him and landed, so I was poised above and behind him.

I managed to free my arms as he fell. I let his momentum spur me up and over his head. His body fell with an audible thud, and miraculously, I landed on my haunches. I pulled the knives from my boot and plunged one through his head and the other into the top of his skull. I had no moment to breathe or celebrate before the remaining two infected grasped my arms. I felt like a wishbone from a Thanksgiving turkey for a split second. The man and woman pulled, both eager to get the first bite of me.

My knives clattered to the ground as their inhumane grips numbed my wrist. I watched in horror as the man wrapped his mouth around my covered wrist and bit down. I screamed as the pain followed. There was so much blood, gore, and other unidentifiable substances clinging to my shirt that I could not tell if his teeth had broken through. My wrist hurt, but it could be his death grip on my arm. I freed my wrist from his grasp, but he quickly latched onto my bicep.

I knew I had to weaken one of my assailants and surmised that it was the female. She barely reached my breast and weighed at most one hundred and fifteen pounds. I chose to free myself from her first. I raised my foot and pushed out with all my weight. I knew that if I was to strike out her knees with enough power, I could essentially dislocate it. Of course, it wouldn't kill her, but it could cause her to loosen her grip on me, allowing me to dispatch the other infected. He was an inch or so shorter than me but had to outweigh me by fifty pounds.

I let out a war cry as my foot connected with her knee, and the satisfying crack of broken bone filled my ear. She didn't cry out but stumbled and fell backward over the same bag I had just fallen over. It caused the other infected to stagger, and as he lurched forward, I grasped the hair on the top of his head. I felt clumps of his hair separate from his skull and into my hand. I tried not to shudder or let go. I managed to gain enough purchase of it to yank with all my might in the same direction as his fall. Once I knew he was continuing his descent down, I grasped my other sai and struck it in and up the soft spot between the base of the skull and the neck. I hadn't had time to put back on my gloves, so I felt his cold coagulated blood coat my hands.

I whirled back around, desperately ignoring that I wanted to swim in a pool of bleach to get all their secretions off me. I didn't think I would ever feel clean again.

I pulled my gun from my shoulder holster, knowing no one was in my sight, and took three shots at the woman poised to attack again. It was like she was in slow motion as I watched my bullets strike her cheek, shoulder, and, finally, her forehead. Then, like a caged animal, I wildly spun around, ensuring no more threats were imminent.

“Honeybee!” Dad exclaimed, snatching me up into a hug.

“Papa Bear,” I murmured against his shoulder.

“Were you bitten?” He sobbed, clutching me almost painfully.

“No,” I mumbled from numb lips. “Yes. I don't know!”

Suddenly I wondered if I had been but didn't remember. It wouldn't be the first time I got injured, and I hadn't recalled it. Plenty of sparring matches left me black and blue without recollection of how they got there. After one particular fight, I went home with three scratches down my cheek. I never even remembered when the female I had been sparring with had struck out with her nails at one point. Another instance had me nursing two broken toes for a few weeks. When people asked me how I got it and why it hadn't caused me to end the match, I honestly replied that I had never felt it. It wasn't until the adrenaline left that I typically felt my injuries.

The adrenaline of the last five or so minutes came whooshing out of me all at once. I felt my entire body begin to shake as if it were in the throes of a seizure. My stomach dipped. My head spun. My mouth filled with saliva as if I was in danger of vomiting.

I felt another body crush behind me, and the smell of Bergamot and Sandalwood let me know it was Axel.

"Breathe, Avery, breathe," Axel grumbled in my ear.

I gasped out a breath, realizing that I hadn't been breathing.

"We need to take her back, get her under the showers, see if she was bitten," Uncle Mitch said with tears in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Avery, I'm so sorry," Amy sobbed.

"I'm okay!" I began to panic. "I'm okay," I insisted, looking at the others.

Yet I began questioning myself when my gaze met Corbin's, Dad's, Uncle Mitch's, Aris, and the strangers.

"No!" I screamed in denial. "No! No! No!"

Only my screams weren't escaping my lips. Instead, the darkness began to cloud my vision. The will to stand on my own was gone as I disappeared into the prison of my head.



I don't remember how I got back to camp. I hadn't passed out, but I had been in a state of shock.

The warm water cascading down my body finally seeped into my consciousness. Gentle fingers massaged my scalp. The feeling of a washcloth glided over my inert limbs.

"She's going to be okay. She's going to be okay," I heard Wyatt repeatedly muttering, his voice filled with tears.

"Who the fuck stopped the sweep?" Kingston screamed, his voice breaking at the end. "This all could have been prevented." His following words came out in a broken whisper.

"None of this is helping," Easton hissed out almost clinically, yet I heard the empty hollowness in his voice.

"Look, you all need to calm down," Zeke commanded somewhere to the left of my ear. "We don't know if she was even bitten. Do you forget who the hell we're talking about? Our girl," his voice grew thick for a moment. "Is a fighter. There's no way in hell she would ever get herself bitten."

Suddenly the memories came flooding back, and I realized I must be in the shower and may have been bitten. It was a struggle for my eyes to focus on my surroundings.

"There you are, baby girl," Corbin crooned, his eyes bloodshot as if he had been crying.

I blinked several times, trying to comprehend my exact location. I was draped across Axel and Corbin's laps in one of the bathhouse showers. And they were still completely dressed. Zeke had stripped down to his boxers, kneeling behind me. His hands were weaving through my hair, washing it. Easton, Wyatt, and Kingston— also in their boxer briefs— each had washcloths in their hands as they bathed my body.

For several mind-numbing seconds, I watched as the soap was rinsed from my body, intermixed with shades of brown, black, and red. Did I get that disgusting? I didn't realize how much my other gear protected me from this gory mess.

I was accustomed to seeing my men strong and resilient. But, instead, each one of them had a look of devastation in their eyes. I had never seen them this vulnerable.

"Was I bit?" I asked, my voice hitching with unshed tears.

In many ways, when life ended for others, mine had begun. Amid great sorrow and life-altering devastation, I found myself. The infected had been created, ended our world as we knew it, and our world forever changed. Yet, in these terrible times, I found love. I learned I was capable of loving not only one man but six. I discovered the love of children I never carried in my womb yet loved no different than if I had. I found what true loyalty was in my canine companions. Even now, as my eyes wandered, I saw Sasha, Athena, and Bane lying in the shower stall beside all my men.

*Please, God, I silently prayed. Don't let this be it. Please give me more time for my men, children, and furbabies.*

"I don't think so," Easton exhaled, hopefully. His eyes filled with tears.

"I don't see anything either," Wyatt sobbed out a breath.

"Just bruises and abrasions," Kingston sat back on his haunches as his eyes scanned my body.

Relief flooded my veins, and I gingerly attempted to sit up. Axel and Corbin seemed to understand what I needed to do and helped me. I looked down at my body and noticed bruising on my upper left thigh and right shin. My chest revealed mild bruising where the behemoth of infected had held me in a bear hug. Further down revealed a bruise on my hip. But then I remembered where I might have been bitten. I turned both wrists. The only place I had felt the infected bite down. All I saw was bruising. My wrists looked worse than they felt when treated like a human wishbone. I let out a sob of relief.

“It only had my wrist in his mouth for less than three seconds,” I informed them.

“No bite marks,” Easton resolutely nodded as he leaned in and placed his forehead against mine.

The others crowded around me, whispering words of love and relief. I melted into them, my hands reaching to reassure each of them. Quiet sobs escaped my lips as I realized how lucky I had been.

“If she got bit, she needs to be put down,” a somewhat nasally masculine voice quipped from the stall doorway.

Axel and Corbin immediately popped up as the others attempted to cover me from the intruder’s view. “Get the fuck out of here,” Corbin snarled.

I looked over Easton and Wyatt’s shoulders and saw Captain Beal.

“I told you we would come out with our findings,” Axel said between gritted teeth. He clenched and unclenched his fist in a fury.

“Who the hell do you think you are barging in here when our woman is naked” Kingston bit out.

“I tried to stop him,” a raspy masculine voice growled behind the captain.

It took a moment to realize it was Ari Wa Timoti. It still seemed surreal to have the man I had seen in concert two times and listened to repeatedly less than ten feet away from me. Sylvia was going to lose her shit when she realized he was here. She had a poster of him in our dorm room. I had been a fan, but Sylvia had been a super fan.

“He waited until your dads were distracted,” Ari angrily explained. “Personally, I think the man’s a pervert. He seemed too adamant on getting in here.”

I had noticed how Ari had kept his gaze averted the entire time he had explained the situation.

“I’m not a pervert,” the captain insisted with a stutter, yet I had noticed his lascivious gaze attempting to look at my

nudity.

“I’ll get him out of here,” Ari staidly stated before grabbing the captain by his neck.

The captain’s limbs flailed about like a recalcitrant puppy in the grasp of his mother’s teeth. If the situation weren’t so tense, I would have laughed.

“Thanks, man,” Corbin solemnly nodded.

“I demand to inspect her,” the captain shrieked as he was getting dragged away. “Just because her daddy owns part of this land doesn’t mean she should be excused. This is *our* community, and she’s a danger to us all. Nepotism shouldn’t excuse her from the same treatment we receive.”

“Hey, creep,” I heard Ari snarl as the captain yelped in pain. I assumed Ari had grasped him harder. “Even if that’s the case, *you* won’t be doing the inspecting.”

“Come on, goddess,” Kingston bade, holding a towel. “Let’s get you dressed. Your family would love to see you.”

I nodded, knowing I needed to ease their minds as well.



“I’m not sure I like how that rock star keeps watching you,” Kingston jokingly grumbled as I leaned back into his arms.

I was too wired to sleep. And surprisingly, I was famished once my dad, uncles, and aunts were reassured that I had escaped the infected unscathed. Well, intact as I could be considering the bruising littering my body.

I looked up from the shredded pork quesadilla the kitchen staff had made on short notice. Our kitchen staff was excellent. They had thrown together a quick meal with the leftovers of the day. Shredded pork quesadillas, a left-over variety of pasta

sides, and vegetables had been put out for our refugees and the people who responded to the rescue.

I saw Ari sitting next to Dad, Uncle Mitch, Uncle Scott, and a few men that I assumed had been the leaders of their group. He was avidly paying attention to something Dad was saying and nodding now and then.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I smiled and shook my head, taking another bite of the delicious pork. “Mmm, this is so good,” I sighed in contentment.

“I wonder if there are enough leftovers to make these again,” Wyatt agreed, squeezing my upper thigh. Then, at Kingston’s snort of annoyance, Wyatt grinned. “King, you forget our woman is gorgeous and pretty kick-ass. Men look at her all the time.”

I fully expected to hear some sort of lecture from Wyatt and Axel, especially after the last time they believed I had put myself in unnecessary danger. Instead, they had been loving and demonstrative in their affections since they dried me, dressed me, and brought me to the dining hall.

“It’s nothing new,” Corbin added, leaning back and kissing the inside of my knee.

Instead of sitting at tables, we all took seats in front of the fireplace. The couches, loveseat, and recliner looked like a better option to eat our food. Wyatt and Kingston had taken seats on either side of me, while Corbin had sat on the floor between my legs despite the available seating. Zeke had dragged a chair to the back of the couch so he could sit directly behind me, occasionally running his fingers through my damp hair or gently squeezing the nape of my neck. And Easton and Axel had taken residence on the ottoman before us.

Our choice of seating gave us a little privacy. The refugees we accepted in our midst added forty-one new people to our community. There were four women, sixteen men, two teenage girls, seven teenage boys, and eleven boys and girls ranging from six months to twelve.

Currently, most of the children were sound asleep in the unlit part of the wedding hall. The leaders of their group requested not to be separated yet. The hour was late, and they had been used to sleeping in close quarters. Dad and Uncle Mitch hadn't hesitated to answer their simple request.

Jewel, Sylvia, Lisa, Toni, Mikhail, and a few of her teammates hadn't balked or complained about assisting in setting up their sleep area. So after they had been inspected, Sylvia's team was ready to extend our hospitality. First, they handed out the toiletry bags we had assembled one afternoon. In addition to showing them the utility closets, we had put clothing in for this purpose. Then they helped set up a sleeping area for all the refugees.

We still hadn't heard how their journey was or why they chose to come here, but I was sure we would find out soon enough. Then, as if they realized I had been talking about them, Dad stood up with four men, including Ari. It took me a second to realize they were headed our way.

"I guess we won't be sneaking back to our cabin anytime soon," Kinston jokingly grumbled as they drew closer.

"You know that wasn't going to happen," Corbin looked down at his wristwatch.

It was almost midnight, so it wasn't terribly late. We'd had later nights in the past. It was disappointing that we couldn't sneak away. However, I never believed we could have. I could have easily claimed my traumatizing night required me to take some downtime, but we all knew that we hit the ground running when things happened. We couldn't hide when needed to help transition the new arrivals.

And oddly enough, physically, I was in pain but not enough to cry off. Instead, I was mentally wrapping my head around my close call to death. Emotionally, I was happy and content to spend time with my guys. My near-death experience made me more grateful to have them, and I never wanted to take another moment with them for granted.

Axel and Easton readjusted themselves to face the people heading our way. Sasha gave a low warning growl while

Athena and Bane continued sleeping at my feet and Kingston's. I was tearful when I realized my furbabies had escaped severe injuries. The vet assured us that Sasha had a sprained paw but should recover quickly, and other than having the wind knocked out from her, Athena seemed in fine shape.

"Sasha, settle," I said in a firm voice.

She had been disgruntled when Bane and Athena refused to make space for her near us. So, she had taken residence next to the recliner. Her desire not to interact with Bane or Athena outweighed her need to be closer to me. She wasn't outwardly aggressive towards them, but she made no secret that she barely tolerated them.

She looked over her shoulder, and I'm sure she would say if she could talk. "Bitch, I'm trying to protect you." Yes, I imagined she would constantly curse at me if she could speak. Instead, I smiled and shook my head as she lay down and eyed the newcomers with barely concealed aggression. It caused one of the men to falter in his steps, and Wyatt, Kingston, and Corbin didn't even disguise their mirth as they let out boisterous laughter.

"She won't bite," Zeke smirked.

The newcomers seemed reassured by this fact as they continued forward.

"Unless we tell her too," Kingston added, causing one of the men to falter again.

"Reins," Dad said indulgently with a roll of his eyes and a slight smile curving his lips.

My dad's reaction to knowing I was okay shocked me. He had bawled and held on tight to me after I exited the bathroom. Before tonight I had only witnessed my father cry one other time. He was always so stoic and held his pain with expert precision. I knew my mom's illness had taken a toll on him. I knew he had been hurting every day of her diagnosis. Yet, the only time I had seen him break down was when my mom's body had been lowered to the ground. Then, and tonight.

Tonight, it was my Uncle Mitch and Uncle Scott gently pulling him away from his crushing grip on me and reassuring him I was okay.

I was also informed that Captain Beal would be cleaning the stalls and barns for the foreseeable future. In a surprising turn of events, Uncle Scott had given the man a black eye once Ari marched him out of the bathroom. The man had an issue with us nearly from the beginning. Since he held a “higher” rank in the military, he had assumed that he should have been given a large house, a cushy job, and respect from the beginning. He had already shown us he wouldn’t be trusted in the field. The only time we assigned him a job on recovery, it wasn’t a critical mission. The followers he initially had seemed to be leaving his side one by one.

I saw Uncle Mitch give me an assessing look, and somehow, I knew it wasn’t just to see if I was still okay. I knew he wished I would meet his eyes. But I couldn’t. Not yet.

Since exiting the bathroom, I resolved to put the Uncle Mitch and Aunt Pam infidelity issues on the back burner. Tonight was about love and not bitterness. I had insisted the men take me to the big house before our late-night snack, and I watched my children sleep for several moments. If Isa hadn’t been recovering from teething issues and Dani and Foster wouldn’t be little nightmares— to say the least— tomorrow, I would have dragged them down here with us. Instead, it took Corbin and Easton reminding me several times we could love on them to our heart’s content tomorrow.

“She’s fiercely protective of our woman,” Axel explained, returning me to the discussion.

The new guys seemed to be cautious of Sasha. And I was okay with that. She was my protector for a reason.

“But won’t become aggressive unless she feels like Avery’s in danger or is instructed to attack,” Corbin added.

“I saw that,” the tallest man said with a rueful smile. “Hello, my name is Larry, and this is Allan, Dwayne, and Ari.”

Larry pointed to the three other men who accompanied him and my dad. Larry was the tallest and leanest of all the men. With his short light brown hair and how he carried himself, I immediately pegged him for prior military and Uncle Mitch's friend. Besides his somewhat bushy brown beard, liberally laced with gray, his military bearing was apparent.

Allan was a man who appeared to be in his late twenties. From how his sandy blond hair was parted and styled to the side, his clean-cut shaven face, and how he looked, I could easily see him as a businessman, maybe a lawyer, stockbroker, or something that required him to sit at a desk for hours on end. I imagined the collapse had changed him into the man standing before us today.

Dwayne was a shorter, Black man with a friendly-looking face. If I had to guess, I would say he was in his mid to late forties. I imagined if I stood up, Dwayne would be shorter than me. He was a stocky man and walked with a slight limp. I didn't know if that was from an injury sustained tonight, pre-collapse, or post-apocalypse.

"Larry, Allan, Dwayne, and Ari," Dad continued the introductions. "As we were saying, this is one of my daughters, Avery. She's part of our recovery team and fills in as needed around the community. And those are her men Axel, Easton, Kingston, Zeke, and my nephews, Corbin and Wyatt."

I noticed that none of them blinked when Dad introduced them as my men. Hmm... interesting.

"Corbin is Scott's boy, and Wyatt's Mitch's boy," Dad pointed to Wyatt and Corbin. "Corbin helps us with community issues when he's not out on recovery."

Corbin nodded and murmured appropriate greetings.

"Wyatt's our pyro," Dad continued. "If he's not with Avery or their children, you can generally find him in the explosives building. He's always finding ways to make fighting off the infected easier."

"I'll love to help you with that," Dwayne grinned. "In my former life, I was a chemistry professor, and I had a hand

concocting our little cocktails.”

Wyatt grinned, leaned back, and placed an arm around my shoulder. “I wouldn’t mind the extra hands. Kingston and I sometimes get carried away, so having someone there to rein us in could help.”

“We don’t need reining in,” Kingston said with a wicked smirk. “You never know when we need larger explosives. I’m Kingston,” he introduced himself. “Jack of all trades, master of none.”

I smiled and shook my head. It was no secret Kingston liked to float around as I did. He was perfectly content not stepping up into any one role. Some days, you could find him with the construction crew, and the next in the explosive shed.

“I don’t think we need to be filling in any more holes the size of the last one,” Dad said with a wry tilt to his lips.

“That was one time,” Kingston protested with a laugh. “How else are we supposed to know if our cocktails are effective? This is my twin, Easton.”

Easton smiled and waved, “Most of the time, you’ll find me in the clinic.”

“Easton is one of our best docs here,” Uncle Scott added, causing my reserved man to duck his head in acknowledgment and chagrin.

“Zeke and Axel’s jobs work hand in hand,” Dad prodded.

“Coach and I try to train our community on what they should do in emergencies and help with the training plan for the younger ones and non-security adults,” Zeke explained. “Think of it like gym class.”

“With fake weapons and martial arts,” Kingston joked.

The men seemed impressed as they nodded. I’m positive they would be joining our training program by the eager glances they exchanged.

“Think of it like gym class on steroids,” Wyatt quipped.

“I run our training for security and recovery and ensure our security measures work,” Axel stated next.

“Would you mind if our group slips in with your training?” Larry inquired, confirming my suspicions. “We didn’t have the resources to train our people extensively.”

Larry looked around the room, seemingly in a daze. “I thought Sanctuary would be a great place to settle. I just hadn’t expected it to be this... advanced.”

“Thanks to these people right here,” Uncle Mitch pointed toward us. “They came up with a game plan almost immediately. Then they executed it with impressive precision. They procured many things to make our community more sustainable without hesitation. I leaned on them a lot to implement our current procedures and strategies.”

“We never turn anyone away willing to learn,” Axel stated before handing me the rest of his strawberry shortcake trifle.

I was so ecstatic to see that we had leftover desserts from earlier. And even happier when Axel had procured the last trifles for him and me. Generally, I wasn’t greedy when it came to desserts but I knew the baker had gone overboard today. I realized we had a lot of leftovers, so I wasn’t going to feel guilty consuming the last of those.

“Do you mind?” I inquired after I cleared my throat. “If I ask how you came to get here and why so late?”

“Have a seat,” Dad urged. “Did you get enough to eat?”

“I might grab some more macaroni and cheese while you fill them in,” Dwyane said, patting his stomach.

The men sat on the recliner and loveseat while Dad pulled up a chair.

“I was right outside the city when the crap hit the fan,” Larry explained. “I found Dwayne, his sister, and her two children escaping the city. We banded with another small group of individuals and eventually found a gated community that was mostly empty. That’s where we met Allan and eleven other men, women, and children with us today. We were doing

well for a while until a group of men came and took a lot of our women. We lost many of our men that day as well.

“I knew we were no longer safe there, so we decided to get back on the road. We found an RV park attached to a state park. We did well there, and a few other groups joined us. Among them was Ari and seventeen other people he had helped travel away from the city.”

My eyes flitted over to Ari, and he almost seemed bored of our conversation as he leaned back into the couch. His eyes were half closed, and he was tapping his fingers on his leg as if drumming to a beat in his head.

“While scavenging one day, we ran across a group of other survivors,” Larry continued. “They seemed alright at first. They told us how they had settled at an old juvenile detention center. They told us how well they were doing and wondered if we wanted to join them. He said we were free to come and go as we liked.

“Some people jumped at the chance to settle behind tall fences. They seemed to be sitting pretty.”

“It didn’t feel right to some of us,” Dwayne interjected as he returned with his macaroni and cheese. “A few of our top scouts went with them, intending to come right back. They didn’t.”

“Work camps,” Corbin surmised aloud.

Larry, Allan, Dwayne, and Ari nodded. “Ari and I went to check this place out. Something told us to hold back and observe them. And we’re glad we did,” Dwayne continued. “They have a group of guys that walk the perimeter keeping the zombies out and the workers in. They separated the women, men, and children from each other. They’d allow parents to visit the children if they completed their chores.”

“They don’t have any modern equipment to till their land, plant their crops, harvest, or water it,” Larry continued. “Men are falling out from exhaustion. Women are locked in the kitchens, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. They’re treating them like prisoners.”

“We had planned on rescuing our people,” Allan verbalized next. “Problem was we didn’t realize they were still watching us. They had hoped to convince us all to go willingly with them. Then,” he exhaled, closing his eyes, pain flashing across his features. “They came rolling into the park right before sundown. They told us we had to go with them.” His voice broke, and my heart hurt for him. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what happened next.

“We tried to fight back,” Larry continued. “We lost a lot of people. And then, they released them.”

“The infected?” Zeke conjectured, his jaw clenching in anger.

“They had trash trucks filled with them,” Ari finally spoke. “We had to grab what we could, and we left. We could not fight against the living and the dead.”

“I remembered how secluded y’all were,” Larry said. “I remembered how Mitch said the invitation here was always open. So I figured we could be safer if we could make our way here.”

“I knew it would take a few days to make the trek, but we had enough food and water to last us damn near a week. Ari and his,” he winced, and I saw Ari duck his head. I saw the clenching of his jaw and his attempt to hide his pain. “They had several vehicles ready for a quick getaway. We stocked our canteen and the vehicles, just in case.”

I wondered if it was Ari and whoever they avoided talking about who kept the vehicles ready and stocked. I looked around and finally noticed that I didn’t see any of his bandmates. I remember Sylvia telling me how his band was formed in high school. A couple of them had been together for nearly twenty years. It was also well known that the band spent much time together and was rumored to have purchased several homes jointly.

Even after their bassist got married last summer, it was reported that she traveled with them and stayed in the same homes they did.

“We found a few places along the route to hunker down at night,” Larry resumed their story. “But either they were tracking us, or a group similar to them is out there because we were attacked as we were bedding down for the night. So it was either wait them out or take our chances. We decided we needed to take our chances.”

“These are the work camps the general wants us to take care of,” Wyatt stated, looking at Dad.

Dad nodded. “I’ll make sure the general knows we would want to hit them first.”

“It’s days away?” Kingston inquired with a frown.

I knew what he was thinking. It would take days to return if it took days to get there. Not to forget the day or two that it may take us to do proper reconnaissance. Even with Fletch using satellites, that would be at least a week away from our children. The longest we had ever left was four days.

“Without the children and older folk, we might be able to make it there and back much faster,” Larry reassured us.

I nodded and leaned back into Kingston and Wyatt. I knew none of us would be willing to be left behind. Cleaning the world of all the infected and the corrupted gave our children a better chance for a normal future. We wanted them to know life outside of these walls eventually. Hopefully, they would be too young to remember this life by the time we “fixed” it.

“Avery,” Dad began.

“No, Dad,” I firmly stated, understanding what he was about to say.

“But—” Dad began once more.

“She’ll be needed out there,” Corbin resolutely stated. “I hate the danger she’ll be in, but we all know several people would be infected or gone if it wasn’t for her. Her track record speaks for itself. Hell, Amy and that boy wouldn’t be here without her instincts and skill.”

“What about your kids?” Dad asked with a mutinous tilt of his jaw.

I blinked at him in shock before narrowing my gaze on him. I loved my father dearly, and I never spoke against him before. I was an obedient and well-behaved child. But he had to realize I may always be his little girl, but I wasn't a little girl any longer.

“What about yours?” I leaned forward, bracing my elbows on my knees. “Madeline is younger than Foster, Dani, and Isa. But, of course, you also have Ben, Mikey, and Miller to consider. Because you're going, right?”

Dad went to open his mouth, but Wyatt cut him off before he could say anything he would regret. “Uncle Bryan, it's late. It's been a long day. We're all tired. Let's not say anything we regret. Plus, you might think we're careless and reckless for running out there when we have children here, but we do it—she does it— for the same reason you served. We want a better world for our children too. We want them to have some of the freedoms we once had.”

I gave Wyatt a brief smile and a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you,” I murmured.

I knew he and Axel struggled the most with me going out there. I knew sometimes they still preferred that I stay here. However, I knew they understood how important it was to me to make a difference.

“It'll take us twenty-four hours to prepare,” Axel stated, standing up. “Let's all get some rest and finish this discussion tomorrow with clear heads and a full night's sleep. We'll see you at lunch, Colonel.”

Dad reluctantly nodded, and I was thankful he realized the wisdom of waiting. I was tired, and I didn't want to get cranky. I had enough emotional and mental baggage to unpack without adding more tonight.

“Lunch,” Dad nodded in agreement.

“Goodnight, all,” Corbin resounded with a wave. “I'm sorry to hear what y'all have been through, but we're glad you made it.”

“When will the meeting take place?” Ari asked, standing up.

“What meeting?” Wyatt asked as he gently pulled me up.

“Some of us will be going with you,” Ari looped his thumbs into his pockets.

“We’ll let you know,” Axel informed him before we all left the dining hall.

With each step we made toward the exit, my feet felt heavier. Sometimes our issues seemed huge, but like eating an elephant, the only way to take care of it was one bite at a time.

## CHAPTER 7



“BITCH,” Sylvia said without preamble as she sidled up to me.

“Uh, what?” I asked her in shock as I carefully pulled the cheesecake out of the oven.

Today Sylvia and her team— Toni, Mikhail, and Sarah— decided to work in the camper’s kitchens. There was enough room for us to share the space with the winter preppers. Grandma Betty, Winnie, Stephanie, and a handful of teens utilized the old dining hall area. We typically rotated between the kitchens for our side projects.

There were only four commercial kitchens at our disposal. The main dining hall was occupied by our normal kitchen staff. The restaurant kitchens were commandeered by our butcher for him to process and prepare all our meat. The remaining kitchen was located at the recreation center and they had already been claimed.

Gloria, Mike, and Suzy requested to utilize the rec room kitchens for their milk projects. We had taken to storing all our overflow of milk products up there, so it made sense that they make a variety of cheeses, butter, and whatnot there.

I decided to work with Sylvia and her team while I made Zeke's birthday cheesecake. We finally had enough beeswax to try our hand at lip balm, lotions, deodorant, and other toiletry items. It was also the perfect place to hide. I still wasn't ready to face Aunt Pam and Uncle Mitch. With the start of a new day, I was confronted with having to meet some of my emotional baggage. So, of course, I hid for a bit longer.

I knew Corbin and Wyatt thought it was weird when I barely acknowledged Uncle Mitch or Aunt Pam at breakfast. No surprise that I was unable to sleep in. Well, not for long. By the time eight o'clock hit, we all seemed restless to get on with our days. I had hoped we would have missed them, but that wasn't my luck. We had gotten there as our parents had sat down for breakfast.

The General had come in, and Corbin and Axel had joined Dad and Uncle Mitch to discuss our mission. By lunch, if not dinner, I imagined we should get the details of our mission. I knew the General had a specific place in mind. However, with our new members, I imagined it would change from our original assignment.

"When were you going to tell me Ari Wa Timoti was here?" Sylvia whined, reminding me of her beef.

I forgot that even though she had met most of our newcomers, she hadn't met them all. She had been busy gathering our initial newcomer's essentials. And with everything else that happened last night, I had completely forgotten to fill her in.

"Oh yeah." I grimaced. "When did you see Ari?"

"I didn't," she griped. "And we're on a first-name basis with Ari Wa Timoti?"

"We heard all about it, though," Mikhail stated as he carefully examined the book of beeswax recipes.

Mikhail was Sylvia's new male "best friend." The man was wickedly good with a make-up brush and had become Sylvia's right-hand man. He helped her create their work schedules to keep them on task. They rotated their jobs

depending on the needs of the community. They controlled the luxury goods shop, helped with newcomers, helped me with my side projects, and generally filled in as needed.

“Rumor has it that he was enamored with you last night,” Sarah pouted.

Sarah was the perfect worker bee. She had attended college with Emery and Trevor. She was supposed to earn her degree in hospitality management this past spring, so working with Sylvia was right up her alley. Plus, she was laid back and drama-free so she fit in with them perfectly.

“Not likely.” I shook my head, returning to add essential oils to my deodorant bars.

“Girl,” Winnie chuckled. “I was there, the man couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

Winnie, Stephanie, Grandma Betty, and a handful of other women and older teens were washing, canning, and preparing to store the asparagus, broad beans, salad onions, peas, and early potatoes. They had set up their prep area close to us and we had been conversing a broad range of topics all morning. I wasn’t terribly surprised she had eavesdropped into the new subject of interest.

I snorted and shook my head. “You guys are nuts. We barely spoke all night.”

“Do you have a golden vag?” Toni quietly teased so the teens and older women wouldn’t hear her.

Toni was our resident hairdresser. When she wasn’t cutting or fixing other people’s hair she was helping Sylvia out. Uncle Mitch, Dad, and Uncle Scott realized her ability to help people with their hair was a morale booster and allowed her to set a schedule to help in that area.

“It must be,” Mikhail cackled. “Those men she already has; adore her, and now she has another man caught in her spell.”

“Oh, my goodness!” I cried out in shock. “Stop. It’s not true.”

I pretended to get immersed in my task at hand, hoping they would drop the conversation. I turned and poured the deodorant liquid out of the hot pan and into the plastic molds we'd found for them. I looked over at the container we kept them in and determined I had enough to complete this job. However, we wouldn't have enough the next time we had to complete this task.

"I think we have just enough containers for today." I informed Mikhail. and

He leaned over to notate it in the composition book he kept on hand. "I'll stop at the bathhouses on the way back from lunch," he said.

We had bins staged in the locker rooms for recycling. The lotion, shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, and other various hygiene products containers were to be placed in them. We'd discovered how vital recycling was weeks ago. People needed additional toiletries but we didn't have the proper devices to put them in. We then insisted that the community members dispose of all toiletry plastics at the bathhouses. We needed to reuse all the containers we could.

"I'll help," Sarah volunteered.

Isa reminded me of her presence as she cried out in frustration. I whirled around on her and noticed she had dropped her favorite teething toy. I had set her up in her jumperoo, and she was perfectly content.

She had excellent head control, and her feet finally touched the floor. She could circle and discover all the toys on the saucer-like contraption. Plus, it had springs when she felt froggy and decided to kick her legs up and down. We all laughed when she discovered that function and bounced up and down like a baby kangaroo. Corbin even insisted on recording it.

"Ma'am." I said in feigned exasperation as I picked up the toy. "Stop dropping it, and I won't have to keep picking it up." I did a quick rinse of it before I handed it back to her.

She gave me a broad smile, and I couldn't resist kissing the top of her head. I couldn't part from her today. So I'd decided to bring her with me to the kitchens.

The guys seemed just as reluctant to take the other children to childcare. Foster was with Zeke helping get our go-bags ready. And Dani was with Kingston, showing some of the teen boys and girls how to change the oil on the vehicles we were utilizing the day after tomorrow. After lunch, Easton was taking Isa to the clinic with him so she could nap. Axel was taking Foster with him to make his rounds around Sanctuary. I would take Dani and Mariah with me to Toni's hair salon.

Toni had commandeered the original front office for a hair salon three days a week after lunch and before dinner; Toni, another former hairdresser, and a barber, cut and trimmed hair for the community. Occasionally Toni and the other girl could style and color hair as well.

Mariah needed a trim, and Danni wanted braids. She saw another brown baby with braids and insisted she wanted them. After talking to Aunt Carol and a few Black women, we decided to give them a trial run. I didn't know how long she could wear braids without damaging her hair. After all, she had beautiful, luscious corkscrew curls. It required a tad more upkeep than, say, Mariah's, but not much. Once they assured me it wouldn't, I asked one of the Black women if they wouldn't mind showing Toni and me how to do them. I was capable of braiding, but I couldn't seem to get them tight enough.

"Aren't six men enough?" Sylvia playfully pouted, obviously unwilling to drop the subject of Ari.

"Oh, my goodness! Can we discuss something else? Ari isn't interested in me. I don't know what you're talking about," I snorted.

Admittedly Ari was attractive and crazy talented, but I was perfectly content and happy with my men. Six was enough, and some would say that was too many. Not that I cared what those people had to say, truthfully. However, I already felt like it was a juggling game making sure all my men knew how

much they meant to me. In addition to spending enough quality time with each of them.

“Mommy!” The screen door was ripped open and reverberated off the side of the wall.

The old camper’s cafeteria was one large open area. Counters, heating tables, and cold storage separated the kitchens from the dining area. So, when the door opened, it wasn’t hard for me to look up and see Mariah tearing through it.

She looked like she had been crying, and I was immediately concerned. “What’s wrong, baby girl?” I crooned as I lifted her.

“She tried,” she began to sob. “She tried. I told her no. It wasn’t her day. She picked me up. She was trying to make me go.”

Most of her words were gibberish, and I was confused why she was so upset. She was supposed to be in school. Axel and Alec had dropped her off together this morning after breakfast.

“She tried to look for her Dads first,” a deep raspy voice explained, causing me to start.

I saw Ari standing in the doorway with Ihaia on his hip and Hahana holding his hand. Slowly, I understood that he must have brought her here. However, I didn’t know why or how. He shouldn’t have been able to sign her out, and the teachers were well aware of who picked up our children. They wouldn’t have allowed him to take her. My concern was rising.

“There’s my new friend!” Ihaia beamed as he struggled to get down from Ari’s grasp. “Me, find! Me, find!”

His sudden movement surprised Ari and he barely prevented Ihaia from a nasty fall. “Hai,” Ari scolded.

It wasn’t until Hai had launched himself at me that I realized he was talking about me. So I attempted to smile at him and embrace him and Mariah simultaneously.

“Hi, buddy.” I pushed a lock of his hair from his face.

“Don’t make me,” Mariah continued sobbing.

“What happened?” I asked incredulously, still attempting to find out what was going on.

It took me a moment to realize that all the chattering had stopped. Sylvia, Toni, Sarah, and Mikhail weren’t even trying to hide that they were openly gawking at Ari. All four of them were leaning on the counter and whispering furiously to each other. The others that had been prepping the produce at least pretended to continue their work even though I could see a few of them completely missing the containers they were shelling peas in. As a result, peas were scattered across the worn wooden floors with zero notice.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I said in exasperation. “He’s just a man!” Admittedly some of my frustration stemmed from Mariah’s unnatural outburst. She wasn’t generally a crier. I saw her fall from the swings once and barely shed a tear. Our girl was tough. “He eats like us, pisses like us, and he even sh—” I caught myself at the last second. “Ships like us. Do you mind telling me what happened? Out on the porch,” I added as I noticed no one had returned to work. “Seriously, peeps.” I disgruntledly laughed as I grasped Hai’s hand and carried Mariah out. “He’s *just* a man.”

“But I bet his shit smells like candy,” Mikhail petulantly responded loud enough for my retreating back to hear.

“Mik!” Sylvia, Toni, and Sarah burst out with shocked laughter.

“I’m just saying,” Mikhail sassed. “He might do the same things we do, like piss, but I wouldn’t offer to hold any man’s—”

“Mikhail Johnson,” Grandma Betty warned with laughter. “There are kids around.”

“I’m sixteen,” I heard a girl loudly protest. “Old enough to—”

Grandma Betty cut her off as well. “Girl, shell those beans, or I’ll show you what else you’re old enough to learn and do.”

I heard laughter once more as the door snapped behind us. I looked up at Ari and saw him smirking down at me.

“It must be so exhausting,” I sympathized as I sat on one of the porch swings. I pulled Hai down beside me as I cradled Mariah to my shoulder. “It’s okay, baby girl. I got you,” I crooned in her ear.

Sasha took residence next to our swing. She was extra attentive today. I attempted to leave her home, but she wasn’t having it. When one of the guys returned to the house today to get something they forgot, Sasha had managed to get out. One minute I was pulling out the pans and molds we would need today, and the next, I had Sasha pushing up against my leg.

“It can get old,” he said with a casual shrug. “It doesn’t happen as often as it once did.” He seemed to catch himself with a grimace.

He didn’t need to elaborate. I’m sure in most survival situations people could care less who he was. Who was and wasn’t once famous seemed to pale in comparison to if you had enough food, a safe place to lay your head at night, and such.

“Although,” a cocky grin curved his lips. “I do resent the remark that I’m just a man. I’m more than *just* a man. I’ll have you know—”

“Yada, yada, yada,” I waved him off as I cut him off. “Anyhoos, out with it; why is my girl crying?”

He seemed shocked that I had cut him off. I imagined that didn’t happen often.

Hahana let out a giggle as she looked up at Ari. “Uncle Ari, you have that same look you get when Mama tells you off.”

I smiled at her girlish giggles and felt silly for not recognizing their resemblance. On closer inspection and not in the dark of night, I could clearly see they shared the same full bottom lips, brow line, hair texture, and color.

“I’m sure your mama and I would get along great then,” I smiled smugly. “Men, like your uncle, need a dose of reality

every now and then.” As the girl’s laughter died, I realized my blunder.

“I’m sorry.” I closed my eyes in embarrassment.

I felt like such an ass. It was evident that there was no woman present last night. I should have realized they didn’t have a female figure in their life. Typically, I was a lot more observant and conscientious with family dynamics nowadays. I held my tongue in most instances and kept my filter on. It was rare to meet an intact family. Over ninety-five percent of our community lacked a parental figure or nuclear family members.

“Hey, Hana, can you take Hai to the park?” Ari suggested pointing towards the park.

Hai got up with excitement, but Hana seemed a little more reserved. Eventually, she nodded and went to the park.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, rubbing Mariah’s back. Finally, she seemed to have calmed down some.

“It was cancer four months ago,” Ari reassured me as he sat opposite me. “It’s been tough on us, but a part of me is thankful my sister never had to deal with this,” he pointed towards the gates. “My sister was a kindhearted woman already too soft for this world. If she had to deal with the zombies, I’m not sure how long she would have lasted. At least she was able to pass away in comfort with her family surrounding her.”

I nodded, uncertain of what to say. There were no words I could give Ari to ease the pain. I could have told him I had lost my mom in a similar situation, but I didn’t think now was the time or place.

“So,” he cleared his throat. “I was showing Hai and Hana where they would start going tomorrow. As we were leaving the dining hall, I saw this woman dragging this little one out of the building.” He gently patted Mariah’s back. “She was crying and telling her no, and when I approached the woman, she insisted that she was the girl’s mother and had the right to take her. It didn’t sit right with me, so I asked her to hand her

over, or I would find the proper person to deal with her. The woman yelled at me and scolded the little girl, but the little one is a fighter.”

I inwardly cursed. “Mariah, did your mom try and take you?” I inquired, attempting to hide my fury and confusion. I finally mouthed at Ari’s confused look. “I’ll explain later.”

“Yes,” Mariah sniffled. “I told her it wasn’t her day. She said every day is her day. Then she said we were leaving. I don’t want to leave you, my dads, uncles, sisters, and brother. Please don’t let her take me.”

I stiffened and wondered where Gianna could be going, and then I realized I had to talk to Alec and Axel. They needed to know that Gianna attempted to take Mariah to goodness knows where.

“I won’t let her take you,” I reassured her, pulling wet strands of hair from her tear-soaked face. “Let’s take you back to class, and I’ll talk to your dads.”

Mariah violently shook her head. “No, I want to stay with you. She might come again.”

I inwardly sighed, but I understood that her fears weren’t unfounded. As it was, I needed to talk with her teacher. She understood that Gianna, Mariah, Axel, and Alec were in a tricky situation. Everyone knew that Gianna was on restricted visits with her daughter.

“Okay,” I sighed, understanding her fear of not returning. “Let me grab Isa, and we’ll be on our way.”

I stood and was relieved to see Mariah willing to walk again. She wasn’t heavy, but I needed free hands to gather Isa and all her things. I headed toward the entrance. It was better to get to the bottom of this while it was still fresh. There were a lot of questions that needed to be answered.

“Thanks for intervening.” I tried to smile at Ari as I entered the building once more.

Everyone paused and looked up. I attempted to roll my eyes at their apparent interest. It was clear most of them were eager to see if Ari followed.

“I have to go talk to Mariah’s teacher and find Alec and Axel,” I told Sylvia and the others.

“Uh huh,” Sylvia said, her voice filled with doubt. “Is that the type of sisters we are now?” she mock pouted.

“I’m sorry I can’t continue helping you guys,” I frowned as I attached a baby carrier to my chest.

“It’s a good thing she’s pretty,” Mikhail said with an indulgent smirk.

“She can’t have it all,” Sarah added. “Looks and bad-ass-ness are enough. Only God would mock us, mere mortals, by making her smart too.”

I was so confused by their conversation. My head was too clouded with my faux pas with Hana and the current situation.

“You’re wrong there, too,” Sylvia whined. “She actually has brains too. She carried a 4.0 GPA at school.”

“Of course, she did,” Toni snorted good-naturedly.

“Can someone translate their gibberish?” I inquired with exasperation as I secured Isa to my front.

I had to ensure that she was pointing outward. We discovered last week that she fussed and hated the carrier unless she could look around. She was too nosey and wanted to see everything, not just our chest.

“They’re mad you didn’t introduce them to your new friend, the pop star,” Stephanie teased as she lifted Madeline to her breast.

Stephanie rarely utilized the childcare. Instead, she preferred keeping Madeline by her side. She intentionally chose jobs that allowed her to take care of my baby sister and work.

“Ouch,” Ari said from the doorway once more. “I take it you’re not a fan. Pop? Really?”

I was surprised he hadn’t left yet. I assumed he would join his niece and nephew on the playground. I hadn’t expected him to follow me back inside.

“We are!” Toni, Sarah, and a few teens simultaneously stated.

Ari smirked, and I saw his rock star persona slip into place. I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. I may not have known him long but could see through his façade. It was clearly evident to me that he had a “public” face and his authentic one.

“And if you’re ever curious,” Mikhail added. “I swing both ways.”

Ari gave him a megawatt smile and spoke. “Sorry, my guy, I’m really flattered. You’re a good-looking guy. But I only swing one way.”

“All the good ones do,” Mikhail said with a dramatic pout.

Almost everyone laughed, and I couldn’t help but laugh as well. These people made my days better. We might work a lot, but we had fun doing so. Plus, Mikhail really was a shameless flirt.

“Seriously, ya’ll done lost your minds,” I muttered as I handed Mariah Isa’s diaper bag.

Mariah took the role of big sister seriously sometimes. She liked helping, and every now and then, she wanted to change diapers too. It was rough at first, but she had become rather good recently.

Mariah giggled, and I noticed how Sasha was licking her face. I was glad to see a smile on her face once more. The only exception Sasha made with whom she preferred was when the kids were present. She was just as watchful and protective over them, although Mariah was her favorite.

“Sorry, no,” Stephanie said with a touch of chagrin. “I mainly listen to country. I didn’t even know who you were until one of the girls told me one of your songs.”

“We can’t all be perfect.” Ari flashed her a wink, and I nearly snorted.

Stephanie didn’t seem to be impressed by his fame. However, she wasn’t immune to his charms. I was pretty sure I

saw a blush rise to her cheeks and mentally noted to tease her about it later.

“I know all your songs,” Toni piped up. “Even before you became big.”

If she were a cartoon, I would see hearts in her eyes. This outrageous flirting was out of character for her. She was ordinarily discreet about who she had a crush on. And recently, she had begun talking to one of the guards. I thought she was smitten by him, but it was evident that a rock star could easily turn her head.

“You guys are too much,” I muttered. “Well, I’ll see ya’ll later!”

Sylvia loudly cleared her throat, and I turned and saw the expectant look on her face. I rolled my eyes and stopped by the door. She pointed to herself before making an obvious head nod toward Ari. It took me a moment to understand her silent prodding. She seriously expected me to introduce them. If I didn’t love her so much, I would ignore her.

“Ari, I would like to introduce you to my sister from another mister, and your biggest, obsessive fan, Sylvia,” I continued at Sylvia’s satisfied smile. “Her harem is four deep, but it appears she’s accepting additional applications. That’s our friends Toni and Sarah. And the thirsty stud muffin over there is Mikhail.” Instead of being outraged, Mikhail preened, and smiled. “That’s my stepmom, Stephanie. She was sleeping when you got in last night, and attached to her boob is my baby sister, Madeline. My stepbrothers Mikey, Miller, and Ben are at school.”

Stephanie smiled and waved, unembarrassed that she was breastfeeding in front of a rock star. Admittedly some people were still uncomfortable when she did it, but they really needed to get over themselves. If Stephanie were walking around topless without a baby attached to her, most of the men would check her out. Yet, some people, men, and women alike, had expressed discomfort by her feeding a baby, even when she had a cover on. She never allowed them to shame her and generally put them in their place.

“That’s Grandma Betty—everyone calls her Grandma Betty,” I continued when it finally sunk in that I was entertaining these crazies. “What am I doing? The rest of you can introduce yourselves later. I need to find out what happened to Mi. I’ll see you later. Again,” I said before I turned to leave.

I left, ignoring the grumbling of some of the peanut gallery. Once we got outside, I began to head up toward the dining hall. It was once a wedding hall and was designed with those intentions. Mariah’s kindergarten classroom was in one of the old rooms. Kindergarten and under were all cared for in the dining facility. The previous employee break, grooms’, and bride’s rooms had all been transformed for our needs. We separated the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers because we realized we had too many children, and it wasn’t working when we only operated one room.

“How many kids do you have?” Ari dubiously asked as he fell into step beside me.

I started, not realizing that he had followed me out. In proper Sasha form, she inserted herself between Ari and me. Until she was comfortable— if ever, she would remain between him and me. She did that with everyone she wasn’t familiar with.

“Four,” I hesitantly explained.

I didn’t know why Ari followed or attempted to converse with me. Were Kingston and some of the others, correct? Did he... like me? I was equal parts flattered, surprised, and exasperated. Since I acted immune to his charms and fame, did he view me as a conquest? Was he simply curious? Did he not care that I was in a relationship with six other men?

“We’re the children of her heart,” Mariah explained as she skipped ahead of us.

I was glad to see that she seemed to be bouncing back. However, I wished our precocious six-year-old wasn’t so friendly sometimes. I didn’t want to encourage Ari. I didn’t know what game he was playing. I didn’t understand why he would be interested in my life.

“As Mariah so freely stated,” I smiled wryly. “I have three adopted children, and one of my men shares custody with his twin for Mariah. So, she’s one of mine too.”

Again, there wasn’t even a blink. It was so refreshing not to get the typical response. However, it was also weird. I knew Ari was famous, and I’m sure he’d seen and done crazy shit, but so far, our peculiar arrangements had yet to faze him.

“That’s admirable,” he remarked. “I was in the process of officially adopting my niece and nephew before all this.” He waved his hands toward the gates. “My sister’s illness struck fast and quick. She barely had the time to name me their guardian, and then she was gone.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “My mom had a brain tumor. We had less than six months with her after her diagnosis.”

I blinked and frowned, surprised I divulged so much information to him. “How are you settling in?”

I could feel him looking at me, but I refused to gaze his way. I didn’t want to see his reaction.

“It seems really nice here,” he admitted after several moments of silence. “I saw the General, and he offered to take us to the bunker, but I’m pretty sure most of us will be staying here.”

“I’m sure that went over well,” I drolly stated.

For some reason, the General was determined to increase his numbers. It was an ongoing discussion between him, Uncle Mitch, and Dad. Uncle Mitch and Dad believed we should allow the people to decide where they wanted to go, especially if we were the ones to discover them. But, on the other hand, the General felt the bunker needed the extra bodies. It was a constant issue, and I was over it.

“Oh, I could tell it did,” he smirked. “He was rolling out the red carpet and everything.”

“But there’ll be no paparazzi or reporters yelling questions at you,” I dramatically paused. “Scratch that; you might still get that kind of attention,” I teased.

He made an unamused noise, and I smiled and shrugged.

“Hana! Hai,” Ari called to his nephew and niece as we walked by.

I was impressed that they immediately came running. They didn’t whine about wanting to stay and play; they came without question.

“How long have you been behind the walls?” Ari inquired, catching my surprised expression at how well-behaved his nephew and niece were.

“Almost since the beginning,” I said with zero shame.

I already realized I was fortunate. I had only experienced a small portion of what other survivors had undergone. Zeke had told us they had to train the children to stay quiet at night. They didn’t want to attract the attention of the living or the infected.

“They’ve learned to come immediately,” I quietly added as understanding dawned.

“In my experience,” he said after a beat of silence. “The kids seem more resilient, adapted rather well, and accepted the changes quicker than most adults I’ve encountered.”

I nodded thoughtfully.

“Do you like dolls?” I heard Mariah ask Hana as she grabbed her hand.

Hana looked at her uncle with wide eyes, and he smiled and nodded to her in encouragement. She seemed to relax a little bit as she nodded earnestly.

“Me no like dolls,” Hai grumbled, less reserved than his sister.

“That’s okay.” Mariah grabbed his hand as well. “I have cars, balls, and boy toys too. And Foster, my brother, has lots of boy toys too. So, you can play with him.”

“Kay, me go now?” Hai inquired.

Mariah looked over her shoulder at me.

“Maybe later,” I smiled at her.

I loved how outgoing Mariah was. She was comfortable in her skin, and you could tell. Mariah had a tender, empathetic heart and made sure to include everyone all the time. She had made herself the self-appointed welcome committee to all the kids too. She didn't care if you were two or twelve; she always made it a point to introduce herself and attempt to make the other child comfortable.

The kids continued to chatter, and when I turned to look at Ari, I saw a small smile curving his lips. If you asked me, he was more attractive this way. He seemed more real than he was, flashing his rock star megawatt smile. He was more likable and personable too. Not that I was looking at him as more than a potential friend!

“They've witnessed a lot,” Ari said with a grim tilt to his mouth, continuing our conversation before Mariah interrupted. “They know that not listening could mean life or death.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” I apologized with a frown. “I know we're fortunate in many ways. My brother, BJ, my best friend, Sylvia, and I were taking my other brothers to a tree-top adventure park the day it came to our town. My family owned this land, and we immediately made our way here.

“I've been out numerous times, but I've only faced a small fraction of what I'm sure you've been dealing with for months.”

Ari seemed to have waved my apology away as he dug his fingers into his well-worn, artfully torn jeans. “We thought we had a perfect thing going a time or two. I hope this is the last place my nephew and niece ever know. I want them to laugh and become free once more.” He pointed to the small group of toddlers playing on scooters, big wheels, tricycles, and other yard toys.

The toddler teacher smiled and waved at us as we passed. I smiled and waved in return. The teachers like to take the children outside to play on the nicer days. They were taught educational lessons, but play was integrated throughout the

day. More times than not, the teacher was able to incorporate the two.

“We thought we were fortunate to have the number of children in our group,” Ari continued. “This place is so unreal.”

“Sometimes I feel like we could have done more,” I admitted as I walked up the porch steps leading to the side of the dining hall. “I wished we would have done a search and rescue the moment crap hit the fan.”

Ari firmly shook his head. “Whatever you did, was enough,” he insisted. “In the beginning, we tried to go door to door.” Sadness flashed in his eyes again. “We lost,” his voice broke slightly. “More people than we should have. We found three children in the first two weeks after the outbreak and lost fifteen. But, in the end, the risk wasn’t worth it. I wish we could have saved more, but sometimes we must weigh all the outcomes.”

From his expression, I knew he was unwilling to say more. If I had to guess, he had lost someone or more than one who meant a lot to him in their initial endeavors. His expression and personal experience gave me a little comfort. It will always be one of my greatest regrets, but now I understand what could have happened to us too.

“Do you think the kids will be ready for school and preschool tomorrow?” I inquired as I led him to the classrooms. “I’m sure Mariah will be more than happy to make Hana feel more comfortable, and I can introduce Hai to Elsa. They’re the same age, but Elsa’s on the quieter side.”

Hai turned around from where he walked ahead, smiled, and waved at me. “Hi, friend!”

“Hi, friend!” I smiled and waved back.

“That’s the plan,” he confirmed. “I admit, I’m worried about Hana, but as you can see, Hai is a little flirt and makes friends quickly.”

“I wonder where he learned that from,” I blurted, before I could think.

I could palm my forehead. I hoped Ari didn't assume I meant he was flirting with me. Or did he think I was flirting with him when I made that comment? I hoped not!

We entered the hall for Mariah's classroom, and she stopped short and looked at me worriedly. "You're not making me go back, right?"

I could kiss her for her interruption. I refused to look at Ari and gauge his reaction. I was sure he had his cocky smirk in place.

"No, pumpkin, not today. I promise," I quickly reassured Mariah.

I stopped outside Mariah's classroom and peeked in. I liked Ms. Doan, but she needed to know it wasn't okay to allow Gianna to waltz in here and take Mariah at will. I thought she understood that. The therapist, Alec, and Axel had let her know.

I saw Miss Doan helping a few kids with their abacuses as they learned math. I prepared to knock on the open door when I noticed movement in my peripheral. My jaw dropped when I realized who was sitting in the reading circle. One child was perched on her lap, while another child leaned their head on her knee. An additional four children were avidly listening as Emery read to them.

She must have finally seen me because she looked just as shocked to see me. It was evident she didn't expect to see me. And I knew my reaction reflected hers. She abhorred children. So why was she here?

## CHAPTER 8



“WHAT are you playing at, Emery?” I hissed the moment we got out on the porch.

Moments earlier, I don’t know who was more shocked, me or Ginny Doan. Ginny was under the impression that it was me assisting her in class this morning. But, of course, it wasn’t the first time I had assisted in the classroom, so she didn’t think twice when Emery showed up a little over an hour ago to “help” her with the kindergarteners.

When I asked Ginny why she allowed Mariah to go with Gianna, she insisted that she was utilizing the restroom and getting snacks for the children. She never even saw Gianna. And when she noticed Mariah’s absence, Emery informed her that her parent had retrieved her. But, again, it wasn’t anything new. We had all been known to pull the kids or not even take

them to their classes. Sometimes we thought they would have more practical learning with us than in a classroom.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Emery said with a careless shrug. “And who was that man?” she asked me with a narrowed gaze.

“Why are you dressed like me?” I scrutinized her in return.

Emery wore skin-tight jeans, dresses, and skirts. I preferred athletic wear, jeans, and shorts. Emery was currently dressed in nearly identical jean shorts as me. Today, I chose a black sleeveless top with a semi-open back and a knot at the base of my spine. It was tighter across my breast but looser around my waist and hips. Emery’s similarly styled top hid her baby bump with ease. Plus, her hair was identically styled like mine. The last time I saw her hair in a ponytail was when she cheered—in high school. Since then, it was always styled and left down. She was very vain when it came to “our” hair.

Emery scoffed loudly. “You don’t have a monopoly of styles and clothing, Avery,” she rolled her eyes.

“Why are you saying you’re me?” I spit out next.

She smirked before it was quickly replaced with annoyance. “I never said I was you, Avery. I can’t help it if most people are too dumb to tell us apart.” I began to open my mouth, but she cut me off. “I didn’t correct her because you’ve turned everyone against me. People hate me because of the lies you told them.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. First, Emery did all that on her own. Second, she seemed too ready with her explanations. Third, I didn’t trust her. She was up to something. Then my eyes widened as I noticed the bandage on her cheek.

On the same cheek I now bore a small scar. Tree bark had lodged itself in my skin when we were attacked. I had been warned it might scar, and it had. However, it wasn’t unsightly. It was a small one-inch scar, if that, and no wider than a pen.

“What did you do to your cheek, Emery?” I asked in horror.

Instinctively, I knew she had intentionally marred her skin, which made no sense! She was beyond vain! She had sobbed and begged Dad to pay for plastic surgery our senior year. She had been in a skiing accident that required surgery on her left knee. It had left a noticeable scar, yet she had been inconsolable when all the creams and patches she used hadn't eradicated it.

It was faint, and you really had to look for it now, but at the time, you would have thought the world was ending with how she behaved. She had attempted to beg our grandparents, who supported Dad's decision. They didn't want to pay for unnecessary surgery.

"Why are you so obsessed with me," she jeered. "I had an accident. Why would I want to look like you when you're the Wish version of me?"

I didn't believe her for one second. I knew I would have to wait and see, which was beyond infuriating. Even though I knew I wouldn't get any truth from her, I continued interrogating her.

"Why did you allow Gianna to take Mariah out of class, and why did you lie to Ginny?" I asked.

"Again," she smirked. "Ginny assumed it was Alec. I told her her parent had picked her up. Is Gianna her parent, or is she not? She's her mother, not *you!*"

"I never said I was, and Gianna needs to work on herself before she's trusted around that little girl again," I angrily retorted.

"Says who? You? Your men?" Emery gloated. "Frankly, I think it's disgusting that you're poisoning her against her mother. There's a reason a judge granted her full custody. You, Dad, the aunts, and uncles, think you know best, but you really don't. And if you think you can take my child away from me like you did that little girl, you're nuts. I see what you guys are trying to do."

I let out an incredulous laugh when understanding dawned. "Of course, you befriended Gianna. Anyone that's against me,

you make sure to ingratiate yourself with.”

I saw anger flash across her expression before she gave me another smirk. “Get a life, Avery. I couldn’t care less who likes or doesn’t like you. It’s always been you who was so obsessed with me. I wanted Trevor; you took him. I wanted Corbin; you took him. I told you I was talking to Wyatt, and now you have him too. Then when you realized Trevor and I were going to have a baby that you failed to give him, you ruined that too.”

I was so accustomed to her vitriol that I had already girded myself against this particular venom she spewed. She had hit her mark the last time, and I was determined to conceal the hurt her words caused. There was no truth in her words. My miscarriage wasn’t anything I could have prevented. Yet, my face must have shown some pain because she grinned in satisfaction.

She let out a smug laugh when she realized how her words had hurt me. And she cut me off before I could remind her that she brought all her issues on herself.

“Who’s the man, Avery?” She disdainfully asked. “Do your men know you’re trying to add another man to your disgusting little arrangement?”

She tried to hide her jealousy, but I saw it. “Don’t be jealous, Emery,” I gave her a saccharine sweet smile. “You wish you could have *my* life. You “may” have wanted Trevor, Wyatt, and Corbin first, but *I* got them. They never chose *you*. *You* were the substitute for *me* with Trevor. You tried to trap him with a baby, yet he still doesn’t want *you*. And no matter how often you threw yourself at Corbin and Wyatt, they never desired *you*. You sent them nudes, and yet they still rejected you.

“Corbin and Wyatt wanted *me*. I never had to chase them or behave so desperately,” I gave her my own smirk. “Now, who’s the Wish version of who?”

I completely ignored Emery’s curiosity about Ari. She had an eclectic taste in music and could easily name several artists and their songs. However, in most cases, she wouldn’t

recognize the actual artist, especially if they were part of a band.

I saw the ugly enter Emery's gaze and knew she was moments from blowing, but before she could, I heard Dad's voice right outside the screened storm door leading up to the porch.

"What's going on, girls?" Dad cautiously inquired.

I turned my head and saw Dad, Uncle Mitch, Uncle Scott, Aunt Carol, Aunt Pam, Axel, Wyatt, and Corbin. I realized then that it was lunchtime, and I was so furious I had never even heard the lunch bell ring. My body was shaking with the adrenaline running through it. I was so pissed at Emery and suspicious of her motives today.

I truly believed helping Gianna hadn't been her only agenda today. She was like a snake lying in the grass, preparing to strike. Only I didn't know when, why, or where.

"Gianna attempted to take Mariah today, and Emery helped her," I informed Dad before looking at Axel briefly. "Ari stopped Gianna from dragging her away. Mariah knew where I was and came running to me upset."

I saw how furious the news made Axel. His jaw clenched with anger and frustration.

"Why would you allow that to happen, Emery?" Dad inquired with a frown.

"Gianna just left with some of the bunker people," Axel informed me as he glared at Emery.

I heard Aunt Pam and Aunt Carol exclaim in dismay. My heart raced with renewed anger. What would have happened if Gianna had taken Mariah? I forgot that a small group of bunker people was leaving on the same helicopter the General came in on.

We could have gone after Mariah, but it could have taken a day or two. We didn't have days, especially since we were leaving on a mission the day after tomorrow.

Emery crossed her arms over her chest and pouted. “I think it’s cruel how you keep that little girl away from her mother. Gianna only gets to see her when other people are around. She’s a grown-ass woman, and every one of you treats her like a child.”

“A medical professional evaluated her,” Dad slowly explained as if he was reasoning with a toddler. “Her actions and behavior reduced her time with her daughter, not us. Gianna was emotionally and verbally abusing Mariah. Until she realizes her behavior hurts her daughter, we can’t in good conscience allow her time alone.”

“And it has nothing to do with Avery’s desire to turn her men against every female she’s threatened by?” Emery jeered. “She wants to replace Gianna. She wants Gianna’s daughter!”

I shook my head at her. “You really need help,” I sighed wearily.

“I heard her call you mom.” She whirled on me. “Everyone says I need help, but what about you? You are not her mom; she already has a mom!”

“Mariah chose to call Avery mom of her own accord,” Corbin huffed. “We already corrected her and intended to discuss this with her therapist. No one forced her to call her mom.”

“Emery, why do you look like Avery?” Wyatt interjected.

I didn’t think the others had noticed until Wyatt pointed it out. Standing side by side, any stranger could easily confuse us. Emery was slighter and not nearly as muscular as I was, but only someone looking for our differences could probably see that.

“She was pretending to be me,” I gave my full attention to Dad. “Suddenly, she likes children and decided to help with the kindergarteners. Emery didn’t correct Ginny when she assumed she was me. When Ginny went to the restroom and gathered snacks for the kids, she handed Mariah to Gianna. She knew what she was doing was wrong, yet she’s playing dumb.”

“Do we need to start monitoring you again?” Aunt Pam stated with a frown. “We just allowed you to discontinue your administrative duties because you said you wanted to learn more about the community.”

“Like always.” Tears sprung to Emery’s eyes, but I called bullshit. I didn’t believe they were real at all. She always had a flare for dramatics. “You believe Avery. She’s trying to twist things. Gianna came to me crying earlier. As one mother to another,” she rubbed her barely there bump. “I felt sorry for her. She said she was just going to play with Mariah at the park. How did I know she lied to me and planned to take Mariah? You guys don’t even know if that’s what she would do. Maybe she wanted to spend a little time with Mariah before she left!”

All the adults exchanged glances, and I could see how Uncle Scott and Dad wanted to believe her, but I didn’t believe a word that came out of her mouth. I saw the rest of them agreed with me.

“Emery, you’re on probation,” Dad slowly stated.

“Bryan,” Aunt Pam warned, but Uncle Scott put a staying hand on her shoulders.

I’m sure if it was up to Aunt Pam, Emery wouldn’t be just given probation. Probation was like a warning. She would have to screw up again before they assigned her to a job of their choosing. But Aunt Pam was no longer fooled by Emery and wanted her to be punished more severely.

“Why?” Emery sobbed. “I did nothing wrong. You guys wanted me to “grow up,” so I decided to help the kiddos today, and you still can’t be satisfied. I’m trying, and Avery says one thing, and you all believe her!”

“Always the victim,” Corbin scoffed.

“Whatever, Corbin, you were my best friend,” Emery sobbed. “But the moment Avery started spreading her legs for you, I became the villain. She’s such a sl—”

“Enough, Emery,” Aunt Pam snapped out. “Not another ugly word. Go get lunch.”

Emery looked ready to argue until her friends approached the side door. They seemed shocked to see us all standing there. They slowly began to back away, and I saw them exchange heated whispers. Emery looked at them, but I was unable to catch their silent exchange. They quickly retreated before anyone could question them. It just made me more suspicious of her behavior. It was apparent they were in on it with Emery. What was their game?

Wyatt and Corbin came to my side and hugged me. “Rough morning, baby?” Corbin asked.

“You can say that,” I breathed out in frustration. “I calmed Mariah,” I informed Axel. “Gloria and Mike took her, the boys, and her siblings to the park. Ari followed with his nephew and niece.” I pointed to the park, where the group was coming up the path as I spoke. “She has a bandage on the same cheek I had mine on.” I suddenly remembered as I realized the parental units hadn’t made their way inside.

“Is that what that was?” Wyatt asked with a frown.

“To what end?” Dad asked with a weary sigh. My heart truly went out to him. I was sure he constantly felt in the middle of us. Even if he agreed with me and believed me over Emery, as her father, he never wanted it to appear like he was choosing “sides.”

“There’s a lot of things Avery and I kept from you, Uncle Bryan,” Trevor stated from the opposite side of the porch. “Ever since Aunt Isabella passed away, Emery seemed troubled. She would always lash out at Avery when she felt slighted. She never told you because she didn’t wanna make any waves and was afraid of the retaliation.”

By the expression on Trevor’s face, he had been there long enough to hear some of our conversations. He looked so lost and devastated that I couldn’t help but embrace him. Friends did that, right? By now, I’m sure he understood that that’s all we could ever be.

He seemed grateful and surprised by my actions and briefly returned my hug before he moved to place his arm over my shoulders.

“Like what?” Dad, Uncle Scott, and Aunt Pam nearly said simultaneously.

Trevor gave me a look, and I nodded. Maybe it was time I gave my dad a full disclosure. I never wanted to stress Dad out when he was deployed by informing him of all the messed-up crap Emery had done when he was gone. I never wanted Aunt Pam or Uncle Scott to feel like watching us was a burden when Dad was away. I had kept silent to keep the peace, but maybe that was a mistake from the beginning.

“Uh oh, what happened now?” BJ stated as he took the stairs two at a time.

I blinked a few times. When did my brother filled out more? He was never skinny or slim, but I was pretty sure he didn't have that wide of shoulders or definition in his arms a few months ago. I knew he had been doing a lot of manual labor around here on top of working out with us. However, it wasn't until that moment I noticed how quickly he was shedding the skin of a teenager and becoming a man.

His broad smile and teasing eyes slowly dimmed as he realized the seriousness of the situation. He looked at me, and a small part loved that he still sought me out. We may have drifted apart here, but he was still my best friend and reciprocated my feelings.

“Emery,” Wyatt succinctly explained.

BJ sighed, placed his hands on his hips, and looked up at the ceiling.

“What now?” He almost sounded like Dad with his weary tone.

“We'll talk about Emery after lunch, but right now, we have something to tell you all,” Aunt Pam asserted.

I saw the looks Aunt Pam and Uncle Mitch exchanged while the others seemed reluctant to meet our eyes.

I immediately ducked my head and sighed. I don't think I was ready for this discussion. I also didn't understand why they would break this news in front of us. Why would they cheat and treat it like it was no big deal?

“Avery and Zeke caught Mitch and me in a compromising position last night,” Aunt Pam said without preamble.

Trevor choked on the water he had been drinking while Wyatt’s fork clattered to his tray.

“Excuse me, what?” Corbin stopped mid-bite.

I immediately felt the eyes of everyone at the table. Zeke grabbed my hand, linked my fingers through his, and placed it on his thigh. I saw the dumbfounded and hurt expressions on Wyatt and Corbin’s faces. I tried to give them an apologetic look. I hoped they would let me explain how I had seen it moments before I nearly lost my life. I prayed they understood that I hadn’t intentionally kept it from them and wanted them to have clear heads before our battle.

“You cheated on Dad?” Trevor inquired in a horrified whisper.

After we had gotten our lunches, Dad, Stephanie, my aunts, uncles, Katie, Wyatt, Corbin, Trevor, Zeke, and I found a table at one of the pavilions not too far from the dining facility.

“Why would you do that, Dad?” Katie cried out angrily, standing from her seat.

Stephanie stood up and immediately began to murmur words I couldn’t hear in her ear. Eventually, Katie sat back down.

“Time out,” Dad calmly stated before shooting a look of exasperation with Aunt Pam. “Let them explain before you jump to conclusions.”

“We’re swingers but not,” Aunt Carol nonchalantly stated.

“How can you be swingers but not?” Wyatt spluttered.

“Are you polyamorous?” Aunt Carol shot back. “After all, you’re engaging in a relationship with multiple consensual partners.”

“No, our sexual relationship is about Avery,” Corbin countered. “We have a brotherhood; most people will never understand. We don’t engage sexually with each other— not that I’m judging. To each their own. We all love each other and wouldn’t hesitate to sacrifice ourselves for each other as well.”

“We don’t have a label,” Wyatt added. “We just are.”

“Neither do we,” Aunt Pam stated.

“I’m confused,” Trevor blurted. “You’re swingers, or you’re not.”

“They don’t label it,” Zeke spoke up. “They all love each other in their own way and choose to express themselves outside of societal norms or definitions.”

Aunt Carol grinned at him, leaned over the table, and cupped his cheek. “I knew you were a bright one.”

Zeke exasperatedly rolled his eyes but smiled.

I think I slowly understood what they were trying to tell us, and I had to admit that a significant portion of the weight I felt on my shoulders seemed to have lifted. So, I decided to keep quiet and wait them out. I wanted them to explain it to me before jumping to conclusions.

“When we were in high school, then later in college and tech school, we were known to share women between us,” Uncle Mitch spoke up next. “It wasn’t uncommon for us to date a girl, and then later, the same girl would date another of my brothers. And sometimes, it was three different women rotating between us.”

My jaw dropped as I looked at Dad and Stephanie, as I got a clearer picture. Dad looked chagrined while Stephanie shook her head. It was clear that Stephanie was never interested in the lifestyle. Suddenly I wondered if my mom had been. She never struck me as the type to be, but then again, I felt like Uncle Scott would be too... stiff to be okay with letting Uncle Mitch and Aunt Pam sleep together.

Dad sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I still think you got it easier explaining it to your boys.”

I would probably tease Dad if the situation weren't bizarre and uncomfortable. The man could strut into a store and purchase the correct pads or tampons for Emery and me. Our feminine attributes didn't scare him. However, he never grew comfortable discussing sex and other intimate conversations with us.

"Hey, my daughter is right there," Uncle Mitch stated with a smirk, pointing to Katie.

"But I've already been scarred for life," Katie snorted, seemingly better now that she understood that it wasn't infidelity but consensual. "You guys forget that your bedroom activities weren't always confined to the room. I should be in therapy for the number of times I caught you guys in *compromising* positions."

Wyatt shuddered. "I still believe those were lucid nightmares. I never saw anything!"

I had to smile at his denial. It was no secret that Uncle Mitch and Aunt Carol hadn't been as discreet with their dalliances. The women may have curbed their inhibitions and sex talk around us, but Wyatt's parents had never been as consular with their own children. They let their freak flags fly freely.

"Mom and you?" I finally asked Dad, knowing from Stephanie's expression she wasn't open to the idea. Plus, it explained how her death seemed to hit my uncles and aunts nearly as hard as it had Dad. Their lifestyle had created another level of intimacy.

Dad nodded, cautiously looking me in the eyes. He cleared his throat. "For a while, the sharing stopped when we found the women, we wanted to spend the rest of our lives. We knew most people would never understand our lifestyle. Pam, Carol, and your mom knew we had previously shared women.

"We never lied to them, just like I told Stephanie that was my way of life once. She understands that we have rules. For instance, Pam and Mitch sleeping together last night weren't behind Carol and Scott's backs. They knew. Transparency, honesty, and trust are crucial to them."

“If you went down to the basement, you would have found me in the sex swing with Scott,” Aunt Carol smirked.

Uncle Scott turned pink, Aunt Pam, Stephanie, and Aunt Carol giggled, and Uncle Mitch smirked. I looked at the other men sitting at the table. I don't know who was more horrified Corbin, Wyatt, or Trevor.

“That's it. ” Wyatt said in an aghast whisper.

“Not if I beat you there,” Trevor took a large bite of his pork taco.

Honestly, that was a much tamer response than I expected from him. Maybe the apocalypse had changed him. Pre-apocalypse, Trevor would have remained quiet or left by now.

“We love our wives,” Uncle Scott was still very red as he explained next. His gaze was fixed on his salad. “It's just another way to spice up our love life. Plus, over time, we have come to fall in love with our brother's spouses but in a different way.”

“It took a lot of communication, and to be honest, we screwed up a time or two in the beginning, especially when emotions came into play, but we learned the more open we are, the better. And it helps that we all trust each other.” Aunt Pam leaned over and kissed Uncle Scott’s cheek.

“We never engage with each other when the other spouse isn’t aware of it,” Uncle Mitch resumed. “So, the entire time Uncle Scott wasn’t here, I was never intimate with Pam.”

“Not that I would have minded,” Uncle Scott countered. “Mitch and Bryan are more than brothers to me. The same camaraderie you all have.” He pointed to Wyatt, Zeke, and Corbin. “Is similar to what we have with each other. I wouldn’t have minded as long as my Pam was loved and happy. In fact,” his voice broke a little. “If something had happened to me, I would have felt better if Mitch or Bryan cared for my Pam in any way. I trust them with my life, so why wouldn’t I trust them with the person who means the most to me? Outside you boys, of course.”

I felt tears spring to my eyes at his beautiful words. Uncle Scott was on the introverted side. He rarely showed emotions and tried to hide them. But his laying his soul bare to us hit me. After all, I would always see him as my second father. He had been there for me as much as my father was growing up.

Suddenly, I remembered what Aunt Carol and Aunt Pam said after we arrived at Sanctuary.

“So, you guys engage in,” I cleared my throat, still not one hundred percent comfortable having this discussion with them. “Activities separately, but never together. When we first got here—”

“You said you got a woman for Dad for his birthday,” Wyatt blurted, cutting me off. He pointed to his mom. “But you never,” Wyatt cleared his throat and closed his eyes.

He probably just remembered who he was talking to—his mom. And no matter how comfortable you were discussing sex with your parent; double penetration still probably wouldn’t come up.

It had been amusing listening to Aunt Pam, Aunt Carol, and Sylvia talking about it, but that hadn't been my dad talking. There were still some things I didn't want to think about. It was still shocking enough to realize that Dad and Mom had embraced an alternative lifestyle once upon a time.

"Never mind. I don't want to know!" Wyatt grumbled before shoveling baked beans into his mouth.

Aunt Carol, the freak that she was, smugly smirked. One day I hoped to be half as brazen and unapologetic as she was. But instead, she embraced life and didn't allow other people's opinions or judgments to define or intimidate her.

She looked at Dad first, and Dad nodded.

"Well, the woman," Carol hesitantly began.

"It was your mother," Dad interjected before he leaned his head back and rubbed his hands over his face. "Shit! This is tough. Even if Isabella said she wanted me to be truthful and honest. Isabella," he seemed to be looking up at the heavens seeking an answer to this tough conversation. And that completely broke me. It had been too long since I heard him talk to her. When she first passed, I often heard him talking to her and God as if seeking guidance.

I had made peace with him moving on with Stephanie. It had been a long, hard road, but I now loved Stephanie. She was a fantastic woman. My dad deserved happiness and shouldn't have lived the rest of his life single to protect our feelings.

However, a small, bitter part of me wished my dad would have continued talking to us about Mom. He seemed more open to talking about her after she passed away. As time passed, he spoke less and less about Mom. Then eventually, he almost stopped altogether.

