

FREEDOM'S LANDING
BOOK ONE

TROY

LUCY REGATTA

TROY

A STEAMY FUTURISTIC
DYSTOPIAN ROMANCE

FREEDOM'S LANDING

BOOK 1



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ORIGINAL COVER

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*To Donna,
a kindred spirit in all things romance.
Thank you for believing in me.
You are a constant source of inspiration,
and I'm so grateful for your friendship.
You're truly amazing and
I'm blessed to call you
friend.*

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YOU CAN RUN, BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE

**North American Coalition
Zone Seven, Ottawa City Central
Earth Year, 2116**

EVANGELINE

EVANGELINE SAT PERCHED on her office chair with her long, slender legs crossed at the knee. One high-heeled foot tapped angrily on the tiled floor. She glared across the vast expanse of the antique desk, staring down Nancy O'Neill, a former member of her private security detail.

Evangeline favored the enormous desk, an old-world monstrosity with its intricate and aged design. It was at odds with the sterile white walls and tiles of her corner office, but it gave off an air of superiority that made her visitors feel small. It diminished their confidence, a point that was driven home by the elite security guard who stood across from her now. Nancy's posture was rigid, her eyes glued to some invisible point behind Evangeline's head. From the tight set of her mouth, it was clear Nancy knew she'd crossed a line.

Evangeline thrummed her cherry-red nails on the embossed leather desk pad. She was furious. How could a six-foot-five Elite Breeder disappear in a city full of women?

"You've done nothing to help your plight," Evangeline said to Nancy, her voice dripping with rage. "Not only did you betray me by fucking my favorite Elite Breeder behind my

back, but now, when I've given you the opportunity to rectify the matter and find him, you come up empty handed!"

"Ma'am, we believe he's crossed over into the Dead Zones and that he's getting help." Nancy glanced nervously at Evangeline. "The Network knows how to hide their tracks. We've exhausted every—"

"Exhausted!" Evangeline interjected, her voice like a cracking whip. She stood up and slammed her hands down on the desk, her long brown hair swinging around her face. "Tried isn't sufficient!" She leaned forward, meeting Nancy's eyes, making the younger woman pale with a single withering look.

"He never should have made it to the Dead Zones!" Evangeline yelled, her painted red lips twisting into a scowl. She bared her teeth, fists clenching tightly at her sides. "You're going to have to fix this mess you've made. Losing a Class 5 Elite Breeder is unacceptable. I already have the Council breathing down my neck. I don't need to tell you how rare e-breeders are. They want him back and so do I; this kind of loss carries serious consequences."

It was bad enough that Troy had gone missing on the night of Evangeline's annual Valentine's Day gala—the most prestigious social event in the district, which she hosted. She'd barely been able to conceal his disappearance from said event, and it was only a matter of time before the truth got out. It was humiliating to ask the Council for their help in locating him. Evangeline shuddered when she thought of the pandemonium that would ensue once the media found out.

She would be a laughingstock.

The newsfeeds would be all over it, like flies on shit. The mere thought made her feel sick to her stomach and left an acerbic taste in her mouth.

"You need to rectify this problem as soon as possible, before he disappears forever," Evangeline continued. "And if that happens, you'll never work in security again. Even as it is, your prospects are looking slim."

At least Nancy had the sense to cast her eyes downward as if she were searching for something on the floor. Her cheeks reddening.

Nancy wasn't solely responsible for what had happened. The fact that she'd fucked Troy behind Evangeline's back, *that* was unforgivable. But Evangeline had allowed her e-breeder to roam freely around the estate after three years of being together. His betrayal was profound and stung deeply.

She'd known that Troy had run in the past, but she'd believed he was content with his position and happy to be by her side. After all, hadn't she put him on a pedestal and granted him all sorts of privileges?

And then there was a slight complication—Evangeline loved Troy, was *in* love with him, even though he was eight years her junior. A top-tier Elite Breeder, trained in bed play, he was highly skilled between the sheets, and his virility only made him more appealing. Evangeline used every trick in the book to delay his transfer from under her Keepership, inventing all sorts of fertility issues. All lies, every last one.

The Lottery, a draw for fertility treatments—or even better, access to breeders—was closed to most women once they reached thirty, and then their baby-making days were over. But they gave politicians some leniency when it came to their reproductive capabilities and timeline.

Evangeline was nearing thirty-five. She was running out of time. She had no intention of ever having a baby, too focused on her career as Governor of Zone 7. However, she was notorious for getting what she wanted, and she wanted Troy back—regardless of his betrayal. At best, they'd had another two years together before the Council took him back into their fold, but his disappearance threw a wrench in her plans. She wasn't sure they'd allow her to keep him after this fiasco, but Evangeline would try her damndest to make it happen.

“Gather personnel and send them to the Dead Zones.” Evangeline straightened up and smoothed her dress suit back into place. “Recruit the most competent trackers by whatever means necessary. Determine who aided in his escape. Go back

through the staff roster for any clues. I need evidence that I can present to the Council before we can confirm a Network tie-in. Nothing is off limits, understood?”

“Yes, Governor.” Nancy inclined her head, her face a mask of neutrality. “May I take my leave?” She kept her gaze fixed forward and continued to avoid making eye contact with Evangeline at all costs.

Evangeline dropped into her chair and waved Nancy off with a dismissive flick of her hand. “Go.” She spun her chair around and took in the expansive view from her office, scanning over the pristine low-rise landscape. Troy was out there somewhere. Just imagining another woman near him, touching him, twisted her insides into a painful knot. It made her green with jealousy.

Nancy was desperately trying to make amends for her misconduct, but no amount of grovelling would sway Evangeline. She’d make sure Nancy faced the consequences of her unfortunate actions. She kept dangling the promise of redemption in front of the woman, but once Troy was returned, she’d strip Nancy of every hope and ambition, leaving her with nothing. If all went according to Evangeline’s plan, Nancy would never work in a high-level position again.

Evangeline clenched her fists on the armrests and gritted her teeth, a fierce determination filling her heart. *No one touches what belongs to me—ever.*

And Troy was hers.

OFF WITH HER HEAD

Three Days Earlier

TROY

TROY FISTED a handful of Nancy's red hair and tilted her head back until their eyes met in the full-length mirror. She was on all fours, stripped of everything, her face a mask of sensual abandon. He knelt behind her as she shamelessly rode his dick, desperately chasing her pleasure.

"Harder, please," she moaned, the words escaping in a throaty plea.

Troy yanked on her hair, adding a pinch of pain. "Quiet or I'll gag you," he snarled into her ear before gliding his tongue across her cheek. "I control how this works." His thrusts slowed as he entered her, ensuring she understood her place. He dictated the pace.

Nancy clamped down on her lower lip. "Bastard," she purred with blatant satisfaction. He plunged into her, balls deep, holding himself steady as he shifted his weight onto one knee behind her.

Nancy liked being dominated in the bedroom, and tonight, Troy had every intention of making all her darkest fantasies come true. Not only would he tie her up, but he planned to muzzle her, just like he'd threatened to.

He was already sporting the ball gag around his neck as part of his costume, along with a spiked collar and heart-shaped dog tag with the words "My King" inscribed on it. This

year's theme for the Governor's annual Valentine's Day gala was the Queen of Hearts, and Troy was Evangeline's King. The iconic monarch in *Alice in Wonderland* was just as powerless as he was.

Luckily, Troy had bet on Evangeline being too busy at the gala to monitor him, and he'd been right. With the Governor engrossed in conversations about politics, Troy was free to wander the premises and he'd made his way to Nancy unmolested. The Governor was his acting Keeper. She ruled with an iron fist, and few women risked pawing him without her explicit permission. He was hers, and *hers* alone.

Ever since Chimera, the hybrid virus that had devastated the male population everywhere, men were divided into three categories. Category one was Susceptibles: males diagnosed with the Achilles Effect, which made them prone to any illness and required them to stay in sterile medical facilities. Nevertheless, these men were important to the female-governed world of the Coalition because their genetic material was used for artificial insemination, ensuring humanity's survival.

Category two were S-breeds; sterile, their fate was to serve as sexual playthings in Himeros Houses for women.

At the top of the list was category three: Elite Breeders. These males were both healthy and fertile and were leased out to the Coalitions' affluent. These privileged women acted as their designated Keepers until they became pregnant. Once the pregnancy was confirmed, the e-breeder would be sent away, and the entire process would begin again. Fuck. Impregnate. Relocate. And repeat.

Troy fell into this rare category. He'd been assigned to new Keepers countless times before, as was expected of a virile male born and bred to serve his country. But Evangeline was the first woman powerful enough to prolong his stay without the Council's intervention. But, fed up with being defined by his gender and patriotic duty, tonight, Troy would strive for independence—again.

Troy couldn't believe his luck when Nancy stepped onto the Governor's grounds as part of her security team. She was a tall and impressive woman at six-foot-two, a perfect complement to his six-foot-five frame. It was obvious from the beginning that Nancy found him attractive, regardless of the fact that he was the Governor's prized possession. But Evangeline wasn't willing to share Troy, unlike so many of his other Keepers before. Women were allowed to admire and caress his body, but no sex. Not ever.

Over the next couple of months, he and Nancy managed a few illicit rendezvous, with his end goal being to seduce her. But not in the way she probably imagined. In his mind, it was a fair exchange. She got to fuck an Elite Breeder, and in the end, he got to borrow her uniform.

The timing of Nancy's arrival couldn't have been more perfect, with the Governor's upcoming Valentine's Day gala. With Marcy's help, his nurse and coconspirator, they set up an escape plan to get him to the first station of the Network, a clandestine organization that aided citizens in escaping the Coalition. From there, Troy would make his way through the Dead Zones and eventually reach Freedom's Landing, a small enclave of survivors who, despite the odds, had stayed alive in the wilderness all these years.

Determined to bring their playtime to a close, Troy slammed fiercely into Nancy, and she gasped in delight. In the mirror, he watched the tiny red rhinestones Evangeline had glued over his right eye in the shape of a heart, glint in the light with each rhythmic thrust. His royal cloak, trimmed in ermine and clipped diagonally across his glistening chest, added a regal touch to the otherwise debauched scene. A filigreed crown lay discarded on the carpet, forgotten in the heat of passion. If Evangeline found his ridiculous costume incredibly sexy, who was Troy to argue? Whatever the Governor wanted, she got.

Nancy's blue eyes held his momentarily in the mirror before they rolled back into her head as he pounded away at her—hard, just on the edge of being brutal. Troy released his fury into her body. Slapping against her ass, he watched her

skin brighten to a soft pink. He grabbed the fleshy globes, biting into them with his fingertips until her skin paled. She loved it.

One palm circled the back of her neck. “Stay down, like a good girl,” he whispered into her ear, and she responded with a muffled groan of agreement. She put up a token resistance against his grip before Troy overpowered her, pushing her down onto her forearms as he leaned forward and forced his fingers into her mouth.

Troy had become a connoisseur of dominance in the bedroom through years of practice and far too many partners. Now, as he thrust against Nancy on the floor of the oversized walk-in closet in one of the estate’s guest bedrooms, his skill was put to good use.

The role of Dom drew Troy because it was the only time he felt truly in control. And the power he held over Nancy excited them both. He confidently assumed the lead with skill, and many influential women enjoyed submitting to him during sex—wanted it—and Nancy was no different.

“Mm-hmm. Yes,” she purred as Troy’s fingers entered her mouth. Her pleasure escalated, sucking him into her mouth as she reached down and let out a low moan as her hand flew to her clit. Troy pulled his invading digits out, smacked her butt cheeks, then drove himself into her with wild abandon.

“That’s right. Take all of me deep inside your sweet, wet pussy. And just maybe...”

Troy grabbed her by the front of her neck, his hands lightly squeezing her throat. He had been reluctant to do this in the past, but he was finally prepared to take the risk and give in to her desires.

“Yes—do it,” she pleaded with excitement. “Fuck me hard and choke me—my God—yes.”

Troy curled his fingers tighter around her neck. Her body quaked with excitement as the sensation of pleasure and danger drew nearer, hovering between the brink of life and death.

“Oh yes, more,” she pleaded. “Choke me until I come on your dick.”

Troy used his weight to drive deeper inside her one more time before he shifted and locked his arm around her windpipe, pulling her upright and flush against his chest. She quickly moved her hands up to protect her throat, gripping his forearm to push him off. But instead of continuing to struggle, she released a quivering breath and shut her eyes.

She wanted this.

And badly.

Troy thrust into her, the different angle sending pleasure coursing through his balls. He fought against his own arousal, not wanting to get off on what he was doing, yet he couldn't help it. Perhaps it was their precarious situation that aroused him even more; there was always a chance of getting caught and ruining everything. Troy didn't want to become addicted to this act, strangling while screwing, but he couldn't go limp. Not today. Today he needed to be a living piston and keep his intended victim enmeshed in fucking.

Troy threaded his hand into the fold of his other elbow, locked his arm in place, and applied pressure to Nancy's neck, just enough to restrict the blood flow to her brain.

“Yes!” she gasped, arching her back against him. The contractions in her body indicated her imminent orgasm. He pulled her closer to him as he released his own climax, jets of semen being eagerly swallowed by her greedy cunt.

Troy embraced Nancy; his face pushed against her nape as he let out shaky grunts of pleasure. His breath was heavy and labored as he held her tightly in his grasp. Nancy strained to break free, becoming more frantic as she realized he was squeezing the oxygen out of her lungs. She desperately clawed at him, yet all that could escape her lips were small, whimpering gasps.