Corbin placed a comforting hand on my back while Zeke squeezed my hand.

"You don't have to explain," Aunt Pam gently reminded him. "In fact, I'm pretty sure Isabella wrote a letter for this very conversation."

When Mom knew her, time was limited she had written letters for us. She wanted to ensure she was there on our “big” days. When Emery got her heart broken in her sophomore year of high school, Aunt Pam gave her a letter. When BJ took his first girlfriend on an actual date, he got a letter. When Emery and I graduated high school, we got a letter. All major life event was followed with a letter.

“You have them?” I incredulously inquired.

Losing my mom’s letters, her favorite recipes, and photos of us together had been tough. Sure, there were pictures of us up at the big house, but it wasn’t the same in my eyes. They didn’t have nearly as many as my scrapbooks and albums of my mom and me.

Aunt Pam nodded. “With all the moving we were doing, I thought it was safe to keep it here. So, Nana put them in her cedar chest for us.”

A little piece of me felt like it had been returned. A part of me wished Aunt Pam would have just given us all our letters once we became adults. However, the other part of me looked forward to the surprise of the letters. Aunt Pam, Aunt Carol, and Mom had spent countless hours scribing our notes while we were in school. A lot of things had been tough on Mom near the end. Her memory and simple tasks could elude her at times. Yet, before losing all her faculties, she told Aunt Pam and Aunt Carol everything she wanted to tell us. She had given them to Aunt Pam since, distance-wise, she was the closest.

“I don’t talk about her to you guys enough; maybe that’s why Emery struggled the most after she passed away,” Dad mused with regret. “Part of me...”

“You don’t need to explain, Dad,” I wiped my nose on the napkin Corbin handed me. “I understand that we all process our grief differently. You never were a big talker.”

“It’s not an excuse. I loved your mother. She has and always will have a part of my heart,” Dad sadly smiled. “And the only reason I found it difficult to have this discussion today was there are just some things I don’t know how to talk

to you girls about. When your mom discussed sex with you guys at twelve, I thought I had dodged that bullet.”

“You guys didn’t have a family meeting?” Wyatt asked in mock shock, attempting to alleviate the tension. “Mom and Dad made us watch a movie on childbirth, followed by graphic pictures of STDs, then made us practice putting a condom on a banana.”

Most of us had to laugh, and I was thankful for the reprieve from the heavy talk.

“At least you didn’t know who the actors were in your video,” Katie shuddered with a curl of her lips. “I got to see the video Dad recorded of Mom giving birth to me.”

“You always practiced safe sex, didn’t you?” Aunt Carol smugly asked. “Pregnancy and giving birth aren’t for the faint of heart.”

“You did not?” Stephanie asked in a tone of horror.

Aunt Pam and Aunt Carol looked at each other and exchanged laughs. “Of course, we did.” Aunt Carol smirked. “Those health classes at school were too soft on them. I didn’t want to become a grandmother from my teenage son or daughter. I would have shown Wyatt and MJ the same one, but Mitch thought it may scar them.”

“Too late!” Wyatt mockingly cried out. “Thanks, Dad.” He gave his dad a relieved smile.

“I’m here for ya, son,” Uncle Mitch chuckled and shook his head as he took a bite of his cucumber salad.

“How did we get so off-topic?” Corbin queried with a smile. “So, the short of it was Avery and Zeke caught you guys banging,” he pointed to Aunt Pam and Uncle Mitch. “And you decided to clear the air finally? Honestly, I don’t care what you do in your free time as long as it’s all consensual and you’re happy.”

“Corbin Zachariah Cavalier,” Aunt Pam said sharply, despite the slight curve to her lips. “There’s no need to be so crude.”

“I guess it explains why they were so open to our relationship,” Wyatt mused aloud. “Well, we support you guys too.”

Uncle Mitch, Uncle Scott, Aunt Pam, and Aunt Carol exchanged looks. “Thanks, son,” Uncle Mitch nodded. “That means a lot to us. In the past, it was something we only engaged in occasionally, but now that we’re all together again, it may occur more often. I’m sorry you had to see that last night, Avery and Zeke.”

“Luckily,” I tried to shake off my melancholy feelings. “I didn’t actually see anything,” I teased. “It just came as a shock, is all. I assumed...” My face heated. “And I shouldn’t have. And I should have allowed ya’ll to explain. I love you guys, and whatever makes you happy makes me happy.”

The work bell rang, indicating the end of the lunch. We all took the last few bites of food we wanted before storing our utensils on our trays.

“Well, that went well,” Aunt Carol smiled cheerfully. “Unfortunately, we have to return to work.”

We all broke off into individual discussions as we prepared to leave. Finally, I stood, taking a deep breath.

I was relieved Uncle Mitch and Aunt Pam weren’t sneaking behind Aunt Carol and Uncle Scott’s backs. I accepted their relationship with each other. However, a small part of me was stunned by the revelation.

“I’ll take that,” Corbin stated, gently pushing me toward my dad.

I looked up to see my father a few feet away. I saw the silent pleading in his eyes and immediately embraced him. I had to understand it had probably been hard talking about Mom. I had to recognize he did his best to raise us. Even if Emery was a headcase, BJ and I turned out pretty good.

“Did I mess you guys up?” he inquired gruffly in my ear. “BJ seems to have coped well with it all, but sometimes I wonder if he sleeps around to ease an ache inside of him. I wasn’t around as much as I should have been with you kids.

“Your mom and I always knew your sister struggled. After discovering her eating disorder, we should have dug deeper for the root cause. I was a little hard on her, but I felt like she didn’t apply herself as much as she should have. Plus, it was no secret that your mom spoiled her. They were so much alike, and I knew your mom had no favorites, but they related to each other the most.”

I knew that. I knew my mom never had favorites, but she did spoil Emery. Dad was hard on her sometimes but was within reason to be. In turn, Mom always seemed to overcompensate for it. She felt like Emery was too sensitive to handle Dad’s criticisms. And maybe when we were younger, he had been a little too strict with her, but he had simple expectations. He expected us to try our best in school, do our daily chores, and respect them.

Emery never liked school. And she cut corners with her daily chores. When we were around ten, she would take a small portion of her allowance and pay BJ to do most of her tasks. At eight, BJ had been gullible and thought the dollar he received was enough to finish cleaning the bathrooms, putting away the dishes, and anything else Emery and I were expected to do.

“You were always strong and independent. And maybe I shouldn’t have assumed you didn’t need me from time to time. I mean,” Dad gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I didn’t even know my first baby was pregnant, which I should have known.”

I didn’t mind being independent; I knew part of that was because I had been a people pleaser. And BJ and Emery struggled with their behavior and grades. So, I felt I had to be the perfect child to balance them out.

I emphatically shook my head as I leaned my head into his chest. “The pregnancy was supposed to be a secret until the Fourth of July party, but I had miscarried. And you did nothing wrong. You raised us all the same way. And look at BJ now, I mean,” I snorted a laugh. “He’s a womanizer, but he respects women. And he was a bonehead as a child, but he’s a good

man now. Look how much he does around here; without your guidance, he probably wouldn't be half the man he is now."

Dad gave a sad laugh. "I wish I could believe you. I knew I had failed in many ways. When we return from our mission, wanna go fishing with your old man? Or maybe we can go on a hike. We can talk about your mom, life, anything you want. I don't want to waste more time and constantly live with regrets."

I must admit it had been some time since we had one-on-one time. And yes, I may be a mother myself now, but I would always be his little girl. "I would love that," I agreed before I gave a short laugh. "Stephanie's allowing you to go?"

Dad pulled back, grasped his neck, and looked down at his feet. "Yeah, I'm in the doghouse for that one, but she understands we're needed out there. Hey," he looked up, blue eyes so much like BJ's. "Did you ever hate me for marrying Stephanie? Did you think I was a shitty parent for not discussing it in further detail with you all?"

"I admit," I said truthfully. "I was hurt at first. In a way..." I expelled a loud breath, attempting to find the right words. "I felt like you were betraying Mom's memory, and you must not have loved her as much as she loved you. Then I realized that you were still young, and I overheard her when she made you promise to move on. I knew she wanted you to be happy. And ultimately, I like Stephanie; she's good for you.

"I see how much she loves you. Mikey and Miller were great additions. I love them like brothers. And I love my half-sister." I jokingly nudged him. "And now that I'm in a relationship with my guys, I can see how it's possible to love people in different ways, yet equally."

"I never thought I would be relieved for you to be in a relationship with six guys so that you could understand that," Dad dryly stated with a twinkle in his eyes. "I will love your mom to my dying breath, but I also love Stephanie. I do love them both in different ways."

I nodded, understanding what he meant. Dad smiled down at me and kissed my forehead. Then a frown marred his face.

“Has Emery been that bad, and I didn’t see it?” He frowned. “I mean, I knew she had a little sibling rivalry with you when she was around eleven or twelve, but I thought it was normal. Your mom and aunts seemed convinced it was just a phase. Aunt Carol said she was the same way with her sisters growing up, and they became best friends.

“I admit it was a shock to find out that she slept with Trevor. I never expected her to sink that low. I wanted to believe her when she said she was too drunk, but—” he shrugged, seemingly at a loss for words. “What else did I miss while getting deployed way too many times? Sometimes, I wished I had separated right after your mom passed away. I missed too much of your lives.”

“Hey, Ave, someone’s ready to get her hair done,” Kingston quipped as he came out on the deck with a diaper bag on one shoulder and Dani on his hip. Mariah stood beside him with the umbrella stroller in case Dani got tired of walking. “Whoops, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were still talking. I can take her and meet you up there.”

“No, it’s fine,” I insisted before looking at Dad. “Can we postpone this discussion? I’m feeling a little... raw,” I honestly admitted. “It is a lot to unpack. And you can’t blame yourself. Sure, we missed you, but we never wanted for anything. You provided for us and never made us get a job so we could focus on our studies and sports.

“Again, you have to admit, BJ and I turned out pretty darn amazing,” I teased. “You can’t throw out the whole carton of eggs over one bad one.”

“I mean, I’m amazing,” BJ piped up next, sliding next to Kingston. He had Carson in his arms and Ricky— Mike’s other brother— stood beside him. “The juries still out for you,” he joked. “Hope you don’t mind, Ave, but I invited myself along. Ricky, Carson, and I need a haircut.” He rubbed his hands through his hair. It had gotten long enough to curl around his ears and on the back of his neck. The longest he’d had since he joined the military academy at thirteen.

“No, it’s all good,” I reassured him. “Rain check?” I asked Dad.

“Yeah, sure,” he said with an exasperated look. Then he pulled me in for another embrace. “I love you, Honeybee. I’m sorry if I failed you.”

“You didn’t,” I insisted once more. “And I love you too, Papa Bear.”

## **CHAPTER 9**



AS everyone settled in the living room, I snuck into the house with a beautifully decorated strawberry crunch cheesecake. After getting to know Zeke, I discovered we both loved strawberry crunch bars. So, once I procured some golden Oreos, I couldn't resist attempting to make it. Once the cheesecake was finished, I took the Oreos and strawberry wafers and crumbled them on top. Next, I added some whipped cream florets, whole cookies, and fresh strawberries to garnish it. I was proud of my creation— if I said so myself. It was almost too pretty to eat.

Technically, Zeke's birthday was in two days, but since we were going to be gone, I wanted to celebrate tonight. When we first got together, I thought he said his birthday had just passed. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised to find I had misheard him. I wanted to make my guys' birthday as memorable as possible.

After dinner, we invited Sylvia and her family, our families, and Rhys and his family. The cheesecake was mainly for the adults, and I made strawberry crunch cupcakes for the kids.

Today we did our last-minute prepping for tomorrow. Then I finished decorating Zeke's cheesecakes and baked and decorated the cupcakes for the kids. So, all in all, it had been a productive day.

"Where's he at?" I whisper-shouted to the guys.

Aunt Carol and BJ had set up the cards for a game of Heads-Up Apocalypse Addition. We used large index cards since we didn't have the original game. We picked several categories and put words on the cards to match the topic. The cards were placed face-down in the middle of our coffee table. One at a time, the teams sent one person up there, and they would set the card face out onto their forehead. Then, their

team would give clues for the person to guess the card. They had two minutes to get as many cards as possible. The first team to get twenty-five cards won. It was a fun group game and got interesting at times.

We learned early on the best way to divide the teams was by putting our names in a hat. Certain people— cough, cough, me— could get super competitive at times. Kingston and I learned we were better off on the same teams, or we accused each other of cheating. For the record, I never cheated. I loved winning fair and square. A few others also worked better together than on separate teams. For instance, Dad and Uncle Mitch, Amy and Wyatt, and Sylvia and Simon, to name a few. When we were separated from our “arch nemesis, ” things could get heated and entertaining.

“He’s bathing and getting Isa ready for bed,” Kingston informed me, standing up as Stephanie and Aunt Pam followed me into the house carrying the cupcakes and cupcake stand.

I reached into my cabinet for my cake stands while Stephanie and Aunt Pam unpacked the cupcakes from the containers, I had hidden them in. Sylvia joined us in the kitchen and began to make coffee.

“Want help?” Easton inquired as he looked up from his in-depth conversation with Dad and Uncle Scott.

Dad and Uncle Scott were scientists, while Easton was a doctor. They had a lot of interests and things in common. I believed they were discussing the virus and possible solutions to discover a cure. None of them studied pathology, but it didn’t stop them from researching as much as possible.

Despite their appearance, Dad and Easton were nerds at heart. I imagined that if most people had to guess their occupations, they would never think of scientists or doctors. Uncle Scott was a good-looking man too. However, he had the stereotypical look of a “nerd.” He had a slim build, fair skin, and glasses. Nevertheless, they loved talking about science and medical discoveries. They had been putting their heads

together lately concerning the virus and the possibility of “discovering” a cure for it.

“I’m good, thanks, my king,” I smiled at him. And as I saw Corbin, Wyatt, and Axel attempt to enter the room, I waved them off.

They smiled and sat at the island next to Rhys and Uncle Mitch. Soon they were immersed in a discussion about football. The way they were talking, they were contemplating creating teams for softball, basketball, and flag football. I knew Uncle Mitch had competed in intramural sports long after graduating high school. Unlike Dad and Uncle Scott, college never interested him, so he enlisted straight out of high school. However, Uncle Mitch never stopped playing sports. He participated in volleyball, softball, basketball, and football on the bases he was stationed on and for his community.

I wouldn’t be surprised if it generated a lot of interest. Seeing the young adults and teens down at the basketball courts every night wasn’t uncommon. Dad and Uncle Mitch had played several times with them. I think that gave them the idea to have scheduled games to generate more interest and use it as a community builder.

“Hey,” King protested as he slipped behind me and wrapped his hands around my waist. He nuzzled my cheek before brushing his lips against my cheek. “How many times do I have to remind you that I’m the original king?” he jokingly grumbled.

I laughed. “But Easton calls me his queen. You call me a goddess.”

“Does that make me a god?” he quipped back.

“Hardly,” I snorted as he attempted to snatch a decorative cookie from the top of my cake.

I slapped his hand, and he gave me a wounded look. “I will chop your fingers off,” I threatened him. “Let Zeke see it before you defile it.”

Kingston dramatically clutched his hand and pouted. “But it’ll be in our bellies in less than ten minutes.”

“It’s Zeke’s birthday cake,” I dryly reminded him as I pulled out candles from where I’d hid them.

The only candles we could find were pink and purple unicorn sparkly ones. And I loved it! He’d have crap to say about it, which made it more amusing.

“Where’s my birthday cake?” Kingston pouted.

“It’s in the oven,” I cheerily informed him before kissing the hand I had smacked. “Now get the children so we can sing Happy Birthday,” I commanded him.

I kept warily looking up. It would be my luck that Zeke would get our daughter ready in record time or forget something he may need for her and come back down for it. I knew someone would warn me if they saw him before we were ready, but I wanted to give him a legitimate surprise.

“Really?” Kingston excitedly exclaimed.

“Really, what?” I asked in confusion as I began to place the candles strategically.

“My cake’s in the oven?” He hopefully inquired. He said it loud enough for Corbin, Axel, and Easton to hear. They all started laughing and shaking their heads, clearly understanding I was messing with Kingston.

“Yup,” I popped my “p” with a sugary sweet smile. “And it will be done next month.”

“What?” Kingston gave me a crestfallen look.

“Our birthday is next month,” Easton reminded him as he entered the kitchen.

“I mean, it’s less than thirty days away,” Kingston pouted. “Can’t it be my birthday month?”

“It’s not even July,” Axel, exasperated, reminded him.

“Technically—” Kingston began to argue, and I swatted his butt once more.

“Even if your birthday is less than thirty days,” I cut him off. “It doesn’t qualify as your “birthday month.” Now, please, go get the children!” I pushed him towards the garage.

The garage play area was impressive. The guys had really transformed it into every child's dream playroom. They had built a playhouse approximately eight feet up, complete with a slide. Under the playhouse was a ball pit. Rings were suspended from the ceiling to swing across. And an entire wall was filled with those fake rocks for the kids to climb up. So, needless to say, our kids were spoiled but fell asleep quickly on most nights.

"How's this look, Ave?" Stephanie asked as she finished placing the cupcakes on a tower.

"Great, thanks." I smiled at her.

"Coffee's done for anyone who wants it," Sylvia informed everyone as she pulled out the flavored creamers.

We'd found a ton of those coffee creamers that required no refrigeration. We had given most of it to the community but held back a case for ourselves. Suzy attempted to make a flavored creamer, but it wasn't the same.

"Disposable cups or real cups?" Aunt Pam asked as she pulled down some coffee mugs.

"Real," Corbin and I nearly said simultaneously. We looked at each other and laughed before Corbin kissed my lips sweetly.

"It's Kingston and Wyatt's turn to wash dishes," Easton informed Aunt Pam.

They laughed, understanding that Kingston and Wyatt would readily change a diaper, clean a toilet, or set the table before they washed dishes, folded laundry, or swept and mopped. They hated the tedious "chores."

"Aww," Wyatt whined. "You would."

"It's better for the community," Uncle Mitch smirked, causing most of us to laugh again. "I don't want to burn trash more than we must."

There was a knock on the door, and BJ popped up from the floor. "I'll get it," he called out as I exchanged looks with Easton, Corbin, Wyatt, and Axel.

As far as I knew, we weren't expecting anyone else.

"Maybe it's Amy," Corbin shrugged. "She said she may or may not come."

After I got Dani's hair braided yesterday, Amy tracked me down. She apologized for putting me in a dangerous position the night before. Of course, I informed her it wasn't intentional and didn't hold it against her. Then she asked me if I wouldn't mind getting her a pregnancy test. I sneaked her two this morning. I hadn't seen her since then, so I wasn't sure what the results were.

"Amy, Josh!" BJ enthusiastically greeted before he said. "Oh... hey man, um, yeah, no problem. Come on in!"

"Look who I found wandering around," Amy said with a slight smirk. "So, I invited him to game night."

It took a moment before I saw Amy and Josh enter my line of sight, followed by Ari, Ihaia, and Hahana.

"I hope you don't mind me crashing the party," Ari said with his confident smirk. "I brought some beer." He held up a thirty rack.

Ari's group had come with a few supplies and offered to donate them to the community. My uncles and dad insisted that they keep everything they brought. We were in an ideal place supply-wise. We rationed some of our stuff, like sugar, but we still weren't in danger of running out any time soon.

I blinked in surprise as Hai spotted me. Clearly, the boy was besotted with me, and I was positively smitten with him too.

"Friend! Friend!" he cried out in delight before running around the center island.

I didn't hesitate to embrace him and placed him on my hip while I looked for a lighter to light the candles. Poor Hana was almost painfully introverted. She seemed really comfortable with Mariah yet spoke very little. I didn't know if Hahana was like this pre-apocalypse or if it was from the loss of her mom. Witnessing the crumble of society shortly after losing her

mother couldn't have been easy. I wondered if she had a father and if she'd lost him before the apocalypse, or during it.

"Come on in!" Sylvia enthusiastically exclaimed. "We were just getting started. I hope you like games!"

"Love them, actually," Ari said with chagrin.

He shot me a wink when he saw Hai on my hip, and... was that a flutter. No, a flutter meant an interest, and I had no interest in him, no matter how hot he was. And talented. And... no! Six men were more than enough. I rolled my eyes back at him, barely refraining from fake gagging at him. I'm sure that wink, had many girls drop their panties for him. Then, as if he could read my inner monologue, he laughed, covering it with one broad hand.

Even that move was... nope. And nope, again.

Ari turned and looked around our house with interest. Admittedly we had one of the largest houses— save Nana and Pop-pops house— thus far. Sylvia, her kids, and the men's house were slightly smaller, but not by much. I knew he was in another set of hunters' cabins. Most of them were two bedrooms and approximately a thousand square feet. In comparison, our house was a little excessive in size.

Uncle Mitch hadn't bothered putting the newcomers into the cabins and moved them straight to the hunter's cabins a little way down from the RV park. It was the newest cabins finished with their solar panels and such. Larry, Dwayne, and Ari had requested that their group stay as close as possible. We hadn't fought them on it. Most of them had been together since the beginning and keeping them separated would have been petty. Especially since we still had the room.

"I love games too." Sylvia sent me a mock glare before taking a seat between her men and Ari.

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. She might want to add to her harem, but I was good with a capital G.

Simon huffed and crossed his arms over his chest petulantly while Joe, Cal, and Chad exchanged indulgent smiles. By now, I'm sure Sylvia had told them about her

massive crush on Ari. By dinner, Ari's presence had been spread throughout the camp, and it was no surprise that his table had been filled with Emery and the likes.

"Beer on a school night?" BJ joked before clapping his hands in glee.

We were leaving tomorrow morning. Today, Dad, Uncle Mitch, Uncle Scott, Axel, Corbin, Larry, and Ari had gone over maps and planning. The General wasn't happy that we were heading there first, but ultimately, he had no say in our actions. Dad and Uncle Mitch had to remind him that this mission supported his goal. In addition, we had more intel to go by than the mission he wanted us to embark upon. In the end, the General begrudgingly offered support. Ten people were on their way from their bunker.

We were leaving an hour after sunset and knew we needed a decent night's sleep. But some of us had trouble sleeping the night before and needed a distraction like tonight. *I* had been looking forward to tonight since we decided to do something with our family and friends.

"I think we're all responsible enough to realize how to handle our alcohol." Wyatt smirked before grabbing two beers for himself and Corbin. "Have a seat, man," he told Ari, indicating the couches, chairs, and overstuffed bean bags we had set up for the game night. "Kingston is getting the kids. After we have cake," he whisper-yelled. "They can all go out to the garage and play until bedtime. Then, if it gets too late, we have enough beds for the little ones."

"Thanks." Ari smiled and sauntered to a chair, putting the beer on the dining room table.

I blinked slowly. When had Wyatt become friendly with Ari? I knew Wyatt and Corbin liked Ari's band. In fact, when they created the play space for the children, they played his music with a portable speaker.

"BJ." Dad gave him a raised brow as he reached for a beer. "Did you forget you're only nineteen?"

“Are you kidding me?” BJ incredulously laughed. “If I can kill the infected, loot and plunder, and take down a baddy or two, why can’t I have a beer?”

“We were drinking when we were sixteen,” Uncle Mitch joked before opening a beer for himself and handing one to BJ.

BJ gave him a large smile in thanks before pointedly looking at Dad and taking a sip. Of course, no one believed that this was the first drink BJ had ever had. I’m pretty sure some of the older women he hooked up with also supplied him with alcohol.

I saw no harm in it. BJ was correct, in a way. If BJ could do the things he did for our community, what harm was it to allow him to drink? These were different times, and it wasn’t like he was driving anywhere or overindulging.

“I thought we agreed we would keep some secrets to ourselves,” Dad mockingly huffed.

“I mean,” Wyatt smirked. “After yesterday’s conversation, I think a little underage drinking isn’t so taboo.”

“Right,” Corbin added. “I think drinking at nineteen in the apocalypse isn’t nearly as scandalous.” He chuckled.

Even though I was still wrapping my head around the secrets we had learned, I couldn’t help but laugh. The first reason was that Corbin utilized the word scandalous. And second, because truthfully, knowing Dad and the uncles drank before they were twenty-one paled compared to learning our parents led an alternative lifestyle.

“Wyatt Eoghan and Corbin Zachariah,” Aunt Pam said crossly as her cheeks bloomed red.

BJ, Sylvia, her men, and Rhys seemed rightfully confused while Easton and Axel exchanged amused glances. Corbin, Wyatt, and I divulged our “family” secrets to the other guy’s last night. First, I asked Aunt Pam and Aunt Carol if they minded. They hadn’t hesitated in permitting us to do so. They understood we were a family and should be able to discuss things openly.

I felt it was too private to tell my best friend just yet, and we wanted the parents to have the right to tell BJ when and if they were ready to. At this rate, I suspected it would be sooner than later.

Since the truth had come to light, I finally noticed slight differences between my aunts and Uncles. I saw the lingering glances and casual touches between Aunt Pam and Uncle Mitch and Aunt Carol and Uncle Scott—the normal affection between the couples. I don't know if they felt freer after divulging their secret or if I had been oblivious the entire time.

“Did we miss something?” BJ looked at Sylvia and then Trevor.

“You really didn't.” Trevor grimaced slightly.

I knew all the guys had given their parents their blessings. However, I think Trevor's overactive imagination gave him images he wished he could bleach out.

Sylvia placed her hands on her hips and gave Aunt Pam, Carol, Stephanie, and me a narrowed look. “Secrets don't make friends.” She frowned.

“I'll fill you in later.” Aunt Carol smiled at her with a wink.

Sylvia seemed assuaged by this answer because she grinned and wiggled in her seat. Then, she turned to engage Ari in a conversation with her guys.

I caught movement in my periphery, and I noticed Dani and Foster poised in the doorway. Foster smiled when his eyes lit on Isa, Jenny, and Madeline. All three babies were in our play yard surrounded by toys. Isa and Madeline were working on tummy time, while Jenny played with a crawling toy. Foster made a beeline toward them, while Dani's eyes lit on me.

“Ave, I help?” Dani ran across the living room towards me.

I had to admit the braids were darn cute on her. I couldn't believe how long her hair truly was. In its natural state, it fell to about chin length. Sahara had put the product in it and then

proceeded to part her hair. She patiently demonstrated how to tightly braid Dani's hair. I was so proud of how still Dani sat for us. We parted her hair and then proceeded to braid it into two pigtails. With it braided, it fell just past her shoulders. The hairstyle was versatile enough to leave it in pigtails or wind them into two space buns. And most importantly, Dani loved it.

Loki was hot on Dani's heels, playfully nipping at the pom poms on her socks. He was very much a puppy, and I doubted we could ever train him like Bane and Sasha. He didn't have it in him. He was a good puppy but had no patience to learn anything beyond simple commands, which was copasetic since he was the kids' dog.

I quickly bent down and scooped Dani up in my other arm. "Loki, no!" I said firmly. "Sit," I commanded.

When he did, I said, "Good boy. No bites!" I warned him.

"Loki, come," Axel snapped a finger. Immediately the dog looked chastised and slinked toward Axel.

Axel had the firmest hand on the dogs. He had already established his dominance with them. And they knew they messed up if Axel used that tone on them. He seemed to scold the puppy before lifting him into his arms.

"Hmm," I focused my attention back on Dani's question. I set her and Hai on each side of the cake. "How about you separate the candles?"

She was always trying to "help," but more often than not, she made a tremendous mess. She helped me make Isa a bottle and spilled half of it on the floor. She wanted to help Wyatt clean the dishes and dropped two bowls and a cup. She helped Axel brush Mariah's hair after a shower and managed to get the wide-tooth comb tangled in it. We learned to have her help us with simple tasks and divert her attention to another for the harder ones.

Plus, it wasn't like she could help me to light the candles. So, I handed her the candles and smiled as she separated them.

"Me too?" Hai hopefully asked.

I smiled and reached into the drawer for the extra unopened pack. “Sure can!”

“I can grab him if he’s too much,” Ari offered.

I looked up to see Mariah in Hana’s face once more. She really didn’t understand the concept of personal space at times. However, Hana didn’t seem to mind as she took the doll Mariah offered her.

“We’re good, thanks.” I shook my head and returned my attention to Dani and Hai.

“How did Hana and Hai like school and preschool today?” I politely inquired, placing the rest of the candles into the cake.

“Hai loved it, and I think Hana’s still undecided,” Ari said with a wry twist of his lips. “Having Mariah there definitely helped her feel more comfortable.”

“No one is a stranger to Mariah,” Alec affectionately stated. “I’m glad she’s clicked so well with Hana.”

I was glad to see Alec and Axel more relaxed. They attempted to contact Gianna, but she hung up on them. Eventually, they decided to go straight to the General. They had an in-depth conversation with him today and notified him of what happened yesterday. The therapist and play therapist completed their reports for Alec and Axel yesterday so they could present them to him today. I knew they worried Gianna could return and attempt to take Mariah again. However, the General assured them he wouldn’t allow Gianna to use the bunker as an escape.

“Me too,” Ari admitted.

“Is the rest of your group settling in okay?” Dad inquired next.

“We are, thank you,” Ari nodded.

“Thanks again for the help with the outdoor furnaces today.” Uncle Mitch smiled.

Uncle Mitch and a few people were installing outdoor furnaces for the cabin apartments. They didn’t want only one person responsible for keeping the fireplace lit. With the

outdoor furnace, Bobby and his team could keep them consistently burning, and the ductwork would be able to push the heat in each apartment in the winter.

“No problem,” Ari smiled. “I learned something new today, and the people you have working on them are funny.”

Uncle Mitch laughed. “I’m pretty sure Lewis was a stand-up comedian, and Aneesa feeds off his energy. So, they play off each other’s personalities. It’s never a dull moment around those two.”

“They definitely made the day go faster, and it didn’t even feel like work,” Ari agreed.

“Aunt Carol,” Kingston called from the garage doorway, diverting my attention from the living and dining room conversation. “Just the woman I wanted to see.” Kingston wickedly chuckled. He sauntered over to her and placed an arm around her shoulder. Then, he leaned down and whispered something in her ear.

She shouted with laughter and backhanded him in the chest. “I’m sure Avery would appreciate her own. Plus, mine is staying where it belongs.”

My jaw dropped as I realized Kingston must have asked her about the sex swing. I immediately turned red, my imagination conjuring up the image of her and Uncle Scott and then us “borrowing” it. NO! Just no! Corbin, Kingston, Zeke, and Uncle Mitch uproariously laughed. Even Axel had a smirk and a look of contemplation in his eyes. Wyatt seemed stuck between mirth and mortification. While Uncle Scott was the same shade of red, I was.

“Why are you so red, goddess?” Kingston licked his full bottom lip as his eyes lustily roamed my body.

I was glad I’d made an effort in my appearance tonight. I needed to change after the day I had. However, the extra steps made me feel prettier. After finishing the treats for tonight, I’d taken Foster, James, and Miller down to the poultry yard. We had cleaned the coops and placed new bedding, so I’d had sawdust all over myself. Then Foster left blueberry stains on

my shirt from his snack. He wanted to cuddle with me while he was eating them. I had been filthy. So, tonight, I slipped into a white sundress. I thought it would be nice to dress up for the celebration.

I refused to answer him. So, of course, he chose to continue talking.

“Where do you think we can find such an item?” Kingston mused aloud. “And where could we place it where the kids won’t see it?”

“Our luck; they would think it was theirs,” Corbin joked. “It was bad enough when they thought—”

“Corbin!” I shrieked, cutting him off. “So, help me if you finish that statement, you’re in the doghouse.”

Of course, that set my ornery men off once again. Wyatt was laughing so hard he was crying.

The situation in question involved a vibrator and Foster thinking it was a toy. Luckily, it wasn’t used yet. Corbin and Wyatt had plugged it in so we could play with it when the kids went to bed. I was putting a fresh diaper on Isa and sent Foster and Dani to hug and kiss the guys. It was our routine before brushing their teeth, tucking them in, and reading their bedtime stories. I completely forgot it was out, and I hadn’t known Easton was in our room brushing his teeth and getting ready for bed.

Foster saw it on the way out the door, grabbed it, turned it on, and came skipping out of the room with a bright pink bullet-like vibrator. He asked if he could play with it. Zeke panicked and said no, it was an air freshener. Foster proceeded to smell it and said it was broken and didn’t smell like anything. I was mortified, even if we never used it yet. Axel swooped in and took it from him, saying we should throw it away. Zeke had to scoop Foster up and distract him. Corbin, Wyatt, and Kingston had died laughing.

“Ooh, a good story! I wanna hear!” Aunt Carol gleefully cried.

“Me too!” Sylvia insisted.

I glared at the guys and was about to tell them off when Jessica looked up at the loft area and grinned. “Hey, Zeke! What took you so long?”

I frantically began to light the candles, and Easton took the spot next to the lights to cut them off when I was ready. Aunt Pam started to help me light the candles, and I smiled my thanks to her.

“Well,” Zeke drawled, coming down the stairs. “As I washed our little darling, she decided to poop herself. I had to drain the tub and refill it. Then as I was putting a diaper on her tiny butt,” I could hear the shudder in his voice. “She decided to have another blowout. How someone so tiny and cute can expel so much and emit such noxious smells blows my mind. After ten wipes, I decided she needed another bath.”

“Aww, poor babe, teething can do that,” Stephanie sympathized.

“I’m just happy she’s feeling better,” Zeke commented. He reached the bottom of the steps as we lit the last candle.

“Go, I got the kids,” Aunt Pam offered, gently pushing me forward.

Aunt Pam stood in front of Hai and Dani as they continued to play with the candles. I slid the cake away from them and quickly lit the candles. The kid’s eyes got large as they realized what I was doing.

“I blow,” Dani leaned forward, her mouth pursed.

“No ma’am,” I laughed lifting the lift cake.

Once Easton saw I was ready he shut the lights off. Then we all began to sing Zeke Happy Birthday. I strolled towards him with all thirty candles blazing. I hoped none of them went out before he could blow them out. Zeke stopped mid-step; Isa cradled to his chest. He blinked in surprise before a wide smile stretched his lips.

“What’s all this?” he softly inquired as I reached him.

“Well,” I coyly smiled at him. “It’s not every day you turn thirty. We’re going to be gone for your actual birthday. Plus, I

still owe you a cheesecake.”

“It looks like those strawberry shortcake popsicles.” Zeke grinned knowingly.

“I know,” I laughed.

“Have a seat, make a wish, blow them out!” Amy insisted.

Uncle Mitch stood up and took Isa from Zeke’s arms. Zeke smiled his thanks at him.

“Okay, sounds good,” Zeke nodded, his eyes never leaving mine.

I felt warmth in my belly. If I had known such a simple gesture could make Zeke this happy, I might have done it sooner.

We walked over to the table, and I set his cake at the head of it. Zeke sat down, and before I could move away, he pulled me into his lap. I made a little squeaking sound as I ungracefully landed in it. He laughed, as did everyone else. Then he adjusted me into his lap in a more comfortable position.

Without preamble, he closed his eyes briefly, opened them, and blew the candles out. Everyone cheered, and as I looked around, I realized moments like this made me thankful that we found ways to find our happiness even in the apocalypse.

“I want a piece!” Mikey loudly exclaimed. “That looks good.”

“Please,” Miller reminded his brother.

“Please,” James, my cousin, and Mikey simultaneously blurted out.

“I have to say, Avery,” Stephanie smiled as she brought us some saucer plates and a knife. “I thought the cupcakes you made for my baby shower were exquisite. But this cheesecake is on a whole other level.”

“Thanks.” I smiled at the compliment.

I hadn’t always had the patience to make my baked goods pretty. Instead, I cared how they tasted. Then I discovered I

enjoyed how therapeutic creating something that tasted *and* looked good could be.

“Children,” Aunt Pam stated. “Avery made cupcakes for you all.” She brought over the cupcake stand.

“Oooh, that looks good too!” Mariah chirped, bouncing on her toes next to me. On her other side, Hana’s hand was firmly grasped. “Look, Hana!” she loudly proclaimed, “They have those crumble things, a whole cookie and a strawberry!”

Hana merely smiled and nodded.

“You know my birthday is at the end of August, and I love red velvet cake,” Simon teased.

“Has she ever forgotten?” Sylvia rolled her eyes. “We’ve been competing together for five years, and she’s never forgotten.”

“Nope.” Simon grinned. “But do you remember the first year she made my cupcakes?”

“They weren’t as pretty as they tasted,” Sylvia agreed with a laugh.

“Who taught you to bake and make such pretty things?” Jessica inquired as she brought over some forks.

“My mom,” a touch of melancholy entered my voice. I really did miss her. “She loved to bake. And I have come a long way since I was sixteen.” I stuck my tongue out at Simon.

I attempted to shake off my sad feelings. I didn’t think it helped that I still had a letter from my mom waiting for me. I wanted to be in the right frame of mind and somewhere quiet when I read it. I just wished I could add her letter to the others residing in my apartment, hundreds of miles away.

Our first letters were given to us when we got our periods. Emery and I hadn’t had our first periods before she passed away. So, Aunt Pam had one waiting for us when we did, complete with a “Period” party. Emery gloated when she got her letter and party before I did.

We also got one for our first school dance. Emery received hers our freshman year since one of the football players

invited her. Trevor and I were still brand new and didn't want to go. But, admittedly, the following year, we went so I could get my letter.

We received more letters when we got our first jobs, driver's licenses, and graduations. I got one when I failed to make it to the Junior Olympics team, and Emery got one after her cheerleading squad lost Nationals. Mom didn't know specifically what our source of "devastation" would be, but she knew we would experience it. Her letters have always encouraged me and improved some of my life's most challenging times.

"I was just kidding," Simon ribbed.

"I know," I said with a shrug, determined to remember I had a reason to celebrate now.

"Well, what did you wish for?" Sylvia prodded Zeke, obviously picking up on my melancholy mood.

"I would never tell. Or it won't come true; everyone knows that." Zeke tightened his grip around my waist. "But I will tell you this." He smirked. "There's not much more I could wish for, especially since I'm already one of the luckiest men in the world. I got everything I need and want right here." He squeezed my hip and thigh with his firm hands.

I turned to look at him, and I knew he was talking about me, among other things. As his aqua-blue gaze met mine, he palmed the back of my neck, tilted my head, and pressed his lips to mine. I fully expected a somewhat chaste kiss in front of the kids, our families, and our friends. It wasn't. He kissed me with a passion that had my toes curling and had me wishing we didn't have guests.

When we pulled apart, I was breathing heavier. I vaguely heard the mock vomiting sounds, cheers, and catcalls.

"That was so beautiful," Aunt Carol tearily proclaimed.

"It really was," Amy's voice was thick with tears.

My head whirled around to see Amy crying. I think my jaw literally dropped. Amy was the least emotional person I had ever met. Including a lot of the men I knew. She didn't

even tear up when we watched *Hachi* for a family movie night. What kind of monster didn't even tear up for a movie like that?! I'll tell you who! Amy! Amy had looked at all of us as if we had lost our minds.

I think Axel was the only one who outwardly showed no emotions watching that movie. However, we all noticed how much extra attention and cuddles Bane got that night from him.

Understanding dawned as I looked at Amy. There could be only one reason why she was crying. She was hormonal. She vomited over smells not once but twice the other night. All the signs pointed to one outcome.

"Why are you crying, Mom?" James asked with an exasperated tone. "You need to rub some dirt on it and get up."

"Rub some dirt on it?" BJ snorted a laugh. "Where did you hear that from?"

Wyatt and Corbin exchanged guilty looks. Recently, Wyatt and Corbin took Mikey, Ben, Miller, and James dirt bike riding. James had fallen off his bike, and began to cry. After they checked him over, they realized he wasn't injured. They believed it was pride and embarrassment that caused the tears. They jokingly told him to rub some dirt on it and get up. It seemed to be the pep talk he needed because all the boys came back excited and happy.

"He might have heard that from us," Wyatt guiltily confessed while Aunt Carol gave him a mock look of reproof.

"Hey, son," Uncle Mitch gently scolded James. "That's no way to talk to your mom. And Wyatt, maybe you should watch what you say to your impressionable younger brother."

"Duly noted." Wyatt gave him a wide-eyed look before dropping a kiss on the top of his mother's head.

Aunt Carol murmured something to him and smiled, patting his arm lovingly. She never held a grudge or blamed her other children for a learned behavior. Unless it was dangerous, then another woman emerged.

I cut the first slice of cheesecake and made it on the larger side, handing it to Zeke. He grinned and kissed my lips once more. “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “No one ever made a cake for me before.”

He took a large bite of the cake and made a sound of appreciation. It warmed my heart to see his enjoyment.

“Never? What?” I asked in a mystified tone, but then realized now was not the time or place. “Later?”

I knew he grew up in foster care but had a girlfriend for over ten years. I would have thought she would have made him a birthday cake sometime in their relationship. Sylvia hated cooking and baking but at least attempted to make her exes a cake or two.

“Later,” he finished swallowing his bite. “Not only is this the first birthday cake anyone has ever made for me, but it’s the best I ever had.”

He kissed me again, and I could taste the sweetness on his tongue. Again, I had to force myself to pull away. Now wasn’t the time or place. I didn’t want to become any hornier than I was.

“Okay,” James was saying with a little bit of embarrassment. “Sorry, Mom.”

I nearly forgot about the conversation we were having.

“It’s okay to express our emotions,” Mariah staidly stated.

I continued to slice the pieces. I was glad I had made an additional cheesecake. I had a feeling even with my modest cuts, we wouldn’t have many slices left, if any. If there was, I had to ensure that I hid it for Zeke because I was certain Kingston would attempt to commandeer it for himself.

“Okay, Ms. Thing, where did you hear that from?” Sylvia jutted her hip to the side and placed a fist on it. “You’re six, not sixty,” she teased.

It was Mariah’s turn to look ashamed. “Foster couldn’t find his wubby and wouldn’t stop crying. I told him he was a big baby. And boys don’t cry,” she mumbled. “I told him it

was silly to cry over a stupid toy. Uncle Kingston told me it wasn't nice to make fun of Foster when he was upset. He said expressing our emotions, whether we were boys, girls, men, or women was okay."

Everyone's eyes swung to Kingston. He already had a cupcake in his mouth. He tried to hide behind his jester, blasé persona, but nearly everyone here understood it was just a defense mechanism. His eyes widened as almost all the women and some of the men made "Awww," noises and the fact that he was caught with a cupcake before all the kids could get theirs.

"What," he said around a mouthful of food. "I just read it on the inspirational poster in the Major's office, and I thought—"

He seemed to realize he was only digging a giant hole for himself when Wyatt and Corbin made a heart with their thumbs and pointer fingers over their hearts. Then they proceeded to wipe away imaginary tears. I exasperatedly shook my head at them. I couldn't defend Kingston because it would only make things worse, so I bit my lip smiling.

"You know what?" he said in mock outrage, picking up Foster and placing him in his booster seat. "I have feelings too! Is no one going to tease Amy? She never cries! She didn't even cry when Pollo disappeared!"

"No one did but you! That rooster was diseased!" Amy argued with tears still on her face. "What idiot finds an animal in a third-world country with half its feathers missing and eyes that crossed? Then believes it would make a perfect pet. Plus, you were delusional enough to assume you could nurse him back to health. There's a reason we found him in the middle of nowhere. I bet the hens kicked him out! Even they were smart enough to realize he was useless!"

"To make matters worse, you tried to make him our mascot and keep him in our tent. Our tent! He pooped everywhere when he wasn't attacking us. He didn't even crow with the rising sun. He would crow in the middle of the night! The rooster was broken!"

Almost everyone laughed as I continued putting cheesecake slices on the adults' plates. Sylvia, Jessica, and Aunt Pam gave the kids cupcakes after they sat at the counter or table. Jessica and Aunt Carol were passing out cake slices as I placed them on the plates.

"Oh, my goodness," Corbin sighed, rubbing his eyes at the memory. "I swear that dumb bird walked into things like he was coming home from a bender. He would walk into closed doors, rucksacks, foot lockers, EV-ER-Y-TH-ING!"

"Or into the fire pit!" Wyatt added. "He attacked me when I attempted to save him."

"It was a little inconvenient to have to look under our cots to make sure he wasn't lying in wait to attack us," Easton huffed.

"How did he disappear?" Mariah sadly inquired.

Her inquiry caused Wyatt, Corbin, Axel, and Easton to exchange amused glances. I'm sure this would be another interesting story.

Mariah looked horrified by their reactions.

"He didn't!" Axel reassured her. "He just found a better home to live in."

Damn, I wished I knew where the rooster went. Losing a pet was never funny, but I don't think I could ever view a rooster as a beloved pet. I looked at roosters as more like working animals. Not that they deserved less care, but I've been around enough roosters to know I would much rather cross the path of a skunk than a rooster. At least the skunk sprays out of defense. Roosters were jerks and attacked without provocation.

"But you said he disappeared." Mariah narrowed her gaze on Kingston.

"Amy was crying!" Kingston pointed at Amy with his fork. "Why isn't anyone asking her why she's crying? She never even cried when she dislocated her shoulder."

“Not everyone’s a bit—” Amy caught herself around the kids. “Biscuit like you are. I so happen to have a high pain tolerance.”

“She never cries,” Wyatt added, finally reprieving Kingston. “Not even when Chad elbowed her in the eye!”

Several eyes swung in Chad’s direction in shock. The man was well known as being a gentle giant.

“It was a mistake!” Chad immediately held his hands up in defense. “She’s pocket-sized and thought it would be a good idea to sneak up on me and attempt to scare me. I jumped and accidentally elbowed her in the face.”

Once again, laughter ensued.

“Everyone knows not to scare Chad. He tends to strike out first.” Corbin chuckled, shaking his head. “Do you remember when we were on that night mission that required us to leap out of a C-130?”

“What is this pick-on-Amy night?” Amy huffed in annoyance.

“I want to know,” Sylvia stated, taking a bite of her cheesecake, her head swinging back and forth.

“Amy walked on a broken ankle for five hours after she jumped from the bird.” Easton shook his head at the memory and shot Amy an exasperated look as if it had just happened.

“Guess what didn’t happen?” Corbin drolly inquired.

“Tears! Crying!” Sylvia, Simon, Joe, BJ, and Wyatt simultaneously yelled.

“I thought she was part robot,” Joe mused aloud.

“You know,” Aunt Pam said with mock ire. “It could be hormones. You men have no clue what bodies put us through for about forty years of our lives. The average age of women dying is in their mid-seventies. You do the math. That’s over half of our lives dealing with womanly issues.”

“That’s not it!” Cal nonchalantly stated. “Maybe she’s an alien,” he said in mock horror.

“Maybe she had a twin that likes to pretend she’s her occasionally,” BJ impishly stated.

Some people laughed while others groaned.

“Too soon, dearest nephew of mine,” Uncle Mitch groaned.

“Yeah, you can say that,” Dad good-naturedly grumbled.

“Who says I was talking about anyone in particular?” BJ guilelessly blinked before he coughed in his hand. His cough remarkably sounded like he was saying Emery.

“Let the girl cry if she wants to. Next topic,” Aunt Carol prodded.

“Mommy cried a lot when she was pregnant,” Mikey innocently stated before licking the cupcake wrapper.

I saw Amy and Josh exchange looks, and I knew she was. That was confirmation enough for me. However, the boys still seemed to be oblivious. Only Easton seemed suspicious. He now had a look of contemplation.

“Mommy wouldn’t make us hamburgers or steaks either because she said it made her feel sick,” Miller added, adjusting the glasses on his face.

“She loves cheeseburgers!” Mikey cried out in remembered ire.

“I do, just not back then,” Stephanie laughed as Dad kissed her temple.

“All she would eat was baked potatoes,” Miller pulled a face. “So weird.”

Most of the adults laughed at the children’s commentary. I could see Josh shifting in his seat. From his reaction, I could tell he was itching to relieve their secret. Yet Amy seemed committed to keeping it.

“My Aunt would stick her pickles in the jar of peanut butter when she was pregnant.” Ben wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Now that Ben was seeing a therapist, he was speaking more. I was so proud of the progress he was making. I just hoped and prayed Ben would continue to come out of the shell he had once been in. I knew he would forever carry the scars of seeing his family die. It was just a relief he was taking the proper steps on the road to healing.

“My mommy,” Elsa, Rhys’ daughter, piped up next. “Threw up and farted a lot.” She giggled, and the other kids joined in. “She said Christopher had a lot of hair!”

No one corrected her mispronunciation. And we continued to listen as they spilled their mother’s secrets. I swear I should be writing down half the stuff they said on a daily basis. They were a huge source of amusement around here.

I looked over at Rhys. He was feeding Nova a bottle with one hand and attempting to help Christopher peel the wrapper off his cupcake with the other. I saw grief cross his features for a split second. I knew he still missed his wife, but the kids helped immensely. He was a good man, and I hoped God had someone else out there for him. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but someday.

Trevor seemed to notice his predicament and hopped up at the same time Uncle Scott did. Uncle Scott leaned over the table and started helping Christopher remove the paper. At the same time, Trevor attempted to take Nova.

Rhys started to protest, but Trevor shook his head.

“I got her. Eat,” Trevor insisted as he took Nova back to his seat to feed her with one hand and eat with the other.

I had to smile. No matter how horrible our relationship ended, there were some things I knew without a doubt. And one of them was Trevor was going to be a great dad. He made feeding Nova and eating look easy. Plus, I knew Trevor always had a soft spot for kids. His chosen profession was teaching kids before he decided to become an architect.

I was glad Rhys invited Trevor to move in with him so he could get more experience with younger kids. Plus, it assisted Trevor in getting away from Emery. They had a strong

friendship that seemed to work for both of them. Rhys needed someone to hang out with without the pressure of wanting a relationship. In addition, Trevor was there to assist him or give him breaks with the kids. And Trevor needed a strong man who wasn't family to influence him to stand up for himself. Everyone dreaded that Emery would easily manipulate him to return to her for the sake of her baby. Or he would be motivated by fear to return to her. We all thought he might think he would be unable to care for a baby on his own without Emery.

But I think Rhys was showing him that men had the capability to care for children on their own. Rhys raised and cared for his two children before adopting Nova. There was no doubt he was rocking it. Rhys made single parenthood look easy. He was an incredible, loving father. He was the type of Father Trevor needed to emulate.

"Thanks," Rhys murmured before turning to give Elsa a gentle smile. "Some women that carry babies get sick. It's natural. They're growing a baby in their bellies. And Christopher did have a lot of hair. And you had none," he teased her. "You were so bald; I could see my reflection on your head. Your mama did not fart when you were in her belly."

Everyone laughed at their antics. "Daddy," Elsa giggled with exasperation. "I had some hair."

"You did," Rhys solemnly nodded. Then, at Elsa's triumphant smile, he continued. "Like two or three pieces." He mock sighed. "I sure miss the days I could look down at your beautiful shiny head and make sure I didn't have any food in my teeth."

"Daddy!" Elsa shrieked with laughter.

After a few moments, the laughter died down for a little bit as we all tucked away our food. Zeke rubbed my back with one hand and ate his cake with the other. I ate my cake with one hand and ran my fingers through his hair with the other. All my men had a thing for their hair being played with or their scalps being scratched with my nails.

“My other mom,” Mariah broke the silence. “Says I made her fat when I was in her belly. She said it was my fault she had to bust her a-word to be skinny. She said it was my f-word fault she couldn’t play games or dolls with me because I was f-word hard work and she needed to have her me-time too.”

I’m sure I wasn’t the only one in the room horrified by Mariah’s words. I swear that woman was wasted air. The more times Mariah told me, her dads, or the guys another story about Gianna, the more I detested her. I could see that Alec and Axel were fuming at her words. But I also knew they were trying to calm down before they said things they shouldn’t have. They had already determined they would never speak ill of Gianna in front of Mariah. They wouldn’t destroy her innocence any more than it already was. Children had no business being thrown into adult affairs.

Ari let out a sound similar to a snort. I had nearly forgotten he was there. Ari was so silent, and I assumed a rock star like him would have wanted to be the center of attention. So, I presumed he would insert himself somewhere to ensure people were paying attention to him. And he hadn’t.

“Hey, Sweetie.” Ari leaned forward and looked at Mariah until her gaze met his. “Did you like your cupcake?” She nodded. He gently smiled at her. “How about ice cream?” A nod. “Candy?” Another nod. “Those foods taste good, huh?” She nodded. “Do you like eating pig’s feet?” She emphatically shook her head. “How about cow eyeballs?” She scrunched her nose in disgust and shook her head. “How about fried tarantulas?”

“Gross,” she finally said aloud as the other kids began to make sounds of disgust.

“Grasshoppers?” he asked.

“They’re bugs,” Mariah refuted.

“Fruit that smells like feet and bad eggs and breath?” he shot out next.

She snorted and looked at him as if he was crazy. “There isn’t any fruit that smells like that!”

“Yes, there is. It’s called durian. People in the Southeast Asia eat it.” He nodded sagely. “People worldwide eat gross stuff like pig’s feet, cow eyeballs, fried tarantulas, grasshoppers, and a whole heap of other disgusting stuff.”

Mariah looked at Alec and Axel, hoping they would refute Ari’s claims. Instead, Axel softly smiled at her and nodded.

“It’s true.” Alec made a face. “Other cultures consider some of those foods delicious. Do you remember, Mr. Marshall?”

“Yes. Mr. Marshall used to bring me lumpia!” She excitedly nodded.

“Well,” Alec chuckled. “He tried to get Daddy to eat the smelly fruit too. He loved it, and I couldn’t be in the same room as him when he ate it.”

“Why would he want to eat something smelly?” Mariah asked in exasperation.

“Because,” Ari spoke up. “Sometimes people put gross things in their mouth and their bodies. Those bad things,” he made eye contact with her. “We don’t have to eat them. Just like the words that make us feel bad. We don’t have to believe them. Eat foods that make you feel happy,” he continued. “Believe the words that make you happy.”

“Not all the time,” Aunt Carol piped up with tears in her eyes. “Some foods we think are bad are good for you, so don’t think you can eat ice cream instead of broccoli.”

Ari chuckled. “True.” He nodded. “Some foods that don’t taste good for us make us stronger. And sometimes the foods that taste good make us weaker. And sometimes, the words that make us feel bad are the words we need to hear to become better people. And sometimes the good words people say to us aren’t for the right reasons.”

I had to smile at Ari’s attempt to make Mariah feel better. He brought it to a level she could possibly understand, but on the other hand, it could be interpreted in many different ways.

“Okay.” Mariah nodded, all smiles again. “Your uncle is kind of weird,” she whispered loudly to Hana.

“I know,” Hana whispered back, causing the table to break out with more laughter.

“Hey,” Ari said in mock outrage as he took his napkin and Sylvia’s unused napkins and threw them at them. “I’m not weird.”

They both fell into a fit of giggles. Shortly after that, Axel and Alec took Mariah to the playroom. I’m sure they wanted to reassure her that she was a sweet little girl, and she was loved.

“Okay, who’s ready to get their butts kicked by Team Sylvia?” Sylvia jumped up when everyone was finished eating. “Come on, kids, let’s wash our hands! You guys have a little more than an hour to play before bedtime.”

“Bedtime now, Daddy?” Sylvia’s adopted son, Phillip, or Philly, leaned on Chad’s shoulder.

“Sure, buddy.” Chad kissed the top of his head.

“All the bunks have clean sheets on them, and the toddler nets are in place.” Easton smiled at them.

Since Foster and Christopher had a mischievous streak, we had to put nets on the beds to prevent them from jumping down. We briefly entertained the idea of removing the triple bunks, but they were too convenient. Especially when we had our game nights, and the kids were put down to sleep.

“Jenny should lay down too,” Joe agreed before he removed Jenny from her highchair. “Look how messy you are,” he cooed to Jenny as she gave him a big toothy smile.

They’d started Jenny on solids in addition to her milk. And since she was so independent and had a sufficient amount of teeth, they carried random food around like pureed peas, finely cubed cooked carrots, and such. Most of the time, the food ended up everywhere but her belly, but she was attempting to feed herself, and they were encouraging it.

“Thanks, guys,” Chad commented as if we hadn’t done this close to a dozen times.

On game or movie nights, they always seemed to end with extra kids in the bedrooms upstairs. Stephanie, Sylvia, and Rhys typically put the babies in the playpen we had set up down here or the additional two we set upstairs in Isa's room.

Kingston and Wyatt were in the midst of wiping Dani and Foster's faces and hands. "Go get your pajamas on," Corbin called to their retreating backs.

All the kids seemed ready to go back into the playroom, and I was grateful to see Stephanie, Dad, and Uncle Scott helping to start the clean-up. There were crumbs everywhere, and I was thankful we had dogs that would clean up once we allowed them to leave their beds. We didn't like them begging, so we typically sent them to their beds when we were getting ready to eat.

We were lucky they didn't seem to have sensitive stomachs because they reduced the amount of sweeping, we needed to get done.

Surprise at our new guest grew as he stood and began collecting empty plates. "That was amazing, Avery. Thank you. And thanks for inviting me into your home." He made eye contact with the rest of my guys.

"You're welcome," we nearly said simultaneously.

"We live right next door," Sylvia informed Ari. "You can visit us *anytime!*"

Almost everyone laughed except Simon. He seemed peeved at her hardcore flirting. Although, out of all her guys, he should have expected it more. He'd known Sylvia the longest and knew flirting was her second language.

Ari chuckled and shook his head before looking at Simon. "I don't know about all that Black Belt Boy looks like he wants to kick my ass."

Again, laughter ensued. Simon seemed pleased by his acknowledgment. I didn't even want to guess how he discovered Simon had a black belt. I assumed he had visited our training areas today. Coach trained women, children, and

anyone else who wanted to learn Tae Kwon Do nearly every day of the week.

Different conversations began throughout the room as we prepared to play our games. But, for once, I didn't jump up to help. Instead, I enjoyed being held in Zeke's arms, and he seemed just as content.

"Thanks again, siren," he murmured against my temple before kissing it.

"You're welcome." I leaned back into his arms, caressing the arms that held me.

"When Nova's finished, I can change her diaper and put her down if you want," Jessica sweetly offered Rhys.

Jessica had become a fixture at their house, although she still slept and stayed in her room in the old campers' cabins. She wanted no part in the party cabins. She wasn't into the drama that always seemed to be going down there.

"Sure, thanks." Rhys smiled.

Mariah came skipping out of the playroom. "Come on, Hana and Hai. You haven't seen our playroom yet. We have a kitchen and everything we need for the babies in the playhouse. There's also a slide and rings we can swing on. And a rock wall to climb up. But first, we need to wash our hands."

I was so happy to see her smile back in place. She was amazingly resilient. Even on her rough days with the therapist, she quickly bounced back.

"Hey, Aunt Amy," Mariah said after she washed her hands.

"Yes, pumpkin?" She smiled down at her.

"Do you have a baby in your belly?" she innocently inquired. "You were crying. And yesterday, when I tried to share my eggs with you, you said no thank you. You always like the extra program."

"Protein," Easton gently corrected her absentmindedly as he repeatedly dissected Amy with his physician look.

“Yeah, that.” Mariah sagely nodded. “And,” Mariah continued. “This morning at breakfast, I had to go potty really bad. You were getting sick.” She stepped back and critically eyed her. “But you’re not fat, and I haven’t smelled you fart.”

Amy shifted in her seat as red tinged her cheeks.

“Holy shit,” Kingston quietly murmured.

“You owe me a dollar, Uncle King!” Mariah scowled before getting her swear jar.

Dollars were useless now, but somehow the guys always had them on hand to feed her swear jar.

“You’re—” Wyatt began to blurt out.

“We’re pregnant!” Josh shouted out with glee. “My swimmers are strong, and I’m gonna be a daddy!” he stood and shouted to the ceiling.

It was a shock that none of the babies reacted as the room erupted in chatter and laughter. Amy was glaring at Josh. Josh seemed unrepentant and ecstatic to divulge their secret finally.

“It was killing you not to say anything,” Corbin predicted as he hugged Josh. “Congrats, man.” He beamed as Josh eagerly nodded.

“What’s wrong, little mama?” Kingston crooned as he and Wyatt caged her into a hug. “Aren’t you happy?”

“I am.” She nodded with a smile but then burst into tears. “I am so happy. I just wanted to wait a little longer to say anything. Did you know one and four pregnancies end in miscarriage?”

“I am excited, but then I think I really wanted to do things right. But this stupid apocalypse had to get in the way! First, I wanted the engagement, then marriage, and then babies. But now we can’t have our wedding! I really wanted a wedding! I know, I know,” she continued speaking, although everyone seemed frozen in shock by her outburst. “I’m not a girlie girl, but part of me is!

“Then I wonder if I have what it takes to be a mother. I didn’t have just one shitty mom but five. What kind of role

models were they? Promise me you'll kick my ass if I choose booze over my baby, boys over my baby, bongos over my baby, billions over my baby, or...or," she frowned. "There's no B word for the reason stepmom number four left. No, wait, there was. She was a bratty bimbo. What was my dad thinking with that one? She graduated high school two years after I did! She used to knock on our door and sell us Girl Scout cookies!" she continued to sob.

"Okay, kids, let's go play." Uncle Scott clapped his hands enthusiastically.

Uncle Scott did not handle crying women well. He ushered the few stragglers to the playroom. The kids seemed just as shocked by Amy's outburst as we were. The hormones had to have wreaked havoc on her emotions, considering she was usually stoic and nearly detested "over-the-top" feelings.

"I'm going to feed my granddaughter and put her to bed," Dad volunteered. "She's almost half asleep as it is. Honey, I'll come back for Madeline after you get done feeding her." He kissed the top of her head.

I quickly flashed him a grateful smile as Dad lifted Isa from the highchair she had been placed in. The highchair was slightly reclined backward, and her eyes were heavy as she half-heartedly gnawed on the end of the giraffe teether.

"Thanks, dear," Stephanie murmured.

"Thanks, Uncle Bryan," Wyatt echoed.

Dad smiled and tilted his head in acknowledgment. I think he was escaping to give Amy some privacy. Unlike Uncle Scott, Dad handled emotional outbursts really well. He had to learn that skill long ago with two girls who went through puberty simultaneously.

Aunt Pam seemed to be assessing the situation more. She looked around the room, seeing the men who seemed torn between comforting Amy and running. Secretly, I was comforted by the fact that my guys seemed willing to stick by Amy's side. After all, she was the sixth member of their team, and they viewed her like a sister.

“Okay,” Aunt Pam said in a firm voice. “I need all of you men to leave, watch the kids, go to the fire pit and make a fire, put the kids to bed. I really don’t care what you do. Just leave us women alone. We’re having a girl talk. Go have boy talk.”

My guys seemed torn momentarily, while the others seemed to appreciate the opportunity to slip away.

And just like that, our evening plans had changed. Not that I minded. Amy needed us; from the sounds of it, she’d never had a tribe. I guessed she would learn quickly what a tribe would do for her. The answer was anything. Damn, near anything.

## CHAPTER 10



“WE probably should get to bed,” I reluctantly stated as I stared into the bonfire flames.

I was just too cozy in the hammock lying on Zeke. I could easily fall asleep like this, but I didn’t think that was ideal. The gentle breeze caressed my skin, and the sway of the canvas lulled me into a state of comfortable bliss.

It was with great difficulty that I made that statement. But, all in all, tonight was amazing. After our long talk with Amy, we played a couple of games of Heads Up and wandered to the fire pit. Sylvia didn’t take long to beg Wyatt and Ari to play and sing for us. Ari seemed reluctant initially, but eventually, Ari joined in once Wyatt began playing.

One song turned into another until they became our entertainment for the night. I had to admit, for two men who never played together before, they sound amazing. Ari's voice was raw and full of grit, whereas Wyatt's was smoother. Yet somehow, it worked. Both men were well-versed in an eclectic range of music. I swear, if this were pre-apocalypse, their rendition of Zach Bryan's *Something in the Orange* would have gone viral. They had put an alternative edge to it, and I may be partial, but it was better than the original.

"Do we have to?" Kingston jokingly whined from the chair he was sitting in.

"I thought we already told the children to go to bed," Corbin teased before sipping his beer.

The "older folks" went to their homes a little over an hour ago. Trevor, Jessica, Rhys, and his kids followed them shortly after. My step-brothers and James begged to stay here, and after we set them up with a movie, they pulled out their sleeping bags and eventually fell asleep on our living room floor.

"One more song!" Sylvia pouted.

The only people remaining at the fire were Sylvia, her guys, me, my guys, Alec, and Ari. Hana and Hai were sleeping soundly upstairs in our bunks. Hana and Mariah seemed reluctant to separate, and Ari seemed relieved to see his niece getting along so well with Mariah. He confessed that Hana had been entirely different before her mom got sick. Then a few short months later, the apocalypse hit.

"Well, I'm heading in. Some of us have an early morning," Simon stood up, shooting Sylvia a perturbed look.

I saw Sylvia hide a smile before leaning back into Chad and Joe. When Simon went in earlier to check on the children and use the restroom, Sylvia bluntly propositioned Ari. She asked him if he was attracted to her and would be interested in entering into an arrangement with her. Ari had only blinked once before kindly but firmly stating he thought Sylvia was attractive, but he wasn't attracted to her. In true Sylvia fashion,

she shrugged, said it was worth a try, and returned to making out with Cal.

I had to give Cal, Joe, and Chad credit. They didn't seem to mind her flirting or asking Ari to join "them." Part of that was because I believed Joe and Cal had a man crush on the famous singer. And Chad could never and would never deny Sylvia anything.

When Simon came back outside, Sylvia started flirting outrageously with Ari again. I think she was intentionally trying to goad Simon. Sylvia confessed that Simon was a very attentive lover when he felt jealous or insecure. It was the same reason she would deliberately incite Cal. Apparently, angry sex with Cal was out of this world. You would think those men would have caught on by now. Maybe they had. Maybe they loved the push and pull as much as Sylvia did.

"I hoped you had a great birthday," I murmured to Zeke. "I wished we could be here for the actual day."

"It doesn't bother me," Zeke reassured me, kissing my neck. "This was the best birthday I ever had."

I gave him a skeptical look over my shoulder, and he chuckled. "Cross my heart," he insisted. "My foster parents never seemed to care about it. If they remembered, they would get me a cupcake when I was younger." My heart broke for him. Why become a foster parent if you weren't going to be a *real* parent? "When I was with Tanya, she would get me the cake and take me out, but," he paused. "I hate to sound so ungrateful, but she always bought her favorite cake since she only liked a certain kind and brand. I liked it. It was okay, but I was never crazy about black forest cake. I ate it, and growing up the way I did, I learned to be grateful to get anything."

"You never told Tanya?" I inquired.

I had to give the girl the benefit of the doubt. If he weren't vocal about it, I hope he didn't expect her to become a mind reader. But, on the other hand, it wasn't entirely her fault if he didn't tell her.

“She knew,” he chuckled. “She was just very particular about certain things. She was my first real girlfriend. I cared for her. She wasn’t a terrible person. I probably would still be with her if Emery hadn’t interfered.”

I felt no jealousy about his past. He had already told me as much. We had already realized Emery might be filled with evil, but her machinations had benefited us. I now had the guys, and Zeke had me.

“Well, I’m glad you’re not.” I feigned a glare at him.

He chuckled and kissed the spot behind my ear. “Of course, that would have been difficult if I had met you and been with her. I am loyal, but how can anyone not be tempted by you? You’re beautiful, strong, kind, selfless, and so many other admirable things.”

“Aww,” I cooed with a teasing smile. “You’re not too bad yourself. So how did you celebrate your birthdays in the past?”

He pinched my butt, causing me to squeal with laughter. “Brat,” he grumbled. “I only ever really celebrated it with Tanya. As I said before, Tanya came from money, so it was always about the show when we went out—more times than not, we would go to her mom and dad’s country club.

“It wasn’t me, and she knew it, but she tried to get me to fit in the neat box she had created. She would buy me expensive watches and clothing, and one year she got me a set of golf clubs. I was not fond of golfing, but I still went with her dad. After all, they had helped me out in so many ways.”

I understood encouraging your partner to try new things, but when was it too much? It just sounded like she took advantage of Zeke’s affable nature. It almost seemed like she knew how grateful he was to her family and exploited it. I hoped never to be blind to my shortcomings and constantly strive to understand my men. Suddenly, I remembered that I had gifts for him too. Hopefully, my presents were ones he liked.

“I almost forgot.” I sat up and laughed when the weight distribution made the hammock tilt at a precarious angle. He

scrambled to keep himself from falling out of it.

“I have something else for you,” I enthused, thinking of the lingerie I planned to wear for him tonight and the swords I got.

Coach trained in Haidong Gumdo, the Korean art of the sword, and decided to impart some of his knowledge to a select group. Zeke took to it like a fish to water. The only problem was we never procured any real swords. Currently, our people trained with bamboo and weighted wooden swords.

I had gotten with Chad a few weeks ago, and he was excited to try making a sword. And with Coach’s help, he had forged a blade set for him from me. Bobby, the guy who chopped and milled wood for us, was talented with woodworking and engraving. I asked him to make the handle of the sword. I was further pleased when he could etch a design of my making into it.

Needless to say, Coach and Bobby now had a new hobby. When they weren’t training our people or helping where needed, they could be found in the forge with Chad. They loved creating weapons for the recovery team to utilize.

“Oh yeah?” He sat up, embraced me from behind, and murmured his words against my neck.

“Yeah.” I nodded, rubbing the arms that held me.

I knew he wouldn’t press me to tell or be impatient to show him. So many people let him down in the past, so he learned never to expect anything from anyone. So, of course, I silently vowed never to misplace his trust in me. And I was determined to be someone he could expect things from and rely on.

“Can’t wait to see it, but I don’t know how you’re gonna top that cake.” He continued to nuzzle my neck.

“Let’s go now,” I urged him.

My guys told me they would give us some “alone” time. I hadn’t even thought about that, and I was thankful for that. Each one of them deserved to spend some time with me without worrying about others intruding. Corbin and Wyatt

often liked being with me together, but that didn't mean the others did.

“Don't have to tell me twice.” He eagerly jumped up, causing me to laugh.

“Where are you going?” Sylvia teased us as we headed towards the house.

Without skipping a beat, Wyatt began to play another song. It didn't take me long to recognize *Birthday Sex* by Jeremih. I laughed when I realized his acoustic version didn't quite fit the song. We firmly closed the door behind us as I heard Ari and him begin to sing it at the top of their lungs.

“I think he has the hots for you,” Zeke murmured before he pushed me against the wall.

“Who—” I was cut off when his lips covered mine.

His kiss was almost rough and primal as he tilted my head back. I moaned into his mouth, biting his bottom lip, matching his primal passion. He had been highly affectionate and handsy tonight, lighting the fire within. Each time he would kiss or nibble on one of my erogenous zones, I had been tempted to slip away.

He growled into my lips and grasped my waist into his hands. He pulled me into the curve of his hips, letting me feel how much he wanted me. My hands fumbled with his belt. He pulled back long enough to give me room to work. Then his hands were back on my hips and neck as his mouth came back down on me. His tongue delved into my mouth, and I sucked on it before gliding mine against his. I continued my mission of getting him naked. I finally freed his belt, then the top button of his jeans. I could feel his erection pressing against my knuckles as I slid his zipper down.

“Fuck,” he muttered as I grasped his hard length in my hand and squeezed. “I wanted to go down on you before I fucked you tonight, but I need to be in you. Now.”

His panted words against my neck only ramped up my desire. His hands were impatient as he slid them over my thighs. His hands left goosebumps in their wake as he shoved

my dress over my hips. Finally, he grasped the hem of my dress and slid my panties down with the other hand. I wiggled and stepped out of them. Next, he pushed the straps of my dress down. He left hot wet kisses on my chest before he pulled my bodice down further. Soon the cool night air was caressing my feverish skin.

I was eager to feel his bare chest against mine and impatiently pulled his shirt over his head. I threw it to the side, not caring where it landed. His hands were back on me, shoving my strapless bra to reveal my breasts.

“I need you too,” I mewled as his mouth latched onto my breast.

His eagerness to have me and my desire to feel him inside me made me completely forget about the sexy lingerie I had picked out for tonight. His long, lean fingers rubbed up and down my folds.

He suckled on one breast and ended his ministrations with a gentle bite before diverting his attention to the other one. He was rougher when he latched onto my other breast, and I gasped, flinging my head to the ceiling. His attention to my breast was like an invisible string to my core. It pulled and caused the ache within to become more acute.

I restlessly thrust my hips towards him, eager to feel him where I needed him most. But instead, he was purposefully teasing me as he continued to play with me, his knuckles barely grazing my clit.

“You’re so wet for me,” he smugly declared as he disengaged from my breast with an audible pop.

His eyes were half-lidded as he looked up at me. They were so full of desire and satisfaction.

“Zeke.” I turned my face into his shoulder and gently bit it. “Stop teasing me,” I whined.

“Who me?” He gave me a guileless smile before he pulled my nipple back into his mouth.

“Zeke,” I growled out his name digging one of my hands into his shoulders while the other firmly grasped his cock. I

squeezed and jerked him, causing him to moan around my nipples.

“You want this, siren?” he murmured against my breast before firmly rubbing my clit.

“Yes,” I hissed out, pushing my hips towards him.

“All you had to do was ask.” He wickedly smiled before slipping two fingers into me.

I gasped as his fingers slid in and out of me. His thumb continued to rub me. I stroked him until he seemed like he had had enough. Then, he pulled out of my grasp and tugged on my nipples with firmer suction. Under the ministrations of his fingers, thumb, and mouth, I felt my orgasm rise.

“My siren’s close, aren’t you?” he crooned, leaving my breast and placing his lips against mine.

I was panting as my tongue entangled with his. I nodded, unable to voice it. I was desperately clawing his shoulders and riding his fingers.

“Give it to me, siren,” he growled before pressing harder on my clit and thrusting his fingers deep within me.

He placed a palm against my stomach and curled his fingers into me. He made the come-hither motion with his fingers, and I could feel him rubbing against my G-spot.

“Zeeeeeeke,” I mewled against his lips.

I felt my orgasm rise and knew I was moments from coming. Zeke seemed to know this and covered my lips with his. The urge to pee hit me, and suddenly I was afraid I was going to. I began to squirm and pull away from him, but he firmly grasped my hip, keeping me in place. I tried to utter my protest, but he shook his head and worked my G-spot and clit simultaneously. My orgasm slammed into me like a tsunami, and he was there to swallow my cries. I felt like a floodgate was released, and my body was wracked with the tremors of the strength of my orgasm.

“Good girl,” he said with a feral growl of approval.

My legs seemed unwilling to support me, and he seemed to know this as he pushed my back against the wall and leaned his body into mine. He gently began to trail kisses against my shoulder blades, his breath just as ragged as mine.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, brushing his lips against mine.

I felt my wetness trailing down my legs and knew the amount of juices coming from me wasn't normal. I tried to hide my embarrassment against Zeke's shoulder, desperately trying to catch my breath.

“What's wrong?” he inquired after several moments.

“Nothing.” My mind scrambled with how I would clean up the mess before he noticed.

Not that he couldn't have. His hand had to be covered in my cum and pee. I shuddered in revulsion at the thought.

“Something.” He gently nipped my shoulder before he tilted my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes.

We were cloaked in the foyer's shadows, but I could still see the concern in his gaze by the gentle glow of the under-cabinet lights we left on in the kitchen.

“I peed,” I said in embarrassment, realizing he had the right to know so he could wash his hands.

*“Way to kill the mood, Avery,”* I inwardly scolded myself.

I expected him to be repulsed. I thought he would quickly leave me and wash his hands. I anticipated many other adverse outcomes. I didn't expect his smug laughter.

I blinked at him in confusion and shock.

“Siren,” he crooned against my lips before kissing me.

His tongue tangled with mine in a less hungry, less hurried motion, even though I could feel how hard he still was. For a moment, I got lost in his kiss before I moved, reminding me that it wasn't the usual amount of wetness between my legs and down my thighs.

“I got to clean it up,” I muttered in mortification.

“Siren.” He chuckled once more. “You didn’t pee. You squirted.”

It took me a moment to realize what he had said. I’d heard of squirting, but I didn’t think I could. It wasn’t like I had before. I had five other thorough, very attentive lovers, and never once had I squirted. And honestly, I never thought I was missing out on much. The word itself sounded so...crass... gross even. Couldn’t they come up with another word for it?

“Um, are you sure?” I inquired dubiously.

Without breaking eye contact, he slipped the fingers that had been in me into his mouth. He licked them clean with a look of bliss and a smile curving his lips. I was simultaneously mortified and turned on. I mean, he should know what my... cum tasted like versus the other thing...right?

“Very.” He hummed in enjoyment before grasping my thighs and lifting me.

I squeaked a protest before he firmly grasped my ass, chuckling and shaking his head. He was taller than me, but not by much. I knew he was strong, but I still feared I was too heavy and tall for him to carry me with ease.

“What are you doing?” I protested.

Since I was so tall and Zeke wasn’t as tall as Axel or even Corbin and Wyatt, I felt too unwieldy to be held by him. Zeke was four or five inches taller than me and on the slimmer side, but he showed no strain as he carried me to the bedroom.

“Now that you’re ready for me,” he smirked. “I figured I could finish what we started.”

“Can we shower first?” I still felt lingering shame.

“Nope,” he popped the “p” with a wicked grin.

“Zeke,” I protested.

“Shh,” he cut me off with a whisper yell.

He took a few long strides toward our room. Finally, he inclined his head to the left, and I gaped.

Shit! How did I forget that Mikey, Miller, James, and Ben crashed out on our floor? Popcorn and cupcake wrappers littered the floor around them. So it was with immense relief that I realized they were all knocked out. In addition, the way our television and furniture were situated, they wouldn't have seen us unless they had stood up.

"Maybe we should clean up." I quietly cleared my throat. "I don't want the boys seeing our clothes tomorrow morning."

Zeke emphatically shook his head. "I'm sure one of the guys will do it," he smugly said. "Besides." He placed me on the bed, wedging his hips between my spread thighs. "If my calculations are correct, two or three of the guys will be here in less than thirty minutes. And I want every minute of that that I can."

With those words, I felt his reasoning was justifiable. It really wasn't fair that they split their time with me. I knew most of the time, they didn't care. In fact, the way Kingston, Wyatt, Corbin, and Zeke shared my bed daily with zero complaints made me believe they were saints. They rotated who slept on either side of me but didn't seem phased if they found another man in my bed when they came to it.

Only Axel and Easton made their preferences known. As a result, I typically slept in their rooms when it was their "turn" to sleep with me. You would have thought it would cause a lot of chaos, confusion, and inconvenience, but oddly enough, it didn't. Even the nights Wyatt or Corbin voiced their desire to have me to themselves, they made it work.

"Then you better make them count." I impishly smiled at him.

He let out a mock growl before he divested me of my dress and strapless bra. Then he pushed his boxers down and let them pool at his feet. I couldn't help but lick my lips as I noticed how hard he was.

He released another sound of masculine satisfaction as he stepped forward. "Give me your mouth, but don't open," he commanded.

I didn't know what his intentions were, but I obeyed. I trusted him, and everything I did with him brought me pleasure. Admittedly they had all introduced new things to me. Some of them were more thrilling than others. However, trusting them, exploring with them, and trying different things was a delight.

The embers he left banked began to stir back into flames. It was no secret that Axel, Wyatt, and Zeke liked to take charge in the bedroom a lot. However, Axel and Zeke sometimes tended to take it a step further. I tilted my chin up, offering my lips to him.

A pleased smile crossed his lips before he grasped his cock. Then, before I knew what he was doing, he smeared his pre-cum against my lips. I could feel its thickness coat them.

"I loved your red lips earlier," he hummed as he looked down at me. The desire in his eyes was heady and empowering. I liked knowing I had this effect on him. "But this," he reached out, smearing his moisture across my lips with his thumb as if making sure it was evenly spread. "Looks better." I couldn't resist sliding my tongue out and tasting the cum he rubbed on my lips.

His nostrils flared, and I saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "You like that, don't you, siren?"

I nodded before I leaned forward and licked the head of his cock. He let out a noise between a groan and moan before he grasped my chin and tilted my head back. "You want my cock, baby? You want me to fuck your face?"

It was my turn to moan at his words. His firm grasp on my chin and his eye contact made the ache between my legs rise. I sighed, wishing I could find some friction to ease the discomfort.

"Please," I breathily replied, knowing he wouldn't do anything until I vocalized it.

"Good girl," he hummed, caressing my cheek.

I never knew I was a woman who craved praise in the bedroom now and then until Axel and now Zeke. The way

they took our games to another level fulfilled a need I hadn't realized existed. Of course, it wasn't something I always wanted or needed, but maybe that was why our arrangement worked so well. Each of them was uniquely special, even if some of their kinks crossed over.

“Open for me, siren,” he commanded.

I obeyed, and he made a deep sound of approval at the back of his throat. He wasted no time sliding into my mouth. The first few thrusts of his hips were shallow, as if he was preparing me. He muttered curses and praises as I looked up at him. I knew he loved my eyes on him when I took him into my mouth. Soon he began to push in deeper. I could feel him hit the back of my throat, and I tried to hollow out my cheeks and swallow every time he hit the back of my throat. He hit my throat just right a couple of times, and I felt my gag reflex get triggered. Instead of stopping or panicking, I attempted to swallow him past my gag reflex.

He praised me some more and weaved his hand into my hair. “Can I go deeper?” he huskily inquired.

I knew what that meant and nodded. I could not swallow any of my guys entirely, but I was determined to do so one day. I could never rise above my limitations if I didn't allow them to push my constraints.

He began to thrust into my mouth earnestly. I could feel I was taking him deeper, but I still couldn't take it all. He hit the back of my throat at one point, and I began to gag. Tears sprung to my eyes, and I could see the raw lust in his gaze. But I also saw his concern as he began to withdraw. I knew he didn't want to hurt me, and he was afraid he was suffocating me, but I needed him to push me more. So, as he began to extricate himself, I hastily grabbed the back of his thighs and shoved down further on him.

I gagged some more, tears continued to spill on my cheeks, and I saw him on the verge of losing control. Then, after a few more deep thrusts, he uttered a loud curse and quickly withdrew from my mouth.

“Shit, siren, you take my cock so prettily,” he growled, the feral beast in him pushing up to the surface. “I love watching you gag on my cock. I can’t come in your pretty mouth. I need your tight pussy.

“I love your cock,” I gasped, attempting to catch my breath. “Any way I can get it.”

He grasped my ankles, pulled me down until my ass was almost off the bed, and then placed my ankles on his shoulders. He leaned forward, gripped his cock in his fist, and in one sure stroke, he plunged in.

He let out a feral growl. “Your. Tight. Pussy. Was. Made. For. Me,” he punctuated each word with a push of his hips.

With my butt and hips off the bed and him driving down into me at this angle, it was a fine line of pleasure and pain. He was almost too big to take like this, and if I wasn’t so turned on and wet, I know it would be a different story. But, as it was, his dirty words, praises, and skillful fingers rubbing circles on my clit, was the only thing that allowed me to embrace the slight discomfort.

“Shit, Avery,” he husked as his thrusts became more frantic. “I need you to come,” he insisted, rubbing my pleasure button feverishly.

“I’m close.” I closed my eyes and threw my head back, feeling the slow burn simmering just below the surface. Hot lava was in my womb, threatening to erupt like a volcano.

“I feel that,” he said between clenched teeth. “I feel you squeezing me tighter. Avery, siren, I need your eyes,” he insisted.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. I saw the desire, the need, the madness, and something more profound in his aqua-blue gaze. It was that *something else* that pushed me over the edge. My vision went black as my orgasm overflowed.

“Zeke,” I cried out as I felt his pulse within me.

He dropped my legs and collapsed between them. His sparse hair-covered chest rubbed against my tender nipples. It

brought different sensations against my sensitive skin. He thrust deep and hard into me at a frantic pace.

“That’s it, Ave.” His mouth fell onto mine.

Our kisses were filled with teeth and tongue and so beautifully messy as my orgasm seemed to stretch endlessly.

“I love you,” he growled as he jerked in me.

As he continued his shallow thrusts, I could feel the warmth of his juices begin to coat my thighs. I kept my eyes closed, powerless to move. I desperately attempted to draw air into my lungs. I could feel the sweat covering our skin as our hearts rapidly beat the same rhythm. The weight of his body on me should have been uncomfortable, but it wasn’t.

I was lost in bliss. His words of love vaguely registered in my subconscious. His first confession fell on semi-deaf ears. Then, his words of love entered a brain full of mush, so high on dopamine. Who needed drugs if they could get orgasms like this? Orgasms were my drug of choice.

I couldn’t help the giggle that escaped my lips. Zeke lifted onto his elbows, bracing his upper body over mine, leaving our legs entangled. His confused expression and the wild disarray of his hair caused me to laugh harder.

“What’s so funny?” he inquired with a raised brow at me.

I continued laughing, realizing it wasn’t that funny, so it only made me laugh harder.

“Avery.” He playfully nipped my shoulder. “You’re gonna give me a complex.”

I. Couldn’t. Stop. Laughing.

“Just say no to drugs,” I gasped between laughter. “Who needs them if you can get orgasms? The dopamine is positively addicting.”

He chuckled, shook his head, and stood. I made a sound of protest as he slipped out of me. His smug grin was back in place before he lifted me.

“What are you doing?” I somewhat slurred.

I was so tired suddenly. It had been a long day. It was finally catching up to me. Either that or the two mind-blowing orgasms sealed the deal.

He set me down on the toilet. “Pee, siren,” he insisted before he turned on the shower.

I smiled at his thoughtfulness. They all understood by now that I liked to pee after sex. There was a time or two I had passed out before I could muster the energy to leave it. And even if the guys cared for me and cleaned me up, I still felt weird not peeing. Psychologically, I knew there was no need.

I was told the importance of peeing after sex with a condom, which I carried with me. I had one UTI, and that was enough. I had become facetious about it. Sure, the guys and I didn’t use them, but I impulsively felt I still needed to go.

“Come on, siren,” he said, holding out his hand.

I took it and let him lead me into the warm shower. I sighed in relief as he slipped behind me and embraced me. I leaned my head back into him and smiled in contentment.

“I thought it was your birthday,” I joked.

“It is,” I heard the smile in his voice as he began to run my washcloth along my skin.

“Then why does it feel like mine?” I turned into his arms and kissed him.

I realized he had confessed his feelings to me when I felt the love he poured into his kiss. My eyes popped open. “Oh. MY. Goodness!” I exclaimed. “I love you too! And it’s your birthday! Not mine!” I scrambled with the handle to the glass door to get his gift.

I should have returned his words immediately and insisted he open my gift before he gave me orgasms.

He chuckled and pulled me back into his arms. “Shower first,” he insisted, kissing me senselessly under the shower spray. “I got my birthday wish. I really don’t need anything else.

He retook my lips; our lips were more passionate and less desperate. It was filled with more love, less lust. All those feelings were terrific, but sometimes you needed one more than another.

“You wished that I would love you?” I said against his lips, his words sinking in once more.

“I did.” He nodded, leaning his forehead against mine.

“Last night, this morning.” He drew in a ragged breath. “After you fought the infected, and we thought it might have bitten you, I was filled with so many regrets. And the top guilt was being terrified you would leave me without knowing how much I loved you.

“I thought I loved Tanya, and it wasn’t until you I realized the feelings, I held for her were a candle to the inferno I feel for you. I proposed to her, but my dreams and visions never went further than a house we could call our own. Yet, the first time I saw you sleeping with Foster on a cot barely big enough for you, I imagined he was my son you were cuddling with. You could so selflessly show affection for our son when you nearly passed out moments earlier. You almost died attempting to save a woman that would have allowed you to die had the situation been reversed. Then, last week when the children were sick, and you crawled into the crib with Isa, I realized I want more children with you. I want to see you all big and round with my baby.

“I meant what I said earlier. Even if I had to wait months, years, even to hear you tell me you love me, I would have waited. I know that I have it all. I have a family I never dreamed of. By accepting me into your life, you gave me five brothers, three children, aunts, uncles, and even,” his voice slightly cracked. “A dad. Last week,” he confessed. “Your dad and I were installing solar panels on the water heaters and discussing everything. I kept calling him Mr. Harrison, and he told me I was either Bryan or Dad. And if I planned to stay with you, I better call him one or the other.”

By then, my tears intermingled with the spray of the shower. I hadn’t really realized how much we had all come to

mean to Zeke. Sure, I had noticed how Dad spent one-on-one time with Zeke, Axel, Kingston, and Easton, but I assumed that was because he was filling in as needed. Now, I realized he was attempting to get to know the men I chose to be with. The fact that he saw them as more; further reiterated, what a fantastic father I had.

“I’m the lucky one,” I finally stated before brushing my lips across his. “I was wildly attracted to you when we first met, yet I wanted to deny it. I was with Trevor for years, too, and my feelings for him differed. I don’t want to compare my love for him to you guys, but I realize it’s a better kind of love. Yet, I never looked at another man or found an attraction to them while I was with Trevor.

“You recognized our attraction, and after saving me a couple of times, you had the courage to go to the guys and ask them to pursue me. Not many men would have the guts to do that.

“And how you care for our children and fit in so easily with the others makes life easier, better. You fill a need and want in me that I never realized I needed or wanted. I love you and am glad you pushed for this for us.”

“Always.” He smiled before kissing me and cleaning me up.

I picked up a washcloth and began to reciprocate his ministrations. Of course, we had to give each other one more orgasm before we finally found our way to the bed.

## CHAPTER 11



“THESE are beautiful,” Zeke whispered in awe, lovingly tracing the intricate design in the handles.

Above the leather bindings where he would typically grasp it, I had decided to honor his time in the service with the silhouette of a soldier on one side. On the other, I had Bobby carve a samurai design to represent the warrior he was becoming. I knew he was a multi-faceted man and embraced new challenges while honoring where he had been. I think that was one of the reasons why I loved the man.

“That’s badass,” Kingston whistled as he examined the sword.

I had to wait until this morning to give Zeke his gift. The guys seemed to agree because they also gave him his gifts as we prepared for the day. Axel knew I was getting a sword made for him, so he made him a back scabbard sheath to keep it in. Kingston showed him his tattoo book and promised him a tattoo when we returned. Finally, Corbin, Wyatt, and Easton found and procured a brewing kit, growlers, and bottles so Zeke could make the beer he wanted.

Zeke had shown interest in brewing beer for the community, and the guys had taken his interest to heart. Kingston and Wyatt told him they would love to help him with his new hobby.

“Chad did an amazing job,” Corbin agreed.

“Bobby and Coach helped,” I informed them before accepting the kiss Zeke gave.

“Thanks a lot.” Zeke seemed momentarily choked up as he looked at all of us. “You guys put a lot of thought and planning into making my birthday great. It means more than you’ll ever know.”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Wyatt gave him a crooked smile while putting Isa into her car seat carrier. “You’re our brother now.”

I wasn’t the only one to see the emotions swimming in Zeke’s eyes. I loved my guys even more. Every day they did things, reminding me how fortunate I was. They really did treat Zeke like a brother.

“Well,” Kingston grinned wickedly before sliding Foster’s sandals on his feet. “I wanted to show you what kind of gift giver I was so you can think about my birthday gift. In case you forget, it’s next month.”

We all laughed, and I was thankful for his comedic intervention. I knew Zeke felt raw and preferred to behave like he wasn’t emotional.

“I already got you socks,” Corbin snorted. “Since you keep stealing mine.”

“Oh, you too?” Wyatt asked with mock ire. “I caught him in my drawer yesterday.”

“I’m glad he’s not only taking mine,” Zeke smirked.

“I’m not taking them. Maybe you should wash your clothes more often,” Kingston snorted.

Easton made a sound of disbelief. He handed Dani her sippy cup before he lifted her on his hip. “You know he’s “paying” Gloria to do our laundry when it’s his turn. And we all know how meticulous she is. So admit it, you lose your socks, then raid our drawers.”

I was astonished and upset when I learned that Wyatt and Corbin were bribing Gloria to do our laundry during their weeks. I assumed they had taken advantage of her kind nature. That lasted a whole five minutes when I realized she didn’t mind doing it in exchange for things we could procure for her. Plus, it saved me from losing my mind. There just weren’t enough hours in the day to wash clothes for a family of eleven.

It was no secret that only Easton, Axel, and I seemed to do it correctly on our weeks. Zeke wasn’t too bad at it. However, Kingston, Corbin, and Wyatt tended to put clothing away in

the wrong drawers, forget them to the point our apparel was wrinkled, or our clothes came back a few sizes too small. It had become a bone of contention when we—typically me—had to return and fix the issues they had caused.

Kingston gave him a mock look of hurt. “You would betray your own flesh and blood, your twin, the person you shared a womb with?”

“I’m sorry the truth hurts.” Easton gave him a lopsided smile before he pretended to take a sip of the drink Dani held up to his lips.

Dani smiled up at him and patted his cheek. Easton gave her a sound kiss on her cheek in turn. I smiled at their cute interaction.

“I’m pretty sure I unearthed at least seven pairs of socks from the bottom of the front closet just the other day,” Axel dryly stated as he handed me a bag of treats for Sasha.

“How do you know they were mine?” Kingston protested.

“You’re the only one who kicks off their shoes and socks the moment you walk in the door,” Wyatt said with an exasperated look as he placed our filled canteens on the island.

“Like the kids,” Corbin agreed.

“Come on, children,” I called, zipping up the bags we put together for Foster, Dani, and Isa.

They already had clothes, shoes, and toys at the big house. There were just a few last-minute items I needed to throw together. Foster needed his favorite stuffy. Isa was favoring a giraffe teething toy. It seemed to be the only teether that calmed and soothed her for a prolonged period. And Dani was currently obsessed with Toy Story, so we had to pack her DVD. She insisted on watching it every day, and we didn’t mind indulging her since she was generally such an active little girl. Mariah also had a children’s makeup kit she requested to take with her so she and Hana could do their makeup.

My brothers, James, Hai, Hana, and Mariah, came running in from the playroom, followed closely by Loki as our front

door opened.

“It’s us!” Alec called out before rounding the corner. “Oh good, I was just coming by to see if you need help with the kids. But as always, you have everything handled. How were they?”

“Great,” I said with a smile, grabbing my bag. “We only had to tell the older boys to calm down a few times after you left. But they made up for it this morning.”

James, Miller, and Ben had been great helpers this morning. They already gave the younger ones dry cereal before we dressed. Then they helped us get the younger ones dressed while we prepared to leave for our mission.

“We weren’t that bad.” Mikey shook his head with a bemused smile.

“Uh-huh, sure, kiddo.” Corbin affectionately reached out and rustled his hair.

Mikey ducked his hand and glared at him. “I’m hungry. Is it time for breakfast?”

“You already ate this morning,” I teased him.

“Umm,” Wyatt said with a laugh, covered by a laugh, as he quickly rounded the island. “I thought we picked everything up last night.

Wyatt, Kingston, Corbin, and Zeke were laughing, and I looked up as I shoved my water bottle into the side pocket of my backpack. I saw Ari smirking and realized he must have come up with Alec. They had hit it off last night, too, and Alec offered to show him how to return to his place. So, he must have swung by there this morning and picked him up too. It took me even longer to realize why the guys were laughing.

I let out a sound between a gasp and a squeak when I realized Wyatt had stuffed my underwear from last night into his pocket. I turned a glare at Zeke, and he gave me an unrepentant smile and shrug.

“I looked this morning, and I didn’t see them.” He held his hands up in surrender.

“We thought we cleaned up all the breadcrumbs,” Corbin caught himself, realizing the children were looking on with interest.

I knew I should have insisted on picking up all our clothes before we went into the bedroom.

“They didn’t even make it to the bedroom,” Kingston said in a loud whisper.

“So, I saw,” Ari replied, and when I looked at him, he gave me a wink.

My stomach dipped, and I felt like a fan girl for a split second. Then I realized how wrong it was. I glared back at him. He needed to cut that shit out. He was barking up the wrong tree.

“What was that?” James asked with a frown as he scratched the back of Loki’s ear.

It took me a moment to realize James had seen Wyatt slip my underwear into his pocket. I felt my cheeks warm.

“Nothing!” I emphatically stated. “We should get going,” I urged, slinging my backpack on.

“Wyatt, did you stick underwear in your pocket?” James guilelessly asked.

“Hush,” I heard Miller hiss at him.

“What?” James asked in a mystified tone.

I pretended not to hear the laughter as Hai stuck his hand in mine and smiled up at me as we walked out of the house.



It never got any easier leaving our children. And today, it looked like it was going to be harrowing.

“No go, mama, no go!” Foster sobbed as he attempted to break free from Aunt Carol’s arms.

“It’s okay. Mama will be back,” Aunt Carol cooed, patting his back.

“Me go too, mama!” he insisted, twisting and turning in her arms.

“Hey buddy, look what I got,” Easton pulled out a few packs of gummies. “If you go with Auntie Carol and Auntie Pam, they’ll give these to you later.”

He attempted to hand him the pack of fruit snacks, but Foster slapped it out of his hand. “No!” he sobbed. “Want Mama!”

My heart broke, and I wanted to place my pack down and tell the others to go without me.

“We have him, Avery,” Aunt Pam reassured me. “Go on and go. And when we get back,” she surreptitiously looked around. “We’ll tell you how far we got with our wedding planning.”

Last night we briefly discussed it with Josh while Amy went to the bathroom. He admitted to wishing they could have gotten married. I told them about my surprise wedding idea. Then Jessica and I mentioned the wedding dresses we had procured. Needless to say, Aunt Carol, Aunt Pam, Stephanie, and Sylvia were too eager to start making plans. Josh was ecstatic to keep it a secret until the last possible moment.

He admitted to us that Amy hated planning it. She knew what dress she wanted, who she wanted in the wedding party, and the colors. And beyond that, she hadn’t cared about the rest of the details. Our willingness to help plan it all had him floating on cloud nine.

“Come on, baby,” Corbin quietly insisted before he placed his arm around my waist and gently tried to usher me away.

“I love you,” I said as tears thickened my voice. I quickly kissed Dani, Mariah, Isa, and Foster’s cheeks. “Be good. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

It took all my self-control to allow Corbin to lead me away. Then, looking over my shoulder, I noticed the rest of my

guys giving hugs and kisses to the kids. Seeing Foster ignore them and beg me to return broke my heart.

“It will never get any easier,” Dad stated as he fell in step beside me.

I gave him a vexed look. Did he think this was an inspiring pep talk? Because if it was, it sucked. If I gave him a rating, I would give him zero stars. I would not recommend it.

He gave me a sympathetic smile and shrugged. “I’m not sure you remember how you behaved when I had to leave you all,” he explained. “Emery would try to cling onto me and beg me not to go, and you would go hide.”

“I did not,” I contended, despite not remembering it. “I remember sticking cards or my favorite toys in your bags, though.”

A ghost of a smile curved his lips. “When you were older.” He slung an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into a side hug to kiss the top of my head. “But when you were three, four, and even five years old, you knew it gutted me not to get my hugs and kisses, so you would hide. You thought if you kept my kisses from me, I wouldn’t leave. I hated leaving you all,” Dad gave me a gentle smile. “It took you a little while to realize I *had* to leave. It wasn’t my choice.”

“I did not,” I gasped in denial once more.

That sounded so petty. In fact, it would be behavior I expected Emery to indulge in. I knew I had always been daddy’s girl. I wouldn’t do that to him!

“Are you sure that wasn’t Emery?” I dubiously inquired.

“It was definitely you,” Corbin snorted as he squeezed my waist.

I shot him a glare. “How would *you* know?”

“Because who do you think Aunt Isabella had to ask to go look for you?” Corbin squeezed my hand. “You nearly had my nine-year-old self panicking because I couldn’t find you one afternoon. Typically, if you had these favorite places, you would hide there. And no matter how hard Aunt Isabella

attempted to lure you from them, you wouldn't come out until you were ready to. This one time, your dad left on a Friday morning, and you didn't come out of your hiding spot until Saturday night. You were so damn stubborn."

"Isabella did call you the Avery whisperer." Dad smiled fondly at the memory. "With Em, you could divert her attention or bribe her with a root beer float or a new nail polish color. You, on the other hand..." He shook his head with a laugh.

"You guys are pulling my leg," I denied with a roll of my eyes.

I didn't want to think I was ever difficult or that stubborn. However, now looking back, I could see that occurring. I had a stubborn side. I also knew I was slightly petty until my mom passed away. I had done a lot of growing up in a short amount of time. So, a lot of my pettiness had faded away.

"You know how competitive she was." Corbin smirked at Dad as if I hadn't spoken. "Once I knew she was under her bed, I pulled out Candy Land. I had to pretend I didn't know she was there. Then I said I would be the blue guy, and Avery was the yellow guy."

"That was her favorite piece," Dad confirmed with a chuckle.

"I would have to give a play-by-play of the game," Corbin continued. "Of course, I would make sure her yellow piece was losing. She never made it to the end of the game. She would scramble out and insist I stop cheating."

Suddenly I had a flashback of me sitting on my bedroom floor. A nine-year-old Corbin sat across from me with his dirty, well-worn Phillies baseball cap. He denied cheating, and I demanded he start the game over. If I still didn't win, we would play until I did.

"You used to have a disgusting Phillies baseball cap. Aunt Pam would have to wash when you were sleeping because that was the only time you took it off," I groaned. "Crap, I was such a brat."

Corbin and Dad exchanged looks before laughing.

“Uncle Scott, Uncle Mitch, and I took all the boys to the World Series,” Dad fondly recalled looking at Corbin. “BJ and MJ may have still been in diapers back then. I bought you that ball cap since you forgot yours at home. We weren’t even Phillies fans, but since they won, you insisted it was because you wore the other team’s cap. You believed it brought them luck and became a die-hard Phillies fan after that.

“And you may have behaved like a brat,” he kissed the top of my head once more. “But I remember the first time you came down the stairs, gave me a little wave, and said bye, Dad,” A wistful look entered his eyes. “Suddenly, I was dad and not daddy, and I wasn’t the center of your universe anymore. You didn’t need me anymore. I was so damn proud of you because you were the one consoling BJ. But on the other hand, my heart broke because I realized I was going to miss you missing me that much.”

My heart ached for him. I was a new parent, and I could already imagine how heartbreaking that would be. I wished Foster hadn’t been nearly inconsolable, but I also had to see that his meltdown demonstrated his love. I was sure there would be a day when he was older and sassing me that I would wish I could have the toddler back that had me at the center of his universe.

“I always missed you, Papa Bear,” I insisted, wrapping my arms around his waist and leaning my head on his shoulder. “But BJ missed you more, so I had to be there for him.”

“I know,” he smiled down at me. “Your mom and I would always say how proud we were of you. You were like a mama duck, and BJ was your baby chick. He would follow you and try hard to do everything you did. When he was four, almost five years old, I promised him I would take his training wheels off his bike when I returned. When I returned, he was zipping around on your purple bike.”

“With the pink and green tassels, flower basket, and an annoying ass bell,” Corbin groaned before laughing at the memory.

I had to laugh at the memory too. I remembered how heartbroken BJ was and how much he wanted to learn to ride his bike on two wheels. If I had taught him how to ride his bike, I thought he would feel better about Dad leaving us.

Dad nodded and laughed as well. “Avery couldn’t figure out how to remove his training wheels, so she taught him on her bike.”

“She came up to the ball field holding BJ’s hand, pushing his bike, and a monkey wrench,” Corbin groaned. “We were in the middle of the ninth inning, and she marched onto the field, gave me the monkey wrench, and insisted I take the wheels off right then and there. I was so embarrassed. I tried to tell her she had the wrong tool and that I would do it when I got home.”

“Your coach yelled at me!” I exclaimed with a burst of laughter. “And you didn’t help me take them off.” I mock glared at him.

“I was eleven, Avery,” Corbin argued back with a smirk. “You embarrassed me. The boys teased me about that for weeks. And if you hadn’t tattled on me to Mom, I probably wouldn’t have done it at all.”

I mock gasped as Dad continued laughing. “I wouldn’t have had to tattle on you if you kept your word.” I dug my elbow into his ribs.

He yelped and jumped away from me. “You’re still a brat!”

“I am.” I smugly smiled at him. “But you still love me.”

The scowl he sent me melted away as a grin spread across his face. He leaned down and kissed the corner of my mouth. “You’re right.”

Dad let out a sigh that was part contentment, part melancholy. “Your mom is probably looking down on you two, beaming with happiness,” he quietly stated. “Our family always believed that Avery or Emery would end up with one of you boys. We suspected the lines would blur even if we raised you as cousins. Your aunts, uncles, and I all thought it

would always be Trevor and Avery. But your mom insisted that it was going to be Corbin.”

“I always thought Aunt Isa was a wise woman,” Corbin smugly stated as we arrived at our vehicles.

“That she was,” Dad nodded and smiled.

That sad feeling hit me once more. I would always wish my mom had never passed away. I loved Mikey, Miller, Madeline, and Stephanie, and I couldn’t imagine a life without them in it now. However, I knew life would have been different with her around. I wanted to believe that Emery wouldn’t have become the manipulative, vindictive woman she became.

“I still miss her,” he softly stated as if he had read my thoughts. “I thank God that when I see you, Emery, or BJ smile, I still see her. And how you wrinkle your nose sometimes reminds me of one of her many facial expressions I fell in love with. She may have left us but still lives in you all.”

He stopped by the vehicle I had been assigned to.

“I wish she were here,” I admitted quietly. “But I love having Madeline, Miller, Mikey, and Stephanie in our lives. She’s a good woman, and her children are amazing.”

He sighed and nodded, a faraway look in his eyes. “I’m just happy you accepted them. Steph did tell me how much you stepped up and helped her with the boys while I was gone. And we can never thank you enough for standing by her during her birth with Madeline. I am a lucky father to have an amazing daughter like you.

I stepped into his embrace and leaned into him. “I love you, Papa Bear.”

“I love you too, Honeybee,” he murmured with a kiss on the top of my head.

“Load ‘em up!” Wyatt yelled before jogging over towards us.

“I guess that’s our cue.” I squeezed his waist.

It was going to be kind of weird seeing him out there today. It was the first time we were leaving together. He had never seen me in action outside the gates so I hoped I could make him proud today. I prayed I could reassure him enough to prove my usefulness out there.

“See you soon, Honeybee.” He kissed my cheek before leaving us to get in the vehicle he was assigned to.

“See you soon, Papa Bear.” I sadly smiled as I watched him leave.

“Be safe, and I love you,” Wyatt embraced me and murmured into my ear.

He pulled back and gave me a brief kiss on my lips.

“We’re going to the same place,” I reminded him with a laugh.

“I know,” Wyatt said with a laugh and shrug before turning and returning to his vehicle.

“Keep her safe,” Axel said next, from behind me.

He was standing beside Easton and Zeke as he looked at Corbin.

“With my dying breath,” Corbin confirmed with a nod.

“Guys, we’re going to the same place,” I reminded them once more with a shake of my head.

“You never know if we’ll get separated,” Easton pragmatically stated before he pulled me in for a hug and kissed the corner of my mouth. “Love you, queen.”

“Love you too, king,” I smiled before Zeke slid in.

“Thanks again for my amazing birthday surprise.” He pecked my lips. “I can’t wait to see how well it works.” He pointed to where his sword now hung on his back.

“Hopefully, you won’t have to use it,” I countered.

He chuckled. “We can all hope and pray.” He gave me a knowing look.

We wouldn't encounter any infected on the route in a perfect world. However, this wasn't an ideal world, unfortunately.

"I love you, be safe." I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and grazed my lips against his again.

"Damn, I'll never stop wanting to hear that, siren." he squeezed tighter. "I love you more than you'll ever know."

I smiled and felt my heart melt. These men always knew how to make me feel special and loved.

"Come on, Z," Wyatt called with a smile and wave.

Zeke gave me one more hug and hurried off. Axel stepped in next and tilted my chin up. "Keep your eyes open," he commanded with an intense look.

"I will," I promised.

"You better," he gruffly murmured. "You own my heart."

He never outright told me he loved me. He said it in a roundabout way and showed me in others. And I was okay with that. I knew he loved me.

"You own mine," I murmured, looping my arms over his shoulders.

Even if he shared my heart with five others, I knew he was okay with that. And if it wasn't for him planting the idea in my head initially, I don't know if we all would have fallen together so quickly.

Instead of a quick kiss, I got the kiss he generally showed me in the privacy of our bedroom. He tilted my head back and kissed me with all his passion. His tongue invaded my mouth, engaging mine with a primal want and need. His teeth grazed my bottom lip with the promise of what he would do to me the next time we were alone. I was breathless and in need when he finally pulled away.

"Be good," he said before turning.

Bane sat and looked up at me. I couldn't help but laugh as I kneeled. "Be a good boy, and protect your daddy," I

commanded before reaching into my pocket and giving him a treat.

He took it gently from me but left his drool on my hand. I laughed and wiped it on my pants before he kissed my cheek.

“Bane,” I laughed, wiping my cheek. “Go get your dad,” I instructed, and he nudged me once more before he ran off to join Axel.

I stood up, and my smile slowly faded. I hated separating from the guys. And today, I felt incredibly raw. I didn’t know if it was because I felt guilty for leaving Foster and my other children as I did or wished we could all stay as one team. But I was determined to stay together eventually.

“I feel off,” I admitted to Corbin.

And I did. I had this disconcerting feeling but didn’t know where the source originated. I typically didn’t feel this sense of foreboding, moroseness, or worry. Instead, my emotions were all over the place, which was unsettling.

“We’ll be alright and back home in one piece in less than a week.” Corbin hugged me and leaned his cheek against my head.

“I hope so,” I murmured into his chest.

I stayed in the comfort of his embrace for several moments as the vehicles around us fired up for our journey. I wanted to stay in the shelter of Corbin’s arms. In them, I felt all would be right in the world.

“Let’s go, baby,” Corbin finally bade, pulling me onto our assigned bus.

“Come on, Sasha,” I needlessly stated before she bounded in front of me.

We had removed approximately six seats in the back, and skids had been bolted down before mattresses were added. And bedding had been added for additional comfort. Sasha and Athena’s crates had been tucked under the pallets for their convenience as well as ours. It wasn’t necessarily needed but added for our comfort.

With the drive ahead, we didn't know if we would need or want to utilize the full-size bed. I knew Corbin and Kingston had also brought other creature comforts in case we wanted them later. Essentially, we were going in blind and wanted to be prepared to sit and wait if need be. I was brought back from my musings when I took notice of the other occupants on the bus.

I stopped short when I saw Rosie, Ari, and two other bunker troops already sitting in the front seats. Since Rosie had gotten injured, Axel no longer allowed her on the teams. Not because she got hurt but because her actions nearly killed her team that day. Not to forget, she had put us all in danger because she could not follow directions.

Shortly after the General visited, he asked Dad and the uncles if he could invite people back with him. Of course, they told him yes. We weren't a prison and realized some people might like the bunker better. Only ten people wanted to go with him, and Rosie was one of them. I should have known she was up to something.

She hadn't even noticed us boarding the bus. She was too busy flirting with Ari. She let out a loud, high-pitched giggle. I barely refrained from rolling my eyes as she leaned over into Ari. She was batting her eyelashes at him and touching his biceps. He was being friendly, but how he held himself made me believe he wasn't receptive to her flirting.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Corbin barked.

Rosie jumped before she looked up with a smug smile. "Since I'm part of the bunker now, the General realizes what an asset I am. So he asked me to accompany you all today."

"We benched you," Corbin practically growled out.

Rosie crossed her arms over her chest and smirked. "Yes, you did, but the General didn't think the infraction was severe enough to keep me locked up. My arm is all better, and I have full use of it. Thanks for asking."

She flexed her arm, and I wouldn't have noticed her slight wince if I hadn't been paying close attention. Easton had

attempted to coax her into staying for physical rehabilitation of her arm. He had found several exercises that could help her gain almost full use of her arm. She insisted that she would work on them. It was evident that she hadn't.

"You were never locked up," I scoffed, dropping my bag onto the hump beside the driver's seat.

Uncle Mitch hopped onto the bus, and his eyes immediately honed in on Rosie. "I just got off comms with the General," he sternly stated. "I already told him that if you fail to obey orders once today, you will never come out with us again. If he wants to utilize you for the bunker, so be it. We can't stop him. But we can say who accompanies us. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she said with barely contained fury.

"I hope you really do understand," Uncle Mitch clipped out before giving me a hug and a back slap to Corbin. "Let's fire them up."

Corbin nodded before sliding into the driver's seat. He started the engines as one of the bunker guys looked over at Rosie. I didn't want to sit down until I knew where Kingston wished to sit.

"Where's King, Josh, Chad, and BJ?" I quietly asked Corbin as I looked out the back doors.

We were taking an eclectic mix of vehicles. Axel, Dad, and Uncle Mitch had spread the teams between eight vehicles. During breakfast, we were informed that Corbin, Kingston, Josh, Chad, BJ, Ari, and I would be on the bus with three people from the bunker. I hadn't even seen all the bunker people at our meeting, and I knew it had irritated the uncles, Dad, and Axel. And I had a feeling if the general continued trying to manipulate the situations to his liking, Dad and the uncles wouldn't agree to work for him any longer.

I understood that he believed that since he was a General and Dad and Uncle Scott were in the military, he was still their commander. He was under the impression that he still had the right to call the shots. I knew Dad and Uncle Scott were

attempting to keep the peace and not express their true feelings, but was unsure how long that would last. In their eyes, the same government that the General still believed he ruled over no longer existed. They had been on the front lines when the virus was released. However, they still held onto secrets we had a strong suspicion about. A mistrust that revolved around our government funding and being more than aware of this biological weapon. And if that was the case, our own government became a domestic enemy. Therefore, that caused any previous oaths they made null and void.

“Wow, Diaz, what did you do?” the man whistled lowly.

“Nothing, Thorn,” Rosie snorted. “I told you nepotism is strong here, so watch your backs. Avery and Corbin’s daddies own this land, so if you piss them off, you’re treated like shit.”

I turned my glare on her but was saved from responding as Kingston hopped onto the bus, followed closely by Josh, BJ, Chad, and Josh.

“Don’t believe her lies, boys,” Kingston sneered, taking a seat on the dashboard as BJ, Chad, and Josh squeezed past him to find their seats. “She failed to listen to her team lead when we visited another settlement and had guns pulled on us. We were lucky that no one was trigger-happy; otherwise, that could have ended badly. Then on her last mission with us, she got her team shot at and got herself shot. She put the team in danger and nearly died.”

“I didn’t nearly die,” Rosie scowled.

I made a sound of disbelief as BJ and Kingston let out laughs. “Last time I checked, you’re near death if you require a blood transfusion. And if my girl hadn’t been there, you wouldn’t be here either. She had to give you the blood transfusion and used her blood to replenish yours. Did she ever thank you for that?” he turned his gaze to me.

I shook my head. “Some people have more pride than they should,” I said with a flippant shrug.

In truth, I never expected her to thank me. Before all this happened, I had every intention of going into the medical

field. I realized not everyone I would have under my care would thank me. I didn't want to help people for appreciation; assisting others had been sufficient. However, it slightly irritated me when she never thanked me, even after discovering I passed out when I had donated my blood.

"Yikes," I heard Thorn mutter. "I kind of wished I would have known this before."

"We're rolling out," Corbin warned before putting the bus in drive.

"Avery," I heard Ari huskily call out. "I saved a seat for you," he slid over.

Confusedly, I looked at him before I felt Kingston gently nudge me on the back. I looked at Kingston next, and he smirked and nodded. I wanted to remind him I told him I was sitting with him, but I saw the mischief lurking in his eyes. Understanding finally dawned, and I grinned.

I had a feeling Ari had somehow communicated to Kingston. It was clear Rosie had been flirting with him. He must not have relished the thought of enduring it for goodness knew how long. I could do him a favor if Kingston were okay with it.

"Thanks, Ari," I smiled as I squeezed past Rosie and sat beside Ari.

"No, thank *you*," he murmured for my ears only. "You saved me from unwanted advances."

I smiled and shook my head, trying to ignore how my skin prickled when his warm breath caressed the side of my neck. From my peripheral, I saw Kingston giving us a knowing smile.

"Unbelievable. Are you fucking kidding me?" Rosie scoffed.

I pretended not to hear her as I tried ignoring the feelings Ari elicited. He was just a friend—kind of sort of. After hanging out with him last night, I determined Ari was likable. I would have never known he had once been famous. He was down-to-earth and very personable.

“I was happy to see how well Ihaia and Hahana seemed to adjust to the idea that you were leaving and staying with Stephanie, Grandma Betty, and Stewart,” I stated, trying to act like he did not affect me.

“Unfortunately, I had to leave them when I scavenged,” he quietly rumbled. “I hated doing it before, but I’m somewhat more comforted knowing they’re in good hands here. They’re safe, and your family welcomed them with zero hesitation. Stewart told Hai he was taking him, Ben, Mikey, and Miller fishing after school.

“The last time I took him fishing, he was too young to remember, but he loves it. Although, island fishing and lake fishing is slightly different. Grandma Betty plans to bake treats with the girls at the...rec center,” at my nod, he continued. “Having Mariah there has helped Hana feel more secure.”

It was clear that those two would be joined at the hip for the foreseeable future. Hana was still quiet, but she had laughed and smiled a lot over breakfast with Mariah. Mariah had elected to stay with Steph this time, even though Steph, Aunt Pam, Grandma Betty, and Aunt Carol typically watched them equally.

“They are too cute together.” I smiled. “Mariah is outgoing and gregarious. Plus, she has an innate ability to draw people out when needed.”

“Her mother,” he gently prodded after a few moments of silence.

I understood that he was asking about Gianna. He hadn’t asked many questions last night. But I fully suspected that he was quietly drawing in enough information to understand the lay of the land.

“A piece of work,” I said concisely.

He nodded before he said. “And Mariah’s father is...”

“Alec and Axel,” I said with a straight face.

Ari gave me a skeptical look.

He looked thoroughly confused before Kingston's wicked laughter cut in. He had sat on the hump beside Corbin and next to the steps. Since we were in the seat behind Corbin, we weren't too far from him. He spread his legs and leaned over on his knees.

"Long story short. Axel's name is on the birth certificate, but Alec is her biological father," Kingston informed him.

"Sounds messy," Ari made a face.

"It was," I agreed. "But it's a lot better now. They raise her together, and it works for them."

"So, Ari," Rosie leaned over to make eye contact with him and smiled. "Did anyone tell you about the bunker yet? It has a bowling alley, movie theater, commissary, arcade, pool hall, and you can eat whenever you want. If you're on recovery, that's all you have to do. You don't have to play in the gardens, work in the kitchens, or any of that other bullshit Sanctuary makes you do.

"Unless things changed," she shrugged. "Sanctuary barely had anything to entertain you and made you work from sunrise to sunset. And they kept us on a strict diet."

Immediately my ire rose. Not because Rosie was pretending I wasn't sitting there but because she was making it sound like Sanctuary was no better than a work camp.

"Things must have changed," Ari dismissively stated before pointedly looking at Kingston and me. "You and your twin?" he raised a brow at me.

"Don't necessarily get along," I hedged.

"Understatement of the century," Rosie snorted. "Avery demonizes her sister, and everyone falls for her sweet, innocent act."

She was openly admitting to eavesdropping. I couldn't be entirely annoyed since we were in close quarters. My greatest pet peeve was her insistence on inserting herself into the conversation.

“I’m sorry,” BJ snorted from the row behind her. “How is their conversation any of your business? And it’s hard to pass a fair and unbiased opinion when you weren’t around long enough to realize our true family dynamic. You just wanted to hate Avery because you wanted Kingston’s dick, and he wouldn’t give it to you.”

“Sounds familiar,” Thorn snorted from his seat behind us.

“Shut up, Thorn,” Rosie scoffed. “You don’t know anything. And BJ, maybe you should mind your own. The adults are talking.”

BJ guffawed cruelly. “So, does that make you a pedophile? Last I checked, you begged for my dick before you rushed to the bunker.”

“I never,” she began as her face turned red.

“You did,” Chad cut her off next. “Can’t deny much when there are witnesses. I caught you begging to give him head in the barns. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn’t reminded him that he was drunk.”

I turned and looked at my brother; he had the audacity to blush before shrugging. “I didn’t think I needed to tell you. I was drunk, and it didn’t actually happen.”

He was right, but I was slightly irritated that he hadn’t told me, and I had to discover this incident from Chad.

Most of the men chuckled while Rosie turned redder. I should have stopped them from ganging up on her, but I didn’t. I hated being petty, but sometimes people deserved the consequences of her actions. She was so eager to paint me as a whore, yet ignore her double standards.

“I was drunk too,” Rosie spluttered out. “I didn’t know it was you.”

“Yet, you tried to convince him to return to your cabin the following night,” Kingston smirked. “When you were sober.”

“I didn’t—” Rosie protested again before Kingston cut her off.

I glared at Kingston and BJ. I never knew any of this. Rosie openly despised me, and it would have been nice to discover this before now. I would have thought my brother would, and my man would have told me sooner.

“I told him he should tell you,” Kingston put his hands up in surrender. “I wanted to tell you, but he knew he screwed up.”

“Beep. Beep,” Josh chortled.

“I hear that bus, too,” Corbin gave Kingston a smug grin.

“I’m sorry, Avery,” BJ stuck out his bottom lip. “I shouldn’t have let a girl who treated you like shit almost suck my dick.”

“Eww, stop,” I shuddered. “I don’t need to hear about anyone doing that to you,” I protested. “And being drunk isn’t an excuse.”

“That’s why I turned her down when she wanted more,” BJ protested.

“Stop, right there,” Corbin advised him before he could say anymore. “You’re going to dig a hole you can’t escape. I think BJ wasn’t really thinking that night.”

“You think?” I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him.

“Hey, I’m just finding out, too,” Corbin’s eyes met mine in the mirror.

“I’m not a horrible person,” Rosie seethed. “You act like I’m not good enough for your brother.”

“You’re not,” I bluntly stated. “You never liked me from the moment we met for no reason. We wanted to protect our community, and you and your group knew we had to do physical inspections before anyone entered. You tried to defend your friends when they had a knife on my sister. You—”

“She’s not even your *real* sister,” Rosie derided as she cut me off. “You lied!”

“Mike is good as my sister,” I snapped back. “She has no family, so I made her mine. And what happened to the woman that threatened a fifteen-year-old girl?” At her glare, I continued. “No words, huh? Her sister turned and then turned on her when she attempted to break her out.

“If it were left up to you, you would have given those women a pass, and they could have turned on the whole community. You have terrific instincts, but let your emotions control your behavior too often.

“Then you set your sights on Kingston, and when he made it clear that he was taken, you still pursued him while you slandered me behind my back. And attempted to turn other people against me.”

“Sounds familiar,” the man next to Thorn chimed in.

“Hines told me he was single,” Rosie hissed before turning her gaze to me. “You have five men! How big of a slu—”

“Don’t finish that statement,” Kingston cut in with a rare look of maliciousness. His eyes were so cold, and his face devoid of its usual humor. “You really can’t talk when you hooked up with more men at Sanctuary than Avery has. You’re just mad and jealous because we want to stay with her while none of the men you slept with wanted you beyond a night or two. And she has six now,” he smirked.

“It’s disgusting what you guys do, and it’s not like she can satisfy you all forever,” Rosie mocked.

“I’m sure she will,” Kingston beamed with a confident smile.

“She keeps us more than satisfied,” Corbin added.

“Anyways,” Josh piped up. “Avery, now that we all know what a great woman you are and how others,” he gave a pointed look at Rosie. “Aren’t. I need everyone’s help. If we were to stumble across someplace with oatmeal crème pies and cool ranch Doritos, I would give you damn near anything as a trade.”

“Uh oh, the cravings begin,” Chad chuckled.

“You have no clue,” Josh gave a long-suffering groan but couldn’t hide the pleased smile on his face.

“I’m pretty sure our shoppette has cool ranch Doritos,” the man next to Thorn stated with a grin. “I can hook you up on our next visit.”

“I wonder if our baker has a recipe similar to those oatmeal crème pies,” I added in thought.

“I bet they’ll be better, too,” Corbin helpfully added.

“Thanks,” Josh smiled. “Sorry, we didn’t get your names before the drama started.”

“I’m Masters, and this is Thorn,” Masters stated with a grin. “And no worries. It’s been entertaining, and I’m relieved to know that it’s not just the bunker experiencing cattiness and pettiness.”

“Rosie seems to be the common denominator in most cases,” Thorn added.

“Shut the fu—” Rosie began before BJ loudly spoke up.

“I’m BJ, that’s my sister Avery, my brother-in-law Chad,” he smirked, and I had to laugh because, in a way, he was. BJ saw Sylvia as a sister and since Chad was dating Sylvia, he was our brother-in-law. “He’s seeing my sister, Sylvia,” BJ continued. “Then there’s Ari and Josh. And those two men up front are also my brothers-in-law, Kingston and Corbin. However, Corbin is also our cousin too. Avery likes to keep it in the family,” he winked.

I reached into my pocket and immediately pulled out one of Sasha’s treats and threw it at him. “You are such a little shit,” I protested as the others—save Rosie—laughed. Thorn and Masters had expressions full of confusion and disgust.

“Our grandparents adopted our fathers. They’re adopted brothers,” Corbin chuckled. “We aren’t related by blood.”

“Not that that would stop Avery,” Rosie interjected.

“So, Masters and Thorn,” Kingston said, pretending not to hear Rosie. “Tell us a little about yourselves. It’s gonna be a long ride. Let’s bond.”

Thorn chuckled at Rosie's sound of indignation before he launched into his introduction.

## CHAPTER 12



DEAR Avery,

Like many of the previous letters I have written, I wish I had been there with you to speak the words I wrote for you. I

imagine Pam has given you this letter after you discovered that...gasp...I wasn't always just a mom. I'm not sure if my grandchildren surround you or not. I'm unsure if this letter is given to you in the order I wrote them, or if (like always) you've done things slightly differently than I expected.

Let's be honest, baby girl, your sister Emery may be rash and make decisions on a whim. But you, my dear, were my child that did things "unconventionally." It all started when you were a baby. Your sister may have been the fussy one, but you were my stubborn one. The first weekend your daddy and I decided to get away after your birth, you were four months old. Up until a week before our weekend getaway, I breastfed you both. I knew we needed to introduce you to bottles. In fact, I was a little behind on this. I was a first-time mom, so \*shrug\* mistakes were made.

Anyways, *mission bottles* were a success for Emery. She took to it right away. Ironically, she refused to go back on the boob after that weekend. You, on the other hand, refused to eat from the bottle. I asked your aunts and went to Google for advice. We figured you knew I was your milk cow so that you wouldn't take it from me. You didn't. Dad eventually got you to take the bottle after approximately fifty nipple changes and twice as many different bottles. \*I'm exaggerating, but you get the picture\*.

We thought we were good to go when your daddy took me to a bed and breakfast I had been dying to go to. \*Side note\* Make sure the man you decide to share your life with listens to you. I mean really listens to you. And remember, two people make a successful marriage; if you've heard it takes fifty-fifty, that's bull crap. It takes one hundred percent from both of you. Your Nana once told me that the key to a successful marriage was always striving to out-serve each other. I hope she's given you these exact words.

By this point in Mom's letter, I was laughing and crying. I was crying because Nana never got to give me these words of wisdom. She had given me so many, but these weren't among them. I wish she could have.

I was laughing because this letter, like the others, was my mom to a “T.” In life, she had a way of rambling or diverting from the original point of discussion. Dad always teased her and said she didn’t have a one-track mind. He insisted that her mind was made of many tracks, and the conductor would flip the switch at any given moment. So her train of thought would veer to another path eventually, sometimes more than one. However, you still ended at the destination of her final thoughts. We just had to take the scenic route to get there.

If she hasn’t been able to impart this gem to you, I will. Never stop dating the man you fall in love with. Life will get in the way. Life will slip away from you, and if you’re not careful, you’ll wake up next to a stranger one day. Always make time for each other.

Anyhoos back to my original intentions behind this letter. There aren’t many things I regret in this life. In fact, I hope you remember me embracing life to the fullest. I pray you recall how I always was willing to try everything and anything once. Well, almost everything ;)

I don’t know how or why you found out at one time your father and I were in an open relationship with your Aunt Pam, Aunt Carol, Uncle Mitch, and Uncle Scott. I imagine if you did, your father would be super uncomfortable explaining it to you. He never was any good at “girl” talk. He claims it was because he never grew up with females. However, I believe it’s just because if it were his choice, he’d keep you little forever.

If he were to begin having adult discussions with you, he would have to admit you’re no longer his little girl. But, from the hormones you and Emery are beginning to exhibit, I imagine he’ll have to face reality soon enough.

I digress once more. Are you surprised?! When I met your father, I fell hard for him. It really was love at first sight. I had boyfriends before, and I knew he was the one. I was barely eighteen, and he was this dashing twenty-year-old man with eyes the color of the sky. In this, I’m pleased with the fact Bryan Junior inherited them. You and Emery were the best of me, whereas BJ was the best of him.

Anyways, when he introduced me to Mitch and Scott, I also had to admit I found them attractive. And once I discovered that they had open relationships with their women in the past, I admit I was intrigued. So your Aunt Carol, Aunt Pam, and I discussed their history when BJ was about two or maybe three years old. By then, we were all a little tired, and reality had hit us with love, marriage, and children.

We admitted wanting to liven things up in our marriage and the bedroom. We joked about keeping it in the family. I hope you're not shaking your head at me! I hope you realize what we decided to do next wasn't taken lightly.

Your Aunt Carol approached your father and me about a year later. She said she wanted to gift Mitch with a surprise in the bedroom. I expected your father to laugh her out of the house or become irritated. I was surprised when he told me it was up to me. I struggled with the idea at first. I loved your father. I only needed and wanted your father. But by then, I had loved Mitch differently. It wasn't too far of a stretch to imagine being with him intimately.

I ensured your father was completely okay with it and finally told Carol I would. So after the first summer, we could all leave you, the kids, with your grandparents; we set up an adult trip for all of us. We loved you kids and missed you dearly, but it was nice to remember we were people beyond moms and dads. And that's how it began.

Every summer, we would leave you kids with your grandparents after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July bash and indulge ourselves. Eventually, it was like Woodstock, and our love was flying freely. And it was love. We all loved each other in a very unconventional way. Society would have frowned down on us, and almost everyone would never understand, but it was our choice. We were happy, and that's all that matters in the end.

I pray that you live your life in the same manner. If you aren't hurting anyone and are truly happy, I hope you have no regrets. I hope you realize that life isn't always in black and white, but plenty of shades of grey exist. Don't box yourself in

because you want to stay in the lines. Color away, my sweet girl. Go outside the lines.

Embrace all the moments that make you happy. And when death comes knocking for you, you, too, will realize you lived a good life. You will die knowing you lived every moment to the best of your ability.

Okay, my girl, I think I threw enough at you for now. I love you to the moon, my sweet baby girl— until we see each other again.

XOXO,

Your Mom

I took a deep breath in and wiped weary hands over my face. I missed her. I wished I could have had this conversation to her face. However, I was still thankful for this little piece of her. I could see that I was lucky to get this. Some people lost their parents and never had the chance to say goodbye or get letters.

The bus started to slow down, and I looked up in confusion. After a few hours on the road, Corbin had bid me go lay down for a little bit. Of course, I couldn't sleep, but I welcomed the respite from Rosie's incessant prattling.

She got over the embarrassment of our truths rather quickly. However, once she realized Ari wasn't as close to me as she assumed, her charm was turned back on. Ari still seemed unimpressed, and once I realized that Kingston, Corbin, BJ, Chad, and Josh protected him from her advances, I slipped into the back. The sad thing was if she had half the personality of her looks, I'm sure she would have men falling at her feet.

"Copy that," I heard Corbin murmur into the radio as I went up front.

"What's going on?" I inquired as I looked around.

Sasha nudged the back of my legs and let out a loud huff. She'd been with me long enough that I knew she also sensed something amiss.

“Axel doesn’t like the looks of those vehicles on the side of the road,” Kingston explained as he slipped on his flak vest.

I could see the vehicles pushed off the side of the road, but I didn’t see anything alarming. We passed a lot of distressed cars today. But, again, I didn’t notice anything different to cause Axel to want our caravan to stop.

“Neither does Sasha,” I unnecessarily commented.

“IED?” Thorn inquired, peering out the front windshield.

I knew IED stood for Improvised Explosive Device. I also knew you typically encountered it overseas, not here in the States. It was just another example of our life’s drastic turn. I’m sure such a device could help cripple a hoard of infected, but I didn’t think that was its purpose. Was it a trap? Was it intended to strike unassuming travelers roving this route?

“I believe that’s what he thinks it is,” Kingston confirmed. “I’ve learned never to question Axel when he has suspicions.”

“Do we release Sasha?” BJ inquired as he stood up and slipped on his vest as well.

“Let me check with Ax,” Corbin responded, picking up the CB radio. “Alpha, Alpha 3.”

“Go ahead,” Axel responded.

“Sasha’s acting up. Should we release her?” Corbin inquired. While we waited, Corbin looked at the rest of the bus. “BJ and Josh up top,” he instructed. “Check the surrounding area and ensure we’re not being watched or this is an ambush. Take your rifles with you,” BJ and Josh nodded and hooked up the ladder to the top hatch.

Although our bus wasn’t like Ari’s group, it had been modified. Instead of buckets, a platform had been erected on the top. In essence, cages made of fencing had been assembled. Other modifications had been made to it as well to protect us in the event we were trapped on the bus and needed ways to get ourselves free. It also gave us more mobility to defend against the infected or anyone else who harmed us.

“Ari and Thorn post up near the door. Masters and Diaz watch out the back emergency exit. Chad, King, Avery, you’re with me,” Corbin continued.

There were a few beats of silence before Axel replied. “Yes,” he concisely answered.

“Why can’t I go with you guys? What good am I watching out the windows on the bus,” Rosie immediately griped.

Ari spoke up before Corbin could remind her who was in charge.

“I thought you said you were in the military,” he drolly stated. “I think you would recognize who’s in charge by now.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Rosie immediately attempted to take back her words. “I mean, I’m an expert marksman, and I thought I could be better used elsewhere. But, unfortunately, not *everyone* can say that here and are being utilized elsewhere.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing it was just another dig at me. While waiting for Axel’s response, I had already slipped on my vest. I ensured my weapons were adequately secured before I descended the bus steps.

“Just do as you’re told,” Corbin commanded, opening the doors.

“Follow instructions and prove to us that we made a mistake removing you from our recovery team,” Kingston added, following me down the steps. He blew a low whistle, and Athena came bounding down the aisleway.

Sasha immediately took point, leading Corbin, Kingston, Chad, and me. I looked back and noticed Athena had taken her spot beside Kingston. As we walked closer to the parked vehicles on the side of the road, I saw the other vehicles had people posting up outside and watching our backs as we investigated the possible ambush. I kept my head on a swivel and noticed the absolute stillness of the area surrounding us.

I saw Sasha’s hackles rise. The thick black stripe puffed up her spine like a mohawk. The hairs on the back of my neck

stood on end. Goosebumps erupted across my skin. It felt like someone was watching us, but I saw no one.

To my right were rolling hills of the forest. To our left was another set of sparse woods, where I could vaguely see the opposite side of the three-lane interstate. Up ahead, there was an overpass. I continued to scan it. All I saw were abandoned vehicles and no movement whatsoever. That in itself was suspicious. Generally, we saw a few stragglers and sometimes smaller groups of infected on the once-bustling highway.

It wasn't also uncommon to see some infected left in their cars. After the second or third time of nearly jumping out of my skin, I learned never to assume anything. It was unnerving to be doing a sweep around abandoned vehicles and suddenly have an infected slamming against the glass. Seeing someone else startled out of their mind could be amusing, but not when it was me.

Someone had taken the time to push the cars off to the side of the road and clear the infected. Yet, the cars and trucks we were approaching were clearly carefully placed. It was as if they wanted to direct the traffic into a single line, caging travelers in.

"Something doesn't feel right," I murmured.

It was an inane comment considering our stop. I wasn't the only one feeling the unease. Even if Axel hadn't trusted his instincts, it was evident that something was amiss.

"I agree," Corbin muttered as he looked through a pair of binoculars.

We finally reached Axel, Dad, Uncle Mitch, Uncle Scott, Wyatt, and Zeke's sides. They were all approximately twenty feet from a grouping of vehicles. It looked like they were haphazardly arranged in a choke point of sorts. Any other person, me included, would have assumed that the cars had broken down in that configuration. Yet, all the other vehicles along this stretch were almost neatly pushed off to the side.

On closer inspection, I finally saw it. Three canister-looking items resembling propane tanks. The fact that Axel

noticed it both baffled and impressed me. Anyone else probably wouldn't have seen the carefully concealed objects. It blended so well with its surroundings that most people would have overlooked it.

"There's plenty of places people can hide," Uncle Mitch grumbled, his rifle low and ready. His fingers were centimeters away from the safety and trigger of his gun.

Everyone else seemed to be on edge. I could see the tension in their stances. I could nearly feel their apprehension radiating off them.

"My thoughts exactly," Axel confirmed as Sasha began to pace back and forth.

"Release her," Dad looked over at me, knowing Sasha wouldn't listen to anyone else's commands while I was present.

I nodded and ran a reassuring hand over Sasha's head. My stomach clenched with strain. The feeling of worry still gripped me in its clutches.

"Go, Sasha," I commanded.

Sasha took off, a blur of fur seconds later. She ran up to the propane tanks, sniffed for a few seconds, sat, and huffed a warning. I'm not sure what previous training she had, but I suspected detecting explosives may have been one of them.

"Athena, Bane, Roscoe, stay," Axel instructed the other three dogs as they started to follow her.

Bane heaved a weary sigh before sitting and leaning his entire body weight on my legs. I quickly righted myself and touched his head, scratching behind his ear. Athena let out a grumbling sound of discontent. And Roscoe let out a low whine. I would have laughed at their antics if the situation wasn't so dire. Clearly, they took enjoyment out of being put to "work."

"Where did you get her again?" Uncle Scott inquired, impressed.

I couldn't take my gaze off of Sasha and the potential bomb. This was all new territory for me, and I wanted to call my dog back. She had become one of my children, albeit a four-legged furry one. However, it wasn't until Corbin began to speak that Uncle Scott's words registered.

"Brayden and Gael's group found her in an abandoned squad car," Corbin replied for me. "They said she was despondent until she met Avery."

"We're fortunate she did," Dad said with a decisive nod.

"You can call her back," Axel stated as he slipped a hand onto the nape of my neck.

When he gently squeezed it, I felt the tension ebb slightly. I made a conscious effort to relax and let out a full breath. I always believed it was wise to hold onto a bit of fear. I knew I could get sloppy and inattentive if I were too relaxed. However, the extreme opposite was just as detrimental. Too much fear could cloud my judgment and cause me to make mistakes.

"Now what?" I quietly inquired before letting out a whistle.

"Now, Wyatt disarms it," Axel stated with a decisive nod.

My first instinct was to ask him if he was insane. I knew Wyatt was trained in the military for explosive devices, but it made me apprehensive. Accidents always happened, and I didn't want it to be this time.

"Kingston, follow him to assist. Zeke, can you watch their backs?" Axel commanded next as Sasha reached my side.

Instead of sitting and requesting her treat, like usual, she stalked toward the side of the highway to our left. She wasn't indicating anything alarming, but I knew she was still on high alert. She felt the unease in the air too.

"Rev, say a prayer up for us," Wyatt smirked before brushing a kiss against my temple. He reached for my hand and squeezed it. I longed to hold onto it tighter and beg him to stay.

Again, these feelings were new. I commonly understood the dangers we were all in out here. Typically, I understood the mission still needed to be completed regardless of my feelings. However, something felt off, and I couldn't demand they listen to my pleas without definitive proof.

"I got their six," Zeke drawled, kissing the top of my head.

"Copy that," Kingston responded before kissing my forehead briefly and following Wyatt.

Athena trotted to Kingston's side and looked up at him as if waiting for instructions.

"Let us pray," Chad rumbled as Axel and Corbin pressed against my sides.

We bowed our heads and said a quick prayer for safety and discernment. When I opened my eyes, Axel held out his fist. We placed our fists against his. Instead of saying the customary battle speech, he simply nodded. I'm not sure if I was reassured by the fact or disturbed. Did he not say it because he believed no battle would ensue?

"We need more cover on the ground," Axel explained next, looking at Dad and the uncles. "We can keep one person on each vehicle and keep the people posted up top. Everyone else needs to spread out and watch the perimeter."

"Mitch and I can issue the new order," Dad gave a decisive nod.

My dad knew war. My dad had witnessed enough to be perfectly capable of commanding us all. So were Uncle Mitch and Uncle Scott, for that matter. However, I knew they often deferred to Axel in such issues. They respected the fact that Axel had more experience when it came to securing and infiltrating dangerous areas. They may have worked in those areas, but people like the Alpha team ensured they were as safe as possible while they did so.

Dad and Uncle Mitch turned and began walking back toward the vehicles.

"I'll go get comms," Uncle Scott stated.

“Copy that,” Axel stated with a nod.

“Should some of us take a vantage point from above?” Corbin inquired as he pointed to the overpass.

“You should grab your earpiece and BJ, Josh, Felix, and Chen,” Axel agreed. “And have our sixes from up there.”

Chen was one of the guys from the bunker. Axel and Easton had taken a liking to him. He was once part of the Navy Seals and wanted to transfer to Sanctuary with us. However, unlike us, the General seemed unwilling to allow him to take permanent residence with us. We understood that they did need him, and he was one of the most experienced and best troops they had. But on the other hand, we felt he shouldn't have to be forced to stay somewhere he didn't want to be because of that.

The General reassured him that he wouldn't mind Chen leaving once more people were trained. But we still had our doubts about that. With the Vice President and a couple of US Senators residing at the bunker, they seemed to think they held more power and authority than our community.

“Can do,” Corbin stated.

He brushed his lips across mine before I walked towards Sasha. She seemed on high alert in this direction, and I wanted to ensure I saw whatever she did. I jogged over to where Uncle Scott came out with cases of earpiece radios and grabbed one. I saw other people come out and begin procuring theirs. There wouldn't be enough for everyone, but if each group had at least one person using them, that's all that mattered.

“Be careful, Ave,” Uncle Scott squeezed my shoulder in reassurance.

“You too,” I smiled before returning to Sasha.

I noticed others begin to roam the shoulder of the road. I couldn't see any movement but I didn't trust all of their perceptions. I couldn't trust some of these people until I worked with them for a while. I hated being so skeptical but it was the nature of the beast.

As I walked I could feel the sweat begin to drip down my back. I squirmed uncomfortably. It wasn't even noon, yet the sun was beating down on us. With my layers of protective equipment and long clothing, it made it all the more unbearable. Unfortunately, safety outweighed comfort so I had to suffer in the summer's heat.

After several moments I noticed a small group of the bunker people, and a few of our people began joking around. One of the younger guys jumped to one of the lower branches of a tree and started doing pull-ups. They were clearly having some pull-up contest when another man took his place, and they started counting his movements aloud.

I hated to be that person to break up their pow-wow, but I felt like they weren't taking this situation seriously. I looked around for my dad, the uncles, or Axel and didn't see them. I exchanged a look with Joe and Cal.

Joe mouthed. "Your call."

I nodded and knew he was leaving it up to me. He may have once commanded Bravo, but since coming to Sanctuary, he didn't seem to mind deferring to everyone else. He had no problems running a group during our morning workouts. However, I realized he also hated feeling like he was stepping on anyone's toes or overstepping his new position.

I hated being confrontational as well. It was bad enough that a small group of people only saw me as the token female or something. Some believed I was out on recovery only due to my position. My dad and uncles owned Sanctuary. Wyatt and Corbin were my men, held prominent roles in the community, and had a significant say in its day-to-day running. My other men had been promoted to high esteem. I understood because individuals like Rosie made people believe it was some form of nepotism. She and others like her wanted to think we wouldn't be held in such high regard if it wasn't for who we knew.

I knew other people constantly came to our defense. I recognized that I had changed the opinions of some once they saw I wasn't just an ornament. I pulled my weight around

camp and frequently exceedingly so. Most of them even held a grudging respect for me once they realized how intuitive and skilled I was on recovery. However, I learned from a smattering of characters that my efforts would never be enough. They already had their preconceived notions of me, and no matter what I said or did, I probably would never change their minds.

“Hey guys,” I walked over to the grouping of people. “We should probably get back to ensuring we aren’t being watched or in danger.”

“Guys?” one of the bunker girls scoffed with an eye roll. “Way to be inclusive.”

I blinked at her in surprise and then feigned a smile. “Sorry, *people*,” I overemphasized. “We should probably get back to our mission.”

One of the bunker guys gave me a slow once-over. A slow sleazy smile spread across his otherwise unremarkable features. “Sure, doll, in a moment.”

“You do realize that that’s a bomb they’re defusing up there and should be cautious of our surroundings,” I attempted to conceal my ire.

“Yo, guys, just do as you’re told,” Cal came up beside me.

A few people snickered while the others ignored us and returned to their little competition.

“Nah, we’re good,” one of the guys flippantly stated as he began his turn for pull-ups.

“We don’t answer to you,” the skeezy man drawled with a grin. “Last I checked, I’m the head honcho of *my* group.”

“But you’re under the command to listen to us ultimately,” Joe seethed as he joined Cal and me.

The girl leaned forward and looked Joe up and down. “Who are any of you to tell us what to do?” she cruelly laughed before she looked around. “There’s nothing to see out there but a bunch of trees, rocks, leaves, and shit. You need to chill.”

“How much time have you spent out here?” Joe fumed. “Have you not realized that things can change in the blink of an eye? Just do as you’re told and do your jobs.”

A couple of our guys from the community separated themselves from the group.

“Sorry,” they muttered to us before looking at the others. “We’ve been out enough with Joe, Cal, and Avery to know they’re probably right. So let’s get back to it.” One of them stated before heading back to their task.

I merely nodded, appreciating that they realized it wasn’t the wisest thing to align themselves with people like them.

“Where did we hear the name Avery from before?” the woman asked with a slow malicious grin.

“Isn’t that the name of the girl who spreads her legs for all the guys?” another man asked with feigned obliviousness.

“Or the name of the girl who can kick your ass for not minding your own damn business,” I smiled sweetly.

My statement only elicited laughter from the group. I was so close to showing them who they were genuinely screwing with. I wasn’t some meek female to take their insults lying down, and I wasn’t even being cocky when I assumed I could hand them their asses with no problem.

I stepped towards them and realized that Sasha was by my side again. A few people were smart enough to take a step back. Sasha could be intimidating when necessary. When I looked down at her, I noticed she was dividing her attention between the group in front of me and the woods behind them.

“Sounds like the same name,” the smarmy guy smirked before looking me up and down again. He licked his bottom lip. “I can imagine those legs around my waist showing her what she’s been missing. Obviously, she needs a real man if none of them can satisfy her enough to keep her from jumping from bed to bed.”

It would appear that he wasn’t as intimidated by Sasha’s presence. However, I didn’t fail to notice how he kept a wary eye on her while puffing up his chest.

A few of the guys seemed to have sense enough to step away from the group as if they didn't condone the words that just fell from his lips. So at least some people still had some sense to disassociate from people that may place them in an unfavorable light by proximity.

"Seville," one of the men even cautioned with a look of disgust. "Tone it down some, eh? You really didn't need to go there."

Seville merely gave him a cocky grin and shrug. "Just calling it as I see it."

When the girl slapped his chest and glared at him, he laughed. "What, she's a hot piece of ass, and I wouldn't mind having a little taste?"

I felt that this woman was dating or hooking up with this guy. The sad thing was I could see that she was angry about his comment but probably wouldn't cut him off. I dared any of my men to disrespect me in such a manner.

I guess Seville was good-looking, but I spotted his type from a mile away. He was a womanizer and a douchebag. But unfortunately, some women seemed to love that form of toxic energy. And the woman seemed weak enough to accept any disrespect he doled out to her just to be noticed for a few seconds by him now and then.

"No thanks," I gave him another saccharine sweet smile. "You give me the whole pencil dick energy, and I tend to like my men a little more...manly. My men, my boyfriends, can satisfy me real well. You strike me as a one-pump chump. Bet the women you sleep with have to fake their orgasms as well. My men don't have that problem. Ever."

The girl hissed at me. "As if he would be interested in a slut like you."

Joe took a threatening step forward. "I suggest you apologize to Avery now, or I'm sure you won't like the consequences of your words and actions. Then get the hell back to work."

Seville just laughed some more while the ones who seemed determined to separate themselves from the situation wandered off.

“I’ll go get one of the Colonels or Ax,” Cal muttered before leaving.

“Uh oh, he’s going to tell on us,” one of the guys laughed raucously as the others joined him.

I was done with playing nice when Sasha’s hackles rose once more. A feral snarl erupted from her throat, and I realized the woods weren’t as quiet as they were moments ago. I immediately saw the cause of her behavior when I spotted a pack of animals running toward us. They were in varying sizes. Some were low and squatted to the ground. While others rivaled the size of Bane. It took me too long to recognize that the animals once were dogs.

I knew from previous conversations and experiences that animals could get infected. But unlike my experience with downed cows, this was much more alarming. These dogs were fast and agile as they ran toward us. I looked over my shoulder and determined the vehicles were too far away. Not that that stopped Seville, his woman, and a few of his friends from attempting the feat.

“I have movement,” Corbin’s voice resounded in my ears.

Moments later, I heard the unmistakable sounds of small engines coming in at high speed. I didn’t turn and look, recognizing the sounds of dirt bikes, UTVs, ATVs, and other all-terrain vehicles. But, of course, they wouldn’t have had to take the road with vehicles like that. Instead, they could maneuver around the trees surrounding us and hide undetected in the thick foliage.

“Holy shit! They’re dogs,” Joe whispered in horror as he took a stance beside me.

“Yeah,” I agreed as I registered shouts and weapons going off around us. “We have infected dogs coming our way,” I relayed into the walkie-talkies.

I quickly decided what weapon I should use against them. Somehow I thought my sais wouldn't be the best choice, so I pulled my spear and gun. I had trained many hours with my left hand, so I was comfortable enough to wield the spear. I would use it as defense as I attempted to take them down with my gun.

Sasha stalked forward and continued growling. Saliva dripped from her mouth as she snarled a warning at the infected dogs. As they drew closer with alarming speed, I realized they weren't the least intimidated by her.

Now that they were nearer, I realized the dogs looked like they had mange. Large tufts of their fur were now missing. Much like their human counterparts, they also had hunks of their flesh missing, evidence of their attacks. In some instances, body parts were clearly visible, but instead of organs or bones, I saw a mass of black moldy-looking viscera. Their bones were an indescribable shade of black, brown, and green. Their eyes wept red, and their mouths foamed a copper-like substance.

"They're not afraid of her," Joe cried in panic, echoing my inward thoughts.

"Sasha, kennel, now!" I screamed as one came within ten or so feet of her.

Then I remembered our other dogs were out here, and I needed to warn the others to command them to return to their vehicles. The dogs were already in harm's way when they helped intimidate the normal infected. They didn't stand a chance against these demon dogs, and I valued them too much to risk it.

"Incoming dogs, and they aren't afraid," I depressed my earpiece. "Tell our dogs to return to the vehicles."

"Copy," I heard Rhys, Kingston, and finally Axel respond.

I prayed they made it back to the vehicles in time. I couldn't think about the dogs, my guys, family, and friends. Instead, I had to focus on the task at hand. I had to ensure I

made it back to them and have faith they would do so in return.

The dog leading the pack appeared to have once been a Dalmatian, and it was poised to leap on Sasha. Its mouth opened wide, its jaws nearly unhinging completely. I could see the remains of whatever or whomever it had last attacked. The bits clung to its sharp yellowed teeth. The gums that were probably once a healthy pink were now a cross between purple and black.

Sasha hesitated and struggled between heeding my commands and her instincts to protect me.

“No! Sasha! Kennel!” I screamed as another dog broke past Sasha and the other dog and headed our way.

I held my spear up with one hand and aimed my pistol at the dog attempting to attack Sasha. I had seen *I Am Legend*. And although it was just a movie, I would be damned if I was the one sitting on the bottom of the bathtub sobbing as I had to kill my dog.

“Thanks,” I breathed to Joe as he aimed for the next dog closest to us.

I inhaled deeply and carefully squeezed the trigger on the exhale. Unfortunately, the bullet lodged itself into its neck. It blew the dog a few feet back, but still, it was determined in its attempt to injure Sasha. I realized then that aiming for the brain in a dog was a lot more complex than I anticipated. I nearly sobbed in relief when Sasha dodged the other dog and ran.

I didn't have time to turn around and ensure that she returned to the bus as the pack of infected dogs finally caught up to their leader. As the Dalmatian dove for Sasha's hind legs, it gave me the perfect opportunity to take a clean shot. Its head was lowered, and the top was broadside to me.

Once again, I was faced with a moral dilemma. I had to think logically and realize that thing was no longer a family's beloved pet. I had to remember that it would gladly kill Sasha and us. I had to tell my heart it was no longer a living being. It

was dead inside. It no longer had its soul or the equivalent of one. So, I took the shot. I watched its body flip over and skidded to a stop a few feet from us. It twitched, but it didn't get back up.

“We got this,” Joe encouraged.

I had no time to breathe as the other dogs converged on us. Some didn't even bother stopping to attack us but continued to run past us in hot pursuit of other prey. I looked for opportunities to shoot and stab them with my spear. My heart raced, and I could hear my ragged breathing echoed by Joe. I listened to the screams of the people behind me, along with the eerie snarling and howls of the infected dogs.