Troy clung tenaciously to Nancy as she thrashed and fought him, her strength far exceeding that of Marcy's. Marcy had suggested that he should practice the sleep hold on her,

and he was thankful that he had. But Nancy was far stronger than the middle-aged nurse. Troy teetered on the brink of losing his balance. Gritting his teeth, he maintained his grip until Nancy's body slowly relaxed, signaling that she'd finally succumbed to his grip.

Time for immediate action.

He had exactly eight seconds between the instant she lost all muscle control and the moment she would regain consciousness.

Troy laid Nancy down on the floor and removed his gag. He slid the breathable ball into her mouth, making sure the strap at the back of her head was secure. After that, he grabbed his leather pants from where they'd been tossed down earlier and undid the handcuffs, along with the accompanying restraints, from the belt loop.

Troy wrapped the cuffs around Nancy's wrists, securing them to the straps of her gag. Being a pet of the Governor had some unique advantages, such as access to a wide selection of sex toys. He rose to his feet, aware of every ticking second, and opened the drawer where he hid some duct tape and used it to tie her ankles together.

Troy took a step back to inspect his handiwork and saw signs of Nancy waking. In another second, she'd be ready for a fight. She had impressive combat training and experience, and Troy had neither. Although he was in peak physical condition, it was purely cosmetic. Only so women would find him attractive, not for fighting. In the Coalition, men were forbidden to fight.

Troy tugged on his underwear and slipped on his pants. They would do as part of his disguise. Evangeline's female elite security squad wore black as part of their official uniform all the time.

Troy took off the cumbersome cloak and collar and replaced them with Nancy's black tactical shirt and vest. Thankfully, he was just slim enough to fit into them. His strict dietary regimen under Evangeline's care, kept him lean.

Thanks to her, he was shredded, without an inch of fat on his body.

Nancy moaned around the gag. He glanced over and saw her eyelids flutter.

Troy grabbed Nancy's gun belt and fastened it around his waist, then adjusted the holster at his thigh. He had no clue how to use a gun, but he knew enough to point the barrel and look threatening. Marcy told him his next agent would instruct him how to shoot a weapon in theory, if not in practice.

His first stop was in the farthest reaches of Zone Seven, the outermost boundary of the Coalition. Few ever dared to cross the border into the treacherous Dead Zones, and those who did rarely returned. It was infamous for its lack of safety and basic necessities. Even though fences didn't mark its boundaries, nobody strayed beyond Coalition borders for fear of what lurked outside. But if the rumors were true, freedom, as a male, could be only be found in the Dead Zones.

A flurry of muffled, angry words had Troy spinning around to see Nancy staring at him, her eyes brimming with rage. If looks could kill, Troy would have been a dead man.

"Sorry about this," he whispered and pulled a few items of clothing off their hangers. "It isn't personal," he said as he crouched down in front of her and covered her nakedness for modesty's sake. "It's the best I can do under the circumstances."

The telltale signs of their indiscretion were now streaming down Nancy's thighs. Troy wouldn't want to be in her shoes once the Governor found out what they'd done.

Nancy muffled an angry warning behind her gag. Troy slowly rose to his feet and peered around the room, searching for the remaining parts of his disguise. He wanted to make sure that he could seamlessly pass through a crowd undetected.

In the far corner of the closet, Troy spotted the slip-on card sleeve Evangeline had ordered all her security personnel to wear while keeping watch over tonight's event. They were

dressed as playing cards from the queen's deck, with red hoods and black mesh masks to prevent anyone from seeing their faces. Nancy was the Ace of Spades. *How fitting.* Troy pulled out the backpack he'd stowed away in the closet some days prior and quickly stuffed his costume into it. The bag was stretched tight, crammed with items for his escape. Water, food, a personal interface, a pocketknife, a first aid kit, and other essential supplies. Marcy was an angel.

"Damn it!" Troy muttered to himself; he'd almost forgotten. He yanked up his sleeve to the spot Marcy had marked with a blue dot. Until she mentioned her connection to the Network, he wasn't aware of the tracking device embedded beneath his skin. No wonder his previous escape plans hadn't worked; they'd known where he was every step of the way. As a reminder of his unsuccessful attempt, they'd branded him like the livestock he was, with a circled R etched into the right side of his lower back. *Runner.* The resulting scar tissue still ached sometimes, but right now, he had to push past those memories and focus on removing the implant by himself.

Troy inhaled deeply, bracing for the agony. He looked warily at the anesthetic Marcy had given him. For many years, he'd been shielded from pain, and now he was expected to plunge a blade into his skin and extract a tracking device.

If you're going to run, you're going to have to grow some balls.

But first, Troy knelt in front of Nancy. He grabbed the duct tape he'd dropped at her feet and pulled off a six-inch section. She watched him with a combination of dread and defiance in her eyes. He looked back sympathetically, silently communicating that what he was about to do was his only option. He put the tape over her eyes, lightly smoothing it down so it stayed in place. The less she knew, the less they knew, and the better his chances of getting away safely.

Troy set his mouth into a thin line. "I'm really sorry to add insult to injury," he said. He stood up, pulled out the pocketknife and first aid kit, and sat down in the opposite corner, bag at his side.

Troy covered the blue spot with some numbing agent, clenched his teeth, and took a deep breath, forcing the blade into his bicep. Of course it had to be his dominant arm; that made it even harder to extract the device. He hissed as pain seared through every nerve ending. His eyes watered as he kept digging until he almost passed out from the pain. As soon as the tracking device slipped out, Troy exhaled with relief and watched as blood dripped down his arm and onto the pale carpet.

Troy rapidly cleaned the cut and bandaged it up securely. Adrenaline had helped him through the ordeal. He safely tucked the tracking device into his pocket, recalling Marcy's instructions to plant it on some unsuspecting guest while leaving the premises. Doing this would divert the security team. As Troy pulled down his sleeve, he glanced around.

He had everything he needed. This was it. It was time to go.

He rose to his feet, quickly collected his things, and slipped on the card sleeve. He pulled up his hood, hiding himself away, and prepared to exit. Troy lifted the backpack onto his shoulder, but right before he left, he scooped a few pieces of clothing and tucked them beneath Nancy's head for a pillow. Initially, she fought his assistance, but eventually her shoulders relaxed.

Troy glanced down at the woman he'd just fucked and was struck by a pang of guilt. She'd most likely face significant repercussions for the decisions she'd made today. He'd had no choice though. All men were victims of their circumstances.

Rage flared inside his chest, hot and heavy, and for once he embraced it rather than trying to suppress it as he usually would. Nancy was going to get what she had coming. Troy didn't have to be polite anymore. He had the right to feel anger, or anything, for that matter.

Women thought that all a man ever wanted was sex. They separated their precious few male survivors from the general population, providing them with endless opportunities for it. With their baser needs met, they were expected to be content

to live sheltered and idle lives. What the women who ruled over them seemed to forget was that eventually a man could think past his dick. Want something more—like freedom, which once upon a time was rightfully theirs.

His.

Troy had found out the truth of his situation after reading a historical text he'd snuck a peek at years ago. As soon as he realized what he was—a sexual slave—he craved his escape. Until then, he hadn't even known he was a prisoner.

Sex wasn't the be-all and end-all to life. There was also love between two people, family, friends, and the freedom to choose for oneself.

Once, man had known it all.

The words of a dying character resonated from another forbidden book Troy had stolen out of Evangeline's library. He kept it hidden beneath his mattress. The protagonist, Alec, said as he lay dying: "In the end, there is only love." It was the truth.

Troy let out a deep breath, his heart aching. He longed to know what it felt like to be in love. To love and be loved, freely. Without any power plays.

NEVER. EVER. AGAIN.

VERONICA

VERONICA SPILLED the contents of her purse onto the kitchen table. She'd pilfered a handful of acetaminophen samples and a few pregnancy tests, but the day's pièce de résistance was a handheld ovulation scanner.

"Not bad for a day's work." She shrugged, grinning to herself, altogether pleased with her acquisitions.

Veronica picked through the items on the table and packed the everyday essentials back into her handbag. She walked over to the coat hooks near the sliding glass door, hung her bag up, and grabbed the backpack hanging next to it. Veronica placed it on a kitchen chair and unzipped it to reveal a collection of free samples and whatever else she'd taken from her job at the fertility clinic over the last couple of months. Anything medical she could take back to Freedom's Landing was incredibly valuable. After she loaded the backpack with her stolen goods, she returned it to its hook.

"All right, here we go." Veronica grinned, rubbing her hands together with enthusiasm as she eyed the paper tote sitting in the center of the table, a baguette peeking out at an odd angle.

As she drove home in her microtransport, the air had filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread. The interior of the single-occupancy vehicle was small and had cocooned V in a cloud of mouth-watering delight. She was surprised she hadn't torn into the baguette on the ride home. But now that the

aroma permeated her living space as well, the temptation was too much to resist.

Veronica pulled out the bread and twisted off a piece from the end. It was still warm to the touch, and she took a bite. It was better than sex. Veronica had bought the loaf from Marquette's, a boutique bakery, on the way home, along with a container of locally churned butter. Both items had cost her a pretty credit, but sometimes one just had to splurge.

"Mmm," Veronica moaned, savoring another delectable bite. Her eyelashes fluttered closed as she absently dug around in the cutlery drawer until she found a knife. She cut into the butter and smeared it onto the bread. The creamy texture melted and ran down the spongy dough until it was either absorbed or ended up on her fingers. Veronica licked the savory liquid off, not wanting to waste even the smallest drop of the costly condiment.

Fresh bread always reminded her of being at home at the Landing, and *oh*, it was so much better than the food replica chili they'd be eating tonight along with it. Veronica expected her visitor to arrive in the early evening if all went well. Frankie—the resident general navigator for the Network and their tech genius—anticipated the runner would arrive soon.

Veronica had done her utmost to make her guest feel comfortable, thus splurging on real bread and butter. But he was unlikely to appreciate the gesture. Elite Breeders were accustomed to only the finest things in life. Being an e-breeder also meant having easy access to real food on a regular basis. Mainstreamers could only hope for replicas, which were quick to eat but far from tasty.

Veronica took another bite of the still-warm bread, humming in appreciation and licking the butter off her lower lip and the tips of her fingers. So maybe she'd really bought the bread for herself, to soothe her nerves. Tonight was going to be out of the ordinary. It wasn't every day an Elite Breeder showed up at her door.

E-breeder absconders weren't common. In the Coalition, these men lived lives of luxury and privilege and rarely

wanted for anything. They were kept by the upper class and shared among the elite. Veronica pensively twirled a strand of her long brown hair around a finger. But this was the second e-breeder to do a runner in the past six months.

Shadow had been the first in a long while, but he was an anomaly of sorts. Like a wounded puppy who'd been kicked one too many times. He'd endured immense suffering at the hands of a cruel Keeper, leaving him with an understandable, deep-seated mistrust of the opposite sex. Despite this, many of the resident-born women of Freedom's Landing still hoped that Shadow would one day open his heart. However, he seemed determined to remain closed off from the ladies and doggedly kept them at arm's length.

It was unfortunate because potential partners who could produce offspring were as sought after in the Dead Zones as they were in the Coalition. But in the Dead Zones, they got to decide who they wanted to be with, instead of who society dictated. The Dead Zones were all about choice. Of course, as with all things, there were gray areas. Especially for those men who were virile.

Veronica smiled sadly as she thought of Mack. He'd been strong, smart, and beautiful—not to mention virile to the extreme. Veronica felt she hit the jackpot when he'd chosen her as his partner, and for a time, she'd lived the dream.

Ever since they met as kids at the Landing's rusty old relic of a playground, they'd been inseparable. At six years old, Mack would puff up his chest whenever any of the other children tried to pick on her or even make her "it" in a game of tag. Nobody messed with Veronica because they'd have Mack to contend with. Veronica remembered how his dirty-blond hair flew around his face as he pummeled another kid in her defense. Her hero. She couldn't help but smile at the memory. In Mack's arms, Veronica had felt safe, until suddenly, she didn't.

After a few awkward kisses and clumsy embraces, eventually, their friendship blossomed into something more. They grew into childhood sweethearts and married at the tender age of eighteen. Friends and family said they were too

young, even for the Landing, where life was short and precarious, but they were determined to prove everyone wrong.

They were happy during the first years of their marriage, each cherishing the other. They held hands when they walked, shared meals and stories around their small wood-burning stove in the evenings, and kept each other warm in bed at night.

When they were ready to start a family, Mack's semen sample produced excellent results. Yet, despite years of trying, Veronica never conceived, and after a while, they'd quietly given up hope. It wasn't too soon after that Mack, feeling a sudden sense of responsibility toward the perpetuation of the species, began to wander. All to ensure the survival of humanity.

Like he had something to prove.

Many of the women Mack messed around with already had significant others. Across the Dead Zones, this was known as doing a "favor." When an infertile pair couldn't get pregnant, they might ask a male who was virile to sleep with the female. It wasn't out of the ordinary. That was why the ovulation scanner from the fertility clinic had been such a great snag. It enabled women to determine their optimal window for conceiving, thus increasing their chances of becoming pregnant without putting an extra strain on their relationship. However, not all of Mack's children were born to infertile couples.

It was why, after he passed, Veronica vowed never to get involved with a virile male again.

Never. Ever. Again.

It just hurt too much, seeing him look back at her from the eyes of another woman's child. Always someone else's baby, but never her own. Veronica knew life was complicated. Even so, it didn't make Mack's betrayal hurt any less. She tolerated his infidelity but had finally mustered the courage to end their relationship when he became ill.