I vaguely noticed Cal had rejoined our sides along with Ari. I had no clue where they had come from, but I was thankful for their assistance. It seemed like wave after wave came for us and bypassed the little circle we had formed to go after our people. I alternated between using my spear and gun.

“Holy shit, where did they come from?” Cal bit out after several moments of engaging the dogs.

A toy dog of sorts came after him as he spoke. And even though it was small and in life probably not so threatening, it was evil incarnate in death. It quickly dashed between the legs of a much larger dog and leaped with unnatural proficiency, lunging for Cal's stomach. Luckily, it latched onto his vest, allowing him to strike out with his curved scimitar. I averted my gaze and focused on the next dog attempting to leap or climb over their fallen infected pack. Ari was too busy engaging a Great Dane, and I could see the haunted look and determination in his eyes. He didn't see the herding breed type of dog leap up as if it was clearing a five-foot hurdle. His viscous stained teeth snapped mere inches from Ari's face. Ari let out a sound of distress and stumbled back a few feet, causing him to lose purchase from the battle he had been engaged in with the Dane. I reacted quickly, thrust my spear forward, and caught it in its throat.

The weight on the end of my spear made my muscles burn. My hands shook with the effort to carry the dog away from

Ari and towards me. The dog continued to snap his teeth, determined to strike us.

“I’m so sorry, buddy,” my voice hitched as my humanity attempted to leak back in.

I attempted to disassociate myself once more. Hot tears burned my eyes as I ended its misery. Whether the infected had a conscious thought or not, I was uncertain. However, I felt if they had a minuscule amount of consciousness remaining, they wouldn’t have wanted to continue roaming the earth in their condition.

When I looked back up, with tears clouding my vision, I saw no more coming. I looked towards the heavens and attempted to clear my eyes and lock that shit back up. But, unfortunately, I didn’t have the luxury of time to break down.

“Clear,” Joe breathlessly confirmed.

“So fucking senseless,” Cal echoed my earlier sentiments staring vacantly at the infected canines surrounding us.

“This shit should have stayed in books and movies,” Ari seethed. “It was a hell of a lot more entertaining believing it could never happen in real life.”

“Agreed.” “For real.” Cal and Joe simultaneously voiced.

Then Ari turned to me, and before I realized his intentions, he wrapped his arms around me and lifted my feet off the ground. I could feel his rapid heartbeat against my own. The sound of his labored breathing filled my ears. It took me a moment to realize I wasn’t the only one shaking. For a brief moment, I took comfort in his touch.

“I thank you, and so do Hai and Hana,” Ari murmured, nearly crushing me with his gratitude. “And even if we want to view those things still as they once were, we must remember that they too are like the humans that once were. They are no longer there. They are merely empty shells of their former selves with the intent of turning us into them.”

I could only nod, not trusting myself to talk. Today had already left me emotionally raw with Foster’s begging and

reading my mother's letter. I felt vulnerable and exposed—two things I didn't want to feel right now.

“Let's reload,” Joe patted my back. “Our work isn't done.”

I wanted to wallow in self-pity and despair, but I knew Joe was right. Ari gently set me back down, and we all began to reload our guns. I had gone through nearly two whole clips.

The sounds of the skirmish on the road were dying down, but it wasn't finished. I finally looked around. I could see a few of our people lying by the vehicles. The dead animals that attacked them weren't far from where they lay still. I felt grief strike me even though it wasn't our uniforms that they wore. Instead, they wore the multi-cams the bunker handed out to their people.

I intentionally took deep breaths in and released them just as slowly. I willed my heart to slow down.

Further down the road, I saw our people engaging with a handful of those who attacked us. I can only surmise that they had been watching and chose to attack us when they felt the moment was right. From their movements, they weren't ordinary civilians bent on assaulting unassuming travelers. I wasn't sure what their end game was, but it definitely wasn't to welcome us and hope we would or could help them build a community as we had done.

I watched as one of their men ran toward a downed dirt bike. The high-pitched sound of the engine echoed off the trees and mountains surrounding us. He hopped on and revved the engine as he attempted a hasty retreat. But before he could get five feet, a bolt from a crossbow struck him between the shoulder blades. He flipped over the front as the dirt bike slid another ten feet or so.

“Got 'em,” Joe humorlessly chuckled as he wiped his blades.

A sound from the direction the dogs came from carried to my ears. And I whirled, afraid more infected, whether dogs or the human variety, headed our way. At first glance, I saw nothing to be alarmed about. But once again, my instincts

were screaming at me. Not everything was as it appeared. Somehow a group of people had gotten the drop on us. They had attacked us with enough precision that we had only moments to react and determine our next course of action.

Then finally, I detected movement. I grabbed my binoculars, and when I peered through them, I realized that several figures were attempting to retreat stealthily. They wore ghillie suits, nearly blending into their surroundings. As I focused closer in on them, I realized that they were crawling and lurking past squat wooden crates carefully concealed by the natural environment.

It took a moment for my mind to register what I was seeing. These crates were wooden on all sides save a metal door with holes drilled into the front of them. They were raised as if they had been lifted and left open. Then, I concluded that they had set the dogs on us.

The thought both infuriated me and sickened me. The concept that these reprobates had somehow trapped these animals and then released them upon us made me question the humanity left in the survivors. How could such disgusting humans remain when so many good and innocent people perished? Whether by the infection itself or the reprobates that had taken advantage of the situation.

“Six ahead,” I informed the guys as I vacillated between joining the dying fray behind us or pursuing the degenerates ahead of us.

“We can’t let them get away,” Ari said, his jaw clenching with the same fury that ran through me.

“I agree,” I commented, nodding before pressing the button for my walkie-talkie. “We see six men attempting to get away. They set the dogs on us. Permission to pursue.”

“Permission granted,” Dad’s reluctant voice responded.

I longed to find out the status of the others, but something within me said they were safe. The uneasy feeling I had felt earlier had diminished, replaced by cold, brutal wrath. Maybe

it was fanciful or delusional thinking, but I believed I would have felt it if something had happened to one of them.

I was renewed with a new burst of adrenaline. The shakiness in my limbs was gone. The sadness and ache I felt were pushed back to the dark corners of my mind. The lust for blood and vengeance filled me as I raced toward the unsuspecting attackers. They had been confident that they could get away. Their unhurried movements made me believe they became compliant in their disguises. How long had they laid there before they determined it was time to release the dogs on us?

Had they become arrogant enough to believe they could overtake us and continue attacking unsuspecting people? Did they imagine we were so occupied with everything else we wouldn't have figured out the attack was too coordinated?

“We know your location and are right behind you,” Wyatt said as I heard small engines start in the distance.

As I ran, I felt Joe and Ari fall into step beside me. Cal had endurance and trained as hard and long as I did, but I was faster. I wasn't being cocky or arrogant when I said I was one of the fastest runners at Sanctuary. On our group runs, I was consistently at the head of the pack with Easton, BJ, Simon, and Axel. On their better days, Wyatt, Amy, Rhys, Trevor, and Kingston were alongside us.

We were halfway to our marks when they finally realized we were coming after them. I witnessed a man trip and fall over his ghillie suit, and if I weren't so determined and furious, I would have laughed. His attempt to get back up was comical, only to stumble again.

The others seemed to realize their suits weren't the best to run in soon enough. As the distance shortened between us, I watched as some of them attempted to discard parts of their suits. The only problem—for them, that is—was that running and stripping weren't that conducive. Their vain attempts at divesting themselves of the cumbersome outfits greatly impeded their ability to leave quickly. It gave us the much-

needed advantage to catch them despite the distance and head start they had on us.

As we passed the crates they had the dogs kenneled in; I saw a flash of fur shoot past us, followed by another. For a heart-stopping second, I thought we hadn't gotten all the infected canines until I recognized Sasha's light brown fur with her black stripe down her spine and on the tips of her ears. I also realized Roscoe had joined us as he went in the chase behind her.

Joe reached the first guy as Sasha leaped at another. Cal dove and tackled the second guy. Roscoe knocked the legs out from under the third guy as the terrain sloped down. The sudden incline down and Roscoe's hit caused him to flip forward. Again, it was hard not to laugh as I witnessed him awkwardly flip head over foot several times before landing at the bottom of the dry gully.

Ari and I continued to traverse the rough terrain to catch the remaining two. I heard engines coming closer and knew Wyatt and whoever accompanied him were almost upon us. The sounds of men screaming echoed behind us. I felt it was from the men Roscoe and Sasha captured, and I could only assume they hadn't just bitten down on their clothing. I imagine a hunk of flesh had met their sharp canines. What a shame! Enter sarcasm there.

The people in front of us had shed the pants of their suits, and one of them appeared to have lost a boot in the process of disrobing. Ari reached out and grabbed the neckline of the fifth guy. He grasped his shirt, pulled him back, and struck out towards their chest with his other arm with a quickness I barely caught. Then, I noticed him kick out his leg and slam the man onto the ground. It wasn't until his fugitive began to fall that I heard a very high-pitched scream of alarm.

I leaped over the person to get to the last guy, realizing the person Ari took down was a *her* and not a *he*. With the bulky clothing and hood over her head, she appeared to be a man from a distance. It wasn't until her hat fell off and she screamed I realized she was a female.

I had to admit I was slightly shocked. I should have known by now disparity and evil had no face. Instead, it took on the form of men and women alike. She lay winded on the ground, her long dishwater blonde hair spread across the forest floor. The woman's look of surprise, fear, panic, and finally rage burned into my memory as I lessened the distance between the final defector.

The man veered slightly to the left before I realized that we reached the other side of the interstate. As I closed in the last runner, we approached the guardrails and vacant vehicles on the west-bound side. This part of the interstate flowed in the opposite direction we had been on— at least it once had.

It took me a moment to realize he was heading towards their concealed vehicles. They had carefully hidden their quads and dirt bikes beneath camouflaged-netting, branches, and other natural vegetation. I could have easily missed the grouping of vehicles any other day.

Before he could pull off the cover, I leaped at him with a flying sidekick. I knew I could have easily pulled my gun and shot him, but I wanted to take out my anger on him more satisfactorily. Secondly, I had no clue if the gun's sounds could draw any nearby infected. I didn't want to assume anything and erred on the side of caution.

The man stumbled forward with a cry of pain and shock. Before he could completely right himself, I grabbed the back of his hooded head and whipped it back with one hand as I slammed my other fist into his kidney. With any luck, this man would be pissing blood for weeks because there was no way I would allow him to get away with what he had done. Death was too easy of a punishment for him. He deserved to rot somewhere as we extracted information from him. People like him would make it never safe enough for my children to discover the big world outside the gates of Sanctuary.

The man bucked out of my hold, evading my punches to his kidneys. I lost my purchase on him, and he whirled around with a bellow of rage. I was now faced with a man roughly sixty pounds heavier than me and three inches taller. His eyes momentarily widened in shock as he realized I was a female

before his lips pulled back with a triumphant grin. A wicked gleam entered his eyes, and I saw the overconfidence follow. I knew he assumed that lil' ol me wasn't a threat.

“Avery, right?” he inquired with a leer.

I faltered in shock. How did the man know who I was? Had he been spying on us? Did he know Natalie? Did she tell him about us?

I had to get over my stunned silence when he jolted forward. And when he righted himself, I noticed the glint of steel in his hand as the sun reflected off its surface. I didn't even bother reaching for my own. A slow smile spread across my lips, only further surprising him.

He wanted to play dirty after the shit he put us through today? So be it. I had a whole bunch of rage that needed an outlet. Before he could even take a step, I whipped out with my back leg with a crescent kick and struck his wrist. He cursed as his hands spasmed, and he dropped the knife. I delivered an upward knee to his face as he leaned down to quickly snatch up his fallen weapon.

I was rewarded with the sound of a crunch and blood erupting from his nose.

“You stupid bitch,” he screamed. “I'm going to kill you.”

“You can try,” I taunted him as he blindly struck out with a fist.

I evaded his hit and did a double-roundhouse kick. My first kick hit him on the arm while he clutched his face fruitlessly, attempting to staunch the bleeding while my next kick hit him in the head. It wasn't hard enough to knock him out, because where was the fun in that? However, it was hard enough to ring his bell slightly.

He let out a low growl of rage, charging me. “Forget about killing you. I'm bringing back my friends a new toy. They're going to love to hear your screams.”

“Aww, such a big, mean man,” I mocked him. “You aren't even returning to your friends, you coward.”

He swung a big meaty fist toward my face, and I attempted to evade it. Fortunately, his anger and pain made him sloppy, so it landed off my shoulder. It rocked me, but it wouldn't have hurt nearly as bad as my face would have. I had to bite my tongue to keep from crying out. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know it'd hurt.

He got confident and grinned menacingly at me. His eyes were watering, and the blood flowed freely from his nose and down his face. I was able to feint away from his other attack, and before he could attempt to strike me again, I did a left cross to his face. His wobbling gait caused me to miss his nose, but it landed on his eye. He bellowed as I followed up my punch with my right hand with an uppercut to his jaw. In quick succession, I delivered a push kick to his chest. He stumbled again.

It was apparent this wasn't his first scuffle. I could tell by the wheezing of his breath and how he faltered almost drunkenly that he was in significant pain. However, his determination to attack me hadn't diminished, so he was valiantly attempting to right himself. His hands came up in a futile attempt to protect himself. Then, he laughed cruelly, springing towards me.

"I will, and when I bring back more people, we will annihilate your whole group," he taunted.

"Like you did this time?" I humorlessly laughed. "You released infected dogs on us, attempted to kill us with an explosive, and sent in quite a few people, yet you still failed."

I charged him once more with a flurry of punches and kicks. His fist managed to graze my ribs, but he was in pain, and his broken nose impeded his strength. It stung, and I might have a slight bruise afterward, but no lasting damages were incurred.

"Keep mouthing me, bitch," he snarled in rage. "I'll show you what I do with mouthy bitches like you."

"Such a big, tough man," I goaded. "Is that why you attack people with no provocation? You can't get anything in life unless you fight dirty. You only feel any power by hurting

those you perceive to be weaker than you. How's that working out for you?"

He screamed his rage at me, and I knew I had hit a raw nerve with him by my constant ridicule and pointing out his shortcomings and failures. It spurred him into action, and I could not escape his grasp. He grabbed a fist full of my hair and yanked it down.

I was unable to stop the yelp of pain. I felt the sting of my scalp as he pulled me towards him. He let out a victorious laugh that lasted about two seconds. As he gloated, I raised both my hands in a chopping motion. I struck out at his wrist, breaking his hold on me. Then, before he could grab me again, I punched him in the throat.

He let out a loud hacking noise and grabbed his throat, desperately attempting to catch his breath. I took the opportunity to continue my barrage of strikes. I was high on adrenaline and wrath. I landed some round houses against his ribs and felt and heard one or more crack with a pop. He gasped out and swayed on his feet.

"A pretty thing like you sure does have pretty little girls," he gasped with a laugh. His teeth were full of blood. "Do you have two or three? Regardless of your confirmation, they can be trained to be good little girls." He winked at me, his face a swollen, bloody mess.

Shock and surprise were soon replaced with a new level of anger as I realized his implications. He went there. He threatened my daughters. Logically, I knew he held no power. I knew he would never, could never, see them. He was a dead man walking. Once we extracted information from him, he would meet his maker. Too bad for him I felt his judgment would be unfavorable. Regardless, his threats alone made me go red.

One minute he was standing, and the next, I had blinked, and he was pinned beneath me. I straddled his chest, raining blows upon his swollen, bruised, and bleeding face. His attempts to buck me had ceased, yet I continued to attack him

until I felt two sets of arms lift me and carry me away from his inert body.

## CHAPTER 13



“LET me go! He needs to die,” I cried out in protest.

It was like I was undergoing an out-of-body experience. I witnessed everything unfolding before me but didn’t feel like I was there. I saw Simon and Zeke kneel next to the man. I registered that they checked his vitals. I even heard them state he was alive. Still, I continued to struggle to get to him. I begged the people restraining me to release me. I wanted to finish what I had started.

It took several moments before I heard urgent murmurs and whispered words of reassurance seep into my consciousness.

“Goddess, breathe, we got you,” someone stated.

While another voice urgently insisted. “Avery, come back to us. You’re okay.”

Dad came running towards me. His face was full of concern and panic.

“What’s wrong?” I saw his mouth move long after I understood the words. “Is she okay?”

“It’s not her blood,” someone else reassured him.

“I think she’s in shock,” someone else added.

*Who’s bleeding? Who was in shock?*

I vaguely registered someone picking me up and placing me on a quad. Someone’s hard body leaned over me to start the machine. The vibration of the engine reverberated through my body. The machine beneath me lurched forward. A kaleidoscope of colors, sounds, and words whirled by me as the ground beneath me sped by. My hair lashed around my face as the wind whipped around me.

Whoever had commandeered the vehicle held me tight. Soon the world stopped once more.

Another face now loomed in front of me. Hands cradled my face. Words continued to weave their way in and out of my consciousness. One minute someone was removing my vest, jacket, and weapons, and the next, I was gasping and spluttering.

I blinked as cold water streamed down over my head. I looked around and noticed my guys surrounding me and my dad, BJ, and uncles hovering near the trees. I watched Corbin pick up another gallon of water seconds before he poured it over my head again. Wyatt and Kingston had rags and rubbed at my skin.

“What the hell are you doing?” I protested as I realized Corbin was reaching for another gallon of water.

“You’re back with us, Queen?” Easton murmured as he peered into my eyes and tested my pulse on my wrist.

“Where else could I have been?” I asked in confusion.

I didn’t get any answers as a canteen was held up to my lips. Once the slightly sweet liquid hit my lips, I needed no further bidding to suck it down. I frowned when it was empty. I was so thirsty!

The cold rags were continuously rubbed over my skin. It felt so good against my overheated skin. When did I get so hot?

Easton stood before me again, and I reflexively reached out to rub his face. He looked so concerned. He feigned a smile, making me sad that he had to pretend.

“Her eyes are back to normal, and her body temperature seems to have gone down,” Easton quietly called out.

“What happened?” I warily inquired.

“We think you went into shock or got overheated. Or both,” Axel responded as he lifted my chin next.

Suddenly the events of the last twenty minutes or so came rushing back to me. “That man knew who I was. He threatened Mariah, Dani, and Isa!”

During our fight, I had put his recognition of me to the recesses of my mind. I hadn’t wanted my fear or concern to affect me. I could channel my anger into a fight. I tended to overthink and make careless mistakes when my mind was full of misgivings. However, now that I was less heated, literally and figuratively, I felt it was pertinent that that information was disseminated.

Dad and my uncles had taken a step forward. “Are you sure?” Dad frowned.

“I’m positive,” I emphatically nodded as I saw movement behind the guys.

Ari, Simon, Coach, and the General were approaching us. My brows knitted in confusion. When did the General get here?

“General,” Axel nodded curtly.

“The General came in with more people,” Corbin explained. “It was good that he did because that solved one of our issues.”

From his body language, I didn’t think it was a good thing. He had already sent people with us. Why did he send more, and why did he accompany them? I knew he rarely liked leaving the bunker unless it was by helicopter. The Senator and Vice President didn’t like him out in the field too much.

Something didn't seem right. Warning bells were going off in my head. However, I couldn't pinpoint the exact reason for my unease. I had to put that on the back burner for now, though.

"How many people did we lose?" I asked, feeling that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I hated losing people. We had been fortunate not to lose anyone for quite a while. Instead, we had people injure themselves and were forced to sit it out for a while. And that was copacetic, more than all right, in fact. We'd much rather have the people alive.

"Us, none. The bunker lost four. They had an additional injury, and we have three," Wyatt explained next. "Anderson's leaving to get medical care for a bullet wound. It was a flesh wound," he hastily reassured me. "Brayden popped his knee out of the socket rescuing someone from their thoughtlessness," his lips curled in distaste.

I'm sure there was a story behind that statement. We had been out here long enough to realize we couldn't always be on our A-games. We all stumbled and had close calls. We all had to have each other's backs in one way or the other. However, his look suggested that the person in question was reckless and careless.

Wyatt was infinitely patient and understanding. Though, he didn't suffer fools. On the contrary, he despised people who didn't understand how dangerous it was out here.

"And Nigel is getting a brain scan. One of the bunker guys tripped him as he ran from the dogs," Wyatt continued. "Nigel was unconscious for a little while. We think he got a concussion. Luckily, Ari and Gael were there to protect Nigel as they took down the remaining dogs that made it our way."

"Everything okay over here?" General Gypson inquired.

"Just a little shock and heat exhaustion," Easton briefly explained.

"Well, we're taking the injured and dead back with us. You're more than welcome to return with us," General gave

me a pleasant smile.

I immediately shook my head, sure one or more of my men would insist that I go with him. But, when they didn't object, I felt they were displeased with the General. The question was whether it was from distrust or his constant overbearing attitude.

"No, thank you," I verbalized. "What happened to the people we took down?" I asked next as BJ handed me a towel.

I had completely forgotten that I was soaking wet, and when I looked down, I was relieved to see that I didn't have any blood on me any longer. However, I frowned as I realized I also had busted my knuckles while I was beating the crap out of that guy. Easton noticed where my gaze had landed and promptly began to wrap my knuckles. It would make it difficult to wear gloves, but I had zero regrets.

"We've loaded them up to interrogate them," the general stated, seemingly disheartened that I wasn't returning with him.

His behavior made me further suspicious. Why did he seem so keen to have me return with him?

"I want to talk to the man my daughter took care of," Dad said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Why?" General Gypson inquired with a frown.

"We have our reasons," Uncle Mitch immediately responded.

"What reasons?" General Gypson blustered.

They didn't even bother answering him as they turned and headed toward our vehicles.

"Why do I sense hostility?" General Gypson questioned as he followed them.

Once Easton finished wrapping my hand, I immediately followed them as well. I wanted to see the condition of the man I had attacked. I'd blacked out. One minute he was taunting me, and the next...nothing. I remember thrashing him and getting removed from him, but that's it. I had been hot,

and after defending myself from those dogs and then chasing the enemies down, I may have overexerted myself. Maybe it was time I wore material that breathed better. I just loved that my leather jacket and pleather pants cleaned so well.

“I thought we had a good working relationship,” Gypson said as I came within hearing distance. “Why do I feel like you don’t feel the same?”

“I’ll tell you why,” Dad whirled around angrily. “When we first discussed working together, we agreed it would be a partnership, yet lately, you are attempting to control us. I don’t mind sending our people your way and assisting you in growing your operations at your base. However, that wasn’t enough for you when I sent ten people your way last week. My son-in-law,” he pointed towards Easton. “Told us how you refused his transport home. When he secured transport, you attempted to forbid him from leaving. That wasn’t your call to make, especially when Caesar already agreed to stay and assist you longer.”

I looked at Easton in surprise. I hadn’t known that had happened. At any other time, Easton probably would have stayed. If we didn’t have the barbecue, I’m confident he would have felt obligated and guilted into staying. It was no secret that was an inherent characteristic of Easton. And the General probably attempted to exploit this knowledge. As a result, my negative feelings for the general grew.

“That order didn’t come from me. The Vice President and one of the Senators—” General Gypson began to protest before Uncle Mitch cut him off.

“We don’t give a shit what the Vice President and the Senators have to say, and neither should you,” Uncle Mitch coldly stated. “You all may be in denial, but we’re not. We have no government. And before,” he held his hand up as the general opened his mouth. “You attempt to convince us otherwise, be honest with yourself. We know. You know. Our government failed us. They knew about that virus long before it hit us. Our tax dollars paid for its invention. That makes them our enemies. They can pretend they had no knowledge of it, but they signed the bill to fund that project.”

“You don’t know that,” General Gypson spluttered.

I knew they had danced around this issue in the past. Dad and Uncle Scott tried to approach their misgivings diplomatically. I guess the gloves were coming off.

It sickened me to have my suspicions confirmed. I realized our government had a lot of top-secret projects. I knew they proactively defended our country against foreign attacks, including bioweapons. But to knowingly fund and create the disease that caused our nation to collapse was reprehensible.

“I do,” Dad spit out. “General, I respect you. And I know you are a fantastic leader in battle tactics. I saw you in action in Afghanistan. But even you have to admit that that virus is beyond your intel.

“We were pulled from the front lines for this. My brother and I were tasked with trying to fix their errors. They attempted to tell us that someone had stolen and corrupted our data, but I know better; we know better. My nephews and son-in-laws had attempted to contain it before it was too late. Guess what? It was!

“We don’t mind helping you all out, but we won’t take orders from you any longer. If they have a problem, have them come to see me, not by helicopter. You realize, and I realize, they were immediately evacuated to the bunker. They never got to witness their poor decisions firsthand. They were safely ensconced in the bunker long before then. They have no clue how their choices affected us all. So let them spend a few hours out here with the evidence of their failure. Maybe if they have to fight for their lives, they’ll have a greater appreciation and understanding of it all!”

“Come on, Bryan, Scott, Mitch,” General Gypson sighed, rubbing a weary hand over his face. “You know my hands are tied.”

“Are they?” Uncle Scott quietly inquired. “The way we see it is you are still doing their bidding. We,” he pointed to the general, my guys, and finally himself. “Know the people behind the desk have been running the show for way too long, and look where they got us?” he pointed to a pile to the left of

the road. I blinked, and my stomach turned when I realized all the infected dogs that attacked us lay there. As we watched, Chad and Cal lit a match and threw it on them. They went up in flames, and the smell of gasoline and burnt hair instantly made my stomach revolt. “We won’t lead our community down the same path of destruction. Our people are far too important to us.”

With that, they all turned and walked to the road where three military vehicles sat behind ours. Dad, Uncle Scott, and Uncle Mitch immediately walked toward a blue military cargo van. My lips curled in distaste when I recognized Bay standing with another man I couldn’t identify guarding the van. I surmised that the prisoners were in the cargo van.

“Open up,” General Gypson instructed.

“Why?” Bay inquired while the other man began to open it.

Bay slammed his hand on the door before he could. “The prisoners are secure,” he insisted.

“Sergeant!” General Gypson bit out, seemingly shocked by Bay disobeying a direct order.

Before General Gypson could say anything, Axel took a few steps forward. He leaned into the man. His face was full of cold fury. He was generally so stoic and had the world’s greatest poker face. For him to exhibit so much wrath said a lot.

“Open the damn door,” he barked. “And if you ever attempt to assist my daughter’s mother in abducting her again, we won’t just have words.”

Zeke, Corbin, and Wyatt immediately stepped forward as if they were prepared to step in if necessary. I didn’t know if they were attempting to protect Bay or Axel. They might have been ready to jump in and dole out their own punishments. But, on the other hand, they could be preparing to protect Axel from himself. After all, they had to step in for me moments earlier.

“I don’t want the kid,” Bay gave a careless shrug with false bravado.

He tried to behave like he wasn’t afraid of Axel, but I saw his nervous swallow and how he shrunk back in fear initially. He might be a little stockier and have larger muscles, but Axel was taller, and his corded muscles displayed his strength.

“And the way I see it,” Bay smirked as if he believed he was safe with Zeke, Corbin, and Wyatt stepping up. “It’s her kid; she has every right to take her anywhere. You want to claim Gianna is unstable, yet you are fucking your girlfriend with five other dudes. You don’t think that girl sees that? You guys are screwing up the girl more than Gianna ever could. You don’t think she realizes how fucked up that is? Or,” he chuckled. “Do you want your little girl fucking six men when she gets older too?”

Without warning, Corbin delivered a punch to Bay’s jaw. Bay’s eyes rolled back before he fell unceremoniously to the ground. Corbin’s jaw clenched. He opened and closed his hands as if daring the man to get back up or run his mouth more.

Kingston, Zeke, BJ, Wyatt, Simon, and Ari started chuckling with wicked glee while a few bunker people rushed to assist their fallen comrade. Corbin knelt beside Bay while his buddies tried to get to Corbin. They were immediately pushed back by Coach, Dad, Uncle Mitch, Uncle Scott, Chad, Joe, and Cal. In the meantime, the General stood back and allowed it all to play out.

“Number one,” Corbin said with icy coldness. “Our family is none of your damn business. Number two, that little girl is beyond loved by us. Number three, that girl, Mariah, sees how healthy relationships should be. Number four, Mariah finally has a woman who puts her first and repairs the damages her mother has caused to her. Number five, the professionals are well aware of our situation and still believe we are her best advocates. Number six, you should keep your inane opinions to yourself because we don’t give a damn about them.

“I went easy on you this time, but the next time you attempt to help your psycho girlfriend, you should remember it’s not just Alec and Axel you have to deal with but all of us. So do yourself a favor and make sure when you see any of us,” he pointed to the circle we had around us. “Walk the other way.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Bay blustered, clearly embarrassed.

Corbin reached out a hand, and when Bay flinched, he cruelly chuckled, then patted his cheek. "I can tell," he stood back up. "Now open the door," he looked at the other younger man standing by the van who wisely didn't intervene.

He opened the door without hesitation and then leaped up into the van. I saw nine men and one woman bound and sitting on benches against the side wall. On the floor was the man I had attacked. Axel leaped up and knelt next to the guy. He shook him.

"Hey," I heard him call out.

I watched his brows knit, and then he reached down to touch the guy's pulse before laying his head down next to his mouth. Then, finally, he looked up with an enigmatic look.

"He's dead," he stated.

My stomach sank. Yes, the man was evil. Yes, I wanted to kick his ass. Yes, he deserved to die. But, no, I didn't want him dead before we found out how he knew who I was.

"He was alive when we loaded him in," Simon emphatically stated.

"He was yelling at us and throwing a fit," Chad confirmed.

Axel nodded as if to say he believed them. He stared long and hard at the other people in the van. It took me a moment before I realized Axel was under the impression that someone had killed him after he had been loaded up. The question was, what had happened in the last thirty minutes since he was loaded on the transport?

"Me thinks you doth protest too much," Bay smirked as he brushed off his pants.

Easton climbed into the van next. He looked over at the guy and gave Axel a pointed look. I could only assume he saw something to confirm Axel's theory.

"Yet, you're the one who wouldn't allow us entry," Easton coolly stated. "He was injured but not grievously so."

"I didn't even enter the van," Bay stated.

I didn't trust him. He seemed to be apathetic about it.

"What happened?" Axel questioned the others in the van.

No one would look at him or answer. Instead, his gaze swung to the other man tasked to guard the van.

"I didn't talk to or see the prisoners," he held his hands in surrender. "I just got here like two minutes ago. I swear."

I could see from the guy's eyes that he wasn't lying. He looked like some college kid that they forced into the role of a soldier. All his emotions lay bare on his face.

"What are you accusing us of?" General Gypson finally demanded.

He seemed just as shocked by the man's death, but I didn't know him well enough to see if he was lying.

"These people knew we were coming this way," Dad informed him. "We need to find out how. And the only man that was talking is now dead."

"You think I told them?" General Gypson ground out.

"Somebody did," Uncle Mitch insisted.

"They could have been waiting for any travelers," General Gypson countered.

"But they weren't," Axel examined the other prisoners before grabbing a squirrely-looking male.

He was on the skinnier side but clean. He didn't look like he had been roughing it. As a matter of fact, none of them did. They looked as clean and well-fed as we were. These people, wherever their settlement was, were getting by just fine.

"Let go of me," he attempted to kick out at Axel. "I don't know shit."

"What are you doing?" General Gypson demanded.

"Questioning another prisoner," Axel informed him. "We're taking him with us."

"Why?" General Gypson seemed baffled and upset but not angry. "We do have trained interrogators back at the bunker."

“Funny, so do we,” Kingston said with zero humor as he helped Axel get the struggling man down. “This man knew who Avery was and had information about us; only someone within could know.”

“Do you really think I will want to harm you guys and my own people?” General Gypson protested. “That’s preposterous!”

As I looked at the other people in our group, I could see they were also trying to determine if he was lying. It didn’t make any sense for him to want to trap and hurt us. On the other hand, very few people outside of Sanctuary knew the intimate details about my family and me. If he wasn’t the one behind the setup, who was?

## CHAPTER 14



“I think that would be our best option for the night,” Uncle Scott stated as we all looked down at the marina down below.

We had pulled off to a bluff that overlooked a side road. Chad, Cal, my guys, and I had joined Dad, Uncle Scott, and

Uncle Mitch to view the area before we traversed down the long, narrow road. Our vehicles were lined up in a single line as we determined if this location was a good one to stop for the night.

Our earlier skirmish and route change had set us back. We had hoped to be in the town Ari, Larry, and Dwayne had last seen their people in, but we weren't. Our delay was unavoidable. The fight, clean-up, and altercation with the general had been over an hour long. Then once we were far enough away, we stopped again so Dad, Axel, Ari, and Larry could pore over the maps again.

We all recognized that we couldn't take the original route intended. If the general had set us up, we couldn't allow the general to do so again. Unfortunately, the new road had a few detours. One of the bridges had a large chunk removed, making it impassable. It looked like someone had bombed it. The next course we took to bypass the bridge had us going through a hoard of infected; we didn't have the time to handle the situation even if we could have exterminated them at all.

Our decision to detour seemed wise, especially after some guys questioned our deviation from our original plan. That was sketchy because Dad, Axel, and Zeke generally gave our routes out on a need-to-know basis. Just as long as our drivers knew our plans, that's all that mattered. The fact that they learned and memorized the route made us all glad that we had changed course, even if it added time to our plans.

Since we had taken different roads, we had to find a new place to bed down for the night. We had close to two hours before sunset but needed to secure a safe location. Cal came up with the idea of finding a marina once we saw signs of the larger lakes. Apparently, his grandparents had been avid boaters, and he remembered how some marinas could suit our needs. We had bypassed four of them before we saw this one.

It looked like our best option. And from our vantage point, it didn't appear that many infected were wandering below. There was only one entry point and exit, and the rest was surrounded by water. Once the infected were cleared out, we would have to find something to cover the entrance to prevent

any more infected from coming in and anyone else who wanted to cause us any harm.

“We can pull the batteries from the boats, too,” Corbin suggested.

“Back up for the solar panels,” Zeke agreed.

When we met Zeke, we were able to procure a good number of deep-cycle batteries. However, we realized that if we wanted to have solar power available for every cabin, we didn't have enough. Granted, we weren't even at forty percent capacity yet, but it was always best to have it and not need it instead of needing it and not having it. Therefore, until we discovered an alternate power source beyond solar, it was wise to stock up wherever possible.

“Good thinking,” Uncle Mitch nodded in agreement.

“We can also check the restaurant, boats, and siphon gas,” Wyatt recommended. “I'm sure they're picked over, but it won't hurt to look.”

At the end of the marina was a gas station for the boaters. Hopefully, they had enough gas for us to utilize. We traveled with additional gas cans but were learning how quickly vehicles like our bus could go through the resource. Therefore, it was better to find and take advantage of any gas pumps we found along the way and have our gas containers on a need-to-have basis.

“If we have people on watch, maybe we can sleep on the boats as well,” Cal said next. “Sleeping on my grandparent's boat was some of my life's best nights of sleep.”

“Unless you get motion sick,” Chad grimaced. “I'll sleep on Corbin's bus when I'm not on watch.”

His statement caused Kingston, Wyatt, and Corbin to laugh. I was sure there was a story behind their laughter. They were more aware of his hang-ups since they went on many missions together. It wasn't uncommon to be entertained by stories of past assignments.

“Ask the man to jump from an airplane, day or night, and he's all smiles,” Kingston shook his head. “But sleep on a

boat, and he gets motion sickness.”

“I have to give you mere mortals some advantages,” Chad joked with a rueful shrug.

At that, the rest of us laughed. Chad really was one of the most remarkable men I knew. His work ethics were beyond reproach. Plus, how he read people and strived to help them was almost saint-like. It was hard to believe he had any conceived flaws at times.

“Once we clear the area, I would like to have a conversation offline about the schedule before I disseminate it,” Axel stated as he glanced behind me.

I turned slightly and saw some bunker people advancing toward us. The General claimed to have come to us earlier to drop off more people. He had lost four of his people earlier but gave us an additional ten, so now we had fourteen people from the bunker. I didn’t trust most of them. Axel, Corbin, and Wyatt could only vouch for eight of them, and Chen, their sniper, concurred. That left us with six people that could potentially hinder us.

Seeing Seville, his girlfriend, and another man heading our way, I barely contained the sneer on my face. After today’s battle and everything that followed, I had completely forgotten that the man was with us. My guys also sensed me stiffening because they all gave me questioning looks.

“What’s wrong?” Wyatt asked with a frown.

I shook my head. We had enough to deal with without bringing in my personal drama. Maybe I could confide in them once we cleared the marina and bedded down for the night. Until then, I would much rather focus on the task at hand than any perceived slights they might have caused me.

Cal scowled as well. “I should have ensured that douchebag went home with the general.”

I nearly sighed. Cal must not have read the room. Or, more apt, he didn’t see my reluctance in broaching the subject. It was easier to let things go than dwell on them currently. I

didn't want to give these people, Seville specifically, any more of my time. They weren't worth it.

"Avery," Corbin said in a warning tone. "What aren't you telling us?"

"Later," I promised as the douchebag in question pulled abreast of us.

Sasha stood up from where she had been lying and began to growl low in her throat. Bane picked up on Sasha's cue and stood, taking a protective stance before me. As one, we all started looking around for any threats. It took me a moment to realize she was growling at Seville and his friends. She must have picked on my unease. I lovingly rubbed a hand over both of their heads.

Seville and his friends took a cautious step back. He eyed Sasha warily, but as previously exhibited, he opened his stupid mouth. He really was a dense man. I knew more crap was going to spew from his mouth.

"What's going on?" Seville asked, tucking his hands in his pocket.

"We're going to clear out the marina and bed down for the night," Dad said.

His probing gaze looked at the man with suspicion in his eyes before looking at me. Then he looked at Bane and Sasha. He frowned hard enough that the vee between his eyes became pronounced. I felt Papa Bear coming on, and Papa Bear could be a scary man when his cub was threatened.

"But we're hours away from where we need to be," Seville argued.

"And?" Axel gave a callous shrug.

"And I still don't understand why we took a long way around," Seville disputed.

"You don't need to understand," Axel coldly stated. "And you or anyone else with a problem with it can pack up and leave now."

“We’re not here to pander to anyone else’s wishes or desires,” Corbin continued. “You guys seem to forget that this is *our* mission. We don’t have to tell you shit or find out how any of ya’ll feel about the decision we make to get *our* objective accomplished. We’ll disseminate the information as needed, so return to your vehicle.”

“No need to be so touchy,” Seville tried to laugh it off, holding his hands up in surrender.

“I think we have every right to be,” Kingston widely grinned without any mirth reaching his eyes. He stepped forward, leaving mere inches between him and the other man. “Tell me,” He looked down at the man’s top. “Seville, why did my woman look uncomfortable when you walked up?”

“He didn’t do anything,” his girlfriend immediately defended him.

Now that she had on her multi-cam top, I saw it read Hopkins. Once again, she was glaring at me for no reason. I don’t know why I was subjected to her ire. I didn’t hit on her boy toy, he hit on me.

Cal snorted. “Except disrespect Avery and you guys.”

“I was just joking around,” Seville took a step back.

Hmm, I guess he knew who I was but indirectly. If rumors had reached their ears, they weren’t precisely privy to who my guys were. Even if you didn’t exactly know who they were, once you saw them in action, you would realize they weren’t men you really wanted to mess with.

The men looked at me expectantly, but I was unwilling to divulge the earlier incident. I just wanted to get down to the marina and clear it out. Then I hoped to clean up and get something to eat. I didn’t have much of an appetite earlier, so I had only eaten a few hunter sausages. Now that I wasn’t recovering from heat exhaustion, disgusted by humanity, and mulling over the bunker issues, I was starving. This crap could wait.

“He ignored Avery when she asked them to return to work earlier,” Cal said.

Obviously, he had no such compunction. I gave him an exasperated look, and he gave me a smug smile in return. Damn him and his honor. As BJ pointed out earlier, we had inherited new brothers when Sylvia started getting serious with her guys. So I knew he was only standing up for me like he would want my guys to stand up for Sylvia. And they would reciprocate without hesitancy. In fact, I'm sure men like Seville would currently have a black eye or two, depending on who witnessed the incident.

"Then he proceeded," Cal continued, unruffled by my mock glare. "To tell her how he was the leader of their merry band and didn't need to listen to her. Him and his girlfriend," he said with a snort of disbelief. "Figured out who Avery was and proceeded to essentially slut shame her. By the way," he looked at Seville and his girlfriend while the other man wisely retreated. "The woman I love is the same woman, my brother," he grasped Chad's shoulder. "And two of our other brothers love equally. We also have two beautiful children that we raise with her. So in the future, you should really keep your opinions to yourself if you don't know the audience you're speaking to."

"Cal," Dad nudged. "What else did Sergeant Seville have to say?"

"Before his merry band ran the other direction when the infected dogs were let loose," Cal dug in a little deeper. Then, at Axel's jerk of the chin, he continued. "He mentioned that he could—" he grimaced, looking at my dad and uncles.

I should probably be more embarrassed. How everyone else seemed so preoccupied with my sex life was almost comical. By now, I had grown thicker skin. I knew I had to have one to build a future with all six of my men. But, of course, not everyone would support or believe in how I lived my life. In fact, I fully supported the right for everyone to have their own opinions. I would live in an echo chamber if I wanted everyone to share my beliefs and opinions. And let's be honest, that would be so boring. But, on the other hand, I also believed that not everyone should be so vocal about their

judgments, especially if they weren't ready to accept the consequences of voicing them aloud.

"Don't stop on our account. Carry on," Uncle Mitch practically growled out.

"He was joking around," Hopkins maintained as she defended him in a high-pitched whine.

I was suddenly fascinated by how Sasha's coloring blended in her fur. I knew whatever the outcome was of this conversation, it wouldn't be in Seville's favor. The question was, who was going to react first? It was like that coined phrase from that old radio broadcast popular in the thirties and forties. 'Round and around, it goes. Where it stops, nobody knows.'

It could be a toss-up with who would jump in and attempt to defend my honor. I could tell them other people's opinions didn't bother me. However, if they detected even the smallest amount of disrespect, they could "lose" it. Their protective streaks were both endearing and infuriating at times.

"What exactly did he joke around about?" Corbin prompted. Now Kingston and he were looming over Seville threateningly.

"I bet you it was hilarious," Wyatt dryly stated. "I love a good joke. Please tell us. We need a good laugh."

"What, you had plenty of words earlier to our girl when we weren't around," Kingston gave him a grin reminiscent of the Jokers. "Now you have none. You're hiding behind your girl's skirts like the bitch you are."

"Since he can't find his voice, please fill us in, Cal," Easton prodded.

"Seville said if one of you could satisfy her, she wouldn't need to be with you all. Well, not you guys specifically. He essentially accused her of sleeping with every guy back at camp," Cal continued. "He also claimed to be man enough to handle her and expressed the desire to be with her."

"Is that right?" Corbin drawled.

And in a blink of an eye, Kingston grabbed the lapels of the man's uniform top, lifted him, and slammed him against the side of the cargo van we stood by. Seville was of a similar build to Kingston. His feet dangled off the ground with zero strain on Kingston's part. I winced as Hopkins screamed shrilly. She attempted to step in, but Zeke and Chad held her off. His other "friends" didn't seem as eager to step in or interfere.

Seville vainly struggled in Kingston's hold. His face turned an alarming shade of red as he strained to breathe. I was seconds away from intervening when Axel cleared his throat.

Kingston didn't appear to have heard Axel. His eyes almost seemed void of any life. The sheer determination and wrath emanating from him was almost eerie. I would be frightened if I didn't love him so much and knew he would never direct this cold fury on any of his loved ones. Truthfully, I was simultaneously turned on and alarmed.

Did that make me slightly unhinged as well? Was this a valid response to witnessing his primal rage? I was going to say yes. However, I didn't want Seville to die at Kingston's hands.

"King," I gently bade him, reaching out to grasp his shoulders.

Seville's legs kicked madly. How Kingston avoided them, I had no clue. His hands were frantically attempting to find purchase on Kingston's. Then, Kingston leaned forward and began to whisper threats or promises in Seville's ears. I didn't think any of us caught his words.

"Kingston," Easton fervently whispered to his brother, grabbing his other shoulder.

"Please, King, let him go," I added.

Kingston still showed no signs of hearing us. Suddenly, he unceremoniously released him when it appeared Seville's movements became mere twitches. Seville was seconds away from passing out. He fell in an ungracious heap at our feet

while Hopkins continued to scream, cry, and hurl insults our way.

I looked around our circle, expecting to see censorship directed toward Kingston, but found none. If anything, my dad and Uncles appeared to be torn between mirth and pride for Kingston's actions. Corbin and Wyatt closed in around Kingston, showing their silent support for his actions.

"What do you have to say now?" Kingston coldly asked.

"Look, I didn't mean any harm," Seville finally hissed between gasping breaths. "I'm sorry if I took it too far."

He appeared to be seconds away from peeing himself. His eyes were wide with fear.

"You took it way beyond too far," Axel growled out. "The way I see it, you have much more to apologize for. First, you ignored an order. I know this isn't your first rodeo. I'm sure you realize incompetence and negligence out here can kill you and others around you. Second, you ran when you should have held your position. Third, you had the nerve to disrespect our woman.

"Know this, after this mission, you will no longer be invited to any of our missions. Your incompetence, disrespect, and failure to follow protocol make you a liability."

"Like we want to go on any more missions with you. You guys are barbarians," Hopkins sobbed as Zeke and Chad allowed her to move.

She rushed to hug Seville as he attempted to stand up. Seville immediately held out a stiff arm to ward her off, causing her to stumble back. She cried out in distress as Seville ignored her.

"I've served twelve years in the military," Seville protested, not even caring that he was treating his girlfriend like crap. "You need experience like mine."

"No, we really don't," Dad jeered. "And you should be thankful we're allowing you to stick around, and my son-in-law didn't cause you further harm." At Seville's startled gaze,

Dad let out a mirthless laugh. “Yeah, the woman you wanted to slander is my daughter.”

“I think we wasted enough time on this trash,” Uncle Mitch sneered. “Let’s get the marina cleaned up so we can rest for the night.”

A small part of me felt sorry for Seville. However, a more significant part of me felt satisfaction. Maybe he’d think twice before verbally attacking another person without provocation next time.



“Well, shit,” Corbin muttered after Trevor and Zeke lifted the barricade across the marina’s entrance.

“Maybe we should have sent out a scout team first,” Josh agreed as he began to strap on his gear.

I didn’t know why we didn’t consider the warehouse-like buildings next to the entrance. Because the moment our vehicles rumbled up next to it, the infected started coming out of it. It was foolish of me to believe we only had to clear out twenty or so infected. Now we had to clear out nearly triple that if we were lucky. And we were rarely that fortunate.

“Let’s light ‘em up!” Kingston cried out gleefully as he pulled out his flame thrower.

I’d had to hold him and reassure him I wasn’t upset by the earlier incident. He didn’t seem to care about what he did to Seville. He had been more worried about if Seville’s words had “hurt” me. Once he was assured I was fine, he returned to his “normal” self.

I double verified all my weapons were in place, and my magazines were full before I followed Kingston off the bus. I pulled out my sais and prepared to face whatever was awaiting us. We were immediately greeted by five infected.

As Kingston lit them up, Josh, Ari, and I began finishing them. The fire seemed to distract them long enough for us to slip in and neutralize them.

“Someone needs to close that door up there,” I prompted.

Kingston seemed to like that idea because he started to clear a path for us to do just that. As we neared the doors, an infected came stumbling out of the door. With a pang, my stomach sank. She looked to be in her mid-teens. Evidently, her legs had been mauled as she stumbled with a clumsy gait toward us. Her clothing looked a little worse for wear, but even in death, you could tell she had once been gorgeous. She looked like she was freshly turned. Her skin hadn't turned into the ghastly blue-grey they eventually turned into. Her hair still had a healthy shine to it.

As she drew closer, I couldn't help but shudder. It appeared as if her feet were hanging on by a few ligaments. It still baffled me how the infected could still charge us with the injuries inflicted on them. Their determination to spread their infection outweighed any damage their bodies had taken. As I meditated on that thought, I witnessed another infected confirming my musings. The person was a double amputee but must have lost their prosthetics somewhere.

They could not grab onto Corbin and resembled a starved bird eager to peck up all its food. Again, I would have laughed if the situation wasn't so tense and dire. Maybe one day I could find the humor in all the wild, bizarre, and sometimes disturbing infected I encountered.

I was pulled from my musings as the teen infected drew closer. She reached toward us and snarled at us. I shuddered as others tripped over each other in their haste to come after us.

I observed her freshly turned condition once more. I couldn't help but feel some misgivings. Had we been here a little earlier, could we have saved the teen? It had been a while since we found survivors outside the forming groups. Groups and packs had formed and banded together like the infected to survive.

Watching Corbin annihilate her snapped me out of my musings. I braced myself and aimed for the closest infected. We promptly cut down twenty to thirty of them before we finally were able to close the door. By the pounding and growling we heard on the other side of the door, I speculated there were at least twenty more locked inside.

I turned and saw that the rest of our group was halfway down the marina. It was spring when the crap hit the fan, so most of the boats were already in the water. However, there were still some boats up on blocks. They hadn't been launched yet; some were still wrapped for winter storage.

“Should we go down and assist them?” Ari inquired as he began to look around.

The marina was at least a quarter mile long. There was a set of restrooms in front of the boat storage warehouse. And midway down, it appeared as if there was another set of bathrooms for the marina customers. Looking around, it looked like this marina was once very nice. Especially compared to some of the other marinas we had passed.

To my right was the water with boats tied to the docks. There was grass at least three feet tall in front of the dock slips. I imagined it was once well-manicured, as evidenced by the patio sets the boat's owners had placed on their little patch of grass. To our left were parking spaces with numbers coinciding with the boat slips.

Behind the parking spaces was another canal with boats tied to additional docking. A mixture of cliffs and trees were on the opposite side of the docked vessels. I looked up to see where we had been less than an hour ago.

“Nah,” Kingston shook his head. “It doesn't look like there's many infected left. We should pull in the vehicles and find a way to close up the entrance.”

“Good idea,” Josh agreed. “Then we can check out the opposite side of the marina.”

A gorgeous restaurant, gift shop, and convenience store were at the end of the marina overlooking the river. It was two

stories tall and made almost entirely of windows to showcase the fantastic view. An upper deck had a tiki bar and colorfully decorated seating and tables. Signs advertising fuel were on the restaurant's main level and back half.

"After we pick out the boat we're commandeering tonight," Kingston insisted.

"I've been eyeing that yacht over there myself," Corbin smirked, pointing to the left.

"I concur," Kingston let out an enthusiastic whoop before jogging toward the yacht.

It was huge. I couldn't imagine how much it would cost to run that thing. I imagined that the boat owners, or captains, hadn't run it that often. However, Cal informed us that this was a way of life for many boaters he'd encountered. He recalled how many of his grandparent's boat "neighbors" rarely left their slips and hung out with their friends in front of their boats most weekends.

Then a thought occurred to me. What would have happened if people had been on their boats when they had turned? We didn't need any more surprises.

I knew we should focus on the more important tasks at hand and prioritize them. However, I realized Kingston needed the distraction. Outwardly he was behaving like "normal," but I also realized he still needed to return from the dark place his mind had taken him earlier.

"Hold it, King," I called. "Maybe a few of us can go with you. We should do a sweep on each boat before you go choosing one."

He halted, turned, and ran back to me, giving me a loud smacking kiss on my cheek. "You're so smart," he nuzzled my neck.

"I'll go with him," BJ volunteered.

He gave me a pointed look. He had walked up at the tail end of the incident. Zeke and Wyatt had filled him in when they returned to their vehicle. And BJ was learning how each of my men coped with specific situations. His love for them

was no less than if they were blood brothers instead of pseudo-brothers-in-law. His relationship with them was forming and strengthening as mine was.

“Me too,” Josh finished wiping his blade.

“Thanks, guys,” I smiled at them.

“I’ll secure our big boat,” Kingston quickly kissed my lips.

I heard a stifled snort and saw Rosie cross her arms over her chest. She had been surprisingly subdued after our major altercation earlier. The way Masters and Thorn mocked her for climbing a tree when the dogs charged, I imagined it had irritated her enough to stew in silence. I would have attempted to cheer her up if she were a friend. It had been jarring, to say the least. The dogs had been fast. The infection hadn’t drastically slowed them down like their human counterparts.

And I would have defended her actions if she wasn’t such a miserable human. Unlike some of her compadres, she’d managed to remove a couple of the infected canines from her perch. Pettily, I didn’t jump in to defend her. She constantly attacked me. I was spiteful in this situation, but she didn’t deserve my sympathy or protection.

“Aww,” Masters snickered. “Did you want the big boat all by your lonesomes?”

I barely refrained from rolling my eyes, understanding the current pinched look on her features. She constantly had FOMO—fear of missing out. Don’t get me wrong; I sympathized with most people. Losing their life and their creature comforts wasn’t easy. Some of these people had worked hard for their homes, apartments, and other luxuries in the past. Our situation had stripped them of nearly everything and shook their lives in less than twenty-four hours. It had been a difficult adjustment, and in a way, most of us still hadn’t processed or mentally dealt with the situation.

I guess I had more sympathy for those who didn’t seem as lacking in character. Rosie just seemed so bitter and miserable at the oddest times.

“I have friends,” Rosie snarled before whirling on Corbin and me. “I just think it’s funny how you guys always get *everything* you want first. It’s not fair.”

This time Ari snorted, and Masters and Thorn began to laugh with abandon. “Seriously,” Masters wheezed between laughter. “What is your malfunction? That boat isn’t even the largest one here. And there are over two hundred other ones to choose from. You probably wouldn’t even want it if they hadn’t chosen it first. You have issues.”

Rosie turned red. Her nostrils slightly flared when she confronted Masters. “Whatever,” she hissed. “What qualifies your analysis of my character? Maybe your high school diploma you barely received?” she cruelly laughed. “It’s no secret that you barely passed high school. Yet,” she tapped a finger along her lower lip. “I have a bachelor’s degree in psychology. You can only dream of the success I have.”

Her statement didn’t seem to irritate Masters in the least. Instead, he laughed some more. “How’re those fancy degrees working for you now? Putting them to good use?” he mockingly rubbed his chin. “You think I’m embarrassed by barely passing high school? I’m not. That’s why it’s general knowledge. I’ve struggled with dyslexia my entire life. School was never my thing. I’ve always been a tactical learner. I’m the metaphorical fish. My schooling was testing my ability to climb a tree. Newsflash! Fish can’t climb trees. But you know what I can do? Swim.

“Ask my superiors how fast I can dismantle a gun or, better yet, wanna see my ribbon rack? I’ve accomplished a lot in life. I’ve gotten rewards and recognition for many things in my career that you could never achieve with your entitled and bitter attitude. I’m done having a pissing contest with a spoiled brat. We can argue all day about who’s the better person. But it would be a waste of my breath and time.” He smirked. “For a psych major, you’re awfully dense or foolish not to analyze your own behavior.”

I wished I had a mike to drop for Masters. It took all my willpower not to laugh. Witnessing someone else call Rosie out on her bullshit was poetic justice.

“Well then,” Corbin chuckled. “I think break time is now over. First, we need to secure the area.”

“Whatever,” Rosie huffed in annoyance. “I’m going to find *my* boat.”

“Knock yourself out,” Corbin sighed in exasperation.

Kingston, BJ, and Josh had left to secure the boats. Corbin couldn’t really protest her desire to acquire a vessel when Kingston did the same thing. So it was no surprise she would want to evade the task before us. On the other hand, I was glad not to be in close proximity to Rosie any longer. My Rosie meter was full, and I needed a break from her. The idea of being stuck on the bus with her again tomorrow didn’t thrill me in the least.

“She must have been an only child,” Thorn dryly commented, shaking his head.

“Or her parents were shit, and she craves the attention and adulation from everyone else,” Masters snorted. “What do you want us to do, boss man?”

Corbin seemed to contemplate his response as Ari spoke up first.

“I’m going to grab that forklift,” Ari didn’t hide his amusement as he pointed toward the machine. “Then I’m going to grab a few of those dumpsters and put them in front of the opening.”

“Pop Star can drive a forklift?” Corbin taunted.

I’d had to tell the guys how Stephanie assumed Ari was a pop star. They had found it just as amusing as I had. I anticipated that Ari’s call sign would reflect this newfound information. While the others ribbed him, he seemed unaffected by their teasing. He took it much like the guys and our close friends took it. He dished it back or ignored it entirely.

Ari good-naturedly rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t always a pop star,” he quipped before turning towards the forklift.

Since Sylvia had an obsession with him in the past, I was reminded of this tidbit. He had to work while he actively chased gigs. So I knew Ari hadn't gotten his "big" break until his mid-twenties. I couldn't recall what he did, but it was apparent how comfortable he was on the forklift as he started and maneuvered it toward the trash cans.

I watched as his muscles flexed under his black tee. There was something about him that I couldn't help but admire. He was capable, multi-faceted, friendly, and had a sarcastic sense of humor that had me laughing several times today. I assumed the more I got to know him, the more I would recognize his flaws. But, unfortunately, his positive characteristics were growing on me.

"Someone has a crush," Corbin teased me, causing me to jump.

I started forgetting he was standing there. "Whatever," I rolled my eyes. "I'm going to begin moving the vehicles in here."

"Uh huh," Corbin chuckled. "If it makes you feel better, he watches you constantly."

"It doesn't," I called over my shoulder, not bothering to turn around. "I'm happily involved with six other men."

I couldn't hear his response as I walked past Ari. The beeping of the forklift drowned out his words, and I was grateful for that. My life was already crazy. There was no way I could, or should, entertain the idea of Ari in any way.

## CHAPTER 15



“DID you get enough to eat?” Kingston asked as he picked up some of the trash we had.

My guys and I were all sitting at the small gazebo located at the far end of the boats we’d commandeered. Some of our people had stumbled across lawn equipment and had taken care of the tall grass surrounding our chosen area. It could be considered an unnecessary task, yet we found comfort in the superficial appearance of normalcy.

Dad had insisted that we all find boats close to each other. We complied, but chose to retreat to the gazebo for some time to ourselves. We wanted to decompress and get away from everyone else. As the sun descended in the sky, we finally got the time to eat and relax. It was nice to find time for ourselves even amidst the turmoil.

“More than enough,” I smiled, finishing my Southwestern Chicken with black beans and rice.

I hadn’t known what to expect with the MREs initially. I didn’t know how good anything could taste with its extended shelf life. However, I was pleasantly surprised. So far, everything I’d had from the brown packages was rather tasty. And generally, they had so much loaded into them that I couldn’t eat it all.

I put the crackers, cheese spread, and pound cake into my pack before standing up and stretching. We had packed enough MREs for five dinners. Hopefully, we didn’t need to use them all, I wanted to be home before then.

“Do we know the watch schedule yet?” I asked Axel before pulling a clean tank top and shorts from my bag.

We’d set up the showers after clearing and cleaning up all the infected. I needed to take a shower with the portable devices we had packed. I had no problem “roughing” it, but I was taking advantage of the luxury if we had the means and capability to clean up. It was senseless to suffer if we didn’t need to.

The boat we had seized had clean bedding on the bed in the cabin. I relished the idea of climbing into clean sheets with a clean body. I always packed small travel-size toiletries for that reason. Nothing was worse than going to bed feeling filthy.

The bedding wasn’t the only thing we’d discovered. The previous owners had dropped off supplies to prepare the boat for the summer. However, they hadn’t unpacked or prepared the vessel. As a result, they’d left new towels and bedding on top of the bed. And several boxes filled with pantry items had been stacked on the dinette.

Other recovery team members had reported similar findings. So we loaded up items we thought were of use, along with a plethora of batteries. We tried to remove the batteries from the larger boats and the boats on blocks, leaving smaller vessels as is. Other survivors may want to utilize the boats someday and we didn't want to leave them stranded. The team that divested the boats of their batteries were labeled for future survivors.

"I'm going to have a meeting in a little while," Axel confirmed.

Most of our group had chosen boats closest to each other. They just so happened to be the largest boats in the marina. My family and friends did a little boating, but never on this level. I was thoroughly impressed by a few vessel's sheer size and conveniences.

"Do I have time to take a shower?" I inquired.

Axel looked around, and from the looks of it, some of our people were still eating. Some people had immediately taken a shower. Unfortunately, we only brought four units, so the men had to create a schedule to take turns. Luckily, we females didn't have the same issue.

Even with the shower conditions, I suspected everyone would attempt to eat as fast as possible. Most of us were eager to determine if they were on the schedule. That way, we could plan accordingly and establish how quickly we sought our beds. After all, it had been a long day.

"I'm not putting you on the schedule," Axel informed me.

Generally, I probably would argue that I should be. However, I knew we had enough people to cover patrol and guard duty sufficiently. I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I would avoid being on the schedule and seek our bed earlier. The day had taken its toll on me.

"Okay," I nodded, noticing Axel wasn't the only one surprised by my easy acquiescence. "Then I'm going to shower and head to bed."

“I’ll go to the showers with you,” Kingston insisted as he eyed Seville and his friends.

Once again, I was on someone else’s shit list. My antagonist behaved as if it was my fault that they chose to run their mouths and ignored my suggestions earlier. In my opinion, they got themselves into trouble, and I felt no remorse for it. People like them loved to cause dissension, which didn’t contribute to the cohesive unit we strived to develop.

“Okay,” I readily agreed once more.

“Are you feeling okay?” Wyatt teased me before standing up and kissing my forehead.

I laughed and playfully punched his chest. “I’m fine. It’s been a long day.”

“If you say so,” Wyatt playfully nipped at my ear.

“Stop,” I laughed, pushing him away.

“When I get back, we can interrogate our prisoner,” Kingston grinned wickedly.

I should be more disturbed by his blood thirst. I wasn’t. We needed answers. We couldn’t continue working with the General if we couldn’t trust him either. The whole situation seemed suspect.

“I want in on it this time,” Corbin insisted before pulling some jerky out of his pack.

“The more, the merrier,” Kingston grinned, grabbing a change of clothing as well.

He grabbed my hand and began leading me to the bathrooms. Since the power was out, we had set up some lanterns in them. Dad had stated that he wanted the men and women to utilize the correct bathrooms, but somehow, I doubted Kingston would follow that rule. The other four women in recovery had already taken their showers. I was the last one to take a shower.

Sure enough, Kingston followed me in when I pushed open the female bathroom door. He was generally a physically affectionate man. However, when he was feeling randy, he

became extra handsy. I knew where this was headed and wasn't adverse to it.

“What, you're not going to tell me to go to the men's room?” he teased as he removed my shirt.

“Would you have listened?” I arched a brow at him as I grabbed the hem of his shirt.

He merely smirked at me for an answer. His hands went to the fastener on my pants next. I mirrored his movements, just as eager as he was. I knew sex didn't solve everything. However, after my day, it would be the perfect ending.

Before we were completely naked, he pulled me into one of the shower stalls. The portable shower was still hooked up to a propane tank and on. The temperature indicated a favorable temperature, and as much as I wanted to utilize it, I wanted Kingston more. There was something about facing death and realizing how important it was to enjoy such moments. Joining our bodies, souls, and hearts was heady and made me feel so alive.

He divested himself of his weapons before he finished undressing each other. He paused to trail his touch against my shoulders and breasts. I was in nothing but my Wolverine hipster underwear. Since I was matching his movements, I stopped at his boxer briefs. I greedily admired his lean, cut muscles. I still found it amusing how his genetics played such a drastic part in his physical appearance. He was half-black, yet several shades lighter than me and even more so than his twin brother.

He and Easton had very similar builds, yet their eating habits couldn't be any more different. Easton typically ate very clean and healthily. He rarely indulged in sweets and did more cardio than lifting. Kingston, on the other hand, indulged way too often. Sure, he ate healthy, but his diet had more than a healthy dose of sweets. And he preferred lifting weights over cardio.

“What a smart little goddess,” he smiled before placing his lips against mine.

I smiled in return, looping my arms over his shoulders. Kingston's kisses were just as intense as he was. He never took anything by half measures. Like everything else, he threw himself into it with every fiber of his being.

He pulled my bottom lip into his mouth and gently bit down on it, causing me to moan in pleasure. I weaved my fingers through his silken curls and entangled my tongue with his. I tugged slightly on it, reveling in the answering groan I received in return.

With one hand, he tilted my head back to deepen the kiss further. With the other hand, he pulled me closer. Finally, he lifted my leg to loop around his hips. I could feel the bulge in his boxers. I emitted another sound of pleasure. At this angle, my core was lined up perfectly with his arousal.

He ground against me, and he produced a growl of his own. I greedily rubbed myself against him as my sensitive nipples rubbed against his chest. I could feel wetness gathering between my thighs. I was equal parts avaricious to have him in me yet also patient enough to want to prolong this intimacy for as long as possible.

He continued the passionate onslaught on my mouth until I couldn't take it any longer. I reached between us and firmly grasped him in my hands. He let out a long and low hiss, attempting to evade my hands. I refused to let him go and squeezed him a little bit harder.

"I wanted to take my time," he growled as I heard a faint noise outside the door.

It took me a moment to realize that someone else had entered the bathroom. I froze for a moment, but a wicked smile spread across Kingston's lips. I knew he was happy about the new turn of events. The man was an exhibitionist of sorts. He liked the thrill of almost being caught.

"So, he didn't say anything offensive?" I heard a woman skeptically inquire.

One of the bathroom stalls made an audible click as the lock was engaged. Kingston took the opportunity to grasp my

underwear. I realized then that he was completely nude. His proud cock jutted out. He knelt and grinned at me as his mouth hovered over my mound. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. He wasn't going to make this easy on me.

“No,” I recognized the second voice as Hopkins. “We were just standing around talking, and the uppity bitch demanded we return to work. But, like, who the hell did she think she was? I heard the only reason she's out here is that she cried to her daddy. So why should we take orders from her?”

I froze and realized that Hopkins and another woman had entered the restroom. Inwardly I silently steamed over her lies. I heard one of them begin to pee as Kingston placed his mouth over my core. I stifled the moan threatening to leave my throat. He swiped one lip, then the other. I knew he was intent on teasing me from the mischievous gleam in his eyes. And suddenly, my attention was back on him.

“Well, I heard he propositioned her and disrespected the men she's with,” the other woman responded before I heard one of the toilets flush. “Plus,” she continued. “It doesn't matter how she got here. She's badass. Have you seen her fight?”

Hopkins loudly scoffed. “She isn't that great. And did you hear yourself, Wendy? The men? Men! As in plural. What kind of whor—”

Wendy was quick to cut her off. “Don't go there, Cassie,” she assertively stated. “From what I understand, it's not as sordid or disgusting as others make it out to be. Even if it was, who cares? They don't pay my bills, and they aren't hurting me, or you, or anyone else for that matter. And according to Francis, Seb was treating you like shit again. You were defending him, and he walked all over you like he always does.”

I would have fist bumped the air if Kingston didn't choose that moment to latch his mouth onto my clit. I couldn't help the squeak that left my throat as he flicked his tongue over my sensitive nub. Luckily one of the women chose to pour water into the toilet bowl. It must have covered the noise I had just

produced. I weaved my fingers through Kingston's curls and began to ride his tongue. His soft chuckle vibrated across my sex, making delicious vibrations against it.

"I thought you were my friend," Hopkins snapped back.

"Yeah," Wendy sounded like she was washing her hands in the buckets we had set up. "And as your friend, I'll always tell you the truth. We promised to be honest with each other. I'm not trying to be harsh. I'm attempting to look out for you. And Seb is a dog. He brought his wife and kids to the bunker, then started hooking up with you."

My attention was diverted from Kingston's ministrations once again. What a disgusting waste of humanity. I knew I didn't like Seville even before he opened his mouth.

"*Ex-wife*," Hopkins said in a sulky tone. "They were in the middle of a divorce when he brought her to the bunker."

Wendy made a loud noise of disgust. "This isn't you! You've never been a doormat. That woman is the mother of his children and a sweetheart. Would you honestly respect him if he had left her behind?"

"And as I said before, you can't believe everything that comes from that man's mouth. Maybe he was thinking about divorcing her, but he never filed papers. Plus, some of the guys told me the reason Seb never went through with it was because he wanted to security of fucking around behind her back and telling whoever he was hooking up with that he was married. Additionally, he didn't want to pay child support.

"That woman gave up her career to stay at home with his child. Then when she wanted to return to work, he knocked her up again. He didn't even wait until the middle child was two months old before he got her pregnant again. He enjoys the control he has over her life.

"Now he's free to do whatever the hell he wants. He can't even respect her not to do it in front of her face. So what is his wife going to do? Leave him? Make him pay child support? She has nowhere to go and he knows that. He gets his cake and eats it too. He's not a good man, and I don't know why

you're so blinded by him. Especially since you say the sex isn't that great!"

Kingston must have noticed I was too interested in the conversation outside because he nipped at my clit. This time the sound of Hopkins washing her hands covered up the sound of my gasp.

When I looked at him in shock and outrage, he gave me a smug smile before attacking my sex with more gusto. This time I shut out the rest of their conversation. He alternated between sucking and licking me. Finally, when he realized I was getting close to my orgasm, he slipped two fingers into me. I was so wet I barely felt the delicious stretch. He pumped his fingers in and out of me, and I let out a silent sound of bliss as he crooked his fingers in me.

The women continued to talk, but I heard nothing as I felt my orgasm begin to crest. My legs began to shake as it came closer. Kingston seemed to read my body as well because he attacked my clit with fast, hard motions. Finally, my orgasm ripped through me, and I nearly forgot to attempt to stifle the scream that rose to my lips.

"What was that?" I vaguely heard Wendy inquire as Kingston rubbed his chin and mouth against my thigh.

"Yum," he stood and mouthed to me, a smug and satisfied smile across his still-wet lips.

"Is anyone in here?" Wendy inquired at the same time Kingston spun me around.

My legs were made of jelly, and I nearly stumbled on the bench. Kingston was quick to grab me. He righted me before holding my hands in one of his and pushing his hips into me. Then, with the hand that didn't have mine pinned above my head, he rubbed it down my spine.

"Bend over," he whispered into my ear.

I complied through the orgasmic haze clouding my mind. I bent over and braced my hands on the changing bench before me. Kingston wasted no time in entering me in one single

motion. I silently gasped as my body hastily adjusted to his girth.

“You’re just paranoid,” I heard Hopkins mock. “After that biter came out from under that boat, you’ve been jumpy.”

“Do you blame me?” Wendy hissed. “If Seville had been doing his damn job, then I wouldn’t have had to double guess if he had swept the area properly.”

“Seb did sweep it,” Hopkins whined.

“Stop!” Wendy barked out in annoyance. “See, you’re still making excuses for him. He and that Rosie chick should have done their damn jobs. I could have gotten bitten. I’m a single mom, and Hazel could have become an orphan because of them.

“He’s lazy. That chick Rosie is careless. And mark my words. He will be hooking up with her soon enough.”

Once again, my cognitive thoughts were pushed away as Kingston slammed into me. He rolled his hips in a way that made me feel so full. The smooth and sexy way he danced translated into how he made love with me. One hand gripped my hips firmly, but I was distracted by how his other found its way down to my clit. His fingers rubbed into me as he increased his pace.

I pushed my hips back into him, eager to chase his fingers. My men knew my body, and their determination to wring every ounce of pleasure from me was mind-blowing. I knew I was beyond fortunate not to find only one thorough lover but six. Some days I felt like I was living someone else’s dream. Because even in my wildest dreams, I would have never believed it would be possible to find such joy and contentment in my life.

“I need you to come, goddess,” he murmured in my ear.

“Almost,” I breathed out. “There.”

“There’s someone else in here!” Wendy exclaimed as the edges of my consciousness began to blur. “Come out!”

“In,” Kingston called out. “A. Minute.” I stiffened, but he merely chuckled.

With each word, he thrust his hip forward. His hips slammed into my rear, punctuated by the emphasis of each word. I couldn’t even find it in me to be upset or horrified by his brazenness.

Hopkins let out a scream of mortification. “Were you watching us? There isn’t supposed to be any men in here!”

Kingston pushed down on my clit, and I swallowed another scream as my body found another orgasm. It hit me harder than the first one, and my legs began to shake with the effort it took to hold me up. Kingston let out a long and lusty moan making it entirely too clear what he was—or should I say we—were doing. He lost his natural rhythm as he chased his release. I lost my balance, and Kingston immediately wrapped his arms around my waist. I felt him empty into me as he trailed kisses along my neck. An unexpected moan left my lips as he hit an incredibly erogenous spot.

“Nope, was kind of busy here,” Kingston called out smugly.

I should have been embarrassed to have gotten caught, but I wasn’t. I was in such a contented, blissful sexual haze that I couldn’t find the ability to care or even pretend to.

Wendy giggled while Hopkins made a loud noise of revulsion. “You’re disgusting, and I don’t have to take a wild guess to wonder who you all are!”

I tried to manage my breathing but couldn’t help the laugh that left my lips. “Don’t be jealous, hon,” I scoffed. “From the sounds of it, you’re chasing a married man who wouldn’t know how to please you with an instruction manual.”

Wendy laughed, and then I heard her attempt to stifle it. “What, it’s the truth,” I heard her mutter.

“It’s not,” Hopkins angrily hissed. “Seb can be so sweet and caring. The way he behaves in public isn’t who he is behind closed doors.”

“Take it from a man, sweetie,” Kingston snorted before turning on our shower. “If he’s willing to disregard you in public and flirt with other women in front of his wife and you, he’s not a catch. He’s just using you.”

“What do you know?” Hopkins said in outrage. “You and your disgusting friends share the same woman.”

I knew confronting and calling her out on her lackluster love life was petty. However, she had attacked me first. I had every right to remind them to stay vigilant earlier. The rest of the morning had just proven my suggestion correctly. We could have been better prepared to handle the dogs and the people ambushing us if they had been alert. They didn’t have to attack me personally even if they believed they shouldn’t listen to or take my recommendations. They had taken it there, and hours later, she was still so obsessed with me that she was bashing me to her friend.

“Don’t be jealous,” I laughed. “As your wise friend said, my life doesn’t affect yours. I’m not asking for your attention, nor do I care what you and other small-minded people think about my life. It’s a good one, just in case you were wondering. My men know how to care for me and treat me like a queen. So respect yourself and know your worth, girl.”

Kingston rinsed my body down before turning the shower back off. The cold air caressed my skin, and I shivered slightly. We couldn’t keep it running, but something was better than nothing. I was just thankful I was able to rinse off.

“I’m not giving you any attention,” she scoffed again.

I laughed and shook my head even though she couldn’t see me. I never understood how women could lower their worth. I was thankful my parents and aunts had instilled certain principles from an early age. Some of them had been like a mantra. And one of the most essential principles they taught me was people will treat us the way we allow them to. They taught all of us to stand up for ourselves and never allow anyone else to lower our value.

Granted, like most lessons, I had to learn the hard way. I distinctly remember how one of my older “best” friends in the

seventh grade had ghosted me when I wouldn't give her Corbin's number. She claimed I was "hoarding" him to myself. When, in truth, my parents had told us numerous times never to give out another person's number without permission. Corbin hadn't wanted me to give her his phone number. So I hadn't.

When she popped back into my life after my mother's diagnosis, I thought she had been there for me. I thought she wanted to support Emery and me. She hadn't been. She was made aware of Corbin's constant presence in my home. It wasn't until I overheard her telling one of our other friends that she had texted herself from his unattended phone I began to suspect her motives. The final nail in our relationship was when she attempted to invite herself to my house for a sleepover. When I informed her that my extended family was in town and we couldn't accommodate extra people, she attempted to give me an ultimatum. Invite her and some other friends, or she wouldn't be my friend.

At first, I was worried I would lose my popular friends again. I was afraid I would get frozen out again. It took me witnessing how Emery caved into their demands to realize they were using us for access to our older cousin. I was able to see much clearer from the outside looking in.

Four girls showed up at our house on a Friday night. My mom didn't want anyone but our family there. Aunt Pam kindly told them the situation and requested that we contact their parents to pick them up. They attempted to beg Emery and me to manipulate our parents, grandparents, and aunts. I refused to. And sadly, that was another grievance Emery had held against me. I hadn't rallied by her side, and she had been ostracized for a while.

I realized then that I had allowed them to treat me a certain way for way too long. I couldn't waste my time and energy on people that weren't genuine. I couldn't continue making excuses for bad behavior and horrible friendship qualifications. No relationship should be transactional. And I no longer allowed others to rate my value.

“Come on, Cassie,” Wendy’s voice returned me from my musings. “Let the love birds get washed up,” She continued. “Was it a good game?” she wickedly giggled.

It took me a moment to realize she had asked how our little romp was. Kingston went to open his mouth, and I quickly attempted to cover his mouth. Instead, he chuckled, his gorgeous eyes dancing with inner joy. Then, he pulled away from me as he rubbed my body with my body wash.

“Perfect game, but it is every time,” Kingston chortled.

I playfully smacked him before I turned the hose on him. “TMI,” I jokingly scolded him.

“What? It was!” Kingston smiled at me. “You’re the best lay I ever had. That’s why we’re in it for life.”

“Good to hear,” Wendy laughed.

“Gross!” Hopkins loudly protested as her friend attempted to drag her out. “Why—”

Her voice trailed off, and I could not hear the rest of her rant as the doors closed behind her. Then, with the loud snick of the door catching, I realized what had just happened. Kingston intentionally got us noticed. I went to scold him but was unable to because his lips were on mine once more.



I felt as relaxed, satisfied, and most importantly, clean as Kingston and I returned to our boat. His arm draped over my shoulders, and I leaned into his body. I could almost believe we were on vacation if I closed my eyes and pretended momentarily. We were taking the boat out for the weekend and planning to make every second count before returning home to our kids.

I could imagine the marina being well-lit instead of the fire pits that illuminated the road our boats were docked off of. I could pretend I saw typical lighting, not little lanterns, inside

the boat cabins. I could imagine the post above us was merely out for a little while. However, I couldn't deny that without the post lights on, the beauty of nature was more apparent. The exquisiteness and tranquility of the nearly full moon and stars above us were more than evident without the light pollution of our artificial lighting. It was such a lovely night, and now with the sun gone, the weather was gorgeous, albeit a bit chilly.

“We need to have a date night or day soon,” I said as I slipped my hand beneath his T-shirt.

I lovingly raked my nails across his back, feeling him shiver in pleasure. He'd begged me on numerous occasions to give him “tickles.” He loved feeling the gentle scrape of my nails on his exposed flesh. Sometimes, it had been enough to send him into a deep slumber. He admitted it was the only way he could relax enough to take naps as a child.

I wasn't fully aware of Easton and Kingston's past yet, and I wasn't pushing them either. I realized they would tell me when they were ready. I knew it was painful, and I didn't need them to open up old wounds to assuage my curiosity. I knew it didn't affect our relationship, and I knew what they thought was important for me to know.

Kingston emitted a sound similar to a purr as he untucked his T-shirt more. Unlike me, he had changed back into his uniform. I knew Kingston would interrogate our prisoner and needed a bit of faux-normalcy. He might enjoy extracting information on depraved individuals, but I also knew he wasn't as unaffected as he pretended to be. There would always be a small part of him that detested the lengths he had to go to to protect the people he loved and cared for. I admired him for that. I might desire the blood of my enemies. However, I knew I wasn't strong enough to be the one spilling it, at least not in that capacity.

I was still feeling the high of kicking that man's ass earlier. Especially once I realized he was a threat to my children. Even if he was all talk, some things should remain off-limits. At least, that was the case with morally decent and well-intentioned people.

Once again, I wondered how he had died. Then I dashed those thoughts away. I had to focus on the right now. The earlier events would only make me go crazy, especially since there wasn't anything we could do about it right now.

"Sounds good to me. I'll set something up for us the next day off we have together," Kingston dreamily sighed.

"Or I can," I teased him, continuing my ministrations.

The breeze lifted my hair, causing it to fall over my face. I realized tossing my head didn't dispel the strands. I hadn't pulled it back yet because it was still damp. I wanted to air dry it thoroughly before heading to bed. I took my free hand to push it back, turning my head. Before I turned my gaze back forward, I thought I saw movement out of the corner of my eyes. At first, I was going to ignore it, but something felt off to me. I knew I needed to listen to my instincts, so I stopped.

Kingston took a few steps forward without me. My hand fell from his back. It was then that he realized I wasn't beside him any longer. He took exaggerated steps back to draw even with me.

"What's up?" Kingston inquired with a slight frown.

"I thought I saw something over there," I pointed towards our vehicles.

We had left them stationed by the entrance of the marina. It was approximately fifty yards away. We staged dumpsters, vehicles, and skids as barriers to prevent intruders from entering. Our people still had to guard it, but we felt confident they would be safe.

"Maybe Ax already has people on the lookout," Kingston suggested as he examined the area.

"Maybe," I hesitantly agreed as I witnessed more movement.

I saw three or four shapes moving—shapes that resembled people. How the moon danced off the water, and cast shadows on the wall made it difficult to decipher what we saw. It might be people, but then again, it could be the tall grass, bushes, and other natural vegetation reflecting off the water.

It was easy to let our minds play tricks on us out here. It wasn't uncommon to hear and see things that weren't there. We were on high alert, so it was easy to overthink and become suspicious of everything. Nevertheless, my gut was telling me to investigate. Every time I ignored my instincts, disaster or mistakes ensued.

The shapes seemed off. They didn't move like guards patrolling. The shapes seemed to pause and move at irregular intervals as if they were creeping, observing, and moving once more.

"Let's go check it out," Kingston bade me.

He placed our bag of toiletries, wet towels, and clothing down on a nearby abandoned patio table. I couldn't resist quickly rearranging our other clothing so they hung over the sides instead of being bunched up. We had already washed our clothing in the sinks and needed to hang them up when we returned to the boat. I didn't want them to take longer to dry out. I realized a few minutes wouldn't make that much of a difference, but I couldn't walk away with them in a bundled state.

Kingston laughed in exasperation before setting off towards the entrance. I didn't hesitate to follow. I had only brought my sais, so the weapons would have to do. It's all I'd needed when this crap started going down. Plus, I knew if required, at minimum, Kingston had three blades, his Kamas, and probably one or two other weapons I wasn't aware of.

Without any words, we stayed in the shadows. We intentionally walked on light feet to not give away our approach. However, the closer we got, the more I doubted we saw anything. There were no sounds or movement to be seen.

Kingston and I simultaneously appeared to believe it had been a figment of our imagination as we both paused near the vehicles. We saw that the doors were closed on all the vehicles. Plus, there were no sounds to be heard. At least not down here. With a gentle breeze, sounds carried over the water in the still of the night. The echoes of our people laughing and talking were slightly carried toward us.

I wished I had called Sasha or Bane to me. Bane was getting better at flushing out human threats and the infected. Athena's strengths would always lean towards the infected. We doubted she would ever see another human being as a threat. She was way too friendly with everyone. Give her scraps or treats; you will be her new best friend. We had left the dogs on the boats so they could get some much-needed rest.

I continued to circle the vehicles and peered under them, just in case. I saw Kingston mirroring my movements. I took a few steps, then paused to see if I could hear anything besides the crunching of my flip-flops on the rocks.

"Maybe we should still check the vehicles," I suggested heading towards our cargo van first.

Kingston seemed to be of the same mind because he fell into step beside me. As we approached the van, I thought I heard scuffling. It was so faint I had to stop and listen, wondering if I had conjured the noise. Again, it was easy to fabricate sounds and sights that weren't there in this environment.

Kingston and I exchanged looks. He gave me a questioning look, and I nodded. It wouldn't hurt to look. We didn't have much in the van save batteries and cases of toilet paper, paper towels, and cleaning supplies we had procured. Regardless, we didn't know the intentions of anyone dropping in on us. Were they a danger to us? Would they stop after they raided our vehicles? And in my opinion, it was rather bold for anyone to steal from us right under our noses.

Kingston took a small flashlight from his cargo pocket and pulled out his gun. For such a small flashlight, it put off a lot of light. He motioned for me to open the door, and I nodded in understanding. I gingerly climbed on the bumper, ensuring I didn't make any noise, and grabbed the handle. He held up three fingers, and I lifted the door open when he got down to his fist.

I heard a muffled scream before I witnessed a small figure disappear behind the cases of toilet paper. For a second, I

believed my mind was playing tricks on me because, if I wasn't mistaken, it appeared to be a child behind the boxes. But, this time, the sound of them scuffling around was unmistakable. At least two people were hiding in the van.

“Come on out with your hands up,” Kingston commanded.

His instruction was met with silence. I climbed up into the cargo compartment. I pulled out my sais and held them at a ready position. I didn't want to hold them out but wanted to be prepared. Kingston tapped my foot and handed me his flashlight. I smiled and nodded, taking it from him.

“We won't hurt you,” I reassured them. “We just want to know what you're looking for and why you're here.”

I cautiously walked toward the boxes, and the top box flew at me when I was about ten feet away from them. Luckily, I was on high alert, and my reflexes were quick. I sidestepped it and batted it down, keeping my eyes on the dangerous area. The moment my flashlight panned over their hiding place, my eyes met the gazes of three children. There were two boys and a girl.

The oldest boy couldn't be older than fourteen, and the youngest boy appeared to be around seven or eight. And the girl seemed to be approximately ten or eleven. I immediately took stock of their features and attempted to hypothesize about their situation.

Their faces were reasonably clean. However, it appeared it had been some time since they had washed their hair or properly cleaned their clothing. Their clothing was over-sized and heavily soiled with dirt and other questionable stains. And if my assumptions were correct, based on the appearance of their clothing, they had all lost weight since the beginning.

Each of them had a gauntness about their features. Their eyes were a little too big, and their cheeks sallow. And, at first glance, I would have assumed the older boy was wearing over-sized clothing, but I had a strong suspicion that it was his clothing. He probably lost enough weight that his pants only stayed up due to his belt. And his T-shirt was two or three sizes too big.

“They’re kids,” I called over my shoulder as I attempted to look as non-threatening as possible.

I slid my sais back into my sheath. I didn’t want or need to escalate the situation, and the kids’ presence without an adult raised many concerns and questions. However, what alarmed me the most was the absence of an adult and where they could possibly be coming from.

I doubted very highly that any good parent would allow their children to run around at night and alone. And even if they did, the closest set of houses was at least a mile down the road. Also, the only other buildings on this road were boat storage places and marine engine repair shops.

I knew kids could be violent. However, I didn’t think that was the circumstance. All three of them faced me bravely, but I could see the fear in their eyes. Each child had a weapon; a kitchen knife, a hatchet, and a meat pounder. They appeared as if they had been used at one time or another from the dried blood on them. The weapons were in poor condition as if they hadn’t been cleaned after each use. Not that the responsibility or knowledge, should befall any child’s shoulders!

I should probably have been less worried about the ill-kept weapons. I should have been more alarmed by the fact that the children held them up at me threateningly. Instead, I saw their reluctance to use them. I saw that they were just children forced to grow up entirely too fast and forced to do heinous acts in the name of survival.

“My name is Avery. And that guy over there is Kingston. We won’t hurt you,” I said soothingly as the oldest boy stepped protectively before the other two. “Where did you come from? Where are your parents?” All three of them flinched, but didn’t respond.

My heart sank as I realized they must be alone. None of them looked related in the least. The oldest boy had a light complexion, sandy blond hair, and blue eyes behind black-rimmed glasses. The girl was a light-skinned female. She could easily be mixed White and Black or of Latin origins. Her complexion was lighter than mine, but had a brown hue to

it. Her hair was a tangled mess, desperate for a wash and brush. And the middle boy appeared Hispanic with his darker complexion, thick dark brown hair, and eyes. Their vastly different images had me assuming their non-relations. Though I knew appearances could be deceiving.

“What were you looking for? Food? We have some,” I continued as they maintained their silence.

My response was more blank stares, although I saw how the youngest boy pleadingly looked over at the oldest for a split second. Then, finally, the older boy gave him an imperceptible shake of his head but continued to eye me suspiciously.

“Let my friends go,” I heard another boy yell. His voice broke as if he was on the verge of adolescence.

I quickly looked in the direction of the voice as I heard Kingston let out a surprised yelp. I turned in time to see a boy of around eleven or twelve swing a baseball bat—complete with sharp objects embedded in the head of it—towards Kingston. Luckily, Kingston also had quick reflexes because he deftly kicked the bat out of the boy’s grip. It flipped into the air and skidded to a halt in the gravel parking lot approximately fifteen feet away. The boy seemed heartbroken initially, but it didn’t deter him for long. He seemed to decide it wasn’t wise to run for it and produced a pocketknife from goodness knows where and lunged at Kingston next.

“Ro! No!” the youngest boy beside me cried out when I heard another feminine whimper outside the van.

I noticed another little girl of around five or six outside as well. Beside her was a teen girl of approximately fifteen or so. She held the girl back from attempting to get in the middle of Kingston and Ro.

“Ro, we’re not going to hurt you guys,” Kingston evaded the knife.

I noticed Ro’s appearance more as I watched him attempt to hit Kingston. He was athletically built; if I had to guess, I imagined he once participated in sports. He wore jeans clearly

covered in infected blood. His once-white shirt was stained and several sizes too big for him. And I had to wonder if it was even his, to begin with. I imagined he had found it and donned it. His dark hair wildly stuck out from under a dirty baseball cap.

“Liar!” Ro angrily exclaimed, undeterred in his attack.

I had to give it to the kid; he was tenacious, even if he was slightly foolish. He was determined to protect his friends from a perceived threat. Kingston seemed to understand this as well. Unexpectedly, instead of immediately disarming Ro, Kingston merely dodged another strike.

“Put the knife down, little man. I don’t want to harm you,” Kingston calmly stated, narrowly missing the blade.

Ro was quick. He also seemed to be relatively comfortable handling the weapon. I wished Kingston would disarm the kid with whatever means necessary—minus excessive force. If the boy was slightly hurt, I believed it was justifiable.

“Roman, stop,” the littlest girl whimpered.

The beams of a few flashlights caught my attention. I realized that five figures were jogging our way. It surprised me that we hadn’t been interrupted prior to this. I knew Axel would have already had a schedule and meeting by now. He would have filled Kingston in later if necessary.

The children behind me seemed to realize this new development because it spooked them. They immediately attempted to bypass me as the oldest teen girl grabbed the little girl by the hand.

“Run!” the oldest girl yelled, pulling the little girl behind her.

I acted on my instincts and grabbed the littlest boy in the compartment. “There’s no need to run,” I hastily reassured them. “We won’t hurt you, and we can help if you allow us to.”

The oldest boy was on the verge of jumping out of the van as the girl joined the other two girls. He seemed to vacillate for a moment looking between the running females, Roman, and

the boy I held. Surprisingly enough, Roman continued to fight Kingston, and the boy in my arms remained still. He wasn't even attempting to get away from me. On the contrary, he almost seemed relieved to accept help as he went limp in my arms.

"Carlos, run!" Roman insisted, barely looking over.

Carlos shook his head, and that seemed to make the decision for the other boy. He jumped down and paused beside Roman for a second. Roman shooed him away, and I was mildly impressed that the older boy listened. But, on the other hand, I was also slightly disappointed that the older boy had heeded his command. Since he was older, shouldn't he have stayed behind and ensured the younger boys were cared for?

"Where ya running to?" Kingston teased the boy. "I can smell you from here, kid. You reek, and I heard your stomach growl. The good news is we have food and a shower you can clean up in."

Roman uttered a loud grunt of anger, attacking Kingston with renewed vengeance. I had to admire the kid slightly. He didn't seem tired yet, even though I was sure Kingston had heard his stomach rumble. I suspected that they were out scavenging for food. What else would a group of kids look for at nine o'clock at night? It was general knowledge that the infected were much more active at night. Desperation or fear would be the only motives for leaving a potentially safe space at night.

By then, Corbin, Ari, Simon, Wyatt, and Easton had reached us. They looked beyond the van, so I assumed they saw the kids running away from us. They stuttered to a stop as if they were attempting to assess the situation.

"What's going on?" Corbin inquired as he approached us.

"Get the other kids," Kingston suggested as he parried another blow. "They seem really afraid of us."

Corbin didn't hesitate to question him and immediately ran after the kids. Wyatt, Ari, and Simon followed shortly after.

"Um, King," Easton hesitated.

He seemed torn between helping Kingston out and assisting the others.

“I’m good,” Kingston chuckled. “But those kids aren’t. Right, Stinky?”

Roman growled once more and attacked him more ferociously.

“Well, Carlos, can you tell me your story?” I gently nudged the younger boy. “Where are your parents? Where are your grown-ups? What are you doing out here?”

I noticed him flinch again, and a deep sadness entered his eyes before he looked up at me suspiciously. It was apparent that his brain and his heart were warring with each other. I could see that he longed to confide in me, yet something or someone had broken his trust. It made my heart hurt for him.

“Don’t tell her nothing Carlos,” Roman said between clenched teeth.

“You’re not going to hurt us?” Carlos inquired with a slight accent.

He looked between Roman and me. He was still warring with himself. I silently prayed that he chose to trust us. It would make things much easier for us. He seemed to brace himself when he came to a decision.

“No, I promise,” I maintained eye contact with him so he could see the truth in my eyes.

“You can feed us?” he asked next.

I nodded once more. “We have food back at the boat. We have cheese, bread, beef jerky, hunter sausages, and—” I gave him a conspiratorial wink. “I’m pretty sure Kingston over there has sweets hiding somewhere.”

Besides the MREs, Aunt Carol had given us containers of homemade dinner rolls, some aged cheddar cheese, and dehydrated meats. She didn’t want us living on MREs alone. And Kingston always had some dessert smuggled away. I don’t know where he was stashing them, but it seemed like a bottomless pit of resources to quench his need for sweets.

If Carlos was a cartoon character, I could see the bubble over his head filled with food. His expression of yearning fell just short of him drooling. It made me sad to recognize his look of longing. No child should ever experience hunger.

“Come on, little man,” I coaxed. “Maybe we can clean these hands.” I gazed down at the grimy hand in my own. “And get you a little to eat. Then you can clean up, and I can get you more food.”

The look of suspicion entered his eyes again. And I hastily explained my reasoning.

“Sometimes, when our bodies are hungry, we eat a lot and really fast,” I clarified. “If we do, our bodies will reject the food, and we can get sick. We have plenty of food, and we’ll ensure you’re never hungry again, but we want to ensure your body can handle it first.”

“She’s lying, Carlos,” Roman breathlessly interjected, finally showing signs of fatigue.

It would seem Kingston’s objective to wear him down was working. As we watched, I could hear him murmuring tips to the boy. If it were anyone but Kingston, I would think they were slightly insane. Only Kingston would suggest better ways of attacking him while being attacked.

“I’m hungry, Roman,” Carlos nearly whined. “We haven’t eaten in three days, and they seem really nice.”

“The last group seemed *really* nice, too, until they started making us get their stuff and punish us if we didn’t return with anything,” Ro scoffed.

I felt anger burn in my gut. How depraved could some of these men and women get? The innocents were meant to be protected and not exploited. Roman’s statement made me want to hunt these people down and exact the justice they deserved.

Carlos hesitated and looked up at me with wide eyes. I hunched down slightly to meet his gaze. I put the flashlight on my face, illuminating it. I wanted him to look into my eyes. I wanted him to see the truth in my eyes.

“We’re not like that,” I hastily reassured him. “I have four kids at home where they’re safe. Where they belong, we would *never* make you do what grownups should.

“In fact, we have a lot of children where we come from. We make them do some schooling in the mornings, and they have a few chores like collecting eggs and cleaning the dining room tables after meals. We are trying to teach them how to cook, can food, feed the animals, and other things, but they seem to have fun learning all that neat stuff. Other than that, they go swimming, horseback riding, play at the playground, and do a lot of other fun stuff.”

Carlos looked at me and Roman, seemingly still struggling to decide. It was clear he held some loyalty to his friend, but his hunger and fear were making him second-guess himself. Finally, his empty stomach seemed to win out because he gave me a decisive nod.

I got down first and held my arms up to him. He gave me a shake of his head and jumped down unassisted. He appeared to be at that stage where he was determining his level of dependency on adults. Around his age, Mikey didn’t greet me with hugs or tell me he loved me in front of others. He didn’t want to appear “weak” and wanted to act like his much older counterparts.

“Sorry, Ro, but I’m hungry and tired,” Carlos dejectedly muttered. “I’m tired of running from the bad guys and the zombies. I want to sleep all night long without waking up at every little noise. And I’m so so hungry!”

“They can be bad guys,” Ro hissed out, taking his eyes from Kingston.

Kingston took the opportunity of his distraction to disarm him. And before Roman could attack him further, he swooped in and gathered him in a bear hug. Kingston wasn’t holding him tight enough that Roman couldn’t breathe. However, he kept him secure enough that Ro couldn’t hurt him or himself.

“Relax, Jackie Chan,” Kingston said firmly but gently. “You’re fighting the wrong people. I promise you and your friends won’t be harmed by us. So you can let go now.”

Roman got another burst of energy because he was yelling at him and struggling to free himself. He looked nearly feral. Kingston continued to whisper reassurances to him.

My heart hurt for the boy. He had built a tough shell around himself to protect himself from the uglies of our new world. Unlike Carlos, he would never go down without a fight. Not that I was criticizing Carlos's self-preservation coping skills. Everyone had to find ways to deal with their trauma and experiences in their own way.

Corbin, Ari, Simon, and Easton returned with the other four children. Corbin led the way with the youngest girl safely nestled in his arms. Unlike Roman, the others seemed to have been easily persuaded that we meant them no harm.

“What’s going on here?” Dad inquired.

Startled, I saw Dad, Axel, Trevor, and Jessica walking toward us. Dad looked confused by the appearance of the children. I tried to think of a tactful answer without embarrassing them.

“These kids are hungry. We need to get them some food,” Corbin spoke up first.

Corbin gave them a pointed look, and understanding seemed to dawn on their faces. Dad grimly nodded. Trevor and Jessica shared looks of horror. And Axel seemed to be his usual impassive self. However, I caught the slight frown on his face, mixed with compassion, before he carefully masked his emotions again.

I wanted more answers. I wanted to hear their stories, too. Yet, I understood they might need a little more time before they felt comfortable telling us.

“Maybe some showers, too,” Kingston added.

He pretended to sniff Roman and pulled a face. Roman renewed his struggle and began cursing Kingston out. Kingston found great humor in it and started laughing. Roman was a prideful child. Kingston tried to break down his walls, but I didn’t think that was how.

“King,” I admonished him.

“What?” he gave me a guileless smile and shrugged before returning to our boat with Roman.

“We don’t have clean clothes,” the oldest girl said with slight mortification. “Our bags were taken from us.”

She quickly clamped her mouth shut after that. She may have come along without a fight, but she wasn’t trusting us entirely yet. Anger stirred in my chest once more when I read between the lines. They had backpacks before they found the other group. The other group had confiscated the bags from them, and they must have never gotten them back.

“No problem,” I hastily reassured her. “There’s plenty of boats around here,” I waved my hands towards them. “Some people left clothes on them. So I’m sure we can find something to fit you.”

“I have toiletries you can borrow,” Jessica added. “And if you don’t like what I have, I know I saw some in the boats too.”

“Anything will work,” the girl said with relief.

I knew I should never judge a book by its cover or underestimate anyone on appearances alone. However, my first impression was that that wouldn’t have been a statement the girl would have made in the past. Her clothing was grimy, but I would bet they were hers. However, they were clearly designer. I had done enough modeling to recognize them.

I would put money on the fact that she had been popular before the SHTF and her parents were wealthy. She was a pretty girl, and even in this crappy situation, she carried herself with the confidence of someone that had been spoiled and told how great she was her whole life. But, again, I wasn’t judging. I wholeheartedly believed that she had done a lot of growing up in a short amount of time. She seemed protective by the way she kept one eye on the younger children surrounding her and Kingston’s retreating form.

She was just another facet of the confusing puzzle before us. Other than the youngest littlest girl, the teen appeared as if she would have no other familiar ties to the others. From

images only, they looked like a hodgepodge group of children thrown together by circumstances.

“How about Jess and I gather all we can find regarding clothing and toiletries and bring them to wherever you set them up to eat,” Trevor suggested next.

“That will be great,” I nodded with a smile. “Thanks. I’ll take the girls to the girls’ bathroom.”

“And Wyatt and I can take the boys,” Corbin volunteered. “You can bring us the stuff so they can get cleaned up first.”

“Come on, let’s get them a snack first,” Dad clapped his hands with a cheerful smile. “They don’t need to be completely clean before getting a little snack first, right?”

The eager look on the children’s faces reflected that they preferred that idea over Corbin’s. The remaining children exchanged looks but needed no further coaxing to follow us to the boats.

## CHAPTER 16



“EAT slower,” Brittany chastised Raymond.

Raymond gave her a disgruntled look but did her bidding.

So far, we learned that Brittany was the oldest at fifteen. The second oldest was Raymond, at thirteen. He was followed by Roman or Ro, who was twelve. Lara was ten. Carlos was seven, and the youngest, Felicity, was five.

They informed us that they were on their own and had no one waiting on them to return from wherever they came from. We had come to a silent agreement not to press them for any further details until later. We knew feeding them and getting them clean first was more important.

We gave them a snack, then they got their showers and changed into clean clothes. While Corbin, Kingston, and I helped the kids get washed up, Trevor and Jessica procured canvas totes full of clothing and hygiene products for each child.

Dad and Uncle Scott reheated canned soup and a peach cobbler dessert. We laughed at Aunt Carol when she suggested we take a case of the soup they had just canned. We told her we doubted we could cook it and reminded her we had MREs. Now, I was glad that she had insisted that we take it.

The homemade vegetable beef soup was easier on their stomachs. In addition, it was also nutritious and would keep them fuller longer. It came as no surprise that Dad and Uncle Scott decided to spoil the children further. They decided to look for a dessert to feed them as well.

While scavenging earlier, Dad and Uncle Mitch had found enough canned peaches, oats, and other spices to make an impromptu peach cobbler over one of the fires. Jessica and I couldn't resist taking a few bites, and I had to admit it was rather tasty. Of course, in our defense, there was plenty left over. We didn't take food from the kids' mouths.

"So, none of you have any adults looking out for you?" Dad asked as he handed Carlos a hooded sweatshirt.

Trevor and Jess found plenty of clothing for the children. They behaved as if it was Christmas, and it was all mostly used clothing. It was clear these kids had been put through the wringer. And the small comfort of clean clothing had significantly impacted them. I couldn't help but feel for them. And from how my family was behaving, their feelings reflected mine.

The kids all exchanged looks, save Felicity. It was clear they were communicating with each other without any words being spoken. It confirmed our suspicions that they had bonded through their shared experiences. They seemed to want to keep the united front.

"No," Brittany shook her head. "We're all we got. We're family now."

The adults who surrounded me shared our own glances. Kingston, Corbin, and Axel left while the kids ate dinner to interrogate our prisoner, leaving my uncles, Trevor, Jessica, and the rest of my guys around our fire pit. Roman was visibly upset at us and sat as far away as possible. He continued to eye us suspiciously no matter how hard we attempted to reassure him that we were the good guys. The rest of the kids stayed close to each other as possible.

"How? Why?" Uncle Scott gently prodded. "If you feel comfortable sharing with us."

Brittany took a deep breath in before speaking. “My parents had left me and my older sister, Kayla, home alone the Wednesday before all this,” Brittany slowly explained as she waved towards the road. A sad, almost tortured look crossed her features. “It was their twentieth anniversary, and they were going on a cruise. We had a housekeeper, cook, and gardener on staff. At first, when the staff called out, we hadn’t cared all that much. Kayla is, *was*,” she corrected herself with a broken hitch to her voice. “Eighteen. And we felt like we didn’t need babysitters. Plus, we could throw the party our parents had forbidden us to. Only a few of our friends showed up that night. They told us they had sick family members but still snuck out to party. Then when we attempted to order pizza, we were told we had to go pick it up because they were short-staffed.

“OMG,” she sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. “We were so spoiled, insensitive, and clueless. Someone said they heard from a friend who heard from a friend it might be the start of a pandemic. They heard of talks of quarantining everyone. We made jokes about it being a story concocted from the tin foil wearing conspiracy nuts. Then we party our asses off.

“Kayla woke me up the following day and told me she was rushing her boyfriend to the hospital. She said he had a dangerously high fever. I yelled at her for waking me up and went back to bed. The next thing I knew, someone was pounding on my door. I ran downstairs and noticed a few of the neighbors out front. They told me that people were attacking us and they were locking the gates. We lived in a gated community, but the gates had never been closed.

“At first, I thought it was a joke. Then, I thought it was some elaborate prank until another neighbor came running out of his house screaming with his wife and daughter chasing him. There was so much blood. Too much,” she shuddered as if the memory still haunted her.

“I went to tell Kayla, but she wasn’t home yet,” she continued. “I tried to call her, but there was no signal. My cell phone stopped working. I couldn’t even check my socials. But

then I remembered we had one of those old phones plugged into the wall.”

It took me a moment to realize she meant a standard land line. In this day and age, it was easy to forget that people once had permanent phones in their homes. If Nana and Pop-pop didn't have one in their house, I wouldn't have been so familiar with it. I mean, I encountered them in hotels. However, I was probably eleven or twelve when I was informed that cell phones hadn't always been around. I remembered how baffled my young mind had been. It was a convenience most of my peers and younger would never recognize.

I couldn't imagine being confined to my home to wait for a phone call. Plus, texting was way too convenient. Sometimes I liked communicating with people via text versus actually talking to them. And don't even get me started on the bafflement I felt when they informed me that they couldn't talk to someone on the phone and surf the web simultaneously. It was crazy to me, and I had six years on Brittany.

“They said the circuits were busy,” Brittany's voice brought me back from my musings. “I knew I had to find her. I told my neighbors I needed to leave, but I would be back. They told me I had one hour to get her. The hospital was less than ten minutes away. I thought I had plenty of time to let her know and return on time. I didn't have a license yet, but had a permit, so I grabbed my mom's car.

“My Aunt and Uncle owned one of the houses near the front of our neighborhood. At the last minute, I stopped to talk to them. When I got to the door,” she closed her eyes as if to collect herself.

“Mommy was bad and bit Daddy,” Felicity said drowsily from Easton's arms. “Britt Brat had to save me from Mommy and Daddy.”

My heart broke. The little girl either didn't understand her words' implications or suppressed her emotions. Her voice was nearly monotone, as if she was reading from a book or

reciting lines she had memorized. This new world was creating trauma for everyone.

The five-year-old had finished her dessert and had wandered over to Easton. Easton had given her a coloring book and crayons that he had found. He had become her new “best friend.” Coloring had entertained her for a little bit. But soon, it was evident that she was struggling with exhaustion. She hadn’t taken much longer to climb up into his lap. And in true Easton fashion, he had grabbed her a blanket, wrapped her up, and began rocking her.

“I yelled for the neighbors to help me, but most of them watched me from their windows. While the others refused to help me,” Brittany’s voice cracked. “After they were taken care of,” she stared at her interlocked fingers.

At fifteen, this girl had been put in a challenging situation, forcing her to grow up. The adults in the community should have stepped up for her. I wanted to say I was surprised or shocked by their despicable behavior, but I wasn’t. I had heard too many similar stories by now. It was the classic bystander reaction. Most people wouldn’t intervene if they felt their lives were in danger.

“I had to look for the girls,” Brittany swallowed a sob. “I was too late to save Jubilee, but I found Felicity hiding under her bed. I grabbed her and left the house. As I was exiting the neighborhood, they already had the gates closed. I told them I had to get my sister, and they attempted to threaten me. Finally, they told me they’d open the gates. However, they informed me they wouldn’t open the gates for me if there were any zombies around on my return. But I had to take a chance.

“The roads were horrible. It took me over an hour to get to the hospital. They weren’t allowing anyone into it any longer. I begged and pleaded for them to at least look for my sister. They refused to.

“A part of me prayed that Kayla and Roy had already been discharged or left before they locked the doors. I looked through the car park and was so relieved not to see Kayla’s car,” she swallowed another sob. “I found her car on the way

back to the house. She had veered off the road and crashed her vehicle into a tree. I ran down the embankment to see if they were okay. They weren't in the car, but there was so much blood."

She blinked back tears and shook her head. "When I looked up, I was so happy to see her walking out of the woods towards me. Until I realized she had turned into one of them.

"When I returned to the neighborhood, cars lined up, attempting to get in. My neighbors wouldn't allow anyone to enter. I had to leave my mom's car on the side of the road. Felicity and I ran up to the gates, and they were threatening people with guns. One of the guys turned a gun on me when I attempted to help Felicity climb over the fence. Luckily, my dad's golfing buddies recognized me and insisted they let me in. Then a group of zombies came from nowhere.

"I begged them to let the others in, but they wouldn't. I even offered to allow some of them to stay with me at my house and my aunt and uncle's," she couldn't hold her tears back any longer, and Jessica immediately embraced her.

Brittany was a few inches taller than Jessica, but she still looked so tiny and frail in the older woman's arms. Evidently, she probably hadn't had the luxury of breaking down until now. Or if Brittany did, she just needed to release it once more. However, I imagine she had been strong for so long for the younger kids.

"Eventually, these men came and forced their way into her neighborhood," Lara picked up where Brittany had left off.

After her shower, she asked me if I knew how to braid. I told her yes, and offered to do her hair. She was sitting before me while I plaited two braids on either side of her head. The girl reminded me of a young Sylvia in many ways. She was sassy, confident, and had a huge heart. However, I saw the same vulnerability Sylvia hid so well when I first met her.

"She knew it wasn't safe any longer, so she ran with Felicity. Brittany and Roman found me in the apartments I lived in with my mom," she looked over at Roman as if she expected him to jump in and tell us his story. Instead, he

glared at her and mutinously crossed his arms over his chest. Lara made a scoffing noise and continued. “My mom was a nurse and worked nights. Ms. Hernández usually came over to watch me. When I woke on Thursday morning, I noticed Ms. Hernández had left. She never went until Mom got home. I knew Ms. Hernández had been there, though, because her blanket was still on the couch, and she had left her purse on the counter. I knocked on her door, but she didn’t answer.

“I got ready for school, and Mom wasn’t home yet. My bus never came, and when I called Mom, she didn’t answer. When I called the hospital, the phone kept ringing. When she didn’t come home that night, I got worried and got on the subway to visit her. I knew something was wrong when I got on the subway. There were barely any people on it.

“When I got to the hospital, the National Guard was there. They told me my mom wasn’t there, but I knew she was. She would have never left me.”

I was finished with her braids, so I took her in my arms in an attempt to comfort her. She stiffened for a moment but then eagerly accepted my embrace. She relaxed into me and leaned her head against my shoulder.

“I went back there every day, and one of my mom’s nurse friends saw me on the fifth day. She said the guard put many of them on lockdown and wouldn’t allow them to leave, but they had no more patients. She said she had to escape and hadn’t seen my mom in days, but I knew she lied,” her voice cracked. “I knew my mom wasn’t coming back home. Ms. Diane said I could go with her family and we needed to leave the city. We went back to my apartment first. She had three older boys and no clothes or stuff for me. As we were about to leave, Ms. Hernández was in the doorway. She became one of them. Mom’s friend told me to hide.”

Her eyes glazed over, and I could tell she didn’t want to talk about Ms. Diane any longer. “We found Carlos and Raymond at a school outside the city.”

“Dad knew something was wrong long before we saw the first zombie,” Raymond spoke up next. “Mom called him a

conspiracy theorist. Dad packed the car and was ready to go, but Mom didn't want us to leave until she saw all our neighbors leaving a few days later.

“We didn't make it far. We were stopped when we were getting ready to cross the bridge to get out of the city. The army told us to go to one of the safe zones,” Raymond said with the ghost of his past in his eyes. “Dad didn't want to go, but Mom begged and pleaded for us to go. So, we were there for about two weeks when many of the army guys left.”

These “safe zones” had apparently, been erected as we escaped to Sanctuary. Unfortunately, most of them were constructed too close to the major cities. They had the National Guard on many major highways and interstates, forcing people to these safe zones. We had been more than fortunate not to have encountered them. With my guy's positions in the military, they would have been recruited in or required to remain as well.

“Dad didn't feel safe, he wanted to leave, but Mom thought it was the best place to be,” Raymond continued. “We weren't there long when food shipments stopped coming, and the commander in charge thought we needed more stuff. So he decided to send some people out. They took Dad, and he didn't come back. Mom got really depressed. She kept blaming herself.”

We had heard similar stories from a handful of other survivors. The safe zones had been overrun. And the ones that hadn't been overrun had been poorly constructed and run. They didn't have enough staffing, and the people they were supposed to protect were forced to scavenge in the closest cities. Needless to say, they weren't trained, and many never returned.

“One night, one of the new people turned and,” he shook his head as if to dispel the memories.

“My abuela was too old to run,” Carlos picked up where Raymond had left off. “She told me to run. When I was running, one of the adults tripped me, and I fell. He didn't look

back, but Ray helped me up. It was dark, and we decided to hide in one of the school buses.

“The next morning, we returned to the school to get food. Unfortunately, my abuela and Ray’s mom weren’t there. No one was left.”

I was confused for a brief moment. I wondered if someone had come and “cleaned” up, but then realization dawned. Everyone that turned must have left the school in infected form. I wanted to cry with these kids. I had been so fortunate not to witness any one of my loved ones turning. Knock on wood!

“We decided to stay,” Raymond continued. “There was enough food for us to stay. We locked all the doors and decided to wait until the zombies died. Brittany, Felicity, Roman, and Lara found us a few days later. They knocked on the doors. We let them in. There was food for them too. Plus, they had bikes with those trailers full of stuff they found. We thought we were okay until a new group came in to stay there. At first, we thought they were nice. But then they weren’t. We started running out of food, so Malcolm sent some of us out with his guys. In the beginning, they would go with us. We went to different neighborhoods and looked for anything good.

“Eventually, he only sent us kids with one or two of his men. If we didn’t find enough food for “everyone,” we didn’t eat. If we didn’t find enough to satisfy Malcom, we got punished. He didn’t care when we lost friends. He didn’t care how young we were.

“They weren’t nice people. So, when we got the chance, we ran away.”

“There were ten of us,” Brittany hiccupped with a sob. “They chased us down and got two of us. We were running for weeks. Then, finally, we found someone’s abandoned hunting cabin. There was some food there. That kept us fed for a little while.

“When we ran out of food, we knew we had to find more. So Teddy and Eve decided to head out independently to find more food. But, unfortunately, they never came back either.”

“They weren’t supposed to leave without us,” Roman finally spoke up, his voice filled with vitriol.

Roman hadn’t spoken a word since Kingston, and Corbin forced him to shower after he ate a little bit. The boy was going through puberty, and it smelled like it. They had to press him to put on deodorant afterward. He was clearly happy to be cleaner, but hadn’t wanted to show it.

It was clear he still didn’t trust us. He had already attempted to talk the others into running away again when he believed they were alone. They weren’t. Trevor had overheard them when he brought them shoes he had found. He hadn’t confronted them but informed us of Roman’s intentions.

Brittany seemed to be the pseudo-leader of the group. And surprisingly, Roman was the second person the other children listened to. However, no one seemed willing to leave. It was clear that they were exhausted and half-starved. Brittany must have seen something in us that made her feel safe. Because of this, she wanted to stay with us.

“Were Teddy and Eve the adults?” Uncle Scott inquired with a frown.

Brittany had already told us they had no adults waiting for them. She had slightly evaded his earlier question when the topic was brought up. I assumed she misunderstood Uncle Scott when he asked about the adults. I presumed he was inquiring about their parents or legal guardians.

Lara made a sound and shifted in my arms. I noticed the poor girl was now sound asleep. I could have put her down or had one of the guys carry her inside one of the boats. But I felt as if she was craving adult comfort, and I wanted to be here for the kids in any way possible.

Zeke must have been watching Lara, as well, because he was suddenly there with a blanket. I smiled my thanks to him and carefully wrapped Lara in it. He returned my smile and kissed the top of my head.

Lara and Felicity were so deep in sleep that they didn’t even flinch when someone down the way began playing their

music loudly as if there was a block party. A small group of the bunker people were loudly talking and laughing. As I watched them, I witnessed Hopkins and Seville begin dancing. I shook my head at their foolish antics. Didn't they realize we were outside the comforts and safety of our typical environment?

It astonished me that they were behaving as if they were tailgating or at a block party of sorts. Plus, some of them had to be on duty soon. Yet, they seemed to be in no rush to seek sleep. By their behavior, I suspected they had more than Gatorade or water in their canteens.

They had been pretty loud and boisterous earlier. However, it seemed that they had gotten louder as the night progressed. Dad and Uncle Mitch had already informed them that we didn't drink while we were on recovery. We couldn't have our inhibitions lowered in any way. So, of course, they denied having any alcohol.

It was evident they had lied to us. But it wasn't like we would demand to smell their drinks or take a sip. There were some lines my dad and Uncles were unwilling to cross. I didn't think Axel would have such qualms, but he wasn't here to say or do anything about it.

Yes, we were all adults. Yes, we all understood our limitations. However, there was a time and a place for drinking, and this wasn't it. Unfortunately, the bunker group seemed not to understand that. If we were attacked right now, I didn't think they were cognizant enough to defend themselves, let alone our group. But, their audacity knew no bounds.

"So you haven't had an adult looking after you for some time," Dad grimly stated, returning me to the conversation.

Brittany pulled her sleeves over her hand and gave a very teenage-like shrug. "Technically, Teddy just turned eighteen."

Yes, eighteen was considered a legal adult. However, was that adult enough to care for six minors? It shocked and floored me that they had survived alone for so long. They had been on their own for well over a month.

“Eve was seventeen, I think,” Raymond commented as he eyed the pan of peach cobbler.

Dad wordlessly dished up more for him and handed it to him without prompting. I wanted to ask him if it was wise to feed them anymore. But, on the other hand, it was a struggle for me not to procure more food for them as well. They had eaten a little before their showers and then some more after. And then Dad made them their dessert. Their little stomachs would probably ache if they ate any more.

“So you kids have been on your own for over a month,” Dad inquired with a frown.

As I gently swayed Lara in my arms, I noticed Axel, Kinston, and Corbin returning. I didn’t see the prisoner, but I imagined they didn’t want to bring him back with the children around.

“Yay, you can do basic math,” Roman sarcastically stated, rolling his eyes.

Brittany opened her mouth to reprimand him, but Kingston beat her to it. He grabbed the back of Roman’s shirt. It wasn’t done aggressively or harshly. His grip on the younger boy was more to get his attention than to hurt him.

Roman blanched, clearly not noticing Kingston’s approach. However, once he realized who had the back of the shirt, he violently attempted to jerk away from him.

“Let me go,” Roman said between clenched teeth.

“Once you apologize,” Kingston sternly stated. “You can be angry. You can be upset. But you won’t be disrespectful. That man,” he pointed towards Dad. “Made your dinner and dessert while you were getting cleaned up. He made sure the boat bedding was clean for you to sleep on. He doesn’t deserve your disrespect. Now apologize.”

I had never seen Kingston this severe. Even when my step-brothers or cousins stepped out of line, he was never that strict. He was firm, but it was delivered with kindness. With Roman, he almost dared the boy to contradict him or attempt to continue his act of rebellion.

Roman tilted his chin up, refusing to capitulate. The boy was so stubborn. And clearly so broken. It was definitely a defense mechanism for him.

“Roman,” Brittany gently prodded him.

Roman maintained eye contact with Kingston, refusing to look over at Brittany.

Kingston smirked at him. “This isn’t a game you’re gonna win, stinky.”

His jaw flexed, but he continued his silence and scowled.

“Kingston,” Easton softly inserted next. “It’s been a long day for us all and an even longer time for these kids.”

Kingston snorted. “It’s still no excuse for bad manners. If he’s going to act tough and mean, he needs to accept the consequences of his actions.”

“Roman, that was rude. Say you’re sorry. They’ve been really nice to us,” Brittany gently cajoled the younger boy.

The stare-off continued for several moments before Roman finally said, between clenched teeth. “Sorry.”

“Not exactly sincere,” Kingston smirked. “But I’ll take it for now.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” Dad addressed Roman sympathetically. “Your trust was shattered, and I know it may take some time before you realize you can trust us.”

Roman scoffed before standing up and storming off to one of the boats. Silence filled the area for several moments before Corbin looked over at Kingston.

“You were kind of rough on him,” he admonished.

“Need to be,” Kingston said with a careless shrug before he began to help himself to some peach cobbler. “I can see so much of me in him. He’s angry and hurt, rightfully so. However, it doesn’t give him a free pass to act like an aspen,” he caught himself as he looked at the other children. “Hole,” He finished. “Boys like Roman and me need a firmer hand, or they’ll take advantage of the situation. We like to test

the boundaries and see how far we can go. If we allow him to continue down this road, he'll only get more defiant and disrespectful. We should set the parameters and expectations as early as possible."

"Kingston isn't wrong," Easton reluctantly agreed. "Maybe tone it down a bit, though," he suggested.

"I don't think that would do him any favors either," Brittany laughed without humor. "Even before the apocalypse, he had a crappy life. He's filled with anger, but he's a good kid. He's loyal and saved our asses on numerous occasions."

I looked at the other children and noticed how they were quickly fading. Carlos had moved over to Brittany. His head was in her lap as she brushed his hair with her fingers. His eyes were heavy as they stared into the fire. Raymond pulled his hood over his head and crossed his arms over his chest. He rapidly blinked as if he was attempting to ward off sleep.

"We'll help him out and make sure he knows how safe and cared for he is," Uncle Scott reassured Brittany. "He won't need to watch over you guys any longer. We'll do it for you."

"I'm really sorry to hear what you guys have gone through," Wyatt soothingly stated. "I know the words are empty, and they don't fix anything. However, we just want you to know you are safe with us. You will never go hungry again or have to fight to survive.

"We got you some toothbrushes and toothpaste. Why don't you all brush your teeth and head to bed?"

I imagined at a later date and time, we would probe the children further. I hadn't missed Dad and Uncle Mitch exchanging glances. It was as if it was their new mission to rescue and save anyone we could. They seemed determined to exterminate these groups that were taking advantage of anyone. And I wasn't opposed to the idea.

"That sounds good. Thanks for everything," Brittany attempted to smile while she stood up.

Brittany looked at Felicity, and Easton gave her a gentle smile as he stood up. "I'll carry her on for you," he reassured

her.

“And I’ll get Lara,” Corbin offered as he bent down to take Lara from my arms.

“We’ll get you up in the morning,” Uncle Mitch added.  
“We’ll eat breakfast and roll out.”

I knew we still had to discuss what we would do with the children while we continued our mission. We also needed to discuss the information they extracted from our prisoner.

“Thank you,” Raymond mumbled, shuffling towards the boat. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” we all chorused back.

I leaned forward and added another log onto the fire, but Axel grabbed me by the waist and sat down before I could find my seat again. I sighed and settled into his lap, happy to cuddle with him. He so rarely showed affection in front of others, and I imagined what they had to tell us wasn’t good.



## CHAPTER 17



“IT was a setup,” Axel confirmed once we all sat back down.

“From whom?” Dad grimly inquired.

“We grabbed the wrong guy,” Corbin sighed, rubbing a weary hand over his face. “He doesn’t know shit.”

“He confirmed that they were told the place and roughly the time that we would drive by that area,” Axel continued. “He couldn’t tell us their motive or who they collaborated with.”

“Their community seems to be thriving. They have enough food and a trading system going on with other survivor groups,” Kingston stated. “The guy we have is just another cog in the machine. They have one head honcho in charge with a second in command. They give orders, and the rest follow. He claims they’re above board, and this was the only time they had to do people dirty.”

I couldn’t help but snort. “And capturing infected dogs and releasing them on unsuspecting travelers is completely legitimate? So at no point did he question the oddity of his orders?”

“Some people look the other way for simple creature comforts,” Wyatt scathingly commented. “They’re fed and given reasonably safe accommodations. But unfortunately, most of these people were greatly impacted by the release of the virus. They would do damn near anything to survive now.”

“So what do we do?” Zeke inquired. “Do we think the general is involved?”

My guys, the Beta team, and family had only been able to talk briefly earlier. We couldn’t openly discuss our suspicions in front of the bunker group.

“I’ve known the general for years,” Dad sighed heavily. “He’s always been a man I admire and respect. However, how he’s become a lap dog to that Senator and the VP causes concern. He’s a strategic and intelligent man, and I’m sure he can’t be that oblivious to them.

“I don’t want to believe he’s capable of collaborating with another group to harm us. But on the other hand, it just seems too coincidental that he was there today. I realize the bunker wasn’t too far from that location, but it was so dubious. Was he ensuring we were harmed or captured? Did he intend to give us more people, and his timing was fortuitous?”

We all looked at each other. I didn’t think anyone wanted to accuse General Gypson outright. But he had been the liaison between the politicians and us for some time now. The way he was willing to allow the politicians to overreach and almost seem to condone their behavior hadn’t been sitting well with us.

“Personally,” Easton spoke after a moment of silence. “I don’t think the general is behind this. He seemed just as shocked as I was when Vice President Ramsey attempted to force me to stay. I won’t be shocked in the least if Ramsey’s behind this all.

“My impression of him is very low. He was shady when he was in office. And it wouldn’t be too far of a reach for him to be behind this as well.”

“But how do we absolve General Gypson of his involvement? Should we test his loyalty and observe it firsthand?” Wyatt inquired.

“A few of us can go undercover,” I suggested. “Gypson’s reaction today seemed genuine. But I don’t think we will feel comfortable until we know for sure if he’s not an accomplice to them. People like Ramsey and Todd always have an air of arrogance. If they are behind this, I’m certain we could ferret out the truth.”

“That could work,” Uncle Mitch agreed. “Whoever goes in could discreetly spy on them. I’m confident Fletch and his buddies have some kind of spy gear we could utilize. Maybe we could plant the devices, sit back and wait. I know Ramsey and Todd have offices that they operate there.”

“Unless they become suspicious,” Uncle Scott tentatively commented. “If General Gypson behaves skeptically towards them, they’ll be on higher alert. They may cover their tracks. Or they may decide to keep us there. They’ve already attempted it before. So I say we just cut ties with the bunker. Other than a few people, they have little to offer us.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy,” Axel chimed in. “Now that Ramsey and Todd know the amount of talent and capabilities we have, they won’t let us walk away.”

“Regretfully,” Corbin said with a wry twist of his lips. “I think it’s too late to walk away too. Plus, we should attempt to discover what their next move is. It’s evident that someone in that bunker has a vendetta against us. We need to know their reasoning for turning against us.”

“We can’t be controlled, and it hurts their egos,” Zeke added.

“Easton was right earlier,” Dad contemplatively stated. “Todd was a puppet when he gained his Senate seat. He was corrupt, and nearly every one of his election team ended up in jail for embezzling, voting fraud, and a host of other questionable dealings. Todd was smart enough to cover his tracks. But he’s not intelligent enough to mastermind anything.

“I’ll bet my money on Ramsey. Ramsey is a man with no qualms. He’s always had one scandal or another he was involved in. I still don’t understand how he wasn’t indicted after they discovered his involvement with foreign governments.”

“Well, we can’t allow them to get away with another injustice,” I snorted. “We need to stop them before they can strike at us again.”

“By we, I hope you don’t mean you,” Wyatt’s brows knitted together.

I gave him a dubious look. I couldn’t believe that he was back to this song and dance. I’d thought he was over the overprotective stick. He hadn’t attempted to restrict or lock me down in some time. I knew it would always be a struggle for him. However, after our previous argument, I’d assumed he was dealing with it.

“I agree with Wyatt,” Kingston concurred. “But not for the reason you think,” he hastily reassured me. “If Ramsey and Todd become suspicious of us, I don’t want them to decide to lock down the facility. There would be no way of getting out. That bunker was built to withstand a nuclear explosion. They can keep the doors locked with one push of a button. They have enough supplies and amenities to survive years. They don’t even need to leave it. And if we are held hostage, I don’t want it to be you.”

I could understand where they came from when they put it that way. There was no way I could take the children with me. And I didn’t want to be separated from them for an indefinite period of time. But, on the other hand, I didn’t want my guys to be either.

“But it could be you guys?” I half-heartedly argued back.

“Yes,” Wyatt resolutely stated. “And Easton can’t come either. We already know that Ramsey and Todd wanted to keep him. We can’t and won’t give them the opportunity to attempt to do so again.”

“Kingston, Wyatt, and I will go in,” Axel determined as he began to trail his hands up and down my back.

“When we return to Sanctuary, we’ll talk to Fletch,” Dad agreed. “We’ll find out his spy gear and then plan according.”

We all looked at each other and nodded. I couldn’t help but feel anxious. I expected the infected to attack us. I also knew we would have to engage with people terrorizing other survivors. However, I hadn’t expected people that we started considering allies to come after us too.

“This is bullshit,” I heard Roman mutter before we prepared to leave.

“Ro,” Brittany admonished.

It was evident his behavior exasperated her. The other children were still wary of us but were warming up. They seemed to be hopeful that they were finally safe. On the other hand, Roman was very vocal and demonstrative of his unhappiness. I think he would have run away if it wasn’t for the others. However, it was clear he viewed the others as family.

“What? It is bullshit!” Roman argued. “They kidnap us, promise they’ll take us to a better place, and then ditch us.”

Finding a safe place to hide the kids had been a bit difficult this morning. We wanted them close enough to the location we were going to. However, we didn’t want to leave them vulnerable to any attacks.

We had finally settled on a family-owned feed shop. It was off the beaten path and set back off the road. Apparently, people had come through and taken a lot of their stock, but it was infected-free. In addition, it had very few infected in the small gravel parking lot and surrounding farmland. It didn’t take us long to clear the area and ensure it would be safe enough until our return.

“We’re not ditching you,” Joe admonished, pulling out a pack of cards. “We’re staying with you. So come on, kid, let’s

play some Rummy. We'll play for candy," he smiled, pulling out a large bag of mixed candy next.

Felicity made a sound of excitement and scurried to his side. Joe grinned and handed her a lollipop.

"I thought we had to win it," Carlos frowned.

Joe gave him a crooked smile before handing them each a piece.

"The first one is free. Gotta earn the next ones," Jeremy playfully smiled.

"I don't know how to play Rummy," Raymond frowned, opening a fun-size bag of Skittles.

"We'll teach you," Gael said, sitting at the table they had pulled from the back.

Initially, we had wanted to leave some of the bunker people behind. However, on further introspection, we decided it would be wiser to keep an eye on them. Joe, Jeremy, Gael, and two of our other people had volunteered to protect the children. Ideally, we wanted our men at our back, but it wasn't feasible with us not trusting the others.

"I don't want to play some damn Rummy," Roman mutinously replied.

"Hey," Kingston barked out.

Roman wasn't the only one to jump at his sudden raised voice. I think most of us jumped at the loud sternness in his tone. I saw a look of shock on more than one person's face. Very few people had ever seen this side of Kingston. Hell, I don't think I had ever heard him raise his voice.

"We had this discussion about respect," Kingston advanced toward the boy.

He didn't approach the boy threateningly, but there was no mistake in his seriousness. It took everything in me not to want to defend the boy. I wanted to give Roman some sympathy and leniency. However, I had to trust Kingston had Roman's best interest at heart. There was something in the boy

that Kingston saw himself in. I had to trust that he knew how to handle the troubled boy best.

I could see the indecision in Roman's eyes. I could see that he wanted to push back and continue to fight. However, I also so the fearful respect in his eyes, too.

Last night, as I attempted to fall asleep between Axel and Easton, I wondered about Roman's past. There was a lot of pain in his eyes. And somehow, I knew the pain wasn't fresh. Instead, he had entered the apocalypse damaged.

"Fine," Roman finally muttered. "I'll play a stupid game."

He nearly stomped over to the table and sat between Joe and Gael. Joe murmured quiet words to him before pushing his cards toward him. Roman snatched them up, and once again, I worried about him. I could see his inner turmoil.

He didn't trust us. And I was determined to prove to him that he could. A lot of harm was done to him. It would take time to repair the damages others had left on him.

"You guys are coming back, right?" Brittany inquires in a timid voice.

She set the younger ones up with coloring books, crayons, a puzzle, and a Connect Four game. It was apparent she took responsibility for them seriously. She treated them like well-loved siblings.

"We are," I reassured her squeezing her hand. "And if we're not back in three days, the men will take you back to Sanctuary."

We hoped this mission wouldn't take long, and with the surveillance we could obtain, it shouldn't. In a perfect world, we could extract the victims from the compound in a few hours. And even if we found somewhere to hunker down tonight, we should be back by tomorrow. But we had learned long ago never to assume any job would be easy. We realized that with every day that passed since the SHTF, things had become more complex.

"This should last you seven days," Corbin said, entering the building with another crate of homemade soup.

BJ and Ari followed behind him with bread, instant oatmeal, several gallons of water, and a few snacks they could scavenge off the boats and restaurant. Next, we found a flat-top grill with canisters of propane. With the saucepans we got off one of the vessels, they were capable of cooking everything. We didn't want the kids to know hunger ever again. So we had gone slightly overboard with the provisions we were leaving behind.

"Thanks, guys, we got this," Gael assured us.

Gael had already proven his ability to survive out here. He'd had his own settlement before he joined ours. We had every faith in his survival instincts, but once again, life out here was precarious. Things were known to change in the blink of an eye. I just prayed we could return to them on time or they made it safely to Sanctuary if we didn't return in the allotted time.

"We're sure you do," Corbin clapped his back good-naturedly.

"We should get rolling," Ari looked down at his watch.

The other teams were already in place. This little detour had already set us back almost two hours. With any luck, we would be informed of the parts we had to play in the extraction by the time we arrived at our rendezvous point.

"I need you to take care of Athena for me," Kingston knelt beside Roman.

I saw Roman's eyes light up momentarily before his sullen mask was back in place. It hadn't escaped our notice that Roman seemed to be drawn to Bane and Athena. Both dogs seemed just as eager to bask in any attention he gave them.

"You're not taking her with you?" Roman finally muttered.

Kingston hid his satisfied smile. "Nah," he shook his head. "One of the dogs needs to stay with ya'll, and I know you'll take good care of her."

He placed a few containers of food on the checkout counter. "Feed Athena two cups tonight and again tomorrow morning. Here are her treats," he pulled out a pouch of dog

biscuits. “She likes to beg, so tell her to go to her bed while ya’ll eat. Don’t feed her while you’re eating. It’s a bad habit for her to have. Once ya’ll are finished eating, tell her she can clean. She can clean up any food dropped. Otherwise, she needs to stay in her bed. Copy that?”

“Copy,” Roman mumbled, reaching out to Athena’s head.

“You sure you can take care of my dog? It’s a big responsibility,” Kingston prodded.

I realized then that leaving Athena worked two-fold. Athena could protect our people here. But it was also a silent reassurance for Roman. No one could deny Kingston’s love for the dog. Roman knew Kingston wouldn’t willingly leave Athena behind, so essentially, he wouldn’t leave Roman either.

“I can help,” Carlos eagerly piped up.

Kingston chuckled. “Sounds good,” he stood back up. “We’ll see you soon.”

He paused as if waiting for a response. Finally, Roman nodded. It was a baby step in the right direction. Kingston seemed to agree. He seemed satisfied by the action. Then he turned, linked his fingers through mine, and led me out of the shop.

I couldn’t help but look at them one more time before leaving. I wished we could take them with us., but we couldn’t guarantee their safety with us. However, we couldn’t ensure they were one hundred percent safe here either. It was such a precarious situation. One I had no control over. So, I would have to hope and pray they were safe in our absence.

## CHAPTER 18



“WHAT’S wrong, girl?” I cooed, running a reassuring hand over Sasha’s fur.

She continued to pace and occasionally let out a low whine. I frowned, not understanding why she was so restless. She’d behaved this way all morning, and from Axel’s and Rhys’ reports, Bane and Roscoe were acting similarly. We were all perplexed by their actions.

We had been in place for three hours, waiting for the following guard change. We knew it was the best time to implement our plans. And as the morning wore on and her agitation and vocalization increased, my nerves amplified.

We’d observed the former juvenile detention center for the entire day yesterday. Our observations corresponded with Ari and Larry’s conclusions. We verified shift changes, victim movements, and other significant patterns. In addition, we determined the correct locations of where they kept the children, female victims, and all the areas the bondsmen were required to work in.

Wyatt, Ari, BJ, Trevor, Jessica, Felix, Josh, and I were waiting for Axel and Dad’s permission to start our strategy.

These people were predictable and seemed regimented in their daily activities. We were situated near a row of garages. The building that once held county vehicles now had children. It was the area we were heading to once the transition of the shift change occurred. The current guy watching over the building typically left long before the other guard was in place.

“Yep, Squirrely boy, go for your smoke,” Wyatt muttered under his breath as we watched the man stand from the stool he had been sitting on.

The man in question barely looked eighteen. He also shared a lot of characteristics of a squirrel. He was tall, slim, narrow-faced, and scurried about in most of his movements.

He didn't seem to care if the building was unguarded so he could have time to smoke before going into lunch. Previously, Ari and Larry had witnessed the first and second guards arguing. The second guard had an unhealthy obsession with one of the women who worked in the laundry and took his sweet time relieving the first guard. The first guard got tired of waiting, so he began to leave early.

I sighed in relief, happy the waiting was coming to an end. All the inactivity was beginning to wear on me.

“The squirrel has left the nest,” Wyatt quietly spoke in our comms.

We had named all the guards animal names. And each area had a name. The children were kept in the nest. The women that worked in the kitchens were in the pot. The women who worked in the laundry were in the wash. The men who worked the gardens were on the farm. All the other areas had their own code name we knew.

“I wonder why he doesn't just smoke as he's waiting,” BJ voiced my thoughts aloud.

“Because he's hoarding smokes,” Ari replied. “Larry and I deduced that alcohol and tobacco products are as good as gold in there. So if some of the others find out he has nicotine, they'll be as good as gone.”

“He walks off to the old maintenance shed where he hides his stash. He smokes a cigarette or two, sprays down, and goes to lunch. He rarely gets to leave, so when he finds smokes, he hides them away.”

“That makes sense,” BJ remarked.

“Come on,” I heard Felix urge.

He was just as restless as I was. He wanted to get the job over with as well. If it were up to him, we would have attacked yesterday. But unfortunately, the timing hadn't been right.

We knew today was the best day to hit in so many respects. Typically, forty-eight men and eight women willingly occupied the detention center. In the middle of the week, their numbers dwindled to half that. One group would head out to scavenge. And the others sought other survivors to work in the gardens, laundry, brewing stations, and a job that suspiciously appeared like they were cooking meth.

Yeah, insert eye roll here. Forget the fact that our world was ravaged. These people wanted to have the remaining population high. What they received for their things and why they thought it was a good thing to do still mystified us.

“Seems like an awful lot of work for a disgusting habit,” Trevor wrinkled up his nose.

Felix quietly chuckled. “Some habits are hard to break. Most of us have a vice or two.”

“The pig is at the wash,” Corbin informed us before they could continue their debate.

The Pig was the second guard. He was an overweight male in his mid to late forties. The way he watched the woman in laundry, filled me with unease. The women seemed uncomfortable by his attention. I suspected if the woman guard hadn't kept such a close eye on them, the pig would have already done something to the laundry woman.

The woman in question appeared to be in her early twenties. The pig could easily have fathered her. I had no prejudice about age gaps. Chad was fourteen years older than

Sylvia, but their relationship was one hundred percent consensual.

Plus, it was evident that the petite brunette beauty had no interest in the older man with questionable hygiene practices. Even from a distance, I could see the sweat stains under his armpits, down his back, and pouring in rivulets down his ruddy face. He lumbered everywhere with a slow gait and his belly hanging over his belt.

The walk from the correction center passed the laundry, and to the back garages seemed to wind him. He would stop several times to wipe his face with a disgusting soiled rag. I could see his mouth running the entire time he walked. And it didn't take a genius to figure out he hated the job of watching over the building holding the children.

We were lucky that the pig and squirrel seemed lax and detested their posts. It gave us time to extract the children and safely secure them long before anyone noticed their absence. Once we loaded them on the fifteen-passenger vans, Jessica, Trevor, Felix, and Josh would drive back to the feed store with them.

“Copy that,” Wyatt responded as he and I began to snip the chain-link fence.

The fence we were opening was in a blind spot. Since they didn't have the typical staffing, they didn't even bother patrolling this far back. Like the amusement park people, I believed they had gotten overconfident. I didn't think they believed anyone would ever break into their location.

It didn't take us long to open a hole big enough to slip in. We crawled in and began to jog toward the building. We didn't worry about being seen because we were far from the rest of the detention center. The majority of their operations were in the front of the facility. The fencing surrounding the former exercise yard provided additional cover.

Once we reached the door, we were met with several deterrents. It almost seemed like overkill. There was a slide lock with chains, bolts, and padlocks attached to the exterior

door. Why they felt it was necessary to have that many latches baffled me. We exchanged looks.

“Trevor, Felix, Josh, and Beej, can you go to the back of the building and try to open the back windows?” Wyatt directed. “Ave, Ari, Jess, and I will get this open.”

We all nodded, indicating that we understood the directive and were willing to do as he said. He nodded back, and we got to work.

The back of the building had a few windows. However, they had affixed wooden boards over them. It seemed to be another measure of keeping the children imprisoned. We wanted to get them open to give us an alternate exit. The rolling doors and single entry point out front didn't seem like feasible escape routes if we were compromised.

“Copy that,” Felix nodded, withdrawing a crowbar from his backpack before running off with the others.

Wyatt withdrew his bolt cutters while I slid open the rest of the locks. Once we disengaged all the locks, Wyatt attempted to open the door. Unfortunately, it was also locked, and we had no keys. I sighed in defeat, but Wyatt got a confident smile. He withdrew a little black pouch. Once he opened it, I realized it was a lock-picking kit. Within seconds the last lock was disengaged.

“I'm impressed,” I smiled at Wyatt when it audibly clicked.

“Thanks,” he impishly smiled before giving me a quick peck on the lips.

“Ready?” Wyatt inquired.

We nodded. We hoped the children wouldn't be afraid if they saw two women first. And some of the children were bound to recognize Ari. After all, they had been part of his group at one point.

Wyatt opened the door, and I first noticed the lack of lighting. The second thing I noticed was the stomach-turning scents. It smelled like unwashed bodies, human waste, and

more unidentifiable putrid odors. It was hard to identify what was emanating the stench without proper lighting.

The boards covering the windows only allowed a small sliver of light to enter the room. Was it necessary to board the windows up? Wouldn't nails driven into the frames sufficient enough for the purpose? Not, that anything justified imprisoning children in an inhabitable building. They didn't need to suffer in any way. It pissed me off even further.

Their captors may feed them, but they were still prisoners. Ari and Larry said they remained in the building except on their parents' rare visits.

"What the fuck?" Wyatt cursed assessing the area.

"I want to castrate the people who did this," Ari bit out.

Not only were these people emotionally blackmailing their parents, but these kids rarely, if ever, got any fresh air. It was just another thing that infuriated me. Children deserved sunlight, fresh air, and to run free.

I bit my tongue from any response. I was afraid if I opened it a torrent of rabidity would follow. If the children were in this building they didn't need to see my fury. I didn't want them to be frightened by me in any way.

I squinted into the darkness, unable to comprehend what I was seeing. The stillness and quiet in the room had me faltering for a moment. My heart sank in despair. Had the captors moved the kids? Were they alive? No parents had been "allowed" to visit their children yesterday, so we weren't even capable of verifying the condition of the children.

I detached the flashlight attached to my flak vest as I felt the room's humidity cling to my skin. It was over one hundred degrees outside, and even with the cement slab beneath our feet, it was unbearably hot in the four-bay garage.

"John John, Vivvy, Evan?" Ari called out in a tremulous voice.

I reached out with my free hand and grasped his hand in comfort before I realized what I was doing. I suspected he feared the worst too. I panned my light across the building and

noticed the workbenches, toolboxes, various equipment, and a quiet refrigerator, but nothing else.

I moved further into the room, vaguely realizing Ari hadn't released my hand. I sensed some of the others behind my back and heard the clicking of their flashlights being turned on.

"Justice, Abigail, Leo," Ari continued to call out, his voice catching with every second that passed with no response.

"Sasha, search," I commanded as Ari squeezed my hand.

His grip was nearly painful, but I didn't show it. He had no one to comfort him here. I could only imagine the gamut of feelings if the situations were reversed. If my guys weren't by my side, I would pray someone would step up to comfort me.

Sasha went prancing off as I continued my perusal. Wooden skids were draped with itchy woolen blankets. And fury nearly choked me as I realized that the children probably slept on them at one point. Less than one hundred yards away was a prison full of twin mattresses. They could have easily transferred them out here. We knew there were fewer people here than the correctional facility's available beds. Plus, the absence of pillows made me even more enraged.

Ari seemed to have come to the same conclusion I did because if I felt him slightly sway before he was boxed in on the other side by Wyatt. The light from the doorway gave me enough visuals for Wyatt and me to exchange looks. Wyatt and Ari had clicked the other night, and their friendship blossomed. We would ensure he was okay if we could not locate "his" children.

"What the f—" Wyatt began as he finally realized what we were looking at.

Sasha let out a small huff, indicating she had found something. Then a tiny voice cut through the muggy air.

"Ari!" I heard a young female voice squeal, causing me to jump.

"Vivvy," Ari's voice cracked as I swung the light in the direction of the squeal.

A sob caught my throat as I saw Sasha sitting in front of thirty or so children huddled in the opposite corner, furthest from the door. The whites of their eyes were trained on us. Their stillness made my throat sink further and further to my stomach. I felt like I would be sick and not from the smells that clung to my olfactory nerves and threatened to choke me as it permeated my lungs. Holding my breath wasn't helping in the least. Another cry rent the air sounding suspiciously like a baby less than a year old.

My eyes fell on a girl no older than eleven attempting to soothe a baby a little older than Jenny, Sylvia's little girl. Tears flooded my eyes as I realized they were all alive and traumatized.

"Ari!" A boy's voice cried out with a sob as another figure separated from the group.

Ari released my hand to catch the little girl of seven or so launching herself at him. He didn't even attempt to brush the tears away that fell from his eyes as he embraced Vivvy to his chest.

"Shh, shh, Little Bit, I got you," he reassuringly murmured as he rocked her.

He effortlessly swooped down to embrace the other boy that had rushed him. Soon he was surrounded by other children.

"You can come out," I called to the other children. "We're here to help you."

My voice was thick with tears, and I had to stop myself from running to them. I knew rushing them would not reassure them. I suspected their captors had conditioned them to fear adults. I could only imagine what was done to make the children so withdrawn. The youngest appeared to be about ten months old, and the oldest around twelve.

"Come on, guys," The oldest boy embracing Ari called out. "This is the rock star I was telling you about."

"Are you really Ari Wa Timoti?" another boy inquired with awe.

“I am,” Ari smiled through his emotions. “We should get going so I can go get your parents.”

“I told you,” the boy embracing Ari called out smugly. “I told you he was my friend.”

Ari let out a little chuckle. “Be nice, Leo,” he gently rebuked.

Leo seemed unfazed as he grinned and shrugged. I nearly smiled at Leo’s comment. I imagined him telling the others how he had met the famous rock star and the others not believing him. Children were notorious storytellers, and I could imagine the skepticism that others may have felt.

Ari put the first two children down before embracing another two. And I couldn’t help but notice how dirty they were. I also realized some of the stomach-churning stench I smelled emanated from them. I’m sure bathing and cleaning them had been another thing denied to them.

At this rate, I would have to check my blood pressure. I wasn’t prone to high vitals, but my rage was boiling. It was in danger of spilling over. And at this point, I foolishly hoped I could engage at least one of these sick bastards that caused them to be in this condition. There had to be a special place in hell for people like them.

Most of the children began to make their way over to us, while a few hung back.

“No!” one of the older girls shrilly cried in panic. “If we run, they’ll set the zombies on us. They’ll feed our mom and dads to the zombies as they did to Simone’s dad.”

“That won’t happen,” I promised them as the children all stilled. “We’re rescuing you all.”

“No! No! No!” I heard a piercing cry come from one of the corners.

My flashlight landed on a little Black girl of around seven. She was alone and was huddled in a tight ball. Her hands were clasped over her ears. Her face was buried in her knees as she frantically rocked back and forth.

“My fault! My fault! My fault!” she screamed. Her little voice rose with each syllable. “Don’t run! Don’t run! Bad girls make their daddies die!”

As her screams grew louder, the boards from the windows were removed. I blinked as the harsh sunlight assaulted my eyes.

“Little Warrior! Alpha Four!” Axel’s voice called out in the comms. “What’s going on?”

“We have to quiet her,” Felix whispered-shouted from the doorway.

He must have run around the building to warn us of the attention we had garnered. My heart raced, realizing the little girl’s screams must not have gone unnoticed.

Jessica pushed the window open that BJ and Trevor were standing at. At this rate, we might have to slip out of the window. If the other guards were heading this way, they could see us exit the door. The back way would give us a little head start.

“We’ll handle it,” Wyatt clipped out, removing a syringe from his cargo pocket.

I knew it was a little concoction to knock a person out. We had intended to use it on the pig. We wanted to ensure he could not raise the alarm as we attempted to extract the others.

Typically, I would want him to find another way to quiet the child, but we couldn’t risk it. We had to move as fast as possible. At the very least, the children needed to be rescued. As a parent, I much rather know my child could be safe than live in these conditions any longer.

“They’re going to rescue our families,” another older boy from Ari’s group picked up a toddler and grabbed the hand of one of the other younger ones. “They can’t use us against our parents any longer,” he called out confidently.

“Justice, no!” the first girl objected, worrying her bottom lip.

“Myra, don’t do this!” Justice hissed out before handing one of the toddlers off to BJ and Trevor. He whispered comforting words the entire time he passed them off before turning back on the girl. “You know your aunt hates seeing us like this. If Ari says he’ll rescue our moms, dads, aunts, uncles, brothers, or sisters, he will try his damndest. So don’t let your fear stop us from finding freedom.”

“What he said,” a brave little girl around eight or nine piped up before she marched over to the window pulling a toddler who resembled her strongly along.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Simone’s screams stopped, and the other children rushed to the open window.

“You’re clear,” Kingston’s voice resounded in our ears. “Get the children back to the vehicles.”

“Copy that,” I breathed into the comms. “Thanks.”

Jessica and I helped the others through the window. The last child was through the window when Sasha began to whine in a high-pitched tone. She nipped at my flak vest and urged me forward. I frowned at her odd behavior.

My instincts told me something was up, but I couldn’t see anything causing her anxiety. Plus, the others hadn’t seen anything alarming as well.

“Sasha,” I reprimanded her, sliding my flashlight back into place.

“What’s gotten into her,” Wyatt inquired as he helped me up to the workbench.

“I don’t know,” I said in a mystified tone before taking BJ and Trevor’s hands.

I climbed out seconds before Sasha landed beside me. She immediately continued her odd behavior, circling and herding the children toward the fence’s opening.

“I’m neutralizing the pig,” Wyatt informed me before brushing his lips against mine. “See you in a bit.”

“Okay,” I nodded, running my hand over his cheek, and then turned to join the others.

I crawled through the fence and noticed the children were in complete silence. They were blinking rapidly. Their little eyes were getting accustomed to the bright sun beating down on us. Again, I had to lock down my anger and not let the children see how upset I was.

Every single one of them smelled and was dirty. They wore clothing no better than rags. I wouldn't line my dogs' cages with what they were wearing, let alone allow my children to wear them. Children were our future, and because of greed and the evil in humanity that still existed, they were probably scarred for life. What little bit I heard was enough to scar me, and I hadn't experienced it.

Ari had two younger children propped on each hip. Jessica had the baby tucked against her chest and held the hands of a toddler. The men had other children on their backs or shoulders. I nodded at them, understanding what the objective was.

"Want a ride?" I smiled at a little boy of around three or four. He wordlessly nodded and held up his skinny little arms. "Okay, hold on," I bade him before picking him up and placing him on my shoulders.

I surveyed the group and noticed another younger one tucked behind one of the older children. He eyed us, adults, with suspicion, but his eyes followed Sasha with rapt attention. I didn't know how long he could walk but doubted he would take my hand or allow me to pick him up. But, on the other hand, I wanted him to stay close, so I had to think of a solution to our dilemma quickly.

I crouched down next to him. "Sasha," I softly called as she continued to circle us. She seemed impatient to push us along.

We couldn't leave until I was certain everyone was prepared for the walk. Sasha reluctantly came over after a low whine. "Good girl," I murmured, slipping her a treat. "We can get going once we're all ready," I ran my hand over her head.

"This is Sasha," I said soothingly to the little boy of five or so. "Did you know dogs can work just like us?"

He slowly shook his head, his eyes widening.

“Well, they can,” I smiled at him, ensuring I maintained eye contact. “Some dogs search for lost little boys or girls. Some dogs search for bad guys. Some dogs find stuff that can hurt us. Sasha likes to protect us. Do you see how antsy she is?”

He responded with a nod, eyeing Sasha with fascination.

“Normally, when she’s working, she likes to stick right by my side,” I explained, running my hands over Sasha’s fur. “Can you protect me with her? Can you hold my hand? That way, Sasha can walk beside both of us.”

He eagerly nodded once more and slipped his grubby, tiny hand into mine. I smiled and gently squeezed it. “I had a feeling you were a brave little boy, just like my Sasha.”

He gave me a beatific smile and fell into step beside us.

## CHAPTER 19



THE vans were parked at the golf course close by. It was approximately a ten-minute walk, but it took twice as long for us with the kids. They were fed, but sparingly. It was clear they were weak, and tired quickly.