Veronica exhaled loudly and shook her head, trying to rid herself of the painful memories because she stupidly loved Mack to the very end, despite everything.

She still loved him—even now, two years after he'd passed away.

But that was enough ruminating about Mack. She had a guest to focus on for the evening. Veronica couldn't know what kind of e-breeder was walking into the safe house tonight. But whoever he was, whatever his reasons for running—they were his own.

It made sense to keep her in the dark. The less Veronica knew about a runner, the safer it was for them both, in case things went sideways. Everything was on a need-to-know basis because one couldn't share what they didn't know.

With a new chunk of bread in hand, Veronica walked over to the guest bedroom and gave it another once-over. She'd put down fresh sheets the night before and thrown on an extra comforter because the February nights were chilly. On the bedside table, she'd placed a towel and some toiletries. It was enough. This wasn't a hotel after all. It was a safe house, one stop on the way to the next. Veronica's only role was to ensure the e-breeder was ready for the next leg of his journey.

Leaning against the door jamb and munching on the rest of the bread, Veronica activated the AI, Avox, short for artificial voice box. "Hey, Avox. Make sure all security systems are active around the perimeter."

"All security systems are active," Avox responded in his modulated synthesized voice.

"Place systems on silent," V instructed the unit. She didn't need the neighbors waking up while she greeted her male guest in the middle of the night. Men didn't just wander around the streets anymore. Those times were long gone.

"All systems are silent," Avox confirmed.

Veronica exhaled loudly and glanced out the window in the room's corner. It was already dark outside at four o'clock in the afternoon, and she needed to stay vigilant.

She popped the last morsel of bread into her mouth, walked over to the window, and scanned the garden outside. She could barely see anything past her own reflection, but there were plenty of dense bushes where an e-breeder could hide.

“Hey, Avox.”

“Hmm?” the AI responded in his most humanistic manner.

“Darken the windows.”

Before her eyes, the glass blurred and grew totally black; no need for any do-it-yourself curtains here. And now, all she could do was wait.

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

TROY

THE NETWORK AGENT ambled out into the yard, the moonlight catching her eyes as they trailed across the grass. She stopped right in front of the shrubbery Troy was hiding behind. He must have triggered a sensor, because she seemed to know exactly where to look for him.

“Greetings, I am the Gatekeeper,” she recited the secret code and peered through the dead leaves of the branches, but Troy didn’t think she could see him in the darkness.

She sighed and lifted her gaze up to the heavens, studying it as if she had no cares in the world. He wondered if it was always like this for her—winter evenings spent looking up at the stars, so casual and unhurried.

Troy coughed softly; his throat was parched, dehydrated from a lack of water during the day’s trip to this spot.

He’d been on the run ever since his escape from the gala, guided by Marcy’s handheld personal interface, or PI. He traveled to his first destination in the wee hours of the morning and took refuge in a tunnel, hiding beneath a thermal blanket he found in his backpack. Troy endured the day there, unable to sleep for fear of being noticed and apprehended. As soon as the sun set, he resumed his journey.

“I am the Keymaster,” he replied hoarsely and coughed in place of a punctuation. Troy had never been this thirsty in his life.

A hint of amusement played on the agent's lips.

But Troy wasn't feeling playful.

At first, when Marcy had told him the cryptic message, he'd been confused, but she'd explained that the words were quotes from *Ghostbusters*, a classic movie about a supernatural entity, Gozer, and a band of men who stopped an impending ghostly disaster. It was supposed to be a comedy, and clearly the agent found the exchange amusing.

At least one of them did.

One day, when he was safe, he'd watch the movie and find out what all the fuss was about. In the Coalition, they banned the film. Any entertainment that might foster ideas of freedom in the male population was strictly prohibited.

After collecting herself, the woman gazed into the bush once more, this time peering deeply into its foliage as she pulled a dead leaf from one of the twisted branches and turned it around between her pinched fingers.

"Well, Keymaster, are you coming out or spending the evening in there? You must be chilly," she said, her face partially obscured by the shade, her eyes concealed beneath lowered lashes. Troy couldn't make out all her features, only that her voice seemed young.

He expected his next Network agent to be more mature, much like Marcy, who was in her fifties. He'd assigned all the agents, whether real or imagined, the same characteristics. But this female's voice sounded too youthful. Far too delicate and melodic to be a member of the resistance movement. It lacked authority. Was she even able to take care of herself, let alone look out for him?

Undecided, Troy simply stood his ground.

"Oh well then," she said, and gave a nonchalant shrug. The agent pivoted around and walked off, but not before calling back over her shoulder before she disappeared behind the tiny house, "If you're coming, follow me. I'll be inside waiting."

Troy took his time before he moved. The building before him was a relic of days gone by, a single-story structure that

had to be at least a hundred years old. Although it wasn't ideal, it was better than sleeping outside in the cold for another night. He shuddered at the thought, quickly gathered his items together, and tailed the woman around the back of the house.

The yard showcased an old concrete patio. Time had taken its toll on it; the large square slabs were uneven and overgrown with moss. She left the sliding door open, waiting for his arrival. Inside it was dark, making the entrance look like a gaping maw, ready to devour him whole.

He hesitated again for a few seconds, contemplating if he should reconsider his plan to run. Maybe he should go back while he still had a chance. But even as he pondered the notion, the brand on his back itched, a reminder of what awaited him if he failed. What would be the punishment for his second offense? Most runners made only one attempt. Would his sentence be harsher this time? Troy sighed. *Without a doubt.* Failure was not an option.

Troy breathed in deeply, preparing himself for the next step, and cautiously moved inside. The door sealed shut as soon as he crossed the threshold; the glass darkened, and he swung around. Trapped like an animal ensnared in a cage, he felt his heart pound in his chest until the lights burst to life. Troy squinted at the sudden brightness.

“Ahem.” He heard a throat clear behind him, and when he spun around, his new agent stood, hands on her hips, studying him. In the light, she was remarkably beautiful. Her soft features gripped him: warm brown eyes, the gentle angle of her nose, a full lower lip that curled in a friendly smile, and long waves of brown hair framing her face.

“Hey, Avox,” she said, her gaze fixed on him. She observed him warily, like he was a timid animal ready to bolt.

“Hmm?” the system replied.

“Secure all exits.” She kept her gaze steady on Troy.

“All exits secured.”

“You can take your hood off now. You're safe here,” the agent reassured him calmly, but in his heightened anxious

state, it took Troy a moment for her words to sink in. She wasn't speaking to the AI system anymore but to him.

"Of course." His voice was barely audible as he peeled off the hood that had been a constant fixture since he fled the Governor's estate. Men didn't roam around freely in public without inciting chaos.

The agent examined his face, her head tilted to one side. Her eyes roamed over the length of him, nose crinkling with a tinge of distaste. Apparently, she wasn't very impressed by what she saw. Troy expected admiration. Usually a bit of groping. It was what he was used to. Or at the very least a neutral response.

He narrowed his eyes. She wasn't someone to be charmed, but the feeling of rejection stung his breeder pride.

The agent blinked rapidly, as if coming to her senses. "I'm sorry. I'm being awfully rude. What's your name?"

Troy frowned; his lips pressed firmly together. She was still being impolite as far as he was concerned; why hadn't she introduced herself first? She should know that women initiated interactions, not men. Had he just moments ago thought her beautiful?

Troy took in the sparingly furnished room, walls painted a dull beige, and kept his expression as blank and nondescript as his surroundings. He didn't respond right away, lingering purposefully. Making the agent wait. It was childish, but the impulse to hurt her back was strong.

"Troy, citizen number five, forty-seven, three, nine, nine." Troy scowled hard, and a rush of blood pumped into his chest. It was a rare treat to openly express his indignation without fear of retribution.

It was his turn to judge the agent. Troy gave her a thorough examination, roaming over her body with disdainful eyes. He had the right to be disappointed with her too; the thought made him smirk as he watched her take an unconscious step backward.

He observed her more intently now. She was a little over five and a half feet tall. Attractive enough, though nothing out of the ordinary. Dark hair and a generous mouth—*good for giving head*, he thought. Which so few women ever did.

There was a sprinkle of freckles on her nose, creeping toward the corners of her eyes, which he hadn't noticed before. When she spoke, there was a small gap between her two front teeth—oddly attractive, but unmemorable.

“Troy,” she said, her mouth curling around the word. “You don't have to state your citizen number anymore. And in time, you can choose your own surname. Or not,” she informed him, but then she tipped her chin almost coyly. “Um, I just need to tell you—you've got a heart on—”

“What?” he countered hotly, offended by the mere suggestion. “I do not have a hard-on!” Especially not for her.

“Umm...” She pointed to her eye, making a circle with her index finger and then tiny little pinching movements like she was plucking something off her face. “You've got a rhinestone heart on your face.”

A burn crept up Troy's chest, hitting his cheeks with fury. He tilted his head back, shutting his eyes. Had he lost it completely? Of course the heart was still there. He hadn't had an opportunity to remove it and hadn't caught his reflection since leaving the gala. He'd completely forgotten about it. Troy took a deep breath and opened his eyes. The agent stared at him, a searching expression on her face.

“Sorry, but I'm exhausted. I misinterpreted what you said. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions.” Troy was never this reactionary, even in stressful situations. He was sleep deprived and overwhelmed. That's all it was.

The woman gave him a warm smile. “You must be exhausted after all that walking.”

Troy nodded, his feet aching. He looked around for a mirror and thought back to the rhinestone encircling his eye. “It's from the Valentine's Day gala,” he said in explanation.

“Excuse me?”

Troy gestured toward the heart covering his eye as a reminder.

“Oh yes.” She paused. “Were you at the Governor’s Valentine’s Day gala? Because, if so, then wow! I’ve seen vids of it on the newsfeeds. It’s supposed to be a hell of a bash. With so many people, it’s the perfect venue to slip out. Is that what you did?”

He gave her a curt nod. How was it she was so impressed by the gala and not by all the effort he’d gone through to escape? He glowered internally, then inquired offhandedly, “And yours?”

“My what?” She looked at him, genuinely confused again.

“Your name?” He raised his brows. The two of them were going to have some communication difficulties.

“Oh, sorry. It’s Veronica, but you can call me V. Everybody does.”

He gave her a nod, and an uncomfortable silence hung between them. Troy sighed. They wouldn’t get along if they’d met under different circumstances. His guard was up, and he was defensive and off-kilter.

“Let’s get you out of that uniform for the night,” she said finally, walking over to the corridor and disappearing down the only hallway. She returned moments later with some folded garments in her hands. “Hopefully these will fit you. They’re the largest sizes I have.” She smiled, and it reached her eyes, helping to soothe his rattled nerves. “The bathroom is at the end of the corridor, and the guest bedroom, where you’ll be sleeping, is across from it.”

Her eyes raked over him from top to bottom, and her nose crinkled slightly. Troy shifted his weight from one foot to another, a frown etching into his brow. Was he supposed to smell pleasant after having been on the run and hiding under a bridge for sixteen hours?

“You’ll want to take a shower because who knows when you’ll be able to wash again. When you’re done and changed, come join me for dinner.”

He nodded and pressed his lips together in a firm line. He didn't appreciate the way she was ordering him about—like all the other women in his life, without so much as a please. Troy grumbled to himself quietly. What had gotten into him? He was used to being told what to do.

“Thank you,” he finally said, as politely as he could muster. “But first, could I bother you for something to drink? I'm incredibly thirsty.”

“Why didn't you say something earlier?” She scurried to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of water in her hand. Standing before him, she held it out to him, craning her head back to look up into his face.

An odd expression appeared on her features. What was she looking at? Surely the rhinestone heart wasn't that interesting. He frowned and looked down his nose at her, hoping she could see his dissatisfaction. Tonight, he wasn't in the mood to be sized up by anybody. Troy took the bottle of water from her; it was cool to the touch, unlike his temper. “Thank you,” he said gruffly.

“You're welcome.” She stepped back, putting more distance between them again. Her voice was subdued. “There's another bottle on your bedside table. You should probably stop in your room first before you bathe and unload your baggage.”

And then she turned around and padded back into the kitchen where she pulled plates from a cabinet. Just like that, he'd been dismissed.

“Dinner will be ready once you're finished. We'll need to talk before you turn in for the night,” she called over her shoulder.

Troy scanned the room again, taking in its minimalistic interior and the woman setting a table for two, before he turned to follow her orders. As usual, without question or resistance. He couldn't help but feel like a good e-breeder, doing his duty to perfection. But a good e-breeder wouldn't be at a Network safe house now, would he?

MEASURING UP

V

TROY EMERGED from the hallway bare chested and glistening, each cut muscle on sharp display. The sweat top hung loose in his hand by his side. His short hair was slicked back, and the gray sweatpants hung low on his hips, revealing perfectly formed abdominals that tapered to a V shape at his waistline, which V couldn't help but admire. It drew her gaze downward, like an arrow to the unspoken promises that lay below.

The e-breeder's movements were confident and graceful, suggesting strength and agility as he prowled around, taking in his unfamiliar environment.

V studied him under lowered lashes. She tried not to make it obvious, to mask that she was checking him out, and busied herself by grabbing the platter of imitation chili and setting it on the kitchen table. It took genuine effort not to gawk at his cut abdomen and the outline of his package, which seemed to be going commando at the moment—while he casually pulled the sweatshirt over his head.