I was relieved when we settled them into the vans and watched them roll away with Trevor, Jessica, Felix, and Josh. They would go to the feed store until the rest of our team arrived. We had contemplated immediately returning them to Sanctuary but figured their families would want to see them before making the journey home.

As we walked back, I contemplated the situation for the thousandth time. We were thankful we had very few people to deal with. On the other hand, I knew I wasn't the only one who wished we could take care of them all. Half their group would be returning with possibly more victims. Even if we released the infected, they kept corralled; they could take their operations and victims to another location.

Dad and Uncle Mitch had to reassure me and a few others that it was a problem we would have to face another day. We had to rescue those we could today. It was a shitty situation, but I had hoped and prayed their mission to find more victims

failed. After all, finding survivors out of “secure” settlements was getting harder and harder.

Wyatt, Ari, BJ, and I were almost back when Sasha suddenly stopped. Her ears rested on her head, her mohawk rose on her spine, and she let out a long low growl. We immediately paused and brought out our weapons of choice.

Wyatt, BJ, and I immediately formed a circle. Ari seemed to pick up on our strategy as he placed his back against ours. Wyatt held up his right arm wordlessly, and we began to take small steps clockwise. The air was unnaturally still. The birds no longer sang in the trees.

We made our rotations, and I didn't see anything despite the stillness in the air. There wasn't anything hiding in the overgrown grass alongside the winding two-lane road. I couldn't see anything or anyone in the stand of woods to our left. To our right were the lawns of the former golf course, which also had no movement.

“Nothing,” I breathed out in relief and confusion. “There aren't any infected.”

We understood that the people occupying the juvenile detention center made sweeps consistently. They collected the infected and placed them in the dump trucks lining the front gates. They mobilized and weaponized them when necessary. Their procedures actually assisted us on our walk-in. We barely dispatched any infected because of their constant sweeps.

“Does she typically growl over false alarms?” Ari skeptically inquired.

“No,” I admitted. “Sasha's instincts have never let me down. In fact, she is eerily too accurate when protecting us.”

I heard the distant sound of a large diesel engine starting. It was as if my earlier thoughts conjured up the action. I looked down at my watch and realized it was time for them to do another sweep. Every hour on the hour during the daylight hours, three to four men circled the perimeter. If they found

the infected, they had several tools to wrangle them and place them in the trucks.

Wyatt looked over his shoulder toward where our vehicles were stored and seemed to come to a decision.

“We’ll hide until they pass and proceed ahead,” he determined before heading towards the bushes separating the golf cart path and road.

I nodded, although the feeling of unease hadn’t left. Sure, we hadn’t seen anything, but I learned never to doubt Sasha’s instincts. She sensed something, but what?

“Sasha, come,” I called her as she continued to stare down the road.

Her growling had stopped, but her hair was still standing on end, her tail was tucked, and her ears laid back on her head. She seemed reluctant to follow but approached us as the truck rounded the bend in the road up ahead.

We all lay on the slight incline behind the bushes and peered through the bushes. The truck had just rolled past us when there was a sudden commotion over our communication pieces. Disjointed words sounded off in our earpieces.

“Grab...”

“Run...”

“Retreat...”

Ari, Wyatt, BJ, and I exchanged wide-eyed glances. My mind was filled with a thousand possibilities. What could have made them all attempt to talk over each other?

“What the hell?” Wyatt mouthed as he popped up in a crouched position.

The truck had just passed. The driver and passengers could see us in the review and side mirrors if inclined. They could throw the vehicle in park and take chase. They didn’t seem to know what was happening at the center, and we would like to keep it that way. It was three or four people we wouldn’t have to engage with unnecessarily.

“We should go,” I insisted as my heart rate increased.

Wyatt seemed torn between staying put and running toward the facility. The staccato sounds of gunfire echoed off in the distance spurring us into action.

“Retreat, now!” I heard Axel command over the comms.

That’s all the nudging we needed. At that point, none of us seemed to care if the dump truck occupants saw us in their review mirrors. Despite Axel’s directive, we all popped up and began running toward the detention center. It wasn’t a gentle jog by any means. Instead, we took off running at full speed.

Sasha was letting out high-pitched snarls and whines. My palms grew sweaty, my heart raced, and panic gripped me. The sounds of my ragged breathing filled my ears, and I had to tell myself to control my breathing. I would expend too much energy if I continued breathing incorrectly.

After a few deep breaths in and out, I felt a small measure of control. Then, as I took another deep breath through my nose, a revolting smell assaulted my nose. The decay and an overpowering distinctive smell of metallics filled my senses. My stomach churned, and I gagged, inadvertently inhaling deeply. The repulsive smells now permeated my mouth. I slowed slightly, realizing what I was smelling and why Sasha had been so agitated.

“Infected,” Ari voiced my thoughts aloud.

“I thought we said no to unleashing their dump trucks on them,” BJ huffed.

“Even if we had gone that route, it would have been long after we rescued everyone,” Wyatt scoffed.

“It shouldn’t smell this strong,” I shook my head as my mind attempted to search for something just out of reach.

Sasha had been agitated the entire day. The wind wasn’t blowing that intensely. The likelihood we could smell the contained the infected was very low. Something else was amiss. I knew it with a conviction deep in my soul.

Finally, the detention center was in sight. I had to blink a few times before my brain caught up to my eyes. We had seen large groupings of infected together. We had seen hoards. Or so I thought. My steps faltered. If Ari and Wyatt hadn't instinctively reached out for me, I probably would have face-planted.

"Holy shit!" BJ and Ari echoed my inner dialogue perfectly.

"God, protect us," Felix breathed out in horror.

"Only He can," Wyatt grimly agreed.

Less than thirty minutes ago, there had been no signs of the infected. Yet, spread before us now was the largest hoard we had ever seen. Their sheer size and number made Times Square in New York City on New Year's Eve look like a joke. Because of the magnitude of their mass, they had knocked over the fencing like it was no sturdier than a child's block tower.

We sped up, realizing our people were in danger of being swallowed up in them. There was no way we could fight them off. What made matters worse was it appeared as if some of the captors were attempting to prevent our people and their captives from leaving. Unfortunately, they seemed to care more about stopping us than fleeing for safety.

The gates were wide open, and a group of people was running toward us. The sounds of engines starting, moans from the infected, and screams of terror filled our ears. I recognized Rhys and Uncle Mitch leading a group primarily comprised of women. Some of them were outright sobbing. And as I watched, one tripped and fell, and Simon and Larry were there to swoop her up and continue running. With barely a hitch in their steps, they ran with her pinned between them.

Gunshots went off, and asphalt sprayed up. A few women fell into hysterics, while others seemed to freeze. It took a lot of effort on our people's part to convince them to continue running. More shots sounded off, and other inanimate objects were hit.

Then, I realized a few guards were attempting to shoot at them. I was beyond thankful when I realized they were poor shots. But then, a movement at a guard tower caught my eye, and it took me a moment to discover a sniper had taken position up there. My mouth was opened to scream a warning when I saw the sniper slump over, followed by a spray of blood.

It took me a second to realize BJ was no longer running with us. I hadn't even noticed that he had stopped and taken position behind the abandoned prison bus. His rifle was still pointing toward the guard tower.

"I'm providing cover," BJ called out. "Go! Go! Go!" he frantically urged.

I stopped and looked back at him. The unease I felt earlier had exploded into a full-blown panic. I was torn between remaining with him, helping him, and running forward to help our people behind the gates.

"To the moon!" I called to him.

"And back!" he yelled back.

We continued forward, but Felix stuttered to a stop.

"Should I see if that thing runs anymore?" Felix inquired, pointing to the bus that BJ hid behind.

Felix was one of the men who assisted in our vehicles' maintenance and upkeep. His Uncle had owned a mechanic shop. His uncle had employed him there at twelve. He had been hired to sweep, clean, and run errands for everyone. With time he had learned how to work on the vehicles. He hadn't done it in the military but enjoyed helping the mechanics at Sanctuary.

"Go," Wyatt urged over his shoulder. "We may need it."

"Turn around," Uncle Mitch urged as he drew abreast of us.

I saw the fear and panic in his eyes. I saw his desire to run back as well. However, he realized he needed to lead the women and a handful of men to our vehicles.

“Our people still need us,” Wyatt insisted.

There was a resoluteness in Wyatt’s face. It may be foolish for him to run towards the hoard. However, I knew he couldn’t sleep at night if he knew he could have done something but didn’t. Clearly, there were people still in there that needed us. The infected were almost at the old exercise yard but hadn’t reached the front courtyard yet. Some of them had found open doors of the prison and began pouring through them, while the others continued towards our people, the captors, and the captives. There was still a tiny window of opportunity to rescue people.

I tried to hide my flinch as the sounds of screaming reached our ears. Someone was screaming for help. Thankfully, it wasn’t a voice I recognized.

“Wyatt,” Uncle Mitch said sternly.

It wasn’t the retired military man standing before us. It was a father. It was the man who held an eight-pound baby in his arms one day, blinked, and realized he was at eye level with a man. One day he held a baby’s hand as he attempted his first steps. And the next, he watched a man walk out of their home, forging their own path in life. No matter how old we got, our parents would always struggle not to hold on to us tightly.

“No, Dad,” Wyatt resolutely shook his head. “My brothers are still in there. I wouldn’t leave them before, and I won’t leave them now.”

He quickly embraced his father and muttered a few words in his ears. I was unable to hear his words, but whatever was said had tears filling Uncle Mitch’s eyes. Sure, Uncle Mitch had sent us off before. He had even fought by our sides once, but he had never seen his son really in action. He had never seen him in the close calls we had encountered.

What we were experiencing now went beyond anything we had ever done. The current state of affairs was on a whole new level of terror. The situation we found ourselves in was bound to cost us some lives. We just hoped and prayed the ones that meant the most to us made their way out.

Don't get me wrong, everyone in our community was important. Their loss would be another wound to my already fragile heart. However, if I lost my close friends, family, or men, it wouldn't only leave a scar. It would rip pieces from it that I could never retrieve.

Wyatt turned and ran, and I fell into step beside him. I felt like we were in a race with time. I could almost imagine the sounds of the old grandfather clock in Pop-pop's foyer. My grandmother always complained about how loud it was. It could easily be heard at night or in the stillness of the day through most of the house. It had grated on her nerves. I imagined the tick, tick, tick sound in my frantic, somewhat crazed mind. We were racing against that clock, which was the loudest I had ever heard.

"Avery!" Uncle Mitch called after me.

I knew he would attempt to convince me to return with him. He was becoming more and more protective of me. Admittedly, our relationship had evolved. He called me his daughter on more than one occasion. I loved how our relationship had grown, but I wouldn't listen to his cajoling right now. I couldn't.

"Love you!" I ignored his call.

"Ari, man, you can turn back now," Wyatt prodded as we ran.

Ari had paused when we had and continued to run when we did. I hadn't realized he was still with us. I assumed Ari would have jumped in to help the first group return to the vehicles. It was evident that he was an asset out here, but he also lived an entirely different life before all this. A part of me still assumed that a small part of self-preservation and entitlement still clung to him. Despite the fact I had seen no signs of the rock star mentality he must have had at one point.

"You guys wouldn't even be here if we hadn't requested it," Ari staidly stated.

"Thanks, man," Wyatt nodded.

We didn't have much time to get out as many people as possible. As we reached the gates, three vehicles tore out of it. I realized the first two vehicles carried approximately nine of the jailors. The last vehicle held five of our people. Four of the five were from the bunker. I watched in disbelief as they rushed past the women struggling to run. They never even attempted to stop despite the fact they were out of imminent danger.

Wyatt muttered a curse just as Easton, Kingston, Coach, and Uncle Scott reached our sides with approximately twenty more captives. Easton and Kinston carried older teens from the center over their shoulders in a firemen's carry. They were alarmingly still and unconscious.

Uncle Scott was pushing a gurney with a sobbing woman attached to it. She wore a dress that appeared to have blood stains along the hem. And I shuddered as my imagination devised a thousand scenarios for why she appeared like that. Coach held a small bundle against his chest, and it took me several moments to realize it was a tiny infant he was carrying.

I presumed that she must have given birth recently. It made me wonder who helped her deliver her baby. I suspected she had been a captive from her ragged appearance and thread-worn clothing. I imagined her prenatal care had been abysmal.

"Bryan and Corbin are grabbing the last men from the lab. And Axel and Alex found some hostages in solitary," Kingston explained. "They have five more men they are attempting to free from rooms."

Without any explanation, Kingston realized our intentions. He was giving us the information we needed without prompting. I imagine he would be accompanying us if he didn't have a responsibility to the teenager slung over his shoulders. I saw the longing and understanding in his eyes.

Easton kissed my temple, and I attempted to smile at him. "They went in those doors," he nodded towards a side door. "Be safe. I love you, my queen."

He, too, was worried, but he wouldn't attempt to stop me from going. He understood my need to ensure Axel and

Corbin got out before I did. It was a foolish notion on my part, but he still supported my decision.

Sasha whined and pranced around me. She was still wary of our situation but followed wherever I went. Her loyalty and protectiveness knew no bounds.

“Love you, Goddess,” Kingston smiled and winked at me.

“I love you too,” I responded quickly, brushing kisses on their cheeks. We had to keep moving.

“Copy that,” Wyatt nodded just as the sounds of a bus reached my ears. “See you on the other side, guys.”

“See you soon,” Easton fervently agreed as if he was manifesting his words.

“Hey, Wyatt and Ari,” Kingston looked at Ari and Wyatt, hemming me in on both sides.

“What’s up?” Wyatt inquired as Ari made some type of noise.

“Take care of our girl, yeah?” he prodded.

“Always,” Wyatt promised.

“That’s the plan,” Ari responded.

I blinked in surprise. What was going on? Was this another Zeke situation? It couldn’t be. Could it? Ari had moments of flirtation, but I figured that was his persona. I hadn’t taken any of it to heart. Plus, I was perfectly happy with my six men for the millionth time.

“Get in,” Felix called to our group as he threw open the back emergency door. “Scott, I’ll help you load the woman.”

I was grateful for Felix’s interruption and relieved he had gotten the bus started. It would be needed to cause a greater distance between the infected and our people. With the shape most of them were in, the hoard was bound to catch up to them before they reached our vehicles at this rate.

“Let’s go,” I insisted, hearing the ticking clock again. “Love you!” I yelled at my people boarding or on the bus.

I didn't hear their responses or attempt to discern the voices calling to me as I ran. Wyatt, Ari, and I took off towards the multi-windowed front of the building. As we ran, I took stock of our surroundings. I didn't think I had ever been so alert. Even with the distractions, I was hyper-aware of the direness of the situation.

I saw some of the guards falling into the clutches of the infected. I honestly couldn't muster any feelings of sympathy for them. They had essentially enslaved others for their own selfish machinations. I knew it was heartless, but I couldn't find it in my heart to be empathetic right now.

After further observation, I realized some of the captives were being attacked. And there was no way we could step in and assist them. There were too many infected, and it would be a suicide mission for us to intervene. I felt sick to my stomach. My heart grew heavy. I knew, I would be forever haunted by the helplessness I felt.

"There's nothing we can do," Wyatt said with devastation mirroring my own.

I hadn't realized my footsteps slowed until he pulled me along. I determinedly stuffed the feelings of despair down. I didn't have the time or luxury to break down or process my feelings. I couldn't do anything. I needed to focus on the situations I could change right now.

My heart somewhat lifted when I saw Zeke, Oliver, and a handful of our people rushing past with more hostages. I waved at Zeke as we took a sharp turn left. Zeke's eyes widened when he realized our intentions. He opened his mouth as if he was going to protest or warn us, but I recognized the moment he understood his objection would be fruitless.

"Be safe!" he paused momentarily.

The guys echoed his sentiments. Once our eyes met, Zeke kissed his fingertips and pointed them toward me. The gesture was new, unexpected, and touching. My eyes filled with tears, and I returned the action.

"Come on," Ari urged us.

At this point, if I were watching us on television, I would be yelling. I would be mocking myself for the little pauses we had made. I would have scorned the wasted moments we appeared to have as the infected closed in around us. However, this was real life, and we never knew how many moments we had in life, so I was determined to make every one of them count. My men and family needed to understand how much they meant to me in the event I never saw them again. I didn't want the last memory they had of me not telling them how much I loved them.

The infected had gotten closer. They weren't terribly fast, yet they were alarmingly closer. I would say they were a little over one hundred yards away. We had little time to grab who we needed to and run. It was almost a hopeless situation, but there was no way I was leaving without at least trying to assist Axel, Alec, Dad, and Corbin.

We ran alongside the building, causing a greater distance between the majority of our group and the infected. We finally spotted the door we saw on the map we had acquired, and the one Easton had indicated to us. Wyatt reached for the door handle when another scream rented the air closer to our location.

I quickly turned and didn't see who or what could have made that scream. I could only see more trees, shrubbery, and another chain-link fence. It was approximately twenty feet away from the door. The fence appeared to separate the facility from the former employee parking lot. Only a few vehicles remained.

For a brief second, I wondered if that was intentional or the state the captors had found it in. Did they intentionally remove most of the vehicles? Or had that many guards abandoned the facility once they realized what had happened?

Wyatt scrambled to open the door and cursed under his breath, and I determined it was locked. He tugged at it a couple of times as if doubting the evidence. Then Wyatt pulled out his lock-pick set. Ari and I immediately covered him wordlessly. Wyatt attempted to smile and nod at us as we pulled out our guns.

The entrance we were attempting to enter was tucked into a corner of the facility. The building's bushes, foliage, and natural shape seemed to be hiding us from the central area of the facility. We were no longer able to see anything or anyone. The pounding of my heart was loud in my ears as I continued to observe our surroundings.

Moments later, I saw movement beyond the employee parking lot. Heads began to appear, cresting the hill leading down to another road. I gasped when I realized the infected weren't only coming from the back of the property. From our new vantage point, we realized the hoard was even more extensive than we presumed. They were flooding in from another side now.

"Where did they all come from?" Ari asked in a horrified whisper.

For a second, I was speechless. I shook my head. The most important lesson I learned after the world went to crap was never to assume anything. I should imagine the worst possibility and then come to terms with the fact I'll probably witness or experience far greater than that. The "hoard" Trevor and Jessica had encountered was approximately around two hundred. What we were observing far exceeded that. It made me recall the last time I physically viewed a crowd of this magnitude.

My college had been an impressive Division 1 university for football. My school had gone to playoffs twice while I attended there. Rabid fans had come from all over the country. I had seen the tailgaters and packed stadium from a distance and had been amazed at how many people could fit in a concentrated area. Yet, the hoard of infected that fell upon us was easily triple the amount I had seen back then.

"The infected from the cities were bound to travel once they ran out of... food," Wyatt grimly responded.

The wind picked up, and their scent assaulted me. I tried not to inhale or allow it to invade my senses. I pulled out some Vicks, my gaiter, and a couple extra. I sprayed them with a scent I had created. I wiped the Vicks under my nose before

passing it to Ari, since Wyatt's hands were still busy picking the lock. Sasha lifted her nose and sniffed and then growled.

"Now we know why Sasha was so keyed up," I bleakly added. "She must have smelled them long ago."

"Thanks," Ari murmured before mimicking my actions.

"Almost got it," Wyatt hissed.

"You have this," I encouraged him, realizing this lock was more intricate.

Another scream ripped through the air. Closer. The sounds of the infected's moans, wails, and hisses drew nearer. Suddenly, Rosie, Seville, and one of the other bunker people were in our field of vision. They ran into the employee parking lot. They were scrambling to find an unlocked vehicle with keys in it. Finally, one of them found one and jumped into it. The sound of the engine was heard over the chilling sounds of the infected.

"This one!" one of the men yelled to the others.

The rest of them rushed to jump into the running vehicle. Seville exchanged words with the driver before taking his place. The infected were nearly to their vehicle. And I prayed they drove away on time. I didn't like them, but I wouldn't wish *death by hoard* on them.

"They wouldn't," Ari said in a horrified whisper as Hopkins sprinted into sight.

She screamed something unintelligible to them. Rosie paused before getting into the vehicle. Then she yelled something to Seville. The other man dove into the back. Hopkins stumbled and nearly face-planted but quickly gained her footing. Rosie continued to gesticulate furiously. Seville must have said something to her because I saw tears enter her eyes before she climbed into the passenger seat.

"No!" I gasped as Hopkins reached for the back door.

She was less than two feet away, and Seville took off without her. The sounds of the squealing tires were heard above more screams and the sounds the infected emitted. The

car's movement and Hopkins desperate reach for the door handle caused her to lose her footing once more. Unfortunately, this time she couldn't recover. She jarringly fell onto her hands and knees. The infected were feet away from her.

"Hopkins!" I screamed, hoping she could hear me.

"Over here! Run!" Ari and Wyatt nearly yelled simultaneously.

There were about twenty feet and a twenty-foot-tall fence separating us. We would never reach Hopkins on time if we ran and climbed the fence. Plus, it wouldn't make sense for us to get her now.

I nearly sighed in relief when her eyes met ours. Hopkins scrambled to her feet. Her look of pure terror and devastation would forever haunt me. She began to run toward us, and I knew we had to give her a fighting chance. Wyatt and Ari followed me, falling in on each one of my sides.

I pulled out my gun and began to systematically shoot the infected closest to her. Wyatt and Ari did the same. Hopkins was near the fence and began to climb in earnest. She was sobbing, and her panic had consumed her.

"You can do it," I encouraged her, continuing to unload a clip.

"You got this," Wyatt added, switching out his gun.

"Just climb over to us," Ari stopped shooting.

He threw a jacket over the barbwire up top. I hadn't even thought about that quite yet. I had been praying Hopkins would create enough distance between her and the infected. For a second, I thought she had accomplished just that.

For a split second, I thought she had it. I thought she could reach us on time until she looked over her shoulder. I saw the moment her fears overwhelmed her. The sheer number of infected surrounding her caused her to panic more, and she squealed right before she began to fall.

I fruitlessly scrambled to catch her. In my desperate thinking, I believed if I could just touch any part of her body, that would be enough. And for one foolish, crazy second, I let hope hit me when I felt the brush of her boots at my fingertips. I wish I had been thinking clearly because crippling horror engulfed me when she continued to lose the purchase she got on the fence.

She lost the eight or nine-foot advantage she had. She fell several feet until her cargo pocket caught on a sharper part of the fence. Her fingertips barely wrapped around the fencing. The infected reached her. The fence shook under the weight. Her scream sent chills down my spine as she fell backward into their waiting numbers. They converged on her and mercilessly ripped into her.

“Hopkins,” I screamed, my stomach dipping. “No! No! No!”

Her screams echoed in my ears. I lost sight of her. Then there was a break in the infected. Our gazes met. I was paralyzed by extreme horror and regret.

“Please!” she begged, looking directly into my eyes.

I knew what she was asking me. I swallowed the thickness in my throat. I willed the tears to stay at bay. I lifted my pistol. Whether I liked her or not, she deserved mercy.

If I was being actively eaten by eight to nine infected, I prayed someone would take me out of my misery. I knew she understood there was no rescuing her at this point. She knew her time was up.

“Please,” her lips moved.

There was so much blood. So much. I tried not to process what I was seeing. I tried not to memorize this moment at all. I nodded and took a deep breath in. I squeezed the trigger on the exhale. I didn't fail to notice the other two shots that followed mine. A small sob escaped my throat as my own morality reared its head once more. I would never find it easy to kill another person, even if that person was in danger of turning eventually.

“Let’s go, Ave,” Wyatt said with urgency pulling me toward the building.

The fence began to sway towards us as the infected leaned on it. One of the posts lifted up and out of the ground. I could see the concrete ball that had been poured around it into the ground. The furthest point was nearly bent in half as the infected pushed against it. Their angry, hungry maws snapped at us. Eager for a bite of us. Their greedy, disgusting hands reached for us. They were hoping to pull us into them.

“We did all that we could,” Ari soothingly hummed, squeezing the nape of my neck gently and pulling me away with Wyatt.

I nodded, tucking my gun back into its holster. “Rosie and Seville left her,” my voice cracked. “She could have made it.”

“I know. I know,” Wyatt soothingly hummed as he squeezed my free hand. “They’ll have to answer for their actions when we return.”

## CHAPTER 20



WE entered the building, tears clouding my vision. It was clear that we entered through an exit door and not through the main doors, where the door and wall were made primarily of glass. Glass that the infected was currently pounding on, attempting to get to us.

I desperately tried to compose myself as I took notice of my surroundings. We entered a room reminiscent of a booking area. It had a waiting area with chairs strategically spread

across the area. A long counter with computers was on the opposite side of the doors from where we came in. I imagined that's where they had been processed in. Behind the counter were five doors. Three doors to the left appeared to be small holding cells. The door to the far right had *Medical* written above it. And the final door in the middle of the room seemed to be the door that led to the actual holding facilities.

I followed Wyatt through the open doorway and was slightly surprised. I had only seen prisons in movies. This facility, so far, wasn't the dark, cement slab centers I had seen. Instead, it seemed bright and clean.

We ran past several open doorways where it appeared more in-processing occurred. We passed shower rooms, bathrooms, visiting rooms, and rooms filled with dark grey jumpsuits on shelves. As we neared the door at the end of the long narrow hallway, I could hear Bane's distinct barks.

We ran towards the noise. We entered a large open area that appeared to be the main holding area. Opened cell doors gave me a glimpse of bunk beds and metal toilets. In the middle of the large open room were steel octagon-shaped tables with attached matching seats. Above me were additional cells on a mezzanine level.

We paused, waiting to hear the direction we heard Bane in. I thought Bane's snarls were coming to the far left. Wyatt seemed to agree because that was the direction we headed toward. The moment we rounded the corner, a new level of terror filled me. Any relief I felt for seeing Axel, Alec, Chad, and Cal were quickly dashed away.

They were approximately thirty feet away and were attempting to fight back nearly twenty infected. Each man dragged victims along while they fought to protect themselves. The only standing hostage struggled to fight them off with his one good arm. His other arm hung limply at his side.

I heard Ari make a sound of surprise and concern but didn't have time to turn to look at him. Instead, I surged forward, Sasha, Wyatt, and finally, Ari flanking me. I pulled out my sais and attacked, giving the others time to protect their

captives and pull them to safety. The hall was narrow and probably only six feet wide at the most. It made it hard for them to squeeze past us, but they managed.

I had to stop the bile from rising to my mouth as a morbidly obese man made a grab for me. The smell that emanated from him was more pungent and revolting than usual. Some of the blood from his leaking eyes had crusted over. The dried rivulets mimicked tree roots as they snaked down his cheeks over his multiple jowls and between the crevices of his multiple chins.

As his sausage-like fingers closed in towards my neck I noticed that the man had poor hygiene practices in life. His fingernails were long and almost resembled talons. I had no clue what they looked like in life, but in death, they had black mold-like growth on them. I could see the flesh that he had ripped from others and shuddered.

I was beyond thankful that even in death he seemed ungainly and uncoordinated as I sank my sharpened sais into both of his ears. I quickly withdrew them as I felt his body begin to slump forward. I could feel one of the men at my back and knew I couldn't jump back to avoid the man collapsing on me, so I chose to jump over his body just as two more infected advanced forward.

They were too far away to impale with my sais, so I decided I needed to impede their progress forward. The further we could keep them at bay, the better. They were nearly abreast of each other, so I used the momentum of my body and executed a scissor kick, twisting my body to the right, striking my steel toe boot in the temple of the first guy seconds before extending my leg and hitting the other in the middle of their forehead. I could feel my foot embedding into the man's soft forehead and quickly had to yank my foot away.

I was shocked at how easily my foot sank into his skull. It was then that I realized his body was in a deteriorated state. I had seen the infected in several states of decline, but this man was on a different level of decomposition. It just made me wonder once again if they could naturally die off at one point.

I quickly recovered from the unexpected circumstances. I didn't have time to think or react to how badly that situation could have ended before I continued my attack. I plunged my sai up into the man's lower chin up into his brain, quickly withdrawing it at the same time I took advantage of the other man tripping forward and drove it back into the soft back part of his skull and up.

"Holy shit, Ave," Ari breathed as he jumped over one of the men I just downed and used his bo staff he had modified to have blades on each side.

"She makes it look way too easy, doesn't she?" Wyatt chortled as he annihilated an infected.

"That's some special effects shit, without special effects," Ari said in admiration advancing forward.

We continued to take down the infected systematically. We fought as if we had been fighting together since the beginning—minimal words needed to be exchanged as we took them down one by one. Eventually, Axel joined us. And soon, we were surrounded by the down-infected.

"Retreat," Axel brusquely barked out suddenly.

We had little time to gloat about our victory. Because just ahead, more infected began to fill the hallway. They were like crazed sharks when the blood hit the water. They hurried towards us, eager for their next meal. I turned my body as Bane and Sasha pushed their way between the infected and us. They let out low menacing growls and barks as I picked my way over the downed infected.

"I found the override," Alec called out in triumph, as we neared the area where the cells were located at.

The moment Bane and Sasha entered the room, Alec hit a button, and the steel door slammed shut behind us. It effectively protected us against the advancing infected. I barely covered my jump of surprise as the first one crashed into the door seconds after we ran through it.

Something peered at us through the little square glass window in the middle of the door. I shuddered as I realized

most of his face was missing. I found myself attempting to distinguish specific facial features until I realized the absurdity of the action. I whirled around. I had enough fodder for my nightmares. I didn't need any more.

I forced myself to push thoughts of the faceless infected behind me and focus on any more impending threats. I looked around and noticed the sizeable holding-cell area was still devoid of any dangers. I knew better than to assume anything, though.

I briefly wondered where our people and hostages were. I couldn't see them and knew there was no getting out from the direction we had entered. I surmised they were looking for alternate exits down the other corridors and closed doors I could see from our vantage point. I looked at the others, gauging their reactions. I waited for Axel to tell us our following action.

His mind was quick. I was confident he already had another plan of action to enact. With his strategic mind, he always thought quickly on his feet. I realized the others seemed to be waiting on him as well.

"I sent Cal and Chad to scout ahead," Axel informed. "They're making sure we have no alternate exits. And they're eliminating all potential threats by closing the left-open doors."

"They surrounded us on those sides," Wyatt informed him, pointing to the direction we came from.

"We should plan on waiting them out," Alec tentatively stated.

It was the thought that had been floating around my head. If we could secure our location and stay safe, it would be insane to leave at this point. There were way too many of them and so little of us. It would be a wise decision to hunker down.

Axel nodded and sighed, rubbing his finger along his bottom lip. He seemed to have already known that but had a slight hope it wasn't the case. Resignation entered Axel's eyes,

and he finally seemed to solve his inner debate. Suddenly he whirled and grabbed me.

I stumbled into him as he pulled me in tight. The rapid rise and fall of our chests seemed to sync up. The pounding of our hearts fell into a rhythm together. I didn't care how sweaty and nasty we were, I was being held by one of my men.

"I told everyone to retreat," Axel gruffly admonished. "It was foolish to come after us."

I stiffened briefly. Then I realized Axel wasn't talking to just me but Ari and Wyatt as well. I also recognized his ire came from a place of fear and concern. I didn't say anything. I merely nodded and embraced him harder.

"Like they didn't save our asses," Alec huffed with a grin. "There was no way all of us could have escaped unharmed without them."

Axel shot him a scathing glance, but made no response. He knew they had been in a harrowing situation. They were burdened with injured and unresponsive captives. They wouldn't have been able to leave the captives to the infected. Their consciences wouldn't allow them to. It would have put them in a perilous predicament.

"You're welcome, Alpha," Wyatt smirked before embracing us.

Axel shook his head indulgently, but made no move to extricate us from Wyatt's embrace. We seemed to stand there for an extended period in a holding pattern. However, I was sure it was mere minutes.

"There were more down the other corridor, and I closed those doors, too," Chad called out breathlessly as he ran through an opposite hallway.

Another man followed Chad. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place him at the moment. Ari seemed to have recognized him because he darted forward.

"Ari!" "Nolan!" I heard two men cry out in relief.

Ari ran forward to embrace the slighter man who had been a hostage. It was the man whose arm hung loosely by his side. And as I watched them hug each other, I finally realized why he seemed familiar. He was Nolan Callahan, lead guitarist and backup singer of Unfiltered Euphonies.

My eyes filled with happy tears as I realized they were reuniting. Goodness knows how long they had been separated. There was so little joy left in the world; discovering we could still hope for a better day was comforting. Wyatt seemed to realize how fraught my nerves and emotions were and kissed my temple.

Cal came running back into the room from the front of the facility. At his arrival, the men parted from each other, anticipating Cal's words.

"We're surrounded," he breathlessly informed us. "There's no way we're getting out of here. I locked the doors as some of them attempted to come in."

I shuddered at the thought. We had closed the door on our way in, but I didn't think they would attempt to come through. I shouldn't have been so surprised. I was thankful Cal had the forethought to lock them.

"That's some crazy shit out there," Chad commented, peering out the windows. "I have never seen so many of them at once."

As one, Axel, Wyatt, and I joined him. The windows were tall and allowed a lot of sunlight into the room. I gasped as I realized what I had witnessed thus far was just the tip of the iceberg. As far as my eyes could see, there were infected. They surrounded us, and no matter what direction I looked, there seemed to be even more. The hoard seemed never-ending.

"Well, it looks like we're staying for a while," Wyatt broke the stunned silence. "We should reinforce all the exits and entrances. Double-check them," he looked at Cal.

"I don't think we have any other choice," Axel sighed, rubbing a weary hand over his face. "I'll tell everyone else to roll out. For their safety, they can't wait for us. Gemini, Bravo

2, come with me, and we'll ensure that we're safely barricaded in." Wordlessly, they nodded and ran off.

He looked at us as if he was determining who would better work together. "Alpha 4 and Bravo 3, check the place out and see if they have enough provisions for us to survive on." Cal and Wyatt voiced their agreeance.

Axel turned toward me. "Little Warrior and Pop Star," Wyatt and Cal snorted a laugh despite the direness of the situation as they walked away. "There's a medical room over there. We put the others in there. Can you get our captives settled in and give them any medical care they may need?"

For a brief moment, I felt guilty for forgetting about the others. Out of sight, out of mind had taken on a new meaning.

I nodded and headed towards the area Axel indicated. I had to focus on something else. I had to push back the memories of Hopkins's gruesome death. I needed to compartmentalize what I could handle now versus what I couldn't.

As if the rest of our group realized we had been thinking about them, our headsets crackled to life.

"Alpha, this is Alpha 3," Corbin's anxious voice sounded in our ears.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding as I recognized his voice. My footsteps faltered, and Ari placed a comforting hand on my lower back. I attempted to give him a smile of thanks, but the truth was my mask was slipping.

I was a wreck, but I couldn't break down yet. This day turned into a nightmare. There was no guarantee we could remain safe and no way to know how long we would have to wait to leave. It didn't help that I felt guilt over leaving the kids, Foster especially. His pleas still haunted me.

"Go ahead," Axel responded.

"What's your status?" Corbin inquired.

"You all need to leave. Head to safety," Axel stated.  
"We're surrounded, and there's no way we can make it out

until they pass. They're headed your way, and there's no end in sight."

"Copy that. We're rolling out," Corbin reluctantly stated. "Who do you have with you? We're attempting to do a roll call."

"Gemini, Bravo 2 and 3, Alpha 4, Pop Star, and Little Warrior are with me," Axel informed him.

Corbin let out a sound of relief as I followed Ari and Nolan in the opposite direction of the other medical room I had seen.

"Copy that," Corbin responded. "Be safe and return to us."

"That's the plan," Wyatt wickedly stated. "Don't worry. We'll protect our girl."

I had to smile at his comment. Despite the unpleasantness of the circumstances we found ourselves in, at least we were still alive. I knew without a doubt we had lost people today. We always liked to prepare for potential situations, but I don't think we could have predicted this. The hoard had come from nowhere. And even if we had trusted our dogs' caginess, we couldn't have abandoned the people trapped here.

"Good to hear," Dad gruffly stated. "Love you, Honeybee."

It wasn't like him breaking protocol and not calling me by my call sign. However, I could hear the tension and worry in his voice. He wasn't as infallible as I thought he was. As a little girl, I had always viewed my father as a superhero. Now that I was an adult, I realized he may still be a superhero, but he was a superhero with feelings. He was capable of feeling fear and panic.

It struck me then that they were still in danger too. Who knew how far and wide the infected spread? They still needed to retrieve the children and travel several miles to return to safety. We had already run into trouble on the way out here. Who knew what they would face on the way back? They had more people to protect and fewer people to assist them. They

were at least six people short, with the five of us and Hopkins gone.

“Love you too, Papa Bear,” I tearily responded.

I started as Ari paused to embrace me. At first, I stiffened, but then I relaxed into his embrace. I hadn't even realized I was in danger of falling off the ledge until he held me. I knew I should be seeking comfort from my men, but right now, I just needed reassurance that I wasn't alone. Our group was good, and we would do everything in our power to protect each other.

“Little Warrior,” Kingston piped up next. “Make... return... love...”

His statement came in with so much interference I realized they must now be out of range. I began to shake with my emotions. I had two pieces of my heart, but the other four parts were rolling away. The distance between us never seemed more significant. We had gone on separate missions before, but this was different. The danger level had increased exponentially. I was desperately trying to stave off my emotions and remind myself that people in the other room needed me.

“Pop Star?” Nolan impishly nudged, reminding me of his presence.

I pulled away, thankful for his prodding and reminder. I needed to get it together. There was time to break down later.

I looked at Nolan. The poor man looked exhausted and had been beaten within an inch of his life. I could see that he was attempting to alleviate the tension.

“Hi, I'm Avery,” I tried to smile at him.

“Nolan,” he smirked at me. “Hot damn, you're gorgeous.”

“Knock it off,” Ari gruffly stated before pushing open the door we had stopped in front of.

I perused the medical room quickly. This room also had a lot of light coming in. The walls without the tall narrow windows had cabinets and counters lining them. The counters

had jars filled with alcohol pads, cotton balls, tongue depressors, and other first-aid items. The middle of the room had six medical beds with other medical equipment between each bed.

“Sure thing, Pop Star,” Nolan gave him a knowing smile before it faltered slightly.

Now that we weren't in the heat of battle, I saw why his smile had disappeared. Nolan looked terrible, but the other four appeared to be barely holding on. I felt guilty for overlooking the hostages. It was evident Nolan was brutally reminded of the condition of his peers.

My breath caught when I took stock of the four figures lying unnervingly still in four of the beds. Their haggard and soiled appearances were in stark contrast to the pristine white sheets covering the beds. The two men occupying the closest beds were in a horrible state but I could still determine their ages fell between the mid-twenties to early thirties. They were awake but seemed to be in a state of shock, their gazes unblinking. The man in the middle was lying on his stomach and I could see the abuse his body suffered. It took me a second to visibly detect he was breathing as my gaze fell on the last occupant in the furthest bed.

I bit back a gasp when I realized it was a teen girl occupying it. Her long red hair was reminiscent of Merida in *Brave*, the Disney princess. However, her natural curls were visibly tangled and showed signs of not being brushed for some time. Her shorts and T-shirt were heavily stained and had tears and holes littered throughout them. Under a significant layer of grime, her skin was pale. I nearly missed the light freckles covering her skin, she was so filthy.

Easton had said they were all held in solitary confinement. What could she have done to end up in that situation? I forced myself to calm, so I could treat them with a clear head.

“I'll explain later,” Ari grimly stated. “Why is everyone so...”

I needed to assist them immediately. Once again, I was thankful for the distraction. I grimaced as I realized how dirty

I was. I desperately needed a shower, and I wanted to get cleaned up before I treated them. However, I would feel at ease once everyone was stabilized. I could do a quick vital check before getting on with the rest of their examination.

I removed my leather jacket, gaiter, gloves, hat, and sunglasses and placed them on one of the hard plastic chairs. Then I walked over to the sink to wash up the best I could. I decided to wash all the exposed portions of my skin thoroughly.

“Abused?” Nolan scoffed. “I didn’t get this prettied up for no reason. We were the troublemakers.” He made his way over to the teen and gently brushed her hair off her face. “This is Kiara. She *celebrated* her fifteenth birthday last week,” he said in a scathing tone. “She has a little brother and sister she hadn’t seen in over a week, and she attempted to see them. She lost both of her parents, and they always used her siblings against her.”

“I need to get my wife,” a petite, slender man croaked, attempting to sit up.

“The rest of our group took away everyone we rescued,” I truthfully informed him. “They are taking them to a safe place where you won’t be treated like trash any longer.”

Nolan walked over to the man and gently attempted to get him to lie back down. I smiled my thanks again. After washing my hands, I determined I needed to ensure I had the supplies and what else I had on hand. I hadn’t brought my medical bag, so I had to check the many cabinets and drawers they had situated around the room.

“Is my wife safe?” he hopefully inquired.

I was determining how to answer him best. The situation was so chaotic. We had extracted them, and any information we collected would probably be done at Sanctuary. I didn’t want to tell him some people had died, but I didn’t want to lie either.

“They said all the kids were in safe keeping. Is that true?” another man spoke up before I could answer the first man.

I discovered gloves, a blood pressure cuff, gauze, medical tape, and alcohol pads. I pulled them out and placed them on the counter.

“Vihaan, Franco,” Nolan jokingly tsked. “This is Avery, and you should let the girl breathe before bombarding her with questions.”

I shot him a grateful look. I wanted to assess them before getting to all the problematic issues. I wanted them to want to get better. If their mental state was fragile, it could hinder their physical healing abilities.

I was impressed by the items I found. It was either freshly stocked when everything went down, or someone had taken meticulous care of this area. Either way, I felt hopeful they would have everything I would need to do all essential medical care.

I assumed Vihaan was a slight Indian/ Asian man. I knew Vihaan was an Indian name, and he had all the appearances of the nationality. From his soft-spoken and almost timid demeanor, he struck me as an introvert.

Franco appeared to be of Italian descent and had the look of a blue-collar worker. He had swarthy skin, broad shoulders, a built upper body, and a slight paunch to his belly. I imagined before SHTF; he had a physically demanding job to achieve his fitness level.

“Hi Vihaan and Franco. I wish our meeting were for better circumstances,” I tried to smile. “I understand your concerns. I would also worry for my loved ones,” I soothingly stated.

My sociable nursing hat was firmly put in place. I had to put these people at ease. I had to instill confidence in them over my abilities. Everyone knows your mental health significantly affects your physical health. If they were worried or anxious, it could harm their desire to get better.

I might have been breaking down moments ago, but times like these put things back into perspective. These people had been put through hell. I could delay coping with my traumas to help them. They needed me more.

“All the children are safe and are returning to Sanctuary as we speak,” I pulled a rolling tray off the wall to load it with. “Most of my team comprises ex-military, law enforcement, or highly trained individuals,” I softly informed them. “And if you give me your wife’s name and description the moment we can contact base, I’ll let you know.”

I wished I could lie to Vihaan. I knew we had lost some innocent people trapped here against their will. And I prayed Vihaan’s wife awaited him on the other side.

Franco, the man inquiring about the children, sighed in relief and leaned back on the bed, closing his eyes. “I lost my wife, brother, and sister-in-law,” he mumbled. “I can’t lose my son, nieces, and nephew.”

“As far as I know, we got all the children. They’re in good hands, Franco,” I reassured him again. “And the moment it’s safe, we can return to them.”

“Her name is Fatima,” Vihaan blinked sluggishly.

I stopped looking through the cabinets and drawers. I believed I had everything I needed. I placed everything I thought I needed onto the rolling tray. It would make treating them easier.

“Duly noted, Vihaan,” I said as I slipped on the gloves. “I’ll remember that and pass on her name.”

He didn’t respond. He seemed to have fallen into a fitful sleep. I checked his pupils and sighed when I noticed them contracting. He may have suffered an initial concussion, but his pupils were reacting normally now.

“What can I do?” Ari asked, sidling up next to me.

“First,” I determinedly stated. “You should get cleaned up. After that, we’re going to assess their injuries. Then we’ll patch them up to the best of our abilities.”

Ari nodded, and with determination, we prepared to help these people.

## CHAPTER 21



“I thought you had died. How did you even end up here?” Ari asked with a broken hitch. “I couldn’t reach you. I saw the zombies pull you from the vehicle. When I went back, you weren’t there.”

Surprisingly Nolan laughed at the declaration. “I should have been dead. They did pull me from the vehicle. Two of them tripped all over each other to get to me. And another one pushed me in their haste to eat me. I fell and hit my head. The man upstairs must have been looking out for me because there was a gap under the docking area. I rolled under there before I passed out. When I woke up, they were all gone. I went back to our RV park, and everyone was gone.

“As I was leaving, these douchebags caught me. So I’ve been here ever since. And you know me. I couldn’t take this lying down, so I’ve been trying to escape ever since. You didn’t know,” Nolan insisted, seeing the guilt on Ari’s face. “Where’s my niece and nephew?” he inquired, changing the subject.

After our quick showers, I returned to the clinic. We were pleasantly surprised to find out they still had electricity. The backup generators seemed to be doing their job impressively. It just went to show you how spoiled we were when no

electricity brought us mild discomfort. For nearly everyone else, it was now a luxury.

I was beyond impressed at how well-stocked the clinic was. My initial inspection had missed the closet in the corner of the room. The cabinet had already been well stocked. But it had appeared that the people who had taken over the correctional facility had raided several more pharmacies. So I had everything I needed and then some to treat my patients.

I made a mental note to utilize the duffel bag we had found. We would load up on some of the needed medications. We didn't know when we could leave, but I wanted to be prepared when we did. There was no way I was leaving anything behind that we could utilize at Sanctuary.

Three of my patients seemed severely dehydrated and malnourished. Thank the Lord, the bruising and abrasions I found on them were superficial. I cleaned up and bandaged their wounds and inserted an IV to give them the fluids their bodies desperately craved. Unfortunately, my last patient was in dire straits. I found three cracked ribs, second-degree burns, and infected wounds on his back.

Nolan had told us how one of the guards had a sadistic streak. And for some reason, he had it out Harvey, my critical patient. The guard liked to burn the people in solitary confinement with pokers. He also beat them with whips and other torture methods.

The solitary confinement cells weren't as clean as the other cells. They never cleaned them out and intentionally made the cells less habitable. The prisoners weren't allowed to shower and stayed in their soiled clothes for days, if not weeks. Because of these conditions, Harvey had picked up an infection. I had immediately started him on fluids, antibiotics, and pain medications, but now I was faced with the task of attempting to clean up his wounds to the best of my ability.

"They're back at Sanctuary," Ari smirked. "I can't wait for you to see this place, man. It's the perfect spot to ride out the apocalypse. But, hell, even if it weren't the apocalypse, you'd love it."

I couldn't help but smile at his declaration. I always loved Sanctuary, but then again, it had been my grandparents' place. It held so many of my favorite childhood memories. It was a beautiful spot, and I was pleased others appreciated it.

"You know me. Wherever you go, I'll go. Tell me about yourself, Avery," Nolan prodded next, a mischievous smile on his lips.

"What do you want to know, Nolan?" I playfully rolled my eyes.

His gregariousness and desire to rile others up reminded me of a lot of Kingston, with a touch of Wyatt and Corbin thrown in. I suspected those men would feed off each other once they met him. He was a shit-stirrer and thrived on it. I could only imagine the mischief those men would get into in the future.

I slipped on disposable gloves and removed the warm washcloths I had draped on Harvey's back. I had to swallow when saliva filled my mouth. The smell and severity of his damaged skin turned my stomach. Some of his injuries were letting off a putrid smell. I determined the areas that needed the most work and injected him with a numbing agent in several spots.

The man had already suffered enough. I didn't want him to feel any more pain if I could help it. I knew cleaning his wounds wasn't an easy feat. In fact, I suspected I might have to reopen some of his wounds. Some of them had begun to heal, but the infection was under it. I had to purge as much as possible.

"Are you part ninja? What's your favorite color? What did you do before the apocalypse? How many kids do you want? Do you have a man? Maybe a husband?" Nolan rapidly spit out as he slyly looked at Ari. "You know," he puffed out his chest. "I used to be famous."

He perched himself on one of the beds. He too, had taken a shower but had refused any medical care. Instead, he insisted that we help the others, even though I knew his arm needed to be examined.

This medical facility was crazy. It went beyond the initial room we had discovered. There were more rooms off of the clinic housing other medical equipment. It made sense to have some of it, especially if they didn't want to haul a potentially dangerous youth to a crowded hospital unless needed.

I discovered an X-ray machine and other hi-tech equipment. I had never performed X-rays in my clinical rotation, but I was confident I could figure it out. I met several nurses and technicians at the hospital I'd trained at. One of my acquaintances worked in radiology. Sometimes I would take lunch with him if I didn't feel like going to the cafeteria. I had watched him enough times and believed I could successfully operate the machine.

Once the machines warmed up and I finished with Harvey, I had every intention of bullying Nolan into receiving care. He might be stubborn, but he would meet his match today. I didn't play around with other people's health.

"Boy band, right?" I teased him before answering his question in order. "Maybe. Periwinkle. I was a nursing student. I have three kids, three and under, and a bonus daughter who's six," I smirked. "Do furbabies count? Because I have three of those too. One day I would like to have two or three more—kids, that is. However, I wouldn't be shocked if I had another four or five more, to be honest." His eyes comically widened, and I had to hide a smile. "And I have six boyfriends."

I really would like to have two or three more biological kids. However, I wouldn't be surprised if we adopted more. We had the room to accommodate them and the love to provide for them. We seemed to thrive and crave the chaos. It was a discussion I would like to have in-depth with my men. But every one of them had alluded to wanting to get me pregnant. They didn't seem intimidated or put off by the thought of growing our family. So there was that.

I double-checked that I had all the supplies to clean the wounds now that they were softened and not crusted with dried blood, pus, and such. Then I placed a trash can close to my rolling tray. I wanted to dispose of any soiled pads easily.

“We can start here,” I told Ari, pointing to an optimal spot. “While we do that, I want to replace these washcloths with others.”

I threw the heavily soiled washcloths into the trash can too. I wasn't going to wash them. We had so many on hand it was senseless. If we were in Sanctuary, we probably would. We liked to keep waste low. However, I wasn't going to bring dirty ones back with us when it wasn't a necessity out here.

“I'll get them,” Ari volunteered.

Ari had gone through the space with me. He knew exactly where they were, so I smiled and nodded.

“She's shitting me, isn't she?” Nolan asked Ari after several moments of silence before he busted out laughing. “Four children and six men,” he loudly guffawed. “Yeah, right!”

“She really isn't,” Ari smirked, grabbing new washcloths from a drawer. “I met them. Hana loves her oldest daughter. Her bonus baby.”

Vihaan made a slight sound in his sleep and I looked up. Vihaan had barely stirred when we addressed his wounds. Nolan informed us that they liked to punish them with sleep deprivation, so they all were exhausted and healing from injuries. In addition, their captors intentionally changed the temperatures in solitary confinement to extremes. Sometimes it was freezing cold, and other times it was swelteringly hot. And Nolan said they had blared heavy metal music all last night.

Apparently, Vihaan had ended up in solitary for defending his wife. He hadn't appreciated one of the guards attempting to force his attention on Fatima. The one-hundred-and-thirty-pound Indian man needed three guards to pull him off the guard in question. Unfortunately, he split his knuckles open and got jumped by the four guards. Luckily one of the other guards intervened and stopped them from doing any severe damage beyond bruising.

“There’s no way you had three kids come out of that tiny body,” Nolan scoffed. “And,” he said in pretend shocked outrage. “I wasn’t part of a boyband. Have you ever heard of Unfiltered Euphonies?”

I got a bottle of saline solution and began to apply it to Harvey’s back liberally. I took a tentative swipe over the area we were treating. I knew the lidocaine was working when Harvey didn’t flinch or move.

I ignored his comment about not carrying my kids and smiled impishly. “Unfiltered Euphonies?” I wrinkled my nose in feigned confusion. “Wasn’t that a pop duo in the ’80s?” I inquired.

I proceeded to sing a few lines of *Sweet Dreams* by the Eurythmics. I looked at him with a proud smile like I nailed it. Clearly, I knew they were in their early to mid-thirties and not their sixties. And I knew Eurythmics sang that song. So I just had to provoke the man. I knew enough about him through Sylvia.

It was no secret that Nolan had loved the ladies. His name had been linked with many actresses, models, and socialites. He had a lot of scandals related to his wild and partying ways. But I respected the man despite his womanizing ways. Meeting him gave me a whole new perspective of him.

Sylvia had informed me that the band genuinely enjoyed charity work. They did it incognito for years, not wanting accolades and attention. But, unfortunately, one of Nolan’s jilted lovers had blown that whistle. It was then revealed that they had a heart for several children and animal charities.

Ari understood my intentions and smirked at me as he returned with new washcloths. He gingerly laid them on the other areas of his skin that needed to be soft and supple.

He made a loud scoffing noise. “This girl?” he pointed at me in exasperation. “Are you serious? I can’t believe you don’t know who I am. That’s so sus.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Sus?” I arched a brow as I continued to address Harvey’s wounds. “Look, Pops, you

don't have to use slang to prove your street cred around me," I continued to poke.

Ari softly chuckled, throwing one of the gauze pads away before grabbing another. We effortlessly worked together cleaning and disinfecting the area. He didn't seem put off by the grossness of the whole tedious procedure.

"Avery," Wyatt's wheedling voice came from the doorway.

Wyatt and Kingston were so dramatic when they wanted something from me. They pouted or gave me puppy dog eyes. They knew I could be such a pushover with them sometimes. I immediately knew he wanted something from me from his expression alone.

I looked up and smiled at him before I gave him a mock exasperated look. "You seem so sus right now, Wy. What do you want?"

Axel, Alec, Chad, Cal, and Wyatt had already secured our "space." They'd had to close off and barricade several wings of the facility. It was less area that we had to defend. The last time I saw them, they told me they would explore the area more.

Wyatt, Alec, and Cal seemed impressed by the correctional officers' quarters and other areas available to us. They had offered to take over my spot so I could explore, but I didn't want to quite yet. I had taken a shower in the in-processing area, which was sufficient for now. I could take the tour after I ensured my patients were stable or as stable as they could be.

Wyatt gave me a confused look. "Sus?"

I was fully aware that Wyatt knew what "sus" was. He was teasing some of the older teens for adding words like "sus" to their vocabulary.

I bit my lip, trying to stop a smile from curving my lips. "I'm learning new words from Gramps. He's attempting to use the same language as your sixteen-year-old sister. I mean," I shrugged. "I'm really not judgmental. If you want to ship people, throw shade, be salty, behave extra, or yeet something,

that's cool. Whatever makes you feel young, I guess. To each their own.

“And have you ever heard of Unfiltered Euphonies?”

I saw understanding dawn in his eyes, and Ari hid a laugh in his sleeve, quickly covering it with a cough. He knew Wyatt enough to know he was always up to engaging in reindeer games with anyone willing to play.

“Unfiltered Euphonies?” Wyatt frowned. “No. Should I have?”

“I dunno,” I carelessly shrugged. “Nolan here said he *was* famous.”

Wyatt tilted his head to the side with a look of mock concentration. “Holy shit! My sister loved you on Glee. Nolan Funk right?!”

It took me a second to put the name to the face. Again, I only knew who Nolan Funk was through Sylvia. She loved watching Glee, and I reluctantly watched it with her a few times. I really wasn't a huge fan of sitcoms. Generally, I like to watch television for background noise. I didn't want to have to pay attention to a storyline and lose the thread. It was easier to watch reality television while I cleaned, folded laundry, etc. I didn't have to pay complete attention to them.

I was both impressed and shocked that Wyatt had put the likenesses together, in addition to the fact that he knew the cast of Glee's real names. I didn't know it until Wyatt said his name, and it clicked. When I was in college and participated in trivia nights with my friends, I was mostly useless in the entertainment category. I could name a song but couldn't always identify the singer or band. I recognized the faces of actors and probably could identify shows and movies they were in, but I was hazy with their names unless they were major players in the game. I'm talking about Kevin Costner, Kevin Bacon, Angelina Jolie, and Brad Pitt, level of actors.

I began to laugh. Ironically enough, Nolan Funk and Nolan Callahan shared a few similarities build and features-wise. They both were reasonably attractive, with dark hair and

brown eyes. Nolan Funk was more clean-cut pretty, whereas Nolan Callahan was a more rugged version with his eyebrow piercings, full arm sleeve tattoos, and longer hair that fell to his shoulders in intentional sex-hair disarray. However, they both had angular faces and brow lines. I could see how they could be mistaken for each other.

Ari peered at his friend before he began to laugh too. “I see it. You can be Nolan Funk’s older brother. Albeit a dirtier, haggard version of him. All that late-night partying caught up to you.”

“Get the fuck outta here!” Nolan passionately exclaimed. “You guys think you have jokes! I’m only thirty-four. That Glee punk is older than me. And I can use words like *sus*. Today’s teens can’t be the gatekeepers of the English language or any shortening of it.

“Furthermore, *sex on legs* declares she has four kids—when she looks barely legal. Then she tells me she has six boyfriends. And now she claims she doesn’t know who *I* am. Ari and I were in the same band. *I know you know Ari!*”

“I never told them,” Ari said with a convincingly deadpan look.

“And...” Wyatt reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone.

I didn’t know why Wyatt and Kingston still carried their phones. I knew they stored music on them, but I thought carrying it around for that sole purpose was silly. Our phones were essentially paperweights. We couldn’t call or text anyone. Plus, there was no social media to waste our time on.

Don’t get me wrong, I missed my phone sometimes. At first, not having our phones was a significant adjustment. It had been a tool of convenience. However, as time passed, I realized the handiness of technology had also taken away from building authentic relationships. Without our previous distractions, I had noticed how Sanctuary was building a community.

I saw relationships growing between people that technically might not have worked before. I witnessed people helping people in many ways. I observed people learning skills that had all but disappeared. I saw pride and joy when new tasks were learned or completed. I was witnessing a village being built—a tribe. Sure, we had some bad apples, but the majority of our people were inherently good. A new breed of people were born from the ashes of our society.

“This is a picture of our daughters and son,” Wyatt smiled as he showed the phone to Nolan. “I am one of her boyfriends, along with these guys, my brothers. And this is a picture of all of us.”

“When did you get a picture of all of us?” I exclaimed in surprise.

Wyatt sheepishly grinned. “I had Mom take a picture of us at the picnic.”

“Let me see,” I insisted, rubbing antibiotic ointment on the abrasion I had been working on.

Wyatt approached me, and I looked at the picture in question. I never even noticed Aunt Carol snapping the candid photo. It was right before the movie started, as the sun was setting. We all gathered or reclined on the round, wicker patio bed. I was leaning on Axel’s chest, smiling at Wyatt, Zeke, and Corbin. Axel looked down at me with adoration while Mariah perched on his opposite leg. Mariah’s little head was thrown back in laughter, her hand on Easton’s cheek. Easton was perched on the edge of the bed, smiling at her. Isa was lying on my chest, making eye contact with the camera, her fingers in her mouth and a broad smile across her lips. Kingston had his head in my lap; his eyes closed, and a smile of contentment on his face. One of my hands entwined in his hair. Corbin was leaning over the back of the furniture, appearing as if he was whispering something in my ear, a wicked grin curving his mouth. Zeke and Wyatt were on either side of Corbin; laughter transforming their faces. Wyatt was holding Dani, and Zeke had Foster. The kids were smiling at the camera as well.

The picture hit me right in the feels. I laughed at the same time as tears filled my eyes. I never knew the photo was taken, but it perfectly embodied us. I didn't remember what we were smiling and laughing at, but I remember the peace and joy I felt that day. It had been a great day. We spent much quality time together, even when we rotated around to help with the festivities. Our relationship was a work in progress, and I realized it always would be, but I have never been happier.

"I love this," I attempted to clear my eyes by wiping them against my shoulder. "I wish we could print it."

"That was the plan," Wyatt admitted putting an arm over my shoulder and kissing my temple. "Corbin, Zeke, Easton, and I want to display our pictures at the house. Corbin found the picture printer, but we only have 4 x 6 paper. Eventually, we hope to run across some 11 x 14s or larger."

"You're really not shitting me, are you?" Nolan asked in a dumbfounded tone.

I chuckled and shook my head. "I am involved with six men, and we have four children."

"I love seeing the shock on other people's faces," Chad called from the doorway. "My girlfriend has four of us. And, Wyatt, I thought you were keeping that under wraps and secretly adding photos in your home until she noticed? Did you ask her?"

I laughed at Wyatt's crestfallen look.

"I can be bad with keeping surprises," Wyatt sheepishly admitted running a hand over the back of his neck. "Nolan didn't believe Avery had six men and four kids, so I was providing evidence," Wyatt grouched. "Did you tell him that you were headed to the Olympics?"

"I already—" Nolan began before Ari cut him off.

"This one doesn't look too good," Ari redirected my focus on the laceration that disturbed me the most.

I lost the thread of our conversation as I viewed the last abrasion we needed to address. I sighed. "This looks like an

old wound,” I informed Ari. “I might have to lacerate, flush, sanitize it. I have a feeling we’ll have to watch it for the next few days.”

“Did you ask her?” Cal sauntered into the room next.

It took me a moment to remember that Wyatt had entered the room with his puppy dog face. Then Chad came in, asking the same question. Of course, since I was the only her, besides our teen patient, I assumed it was me that they were referring to.

“What do you guys want?” I jokingly sighed in exasperation. “You realize I still have patients I’m working on, right?”

“Yeah, but Wyatt, Chad, and I have basic medical training under our belts,” Cal batted his eyes. “We can take your place.”

I laughed and shook my head. “And?”

“And they have a lot of food, and we’re sick of MREs,” Wyatt pouted. “Plus, it’s prudent to hold onto our MREs for our journey home.”

“Oh my goodness,” I shook my head. “I know you guys have basic skills in the kitchen.”

“Basic,” Chad gave an unapologetic shrug. “I can follow directions, but they have real food here. And everything you make is amazing. Axel and Alec already volunteered to help you in the kitchen.”

“I’m no slouch in the kitchen. I can help,” Nolan piped up. “And,” he patted his stomach. “I don’t think I’ve eaten in three days.”

I placed my scalpel down and looked at him. “With what arm?” I cried in frustration.

He gave me a large unrepentant grin, throwing away some of the trash we had accumulated. His nonchalant attitude flabbergasted me. How can he calmly stand there and joke, when he hadn’t eaten in days. He stubbornly insisted in

staying to help, when I knew I should have insisted he leave earlier.

“First, you wouldn’t let me look at your arm. You’ve been BSing with us for the last hour! And now you tell me—” I exasperatedly threw my hands in the air. “You haven’t eaten in three days.”

Nolan and I were introduced to each other a whole five minutes ago—I exaggerated, obviously. However, his personality put me at ease. Even though he had been a rock star, he was very personable. I could easily see us becoming friends.

Nolan blinked at me in shock at first. I don’t think he expected my impassioned rant. Then a slow smile crossed his features.

“You love me, don’t you?” he winked at me. “Want me to join your harem?”

“No!” Wyatt, Ari, and I cried out in unison.

Wyatt, Ari, and I exchanged looks before we busted out laughing.

Today sucked. Today put me through the wringer. Yet, I learned that darkness is sometimes needed to see the light better.

## CHAPTER 22



“SERIOUSLY, Ave, you’re the best,” Cal groaned satisfactorily.

“I’ve never had soup this good,” Nolan held up his spoon full of rice cake noodles and beef. “And we performed in Asia. It’s Korean, you say? But you’re not Korean, are you?”

Nolan continued to flirt and pepper me with questions, and I entertained him. He knew it wasn't going anywhere, and he was harmless. He didn't creep me out, and I truly believed he was trying to annoy Ari for some reason.

“When we leave, we should try to take some of that stuff back,” Wyatt hummed in pleasure.

When I took stock of the kitchen pantries, walk-in refrigerators, freezer, and storage room, I was shocked, pleased, and angered. They had so much food and a massive variety of it. No one should have been hungry or starved. They had more than enough food to spread around for months.

While I was exploring their inventory, Wyatt ran across the rice cake noodles and begged me to make Tteokguk or rice cake soup. Mom had made it for the extended family a time or two. It had been a family favorite for years.

It had been some time since I made it, but it was a recipe I knew by heart. It was one of the first dishes I had begged my mother to teach me. It was simple but layered with so many flavors. Admittedly, I thought the dish would be a thing of the past unless I discovered a way to imitate some of the much-needed ingredients.

The prison people must have scavenged an Asian food market. They had a lot of Asian ingredients typically not found in average supermarkets. Items I had salivated over. My mom's love of cooking Asian cuisine had transferred to me, and I had been limited with what I could cook at Sanctuary. Some ingredients couldn't be substituted with what we had on hand.

“We can set it aside and take it with us,” Axel said with conviction before leaning over and kissing my temple.

I could see that he was slowly relaxing. I knew our situation was wearing on him. I knew he was making plans, backup plans, and back up to his backup plans. We were safe now, but he was determined to ensure we stayed that way. I knew he would be more at ease once he was comfortable with the strategies running through his head.

“Thanks,” I smiled. “I might be half, but I don’t think so. My mom was adopted, and she was clearly of Asian descent. She went on an identity search for years and learned how to cook many dishes across Asian cultures.

“Through my mom’s travels and the places she lived, she had learned from some of the best. We had been stationed at a few bases with a diverse Asian population, so she learned how to cook Filipino, Korean, Thai, Japanese, and several other cuisines, stretching those demographics,” I brushed over her travels.

As a supermodel, she met many people from different walks of life. They had been more than willing to impart their knowledge to her. My mom had been an outgoing and friendly person. She had made friends with several people that had different walks of life.

I chose not to elaborate on her travel. I wasn’t ashamed of her in any way. I just didn’t like the questions directed towards me once people realized or recognized her name. Emery made sure to name drop as often as possible, but I never liked to.

“She didn’t take one of those ancestry DNA tests?” Alec asked with a frown.

“She entertained the idea,” I admitted. “However, I think she came to a point in her life where she didn’t want her looks and skin color to define her. Plus, my maternal grandparents were from a very mixed culture, and she didn’t want them to believe her journey to discover herself hurt them. They provided her with a good life. They loved her. She never really wanted for anything. And she didn’t want them to believe she didn’t appreciate everything they did for her.

“She entertained the idea of doing a test after they passed away. But then she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, which fell on her list of priorities.”

Wyatt reached over and squeezed my hand. His family had been around as much as possible the last few months of Mom’s life. He witnessed how hard it had been on my family. And in some ways, he had tried to be there for us.

I tried to smile at him. It still hurt. But I loved talking about my mom. Keeping her memories to myself was selfish in a way. Everyone deserved to know what an amazing woman she had been. If I allowed my pain to dictate my life and still my words, I was doing her memory a disservice.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to learn from her,” Chad smiled, standing up from his second helping of soup. “Would you like me to take some soup to the people convalescing?”

The soup was broth-based, so I thought it would be better for our recovering people. I had taken it easy on the meat and noodles in their bowls for easier digestion. If they were able to keep that down, I had set aside more for them.

“Please,” I smiled at him. “Their portions are on the prep table. I’ll be in there in a little while. If Harvey hasn’t woken, I might have to give him a urinary catheter.”

It might have been a little bit too much information, but nearly everyone insisted on taking a round in the clinic. In addition to writing down everything I did, I wanted to inform them of the situation verbally. Most of them had some basic medical knowledge, and at this point, that’s all they needed. I would do the “tougher” tasks and leave them with the smaller ones.

Cal winced. “Better him than me.”

“It’s not one of my favorite tasks to do,” I admitted with a grimace. “But if Harvey can’t utilize the bathroom and we continue to feed him fluids, it has to go somewhere.”

Vihaan, Kiara, and Franco had already woken up once and I had faith I could remove their IVs tomorrow morning. They seemed extremely exhausted still, but that was to be expected. Harvey, on the other hand, still hadn’t woken. I was the most worried about him.

“Do they have the right supplies?” Axel inquired. “Is there some stuff we should plan on taking?”

The team had secured the main cell block, center control room, commercial kitchen, wellness center, staff locker room, and dining area. They had already gone through their

inventory. However, they hadn't checked the medical room since I had been so busy in there and they were less likely to identify the items we may need.

"They do," I nodded. "And I've already set aside a duffel bag and a few boxes I would like to take back with us. It's a shame we can't procure a larger vehicle to transport more."

"Maybe we can," Wyatt declared. "It's a shame to leave some of this stuff behind."

"We'll try our best," Axel stated. "Avery, can you provide us with the training we'll need to assist with the patients after dinner?"

I finished the food in my mouth and nodded. "I can. Before I go to bed, I'll verify their fluids, but they should be good until tomorrow morning. Honestly, they should be okay for most of the night, but it wouldn't hurt to show you guys what to look for."

"I'll probably end up sleeping in there with them," Nolan informed us. "Just show me what to do and I'll watch over them."

"No, you won't," I stubbornly stated. "You need your rest too."

We'd basically had to drag Nolan in for X-rays earlier. Luckily, he had no breaks. His shoulder had popped out of its socket. How he was able to function, joke around, and help blew my mind. He should have been in a lot more pain than he was showing. It took Wyatt, Axel, and I to help him slip it back into its socket. I gave him a sling and insisted he keep it on for as long as possible.

"Aww, sweetness, I knew you loved me," Nolan winked at me. "Fine, I'll sleep tonight, but I still want you to show me what I should be looking for."

"Did that really work for you in the past?" I laughed at his craziness. "Flash a girl a smile, flirt a little, and they're tripping over themselves to get to you?"

"Nah," he gave me a smirk. "I just had to look at a woman and they were dropping their panties. Sometimes it took less

than that.”

“Let’s not be delusional,” Ari snorted into his soup. “All those women saw the zeros in our bank accounts. You merely had to exist. Look how many women Rainer got. It wasn’t his charm and good looks.”

A flicker of sadness crossed over his features as Nolan laughed. “He was an ugly mother fucker, wasn’t he? And his personality left a lot to be desired. Hell, his mother could barely stand him. If she didn’t want to spend his money, she would have avoided contact with him long ago.”

Ari seemed more close-mouthed about their past, but Nolan was very open on several subjects. We’d learned that Ari had been in the city attempting to finalize the adoption of his niece and nephew. Nolan and Rainer had accompanied him since their next concert was close to Ari’s sister’s home. The band had been on vacation when the crap hit the fan.

They had lost Rainer a couple of weeks after that. They had attempted to clear an apartment building when one of the infected burst from a closet door. You could tell it still haunted both of them. They were a close-knit friend group that had become family.

Their other band member and his wife were on the West Coast visiting her family. Nolan admitted that they contemplated making the trek initially, but nixed the idea quickly. They realized having Hai and Hana limited their ability to move.

I stood, pleasantly full. “There’s plenty more soup if you guys want seconds. I already set aside some for our patients if they want more.”

“Where ya going?” Wyatt pouted before he attempted to pull me into his lap.

“I’m going to fill the sink with detergent to wash the dishes and clean up the rest of the kitchen,” I playfully rolled my eye, but still melted into his embrace.

It had been a long day, and I was exhausted. I just wanted to seek a bed.

The head honchos had transformed the staff area on the other side of the kitchens into their rooms. Offices and other rooms had been transformed into bedrooms. And the head honcho seemed to have had an expensive taste. He had put an Alaskan King bed in there with ornate dressers and many other bougie-like items.

The other guys insisted that Axel, Wyatt, and I take that bedroom. Wyatt and Axel hadn't argued. We all wanted to be as close to each other as possible.

Wyatt had already found new sheets and bedding for the bed and changed it. Other than that, the rooms were meticulously kept. Nolan informed us that the women would come through every day and clean the ten rooms they had for the higher-ups. The main guy might be the scum of the earth, but seemingly, he was a neat freak. Nolan said he had lost it more than once when someone didn't clean up after themselves.

"No, you aren't," Axel determinedly stated. "Wyatt and I can clean up."

"I'll wipe the tables down here, Ave. Where do you want me to put the leftovers?" Cal volunteered next.

"I'll check the fridges and pantry, and I'll handle breakfast in the morning," Ari offered.

"They have thick-cut bacon and fresh eggs," Wyatt eagerly informed him.

They had kept chickens. Unfortunately, they were long gone. The infected had gotten to them. However, someone had been preserving the eggs previously collected. They had discovered five-gallon buckets of fresh eggs soaking in a lime-water solution. It was a method I had just discovered and was impressed with when Carol and Trudy began setting aside eggs for this purpose.

As the chickens didn't lay as many eggs in the winter they'd decided to prepare for it. Plus, the chickens currently laid too many eggs for us to consume. Even with our numbers,

we still had an extra surplus every day. It was wise to conserve them while we could.

“Any potatoes and onions?” Ari inquired next.

“In cool storage,” Wyatt nodded.

“Thanks for offering to make breakfast in the morning,” Axel stated. “I’ll help.”

Axel seemed to have given Ari his seal of approval. He seemed to be critical of most new people. It was as if others had to impress him or show them a favorable character trait before he even deigned to talk to them casually. And I had watched him converse with Ari on numerous occasions today alone. Cal and Chad smirked my way every time I caught them talking, but I pretended not to see it.

“Sounds good,” Ari nodded. “Growing up with six older sisters, I rarely had to cook, but Saturday morning breakfast was always my responsibility.”

“Six?” I asked in surprise.

Obviously, I knew about the sister that passed away. However, I wasn’t aware he had others. I wondered why none of them had chosen to adopt their niece and nephew. It didn’t seem normal for the youngest with a very demanding career to take over guardianship.

I wanted to ask him all the questions crowding my head. But on the other hand, I recognized his desire for privacy. He had lived under the microscope as a celebrity and had been burned by people he had trusted a time or two. Even though he was no longer a rock star, I realized he was still wary of people and their intentions.

“Yeah,” Ari gave me a lopsided smile, seemingly seeing all my unasked questions. “My youngest sister and I were the only ones to immigrate to the States. My mom and two older sisters own a restaurant in New Zealand. The other one owns a resort with her husband. And two of them are deliriously happy to be stay-at-home moms. They raise my other eleven nephews and nieces.

“They wanted him to send Hai and Hana to them,” Nolan offered up next. “But Ari couldn’t do that to them. His niece and nephew loved it here. Plus, they love their Uncle Ari and Uncle Nolan.”

Ari gave him a look of feigned annoyance. Like always, Nolan offered more information than Ari was probably comfortable with. I wondered if Nolan had been this guileless and open in the past.

“Hey, Avery,” Chad returned to the room, interrupting my next question.

I wondered how to ask him how he would juggle his career while watching over the kids. However, I was still playing an elaborate game with Nolan. And I didn’t want to be too intrusive.

“Hmm?” I asked, looking up from where Wyatt had linked his fingers through mine.

“Kiara is up and would like to use the bathroom,” Chad informed me with a wry grimace.

I knew Chad felt guilt for not being able to assist me. However, I didn’t blame him. As the only female, it was only fitting if I assisted the younger girl. She didn’t know Chad, and even if she did, it was inappropriate for him to help in that capacity.

“Copy that,” I had to swallow down a groan.

My bones ached, and I was soul-weary. I didn’t resent the fact that I was needed. In fact, caring for the patients helped me keep my mind off the direness of our situation. It gave me something else to focus on. And for that, I was grateful.

It was the reality that I didn’t realize how tired I was until I sat down and relaxed for a little while. Now that I had to get up again, my body reminded me of the fact.

“Do you want to show us what you’re looking for and what to do now?” Axel asked. “I’m sure you would like to take another shower, and Wyatt found you a change of clothes.”

“Sure,” I shrugged my shoulder. “That works. Thanks!”

Axel had washed our clothing, but they were still hanging out to dry. I had chosen to grab a jumpsuit the inmates typically wore. They were drab grey, but I couldn't deny how comfortable they were. It really hadn't bothered me wearing it. However, the knowledge of other clothing appealed to me.

Nolan stood and swayed slightly. Ari and Cal were quick to grab him. I could see the exhaustion had finally caught up to him. He looked seconds from passing out.

“I'm good. I'm good!” Nolan insisted with a self-deprecating laugh.

“You're really not. Why don't I put you to bed so I can gain more knowledge without worrying about you,” Ari firmly stated. “You need to rest and heal so you're in good shape when we're ready to leave.”

I saw Nolan mutinously tilt his chin, but an expression in Ari's eyes must have shut him down. It was then I saw the leader in Ari. He had been fluid and rolled with the punches sent his way. The man before us now resembled the leader of the band he was.

We already knew Ari had been the driving force behind their band. He had booked shows, scheduled band practices, and such before they got their manager. And even after they hired the manager Ari still had a major hand in their success and led them in the right direction.

“Fine,” Nolan grumbled. “Hey, sweetness,” he called over his shoulder. “If you want me to join you guys tonight, I'm up for it.”

Wyatt, Cal, Chad, and I laughed at his audacity while Ari and Axel emitted sounds similar to growls. Axel hadn't spent that much time around the other man, so he hadn't realized what a troublemaker he was. And I still chose to ignore and deny why Nolan's wanton behavior bothered Ari.

“Dream on, Boy Band Reject,” I jokingly called back.

My joke caused the others to laugh again. Wyatt had gotten to the other guys before Nolan officially met them. He had

told them to pretend they didn't know Ari and Nolan were in Unfiltered Euphonies. The poor man was probably getting a complex with how convincing we were. And I intended to stretch this ruse out as long as possible.

“Boy Band,” Nolan snorted in mock disgruntlement. “Once my arm is healed, I'll show you my mad skills.”

“Okay, Dad,” I placatingly returned, before I exited another door. “Panhandling in the subways with your guitar doesn't prove anything.”

I didn't hear his response as I laughed and walked down the hall toward the Infirmary. A loud crash against the windows made me jump. Wyatt and Cal laughed uneasily as Axel slid an arm around my waist. How I forgot about the infected showed how exhausted I was.

I averted my gaze and chose not to look too closely. My observations before preparing dinner had been disturbing enough. The hoard seemed to be never-ending. Some had chosen to linger right outside our building, while others walked past to their next destination. And before the sun descended in the sky, I looked off into the distance and saw nothing but infected. They seemed to be infinite in number.

I prayed by morning that they were mostly gone, but somehow, I doubted we would be that lucky.



I hung my wet towel on the hook before taking off the tags of my new underwear. Our discovery of the cells that comprised nothing but women's clothing had been another irritant for me—all the women I had seen had well-worn and heavily stained clothes. Yet, someone had procured enough clothing to fill up three cells.

I realized they had eight women “on staff.” However, they didn’t need that many. Evidently, they had an amazing wardrobe in the rooms they’d previously occupied. They could have passed out some of the clothing to them, but they hadn’t.

I slipped on one of Wyatt’s T-shirts. They had plenty of nighties and nightgowns to choose from as well, but I liked the comfort of being in Wyatt’s extra T-shirt. Even though it smelled mostly of laundry detergent there was still a hint of Wyatt’s smell on it. After grabbing my brush I sat on the edge of the bed.

Wyatt and Axel were doing another walk-through with Cal. Cal had the first watch. It wasn’t that necessary, but we’d rather be safe than sorry. The security doors and windows would keep us secure from the infected. And the infected was sure to keep anyone else at bay.

I sighed and tried to meditate. I had to leave the main cell block area. The infected seemed keen to get to us and their screeching and wails started getting to me. After going to the command center and watching the surveillance cams, I was thoroughly creeped out, especially after I witnessed some of the infected.

There was no doubt some of them were evolving. While some of them seemed to be deteriorating others seemed to have gained a semblance of consciousness. Granted, the cognizance they seemed to have achieved was still evil. A group of them almost seemed to be attempting to find alternate routes to get to us.

We witnessed some of them climb into a vent shaft. It had all caused me to sit at the end of our seats while Chad, Alec, and Axel verified none of them would get the drop on us. We didn’t know where the vent shafts led to. Luckily it hadn’t led to the areas we were in. Cal was able to find the schematics of the prison and discovered the area we were in operated on a different heating and air conditioning unit. Therefore, the passages they had access to didn’t lead to us in any way.

Even armed with this knowledge, it made me edgy. I wondered if they could eventually reach a level of

understanding to attempt to outmaneuver us.

“Penny, for your thoughts?” Wyatt prodded, causing me to jump.

I attempted to smile as I stood to grab the bones I left on the dresser. The two portions of beef I used for the soup tonight had bones. I cut the meat off the bone and threw it in the soup. Then I kept to the bones to treat Bane and Sasha with them tonight.

“I’ll make you go broke if I start now,” I wryly stated as I whistled to Bane and Sasha.

They eagerly bound towards me, and I smiled before handing them to them. “Good boy and girl. You did so well today,” I cooed to them.

They gingerly took the bones and found areas to start gnawing on them. I had intentionally left some meat on them. We only had a little kibble left for them. We had left our other dog food bags in the vehicles. So, we knew we would have to supplement their diets in other ways.

Sometime tomorrow, I would cook rice, fry some eggs, and mix it with the trimmed fat I had gotten off the beef earlier. We were fortunate that our fur-babies didn’t have sensitive stomachs.

“Want me to help you get your mind off it for a little while?” Wyatt wickedly smiled, pulling me into an embrace.

It was on the tip of my tongue to deny him. However, I saw the fear and worry in his eyes too. He might behave as if this situation wasn’t bothering him and was acting in his usual teasing, joking affable behavior. But I now saw how he was attempting to cope with it.

“Only a little while?” I coyly inquired before looping my arms around his shoulders.

I raised one of my hands and weaved my fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck. He wasn’t in the military any longer but still kept the sides and back short. His only concession was the top of his hair. He was growing it out so

that his thick auburn locks had begun to curl up. It was sexy on him.

“Well,” his emerald green eyes twinkled as they looked into mine.

My body unconsciously leaned into him. It was as if it didn't want the merest of spaces separating us.

“I'm sure I can make it last more than a little while,” he erotically licked his full bottom lip. “However, the last time I tried to extend your pleasure, you yelled at me.”

I scoffed before I laughed. It was a true statement. Wyatt and Corbin thought it would be fun to build me up almost to the point of release and then back off. The activity lasted for what seemed like hours, but I was sure it hadn't been quite an hour. I was not a fan of edging. Admittedly, the orgasm I achieved once they gave it to me nearly made me black out. However, I was too impatient most of the time for the delayed gratification.

He opened his mouth for, I was sure, another smart-ass comment, so I decided to shut him up before he could say anything. I pulled his lips down to mine and brushed them against his. Once he became receptive to my kiss, I licked the seam of his mouth before tangling my tongue with his.

He groaned and reached down to cup my butt. I let out a little squeal of surprise when he lifted me and walked me to the bed. I still wasn't accustomed to them lifting me. Trevor never attempted to, and I believed I was too tall to be comfortably carried. However, these men surprised me time and time again.

After exchanging heated kisses, he grasped the hem of my T-shirt and pulled it off in one swift moment. He let out a low, long growl of approval.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” he husked before lowering his lips to the crook of my neck. “You are beautifully muscled, yet soft where you should be. Your breasts aren't too large nor too small,” he continued to compliment me as he licked, nipped, and kissed my skin.

“Your legs are so long and wrap around me so nicely. Your body was made for me.”

His words were cut off as he took one of my nipples into his mouth. I moaned as I felt the tendrils of lust from my breast coil down to my belly. It was easy to forget how critical our circumstances were when Wyatt’s attention, skillful hands, and mouth were on me.

I got lost in his kisses and touch and soon found myself on my back, my panties gone, and his head between my legs. I let out a breathless cry when his tongue swiped my sex. He expertly flicked his tongue against my clit.

“So good,” I praised Wyatt as he languorously went down on me.

He hummed his response as I weaved my fingers through the hair on top of his head and began to ride his face. His fingers trailed lightly across my hip bones, stomach, and upper thighs, causing my skin to erupt in goosebumps. My body shuddered in pleasure.

“Mind if I join?” a husky voice, inquired in my ear.

I squeaked in shock. My eyes popped open to see Axel standing by the side of the bed. His shirt was off, his hair was down, and his pants were unbuttoned, revealing his black boxer briefs. He was so sexily confident. His bronze skin rippled over his muscles with every movement he made.

His inquiry surprised me. He had expressed an interest in watching in the past. However, he never asked to join and never participated when Corbin, Wyatt, Zeke, Kingston, and I had our “group” play. I never minded that he and Easton preferred our one-on-one times. However, his desire to join us took my arousal to the next level.

His sensual smirk curved his lips upwards, prodding my response. I looked down at Wyatt. He was still going down on me, but his eyes were on mine. A smile was evident in his eyes. I didn’t need his words to know he was leaving it to me.

I had grown in my sexual confidence with these men. They encouraged and tested me to new experiences. I was no longer

shy or second-guessed myself while I was with them. And they always kept me in the moment so that I could achieve my orgasms. I never went without anymore.

There had been a time I felt like I was broken. I wondered if I was too uptight and unresponsive to achieve consistent orgasms. With their guidance, I learned that wasn't the case. If anything, with every new experience, I became more and more eager to explore some more.

"Please," I smiled at him.

His answering smile let me know my response was the right one. He divested the rest of his clothing and walked out of them. He climbed onto the bed and began kissing me with all his pent-up passion. After a few moments, his hands began to roam over my body until he was palming my breast. His fingers began to tug and pull on my nipples.

I moaned in pleasure under their combined ministrations. Wyatt took me to the edge and backed off several times before I realized what he was doing. I growled out my frustration around Axel's kisses. I felt and heard Wyatt's wicked chuckle.

"What's wrong, gorgeous?" he asked in a cloyingly sweet voice.

Axel paused and looked down at Wyatt. One finely arched black brow rose in silent inquiry.

"Our beautiful woman doesn't like delayed gratification," Wyatt explained with an evil grin.

Axel turned to look at me with a smile playing on his lips. "Well," he hummed. "I think all good things come to those that wait. Don't let her come until she makes me come."

I gasped in shock at his declaration moments before he swung his legs over my body and began to climb up it. It took me a second to realize his intentions. He straddled my face, and I could see how excited he was. His member stood large and proud. I forgot about his directive, eager to wrap my lips around him.

I honestly loved giving head to my men. To most people, it appeared to be a submissive act. But in my experience, I held

control when I did. I had the power to make my men mindless with pleasure. I regulated when they came by my ministrations.

I wrapped my mouth around him and groaned in pleasure when Wyatt continued his movements. I freed my arms so I could grasp Axel's thighs. I knew he liked it when I ran my fingernails over his sensitive skin. I vaguely heard the rasp of my nails against his sparsely hair-covered thighs. I felt his muscles jump in response. His low groan made the heat in my belly blaze hotter.

Axel pushed his cock deeper into my throat. I attempted to hollow out my cheeks and swallow around him when I felt him hit the back of my throat.

"Good girl," he praised as he withdrew before pushing back in.

Axel braced his hand on the headboard and fisted my hair with the other. He gripped my hair off of my face and angled his body so he could watch me swallow him down. The intense look of pleasure and concentration on his beautiful, sharply hewn face filled me with enjoyment. I loved knowing I put that look on his face.

"Can you take more of me?" his penetrating gaze speared me.

He rarely wore his hair down. Looking up at him with his hair hanging around his angular jaw and high cheekbones did something to me. I had never been a fan of a man with long hair. I hadn't seen many men that could carry the look well. Axel not only carried it well, but he also owned it.

"Mmm hmm," I eagerly nodded around him.

"I knew you could," he smiled before he pushed his hips forward.

I felt him hit the back of my throat and swallowed. I gagged slightly, but willed myself to take him deeper. Tears entered my eyes, yet I loved it. Axel tested my boundaries and forced me to swallow more and more of him down. He continued to make me groan, and at one point, he looked down

at me, realizing I hadn't stopped his rougher treatment. In fact, he could clearly see the enjoyment I took in it.

“Who,” he grunted thrusting his hips forward. “Do I have to thank, for this new trick? You like gagging on my cock don't you, little warrior?”

Typically, Axel never seemed too interested in finding out what I shared with the others. In fact, he generally took delight in pushing my boundaries further. Yet, I saw the pleasure and genuine curiosity in his eyes. So, I responded truthfully to his question. I eagerly nodded and winked at him, and he growled in response.

I was lost in the sensations that my men were giving me. Wyatt repeatedly took me to the edge. And I was growing increasingly hot and frustrated simultaneously. I needed more, yet I wanted to stay in this sexual haze of pleasure longer.

I knew Axel was growing closer to his release when I felt his thighs begin to tremble. He continued to praise me, and Wyatt reached up to pinch my nipple. I gasped at the sudden sensation. A shot of pain caused a burst of white to flash behind my eyelids. The pain receded, and pleasure replaced the feeling.

“Now, Wyatt,” Axel growled, his movements growing more erratic.

I dug my fingernails into his thighs and was rewarded with a guttural growl of approval.

Wyatt flicked his tongue with renewed enthusiasm as he pushed two fingers into me. The sudden intrusion made my eyes pop open wide. I was well lubricated, yet I could feel the stretch. He made a sound of enjoyment and drove me to the edge. Except this time, I knew he was pushing me over.

“Avery,” Axel moaned my name reverently seconds before I felt the first spurt of cum.

I eagerly sucked him down, my eyes widening again when I realized I was coming too. I screamed around Axel and attempted to swallow as I felt the tight ball of tension in my core unfurl. My body shook with the impact of my orgasm.

My vision blackened, and I had to remind myself to keep swallowing so I didn't choke.

I blacked out for a second. And the next thing I knew, I felt a warm washcloth wiping the sides of my mouth and chin. I opened my eyes and saw Axel sitting on the edge of the bed with the washcloth. The pressure on my belly had my eyes swinging toward Wyatt. His head was cradled on my stomach as he watched Axel. He had a soft smile curving his lips upward, and his eyes were heavy with lust.

"You're such a good girl," Axel exalted me as my gaze met his.

His words made my chest fill with warmth. I wasn't generally a "people" pleaser, but I loved that I could please him. I cherished that I knew he was appreciative of my efforts. I adored that he never took even my small acts for granted.

"You only spilled a little," Wyatt smugly stated, wiping my chin with his palm.

The heat in my belly flared to life once again. His complete confidence in wiping another man's juices from my chin was hot as hell. He was wholly heterosexual but had no qualms about doing it.

"Are you ready for more because it's only been a little while, and I want to make it more?" Wyatt lifted a brow with a smirk.

Only my men were capable of putting me on a roller coaster of emotions in the bedroom. The warm, sappy feelings I was feeling were replaced by playfulness. I mirrored Wyatt's sentiments and playfully tugged on his hair.

"Far be it for me to deny you," I teased. "Carry on."

He triumphantly laughed before he crawled up the bed towards me. He curved his body behind mine before he slipped one arm under my top leg. He lifted it and lined his body up. He guided his cock into my entrance and pushed forward. I let out a long breathy moan as he filled me up. As much as I loved foreplay, nothing felt as fulfilling as when they were fully seated in me.

“How do you feel so tight every time?” Wyatt rhetorically inquired in a low, harsh whisper.

“Because you all fill me up so nicely,” I blissfully hummed.

Since this was the first time Axel had joined us, I didn't know what to expect. However, I didn't expect him to situate himself so he could take one of my nipples into his mouth. I moaned as he suckled on me. Their combined efforts had my nerve endings tingling and my body coiling up in anticipation.

Wyatt continued to thrust in and out of me, turning my head toward him. The open mouth kisses he bestowed on my lips were messy and frantic. Yet, it was beautiful and oddly made sense.

I got lost in the moment. I savored the feelings of adoration I felt pouring off my men. Soon the edges began to blur as I got absorbed in the haze of delight.

I arched my back into Wyatt, attempting to meet his thrusts, and threaded my fingers through Axel's soft, shiny locks. The sounds they emitted let me know they enjoyed the moment as much as I did.

I recognized when Wyatt was close to his orgasm when he reached around to play with my clit. Whenever we were intimate, I strived to learn as much about them as they did me. From the start, they seemed to understand what I needed. Yet, they increased their skill and care each time.

When Wyatt seemed languid and unhurried in his movements, I knew he desired just to feel me. However, when he was more forceful and intentional, I realized he was determined to make me come before he did. No matter how often I told Wyatt I was okay with just one orgasm, he wasn't. He was determined to make me come around him. He insisted that feeling me squeeze him brought him greater pleasure.

He pressed down and circled my clit while Axel increased the suction of his mouth around my nipple. Their combined efforts had me crying out their names. My orgasm slammed

into me, even more powerful than my first one. My cry became whimpers at the intensity of it.

Wyatt let out a guttural groan as he gripped my hips tighter. I was sure he would leave bruises behind, but I didn't care. He emptied himself into me, kissing my shoulders and whispering words of love.

I went limp once the tremors receded. I was pleasantly sated, and my eyes grew heavy. Warm lips began to trail up my breast and up my shoulders.

"My turn," Axel husked in my ears. "Are you ready for me, little Warrior?"

His fingers trailed up my sides, and I attempted to open my eyes for him. Instead, I looped my leg over his hips and my arms over his shoulders.

"Always," I whispered against his lips despite the exhaustion plaguing my body.

I could never tire of connecting with them, no matter how sleepy I was. I loved being intimate with them and growing closer physically.

Axel made a low groan of approval before I felt the warm washcloth between my legs again. When Corbin, Wyatt, and Kingston shared me, they didn't seem to care if the others were in me before they were. They rarely cleaned me up between bouts, and those nights were messy. On the other hand, I didn't mind, or it didn't make it any less good when Zeke insisted on cleaning me up. Nor did I care that Axel found the need to do so as well. They all had their preferences, and I discovered I wasn't too picky about it all. I was happy, they were happy, and that's all that mattered to me.

My willingness pleased Axel as he grasped my hips and slipped into me. I gasped at the stretch. He was longer, whereas Wyatt was thicker. Again I enjoyed both of them in different ways, but my body still needed to adjust to them either way.

"You own my heart," Axel muttered against my lips before abruptly switching our positions.

He sat up and placed his feet on the floor, causing me to place my knees on the bed. He grasped my hips and moved me up and down onto his shaft. It was a new position for us. Typically, he liked to take me rough and hard. Yet, it wasn't an unwelcome change. I liked it anyway I could have it.

Our gazes met, and I discerned the unguarded feeling in his eyes before he cradled my face and guided it down to his. Our foreheads touched and our lips met. He was entirely open to me. He let me see him. He didn't mask his true self. He kissed me deeply, passionately. I could feel all the things his mouth wasn't saying. He loved and cherished me.

I began to move over him, meeting his thrusts. The tiredness that clung to me moments ago seemed to be forgotten. I expected him to increase the tempo at any moment. Yet, he didn't.

His hands began to run reverently up and down my back as I continued to slide back and forth over him. He didn't grab my hips forcefully and drive up into me like a primal beast. He didn't nip at my bottom lip or sink his teeth into my shoulders. Instead, he allowed me to set the languid gentle rhythm.

I nearly forgot Wyatt was in the room with us until he stood behind me. He swept my hair to the side, licked, and nibbled his way behind my ears, down my neck, and over my shoulders. My skin still tingled from my earlier orgasm, and I felt hyper-sensitive.

They both whispered words of love and adoration. They whispered the things they loved about me. They whispered their dreams of our future.

With Axel's cock buried deep in me and Wyatt worshiping my body with his lips, tongue, and hands, I came again. I barely remembered being cleaned up and placed under the covers. Or felt as they crawled into bed beside me, taking me into their embraces. And I vaguely recalled their words of love before I finally slipped into oblivion.

My last thought was on my mother's letter. Of the words, she imparted to me. I would embrace all my moments. Being with Axel and Wyatt tonight was just another way to accept it.

Being with them was what I needed. That was the reminder that life was made of many moments yet so fleeting. We witnessed death. We stared death in the face, yet we came out on the other side and showed *it*. Death may want us, but we weren't ready for it. We still had a life to love and embrace.

## CHAPTER 23



*“DO you think she’s watching over us?” I asked, my voice cracking from disuse.*

*I heard his truck the moment it pulled up. Dad, Uncle Mitch, and Uncle Scott had helped him put the new exhaust on it last month. Now, it was obnoxiously loud. He was smug about the change, but little did he know the parents were just as pleased. I overheard the men talk about it. They viewed it as a deterrent for him to no longer sneak out at night—at least not by vehicle.*

*I cleared my throat. It hurt. It was the first time I had spoken in days. I knew my withdrawal was concerning Dad. I realized he had enough on his plate with Emery’s hysterics, mood swings, and BJ’s intermittent bouts of rage. However, I had found solace in my silence. My siblings were demonstrating their emotions enough.*

*For months I had to be the “strong” one. I had to internalize all my fears and grief. I hadn’t wanted to be a burden to my family. I hadn’t had the luxury of breaking down.*

*I had pretended a lot the last few months. I had to put on a brave face as Mom rapidly declined before my very eyes. I had to put on fake smiles and reassure everyone that I was okay. I had to console BJ and try to keep his mind off the fact that we were losing Mom. I had to hide Emery’s acts of aggression*

*toward me and cover up any damages she incurred. I had to step up and learn how to cook otherwise, Dad would forget to eat entirely.*

*Aunt Pam, Nana, and Aunt Carol were around a lot and often brought us meals or cooked. However, their time was better spent with Mom than caring for us. Someone had to step up, and Emery wouldn't help.*

*I smelled him moments before I heard the leaves crunching under his feet. He had an insane amount of colognes and body sprays. I was just thankful he didn't bathe in it like he used to. And I was relieved when he stopped wearing the more noxious scents.*

*"I know she is," Corbin responded moments before he sat beside me and took my hand in his.*

*Today we buried Mom. It didn't seem fair that the sun was shining and the weather was pleasant. I expected the day to reflect the emotions welling up inside me. In other words, it should be storming outside with thunder and lightning rumbling and cracking around me. In the distance, there should be a tornado preparing to ravage the rest of my life because that's how I felt. There was a huge gaping hole in my chest I didn't know what to do with.*

*Mom would know what to say to make me feel better, but she wasn't here, so I was...alone. How could someone feel so alone yet be surrounded by people?*

*Aunt Carol, Nana, and Aunt Pam had worked hard on the repast for after the funeral. They had made or purchased everything Mom had asked them to do. They even played the music Mom requested. In true Mom fashion, she insisted that we have a party complete with bounce houses for the kids, upbeat 80s music, and fantastic food. She had even begged us not to wear black.*

*She claimed that even though she would have loved to stay longer with us, she had lived a good life. She wanted everyone to remember her when she was healthy. She wanted to remind everyone that she had lived life to the fullest and had few*

*regrets. She didn't want her death to be the exact opposite of how she embraced life.*

*"You didn't tell anyone you were leaving," Wyatt gently chided me, sitting on my opposite side.*

*I jumped, not realizing he had accompanied Corbin. He and I had a different relationship. Since our dads weren't stationed at as many bases together, we mainly saw each other on holidays. Then we spent a month together at our grandparent's house over the summer. However, since Mom got sick, I had seen him more often.*

*"You had everyone worried," Corbin added.*

*I swallowed the hot sting of tears. I had cried enough. My eyes felt gritty, and I felt wrung out. I didn't think it was physically possible to cry that much. Granted, it was all done behind closed doors and away from prying eyes. Emery, BJ, and Dad needed more attention and care than I did.*

*Mom always said I was strong and reliable. She praised me for my instincts and intuition. Mom pleaded with me to be there for BJ and Emery. She feared BJ would rage and potentially end up in juvie. He already got a free pass the last time the police caught him knocking over porta potties and vandalizing benches at the park. After all, poor judgments like that had been the deciding factor in sending him to the military academy.*

*And she knew Emery could get self-absorbed when her emotions were high. They might have been the most alike in their hobbies, tastes, and pastimes, but she hadn't been entirely blind to Emery's faults.*

*"I won't be missed," I insisted, digging my hands in the cool soil of the earth.*

*Our house was filled with people, and I felt so claustrophobic. It was a testament to my mother's popularity. Her agent, people from the industry, and a few A-listers had come—accompanied by their bodyguards, of course. I'd needed to get out of there. I'd tried to stick around, but got so tired of the pitying glances. I detested strangers touching me*

*and telling me how sorry they were. As if sorry made everything magically better.*

*I just wanted to lie down, fall asleep, and wake up to find out this was all just a nightmare. I had been preparing for months for this day, yet I still wasn't ready. I needed my mother, and it wasn't fair that she was gone.*

*"You are missed," Corbin insisted.*

*"Our parents and some of your friends have been looking for you," Wyatt informed me. "You forgot your cell phone."*

*My parents always told us we wouldn't get a cell phone until we started high school. They were afraid social media would heavily influence our actions. They saw how some of our peers weren't acting "safely" online. That all changed when Mom got sick. They wanted us to reach them whenever we wanted to, especially before we had been pulled from school and after discovering Mom's diagnosis.*

*"It's not charged," I sullenly replied.*

*I didn't use mine nearly as much as Emery did. In fact, I didn't even know where it was. I'd lost a lot of my friends this year. I lost some of them because they weren't comfortable around me. They didn't know what to do or say about Mom. The others showed their true colors when I wouldn't let them come over, hoping to see Corbin and now Wyatt. I couldn't understand how boy-crazy they were. We had plenty of time to find boyfriends. Plus, most boys were gross.*

*My stomach made a loud gurgling noise. I barely registered the hunger pains as I reached down and began straightening the flowers people left on the casket. It was a mess. Mom wouldn't like that.*

*"When's the last time you ate, squirt?" Corbin inquired.*

*My hair fell across my face, and I pushed it back in annoyance. It was in desperate need of a trim. Mom...my thoughts stuttered to a stop. It was another bitter reminder of something else taken away from me. My mom wasn't there to get our hair trimmed or run us to doctor and dentist appointments. Dad rarely accompanied us to those things.*

*I loved Dad dearly, but with his work and preoccupation, he often forgot about everyday things. He showed up to nearly every sports event, competition, or award ceremony that he could. However, he forgot the little things. He would forget to get our hair trimmed. He had already forgotten to reload our lunch cards. Emery and I had to miss the previous gymnastics meet because he had forgotten to pay the competition fees on time. And he hadn't purchased our new leos for it. I had outgrown my gym shoes, and Dad had purchased the wrong size. I hadn't worn sixes in over a year. He forgot that BJ had a mild allergy to fresh pineapples and nearly gave it to him the other day.*

*Emery wanted to go to cheer camp this year. The girls—my former friends—had told me they no longer wanted me to come, as if they could stop me if I really wanted to go. However, I didn't care. I never wanted to go in the first place. I was just going for Emery.*

*Dad had missed the registration date. Emery had a meltdown. It was bad enough that she allowed me to comfort her. Since the whole ex-friends, Corbin debacle, Emery acted like I had the plague and would infect her. She didn't want our friends to disown her too. It hurt, but I kind of understood. She'd always fit in better with them.*

*Luckily the coach was sympathetic to our circumstances and made some phone calls. She then allowed Dad to pay for late registration. It was just another example of the hole Mom's absence had created. Dad was trying, but it wasn't enough.*

*"Squirt?" Corbin bumped my shoulder with his arm.*

*My mind was too crowded with other thoughts to process his words. I couldn't even remember what he'd said or asked. I was still adjusting to this new Corbin. He had stopped teasing us for months and it felt wrong. Everything in my life had been upended. Couldn't he have stayed the same? I wanted, no needed, one constant!*

*"Huh?" I responded in return, sitting back to admire my handiwork.*

*Mom would be proud of my effort even if she didn't care for cut flowers. I had to remember to bring some flowers next time. I would have to purchase pots and plant some of Mom's favorites. Dad always bought her flowers, and she loved every one he got her. She always told Dad she loved seeing their beauty for more than two weeks. So he began purchasing her beautiful perennials she could plant in our yards. Each house we moved from had impeccable gardens because of them.*

*At least he was good at things like that. Dad always listened—even with the words she didn't say. He loved making her happy. He never forgot their anniversary or her birthday. And he loved buying her little gifts for no reason.*

*"When did you last eat?" Corbin prodded again.*

*"I didn't see if she ate this morning," Wyatt frowned. "I had to run upstairs and change James. He was covered in syrup."*

*"I think she made herself something last night since she wouldn't let me order another pizza," Corbin mused. Then, finally, he nudged me again, attempting to bring me back to the conversation. "Avery, did you eat last night and this morning?"*

*I scrunched up my nose in concentration. I couldn't remember. Then it hit me. Emery struck again. Sometimes she didn't retaliate immediately. She always seemed to attack me when I least expected it.*

*Her retribution was over schoolwork and an assignment she tried to get out of. Even though we had been pulled from school the last couple of months, many of our teachers sent work for us. Mom was sick, but Dad didn't want us to fall behind in school too much.*

*A week before Mom passed away, Emery believed I got her in trouble. I hadn't. I just completed my work as directed. Dad would check on our assignments after dinner. When Dad realized she was missing an assignment in History, he asked her where her's was. Emery said we didn't have any. Emery attempted to tell him I had gone ahead in the book. She hadn't even told me about the lie. I was at open gym. So when Dad*

*asked me about it, I told him it was due the next day. She was up all night completing it, because Dad wouldn't allow her to go to bed until it was finished. And she wasn't allowed to go with her friends that weekend to some concert.*

*The night before, she struck back when Dad, Nana, Pop-pop, the Uncles, and Aunts left us to our own devices. The adults had spent most of the night doing last-minute preparations for the funeral. They had left the older boys in charge of all of us kids.*

*The boys decided to order pizza. I wasn't hungry at first. The boys handed out our slices and set aside another box for us. And in less than fifteen minutes, Wyatt and Corbin finished the last two boxes while they took BJ and MJ down to the basement to play video games.*

*Before he went downstairs, BJ noticed I wasn't eating and was still secluded in my room. He took my plate and put it away. When I went to get it, Emery had eaten it. BJ was so angry at her, and she insisted that she hadn't known. BJ called her a liar and said she already ate and intentionally took it from me.*

*She claimed she had gotten hungry again and thought it was up for grabs. BJ pointed out that she had only taken a bite of each slice before throwing it away. He called her out on the flaw in her logic. Her antics had made me lose my appetite, especially after she went crying to Corbin and Wyatt. She had a full-on meltdown and had hyperventilated.*

*She twisted the story so she looked like the victim. She claimed she hadn't known he set it aside for me. They believed her. They hadn't noticed the change in her behavior.*

*Unfortunately, she wasn't done "paying" me back for missing the concert. Nana and Aunt Carol made us French toast before the funeral that morning. BJ made a point of preparing a plate for me and setting it beside his. He made sure to tell everyone it was mine and not to touch it.*

*I had been taking a shower. Emery and Katie had taken a long time in the shower and bathroom that morning. So it took me a while to get downstairs. When I went to eat, all the adults*

were getting ready. The other kids had annihilated the French toast, so I had been thankful that he had made me a plate. Emery “accidentally” spilled her orange juice all over my plate the moment I sat down. I refused to eat it and didn’t have the energy or desire to fight with her, so I walked away.

“Dunno,” I lied, picking up a worm.

I rubbed my finger along its cool slimy skin as it wiggled on my palm. Inane thoughts still ran through my mind. I wondered why a stupid worm was alive while my Mom was gone. It didn’t seem fair. It didn’t make any sense.

“Come on,” Corbin stated. “Let’s get you home and feed you.”

“Or we can stop and get Mickey D’s,” Wyatt wheedled, wagging his eyebrows. “I heard they have cool toys in the Happy Meals.

I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t be bribed by a toy any longer. And I haven’t eaten Happy Meals in years. The last time I’d had a Happy Meal was right after he got his license, and Nana and Pop-pop asked the boys to get us McDonalds. Mom wasn’t big on us having fast food, and Dad only went to Chick-fil-a if we got it at all.

Corbin made a scoffing noise. “She’s thirteen, dude, not three. She’s all about the Big Macs now.”

I knew he was attempting to get me out of my mood, but I wasn’t amused. I didn’t want to eat anything. Everything tasted like chalk. How could I eat when Mom’s seat still sits empty?

“Trevor’s been looking for you all afternoon,” Wyatt attempted to bribe me again.

“He told us he wanted to watch *The Karate Kid* with you,” Corbin said.

For a moment, my heart lifted. Trevor hated watching the *Karate Kid* with me. He made fun of my obsession with the ’80s movie trilogy. Trevor couldn’t understand how some of my Mom’s quirks had influenced my taste in music and movies. Once, he indulged me occasionally and watched my favorite

*movies with me, but eventually, he admitted to not liking them. He wouldn't even watch it with me on my last birthday.*

*I didn't hold it against him. Even if he was my best friend, it was okay if we didn't always agree on everything. He was fascinated with things I didn't like, and I was drawn to things he could care less about. His latest fixation was his new girlfriend. It was because of her that I missed him so much.*

*He got his first girlfriend, Cathy Muster, about a month ago. Right after I left school, she moved in. She didn't like me. She thought I liked Trevor. And no matter how often Trevor told her we were just friends, she didn't believe us. She didn't like him coming to our house and hanging out with me even though I needed him.*

*It had gotten lonely around my house. Even with BJ around. Dad had taken BJ out of school since the doctors let Mom come home from hospice. The hospital couldn't do anything for her any longer. And mom wanted to come home in her final days. When BJ wasn't lying down with Mom, he would go to his room. Every attempt at trying to get him out hadn't worked. He was angry and hurt, and I knew I had to let him work through it.*

*"Oh. Did Cathy say it was okay?" I bitterly asked.*

*I resented Trevor for allowing Cathy to come between us. She was one of the popular girls, and I knew Trevor had a crush on her for months. She never even gave him the time of day until he started wrestling and finally hit a growth spurt.*

*I had been so annoyed to see her at the church today. I was happy she came for Trevor. After all, he had lost his aunt. However, even on the day that I buried my mother, she wouldn't allow Trevor to come near me. When he hugged me in the procession line, I saw her yelling at him afterward. After, she gave me an insincere frown and expressed her condolences.*

*Aunt Pam and Aunt Carol hadn't seen her devious behavior. They believed the mask she wore in front of them. They had fawned over her presence. They thanked her for being there for Trevor. They didn't see that her being there for*

*him took him away from me. I wasn't generally a jealous friend, but this was a new experience. I'd never had to compete for my best friend's attention before. No one or thing had ever come between us before.*

*"She's a possessive little thing, isn't she?" Corbin softly chuckled. "Wyatt and I had to step in earlier when Trevor asked Emery where you were. Cathy tried to pout to get his attention. We had to remind her that you were his cousin and best friend. Or is it more now? Did you want to be Trevor's girlfriend?"*

*The way he emphasized girlfriend and said it in a high mocking voice made me shoot a look of indignation his way. He and Wyatt teased us for years. They would sing that annoying K-I-S-S-I-N-G song to us. It was so frustrating they couldn't understand that we were just friends.*

*"Hopefully, we can talk some sense into him," Wyatt smirked. "He needs to run from any controlling females in his life. He should end up with a girl that is like one of the boys. Like our tomboy, Avery, here."*

*I stiffened slightly. I used to embrace my tomboyishness. But lately, I felt like it was used as a criticism. I couldn't help it if I enjoyed and was good at playing sports, and the guys liked having me on their teams. I didn't see a problem with my distaste for dresses and skirts. They were impractical. I loved my Jordans, jeans, and T-shirts. They were comfortable.*

*Their comments reminded me how other people's perceptions were beginning to mess with my head. Cathy asked me if I liked girls the first time we hung out after she started dating Trevor. I told her no. She asked me why I didn't have a boyfriend then. I told her I didn't want one. She tried to say it didn't matter if I liked girls.*

*I may not like or want to date boys, but I knew I wasn't attracted to girls. My choice not to want a relationship had nothing to do with who I was or wasn't attracted to. I made a decision because I thought we were too young to worry about those things right now. Plus, Maren's attention had scarred me regarding sexuality in general.*

*It hadn't helped that Emery overheard and began to laugh cruelly and told Cathy I was spying on the girls in the locker room. I hadn't been. My clothes were taken right after I told one of our friends I wouldn't give her Corbin's number.*

*After gym, we were required to take a shower. We all couldn't fit in at once. I went in with the first group of girls. I heard my former friends giggling and laughing and saw Emery's look of discomfort and guilt as we passed each other. It was a look I was becoming accustomed to lately. Her friends pressured her a lot, and she always loved fitting in. However, she struggled with her conscience from time to time. Sadly, with every act they influenced her into doing, I felt her slipping away from me.*

*Evidence of their influence on her was apparent when I went to change back into my school clothes. When I opened my locker, I noticed my clothes were gone. Emery was the only one who had my combination numbers. I called to them and asked them if they had seen them. They pretended like they couldn't even hear me. I barged in there to get them back. I wasn't spying on them.*

*Emery and Cathy had a good laugh at my expense. No matter what I said, I either liked girls or hated people that liked members of their own sex when neither option was the case at all. I was tired of people trying to label me because I didn't fit in any of the boxes. I didn't feel the need to change who I was to satisfy them. And I hated them for planting insecurities in me when I didn't have them before.*

*"Tomboys are less high maintenance," Corbin teased. "We don't have to buy them jewelry or purses. Wait, do you guys like that stuff?"*

*"Grow up," I scoffed, putting the worm back in the dirt.*

*I knew they were trying to be friendly and make me feel better. But it did the exact opposite. Their teasing was like rubbing salt into open wounds. I couldn't help but notice how Wyatt and Corbin both dated girls like Cathy. I had never seen them with a "tomboy." It was just another example of how*

*Trevor changed and attempted to emulate his brother. It was an argument we had frequently the last few months.*

*They laughed, and together they hopped up. It was clear they wanted to make me leave, but I wasn't ready to go.*

*"I'm not ready to go," I heatedly stated before hot tears stung my eyes again.*

*Suddenly I was reminded where I was and why. And just like that, my mind was flooded with so many inane thoughts. My emotions choked me, and I was hit with another round of grief. I felt if I left, I would have to admit that Mom was gone. I had to acknowledge that she wasn't at some photoshoots across the country. I could still hope that she would walk back through our door. I would have to face the fact that it wasn't just an awful nightmare. It was a nightmare I could never wake from because it was my new reality.*

*"Come on," Wyatt soothed, reaching for my arms.*

*"She's going to be all alone," I sobbed, struggling against his hold.*

*All the tears I'd shed into my pillow at night resurfaced in the bright light of day. I was unable to swallow down my grief. There wasn't anything I could do here to keep busy and let everyone think I was okay. All the walls I had built were tumbling down.*

*"The ground is cold. Mom hates the cold! Dad laughs at her when she wears sweaters in summer. No!" I dropped back down to my knees, adding more dirt to the beautiful black dress Aunt Pam got for me. "We forgot to put a sweater on her," I scratched at the dirt as if I could get to her with just my hands.*

*Corbin and Wyatt dropped down on either side of me. They stilled my hands. The dirt was coating my fingers and embedded under my freshly painted pink nails, blurred under my tear-soaked eyes. They began to whisper words of comfort to me, but I continued to spew everything I had held in for too long.*

*“She promised me we were going on a mission trip this summer,” I told them hysterically. “We were going to clean up a village and help them. I was too young this past year. But I’m old enough now!” My thoughts continued to spiral in all directions. “It was my year to make the cinnamon rolls for Christmas. She would finally allow me to do it all by myself while she watched. I don’t even know if she wrote down the recipe for me. It was a secret recipe passed down from Granddad’s family for generations. Why did she have to leave us? Why!”*

*They held me tighter, making soothing noises as I continued to rant one moment and break down the next. Several moments later, when my voice was hoarse and ragged, I finally stopped. My chest emitted a strange noise, and I attempted to catch my breath. I felt hollow. Empty.*

*The sound of his phone going off, followed by Wyatt’s, seeped into my consciousness. It finally sank in that they had been making noises on and off for a while. I realized they had been ignoring them. They never ignored their phones. It was no secret they hated depositing their phones in the basket before meals. The basket was Aunt Pam’s attempt at not having us preoccupied with our phones and forced us to have conversations with each other instead.*

*Corbin pulled his phone out to silence it again. I suddenly felt selfish when I saw the flash of Dad’s name on his screen. I didn’t want to worry, Dad. He had enough to deal with.*

*“I wanna go home,” I said in a whisper.*

*They nodded, stood, and helped me up. As I stood, I saw the tears they tried to hide. I hadn’t even known they had been crying. The whole time I unloaded on them, they had been mourning too. I knew they missed my Mom, too.*

*Our families were super close. Nearly every good memory I had, had them in it. They adored my Mom. Corbin always did chores around the house for Mom when Dad was gone. Wyatt wrote her a song for the funeral. The tears I had held at bay nearly spilled over then. If BJ hadn’t broken down during it, I*

would have lost it. As it was, BJ throwing himself into my arms had helped me push them away again.

I reached out and grasped both of their hands. I squeezed them, thankful they came to get me. Simultaneously, they dropped my hands and threw their arms over my shoulders instead. I slipped back into a numb state as they led me out of the cemetery and to the parking lot. I had ridden my bike, and they already had it loaded in the bed of Corbin's truck. Wyatt opened my door and helped me up into the cab. I moved to the middle. Corbin slipped into the driver's seat, started the engine, reached over, and buckled me in without words. Corbin shifted the truck into gear and headed toward home while Wyatt slung his arm over my shoulders again.

As we drove, I was aware of my surroundings, yet nothing seemed to compute. When we stopped at a red light, it took me a few seconds to realize what I was looking at. A woman was standing over a little girl and yelling. The little girl was crying with an ice cream cone melting by her feet.

I don't know what possessed me to unhook my seatbelt, climb over Wyatt, and jump out of the truck, but I did. I marched over to the woman and girl, understanding that the girl had dropped her ice cream cone and the woman was mad that she did. The girl's heartbreak and anger on the mother's face called to me.

"It was just an accident," I snarled as I took the little girl in my arms. "Even if it wasn't, it was two or three dollars. You are yelling at her in public for two or three dollars. Can't you see she's upset!"

I heard the boys calling my name but was too filled with righteous indignation to respond. Someone needed to tell this woman how wrong she was.

The woman gaped at me. I saw remorse cross her features for just a moment until she realized we now had an audience. A larger family exited the ice cream parlor and stopped to discover what was happening.

My parents taught me to respect my elders. I would have never confronted her any other time, especially since I didn't

*know the entire story. I also understood that it was okay to have a bad day; sometimes, we took our anger or frustrations out on others. It wasn't right, the woman should have had more self-control. I knew she was human. I also realized we all fall sometimes. No one was perfect.*

*"I don't think this concerns you," the woman huffed in ire.*

*"I want Daddy," the little girl sobbed.*

*Devastation flashed across the woman's features. "We need to run home and get you changed quickly. I can't drop you off with ice cream all over your dress."*

*I hadn't even seen the large chocolate stain on the little girl's white dress. She was pretty, and I could see her mom had dressed her nicely. The little girl's hair was in cute braids down the side of her head.*

*"I want my daddy," the girl repeated. "I'm ready for my fun weekend with Daddy and my bug."*

*Her comment seemed to upset the woman further. "Of course you do and are," she said, pain crossing her features before she became more irritated. "Are you going to tell your daddy I put you in a nice dress, and you made a mess of it? I'm supposed to take you to him now, and I don't have time to change you."*

*"My bug is taking me shopping," the little girl protested. "She loves our mommy-daughter days. We go on shopping sprees," the girl grew more excited, tears fading. "And we're going to get our fingers and toes done. But at a real place, not at home," her little nose scrunched up in distaste. "Daddy gives us his black card, and we can get everything we want. I don't have to wait for Christmas, my birthday, or when you get paid. My bug loves to spoil me."*

*The woman's head reeled back as if she was physically hit. And understanding dawned on me. Her parents weren't together. She was spoiled at her Dad's house.*

*"Your bug? Your bug!" the woman nearly screeched. Her eyes filled with tears. "Your daddy left me for your bug. Your bug destroyed our family and is still trying to destroy it. Your*

*bug tells your daddy that I dress you in rags and send you smelly, dirty clothes. Your bug—”*

*I might have been thirteen, but I was intuitive. I understood that the woman had been hurt. I could understand where her pain came from. However, she shouldn't be taking it out on her daughter. I realized this little girl was stuck in a very messy situation. And unfortunately, she was a casualty of their war. She was collateral damage.*

*I cut off her tirade. “Stop!” I vehemently stated as the little girl trembled in my arms. “Be angry at them, not her. She doesn't deserve to—”*

*It was the woman's turn to cut me off “Who are you? Who do you think you are? It would be best if you minded your own business. Where is your mother? What mother allows their teenage daughter to run around scolding adults.”*

*My head snapped back as if she had physically slapped me. The sting and hurt couldn't hurt any less. “My mom,” my chin wobbled with the devastation I felt. “Is gone. I buried her today. My mom would have never publicly humiliated me over a three-dollar ice cream cone. My mom would have never taken the anger she felt for others out on me.*

*“Why,” my voice broke as warm, strong arms embraced me from behind. “Does someone as sweet and amazing as my mother deserve to die when people like you still exist?”*

*I wasn't a nasty person by nature. I knew my words were cruel and shouldn't have been spoken. However, her disparaging my mother over my actions had set me off. Her words had backed me into a corner, and like any other wounded animal cornered, I struck out mindlessly.*

*I saw the woman's face fall. Her tears flowed over. Her mouth moved as if to say sorry, but she couldn't audibly say the words. I don't know if she was distraught over my lashing or if she realized how insignificant a spilled ice cream cone and judgment from others were in the grand scheme of things. She still had her daughter. She was hurting her when she didn't deserve it. And here I stood, a few years older than her daughter, with no mother.*

*The woman from the other family rushed over to me and the little girl. A woman who looked like her sister went over to the now sobbing mother.*

*“Are you okay, baby?” the older woman cradled one hand on my cheek and the other on the little girls.*

*“Not today, but she will be,” Corbin husked behind me.*

*I had been so single-mindedly focused I didn't even notice that they had gotten out of the truck. We were downtown, and parking spaces were hard to come by on the weekends. They'd probably had to drive around for a little while to find one.*

*“Come on, Avery,” Wyatt gently coaxed.*

*The kind woman looked at Corbin and Wyatt for several moments, and I imagined they had a silent conversation because she started nodding and took the little girl from me. Corbin spun me around and picked me up. I couldn't remember the last time he picked me up, maybe around seven or eight.*

*Wyatt fell into step beside us—his worried gaze on me nearly the whole time. I knew I was acting out of character. They weren't used to seeing me behave this way. I was usually the child no one had to worry about.*

*Corbin carried me away while I witnessed the two women attempt to comfort the mother and daughter. I silently prayed that things would get better for them. Not everyone was lucky enough to have their mom, or their daughter, for that matter.*

*“I'm sorry!” the woman called out to me tearfully. “I'm so, so sorry!”*

*I turned my head onto Corbin's shoulder, refusing to acknowledge her. Corbin and Wyatt began to speak comforting words, praising me for intervening the whole way to Corbin's truck. I realized they had walked a far distance to come to get me. I hadn't been thinking when I jumped out, and now, I felt guilty.*

*Corbin set me down to reach into his pocket to get his keys. My guilt expounded when I realized I had gotten his nice suit all dirty. And when I looked at Wyatt, I saw the pure*

*exhaustion on his face. He had gotten up a lot last night so his parents could have a break.*

*James was just placed with Aunt Carol and Uncle Mitch. James screamed and cried a lot, especially at night. They told us James didn't have a good life before. I heard Katie tell Emery he was a crack baby when he woke us the first night they arrived. It was hard on their family, but they were trying to show James all the love they could while his mom got the help she needed.*

*I was so ashamed now, realizing how my actions were affecting them. While I waited for Corbin to find his keys, I looked down at the black Mary Janes on my feet. They pinched my toes. Dad had bought the wrong size. Again. However, this time it wasn't his fault.*

*Aunt Pam bought our dresses for today. She thought our old pair of shoes still fit us. Emery and Katie were shopping with Dad for other things when Aunt Pam told him of her mistake. He took the other girls to get shoes. Emery grabbed both pairs. We wore the same size. The box said the right size but the shoes inside were wrong. I wanted to believe it was a mistake, but I couldn't tell anymore.*

*I didn't discover the "mistake" until this morning. I knew it was too late to say anything, not that I had been talking. I chose to suck it up, but they still hurt.*

*"Excuse me!" "Excuse me!"*

*I realized that someone was trying to gain our attention. I looked up and noticed the "mean" mom running towards me. She was still crying, and as she drew closer, I realized her tears turned to blood. I saw the foam spilling from her mouth.*

*"Run!" I screamed, turning to jump in the truck.*

*Only the truck was no longer there. And neither was Corbin or Wyatt. In fact, I blinked. I wasn't in town either. I was...I was at the cemetery. No one was around. It was eerily silent, and the sun had disappeared behind the clouds. The darkness continued to descend on me as thick fog began to roll in. I shuddered as it wrapped around my feet.*

*I looked down, wondering why it was so thick, cold, and cloying. I had never seen fog like this. As I marveled at the oddity of the situation, I heard a moaning in the distance. I heard bone-chilling screams. I turned my head and saw nothing. I was all alone.*

*The fog seemed to have taken on a more tangible property because I felt it grab my ankle. The sharp pain that followed shocked me, and I looked back down. It took me a few seconds to realize a hand was wrapped around my ankle. And I watched in horror as another hand broke through. I was momentarily paralyzed as I realized the infected were coming up from the ground. They were rising from the graves.*

*As the infected unfolded herself from the dirt, she looked at me. I cried out in shock, stumbling back.*

*“Hopkins?” I whispered in horror. “But I don’t know you yet. I’m—I’m just a kid,” I absurdly reasoned.*

*However, when I looked back down, I wasn’t wearing the black dress I wore at my mother’s funeral. I was now dressed in an outfit similar to what the guys wore. I wore combat boots, cargo pants, a fitted tee, and a flak vest.*

*“Why?” she sobbed. “Why didn’t you save me?”*

*“I couldn’t,” my voice cracked with unshed tears. “I wanted to, but I couldn’t.”*

*“You could have,” she hissed as foam spilled from her cracked lips.*

*A worm crawled up the side of her face, but she didn’t pull it off. Then in growing horror, I watched as more appeared and began to slither over her.*

*“You didn’t want to,” she let out a banshee-like scream. “You wanted my man for yourself! I saw the way you looked at him. I knew you wanted to take him away from me.”*

*“I didn’t,” I insisted. “I love my men!”*

*She lurched towards me, her intentions clear as her gaping mouth came closer. I turned and began to run. My heart raced.*

*My palms became sweaty. Panic had gripped me so tightly that I was unable even to scream. I had to run to safety.*

*When I ran under the cemetery arch towards the road, my surroundings changed again. Now I stood in the hallway of a hospital. And once again, I was alone. I spun around, attempting to take stock of my surroundings. When I saw no threats, I began walking toward the exit sign. It wasn't until I neared it that I heard sobbing.*

*I paused and saw a little girl huddled in the corner crying. I immediately felt concerned for her and crept towards her.*

*"Hey, honey, are you okay?" I crooned, reaching for her.*

*She whirled around and lunged toward me. My reaction time was quicker this time. I quickly cataloged her inhuman features and turned to run. Only I ran into a door. A door that hadn't been there moments ago. I scrambled to open the door, but it wouldn't open.*

*"Please open," I frantically attempted to pull with all my might.*

*I felt fingers wrap around my shoulders. They shook my shoulders. I looked down and saw blood begin to drip down from the nails.*

*"Avery!" a man yelled at me.*

*I screamed in response. I frantically looked around for another escape route. Out of nowhere, something struck me in the legs. I was knocked off balance and couldn't stop myself from falling. I expected the fall to hurt; instead, it was as if I was gently lowered.*

*"What's going on?" I heard a confused voice inquiry.*

*I looked around, seeking the voice, realizing the little girl had vanished. Now I was back in the empty streets of the town. Only it wasn't the town of my memories. This town looked like World War Three ravaged it. It looked like—*

*"Avery, wake up, gorgeous," I heard a male voice croon next.*

*I spun. Where was that voice coming from? And why did it sound like Wyatt?*

*“I am awake,” I sobbed.*

“No, beautiful, you’re not awake. Think about what you’re dreaming about. Does it make sense?” Wyatt inquired.

*“Wyatt?” I called, hoping he would materialize.*

“Yeah, Ave, it’s me. Wake up,” he coaxed gently.

“But I’m not—” I blinked and blinked again.

The town slipped away, and Wyatt and Ari appeared. Wyatt was kneeling beside me while Ari stood behind him, looking confused. We were in one of the hallways I’d barely glanced down yesterday. A banging on the door, followed by a screech, caused me to jump. Then I realized I must have attempted to pull it open in my dream.

“Shit,” I muttered, rubbing a weary hand over my face.

It had been some time since I slept-ran. As I dropped my hand to my side my thumb brushed the bare flesh of my hips. I kept my eyes closed as I splayed a palm on my belly. When I felt nothing, I continued to touch my legs and then my chest.

Bane whined and nudged my hand. I pet his head, but kept my eyes closed. Of course, Sasha couldn’t be outdone so she leaned on me on the other side. If the situation wasn’t so messed up, I would have been amused by her antics.

“Shit!” I repeated realizing not only had I slept run, but I was also very naked.

Yep. Naked. In front of Ari Wa Timoti. I just prayed Sylvia never heard about this one. She would die of laughter. It was too close to a game situation we had in the past. We had been playing Would you rather? The choices were would you rather be caught skinny dipping in a rock star’s pool or crash a wedding you weren’t invited to? Of course, I chose to go skinny dipping in a rock star’s pool. I could always pretend I thought it was someone else’s pool. I wouldn’t be able to deny not knowing the bride and groom of a wedding I was crashing.

Sylvia said she much rather be a wedding crasher. She claimed she would be so embarrassed if she had to go skinny dipping in someone like Ari Wa Timoti's pool, and he thought she was a crazy stalker. I had laughed at her and reminded Sylvia she could probably turn the situation around. Of course, she had agreed with me.

"Thanks, man, we'll give it back," Wyatt muttered seconds before I felt a shirt placed over my head.

My embarrassment grew some more when I realized Wyatt was slipping Ari's T-shirt over my head because Wyatt was only wearing his boxer briefs. I knew I had fallen asleep with Wyatt wrapped around my front and Axel at my back. We hadn't bothered getting dressed. Wyatt probably only had time to throw on his boxers when he realized I had run.

"Is everything okay?" Ari hesitantly inquired as I thought I heard someone yelling, "Help!"

I thought about it. My sleep running really wasn't a secret. However, it was still embarrassing for me. Plus, I feared Ari might think I was being dramatic. Since it was a rare condition it was a common reaction when I explained it to others. I was attempting to form an answer when I heard the sounds of faint rattling and another cry for assistance.

"Shh!" I held up my hand as Wyatt began to smooth the situation over.

Wyatt gave me an amused glance while Ari looked at me skeptically. I knew I had heard something that time. I wasn't trying to avoid the question. Okay. Maybe a little.

I looked around us. We were in a long hallway with several doors on each side. Most of the doors were additional cells. We had written this hallway off because the central area was large enough for us all. The rooms on the mezzanine were just as opulent and comfortable as the room we had chosen. Nearly everyone else had chosen to occupy those rooms as opposed to the rooms on the administrative side of the building.

Bane's head cocked to the side. He must have finally heard the foreign sound as well as well. Sasha immediately dropped

to her alert position. She looked at me, waiting for my call. I smiled and shook my head.

“Not this time,” I informed her as if she could understand me. “It’s Bane’s turn.”

The situation was excellent training for our beefy boy. Sasha seemed irritated by my directive, and her eyes communicated it. In the quiet hallway, the sound of rattling and voices in the distance made Bane quickly advance toward the central area.

“Did you hear that?” Ari asked.

“That’s why I asked you guys to be quiet,” I tartly replied.

My mortification was making me a little bit snarky. I knew I would have to apologize later. Ari didn’t deserve my sarcasm.

Ari smirked as if he could see right through me. He turned and began to peer into the tiny glass windows in the closed doors. Wyatt began to look around, too, attempting to figure out where the noise was coming from.

I followed Bane as he led me approximately fifteen feet from the door I attempted to open. The rattling got louder, and I still was unable to discern where the noise could be coming from. I looked up. There were metal vent covers. I began to peer through each one.

“Please, somebody help us,” a faint voice screamed.

I frowned, realizing it was an adult female screaming and not Kiara. She was the only other female here. At least, that’s the impression I was under until then.

Bane let out a low bark and pawed at the wall. It wasn’t until I was next to him that I saw a slatted metal cover flush with the wall. It almost resembled a vent cover but much larger. This cover was approximately three feet tall and three feet wide. I dropped to my knees and attempted to look through the darkness.

Bane and Sasha pressed in on both sides of me. I took comfort in their closeness and knew I was onto something.

Bane alerted me to this area. Sasha was mirroring his interests. I rubbed both of their heads.

“Good boy,” I praised, peering through the gaps. “I’ll give you a treat later,” I promised.

It took my eyes a few minutes to adjust and comprehend what I observed. Ten to fifteen feet away, I could vaguely see the outline of people. I blinked as my mind attempted to wrap my head around the situation. I assumed it was a ventilation shaft, and the people I discovered were probably trapped in an area we had closed off. I hypothesized when we had shut off all the areas we didn’t intend to guard; we must have locked them in.

“Please help us,” I distinctly heard a woman yell.

With my head right by the shaft, her voice carried with ease. My stomach dropped. Those people had been trapped and surrounded by the infected for nearly an entire day. Where were they at? Did they have access to food? Water? Anything to make their containment more bearable.

“Shit,” I gasped, assessing the vent. I took note of the fasteners mounting the vent to the wall. “Do we have a Phillips head screwdriver?”

“What? Why?” Wyatt asked in confusion as he dropped down beside me.

“Can you get us out, please!” the woman pleaded again.

I didn’t know how many people were trapped on the other side, but it didn’t matter. There was time to discover that after we rescued them.

“Has anyone been bitten or scratched?” Wyatt yelled back.

I was relieved Wyatt was thinking clearly. I never even thought of the possibility, and I should have. I saw women in distress and wanted to help them immediately. I blamed my inattentiveness on pure exhaustion and embarrassment.

“No!” another woman responded. “You’re free to check us out and if we are, you can put us down.”

Wyatt, Ari, and I exchanged glances.

“I believe them,” Ari rumbled.

“Yeah,” Wyatt said with a nod.

“Hold on!” I responded.

As I scrambled to remember if we had any tools necessary to get them out, I breathed a sigh of relief. The interruption they provided me with gave me some time to contemplate how I would explain to Ari that I sleep-ran. Or it may have caused Ari to forget the matter altogether. Maybe. Probably not. Nope. *Sigh*. He wasn't going to forget.



We rounded the corner and saw Axel, Alec, and Cal coming out of the kitchen carrying cups of coffee. They must have seen our harried expressions because they stopped short when they saw us. Axel immediately reached for his handgun, prepared to use it if necessary.

“There are people trapped on the other side,” Wyatt explained. “I’m going to get dressed and grab that tool bag we saw in the maintenance closet.”

I tried to sneak away to put on my own clothes and check on my patients. I made it two steps before Cal and Alec spoke up simultaneously.

“Where’s your clothes, Wyatt?” Cal chuckled.

“Where ya going Ave?” Alec teased sipping on his coffee.

“Clothes. Patients,” I mumbled attempting to pull Ari’s shirt down.

Even though Ari wore a large T-shirt, with my long legs, it barely reached my upper thigh. I had been in some humiliating situations with my sleep-running, but this had to be very high on my list.

“What—” Cal began to respond before I heard a sound of impact followed by the sound of his distress.

I imagined Wyatt or Axel had struck him. Good. I didn’t know what was more humiliating. Was it Ari witnessing me running naked? Or was it Alec assuming Wyatt and I would sneak off to another part of the facility to hook up?

“Inquiring minds want to know,” Alec chuckled.

As I continued walking toward our room, Axel caught up to me. He threaded his fingers through mine. “I checked on the patients this morning,” he said. “Their vitals were good, and Kiara and Franco want to attempt to eat breakfast with us this morning.”

I appreciated that he wasn’t focusing on the fact that it was evident that I had been running this morning.

“I would like to verify their ability to do that,” I ruefully admitted. “I don’t want them to over...”

My voice trailed off as I unconsciously glanced out the windows of the hallway we were walking down. The sun was coming up and it was a gorgeous sight to see. The sky was shades of lavender, burnt orange, and cotton candy pink as the yellow brilliance of the sun rose. Too bad it was ruined by the realization we were still surrounded by the infected.

“Where are they coming from?” I inquired in dismay. “How long will we be trapped here?”

Axel slipped up behind me and slid his arms around my waist. He brushed a kiss on my neck.

“We have plenty of food and we’re relatively safe,” he said in a reassuring tone. “We will get out of here. They will have to pass sometime.”

I wanted to believe his words, but it was hard to as I viewed the alarming number of infected right outside our windows.

“Come on, let’s get you dressed. Then we’ll release those people and have something to eat,” Axel cajoled.

I nodded and followed him to our temporary room.



“I’m not the enemy,” I heard a man’s distressed voice.

A cacophony of distressed cries and demands bounced off the walls up ahead. Axel and I exchanged glances before running forward.

Wyatt had come to the room shortly after we had reached it. He told me I should go check on my patients while he went to free the other people. I had readily taken the reprieve from the other’s teasing.

My patients all seemed to be recovering. Someone must have found them a television, because Franco and Kiara were up and watching a movie. They were weak, but I didn’t see the harm in them attempting to join us for breakfast. From the notes the others had taken for me, I was informed that Vihaan was on the mend, but slept for long periods. I was also relieved to find out that Harvey had woken briefly, and his temperature had dropped drastically.

As we rounded the corner, I noticed Cal and Alec had their weapons drawn. There were three women, two teenage boys, an older gentleman, and a man in his late twenties to early thirties standing there. Wyatt and Chad didn’t have their weapons out, but their hands were poised by them.

I was somewhat relieved not to see Ari. I was sure I would have to explain to him my condition eventually, but I was glad it wasn’t right now. The remnants of my dream still clung to me, and I wanted them completely dispersed before I confessed. I assumed he was in the kitchen getting breakfast ready.

I didn’t understand the tense atmosphere until I realized the latter man had his hands up and a guard’s uniform on. The others were in the customary dirty clothing.

I unconsciously curled my lip up in distaste. This man had helped imprison these people for goodness knew how long.

When the infected stormed his haven, he had run and holed up with these people. It wasn't until a woman in her mid-twenties stepped between the guard and Cal that I realized we shouldn't jump the gun just yet.

"You imprisoned people against their will," Cal spat out in disgust. "We should do the same to you."

"He's not a bad guy!" the woman ardently declared.

Alec let out a snort of disbelief.

"I know it looks bad," the guard wearily sighed. "But I wasn't a willing participant in any of this. I only stayed to protect them at the price of having my son and his sister taken from me," his voice broke. "Please tell me you guys took out a five-year-old boy. He has dark hair, a button nose, hazel eyes, a little shy. His sister is only nine or ten months old. There were only two children under the age of one. She's one of them."

I recognized immediately who he was talking about. It was the shy little boy I had to coax to walk with us. And one of two babies among the children must be his sister.

I understood why the others might think he was one of the bad guys, but his story seemed legitimate. Why would his son and his sister have been taken away from him if he was in cahoots with these people? Plus, the others were vouching for him and seemed at ease with him. My only question was why he had fallen into the group.

"Cowlick in the back and a spattering of freckles on his nose and cheeks," I supplied. "And the baby girl had a large birthmark on her forearm."

Even if my gut instinct was incorrect, I couldn't deny the man a little piece of mind. I was going to presume he was innocent until he was proven guilty. With the current climate, I tended to assume guilt until innocence was provided, but not in this case.

He emphatically nodded, his eyes filled with relieved tears. "Thank God," he wiped a palm over his face. He blinked his eyes rapidly in an attempt to dispel the tears.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Cal scoffed.

“He’s one of the good ones,” Nolan’s voice spoke up from the end of the hallway.

We all turned as Nolan made his way down the hall. His eyes were heavily lidded as if he had just woken up. His hair was in disarray. He was bare-chested and only wore a pair of low-slung sweatpants. He still looked tired, but he looked much better than he had last night.

He yawned and stretched as he drew closer. I was pleased to see he had put on his sling. In that hand, he had a steaming cup of coffee in it. As he stretched, I couldn’t help but notice nearly every inch of his exposed flesh was covered in tattoos, and he had both of his nipples pierced. I also noted that his nipples weren’t the only things pierced. Sometime between last night and this morning, he found a hoop to put through the right side of his bottom lip. And a curved barbell with spikes on the ends through his left eyebrow. He looked more like the man I had seen in magazines and album covers.

“Like what you see, sugar?” Nolan grinned and winked at me as he passed. “Don’t worry. You can have a piece of this whenever you want.” He rubbed his free hand over his bare torso.

I rolled my eyes when I realized it was a move of seduction. I was sure it had worked on plenty of females. To me, it was comical.

“Or,” Alec teased. “My brother can take pieces of you and feed ya to the infected.”

I quickly looked up, but not out of guilt. I could recognize Nolan had an attractive, slimly cut body. And I couldn’t deny that some of his artwork was impressive and creative. However, I wasn’t in the least bit attracted to him. When my gaze landed on Axel, he indeed was glowering at Nolan. I had to hide a smile at my possessive man. I was sure Axel was aware Nolan was joking and was a major flirt, but he still didn’t appreciate it.

“No thanks,” I smiled sweetly at Nolan. “Your pieces would probably be too tiny for me.”

Most of the guys laughed at my joke, and I saw Axel’s lip lift in a slight smile. His eyes twinkled as they met mine. Then he slipped an arm around my waist before pulling me into his side. He was further stamping a claim on me, and I was okay with that.

“Nolan,” the guard chuckled, bringing our attention back to the issue at hand. “I see you still like to stir up shit. I’m glad to see you, man. I looked for you guys, but you weren’t there.”

Nolan clapped him on the back before pulling back. “I don’t stir up shit. I’m an angel,” he smirked. “And we’re good, Murdock” He threw me a cocky little grin. “That beautiful woman over there patched us up, and we’re on the mend.” He then turned to Cal and Alec. “Seriously, he’s good. I’ll vouch for him. Many of us wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for him. He snuck us food and intervened on our behalf when he could.”

“Put the guns away, guys,” Axel finally commanded. “Let’s all sit down, eat, and talk.”

Alec and Cal put away their guns, but still eyed the other man warily. Almost everyone else seemed to relax as we headed toward the cafeteria. I was sure the rest of us would pass our final judgment on him by the end of the day. I had a feeling it would be favorable.

## CHAPTER 24



“NO,” I shrieked with laughter as I spun from Wyatt’s grasp.

“Come on,” he growled, tickling my sides.

My stomach muscles spasmed, and I feared I might pee myself. I hated that Wyatt knew how ticklish I could be. Since he wasn’t ticklish, I had to find other ways to retaliate.

“Just let me go,” he insisted. “Find someone else first.”

“No!” I tried to catch my breath between laughter. “Find a better spot next time.”

After three days of being trapped here, we had to find ways to entertain ourselves. When Wyatt and Cal suggested we play hide and go seek I didn’t think anyone would want to play. I was shocked and pleasantly surprised when everyone seemed just as willing to participate. I was floored when Axel agreed as well.

We threw numbers in a hat and the person with the highest number was *it*. Of course, I got the highest number. I had to admit it took me over fifteen minutes to find Wyatt. I thought it would be reasonably easy to find everyone since most areas were wide open spaces, but I had been proven wrong. And if

Wyatt hadn't sneezed, I probably wouldn't have found him first.

"I'm allergic to dust!" he playfully whined. "It's not fair that I sneezed."

In the maintenance closet were several long, deep shelves. Wyatt had laid down behind five-gallon jugs of industrial-size cleaners. I would have never looked up there if I hadn't known for sure someone was in the closet.

"Then you should have found a spot that didn't have dust," I wheezed.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Let's go find the others."

I tried to catch my breath as I wiped my tears off my face. "I'm going to get you back for that," I jokingly muttered.

"Mmm hmm," he gave me a skeptical look.

I rolled my eyes and continued down the hall. I pushed open the next door. The room was once a command center. Several monitors on the wall displayed different parts of the prison. After the second night, all the cameras outside had been disabled. It unnerved me to think the infected had done it. There was no other explanation for them no longer working.

There were times I wished the cameras inside weren't working as well. I hated seeing how many corridors were packed with the infected. Watching them gave me the creeps. It was bad enough that I had to retreat to the staffing area once the sun went down. I don't know how the people who took residence in the mezzanine did it. Although they claimed they didn't hear them up there.

The steel doors separating us from them barely muffled the screams, screeches, and banshee-like wails. It was too much for me. I was glad Axel, Alec, Wyatt, Cal, Chad, and Ari had been taking turns on security. I hadn't argued too much about not being put in rotation. It was a gutless move, but I owned it.

I was about to close the command center door when I thought I heard a shuffling noise. Sasha's ears pricked up, and I put a staying hand on her head. These fools didn't realize I could have most of them found in less than five minutes if I

used her. As it was, we had to lock Bane in with Harvey because he would give Axel's hiding spots away.

Harvey, Franco, and Vihaan hadn't minded his company. Franco and Vihaan were fine, but were still weak from their ordeal. Harvey was still sleeping most of his days away, but I was able to remove his IV and urinary catheter this morning. I started him on oral antibiotics and pain meds, and his wounds were healing nicely. He started a liquid diet yesterday, and I'd given him soft foods this morning. I had faith he could walk around for short periods tomorrow.

I moved over to the supply closets at the back of the room. I opened the first one and saw the reams of paper and other office supplies. The second one had extra monitors, keyboards, and computer towers. When I opened the third one a feminine squeal greeted me.

I smiled and hunched down to see Kiara curled up in a ball. Her hands were covering her mouth and her chest was shaking with laughter.

"Darn-it!" she sulked crawling out from her hiding spot.

The teenage girl was amazingly resilient. She spoke openly and plainly about her past. She had an open way of coping with her experiences. She had come here with her older stepbrother, younger half-brother, and half-sister. We hadn't been able to confirm if her brother got out, but we knew her younger sister and brother had. After she described them to me, I distinctly remembered loading them up in the van.

She told us that her mother hadn't been the greatest and didn't know who her father was. Her stepbrother, Titus, basically raised her even though her mom had left his father years ago. Her half-sister and brother's dad had left them shortly after the youngest birth seven years ago. So, Kiara and Titus had been raising them together.

Her mother hadn't been home for three weeks prior to the crap hitting the fan. Since they lived in a bustling city, Titus had gotten them out immediately. They had traveled for weeks finding refuge wherever they could. When they stumbled on the correctional facility, they thought they had been lucky. It

wasn't until two weeks after they got there that they essentially became prisoners.

"Don't worry," I smugly stated. "Wyatt's going to be *it* next."

"I have allergies," he grumbled once more.

"Cal is hiding in there," Kiara said in a conspiratorial whisper pointing to one of the office-transformed bedrooms.

"You're not supposed to tell," Wyatt chuckled.

"Maybe he should have allowed me to have the last brownie last night," Kiara sniffed in mock disgruntlement.

Wyatt and I laughed. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen yesterday. I had taken advantage of the fact that these people had an abundance of Asian staples. Ari, Kiara, and I spent most of the day making egg rolls and dumplings. After that Kiara and I made brownies for after dinner.

I thought two pans had been enough for at least two days' worth of desserts. I had been wrong. Alec, Cal, and Franco had nearly finished an entire pan alone. Kiara had returned for a second brownie, and Cal had already eaten half of it. He tried to give it to her, but Kiara was disgusted by his offer. Cal had laughed at her look of distaste, and it had been the wrong reaction. She warned him she would pay him back, and he hadn't seemed to believe her.

"Speaking about brownies," Kiara impishly smiled. "What dessert are we going to make tonight?"

Kiara had grown on me, not only because of her strength of character but also her eagerness to learn. Her mother didn't cook. Titus, her stepbrother, was limited in his culinary endeavors. She never had the opportunity to learn and was enthusiastic to rectify that.

Wyatt and I laughed once more as I threw open the door. Whoever had occupied the room prior to Chad taking it over had been a slob. Chad had spent the first afternoon cleaning it. This room had a queen sized bed he had commandeered. The bed was elevated and the only feasible space to hide. The only other furniture in the room was two dressers.

I dropped to the ground and smiled at Cal.

“It’s about time,” he jokingly griped, army crawling out from under the bed. “I nearly dozed off.”

“I hadn’t realized how many hiding spaces there were,” I shrugged. “It took me over ten minutes to check every nook and cranny in the kitchen.”

I turned and left the room to go to the next room.

“How bad do you think the bean bag guns would feel?” Cal mused aloud. “We can play an intense game of capture the flag.”

Murdoch, the guard, had been a fount of knowledge. He had shown us the armory. It was carefully concealed, and we wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t shown it to us. It was stocked full of several types of weapons including bean bag guns.

Wyatt had a contemplative look on his face. “There should be enough guns for all of us.”

“No way!” I emphatically exclaimed. “It’s not like a paintball. You can get seriously injured.”

I pushed open another bedroom door and immediately noticed the clothes piled on the bed. I knew the room Ari took didn’t have clothes piled on the bed this morning. I shook my head and walked to the armoire.

“Did you check the kitchens yet?” Cal asked as I threw open the door.

I couldn’t help but burst out in laughter seeing Alec and Nolan nearly sitting on top of each other as they hid. There had to be more spaces they could have found to hide in. Why they chose to hide together baffled me.

“Really?” I laughed shaking my head.

“We ran out of time,” Alec ruefully shrugged as he stood and stretched.

“We had plenty of time to hide,” Cal disagreed.

“Holy Shite! What took you so long?” Nolan teased, stretching his back.

“Well, Pops,” I rolled my eyes. “This place is bigger than it seems.”



I was double checking all the areas after finding every one save Axel. It was nearly lunch time. Most of the people I'd found went to return to the cafeteria. Dustin, one of the teens, found a projector and screen yesterday. And one of the previous captors must have been a movie buff of sorts because he had an expansive collection of DVDs. On day two, they had set up the projector and began playing movies. It had helped with the inactivity.

“Did anyone see what direction he went in?” I asked as I headed towards the front of the prison once more.

Alec, Wyatt, and Ari had remained with me. They seemed just as determined to start the next round after lunch as I was. Hide and seek as an adult was more difficult. Even Jeff, the oldest member of the group at fifty-one had managed to find a spot that took me over forty-five minutes to find.

“Good luck. If Axel doesn't want to be found, he won't be,” Alec chuckled.

I narrowed my eyes on him with suspicion. I wondered why he hadn't suggested finding his brother earlier.

“What?” he shrugged his shoulders. “It's true. Ever since we were kids, I think I found him once. He's crafty.”

“He was pretty good at paintball,” Wyatt mused. “I still think we should break out the bean bag guns.”

“Capture the flag with bean bag guns?” Alec turned with excitement.

“No!” I loudly proclaimed once more. “I’ve seen what those bean bags could do! They don’t just leave little welts.

“I had a rotation at the hospital in the ER during clinicals. These teenage boys came in with life-threatening injuries. They claimed it was from paintball guns. It wasn’t. Their older brother liked to collect weapons. They decided to try out the bean bag guns. One was pissing blood from a kidney shot for a week, and the other had surgery to repair his jaw.

“It’s all fun and games until someone gets hurt,” I disdainfully argued.

“We can wear masks,” Alec suggested as if I hadn’t said anything.

“Maybe some cups to protect the jewels,” Ari added with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“And our flak vest,” Wyatt teased with a smile.

They all looked at each other and laughed. They were feeding off of each other. They also wanted to rile me up. I knew they were stupid enough actually to do it. I thought.

“No,” I emphatically shook my head.

I stopped and sighed. I hated cheating. But I hated looking any longer, even more. A smile curved my lips as a thought struck me. I knew how to find Axel in no time—desperate times called for desperate measures.

I headed towards our bedroom. Once I reached it, I pushed open the door and walked over to Axel’s pack. I pulled out one of his T-shirts. I held it up to Sasha’s nose. I was ending the game sooner.

“Search,” I commanded.

“That’s cheating,” Wyatt hooted with laughter.

“It really isn’t,” I impishly smiled. “We agreed to lock Bane up. No one said anything about Sasha. Plus, this is a great training exercise.”

Sasha pressed her nose to the ground. I could see how her body nearly quaked with excitement. She was trained as a

working dog and needed the stimulation. In fact, the game of hide and seek I was playing with her this morning had inspired Wyatt and Cal's ideal for us to play. I had taken the dog toy from my pack and hid it from her. It never took her long to find it.

Ari snorted and I briefly turned my eyes on him. I still hadn't told him about my sleep running. I was still too embarrassed to meet his gaze and explain what had occurred the other morning. I knew he was curious, but unlike most of the people I encountered in that state, he hadn't pressed the issue yet.

"I mean," Alec smirked. "Bane was the only canine mentioned."

Wyatt made a loud tsking noise. "And I thought you were above cheating. Where is your integrity?"

"I found the loophole," I brazenly shrugged. "I want to hide sometime today."

Sasha pushed the swinging door to the kitchens. Her movements sped up and I followed. She stopped abruptly in front of the walk-in refrigerator and freezer. I frowned.

"Umm, what's up?" Chad said with a chuckle, as he flipped over hamburgers on the flat top.

Heather, Jasmine, Shelley—the women who had been stuck in the other hallway— and Chad were busy making lunch. They were making hamburgers, tater tots, and apple sauce. With everyone pitching in no one had to cook more than once a day.

"I'm tired of looking for Axel," I smirked.

Chad chuckled and shook his head. "Always read the fine print."

I gasped in delight and turned to the others. "See! Chad gets it. The fine print and loopholes are one and the same."

"Did you look in the refrigerator?" Ari inquired.

I realized why he asked. Sasha had stopped searching, and she was sitting by the walk-in unit. She was never wrong, but it could happen. Right?

“I did,” I answered, mystified.