Troy stood quietly with his back to her, staring at a picture. It was a relic, a framed print, its paper edges faded and yellow, with a scene of men and women dressed to the nines, enjoying a day at the park. V guessed that maybe the safe house didn't quite live up to the e-breeder's expectations, but hey—freedom wasn't meant to be a luxury. This might feel like the end of civilization to him, but it was still part of the Northern Coalition, although it was the outermost limits. Tomorrow

they would venture out, and V would send him on his way into the Dead Zones.

Still, she couldn't help but appreciate the tall figure meandering in her modest living room, looking at mementos with only a hint of curiosity. She liked taller men, and this one fit the bill. Mack had been six feet tall, yet this guy was supersized by comparison.

The only thing was, he was nothing but lean muscle. When he pulled off his hood earlier, V had been taken off guard by his sunken eyes and hollowed-out cheeks. She expected the same with his physique and sure enough, she couldn't spot an ounce of fat on him—just hard sinew and roping veins. Her mind went straight to the gutter, conjuring images of what he might look like completely naked. Would he be that defined everywhere? She arched a brow and giggled internally. She rarely thought about dicks, but here she was, trying to visualize his, and it was a monster.

V supposed she couldn't help herself. It had been a while since she'd been so close to such a stunning male specimen. She nibbled on her lower lip. And several months since she'd last seen Keith. Over the last two years, every time she returned to the Landing, they'd slept together, though they remained strictly friends. Keith's body wasn't hard on the eyes, but this male was exceptional.

When the e-breeder saw her watching him, he quickly tugged his shirt on, yanking it down over his waistband, as if he could read her mind and wasn't happy about her train of thought. He slowly made his way to the dining table and dropped down in the chair opposite hers.

When their eyes finally met, she gave him a genuine smile to make amends for upsetting him earlier, although V couldn't imagine what she'd done—except for the heart-on misunderstanding. Still, they couldn't be at odds. They needed to support each other, not the opposite.

Troy held her gaze and gave a slight nod of acknowledgment. His face was stern, his lips tight.

He was younger than she originally thought. Maybe somewhere in his late twenties, but with the shadows under his eyes, it was hard to determine his exact age. His rugged appeal, though not necessarily gorgeous, was sexy as all hell. And in V's opinion, that was far more dangerous. A rush of telltale shivers ran down her spine and she stiffened in her seat. She *did not* want to find him attractive.

V picked up a fork, pierced a slab of the imitation chili, and dropped it onto the plate she'd prepared for him. It clanged against the ceramic. He focused on the plate before pushing it away. "I'm not hungry, thank you."

"You have to keep your strength up," she said firmly, pushing the plate back toward him in a show of insistence. His mouth twitched down at the corners, but he broke off a small piece of chili. Though it looked so minuscule pinched between his long fingers, the food replica was full of nutrients. The e-breeder ate it reluctantly, his expression immediately shifting to one of disdain. As he chewed, V added more chili to his plate.

He stole glances at the bread and butter on the table but didn't say a word.

To be hospitable, V took a knife to the baguette and cut him a generous slice. She slathered it in butter and presented it to him with a smirk. "Here you go," she declared politely, even though she was miffed about his reaction to the chili.

He accepted it with a subtle nod of gratitude and went back to eating methodically without speaking. Though he claimed to have no appetite, V was determined to get some nourishment into him and promptly cut him another slice of bread the moment he'd finished his first serving—just in time for him to dive into the second helping of chili.

He still wouldn't meet her gaze. They didn't exchange any words, and an uncomfortable silence stretched out between them. To distract herself, V noted his features. He wasn't especially good-looking. Just an ordinary guy with a firm jaw and nicely arched eyebrows. His nose was a bit too prominent

for her liking, but his eyes were his most remarkable feature. They were hazel.

Hazel eyes had always fascinated V. The way they morphed in color, ranging anywhere from a moss green to an emerald blue, or even to a soft brown. They were ever-changing, as if constantly in flux, never settling on just one hue.

Chameleon eyes.

The e-breeder's fingers scratched around his face and neck while he ate, as if he were chasing an itch. His hands were completely clean shaven, as were his forearms. Come to think of it, V couldn't recall if he'd had any hair on his torso. It was probably a safe bet to assume he was completely shaved—Coalition women preferred their male partners to be hairless—and the regrowth was getting to him.

V couldn't grasp why hairless men were so appealing to the general populace. She preferred a man with a bit of body hair. She enjoyed the sensation of the crisp strands grazing her skin when they made love, the teasing tickle, and the pleasure of running her fingers through a patch of chest hair. There was something profoundly enjoyable in the feeling of being with someone who was unlike herself. So other.

V grimaced, unable to recall the last time she did some personal landscaping herself. She needed to get on that, although Keith didn't seem to mind.

Once the e-breeder finished eating, which in the end, included over half the loaf of bread with butter, V tidied up and led him back to the guest bedroom.

Troy regarded her silently as she walked around to the other side of the bed. He was very standoffish for an e-breeder. Maybe she really had pissed him off earlier with that remark about his eye? V shrugged internally. He'd been so quick to misinterpret what she'd been saying. Well, they didn't have to like each other, did they? They were just strangers passing in the night.

“This is what you need to know for tonight,” V started, using her most authoritative voice. “If anyone comes to the house, for any purpose, hide in here.” V pressed a board with her foot and a concealed door opened in the flooring. “It’s a secret hiding spot. Anyone searching won’t know you’re in here. We’ve set it up so that it doesn’t sound hollow if someone taps on it from above,” she went on.

“If I’m not back for you within an hour—we’ve been discovered. Dig out the PI from the bag inside to watch the time. Whatever you do... do—not—run,” she emphasized. “Another agent will come for you. There’s some dehydrated food and enough water to last you a few days in there. Are we good?”

“We’re good,” he murmured before covering a yawn and settling down on the double bed. When he stretched out on his back, his feet dangled off the end of the mattress. An unwelcome fluttering sprang into her stomach. It had been a while since she’d been around a strange man, let alone had one in her guest bed. V abruptly became aware of his masculine energy. It was a strange and uneasy sensation. Unlike most women in the twenty-second century, V grew up with men and even had a husband at one point, so the idea of being around them wasn’t entirely foreign.

Maybe it was his height that set her off-kilter. She wondered, and finally asked, unable to suppress her curiosity. “How tall are you?”

With his eyes closed, the e-breeder quirked a brow at her. It arched like a question mark. She supposed the question was rather random and unexpected.

“Six-foot-five,” he replied bluntly.

V nodded, studying the tall male lying supine before her. Earlier, she’d felt insignificant standing next to him, much like the chili replica appeared dwarfed by his very large, fine hands.

V blinked rapidly, her traitorous body tingling. Even Keith didn’t make her feel this way. It was as though the e-breeder’s physical presence had awakened something. And why did he

smell so damn good? So masculine. A combination of soap and musk that had her heart kicking up a beat.

Great, now she was lusting after him. Seeing him as an object of desire, not as an escapee who needs her help. *I need this like a hole in my head.* With a tut, V quickly turned around and made her way toward the exit. She slowed her steps deliberately, suppressing the urge to run. *Stay calm, cool, and collected,* she coaxed herself as she switched off the overhead light and exited the room.

“How tall are you?” he asked her unexpectedly, his voice a gruff, sleepy rumble that stopped her in her tracks halfway out the door.

“Maybe five-foot-five,” she responded, peering over her shoulder.

“Sounds about right,” he whispered, then settled his shoulders deeper into the bed. Unable to stop herself, V crept back into the room and grabbed the extra blanket off the footboard. She pulled it over her guest with care. V spared him a quick glance, and he already appeared to be fast asleep.

She padded silently out of the room and pulled the door closed to a crack, before crossing over to her room and slipping under the sheets. So they’d each sized the other up, coming to their own conclusions, but they didn’t need to know each other well. Tomorrow he’d be gone, and she’d be back to work gathering medical supplies. Although, if he remained at Freedom’s Landing, perhaps their paths would cross again. V’s chest tightened at the idea. But most virile men migrated farther north, where it was safer. When she closed her eyes, she recalled the planes of his face and his lean, hard body. This man would need to be kept safe because whoever lost him most definitely would want him back.

KNOCK KNOCK, WHO'S THERE?

TROY

TROY'S new agent was frantic. She jolted him awake, and her distressed, youthful face slowly came into focus, along with a flash of white that he soon realized was the fluffy white house coat she wore. The room was faintly lit, with all the darkening apparatuses either powered down or lifted.

“Wake up!” she demanded, pushing him toward the edge of the bed, her voice high-pitched and urgent. She was obviously panicking. “You need to hide. They EMP'd the district, and there's no power. Who are you anyway?”

Troy frowned at the revelation. Evangeline had brought out the big guns, using an electromagnetic pulse.

“I—” was all he could get out before she cut him off.

“Someone wants you back something bad,” she said and gave him another hard push. Troy fell off the mattress but caught himself before he face-planted on the floor. Suddenly, the trapdoor was open, and she was rolling him into it. Despite his best efforts to help her, she had more than enough adrenaline coursing through her body for the both of them.

Still in a groggy daze, Troy thumped onto his back. With an oomph, he found himself in the cramped crawl space beneath the floorboards with V looming over him. She tossed in his bag before turning toward the entrance, her features etched with worry.

A loud knock-knock-knock came from the front, and she jumped slightly in response.

“I’m coming!” she shouted out toward the main room before quickly sealing the trapdoor shut without giving him a second glance. She left Troy in complete darkness.

TOO AFRAID TO MAKE A SOUND, Troy waited without digging out his PI. He’d have to check the time soon to know what to do next. Had Evangeline really found him so fast? Maybe they arrested his new agent under suspicion of aiding a fugitive? Was anybody even out there?

Troy’s heart pounded like a jackhammer in his ears as he tried to contain his fear. His eyes darted back and forth over the murky surface above him. Crammed into the small hiding nook with no auditory feedback, he tried to regulate his breathing as he grew claustrophobic and sweat dripped down his forehead and into his eyes. He could smell his own salty sweat, mixed with the dust of the floor and the musty odor of the small space. Whenever he closed his eyes, flashbacks of the last time he’d run flooded his mind and his breathing grew more erratic. Troy strained his ears, desperate to hear something past the beating of his heart—anything that was going on inside the residence—but all he could make out was a muffled silence.

One time, he thought he heard movement overhead, but it was so faint that it was difficult to tell. His limbs cramped with the effort to stay still. Maybe it hadn’t been an hour, but every passing second felt like an eternity.

Eventually, the latch to the trap door opened and lifted up. Troy shielded his eyes, momentarily adjusting to the light. When he was able to see clearly, V crouched down on one knee on the ledge. She glowered down at him, vibrating with displeasure, looking formidable in a slim-fitting black top and tactical pants.

“Get out and grab your stuff!” She ordered. “Put your boots on, and we’re out of here—leave nothing behind. They’ll be back with search dogs. It’s only a matter of time.”

She extended her hand but eyed him coolly, agitated the entire time as he took it and crawled out. If she noticed his hand trembled, she didn't mention it. "Meet me at the front after you've changed back into your pants and top but pack the tactical vest. Trust me when I say they won't risk shooting you." She spun on her heel and was gone from the bedroom in a blink.

Changed, Troy met her near the front door, and as soon as she saw him, she tossed a ball of silver clothing at him. Troy unraveled the lightweight bundle. It was a rain poncho with a hoodie and a pair of slip-on pants with an elasticized waist. Both were made of the thermal blanket material he'd used to sleep under just the day before.

"Don't just stare at it! Put it on! It'll reduce our chances of being detected by thermal imaging. They're probably looking for movement." She spoke as if she was on automatic as she went through her things. "Put these on too," she said, tossing him a pair of gloves. "You're going to need them in the tunnel."

"Tunnel?" he asked, but she ignored the panic Troy was sure was evident in his voice. He didn't know if he could do another tight space.

"From here, we've got to get to the river and cross it. It'll mess with the dogs, and then we can take shelter in the bunker. There's a generator there with enough juice to run the systems that should help scope the area out. So we'll know when it's safe to leave."

Troy obediently put on the crinkly outfit while she verbally walked him through the steps, her voice steady and efficient. She didn't seem the slightest bit concerned that they'd be walking targets with silver ponchos on.

She threw a heavy yellow pack at him. A gust of air escaped his lungs before he could suppress it, which had her rolling her eyes.

"Put your backpack inside the poncho and I'll seal it. It's a dry pack."

Before Troy could even figure out how to do it on his own, she shoved her way in front of him and, in a heartbeat, had its opening rolled and snapped closed.

She disappeared into her bedroom. He heard some rummaging around before the agent came out with a rifle in hand. His eyes widened at sight of the small woman holding such a large gun. He was used to seeing armed guards, but they were taller, more muscular females.

“What?” She stood it, butt down, in the room’s corner while putting on her backpack, then strapped it over her shoulder, adjusting the rifle on her back.

“Nothing.” Troy tried to conceal his surprise.

“Grab all your things and follow me,” she told him as they walked into the kitchen. She opened the closet door and pressed around on the floor with her feet until another trap door opened, leading down into a basement. She jumped down into the hole and motioned for him to follow. Once inside, he could barely squeeze in beside her as she pulled the door closed above them and latched it securely shut.

“This is it. Get down, you’ll have to crawl and follow me.”

“Okay.” *Hands and knees?* He wondered how he was supposed to do that when he was already hunched over and there was barely enough room for them to stand side by side. When she suddenly dropped down and disappeared.

Squatting down on his hands and knees, Troy saw she’d crawled into a makeshift tunnel. “That explains it,” he muttered to himself and headed into the tunnel after V. In the darkness, he could scarcely make her out crawling ahead of him. She was impressively fast, especially considering she was carrying more than him.

The tunnel looked like they had excavated it with a spoon, it was so narrow and tight. It didn’t help that V’s backpack was scraping along the ceiling as she forged ahead. Dirt rained down on him with her forward momentum. He swiped at the tiny pieces of debris that fell into his eyes, but his gloves were

caked with mud, only making the situation worse. Troy grimaced, and bitterly spit out some grit.

It was a while before the tunnel filled with light, and eventually it opened out to an iron grate. They were in the surrounding woodlands Troy had noticed when he hid in the shrubs at the safehouse. As they got closer, the entrance of the passageway grew wider, and Troy shuffled up beside his agent.

The low rumble of rushing water filled the space.

“I have the keys,” she said, shifting onto her knees and shucking off her muddy gloves. She fished around in her pants pocket and dug out a set of old-world keys. They clinked together as she unlocked the grate.

She glanced over at Troy. “Stay low.”

Once they crawled outside, she secured the exit behind them. Troy was struck by the freshness of the forest air. He’d never actually been in a forest before, always confined to city life. Troy looked up, awestruck by the thick green canopy of trees above him. A startled crow squawked overhead and took flight.

“Beautiful,” Troy murmured, tilting his head back and inhaling the clean scent of wet soil and pine. A light breeze nipped at his cheeks and stirred his hair, soothing his flushed skin after being closed in that dark, dank, narrow hole she called a tunnel. He smiled contentedly, tasting freedom.

“Time to go,” his agent whispered. When he looked at her, she was staring at him, a slight upturn on her lips. “Never been in a forest before?”

“Never.” He shook his head in the negative.

Her smile broadened, disarming him. She was stunning when her eyes lit up with amusement. “It never grows old.” She winked. “Now let’s get moving.”

Troy shook off the moment. On the move again, twigs crunched beneath their footsteps as they skirted along shrubs and tree trunks until they reached a river’s edge a short distance away.

The agent gestured for Troy to stop while she pulled out a PI handheld and used it to scan the area for heat signatures. It wasn't a normal function for the device, but Troy suspected they'd fitted it with a special application.

"We're clear," the agent said, gesturing for him to follow as she stepped up to the swiftly moving river. "It only scans a short range, but it's enough to warn us if we have unwanted company," she explained.

"Give me your hand." She reached back for him, her fingers impatiently grasping for his. Troy wavered. She was focused on the river, and he knew what that meant. She'd told him the plan, but now that they were here and he could see the current, Troy didn't know if he could do it. A cold sweat ran over his body, and he stilled. It was only a moment's hesitation, but it had her looking back. Her eyebrows knit together in confusion.

"I—can't swim."

"And that's why you need to hold my hand. You'll have to trust my footing, and I'll have to trust your strength," she told him. "But take off your gloves first and throw them into the river."

Troy exhaled loudly and grimly nodded his acquiescence, throwing off his gloves. "I'm ready." He took hold of her hand, and she squeezed it.

"We can do this," she assured him softly. Troy pressed his lips together and gave her a curt nod. He straightened his shoulders. He could do this.

Troy grasped V's proffered hand and took a deep breath. They stepped off the bank into the freezing water. His boots felt like lead weights as they waded deeper into the roiling river, his stomach twisting into knots. Icy water seeped through the seams of his pants and plastered the frigid fabric to his skin. With each perilous step, the undercurrent pulled at his legs with increased ferocity, determined to drag him under.

But her footing never faltered, despite her small size. She was his anchor and kept him going. Troy clung to her hand in

a death grip, willing himself not to give in to fear.

At one point the water rose above his waist, and the rocks were slippery beneath his boots. Water roared in his ears and pelted his face to the point he could barely see, but she withstood the force of the river even though it was up to her shoulders. If she could do it, then so could he. Troy set his jaw and waded forward after her.

Finally, they were across. Chest heaving and frozen to the bone, Troy braced himself on his knees, fighting the urge to collapse to the ground and kiss the rocky shoreline. Icy rivulets of water ran down his face. His saturated clothing, stiff from the cold, clung to him painfully like a sheet of ice. But V didn't give him a moment's reprieve. She didn't even give him the opportunity to thank her for getting him across. After that experience, Troy had a newfound respect for the Network operative he'd previously judged as lacking. *V, her name is V*, he reminded himself.

V marched into the bushes and returned dragging a tiny makeshift raft, holding a red plastic bucket at her side by its handle.

The raft was small. Too small. There was no way they'd both fit onto it without slipping off or sinking.

Troy moved quickly to assist her, and together, they dragged it over to the river's edge.

"Please tell me you're not expecting us to float downstream on that. I doubt it could handle my weight alone."

"No." She laughed out loud for the first time, a delightful sound. Light and free. "But I need you to strip off your top and wash the upper half of your body into the bucket."

An, "Ah... fuck," escaped him before he could stop himself. His teeth were already chattering, and he was shivering uncontrollably.

"It's the price of freedom, but it'll get the dogs off our trail," she told him.

Troy removed the poncho and his top beneath it without further complaint, while V went down to the river's edge and

filled the bucket with water.

She carried it back toward him, and Troy met her halfway. For the first time, he noticed she avoided admiring his chest, instead, she kept her eyes fixed on his face. Why wasn't she looking? Other women did, but then a pretty pink flush of heat rose to her cheeks. So she wasn't completely unaffected by him. Troy inwardly smirked, happy to elicit any response from V that wasn't negative. It was a matter of male pride.

He started to wash, scrubbing his scent into the water.

"Your hair, face, arms, pits, chest, and stomach, the more the better," she explained. Once Troy scrubbed his skin to a brilliant red, V took the bucket and secured it to the raft. She pulled out a pocketknife and stabbed at the bottom of the bucket before pushing it out on the raft toward the rapids. She let it go and watched as it picked up speed, bobbing down on the current.

"If we're lucky, that will keep them following your scent downstream," she said, coming back over while he shrugged into his frigid wet top.

"Don't put on the poncho. We're close to the apocalypse bunker. You can change there."

"Apocalypse bunker?" Troy knit his brows together. He'd heard of such places, but thought they were primarily derelict.

Troy picked up his things, tossed the soaked poncho over his shoulder, and followed V into the woods. Troy tried not to think about how cold he was, but it was hard when his teeth were chattering and his skin was a sheet of goosebumps under his damp clothes. Every brush of cold, wet fabric against his skin made him want to shrink back into himself. Thank God V hadn't been kidding when she said the bunker was close. They weren't even fifteen minutes into the woods when she stopped to pull apart a hill of branches to reveal a metal handwheel below.

Troy studied it for a moment, arching his brow. He'd seen similar latches in historical reference books. Well, he was going to have to get used to not having modern amenities. The

Dead Zones survived off the grid. Marcy had been clear about that. It was the price of freedom. If Troy wanted creature comforts more than freedom, he should have stayed in his gilded cage.

BUTTERFLIES

V

V WAS thankful for the e-breeder's help to crank open the rusty wheel. Using their combined might, the wheel gave a loud metallic creak and slowly began to turn. Standing so close, V had a clear view of biceps bulging and forearms cording heavily with exertion. Big, strong hands gripped the wheel, knuckles popping and veins protruding. The smell of river water with a hint of minerals and earth infused the air.

It took a lot of effort for V not to admire him openly, but she hated it when women ogled men, so she concentrated on the task. Once they opened the seal, V peered in, running a flashlight app all around the interior to confirm that it was safe.

"Crystal clear," she said with a smirk playing on the edge of her lips. She spun on her heel and descended the metal rungs leading into the dark cavity. After a few steps, she leaped and landed with ease on the concrete floor below. When she glanced back up, the e-breeder's silhouette was framed by the bleak morning sky.

"Pass me the bags and be careful with mine; it's full of medical supplies."

"Got it," he said, cautiously lowering the bags and handing V her rifle. Then he swung onto the ladder, and V got an eyeful of nicely toned ass. Despite his slender frame, he had a great backside. V quickly averted her gaze. She didn't want to get caught looking. *Oh man—I really need to get laid.*

Once he was far enough down the ladder, the e-breeder pulled the cover shut and spun the inside wheel before jumping down with a dull, deep thud. V stepped up on a rung and secured the latch to lock the door.

“Give me a sec and I’ll get the lights,” she said. With her trusty handheld still set on flashlight, V quickly found the generator and pressed the power switch. The neon fixtures flickered awake and lit up the small enclosure with their pale blue light.

V flipped another lever on the wall. “And the heater, of course. Let’s get that started right away because that water was fucking cold.” She shivered and couldn’t wait to be rid of her damp clothing.

V meandered around the room, taking in every detail. She ran her hand along rough concrete walls and inhaled the musty smell of age and neglect. It was like another world, with its cold and dreary atmosphere. The lights from the ceiling penetrated the darkness but cast a dull ambiance throughout the bunker. On one side were large boxes of supplies; on the other side were shelves filled with canned food and bottles of water. V’s eyes roamed over to an old folding table, which held an assortment of weapons and tools such as wrenches, knives, and a pistol. Two bunk beds stood side by side, and off to the right was a small washroom.

V gave the e-breeder, who stood taking in the space as well, a half-smile. “Let’s just hope you don’t mind small spaces.” Their eyes met, and in that moment, a newfound admiration for the e-breeder dawned on V. They’d worked well together, despite their initial dislike of each other.

“I’m doing just fine.” He mirrored her shaky smile with a bewitching, boyish grin that had V’s head spinning. It was so utterly disarming, it took her breath away, making her feel warm despite the cold clothes clinging to her. A bloom of heat spread across her cheeks, and V quickly looked away.

“Let’s get these clothes off,” V suggested, her teeth chattering. She went to one of the shelving units and passed him a fresh set of sweats. He glanced around for a suitable

place to change, and V motioned toward the small washroom on the right. Troy strode past her, opened the door, and peeked inside before stepping in. V's eyes narrowed. With his height, it would be a tight fit.

In the meantime, V stripped out of her drenched clothes. Goosebumps skittered over her skin until her nipples peaked painfully. She was about to unhook her bra when Troy walked in on her. He turned without so much as a flinch, but V didn't feel embarrassed about being half-naked. He must have seen plenty of women in their birthday suits in his lifetime, so what was one more? Besides, she had a nice enough body.

“My apologies, it's too cramped in the washroom,” Troy clarified with his back still turned to V. Before she could reply, he took the bottom of his top in his hands and peeled it off over his head. His pants swiftly followed. Swallowing hard, V couldn't muster the same disinterest he had when he caught her in her bra. She stared, wide-eyed, at the sight of his muscular back, which flared out across his shoulders before tapering to corded hips. His buttocks were firm and well defined, indenting slightly at the sides and flexing with each shift of his footing. V arched an appreciative brow. She'd been right—he had a spectacular ass. The kind you held on to for dear life as he fucked you into oblivion.

Shaking that last thought out of her head, V was about to turn away to give him some privacy when he twisted, and she noticed an angry scar on his lower back. It was a pinkish circle, enclosing a letter R, typically burned into the flesh of those who unsuccessfully tried to run. Shadow had the same symbol. It was a cruel practice meant to deter others. Troy must have tried to escape and failed.

V stepped into a pair of track pants and pulled on a sweat top, deciding against any undergarments. They were going to be trapped in the bunker for a couple of days, and she didn't care if her breasts bounced around. She doubted he would either. Then, like a moth to a flame, she padded up behind him while he was still changing. She lifted the sweatshirt he'd just pulled over his back and ran her fingers over the distinctive

mark. It was raised and silky, and as big as the span of her hand.

At her touch, he tensed up, though he didn't pull away. As she looked at his profile over his shoulders, a muscle ticked in his jaw, and V quickly withdrew her fingers. It would have been inappropriate to touch a free male without asking first, but she didn't apologize. Instead, she asked him in a hushed tone, "You've run before?"

He nodded once before he adjusted his shirt, tugging it down to cover the brand.

"I'm sorry they marked you like that. It's barbaric."

"It happened a long time ago," he whispered.

"Who do you belong to now?" she murmured. The way they searched for him showed that whoever it was had considerable influence and authority.

Troy turned around. "Evangeline."

V's eyes widened. "Evangeline? As in Governor Evangeline? The one from the Valentine's Day gala?"

Troy gave her an affirmative nod. No wonder Frankie told her so little about him—Troy was trouble on a stick. The less she knew, the better. Still, Keith should have told Frankie to share more intel. At least she would have known that there'd be a chance she'd be making an early trip home.

"Ah fucking hell," she groaned. "Damn it, Keith," she muttered under her breath as she turned away from Troy, marched to the other end of the bunker and began to pace.

"Who is Keith?"

"Keith is the head of Freedom's Landing, the compound we're heading to once we're out of here. My home." At her words, Troy's jaw dropped. Clearly, he wasn't used to hearing about a man holding a position of power. "And since my cover's blown and you won't make it to the checkpoint on time, your next agent—who's waiting to meet you at the checkpoint—will head back after a day or two." V took a breath. "That means you're going to need a new navigator. So,

voilà, here's your solution." V paused only to point at herself. "I'm your new goddamn guide to the old world."

"And what does that have to do with this Keith person?"

"Because he could have warned me you were coming in hot," she snarled, still moving. "He knew I didn't want to go home, so he manipulated the situation when I told him I wanted to stay out in the field. Asshole!" V stopped herself mid-rant, fists balled up tightly at her sides. "Sorry. It's not your problem. It has nothing to do with you." She spun to face him, and in that moment, he looked even more emaciated under the harsh fluorescent lighting. She grimaced with disapproval.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked her abruptly, his forehead creased in a frown.