I pushed open the door and looked around. The inside was approximately eight feet wide but twenty feet deep. It was filled with food on metal racking. There was nowhere for him to hide since it was one big open area. I walked to the back and peered into the little window housing the freezer portion of the walk-in. It too was filled with food and there was no way Axel would hide in there for any length of time. I frowned and spun back around.

Then, I realized Sasha hadn't followed me in and was still staring with intensity at the unit. I followed her gaze and realized she wasn't looking toward the walk-in but above it. It took me a moment to realize the flaw in my search. And it impressed me beyond measure that Sasha could still smell him from down here.

“Mother effer,” I chuckled, quickly renewing my search.

By the walk-in was racking that ran along the length of the wall filled with dry goods and condiments. I had already checked the area and followed the rest of the storage area that also spanned the back wall behind the unit. The distance between the racking in the back and the walk-in was much narrower.

I didn't know why I didn't think about checking the top of the refrigeration unit. The top of the unit was approximately three feet from the ceiling. It was wide enough and long enough that from the ground no one could see what was on the top.

I placed my foot on the shelving and began to climb up it like a ladder. I knew it could carry my weight with ease and wasn't in danger of tipping over. Once I got to the top I turned and sure enough, Axel was lying in the middle of it smirking at me.

“You cheated,” he rumbled at me.

“No,” I impishly grinned at him. “We locked up Bane, knowing he would give away our position. We never agreed Sasha couldn’t be used and no one would have thought to look here.”

“That’s the whole point of hide and seek,” he mockingly huffed.

Wyatt laughed from behind me. “And she claims she never cheats.”

“It’s nearly lunchtime and Alec said he would never leave his hiding spot,” I argued. “I was only thinking about his health and well-being.”

“Tell yourself that enough times; maybe you’ll believe it,” Wyatt scoffed with a laugh.

Axel began to crawl toward me, and I noticed the dust now coating his clothing. I shook my head with a smile. I would probably have to hand-wash our clothes again today. Even though there was plenty of clothing here, Axel preferred his own. Unfortunately, we were cut off from the laundry room, so we had to wash our clothes by hand. In truth, it wasn’t that bad when we stayed on top of it.

“Go change,” I smiled leaning in to kiss Axel. “I’ll wash and hang your clothing after lunch.”

I felt him smile against my lips before returning it. I was not too fond of our situation, but it gave me more time with Axel than usual. With us being confined here, I could spend a lot of quality time with him. At Sanctuary, I generally only saw him at meals and a few hours at night.

“Isn’t it Wyatt’s turn to wash?” Axel smirked at Wyatt.

“Hey,” Wyatt protested. “If our woman wants to wash our clothes, why should we deny her?”

“I mean,” I shrugged. “I don’t *want* to.”

His face immediately fell. He hated washing clothes. He was capable, but the chore was too tedious for him by hand. I didn’t mind because he had strengths elsewhere.

“I’ll give you a back rub,” he wheedled.

“Sold,” I laughed.

It really wasn't a big deal. It didn't take me long since Jeff had made us a contraption to make it easier. He was a self-proclaimed McGuyver. Jeff informed us that he loved working with his hands. He regaled us with his past projects. I was impressed by most of them. However, I had my favorites.

He made a fully functional and operational mini roller coaster for his nephews using parts he found at a junkyard. He created a way for his mother to collect her chicken eggs without ever stepping into the coop or opening the nesting boxes. He devised a trap door, pulley, and slide system that went above my head, but I understood the concept. He also made his nieces a tree house with running water and electricity. The water and electricity were sourced through a homemade solar panel and an intricate water collection system. Again all the items he used were repurposed and revamped by him. I was positive the Dads would be excited to meet him.

I imagined Murphy and Trevor would click with him as well. I was excited to see what they could devise when they put their heads together.

“Lunch!” Chad called to us spurring us on.

I turned back around and began to climb back down the racking, but paused when I noticed a bag poking out of one of the top boxes. It was a familiar bright blue. I lifted the lid and cried out with glee.

“Josh is going to be in debt to me!” I proclaimed, pulling out a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos.

After I lifted the first bag, I squealed with glee when I realized the box was full of them. I was thrilled to give Amy something she craved. I hoped this find would brighten her up. I knew she struggled with staying behind, no matter how much she realized she needed to. It was hard to watch her team, and Josh leave without her.

“Chips! Why didn't we see those earlier,” Alec proclaimed, taking the box beside mine from the shelf.

I saw another variety of snacks in the box. I suspected they had looted a Lay's van and a UTZ. As I turned my head, I spied the brand names on the side of the boxes. The entire top shelf was filled with them.

“Don't touch or take the Cool Ranch Doritos,” I insisted. “Amy is craving them, and what Mama wants, Mama gets.”

The men laughed at me as Wyatt grabbed another box by the box I had just grabbed. He hooted when he pulled out a large canister of Cheese balls.

“Has anyone ever toasted these over an open fire?” he excitedly inquired.

Ari, Alec, and I gave him a skeptical look as we laughed.

“Kingston and Wyatt discovered that treat after a night of drinking by the bonfire,” Axel smirked as he attempted to brush himself off. “It taste like grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“Seriously! Don't knock it until you try it,” Wyatt chuckled.

I shrugged. I was willing to give it a go.

“I'm willing to try anything once,” Alec admitted.

“These people scavenged a lot. We probably got tired of looking after discovering the areas in which they kept the other stuff,” Ari admitted, answering Alec's earlier question.

I nodded in agreement. Admittedly, the previous squatters had stashed all over this place. They didn't keep everything together. They had a cell upstairs filled with nothing but energy drinks and another of wines. Then they had an eclectic mix of paper products and food in one of the administrative offices. Their organizational skills left a lot to be desired.

“We really need to find large enough vehicles to haul some of this back,” Wyatt forlornly looked at all the loot, holding up a box labeled Mars. “Either way, this must come back with us for King.”

We all continued to look through the boxes. We exclaimed at our favorite finds. I was looking through a box of crackers

when I saw blue packaging dangled in front of my face. I looked up and clapped my hands, smiling.

Wyatt held up a bag of Andy's hot fries. His remembering how much I loved hot fries further warmed my heart. Granted, hot fries and Hershey's Almond Bars had been my go-to snacks every summer, but it had been years since I ate them in his presence.

"We'll add these to the set-aside pile," he winked at me.

"So many great finds, yet not enough space to put it all," Alec mockingly pouted as he handed Axel some peanut butter cups.

Axel smiled and slipped them into his cargo pants pockets. Like Easton, he wasn't huge on sweets, but his weakness was peanut butter cups.

"I think the police station down the road still has larger vehicles," Murdoch startled me from behind. "Sorry," he ruefully smiled. "Just wanted to remind you lunch is ready."

Most of us playfully groaned, pausing in our search. We all grabbed a few boxes we wanted to grab and started heading back to the lunch area.

"How far?" Axel inquired, attempting to brush some of the dust off his clothing.

Sasha nudged my hand and I laughed. I had forgotten to give her a treat earlier and of course, she was there to remind me.

"Good girl," I praised her, reaching into my pocket for a homemade treat I made her yesterday.

With a little bit of peanut butter, whole wheat flour, unsweetened applesauce, and eggs I had made some yesterday. We didn't want to continue feeding them our food and upset their stomachs.

"Less than half a mile," Murdoch informed us. "They stored a lot of state vehicles there and Oscar only procured a few of them."

Murdoch had told us why he was here a few days ago. Nolan had vouched for him, and Axel believed him enough not to attempt to keep an eye on him. So far, I didn't see an ounce of deceit or evil in him. He had also given us the low down on the facility, his background, and the prominent people who had hijacked the prison.

Oscar Dumas had been one of the previous wardens here. Apparently, he had been fired for misconduct and several other charges over four years ago. The city mayor had been a close friend of his and was able to cover up most of his misdeeds. He was fortunate he only got away with a dismissal.

Since Oscar was intimately aware of the prison and still knew some of the shadier guards he had come here almost immediately with a small group of his friends. He had kicked out the majority of the juvenile delinquents and established a home base here.

Murdoch's younger brother had been one of the juvenile delinquents. He was detained here under false allegations. He was charged with grand theft auto and running from the police. In truth, his buddy had stolen his dad's vehicle, ran from the police, and ran when he was almost out of gas. His younger brother Tyler hadn't run, and his friend denied taking the vehicle. He was awaiting trial, where Murdoch said they had solid evidence to prove his innocence.

When the crap hit the fan, Murdoch had his son. He attempted to get to his son's mother first. They had gotten divorced, and although she was remarried and had another child, Murdoch had a great relationship with her and her new husband. He decided to leave the city and wanted to convince them to leave with him. When he got to his ex-wife's house, his ex-wife's husband attempted to attack him. There was evidence that his ex-wife had been turned, but she wasn't there.

He heard their baby crying and realized she had been alone for at least a few hours. He made the split decision to take her with them. Then he decided to get his brother. When he got to the facility, his brother was still there. Oscar offered him a place to stay.

He claimed the operations seemed legitimate at first. However, after the first month, things started going downhill. Murdoch wanted to leave at that point, but Oscar, the previous guard, and his buddies made it impossible to leave. Murdoch knew at that point he had to make the best of the situation. Plus, he saw how some of the people were being treated. Murdoch decided to attempt to help them in any way he could.

His plan seemed to work until he witnessed one guard attempting to rape a female. He flew into a rage and nearly beat the guy to death. Oscar was more upset that Murdoch “took matters into his own hands” than the would-be rapist. He had a major god complex, so Oscar took away Murdoch’s son and his son’s sister as punishment.

“A few of us can make the trip as soon as possible,” Axel determined.

“That works,” Murdoch agreed.

“Lunch! The food is getting cold, and I’m tired of holding the teen boys at bay. They already had seconds,” Chad playfully called again.

Once again, we made our way to get lunch. We could discuss it over lunch. As we walked to the cafeteria, I realized I was starting to feel excited. Planning was a good sign. When we made plans, it indicated we were finally preparing to leave here. We had made the best of our time here, but I was ready to reunite with my family.

## CHAPTER 25



“AMEN,” we all murmured.

I opened my eyes and investigated the faces of Axel, Wyatt, Ari, Nolan, Murdoch, Chad, Cal, Alec, and Franco. After five days of being confined to the prison, we determined that it was “safe” enough to attempt to retrieve our vehicles. Most of the hoard seemed to have passed. We had to prepare to leave as soon as possible, so Axel told us the plan last night. Those unable to or unwilling to assist in today’s mission

would stay behind while the rest of us enacted our next strategy.

We knew we were on borrowed time. We had no clue if Oscar and his people would return. Even though their fencing and gardens had been destroyed, the prison remained intact. It was secure enough to attempt to rebuild and reestablish themselves here. They had so much food, water, and resources to stay for a while.

And if they did return, we had no clue how many would return with him. His guards outnumbered us. We would much not rather engage them if we didn't have to.

Instead of scoping out the police station, we determined to get the vehicles left behind for us first. We knew our friends and family had left us at least two vehicles. It was hard to determine which ones, but at least we knew their gas tanks were full.

If they weren't large enough to haul some of our products back, we could always check out the vehicles at the police station. Hopefully, Dad or Corbin realized that we likely had additional people with us and maybe wanted to take some stuff back with us.

Axel held up his fist. "The harder the battle."

"The sweeter the victory," most of us responded.

"Ready?" Axel looked at Cal and me.

I nodded. I was unable to speak at the moment. It had been an adventure of sorts the last few days. The group we were with was a good one. We had made the most of the situation and hadn't let our position get the better of us. Now, we had to extract ourselves from our little bubble; I had to get my head back in the game.

"As we'll ever be," Cal quipped.

Axel brushed his lips across mine before he touched his forehead to mine. To some, it may be silly to embrace and show affection before each situation, but I couldn't care less. If our plan were successful, I would see him again in a few hours or less. However, we weren't arrogant to believe all our plans

were fail-safe. We were determined that anything could happen and showed our love every time.

“Eyes open,” he murmured, kissing the spot below my ear.

“Always,” I reassured him sliding on my vest.

Wyatt didn't hesitate to pull me into his arms next. His kiss wasn't as chaste or reserved. I was breathless when he pulled away, and I internally sighed. The way he never shied away from showing me his love and affection would never grow old.

Our situation sucked. However, I was thankful for my time with Wyatt and Axel. We were intimate nearly every day that we were here. Back at home, I had to split my affection between all of them. These last few days gave us time for us to grow closer. Not to say I hadn't missed my other men, but it just showed me how I needed to take care to nurture all our bonds.

“See you on the flip side,” Wyatt impishly kissed my nose.

I laughed and shook my head. “That's the plan.”

“Come on,” Cal jokingly growled. “Watching you three all loved up makes me miss my girl and kids.”

We had determined Cal, and I were the smallest weight-wise, so it was best for us to enact the first step in our plan. Nolan had attempted to argue he was smaller than Cal, but there was no way we were allowing him to. As it was, I had argued he should probably allow his arm to heal more, but he was too stubborn. Ari assured me that it was a long-ingrained character trait.

“She'll definitely show us how much she missed us,” Chad gave him a suggestive smile.

“That she will,” Cal laughed, sliding on his vest.

“After she kicks your asses for worrying her,” I reminded them with a smirk.

I heard Nolan and Ari murmuring something to each other before I heard Nolan let out a grunt of laughter. “What?” Nolan protested. “I'm just saying Latina women can be known for their tempers. I heard she had a thing for musicians.”

It hadn't taken long for Nolan to realize I wasn't the only woman in a relationship with more than one man. Initially, he was taken aback by the revelation but adjusted quickly. As a musician, it was no shock, he had seen a lot of dynamics, so our arrangement wasn't as far-fetched as some he had seen. I didn't even ask what more he could have witnessed, especially after his cocky grin slid into place.

I had conveniently left the room when Alec and Cal prodded him to divulge more of the craziest things he had seen or done. I heard some of their crazy stories of life on the road, but the weird feeling I felt after Nolan had recounted a tale of him and Ari's double-teaming triplets had been enough for me.

I still couldn't define this weird thing between Ari and me. I could admit he was attractive, and he had a lot of admirable qualities I valued. However, I attempted to keep my distance. Not that that was an easy feat in our predicament. There was no way to completely avoid him, especially since our routines had all of us together for the majority of the time.

Plus, I couldn't help but notice how Axel and Wyatt treated him. It reminded me a lot of how they had treated Zeke before Zeke "asked" their permission to pursue me. *Remember that circle I mentioned with Axel? Yeah.* Ari seemed to be in it.

On day two, I began to utilize the staff gym. Of course, Axel had gathered the others from Sanctuary, and we all began to work out. It was an excellent way to keep busy, our stamina up, and our stress at bay. The other able-bodied people eventually joined us as well, including the women. By that afternoon, Wyatt, Axel, and I had been teaching everyone.

I was showing those who needed it basic self-defense and offense tactics. Wyatt led in weapons training. And Axel worked on strength training.

"Sorry, Pops," I teased once I reached the top. "If she ends up propositioning you, it's only because Ari shot her down first."

Nolan and I had settled into an easy camaraderie. He flipped a switch once he realized Axel and Wyatt didn't take kindly to his flirting. His teasing became more like an

annoying big brother of sorts. Axel and Wyatt didn't seem to mind the new dynamic and got along well with him after that. Wyatt more so than Axel, but that was to be expected. Axel's circle may have grown, but he still kept most people at arm's length.

I climbed up into the metal duct and took a deep breath in. I couldn't comfortably sit upright. It was approximately three feet tall and three feet wide. It was roomy enough to move in, but not any broad movements. It was times like these I was thankful that I wasn't claustrophobic.

I looked left and right, determining how endless it seemed. It was mostly dark; however, there was light filtering in various locations. I knew that was where the vents were located. I was unsure I could do it if it weren't for that little light. Even if I wasn't scared of the dark or claustrophobic, those conditions would have unnerved the best of us.

I shuffled around in a circle to notify Cal that he could join me. I looked down and had to blink at the light difference. I had to wait until my eyes adjusted to see the others bathed in the light from the fluorescent lightbulbs mounted to the ceiling.

"That's cold, Bruce," Nolan mockingly shook his head in sorrow.

It took me a moment to remember my parting shot. Then I playfully rolled my eyes at Nolan. Sasha let out a high-pitched yipe, reminding us of her presence. We didn't know how she would behave seeing me slip into the ductwork without her. We didn't want to risk her not following anyone else. So we decided to work on simulations with her.

The first step was to see if she would and could follow me in tight, cramped spaces. We had done some practice runs, with me crawling under a line of chairs and calling Sasha. Granted, I had to army crawl, but it worked for our purpose. It had taken her some time to get the hang of it, but eventually, she understood the objective of the exercise.

Bless Bane's large goofy heart. His heart was in it, but he was too big to follow us. His broad body unsettled the chairs

enough for one of them to get stuck on him. Axel had to find larger obstacles to practice with. Shockingly, he understood the concept faster than Sasha.

I never thought I would enjoy working with canines in a training capacity, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. Axel seemed just as pleased. And it immensely helped when the others began filtering into the cafeteria and giving us additional feedback and suggestions.

Axel murmured something to Sasha before climbing up the ladder next. Wyatt offered her reassuring words before lifting her to Axel. We practiced this yesterday, too, with a ladder and scaffolding we found in the maintenance closet. She seemed weirded out at first, but quickly understood our intentions. Since she was the most comfortable and familiar with Axel, and Wyatt she allowed them to handle her without much resistance.

Axel deposited her into the vent behind me, and I smiled at Axel while giving Sasha a treat. Unlike yesterday, she seemed at ease, almost bored.

“Thanks,” I smiled at Axel.

“You have my heart,” he husked.

“Love you too,” I winked at him.

He smiled and shook his head before climbing back down.

“I’m sure I could convince Sylvia to fall in love with me, Bruce” Nolan’s voice was slightly distorted as he called up to me.

“Keep dreaming,” I quipped back. “And stop calling me Bruce!”

Nolan had dubbed me Bruce—as in Bruce Lee—the other day. Cal had wanted to spar with me after our morning workout. We were roughly the same height, and he had about forty pounds on me. However, he hadn’t beaten me yet. He was equipped for grappling and wrestling. He had never taken martial arts, so he was a novice of sorts when it came to only sparring with his hands and feet. Then Alec decided to try his

hand with me. And I beat him too. Nolan then dubbed me Bruce Lee and called me Bruce since then.

I was realistic enough to realize that I probably wouldn't have beaten them if it was a street brawl. The rules could be restrictive, plus I had years of experience. They had none in organized fighting. Either way, I knew I could give them a run for their money on and off the mats.

"Dreaming big got me to where I am today," Nolan laughed.

"You forget we have Jackie Chan back at home," Cal jokingly reminded Nolan before I could speak.

Cal and Chad didn't seem to mind much when Nolan joked about chatting up Sylvia. However, they had already warned him that Simon would not be as receptive. They had dubbed Simon as Jackie Chan. Of course, Nolan saw that as a challenge.

Cal's head appeared at the opening. He looked around, assessing our situation. Then he placed the pelican case beside me. It held a variety of tools we may need to accomplish our objectives.

"Of course, I had to be the smallest capable man to do this," he jokingly grumbled.

He made it clear that he was slightly claustrophobic. He admitted to struggling with scenarios like this in the past. He was able to do it but hated every second of it.

I heard Nolan suck on his teeth. "I can take him."

I shook my head. He was relentless. He also loved to hear the sound of his own voice. I didn't think I had ever seen him sit quietly yet. It was bad enough that the teens threatened to kick him out of the cafeteria yesterday. They wanted to watch a movie, and he wouldn't stop with his incessant chattering.

They had gotten over the starry-eyed hero worship of Ari and Nolan by the third day. Because, of course, Kiara had recognized them. And unfortunately, that led to me admitting I knew who Nolan was. He was way too smug over that information.

“You say that now,” Chad rumbled with a laugh.

“We got this,” I reassured Cal.

I reached out and grasped his arm, and squeezed him. I already suspected I may have to reassure him a time or two.

“Guess we don’t have an option, huh?” Cal wryly asked.

I crawled forward, unable to hear the rest of the conversations below. The bantering that occurred had helped me for a little while. I heard a slight thud as Cal climbed the rest of the way in.

We had mapped out the air ducts above our heads down one of the hallways. Murdoch had informed us that several vents were spread through the whole length. We planned to crawl through them and draw attention to a single point. When the majority of the infected converged upon our location, we would drop the incendiary devices Wyatt had built. The hope was that it would stun and cause enough damage to the infected for the rest of our group to dispatch them.

Even with the security cameras, we were uncertain of the amount of infected we might encounter. Some of the outside doors were still open. And since we could no longer control the hall door, the infected constantly moved around, searching for their next meal. It wasn’t a situation we could control or predict.

We felt this was the safest way to get rid of them. If we faced them head-on, there was a greater chance of them converging on us. Some of the halls intersected with others, so it was possible they could attack us in four different directions. Also, the number of people we had and the number of infected that would be raining down on us in narrow hallways was a recipe for disaster. After much debate, we determined this was the best way to resolve the situation.

Cal and I would neutralize a good number of them, and after the first blast, the rest of the team would come in. We would continue dropping devices until we cleared the path to the North side. Apparently, the facility had used a receiving area to receive office supplies, linen, clothing, and other

materials needed to run the prison. The receiving area had one sizeable roll-up door and could store three descent-sized vehicles.

Once we procured our vehicles, we planned to pull them into the large bay and load them up. Depending on when all this was accomplished, we would then determine our departure time. If we were to run into any other unforeseen complications, we might have to wait until the first light.

“Not really,” I laughed drily.

I looked over my shoulder and noticed that Sasha was behind me, followed by Cal. The metal flexed under our weight but seemed to hold it well. It made me nervous, but Franco reassured us that it should handle our weight easily. I was skeptical, but we had minimal options.

“I should have taken a layer off,” Cal grumbled.

It took me a second to understand he meant a layer of clothing. Admittedly the air was a bit warm but not uncomfortably so. I imagined his slight phobia wasn't helping his body temperature. He had to be sweating with the stale air and closed space pressing in on us.

“I'd much rather sweat than get anything on me,” I admitted continuing my climb forward.

Our voices reverberated off the walls of the ducts. If this were a standard mission, we would probably reduce the chatter. But it wasn't. If the infected could hear us, we wanted to make sure they started to follow us to the point we wanted them to.

“Clothes could be burned,” Cal flippantly retorted.

“True, but the feeling of their black sludge makes my skin crawl,” I shuddered.

Sasha's nails scraped against the surface behind me. Occasionally I felt the brush of her body as she bumped into my boots. The thuds of our knees and hands beneath us were nearly rhythmic.

“Good girl, Sash,” I murmured to her.

“Feeling my sweat drip in places it doesn’t belong doesn’t feel any better,” Cal quipped.

Immediately, I imagined all the places he was referring to. The balls were a common place men complained about. The image of his balls sticking to his thighs flashed in my head, and I cringed.

“Eww,” I protested with a groaned laugh. “TMI, bro, TMI.”

Suddenly there was a high-pitched whirring sound, and I froze. Sasha collided with me before she slowly retreated. I looked over my shoulders at Cal.

“It’s just the fans kicking on,” Cal reassured me.

I shook my head and laughed at myself. “I should have realized that. It’s a lot louder than I anticipated,” I admitted.

A whooshing sound filled our ears seconds before cold air caressed our skin. Suddenly, I was thankful for my additional layers of clothing. The metal beneath my fingertips was cold, even through my layer of gloves. I shivered as Cal groaned in pleasure. I silently laughed and shook my head.

The trek to our first stop seemed to take forever, but I knew it hadn’t been that long. Crawling to our destination significantly impeded our speed. I could only imagine how restless the others were while they waited for the first explosion to cue them into action.

I sighed in relief when we reached our first vent. I peered through the slats and saw only a few infected lumbering below. My field of vision was restricted at this angle.

“Ready?” I asked Cal, shifting so I could lie on my side.

“When you are,” Cal answered.

Cal and I both needed room to move and deploy the device. I reached into my pocket and blindly felt around for my laser pointer. I silently cheered as I found it. Then I pointed it at my feet. I depressed the button, shining the red light at my feet.

“Sasha, go,” I bade her.

She crawled past me. I returned the laser pointer to my pocket and then grabbed a treat for her. I awkwardly handed her the treat before focusing on what Cal was doing. He had a mallet and chisel ready and began to bang on the vent. We needed to make a hole large enough to drop the device or knock out the vent.

The sound of the metal hitting metal made me cringe, but it seemed to be drawing the infected toward the noise. I now counted ten of them beneath the vent. They were peering up at us, some with their mouths gaping open. The rattling sound emitting from a few of their throats made me shudder.

“Here, fishy, fishy, fishy,” Cal sing-songed, continuing to bang away at the grate.

I let out a surprised laugh. Cal smiled at me with a manic grin. I could almost see the moment he decided to tap into his mischievous side. I shook my head with a grin in response.

“Wanna treat?” Cal continued to croon. “We got a nice big surprise for you. Hey, Hugh,” he suddenly cried out. “I loved you as Wolverine!”

A gasp of shock emitted from my lips, and my heart sank. I loved Hugh Jackman. Well, his body of work, that is. Who didn't love X-Men, The Greatest Showman, and Swordfish? Then I groaned when I realized he wasn't talking about the real Hugh Jackman. Instead, he was talking about an infected that looked eerily like a knockoff version of Hugh Jackman circa X-Men days with thick dark hair and sideburns. He even wore jeans, a belt, an ostentatious buckle, and a white wife beater. Scratch that. It had been white once upon a time. Now, it was stained with things I'd much rather not examine.

“I loved how versatile you were,” I yelled, joining the morbid game. “Loved you in The Greatest Showman too! Hey, Ralph!” I called out next as I viewed a man in a blue jumpsuit.

The infected wore a mechanics jumpsuit and was missing a hand. I grimaced, but decided to embrace this game Cal was playing. I could do nearly anything to keep my mind off this mission's importance. We needed to get out of here and return to Sanctuary. This trip had been a harrowing one.

“Aren’t you supposed to be changing a tire or something?” I yelled. “You’re gonna royally piss off some of your customers.”

“Your fifteen-minute break is over,” Cal added. “Mom! Meatloaf!”

I was startled as he screamed, but then laughed when I saw the man with curly hair and a red bathrobe. He looked nothing like Will Farrell in *Wedding Crashers*, but I could definitely see the correlation. He was tall, and his hair was very similar to Will Farrell’s. However, he also had a massive beer gut, and his nose was rather bulbous.

“I’m sorry I ruined your lives and crammed eleven cookies in the VCR,” I spouted from the movie *Elf*. “On Wednesdays, we wear pink!” I exclaimed.

A woman who looked like she had been desperately trying to regain her youth hopped forward from another direction. She looked every bit of fifty. Yet she wore a bright bubble gum pink crop top, tight white—well, mostly white, now—jeans, and a pair of pink stilettos. Correction, make that stiletto. She only had one whole leg. The bottom half of one of her legs was hanging by a thread, and somehow, she had managed to lose one of her stilettos. I had to swallow the bile that rose in the back of my throat. I had seen so many gruesome things out here, yet I was continually horrified by it.

“Got it!” Cale gleefully yelled.

I smiled in relief. The slats were now wide enough to slip our device through. Now there were at least thirty infected below us. Their groans, hisses, and screeches filled my ears. Their smells pervaded my senses.

Cal pulled out one of the devices as I pulled out my lighter. It was more than unnerving to handle such a volatile thing. I never imagined I would handle a bomb-like weapon. I handled dangerous weapons, obviously, but this seemed like it was on another level. Wyatt had to walk me through the process and reassure me for a little while before I felt comfortable doing this.

If you gave me a gun, I'd shoot it. Someone hand me a bow and arrow; call me Katniss Everdeen. If you provided me with throwing knives, watch them hit their mark over ninety percent of the time. If you gave me a firecracker or anything that might blow up in my face, um, no thanks.

"Now," Cal said as he pushed the device through the hole.

He held it in place while I flicked the lighter on. I took a deep breath in. I realized I was too tense and needed to let go of some of it. I could understand the direness of the situation without letting it overwhelm me. I needed to rein it in, so I didn't make a stupid mistake.

I lit the wick and watched as it dropped below the lip of the glass bottle.

"Fire in the hole!" Cal proclaimed, pushing it out.

We barely watched as it fell about five feet into the open hands of one of the infected before we were spinning back in the direction we needed to be in.

"Sasha, forward," I urged.

My dog scrambled forward, and I followed. Her pace increased without me in front of her and Cal behind her. She could nearly stand fully in the space, and her four legs helped propel her. She made Cal and my efforts look comical. But then again, she had a considerable advantage not being biped like us.

The air was cut off once more, and I heard Cal curse under his breath as we rapidly crawled away. Wyatt assured us that he had set a delayed release on his device, but I wouldn't risk it. I trusted him and his abilities, but one misstep and we could be in the line of danger.

"I think my balls are sticking to my legs," Cal groaned in frustration.

I groaned at the image I had earlier. I had assumed that's what he had been talking about. Now, he confirmed it.

"Gross!" I cried out with a laugh.

We reached the end of the hall, and without hesitation, I turned to the right, barely looking to my left. More vents and the large fan were in that direction. The direction we headed was the way towards the receiving area.

“You have no clue the pain us men go through,” Cal laughed.

My snort was cut off as I heard a bang in the distance followed by a slight vibration in the ventilation shaft. I stopped and braced myself. Once I realized there weren't any aftershocks, I continued forward.

“Bitch, please,” I tried to hide the slight vibration in my voice. “Stop whining like one. We all know women have a higher threshold of pain. Your balls sticking to your leg would barely make us blink and whine like a little bitch.”

Cal let out a surprised burst of laughter. I cursed but sparingly. Years of watching my tongue in front of adults and my “elders” had made me mindful of my words. Nolan had called me out last night. He said he never heard me curse after Kiara, of all people, went off last night.

Jeff gently scolded Kiara when she began screaming at the teen boys, Jason and Dustin, using words I had never even heard. Of course, most of the men had begun to laugh. Cal decided to say nut-less, three-haired, pole-sucking, shit-scooping, ass-eating, bitch more than once after that. Wyatt had guffawed at cunt-cork once he realized she had called the teens a tampon. Alec determined she was a queen of ultimate insults. Nolan proclaimed he would make her a crown. He claimed his travels had him meeting several people from different walks of life, and he had never heard half of the words she had used.

Afterward, Jeff, the unspoken *Dad* of the teens, got the teen boys to admit what they had done to Kiara to garner such a volatile reaction. Apparently, they thought pulling pranks on her would be funny, and she'd finally had enough. They had poured salt onto her pie. That was after they had cut the toes in all the socks she had owned, put baby powder in her hair

dryer, and a few other pranks. At first, she had been a good sport and thought it was funny, but she had had enough.

This morning I woke up to high-pitched screams. I ran into the hallway, sais in hand, to see Jason and Dustin scrambling on their knees from their bedroom. They had a face full of make-up, their nails were painted, their hair dyed in rainbow colors, and it looked like someone had written ‘Boys are weak chuck ‘em in the creek’ on their chests in permanent marker. Cal, Wyatt, Alec, Nolan, and Kiara laughed uproariously as they leaned on one of the walls.

It didn’t take a genius to realize Kiara and the other *boys* had helped her pull off a prank of epic proportions. As the teens slept, they had everything done to them. When Kiara and the *boys* were ready to wake them up, they set off firecrackers under their bed. In a panic, the teens leaped from their beds, and then slipped on a floor covered in dish soap. They landed in a graceless heap. When they attempted to get back up and run they belly-flopped again. It took a while before they comprehended they couldn’t stand. Thus, the reason why they had been crawling out of their room.

Once I realized what had occurred, I couldn’t help but laugh too. Corbin and BJ were going to love this story. And I was sure they would be slightly perturbed to have missed it. I had turned in shock when Axel began laughing too. He had embraced me from behind, and I had appreciated in that moment that it had been a much-needed release before today’s mission.

“That’s an urban legend,” Cal snorted, pulling me from my humorous memory.

“If we could ask several tattoo artists, they would tell you men bitched and whined more than their female clients,” I smugly insisted. “And let’s be real, if men had to deliver a baby, the human race would fail to exist.”

Cal made another scoffing sound as we reached our next vent, effectively cutting off our debate. It was time to focus on our mission. We could get back to it once we annihilated another twenty, or so. Hopefully.

## CHAPTER 26



“LOVELY,” Cal dryly stated.

“Yup,” I agreed.

The receiving area had over forty infected in it. Someone had left the roll-up door open. We could see a few more of the infected ambling outside from our vantage point. Even though most of the hoard had moved on, some stayed behind. We believed the others probably would have left if we had waited another day. However, Axel strongly believed we needed to get our vehicles and prepare to leave. Murdoch, Franco, and Jeff questioned his decision. And for a split second, so had I. Then I remembered who I was second-guessing.

If the hoard had moved on to other areas, it could potentially open up the opportunity for larger groups to move in on us. Even if Oscar and his people didn't return, this space was still a gem. Our group was too vulnerable. And the area was too large to defend with our numbers effectively.

Sure, there was a chance we were misjudging the situation. There was also a possibility we could safely wait a day or two and reduce the risk of lingering infected. However, Axel was a genius at strategy. If he was saying today was the day, we had to trust him.

Wyatt and I knew Axel never made rash choices. He seemed to inherently know things at times. Wyatt and I had spoken up on his behalf and reassured them Axel wouldn't have made the judgment lightly. Of course, Axel had told them they didn't have to assist us, but they still agreed to accompany us.

"Suggestions," Cal quipped.

I looked out of the vent. It was much larger than the ones we had been working with. I wondered how we were going to get down from the great height. But then I looked around and noticed the metal pallet racks with grating approximately four feet below us. The door was to our left, and more racking stretched to the right. I contemplated the wide-open area as I formulated a plan.

"I think we should use one of those devices that make doors blow off," I proposed.

"It's going to be loud, and it may cause a bigger explosion than necessary, but it'll probably be the best option," Cal slowly agreed. "We can chip away at it as we did the others, but that will take too long. Plus, I don't want the others to run into this. The last two groups of infected we lit up weren't the largest, so the others shouldn't be that far behind."

He pushed forward the case he had dragged along, and I pulled out my flashlight. The lighting in the vent shaft wasn't bad, but it was dim. He popped open the latches and pulled out a smaller device. Wyatt has informed us that it could be used

to blow things out, similar to what they used to attach to safes and doors in the movies.

We hadn't used it earlier because we only had a few of them, and it would have been overkill for our intentions. We didn't need to climb out of the other vents. We just needed an opening large enough to drop our bombs down. And Wyatt wanted to conserve them. I fully supported the use of it now, since the others should only be ten to fifteen minutes behind us.

Cal pulled out the device we needed and began to set it up. I watched in fascination. I might not like physically handling them, but the concept was intriguing. Dad had given me a healthy dose of interest in science, particularly, Chemistry. It always intrigued me how different mixed elements could cause a huge reaction.

"It's going to get loud," Cal warned.

"Copy that," I nodded and began to crawl backward. "Sasha, come."

Sasha followed me. I wasn't sure how far we should go, so I continued at a steady pace. Cal pushed the button and began to hasten back until he reached us.

"That should do it," he said.

I nodded, tucked my head into Sasha's neck, and placed a hand over her ears. Cal awkwardly placed his body over ours, and I could have kicked his butt, but I appreciated his action at the same time. I understood that he wanted to protect me.

I didn't want the men to believe I needed protection constantly, but I also understood that was who they inherently were. It was heartwarming to know it went beyond my guys, though. Most of the men on the team seemed to look out for us females—at least the men we liked and hung out with. Plus, I would have done the same to anyone I perceived as needing protection.

The boom that followed and the reverberation indicated that it went off. It was much louder and jarring than the other devices had been. I felt a strong gush of air and debris

showered down on us. I leaned into Cal and Sasha, praying to God that the worst was over. We lay like that for a few more moments. Sasha whined and licked my face as Cal sat up.

“Good?” Cal questioned.

I nodded, taking a deep breath, attempting to center myself.

“Ready?” Cal inquired.

I unfolded my body from around Sasha and nodded. “Good girl,” I murmured to Sasha, yawning widely and shifting my jaw from side to side.

My ears needed to pop, and I was slightly shaken from the experience. I had expected it, but it was still unnerving. I couldn't help but reach out and remove some debris from Cal's shoulder. I looked him over, and he grinned. I silently thanked God for protecting us. I took another calming breath and refocused myself. I had to dispel my apprehension and power on.

Cal took off, and I followed. Sasha crawled beside me since the shaft was wider here. Once I reached the hole, I paused. The small device had packed a massive punch in the wall. I got up into a crouched position and slid my leg out. I climbed the rest of the way out and noticed Cal standing and waiting for me. He rolled his neck and shoulders as he simultaneously kicked out his legs.

“You okay?” I questioned.

“Good, I wasn't hurt,” he laughed. “But holy shit, I'm so damn thankful to be out of there,” he groaned. “I need to stretch out my cramped body.”

I mirrored his movements and stretched. The flak vest was a good twenty-five pounds of added weight. I had become accustomed to the weight, but moments like this made me wish I didn't have to wear it. My whole body ached. I imagined it was from the combined cause of being hunched over for so long and the tension.

When the racking shifted under my feet, I froze. The noise grabbed the attention of more of the infected, and more of

them began to gather below us.

Cal laughed again. "It's safe. I jumped on it a few times."

"Okay," I dubiously stated with a frown looking down.

I realized the grating seemed sturdy and it was clear it was meant to hold a lot of weight. Some of the racking had large skids of product on them. If it was capable of holding that, I was sure it could hold our weight with ease. However, the gaps between the grates were fairly substantial.

"Sasha can't safely navigate this," I determined.

I pondered the dilemma for a moment. I could probably find some things to place down so Sasha could walk over. The problem was the closest skids were on the opposite side of the wall. Plus, they were filled with product. We didn't have time to do the time-consuming task of unloading them.

"We can come back for her," Cal reassured me.

I nodded and reached into my pocket for a treat. Sasha would be safe waiting for us here. I didn't want to potentially harm her when she wasn't needed.

"Sasha, stay," I commanded handing her a treat.

She let out a low whine in protest. And I scratched behind her ear. "It's okay. We'll be back," I promised her.

A crashing sound from down below had me jumping, reminding me of the infected once more. I turned and noticed we had drawn the attention of nearly all of them. Some of them were banging on the racking as they yelled up to us.

"Oh, shut up," Cal yelled down at them. "Yes, you too, cowboy. Damn," he cursed. "I bet you were an ugly mother fucker before you turned."

Cal definitely knew how to alleviate the tension. His glibness was infectious, and it was easy to adopt his nonchalant attitude. It was the closest and longest we'd ever worked together, and I had to admit I didn't mind it. If I couldn't be with my guys, Chad and Cal had proven very easy to work with.

I let out a laugh and shook my head. The infected man he was talking to wasn't the most attractive man. His large ears stuck out from under his cowboy hat, making him look cartoon-like. His eyes were way too close, and his nose was too large for his face and hooked like a beak.

"Bet you she was a pageant queen in her life," I added to our commentary.

A tall willowy blond with a tiny waist and breasts that didn't seem all-natural had her hands wrapped on one of the lower grates. She was shaking it and growling. The blood and white film encasing her eyes barely concealed how blue they once were. Her vile outfit comprised of fitted black slacks, a white dress shirt, and a camel-colored blazer rolled up to her forearms.

I wasn't typically a mean or catty person. I believed harassment was abhorrent. However, I justified that this wasn't bullying if they weren't technically people any longer. Plus, it seemed to keep Cal and me entertained and helped us cope with the situation.

Maybe it was slightly disturbing that we were making up these fake stories about their previous lives. Maybe we should seek therapy after this. However, right then, we had to manage our emotions and feelings to the best of our ability. Some days were easier than others when we eradicated the infected. No matter how many times we knew we were helping out the survival of humanity, it was still a mind fuck.

"Miss California for sure," Cal agreed. "Bet she lived in a mansion with her two-point-five children."

"Her husband went on several business trips, but half of them were actually to meet up with a mistress," I continued. "Hey, Cressida," I called down to her as I gingerly made my way toward the corner of the room away from the entrance. "Did you know Thaddeus Richard Sheraton, the Third, was dipping his pickle in another woman's jar?"

Cal guffawed with laughter. "Thaddeus and Candy," he yelled down. "It's time you came clean."

I looked around and noticed a man in a business suit. His glasses were askew on his face, and he was missing a lens from one eye. “Who’s Candy?” I laughed. “Come on, come on,” I whistled, patting my leg as if I were calling a dog.

Cal laughed, tilted his head back, and cupped his hands over his mouth. “Sooey,” he said in a high-pitched falsetto like he was calling for pigs. “Sooey.”

The infected continued to follow us, banging on the racking occasionally. I noticed how a few from outside began to limp inside.

“Come on, Ave,” Cal playfully groaned. “You know who Candy is,” he insisted.

I continued my search until it landed on a younger woman with pasties over her nipples and a thong covered in sequins. It was clear she was once a stripper. The infected had ravaged her body, and it was evident she had chunks of flesh missing from her neck and arms, but her gorgeous body was undeniable. Her stomach was flat, her legs slightly muscled, and her breasts were unnaturally perky.

“Not the stripper!” I protested.

“Who else?” Cal countered back. “He couldn’t cheat on Cressida without being totally cliché. He and his buddies went out one night and ran into good ‘ol Candy, and he paid for her lap dance. And that’s how their affair began.”

“Shame on you, Thaddeus,” I reprimanded him as I reached the corner. “Cressida stayed home raising your children while you cheated with a stripper. And Candy of all people. You knew she was using you for your money!”

“Cressida wasn’t that innocent,” Cal protested. “She was hooking up with young Derek over there. After he cut the lawn, he would mow her lawn.”

He pointed to a younger infected man, wearing nothing but jeans and grass-stained sneakers.

I groaned at his corny play of words. “Wow, Cal! Mow her lawn?”

I reached down around my neck and placed my earbuds into my ears before pulling out my pistol. We had wasted enough time, and most of the infected were now below us. It was time to eliminate as many as possible before the others joined us.

“Wanna make a bet on who hits the most of them?” Cal inquired, pulling his own pistol out.

“Are you still salty I beat you in the ring?” I teased him, sliding the safety off. “What are we betting?”

“Nah,” Cal laughed. “You’re wicked good. I brought a knife to a gunfight. We should lift all the rules for our next match. Anything goes. Tap out when we’ve had enough,” he challenged with a glint in his eyes. “I’ll trade you my case of iced coffees for your box of Skittles,” he stated.

I smiled at his terminology. Cal was originally from Boston, Massachusetts; occasionally, his lingo and accent would emerge. This morning, he asked if anyone made cawfee, translation coffee. The others ribbed him, and of course, Cal went into a mock tirade in his heavy Boston accent. He blamed the others for losing his roots and conforming to appease them. He accused their teasing for the reason he had to “hide” his culture and origins.

“Bock, bock,” he clucked like a chicken when I took too long to answer.

He knew he was baiting me and knew I would take up the challenge. I didn’t think I would win, but I knew I could give him a run for his money. I wouldn’t make it easy on him. And honestly, I needed the training. I always liked to keep my body ready for any battle. So, it would aid me too. However, he didn’t need to know that. So I played along.

“Not the kid’s Skittles,” I made a mock gasping noise. “How about my case of caramel popcorn for the case of iced coffees? Caramel popcorn is one of Sylvia’s favorites,” I smirked.

“Deal,” Cal said without hesitation, holding his hand out.

I shook it with a smug smile. “Caramel popcorn is Sylvia’s second favorite snack. I already gave Chad the case of Swedish Fish I found. Her favorite snack of all time.”

Cal’s jaw dropped. “What did I ever do to you? Why didn’t you give it to me?”

I turned my head and aimed for the first infected. I sighted him in and squeezed the trigger. I smiled when I hit my mark, and the infected slumped to the ground.

“Because you took the iced coffees as I was reaching for them. One,” I smugly smiled at him.

“I thought you were going for the crackers,” he protested.

I gave him an arched look before aiming for my next target. “Two,” I sing-songed. “And why would I want oyster crackers?”

“I dunno,” he sullenly responded. “Maybe you really like them?” He shot his gun. “One.”

“Horse shit.” I aimed for the next one. “Three. Unless I have a bowl of chicken noodle soup or New England Clam Chowder, why would I want that?”

I continued counting my takedowns and realized I had to switch clips or guns shortly. I lost count and concentration when Sasha started snarling and letting out high-pitched yips. I had my sights set on another infected, but heard the clamoring of the grates to my left. I decided to take down one more before switching clips. Once I neutralized the infected, I turned my head. I gasped as I saw an infected clamoring toward me.

The infected had once been an athletic-looking man around my age and a few inches taller than me. He wore gym shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, and headphones perched around his neck. I had no clue where he came from until I noticed a few more were climbing up the racking.

I had never witnessed any of them attempt to climb anything. Was this something they were learning as they evolved? We had already witnessed them do other things that

might allude to it, but this was definitive proof. We could no longer deny their advancement.

“Shit, Cal,” I exclaimed, pulling the trigger.

The chamber made a clicking sound, and I cursed out once more. I had to make a split decision to grab my sais. The infected was too close, and there was no guarantee I could make the shot this close without making a big mess. I hadn't slipped on my standard protective gear because I hadn't been in close contact with the infected.

As I sprang forward to meet him, I noticed no foam coming from his mouth, and his eyes weren't leaking blood. I would believe he wasn't infected if it wasn't for the hue of his skin, the gray film coating his eyes, and the blood coating his clothing. I mentally noted it and wondered if this was another indication of progressing infected.

He smiled at me, actually *smiled* as I aimed my sai towards his head. He sidestepped my attack and lunged toward me. His reflexes seemed on par with ours. A cold chill ran down my back as I recognized this.

I kicked out at him, thankful for my training, as he stumbled back. I sank my blade into his temple before he could regain his footing. I leaped over his body and advanced toward the others attempting to climb up to us. It wasn't an easy accomplishment considering the shifting of the grates beneath my feet. It was awkward, and my heart raced due to my fear of one of the racks giving way beneath me.

“When did they begin climbing?” Cal exclaimed, right behind me.

“None of them are bleeding from their eyes or foaming from the mouth,” I informed Cal as I reached the rest of the climbers.

Two of them were attempting to climb up together. Their fingers gripped the middle of the grate as they threw their legs over. I kicked towards the gaping maw of one of them while landing my sai in the top of the head of the other. The one I kicked lost its balance and fell, taking a few infected with her.

Unfortunately, the one I impaled was still valiantly attempting to reach for me. I knelt, pulled one of my longer knives from my boot, and chopped down on the fingers gripping the racking. I leaned forward, narrowly missing his teeth gnashing at me, and pulled my sai from its head.

I watched in morbid fascination as the fingers separated from the grating. I couldn't help but notice how brittle the bones seemed to be. There had been barely any resistance from my blade. The infected's angry hiss reminded me of its presence, and I drove my blade through its eye.

In my peripheral, I could see where Cal was taking care of other infected who had begun climbing the steel beams to get to us. Cal was popping off shots and Sasha was furiously barking from the ventilation shaft.

I stood, grabbed the handle of my sai, and kicked out simultaneously. The infected collapsed, taking down the infected that had attempted to climb over him to get to me. Angry hisses and groans filled my ears as I scrambled to the edge. I noticed the pile of bodies below us, but there was one more infected struggling to climb up; simultaneously, the doors to the receiving door swung open.

Bane came charging through the door first. He snarled and leaped towards the closest infected. The infected stumbled back, allowing Axel to swing his machete in a large arc, effectively severing the head from the infected in one fell swoop. Alec, Chad, Ari, and Wyatt flanked his sides and made their way into the room.

I pulled out my loaded gun and pointed it at the woman making the climb up the racking with alarming speed. Her fingertips wrapped around the edge of the top steel bar, and her deformed face popped up over the top. I aimed and shot her in the middle of the forehead. She let out a wailing cry as she fell to her final death.

Nolan and Murdoch had just entered the doors and looked up at me in horror before they realized I had sent it down toward them. By then, most of the infected had been taken care of. There were only a few still ambling in.

“Did that zombie fall from up there?” Murdoch inquired with horror tinging his tone.

“Sure did,” I nodded before I slipped my gaiter over my head. “I think some of them are evolving.”

“Fuck me,” Nolan cursed.

“My thoughts exactly,” I grimly agreed.



“Disgusting,” Wyatt grimaced as he looked at the state of our bread truck.

It took us much longer to reach the vehicles than we’d wanted. There had been pockets of infected that we’d had to get rid of just to reach them. Luckily, our people had left us a fifteen-passenger van on top of the bread truck. It was enough for our people to fit and transport most of the items we wanted to carry back. We may be able to fit it all with some ingenuity and determination.

“What the hell?” Alec asked.

Nearly every square inch of the vehicles from approximately six-feet down was covered. There were bits of flesh, the black tar-like fluids that oozed from them, hair, and other unrecognizable substances. It was apparent from their numbers they must have been rubbing along the sides of the vehicles and left the revolting evidence behind.

“I guess when thousands of infected are traveling in a pack, this is the result,” I tried to inhale deeply into my perfumed gaiter.

Even though the hoard had passed, their smell still hung heavy in the air. The air was so cloying with rot, decay, and the sharp pungent smell of pennies that I could taste it. I hoped that the smell would dissipate as we left here. However, I realized there was a possibility that the smell would remain, especially if we followed the path the infected had taken.

“Guess we know what we’re doing this afternoon before we load up,” Cal protested.

“How?” Alec asked, wrinkling his nose.

“There’s a wash rack on the other side of the garages in the back corner,” Murdoch informed him.

“Well,” Axel prodded. “Let’s get it done.”

We all nodded as Axel and Alec gingerly opened the driver-side doors.

“I’m riding with you, Al,” Cal called.

Chad shrugged. “Me, too.”

I grimaced at the passenger door handle. Before I could search for something to open it with—I didn’t want to touch the substance, even with my gloves—a muscled forearm reached past me. I looked up and saw Ari opening it.

“Get in,” he rumbled.

“Thanks,” I nodded with a smile.

Once the door was open, Bane jumped onto the floorboards at my feet. I had to laugh because he had definitely grown since the last time he rode at my feet. Bane jammed himself in and placed his head on my seat between my thighs with a contented sigh. There was no way I could put my feet down now, so I carefully lifted my legs to rest them on the dashboard. I fondly rubbed my hand over his head, and he closed his eyes contentedly.

“Don’t make the rest of us look bad,” Wyatt joked to Ari as he opened the rear door. “It’s hard enough competing with six other guys.”

“Stop,” I teasingly rolled my eyes at Wyatt.

Wyatt winked at me and climbed into the back seat. Everyone else poured into the vehicle.

“Come on, Sasha,” Wyatt said in an indulgent but exasperated tone. “You know Bane was her boy first. You can’t always get your way. You must realize your brother isn’t going anywhere despite your best efforts at icing him out.”

Sure, enough, Sasha was sitting beside my open door. She wouldn't even turn and acknowledge Wyatt. She looked at me as if she expected me to kick Bane down. I laughed and shook my head.

“Ma'am, Bane needs love sometimes. You've been with me all day. It's Bane's turn. Go on, Sasha,” I urged.

“Come here, Sasha,” Wyatt cajoled again. “I'll even give you those ear scratches you love so much.”

At that, Sasha's ear twitched, and I laughed. “Go on, Sasha,” I bade.

She gave a huff and turned to join Wyatt. I swore, sometimes I believed she was human. There was no way a dog could understand as much as she did. And don't even get me started on her attitude.

“So, back to this competing thing,” Nolan piped up. “I mean, if Avery's open to taking more on, Ari shares really well,” Nolan smirked. “Even though he's used to being in the limelight, he's great at letting others take center stage. He's not an attention hog.”

Nolan made a loud oomph sound as I situated myself in my seat and buckled my seat belt. Axel started the vehicle before reaching over, grasping my hand, and kissing the back of it. I smiled at him, touched by his sweet display of affection. He smiled back and put our joined hands on the center console.

I chose to ignore Nolan's commentary. He had been making suggestions like this for several days. I realized the more I engaged him, the more he exasperated it and ramped up his suggestive commentary.

“If you guys want to start bringing the boxes to the receiving area, I can wash the vehicles,” I suggested.

Even though we had cleared out the path to the receiving area, we had told the others to stay put. Doors had been closed from any of the other infected wandering into the cleared areas. However, we still didn't want them to wander around without us.

“That will work,” Axel agreed, putting a hand on my neck and gently squeezing it.

“You know who can help you—” Nolan began.

I turned and glared at him as he looked at me with a shit-eating grin. Since he knew he had no shot with me, it was like he was pushing his best friend in my face now.

“Hey, No,” I gave him a broad smile, baring my teeth. “Did you know the human body has thirty-five pressure points? I know them all. Do you know there’s a pressure point that can make you go nice night-night?”

The guys in the back began to laugh.

“After seeing you fight, I really don’t think anyone with half a brain will want to test you,” Murdoch snorted.

“My girl was going to the Olympics before the shit hit the fan,” Wyatt smugly bragged.

I smiled at him, feeling all warm and fuzzy by the pride in his voice.

“No shit?” Jeff asked in awe. “I don’t think I’ve ever met an Olympian.”

“I wasn’t quite an Olympian,” I wryly admitted. “I just made the team and was supposed to start my training, but never got to.”

Axel gently squeezed my hand once more and kissed the back of it.

“That’s still hella impressive,” Franco whistled.

Franco came from California. He was a younger single guy visiting his brother when everything went to crap. His brother didn’t pick him up from the airport. Franco assumed his brother had forgotten and wasn’t answering his phone, so he took an Uber to his home. His brother was nowhere to be found. However, his vehicle was still in the garage. He went to his brother’s work and was told his vacation days started the day before. He attempted to reach out to his known friends, and only three answered their phones. They hadn’t seen him.

The third guy had let Franco know about this mysterious illness and suggested the hospital. He went to the local hospital, where security guards met him. They checked him in before he went in. He discovered he wasn't there either. After several hours he gave up looking for him and returned to his brother's house. He woke up to a group of infected teenagers barging into the house. He grabbed his unpacked bag, jumped in his brother's car, and left.

During his escape, he ran into a small group of survivors. Eventually, they stumbled on the prison, and that's why he had been there.

"Tae Kwon Do, right?" Nolan inquired with a sly grin as we pulled into the prison's gates.

"Yeah," I gave him a confused look, wondering what he was up to.

"Did you know that—" Nolan began before Ari cut him off.

"I can help wash down the vehicles," Ari interrupted. "Anyone else?"

"Chad and Cal can watch your backs," Axel determined. "In fact, I think we should all make one large sweep of the area before transferring the cases to the back."

"Sounds like a plan," Ari agreed as Nolan began laughing.

I gave Nolan a confused look. He continued making these strange remarks. And every time I questioned him about it, he became evasive. I don't know if he was messing with my mind for shits and giggles or if he really was trying to "hide" something from me.

"Well, shit," Wyatt muttered.

I turned around to look out the front window and sighed. A group of infected was milling around the wash rack. It was a group we could handle, but I was so damn tired of having to.

## CHAPTER 27



“I think that does it,” I stepped back with satisfaction.

“I hadn’t thought we could get them this clean,” Ari agreed, setting down the hose.

It took us longer than we wanted to clean the vehicles. Some spots had to be scrubbed vigorously to remove the remnants left behind. We had debated just doing the bare minimum, but I think we all were skeeved out getting in the vehicles in that condition.

“Me neither,” I admitted picking up my jacket. “Let’s drive these bad boys up there and get loaded up.”

“Ready?” Chad asked as he rounded the corner.

Chad and Cal stayed to watch our backs after we had cleared the area. Luckily, no more infected had stumbled upon us.

“We are,” Ari nodded as Chad and Cal jumped into the bread truck.

I climbed into the passenger seat of the fifteen-passenger van as Ari slid into the driver’s seat. He pulled out his phone and connected it to the auxiliary cord. Soon music was playing through the speakers. It was raw and beautiful, but I didn’t recognize it. It took me nearly half the song before I finally recognized his voice.

“I never heard this before,” I commented. “Sylvia would have had it on repeat if she had.”

I leaned my head back on the headrest and smiled. Sylvia and I had a thing about repeatedly listening to our new favorite songs when they were first released. We had even been known to shush someone and rewind the song if they dared interrupt us when we belted out the lyrics.

“It was one of the new songs we were going to release on the next album,” his smile was full of bittersweetness. “I just wished I would have insisted that they sent me all of the songs we were settled on. We only had two more songs to lay down and we could have released the album.”

I searched for the right words to say. It wasn’t like I could ask Ari if he could rerecord them. It would never be the same with his other two bandmates gone. And honestly, there really weren’t any words to fix this.

“Are you ready to tell me why you were running the other day?” he asked after a beat of silence.

I stiffened for a moment before I figured it didn’t matter if he knew. It wasn’t a huge secret; he was growing on me as a friend. When we cooked together or hung out, I discovered it was effortless to talk to him. Lately, I forgot that he had been a famous rock star. He didn’t talk or behave like one.

“I started sleep running when my life was turned upside down as a teenager. It’s triggered by stress. I’ve seen a lot of

therapists and tried a lot of different drugs. Nothing works,” I adjusted my ponytail.

He hummed. “After your mother passed away and you developed an eating disorder?”

I scrunched up my nose and shook my head. “I never had an eating disorder. Who told you—” I stopped short when realization dawned. “Emery.”

“She offered to help me install the gravity feeders in the poultry yard,” he confirmed. “I thought it was you at first,” his brows knitted. “It wasn’t until she leaned in to kiss me that I suspected something wasn’t right.”

I sighed and rubbed my temples. This game of hers was getting so old and tiring. I realized Emery was jealous of my situation, but at what point was she going to stop obsessing over it?

“I never had an eating disorder. Emery did,” I sighed. “In fact, we both started seeing a therapist together. I had just begun sleep running due to my mom’s diagnosis and because I was being groomed by one of the photographers we often worked with,” I saw him stiffen out of the corner of my eye, but I continued. “It all happened within three months. Emery always loved modeling more than I did, and the older girls influenced her in the industry. She developed dangerous habits due to their impact.

“We started to drift apart right before my mom passed away, but Emery almost became a different person after she did. How did you know it wasn’t me? She tried to seduce Kingston until he realized she didn’t smell like me. Then she took some of my clothing and scents before her plans were thwarted.”

He shook his head. “First, I knew you wouldn’t make a move on me unless your men approved it. When I pushed her away and asked her if she had gotten permission, she insisted that she had. Something still didn’t seem right, and then I asked her if Hassan had given her his drawing. She smiled, gushed, and said she loved it.”

I looked at him in confusion. “Who’s Hassan?”

“Exactly,” he dryly chuckled. “I reminded Emery my nephew’s name was Ihaia. She laughed and said Hassan was her nickname for him. She thought he had told me that. I then asked her who my niece was. She teared up and asked me if I was calling her a liar. At that point, I was irritated, so I played along for a little while. She asked me if she could come to my room that night. I told her yes; she knew where my room was.”

My stomach dipped in revulsion. At least, that’s what I told myself. And then I realized Ari said yes, and she—being me—knew where his room was. I didn’t.

“Allan said she screamed when he entered his room,” Ari chuckled. “I now owe him something, and she refused to talk to me when I saw her at breakfast the next morning.”

I gaped at him, attempting to hide my smile. “You did not? Why didn’t I hear about this before?” I laughed.

He smirked and shrugged, backing up into the receiving door bay.

Most of our group, including the teens, stood by with our boxes and gear. Chad backed in beside us before Wyatt closed the door behind us.

“She may not stop,” I grimly informed Ari before I opened up my door. “I don’t know how far she’ll go. She hoped I would be miserable when she took Trevor from me. Now that she realizes I moved on and Trevor left her, I’m unsure how far she’ll take it.”

“Now that I know her games, I can be more vigilant,” he reassured me.

I nodded before hopping out. I kind of wished we hadn’t just had that conversation. I rarely thought about Emery out here and didn’t have to watch my back. At Sanctuary, I felt like her mere presence put me on edge. She had already proven she could be vindictive and vile. And until she felt like she was living a better life, she would never leave me alone.

Wyatt immediately embraced me and nuzzled my neck. I laughed. “What in the world?”

“I missed you,” he groaned.

“We were only separated for like twenty minutes,” I fondly rolled my eyes at him.

“That was twenty minutes too long,” he playfully scowled. “You should go take a shower. We already took ours. Want me to come wash your back?”

Now that he pointed that out, I could distinctly smell his Old Spice body wash. I inhaled and moaned in appreciation. Old Spice had stepped up their game since the days my Pop-pop wore it. I lovingly ran my fingers through his still-damp tresses. And he purred and nudged my hand like a cat, making me laugh.

“Eden,” Axel warningly called out. “Let our woman take a shower, and let’s get these vehicles loaded.”

“Our woman’s arm hurts, and she wants me to wash her back,” he buried his head further into my neck.

Axel raised a brow, and I smiled and shook my head. I didn’t know why Wyatt was being clingy. This was the behavior I expected from Kingston. I was sure he was just as excited to get home, but a part of him had relished in our days together too. I could imagine it was sinking in, and he realized his time spent with me wouldn’t be as much any longer.

Wyatt pulled back and looked at me with a mock look of hurt. “Axel hogged you to himself last night,” he playfully sulked. “I just wanted some lovings.”

“Later,” I gave him an indulgent smile and kissed the tip of his nose. “Plus, you monopolized my time the night before,” I reminded him.

“Promise?” he dropped his voice to a sultry whisper.

“Promise,” I said.

He reluctantly released me with a pout. I smiled, kissed his mouth, and went to clean up.



“Do you think he’ll be up for joining us for lunch?” Axel inquired.

I looked up from where I was, checking Harvey’s back. It was healing nicely and showed no signs of infection. He was still sore, which was to be expected, but he was moving around rather nicely today.

“It’s up to him,” I answered, gingerly spreading antibiotic ointment on his welts.

“I’m tired of these four walls,” Harvey chuckled. “I’m ready to join the land of the living again. Thanks again, Avery, for everything you’ve done for me.”

“It was a team effort,” I demurred, placing some light gauze wraps on his wounds.

“What’s on the menu today?” Harvey inquired after giving me a “yeah, right” look.

I didn’t hear Axel’s response as I cleaned the area. I was thankful Harvey was feeling better, especially since after lunch, we planned to sit down and review our plans for our departure. With Harvey on the mend, we wouldn’t have to worry about going slow or worrying about his comfort as much.

Once I finished cleaning up, I grabbed the last box I planned on taking with us. I didn’t know why the prison people had collected so many contraceptives, but I was thankful for them. In addition to the contraceptives, I took as many antibiotics and painkillers as possible.

“Come on, Bane and Sasha,” I clicked my tongue.

They both got up and followed me out of the room. As I walked through the cafeteria, I smiled and waved at everyone. Nearly everyone was sitting down and eating.

“Hey, beautiful, want me to take that box for you?” Wyatt stood up.

“No,” I shook my head. “I got it. Thanks,” I winked at him. “Eat. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” he reluctantly sat back down.

The teens and women had tried their best to clean up the hallways, but the evidence of the battle was still unmistakable. Axel had tried to tell them we could do it later, but they had insisted on doing it. I greatly appreciated it and was looking forward to the nap I planned on having after our meeting.

A loud bang and rattle made me startle as I passed one of the hallways we had sealed off. I laughed at my jumpiness, remembering we hadn’t completely investigated the facility. I knew the infected still lingered in the areas we hadn’t cleared. It was a waste of time and senseless for us to sweep it completely. We did not intend to stay, and our path was devoid of danger.

Bane and Sasha merely looked up at me like I was crazy. I fondly rubbed their heads in return.

Once I reached the receiving area, I slid the box into the open bread truck. Admittedly, we didn’t need everything we’d packed, but it was nice to have. I spotted the Doritos I had found and smiled, thinking about Amy and Josh’s excitement.

I reached into a box and pulled out the first aid kit I wanted to keep in the vehicle for Harvey’s wounds. I had already given him the antibiotics I wanted him to take for a few more days. I didn’t trust that he was infection-free despite outward appearances.

Once I did that, I verified that my backpack was in the van. Axel had loaded it for me earlier. The only thing I had left in our room was a change of clothes in the morning. My sais were on my back, and my knives and reloaded guns were where they typically were.

As I turned away, Sasha and Bane went on alert. I paused and listened, trying to determine what they had heard. I cautiously walked towards the roll-up doors, ensuring the

locks were in place. I was beginning to think they had imagined things when the door rattled.

“Settle,” I whispered to the dogs.

I tried to determine if it was infected or people when I heard a loud bang followed by a loud curse.

“What the fuck?” a man bellowed. “How the hell are we locked out of our own damn place?”

I whispered a curse before making my way to the rolling ladder. There was a narrow window above the door. I pushed it over to the door and carefully climbed it. There was a running truck approximately ten feet away. I counted four men. One man was sitting behind the steering wheel while the other three attempted to get in.

I would let the others know once I determined what we were facing. I ran towards the cafeteria. Bane and Sasha were hot on my heels. I was thankful that Axel insisted that we board the other entrances. The other doors had infected by them, so we hadn't bothered reinforcing those areas. The moment I ran into the room, Axel immediately stood up.

“They're back,” I breathed out.

Immediately everyone stood up and began to grab their possessions. Wyatt and I had found bags, totes, and other carriers for everyone. We'd insisted that everyone pack it similar to our go-bags. Then we encouraged them to keep them by their sides just in case. I was glad everyone had listened.

“Alec, Wyatt, on me,” Axel called out. “Chad, Cal, get behind the wheels of the vehicles, but don't start them.”

Without a word, the rest of us started to make our way to the vehicles. I couldn't help but notice how Nolan had run to the back and returned with a cooler and another food container.

“Nolan,” Ari hissed.

Ari and I were waiting for the last person to go through so we could watch everyone's backs. I pulled out my gun just in

case.

“I’m not leaving my eggrolls, and I’m still hungry,” Nolan said in a disgruntled tone.

We had an ice box set aside for some of the Asian food we couldn’t access at Sanctuary. We had planned on loading it up at the last minute tomorrow morning. Even on ice, we didn’t want to risk spoiling it. However, it wasn’t important enough to risk our lives. I didn’t know how long the front barricades would hold them back.

I laughed despite the tenseness in my body. “Your eggrolls?” I queried.

“Yup,” he nodded. “Everyone else left them. And possession is nine-tenths of the law. I just wish there was more of my soup.”

He had tried to convince me nearly every day to make him more of the Korean soup. I had gotten so tired of listening to him that I had made the soup base, vegetables, eggs, and beef on day two. I found some containers and distributed the soup equally. Then I divided a packet of rice cake noodles into smaller bags. All he had to do was bring some of the soup to boil and throw the noodles in for a few minutes. He had run out of it yesterday, and I had heard him whine about it since then.

“Hot mess,” I muttered with a laugh.

“But you love me anyway,” he took a large bite of a breadstick.

“You keep telling yourself that,” I fell into step behind him, bringing up the rear of our group.

“How ya feeling, Harvey?” I inquired, catching up with the rest of the group.

Ari fell into step behind me as Nolan ran ahead.

“With the proper motivation, nothing hurts,” he dryly stated with a wince.

I worried about him, but understood why he wasn’t favoring his injuries. After hearing what some of them went

through, I would much rather die than be caught by those animals again.

“I’ll give you some pain meds when we get to the vehicles,” I reassured him.

“Thanks, Ave,” he gave me a crooked smile.

“No problem,” I nodded.

It didn’t take us long to reach the vehicles. The teens and a few guys climbed into the back of the bread truck. The bread truck had been modified to accommodate our missions better. Thus, the reason why two bench seats were installed on the sides of the cargo area. Instead of the vehicle being a two-seater, it could now fit eight people.

Someone began kicking the roll-up doors, and Shelley let out a squeal of fear. Kiara immediately clapped a hand over the younger woman’s mouth and whispered to her urgently. The banging had stopped, and I inwardly cursed. We didn’t want our presence to be known before it was necessary.

I crept towards the door and paused. I strained to hear any conversations. I could only hear a word or two. I couldn’t even string enough words together to put together a sentence.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” a male voice crooned before kicking the door with renewed fervor.

I felt a hand grasp my biceps and nearly jumped. I looked over my shoulder and saw it was Ari. He tilted his head towards the van, and I nodded.

Chad was sitting behind the driver’s wheel, and I decided to keep the passenger seat open for Axel. As I reached the van, I heard Nolan dryly laugh. I looked at him and noticed his attention was on the door behind me. More pounding ensued as it took me a moment to realize it wasn’t coming from the roll-up doors. My eyes slightly widened when I saw a man peering down from the window I had used earlier.

I couldn’t hear his voice, but it looked like his mouth was forming the words, “Let us in.”

Nolan must have interpreted the exact words I did because he laughed, shook his head, and stuck up both of his middle fingers. “Fuck off!” he chortled.

“Let’s not antagonize him,” Ari sighed with frustration as he climbed into the van.

I climbed in after him and realized the only seats open were in the front. Sasha took the seat between the driver and passenger door. Nolan’s pack was in the second row beside Kiara. Jeff and Harvey were in the third row. Shelley, Heather, and Jasmine huddled together in the back, sobbing and clutching each other.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I quietly insisted as I stuck my backpack at my feet.

“It’s easy for you to say, GI Jane,” Shelly sobbed. “You have no clue what we’ve been through at the hands of those monsters!”

I was shocked by Shelly’s outburst. The woman was a year older than me but had the maturity of an older teen. Until five minutes ago, I had known her to be almost painfully introverted. She was raised by a single father who was on the spectrum. He was high-functioning but still had a few quirks. One of them being his love of playing RPGs and video games.

Shelly had fallen in love with gaming because of that. She wasn’t on the spectrum, but never moved out of her father’s house. She worked part-time at a fast-food restaurant—not that I was judging. To each their own; who was I to judge? And when she wasn’t working, she was gaming. She never had any aspirations or goals beyond that.

When her mother passed away, her life insurance went towards the house. Shelly’s father only had to pay his yearly taxes and utilities. His job as a bookkeeper of a lucrative small business easily covered his bills, and he never pushed his daughter to move out. They had a weekly Dungeons and Dragons game they hosted at their house, and he liked his daughter getting everything ready for it.

“Shelly,” Jeff gently chided her.

“It’s okay, Jeff,” I feigned a smile. “I don’t know what you all have been through.”

“Doesn’t make it right to act like a bitch,” Kiara grumbled. “It’s okay to be afraid, but lashing out at Avery isn’t right.”

“I know,” Shelly sobbed, nearly hyperventilating.

I understood that she was afraid, but the callous part of me didn’t know how much I could take of the uncontrollable sobbing. The situation was tense enough without her carrying on. Her wailing and the men attempting to kick down the door were grating on my fraying nerves. She was starting to irritate me as the minutes dragged on. I knew it was mean and heartless, and I would feel guilty about it later. However, in the heat of the moment, I was seconds from losing my cool.

Heather, Jasmine, and Harvey tried to calm her down, but I could see they were losing patience with her too. The more they tried to reassure her, the louder and longer her cries became.

“Do you have any sedatives by any chance?” Nolan leaned over the seat, chewing on food as he peered at me. “Maybe a tranquilizer gun?”

“I wish,” I muttered, causing Nolan to laugh and Ari to let out a bark of surprised laughter.

“Can’t you two sing her some lullabies or something?” I groused.

“Now that’s an idea,” Nolan mused aloud. He started to hum and drum on the seats. Which only caused Shelly to cry even louder.

I was getting ready to leave the vehicle and find out what was taking Alec, Wyatt, and Axel so long when they came jogging into the room. I sighed in relief as Wyatt ran towards the roll-up doors. I smiled and watched him attach some of his devices to the door’s frame.

“Start the engines,” Axel instructed Chad as Alec approached the bread truck. “I’m going to guide you back as far as I can.”

Chad nodded and started the vehicle. The banging increased. The moment Chad stopped the vehicle, Bane and Axel climbed into our vehicle.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Wyatt kissed my lips with a loud resounding smack.

His eyes were dancing with glee, and I knew the devices he placed on the doors were “good” ones. I would worry about his obsession with explosives if it wasn’t for the fact he was “balanced” out everywhere else.

“Big boom?” I queried.

“Big boom,” Wyatt confirmed. “Everyone, cover your ears and heads down,” he yelled to the rest of the van as he slid ear protection in.

I noticed Chad and Axel slipping on earmuffs as well. Where the hell they got them was beyond me. Sometimes, I learned it was safer not to ask.

I inserted my fingers into my ears and bent over my knees. Two sets of arms braced over my back, and it took me a second to realize they belonged to Wyatt and Ari. A few moments later, I heard the muffled explosion seconds before I felt the van shudder, then lurch forward. My body was rocked backward as Chad sped forward. I reflexively shot my hands out and braced them on Wyatt and Ari’s thighs. Ari and Wyatt pressed their bodies closer to me, shielding me.

The sounds of metal scraping against metal filled my ears. The sound caused me to cringe. The vehicle rocked back and forth, and I assumed we were driving over the door.

“Shit,” I heard Chad mutter between the screams of the women in the back.

The sound of shattering glass filled my ears, followed by it showering down around us. Once we stopped getting pelted by the glass, Ari, Wyatt, and I all popped up simultaneously. I saw an armored vehicle attempt to cut off our path toward our exit. Axel kicked out the remaining glass from the front windshield.

Another loud explosion filled my ears, and I looked toward the front entrance of the building. Roughly ten to fifteen men were knocked out, screaming, or writhing on the ground. I suspected Wyatt had that explosion on a timer, and it had just gone off.

Unfortunately, three men hadn't been close enough for the blast to affect them. They ran towards us with their weapons ready. I pulled out my gun, leaned forward, sighted in one of the guys, and took a shot. Three other shots entered the man simultaneously, and I suspected I hadn't been the only one aiming for him.

The next man attempted to jump in front of us and shoot a shotgun at us. He hadn't even braced it against his shoulder before my bullet, Axel's, Wyatt's, and Ari's, took him down. The third man, and the driver, must have had some sense left, because they took off running in the opposite direction.

"Leave 'em," Axel commanded Chad as he looked at him.

Chad nodded. I surveyed our surroundings, watching for any more dangers. I was glad to see Harvey, Kiara, and Nolan peering out the back and side windows. I saw Alec and Cal laughing in the other vehicle as they approached us.

"Clear," Jeff called out.

"Clear," Axel confirmed. "Everyone okay?"

"All good," Harvey responded. "And Shelly is still breathing and has a pulse."

I spun and saw Jasmine and Heather attempting to stave off their tears as Shelly slumped in between them.

"I had to knock her out," Jasmine said with zero remorse.

I let out a bark of surprised laughter and noticed Nolan and Ari joined me. I didn't realize how blessed the silence was until she wasn't screaming any longer.

"Did we miss something?" Wyatt asked in bewilderment as he began to pick pieces of glass from my hair.

I switched my gun's safety back on and slumped back in the seat as the adrenaline caught up to me. It was so easy to

shut down my emotions in the heat of the moment. The crash afterward was an entirely different beast.

“Nothing at all,” Nolan laughed before he leaned forward. “Who’s hungry?”

It took me a moment to realize he had a serving dish full of sandwich wraps.

“Oooh, chicken BLT on a sundried tomato wrap, don’t mind if I do,” Wyatt cooed. “Let me take care of my girl first.”

I dryly laughed and shook my head. I seriously contemplated starting a journal. Some of the stuff I experienced and witnessed was beyond belief. It was almost a disservice not to write it down and pass it along one day. I’m sure anyone who read it would think it was fiction. Hell, I was living it and sometimes wondered if this was all a figment of my imagination.

It was hard to believe a short while ago my biggest concern was graduating college, getting my degree, qualifying for the USA Olympic team, and starting the journey for my next stage in life. Now, I was wondering the fate of four of my six men, attempting to raise healthy and happy little humans, fighting the infected, and hoping to survive another day. Yeah, my life would be a page-turner, and most people would skeptically believe it was non-fiction. Unfortunately, it wasn’t fiction, but regardless, I would embrace each new day and continue hoping and praying tomorrow would be better.

**To be continued....**

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

WE meet again! I know we should do it more often... Now, for anyone lighting their torches preparing to charge the castle because I left a lot of loose ends, please don't. This is only part one. I got really, really long winded with Hoards and Harbors, so I had to split it up into two parts. However, there isn't going to be a long wait for the second part. It is finished and will be sitting at the editors shortly.

Now that that's out of the way I want to thank all my loyal, and faithful readers. Thank you for continuing to promote and recommending my books. I lurk in the shadows a lot, and I see all your positive vibes. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To my partner on this crazy ride called life, thank you for all your love and support. Thank you for entertaining our tiny humans when I needed to hide away and write. P.S. I love you more!

Thank you also to Nikki for helping me a lot in this book. You taught me new things and I greatly appreciate it! Thank you, Joy, for continually checking on me and supporting me in my endeavors as well.

Hope to see you soon!

XOXO