Everyone always said her thoughts were easy to read on her face.

"It's just... you don't have any fat on you."

His face twisted as if she were attacking him. "The Governor likes me this way."

V shrugged nonchalantly.

"What does that mean?" Troy retorted, echoing her movement with his own shrug.

"Everyone has their own preferences I suppose?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "So, you don't like it? I thought all women liked muscles. That's why we work out so hard. No one's ever complained before."

V worried her lower lip before responding, "It's a bit much, don't you think? All your veins sticking out." She flicked a hand dismissively at his arms. "It can't be healthy. I mean, there's muscle" —V puffed herself up like a bodybuilder— "and then there's being shredded." She deflated her cheeks for emphasis. She should stop talking—she had no reason to criticize Troy. Deep down, the actual cause of her testiness had nothing to do with him and everything to do with Keith. It was Keith she was mad at. Things were good when

they'd been friends with benefits, but once he'd gotten it into his head that he wanted more, he grew possessive, and the residents of the Landing started calling her the "Captain's girl," which complicated everything.

Troy stood there, eyeing her angrily. His gaze roamed over her body, examining every curvy inch. V pursed her lips together. The Governor, Evangeline, his former Keeper, was an exquisite woman, always dressed to the nines and perfect in every way. Was he comparing her to Evangeline inside his head? Based on his scrutiny, V didn't measure up.

"You trying to pick a fight with me because you know I shouldn't argue with women?" he said, his face devoid of emotion.

The tension between them grew thick and uncomfortable as they squared off in silence.

V couldn't help but poke the bear. Would he bite? Most guys like him, with his strict upbringing, would back off, but there might be some fire in him yet.

"Do you like it?" She meant whether he enjoyed being so painfully thin. It had to take a lot of discipline to look like that.

"I'm not used to women finding me unattractive," he responded curtly, completely missing the point.

V balked. "I never said I found you unattractive."

"I can see that my appearance offends you, though I'm afraid I have little else to offer."

A twinge of guilt nettled V. "Let me make myself clear, babes. I don't give a damn if you're hot or not. I'm not stuck in this hole because I want to fuck you. Look around, this cramped ass place doesn't exactly scream 'romantic getaway,' now does it?" She swept her hand around the room. "The reason I'm doing this is because the Coalition is all kinds of fucked up and I want to make a difference. It's bullshit that you have to rely on your looks and virility to get by. Men deserve better than that."

"So you don't want me," he ground out coolly.

Was he purposefully misunderstanding her? “It’s not about me!” V sighed loudly. “I’m sorry I looked at you funny, okay? I’ll try to school my expressions in the future. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

He stared at her a moment, a wounded expression on his face before he finally conceded. “It just took me by surprise, that’s all,” he said, his expression contemplative. “You’re right. It shouldn’t matter.” Then his features lifted into an unexpected smile.

V preferred his smiles. She even found them a little mesmerizing. At least they’d sorted that nonsense out. A wave of relief washed over her, but it was fleeting. Soon, an old but familiar flutter woke in her stomach, like a flurry of tiny wings brushing against her insides, and it had her hackles rising. So like the butterflies that Mack used to give her. And that wasn’t a good sign.

Not a good sign at all.

CHASING TAIL

NANCY

NANCY STOOD at the edge of the river, vibrating with anger. She glared at the plastic bucket that had been smashed open and the splintered remains of a wooden raft. The cracked pail lay in the river's fast-flowing waters, tapping against the jagged stones like a taunting laugh.

Nancy swiped her dripping bangs out of her eyes, beyond irritated with the situation. The sound of raindrops normally soothed her, but today they hammered against the hood of her jacket like a drum, adding to her thunderous mood. Under the dim light of the overcast sky, Nancy saw the spoils of their search efforts scattered all around the riverbank. Bits of plastic, broken branches, and tangled pieces of rope were spread out over the rocks. The air hung heavy and stale, like a lingering fog of defeat, making it hard for her to breathe.

“We’ve been tricked!” She kicked at the bucket’s shell and the wobbly remains rolled deeper into the water. She thought they’d finally gotten a lead on Troy when they tracked him to a house, only to find it listed under the name of a deceased citizen. Someone had assumed the resident’s identity—a bright and smiling young woman named Tiffany, who worked at the local fertility clinic. The holographic key she left behind was enough to confirm that “Tiffany” had made an emergency departure with the e-breeder in tow, and most likely was part of the Network, because this ploy—despite it being outdated—was too clever for anyone else.

Cynthia, Nancy's second-in-command, chimed in with her two credits' worth, stating the glaringly obvious. "The hounds will have lost his scent. Especially with the rain."

Rain in February. Nancy snorted. More like a torrential downpour, as though Mother Nature herself was set against them. Nancy furrowed her brows together. She had to find Troy. Everything she worked for was on the line—her career, her vision for the future, all because she couldn't keep her hands to herself and off him.

Frustrated and defeated, she'd allowed herself to get too emotionally invested this time. She just had wanted him so badly. There was something about the e-breeder, a magnetism of sorts, and in the moment—moments—it had been worthwhile because the male knew his way around a woman's body. But now?

"Well, at least there's a bright side to all of this?" Cynthia chirped.

"And that would be?" Nancy snarled, barely containing her urge to slap her glass-half-full second-in-command.

"It looks for certain like the Network helped him out."

Nancy's mouth set in a grim line and her nostrils flared. They'd suspected as much, and now they were certain. This was bad. Really bad. They had no other leads, and with the rain washing away his scent, Troy could be anywhere by now.

The task force would have to split up and fan out in all directions. The Dead Zones were vast, endless stretches of woodlands. She'd have to expand the drone units, the hounds, all in the hopes they'd pick up Troy's scent. Unless he was in a vehicle, but then they'd have tire tracks to follow—if those didn't get washed away.

It all seemed so hopeless that Nancy had a fleeting thought of giving up and turning in her resignation. Of course, she quickly dismissed that line of thinking before her muddled brain could entertain it any further.

Nancy wasn't a quitter. No, she would never give up, but she was tired of feeling helpless and out of control. She'd

thought she had everything in check, but this situation was slipping away from her grasp faster than water through a sieve.

“Damn it all to hell!” Nancy cursed and spun around, stalking toward the rugged terrain transport. She had to get back to the command center and figure out their next steps. She reached the driver’s-side door and yanked it open with such force that it protested under the strain. Once inside, she pressed her thumb into the ignition and started up the engine as soon as Cynthia jumped into the passenger’s seat.

Nancy stepped on the gas pedal with a vengeance. The transport roared through mud puddles and debris as Nancy gritted her teeth against the biting raindrops pelting the vehicle from every direction. She wanted to get back to base as quickly as possible and formulate a plan of action before Troy disappeared for good.

They came to an abrupt stop in front of command HQ twenty minutes later. As soon as the women caught sight of her arrival, they began efficiently shuffling into lines, like ants preparing for battle, each one ready to aid their commander.

Either way, Evangeline was going to blow a gasket. The Governor was already seething with rage. She’d been breathing down Nancy’s neck from very start, and the pressure was mounting by the second. *Well, if you want to get things done, you’ve got to do it yourself.*

It was time Nancy took matters into her own hands and tracked Troy down. She was going to have to go in deep and dirty. She and Cynthia would form their own team and head out into the Dead Zones. Once Nancy had Troy in her clutches, he would forever regret crossing her. She just needed to get her hands on that collar, because as soon as she got the new tech around Troy’s neck, there would be no hope of escape. Ever again.

LOVE LOST

TROY

BY THE END of their first day in the bunker, V's brisk attitude had grown on Troy. He admired her honesty and the way her smile reached her eyes. When she laughed, they twinkled. After their initial "disagreement," Troy had to admit that he found her remarkably attractive. She had a kind of unrefined beauty. Even in her relaxed clothing and messy ponytail, she was gorgeous, with her warm brown eyes and delicate features.

"What's this?" she questioned, holding up the playing card sleeve that was part of Troy's disguise. He had done as she requested and emptied all the contents of his bag on a shelf.

"Jeez, Evangeline really went over the top." V inspected the costume. "The Ace of Spades. At least it's a good card." She glanced over at the pile he'd made on the shelf.

"This is nothing," Troy declared as he dug out his regal cape, collar, and crown. He held the items out for V to inspect. Her eyes lit up as she took the crown and placed it atop her head, then twirled around in a circle. The crown slid off-center and drooped amusingly; Troy couldn't help but chuckle at the sight.

"You wore this?" She gestured toward the filigree adornment. Troy answered with a nod, reaching over to rearrange it.

V grabbed the cloak and draped it over her shoulders, its lengthy hemline gathering around her feet. She nestled into the

neck of the garment and exclaimed, “This is wonderful!”

Troy snorted and held up the dog collar. It dangled from his fingers.

V plucked it off and scrutinized it in her hands. She raised her eyes and quirked an eyebrow at him. “Evangeline made you wear this too?”

Troy nodded as he retrieved it, running his finger over the tag’s etching. He hated wearing it, but he’d been no better than a pampered pet. The gag Evangeline forced him to wear was worse. Though it allowed him to breathe, Troy still remembered the sensation of struggling to catch his breath whenever she used it on him. And wearing it in public had been even more humiliating.

“What does the tag say?” V asked, her head tilting to the side.

“It says, ‘My King.’”

She bit down on her lower lip. Her eyes rose to meet his again. “How long were you with her?”

“Three years.”

V considered him and pursed her lips. “I thought you were supposed to do your thing... get her pregnant... and then they move you on to another Keeper.”

“Yes.” He rubbed over the etching with his thumb. “Usually, but somehow, she kept me. She was powerful enough.”

“Do you think she loves you?”

Troy frowned as he met V’s gaze. “It’s possible... Maybe—she didn’t like to share me. But I don’t know if I’d call that love.”

V gave him a sad smile. “Judging by the way she came after you, I’d say yes. She loves you. Zapping the electricity in an entire area, eliminating all tech is serious.”

“Hmm. More like she wants me back because I betrayed her. Evangeline doesn’t like to be crossed.”

“Of course, there is that,” V agreed.

Still inspecting the tag, Troy wondered if V had ever been in love. He was curious about this aspect of freedom, never having experienced it before. Why focus on the past when the future seemed so full of promise? “Have you ever been in love before?”

V brushed her hand over the ermine collar on the cloak contemplatively. “Yes, I was married before and Mack and I were very much in love.” She continued running her fingers through the fur, and a quiet lull settled between them. Her breath hitched, and she turned her profile away. Troy realized she was crying.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he said softly. When she looked back at him, her eyes were brimming with sorrow and heartache. Troy wanted to pull her into his arms and offer her comfort, but instead, he reached out and tenderly wiped away a tear lingering at the corner of her eye. V shrank away from his intimate touch, and Troy knew he’d gone too far.

“When did he pass?” he asked, slowly withdrawing his hand.

“Two years ago.” V lifted eyes riddled with pain.

“I want to know what it is to love,” he murmured, “at least once.”

V chuckled and wiped away the tears from her eyes. “Don’t worry. You’ll get plenty of chances. You’re a virile male, after all.” She returned the cloak to its shelf.

“But how can I be certain what I feel is love?”

“Trust me, there’s no other feeling like it,” she said, her face softening with dreamy memories. “When it’s returned, it’s amazing—the happiest thing in the world. But if the other person doesn’t feel the same, or worse yet, if they shatter your trust and break your heart... there’s no greater pain.”

Troy studied V as she piled all the gala paraphernalia together.

“Did Mack break your heart?” he prodded gently.

Her eyes locked on to his. “You’re very perceptive, but I don’t like to talk about Mack too much. Now, let’s show you how to use a gun.” She picked up the firearm that Troy had taken from Nancy and held it in her hand. She pointed it toward the ground, released the magazine, and checked it. “This one is loaded.” She returned the magazine to its slot and put the safety on. V looked up at him and her lips curved ever so slightly. “This is an important skill to master if you want to stay alive.”

BY THE SECOND DAY, Troy and V had established a routine. V monitored the grid system for any signs of activity and made sure they ate. Although the Network wasn’t connected to the Coalition’s network, they’d developed their own grid system over the years.

They experienced two close calls when movement was detected nearby, but luckily, the source moved away from them. When they weren’t in alert mode, V explained the layout of Freedom’s Landing, a self-sufficient farm with everyone assigned specific duties. Those who were born and raised there, such as V, called themselves resident-borns.

The compound had been a lodge in its previous life, and currently, a man called Keith led it—the same man V had mentioned yesterday. People on the grounds referred to him as the “Captain.” Troy was amazed to hear about what a man could achieve in the Dead Zones, and it gave him hope.

When V wasn’t talking to him, Troy occupied his time by reading and doing exercises. Being in the bunker felt a lot like being in isolation. By day three, Troy was an uncomfortable mess. He was itching all over from the regrowth of body hair he hadn’t had to contend with in years. V couldn’t offer a solution, but the smirk on her face made it clear she found his discomfort amusing.

What wasn’t funny though was the genuine struggle he was having with his oversexed libido. He’d been sexually active every day for years. He tried to occupy his thoughts, anything to take his mind off the wild need he was

experiencing. His sex drive was running rampant, and with no outlet, he was struggling to keep it under control. The constant erections were growing painful, causing him to walk awkwardly. He tried his best to hide the physical evidence of his arousal, although it was tricky while wearing sweatpants.

Troy never thought it would happen to him, but Marcy had warned him about the potential for getting something called “blue balls.” Apparently, it was a condition thought to happen if a male was sexually aroused for a prolonged period of time but didn’t ejaculate. She’d advised him to masturbate to avoid “blue balls,” and he’d attempted it a few times, but with little success.

Then his escape had been moved forward because Troy had overheard Evangeline mention a potential crackdown on Network activities. He’d alerted Marcy, who moved the breakout forward. Even with the short notice, they took advantage of the Valentine’s Day gala, though this left Troy with less time to prepare his body.

Ever since Troy could remember, being a breeder with a viable sperm count meant he wasn’t permitted to masturbate. Each sperm was too valuable to be wasted. So here he was, a highly aroused male used to ejaculating multiple times a day, stuck with a woman who likely didn’t find him attractive.

He placed the book he was reading on his bunk as he thought about how appropriate the title, *Les Misérables*, was to his current situation, and looked over at V, who was half working and half reading. She’d taken a liking to his cloak and wore it most of the time.

He sat up and perched on the edge of the mattress. “V?”

“Yup?” she responded, still distracted. “Are you hungry? It’s time for lunch; I’ll pull something together to eat.”

“Well... yes and no,” he said, clearing his throat.

V turned around on her stool and dog-eared the page before placing the book back on the system’s panel. “So, what’s up?”

“I’ve got a bit of a problem.” She looked at him with curiosity as his cheeks warmed. Should he just say it out loud? *My testicles are tender; do you have any suggestions?*

V tilted her head and furrowed her brow as she put most of her weight on one knee, tapping her lower lip with her index finger. “A problem?”

Troy shifted on the mattress and grabbed his blanket to cover his dick jutting up in his sweatpants and flagging his “problem.”

“Oh...” V sat up straight again, giggling nervously and paling a bit.

“This is not funny,” Troy said, pointing to the bulge under the blanket.

“No, I suppose it isn’t,” she muttered.

“You know we’re not supposed to relieve ourselves,” he said, his cheeks firing hot.

V eyed his lap as she rose, stretched, and sighed before settling beside him on the bunk bed, his cloak trailing along behind her and puddling at her feet.

V stared at him thoughtfully. “You can always use the washroom.”

“I’ve tried but...”

V’s eyes widened. “You’re struggling because masturbating is a no-no?” V lived in the Coalition. She had to be familiar with the Coalition maxim of “procreate to recreate.”

Troy gritted his teeth together and nodded. “So says the Coalition.”

“So says the Coalition,” she repeated, worrying her lower lip. Tapping her foot a few times, she looked to the side like she was internally debating something. When she met his gaze, she totally took him off guard. “I can help you, if... you’d like.”

Troy could hardly believe his ears.

“How... could you help me?” he croaked and cleared his throat. His mouth had gone completely dry.

Heat crept into V’s cheeks. “I can give you a hand job.”

Troy swallowed hard. Had he heard her correctly? Then something occurred to him, and he wasn’t sure he liked it. He frowned. One moment it was a thought and the next... “How many times have you done something like this before?” His voice had an edge of suspicion as the words tumbled out of their own volition. Troy knew it was none of his business. Who was he to judge? Even as an irrational wave of possessiveness crashed through him, Troy knew V wasn’t his to possess. Especially given that he was an e-breeder, and no one female was ever exclusively his.

“I’ve given a few hand jobs, but I wouldn’t call myself an expert,” she admitted. “It’s not part of my job description if that is what you’re thinking. As an agent, this would be a first for me.”

“Why offer then?”

“We’re both adults. You think I haven’t noticed you’ve been fidgety all day? I know you need it. Unless you’re trying to take advantage of me?”

“Never,” scoffed Troy, aghast. Troy didn’t take advantage of women. It was always the other way around. But he needed this—wanted it desperately.

“In that case...” V rose and padded over to one of the shelves, his cloak trailing behind her like royalty. She noisily rummaged around for something.

“Found it!” She turned on her heel, covered the short distance between them, and perched on the mattress, presenting him with a cloth. Holding his gaze, she shrugged the cloak off her shoulders and it puddled onto the floor. “Shall we start?”

Seated beside him, she searched his eyes.

LETTING GO

TROY

“I’M RIGHT-HANDED, so I’ll take this side of the bunk. Lie back,” V spoke with a businesslike air. Troy was used to a clinical tone because some women were simply that. Clinical. Sex was just a means to an end, and he was the vessel through which they got there.

But V was doing him a favor. He didn’t know why he hoped for anything different.

Troy adjusted his position on the bed until his arm was snug against the wall. He made room for V, and soon enough she nestled into his side, her body radiating heat. She fit perfectly against him, tucked under his arm, her lush form melted into his. So delicate and supple. She rested her head against his shoulder, and a faint scent of musk tickled his nose—his, from the cloak, combined with the crisp perfume of laundry detergent. Hers.

Troy drank in her scent, wanting nothing more than to enjoy it. He fought hard to keep his composure, his body crying out for release. His need for intimacy had grown too intense to ignore, and deep down, a part of him wished he wasn’t so desperate. Being this vulnerable left him raw and exposed. Troy blamed the Coalition for conditioning him to indulge in sex so frequently.

V propped herself up on one elbow and stared at him. He felt her gaze, but was too nervous to look at her, as if this was his first time. Ridiculous really, considering how many women

he'd been with over the years. Troy kept his focus fixed on the bottom of the upper bunk as he tried to calm his racing heart. The surface was covered with graffiti, but a sketchy heart pierced with an arrow captured his attention. It read "Frank and Suzy Forever," and Troy wondered what that kind of love was like.

"Tell me if you're okay with this," she asked. "I don't want any more misunderstandings between us."

"I want this." Troy swallowed hard; his throat tight. "There's no misunderstanding."

V nodded and drew the blanket over his midsection. "Lift your shirt up a bit. I'd like to touch you," she whispered. Troy studied her profile; the intensity in her features was undeniable. Could she want this as much as he did?

Pushing the blanket lower, he adjusted his shirt and exposed a strip of skin. With his eyes half-closed, he watched V rest her palm on the bare skin of his lower stomach. Soft and warm, just like the rest of her body. Troy luxuriated in the simple sensation, and his dick twitched in eager anticipation.

"I'm going to reach under the blanket," she informed him. "When you're about to come, use the cloth."

He nodded tightly and squeezed the cloth in his opposite hand. Troy wanted this—needed it.

"Okay then." She inched her fingers farther down under the blanket. He raised his waistband up enough for her hand to slip beneath it.

"I'm going to feel you first, because—oh my God, you're big!" she gasped, her hand running along the backside of his dick. He hissed with pleasure. At least the size of his cock wasn't a disappointment.

She withdrew her hand, looking concerned. "Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head adamantly. Their eyes met for the first time. V held his gaze as she reached into his sweats again, and Troy had to resist the urge to lean in and kiss her.

This time, she nimbly wrapped her hand around his girth, closing her eyes. A mix of vulnerability and excitement moved through him. Troy curled his fingers into the blanket as she tightened her grip on his shaft and moved her fingers up and down its rigid length. Troy uttered a low moan, drawing his hips back with each of her upward pulls, her digits running over the sensitive edges of his crown. With his eyes closed, he turned his face toward V until their foreheads met and their breaths mingled. He yearned to kiss her, to feel some kind of connection, but they weren't lovers—she was just helping him out. Giving him a hand, so to speak.

V shifted and, with her other hand, reached inside his sweatpants, carefully scooping his testicles and rolling them between her fingers.

“Yes,” he murmured, even though the thrumming sensation was slightly uncomfortable in his current state.

Troy pumped into her hand with increasing speed as the need to explode rode him, a rising crescendo spiraling out of control. His balls tightened and pulled up between his legs. As her fingers gently plucked him, V must have felt it too.

“Come for me,” she said, her voice raspy. Troy threw back his head against his pillow, desperate to comply.

“I want to,” he gasped, trying not to fight the urge. Troy clutched V's thigh with one hand and squeezed. He grasped the bedpost for leverage as he drove into her hand harder. Her thumb moved skillfully over the sensitive underside of his penis, coaxing him closer and closer toward climax. Abdomen clenching, he quivered as a wave of heat spread up his spine and his testicles grew so taut, they hurt. Perspiration broke out on his forehead and slid down his temples.

“Shit,” he cursed as he released his hold on the post and scrambled for the cloth to cover himself, but before he could stop, he came on a shuddering, racking cry. His body convulsed with each ejaculation, semen spurting out in long, sweeping arcs, with the cloth still crumpled in his hand.

“So much for avoiding a mess.” V's body relaxed against his heaving chest. She released her hold on his penis, pried the

cloth from his death grip, and wiped his cum-splattered torso clean.

“That should keep you comfortable for a little while,” she whispered against his neck, rearranging the blanket.

“Thank you.” His words came out dreamlike and airy as he fought to catch his breath. He smiled broadly. “This is the first time I’ve ever finished from a hand job.” Her body eased away from him a bit, and he mourned the loss of her soft heat. Troy looked at her face but kept his gaze on her lips as his eyes grew heavy. Her lips were beautiful.

“Next time, I’ll start you, but you’ll finish yourself,” she said. “After that, you should be good to go.”

“You think?” he murmured sleepily. His lips curled up in one corner, and then, to his Class 5 Elite Breeder shame, Troy fell asleep.

GETTING HIS ROCKS OFF

V

V WOKE WITH A START, still wrapped in Troy's embrace. He snored softly in his sleep, still lying on his back. She marveled at how deeply he slept, hardly having moved an inch since they'd fallen asleep. All except for his hand, which had clung to her thigh earlier, now cupped her ass.

V peeled his hand off, laying it gently by his side. She wanted to leave without disturbing him, but the peacefulness of the moment held her in place, and soon she was staring at his profile.

In his sleep, Troy appeared much younger. Evidently, getting his rocks off had done the trick. He seemed tired and spent, but V? Seeing Troy struggle to climax while she held the silky smoothness of his dick in her hand and watched him come had left her aroused and edgy. She'd meant to get herself off once he'd fallen asleep but had nodded off instead.

V should have made it easier on them both and satisfied her growing itch by simply offering to have sex with the e-breeder, but V wasn't much of a player. She couldn't explain why she'd offered to relieve Troy. Who was she kidding? Aside from being a little too thin for her taste, he was smoking hot. She'd been mooning over him, taking every opportunity she could to steal a glance without being caught.

In truth, she hardly understood why she slept with Keith. Probably for the intimacy, companionship, and familiarity. It wasn't for the sex, because in her entire life, she'd never

experienced an orgasm with a man. The only thing that ever satisfied her were her fingers.

God knew Mack had tried, but eventually, V lapsed into the habit of faking it rather than hoping for something that wasn't likely to happen.

V rolled onto her back, glanced toward the washroom, and grimaced. Why did it seem so far away? She groaned inwardly and envisioned trying to take care of herself in that tight and cramped space.

V swung her gaze back to Troy, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. She was comfortably snuggled up beside him, and he looked sound asleep. She could be quick.

V reached into her sweatpants and found her clit. Closing her eyes, she flipped through a few of her go-to images. *Let's see.* Oh yes, a man eating her out. With finger action—a particular favorite of hers. V bit down on her lower lip and hummed out a long exhale. A tingle of excitement coursed through her lower limbs and centered on her clit. She focused on the scene—the kissing, the licking, and the moans—except she couldn't shake the image of Troy; his breath quickening, his muscles tightening.

V groaned, her face contorting in frustration. “No,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She tried to focus and be quick, but her thoughts kept wandering, and always back to *him*.

Troy suddenly stirred beside her. Mortified, V jerked her hand out from beneath her waistband as her face burned with heat. She should have used the washroom, but she hadn't expected that he would wake up, not as sound asleep as he was. Or that he would cover her hand with his and push them both back into her sweatpants.

“I can help you,” he offered in a gruff voice, using her own words against her. Troy shifted his body, propping himself up on one elbow, but kept his eyes trained on where their hands met.

V seldom admitted her inability to orgasm to anyone, but for some mad reason, maybe because she felt so flustered, she blurted it out, “No man has ever made me come!”

Troy looked surprised as he locked eyes with her, and for a moment, he remained speechless. V twisted her head away, ashamed by feelings of inadequacy. She didn’t know why she couldn’t come. She wanted to, desperately, but she was broken in so many ways.

The mattress dipped behind her, causing her to roll back into the cradle of his chest. Troy caught her by the jaw and forced her to look at him.

“There’s a secret to pleasing a woman,” he said with a degree of confidence V hadn’t heard from him yet. His lips curled up into a slight smile; he was clearly in his element.

“And what is that?” V’s heart raced as the tingling sensation grew between her legs. She wanted to touch herself but resisted the urge. All it would take was a little pressure and... V sighed. She just needed a few seconds alone—in the washroom this time—to take care of herself.

“The secret to satisfying a woman is to watch them take their own pleasure,” Troy explained. “Learn how they stroke themselves. Watch how they like to be touched.”

“I don’t like being watched,” V countered hotly.

“No, you don’t. But you *do* like to watch,” he countered, searching her eyes.

V lowered her gaze.

Did he guess she was thinking of him? V didn’t think her cheeks could burn any hotter. But then V remembered who she was dealing with. An Elite Breeder, no ordinary male. Sex was Troy’s specialty, and he’d read her correctly in no time at all. V was an observer in every sense of the word. Even at this moment, she watched as his stunning hazel eyes darkened in the shadows. She imagined them transforming from a deep shade of blue to a rich mossy green.

“You... want to watch me masturbate?” Shock reverberated in her voice.

Troy shook his head slightly, which confused her even more, causing her to frown. “No.” He flattened his hand against hers, which now rested on her belly. “We’re both going to close our eyes, and you’re going to think of whatever it was you were thinking about, and I’m going to come along for the ride.”

“And if I can’t finish?” she asked.

“I’ll finish you.”

“It’s not like I haven’t heard that before.” V snorted and almost laughed out loud. She should have guessed no male could resist the challenge. Why would Troy be any different?

Troy huffed and then stretched out on his side, his arm dangling off the head of the bunk bed.

At first, they just lay there, their synchronized breathing and the low buzz of the generator the only sounds. V thought about staying still until he fell asleep again or gave up—a tactic she’d employed with considerable success in the past.

“Did you remember what you were thinking of?” He pressed his face into the crook of her neck and unexpectedly sniffed at her. He hummed with satisfaction, and for some bizarre reason, the primal act of it sent shivers up V’s spine. “You know, it doesn’t matter how closely I burrow into you. I can’t read your fantasies.”

Of course V knew that, but on some level, hearing Troy say it out loud reassured her that her fantasies would stay her own; she didn’t want to share them. Ever. Or for him to know that her thoughts drifted to him as she pleased herself.

“Even if my eyes were open—which they’re not—I can’t see what you’re thinking.”

True, but even with his eyes closed, he could still hear her breathing. There were so many tells in sex—from the slightest gasp to no breath at all.

They were silent for a few beats. V shrugged internally, then thought, *Oh, what the hell.* She’d try. What was the worst that could happen? As usual, she wouldn’t climax.

V exhaled slowly, slid their hands lower and started to massage her tender bud. His digits lay atop hers, and their fingers moved in unison. She imagined Troy: his torso contracting, his face turned away, his neck corded and taut, crying out as he climaxed. A heated sensation pooled in her sex and V sighed, but it elicited no reaction from him. No inquiries, nothing. Like he was there, and yet, not.

V felt her body tensing as she touched herself. She drew in a deep breath, taking in the musky scent of him, and applied more pressure, rubbing her hardening nub. Her eyes closed tightly as waves of bliss rolled over her as she quietly peaked. It was a gentle orgasm. Not one that left her breathless or her muscles jumping. Troy flicked her fingers away from her sex and pressed down on her pulsing clit, drawing out her climax.

The gentle tremors stopped, and V's mind raced as the realization hit—she'd come.

“Next time,” Troy whispered, “let's see if I can reproduce that for you.”

He rubbed the tip of his nose along the line of her neck, and then the next thing she knew, he'd pushed up and sat with his arms wrapped around his knees. He shifted, and then to V's surprise, ran the tips of his fingers under his nostrils. It was—animalistic. And profoundly erotic.

It was odd for her, but to him, it seemed the most natural thing to do.

His profile turned toward the shelf with all the food supplies. “What's for dinner?” he asked, already thinking of the next craving to satisfy. V chuckled.

Typical male, she thought.

DAY four and Troy gave himself his first hand job to completion.

As they lay on his bunk together, he'd revealed just enough skin for V to rest her hand on his abdomen, just as she'd done before.

“Oh my.” A gasp of surprise flew from V’s mouth as Troy tucked his sweatpants beneath his scrotum, revealing his cock for the first time. V regretted not getting a glimpse of it yesterday. Curious since the last time they had lain together, she tried to imagine what it might look like based on tactile memory alone. But this time there was no blanket blocking her view, and she took in the sight, absorbing every detail.

He wasn’t big to the point of being obscene, but he was larger and thicker than the men V was used to. The shaft was heavily veined, and his testicles and surrounding area were mostly hairless except for some minor regrowth, just like the rest of his body.

Only Keith came in at a close second for size, except that his sex was nestled in a thatch of dirty-blond hair. V pushed the comparison from her head and couldn’t help staring shamelessly. She’d always found penises intriguing and wasn’t at all surprised men were so fascinated with their genitalia. If she had an external entity attached to her body that could give her immense pleasure, plus had a mind of its own, she would be at it all the time too, without hesitation or shame.

Troy quickly kicked off his sweatpants, picked up his long, thick shaft and fondled it. The sight of him stroking himself was arousing. Troy released his dick, and his manhood flopped onto the back of V’s hand. V reached for it.

“Mmm.” Voicing his satisfaction, Troy covered her hand with his, tightening their mutual grip. Men certainly weren’t gentle with their sex.

Troy pulled V closer into his embrace, and the intimacy between them felt far more intense than the day before. She loved how their hands moved rhythmically up and down his hard shaft, tightening in the spots that made him buck and groan. Troy thrust his hips into their grip, his moans filling the room as he threw his head back in bliss.

He was shameless when it came to making sounds, whereas V always tried to muffle hers, embarrassed by them, and yet she loved the noises he made. It kindled her arousal like fuel added to fire.

A small drop of pre-ejaculate appeared at the head of Troy's penis, and as they worked him, it spread down his shaft. He dipped a finger in the wetness, exploring its texture before bringing it to his mouth and tasting himself. V sucked in a quick breath.

"Hmm," he considered. "A little salty."

V whisked her fingertips across the top of the shaft and smeared the natural lubricant all over the tip, especially around the ridges, which she knew were laden with sensitive nerve endings. She wanted to take him into her mouth, but his expression softened into a look of pure sensuality, and V couldn't tear her eyes away.

Troy's eyelashes fluttered closed, and he moaned. "I like that," he remarked as they moved together in sync once more. V extracted her hand from beneath his and let Troy work his magic.

Leaning in, she rested her palm back onto his stomach and ran her fingers over the ridges of his abs. Making her way up, she touched a nipple until it hardened. She gave it a light pinch, eliciting an intake of breath and making him shiver.

She kept teasing his nipple, and soon he was moving faster. "I'm almost there!" Troy tipped his chin into his chest and watched his own hand furiously pump his dick, his abdomen undulating in unison.

"Fuckkk!" He threw his head back as cum spurted over his belly button in silky, erratic ribbons. Troy released his still-pulsing cock, panting for air. It waved over his abdomen like a wilting flag. "I did it!" Twisting, he planted a kiss on the crown of V's head before flopping back onto the bed, beaming with satisfaction.

After he caught his breath, V ran her fingers through the mess he'd left on his stomach, leaving a heart-shaped design. Troy watched in awe as she brought her fingers to her lips and tasted him. Unthinkable in the Coalition.

No sooner had she drawn his essence onto her tongue, his palm moved to her chin and his mouth collided with hers. He

was passionate, rolling her onto her back and plundering her mouth with vigor. V had never experienced a kiss with such fire before. It was too much for her—too intense, too alive with feeling. She didn't plan on emotions coming into play; they only led to pain in the end. He was an e-breeder, and e-breeders weren't meant to get attached.

V shoved at his shoulders. Troy released her lips, though he still held her head between his hands. But the male who pressed his forehead against hers, tempering his desires, was not at all a passive participant as e-breeders were said to be. This was a male of his own mind, taking what he wanted.

"I'm so sorry," she said, their lips nearly touching. Troy gave an agonized groan in response. With one careless mistake, the equilibrium between them had been ruined. What had she expected? To taste his release? It was too intimate.

"I never should have offered to help you climax. I don't know what I was thinking. I can't be with another breeder. I don't want to—"

"Stop apologizing—what did you just say?" Troy raised himself off her and glared down, a serious frown marring his forehead. "Another breeder? You say breeder like it's a dirty word."

"No—no, I don't mean it that way. Only—it's complicated."

"How complicated is it?" Troy rolled off and stood beside the bed. His semen was still slick on his abs as he grabbed his sweatpants and pulled them up. "You think because I'm an e-breeder I don't have feelings?"

V started to reply, but he cut her off. "Don't fucking bother. I can feel you're holding back. Thanks for 'helping' me. I'm good now." He swiped his sweatshirt over his torso to clean himself off and tossed it to the floor. Muttering to himself, he stalked off and slammed the washroom door.

V sat up, tucked her face between her bent knees, and rocked. The bunk bed creaked in protest as she moved, but she ignored it and contemplated her current situation. This was

bad, and she couldn't explain to Troy the why of it. It was far too humiliating—that in all the years she'd been sexually active with Mack, she'd never once gotten pregnant.

She was barren. Couldn't have kids. She'd already learned the hard way that virile men wanted children. That had been the reason Mack had eventually sought out the company of other women. V couldn't handle sharing another male she cared for. Not again. Once had been enough. It broke her in ways she still was yet to understand. She never wanted to be that vulnerable again.

Sure, Troy was super sexy and skillfully worked her to orgasm with those capable fingers, but during their time together, she'd grown fond of him. Maybe because there was something vulnerable about him, which made him a kindred spirit of sorts. She should have known he'd be a temptation she should have resisted. What was it about him?

That was why Keith was a better fit. Keith wasn't virile and had no interest in babies. The Landing was his baby.

With Keith, V could guard her heart. They would have each other for companionship. Could grow old together with no regrets. It would be enough—right?

But with Troy, it was best to barricade her heart because he was dangerous. She would never be enough for a man like Troy, and in time, he'd realize it too.

Right now, he was just a little confused. Circumstances had thrown them together, but once he arrived at Freedom's Landing and all the women fawned over him, he'd realize how fortunate he was to be free.

HOPE

TROY

POUNCING on V that way hadn't been one of his better moves, but it had been more of a compulsion—a kind of primal need to claim her as his own that had royally backfired. When she reacted with shock and pushed him away, he'd stormed off, only making matters worse. Now V avoided any contact or conversation as much as possible. They spoke about basic topics like the books they read or their destination, the Landing. Almost as if they had wiped all their progress clean and reset to day one.

Sure, Troy wanted to learn more about his new home, which V informed him was on fifty acres and supported a good three hundred souls, strong and growing. She warned him that the Landing would most likely be a temporary station as most of the virile males settled farther north, where Coalition raids rarely happened. Only they wouldn't start making trips north until late spring when the conditions were more hospitable.

But Troy couldn't think past the kiss they'd shared the previous evening. It was all-encompassing. Heady, with a level of fervor Troy had never experienced before with any of his Keepers. He'd struggled to keep himself in check. Watching her taste his semen had ignited a frenzy within him, and he wanted nothing more than to be inside of her. In the Coalition, sex was a given, but with V, Troy was at a loss.

“We're heading out tomorrow,” V announced around midday. “So we'll need to pull our shit together this afternoon.

It'll be a four-day trek until we arrive at the pickup point. If we're lucky, there'll be transportation in place once we get there."

All business, V grabbed two waterproof backpacks from a shelf and passed one to him. No more friendly banter, laughter, or warm smiles.

Troy accepted the bag from her, and their fingers lightly touched. An electric jolt seemed to pass between them, and she instantly pulled her hand away, as if struck by lightning.

"How long are you going to avoid me, V?"

"There's not enough room in here to avoid you," she replied flatly, busying herself with packing.

He sighed loudly. "I'm sorry. I got carried away yesterday."

"You don't need to apologize. It wasn't your fault, but I think it's best we leave things as they are."

"What if I don't want to?" He stepped into her space.

She stopped packing, tilted her head to one side, and gave him her best "you've got to be kidding me" look, placing a hand on his chest when he tried to crowd her further with his body. He stopped, his eyes gentling as he stared down at her, and he sighed. "We have time, together, alone. No one has to know, just you and me. I promise to make it worth your while."

"This is about survival, not sex." V shook her head adamantly. "Either way, it's no good. Someone's going to get hurt."

Troy exhaled heavily. "I've never felt anything like that kiss between us last night." Kissing had always been pleasant with his Keepers, but that kiss with V had consumed him completely, and suddenly he wanted to go up in flames.

"Oh, Troy, that's what I'm talking about. We hardly know each other." She looked at him with solemn eyes. "Circumstances have forced us together and the lines are getting blurred. Nothing good can come out of this."

Troy arched a brow. “An exchange of services then?” He could negotiate.

“Troy,” V warned, apparently not liking the turn this conversation was taking.

“I want to be with you, sexually, and I think you want to be with me. You said four days of traveling, so four days— together. No past, no future, just the two of us, enjoying each other’s bodies. I’m used to having sex regularly. I like it, and I need it.”

She shook her head, casting her eyes downward. “You scared me last night, Troy,” she confessed, meeting his gaze. “Plus, we’re on the run. This isn’t a fuck fest. It was wrong of me to offer to do what I did. I took advantage of the situation. Of you. I never should have touched you. It was irresponsible of me.”

“Trust me when I say I wanted what we did.” He ignored her litany of self-accusations. Of course, he knew they were on the run, but they had to rest eventually. “Moving forward, we’ll choose a safe word.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why do you even know about safe words?”

“Why do you?” he countered with a smirk; at least with him it was a given. Although not all Keepers honored safe words. Troy asked her rhetorically, “Did you forget I am an Elite Breeder? My sole purpose is to have sex. All kinds of it. Anyway—let’s go with ‘pineapple.’ It’ll be our safe word. Say yes,” Troy implored while herding her back toward the bunk bed. If she looked down, she’d see the evidence of his arousal. “Because I am dying to kiss you again.”

“What if I don’t want sex?” She licked her lower lip, tempting him to lean in and take what he wanted. “I told you I don’t have orgasms! And never during intercourse. Sex isn’t exactly pleasurable for me.” V grabbed onto a bunk bedpost and held her ground. She fanned her fingers out on his chest, stopping him in his tracks.

A look of disbelief crossed his features. He arched a brow. “You can always say ‘pineapple’ if you don’t like what we’re doing. And we can rectify that little problem of yours. I still owe you an orgasm, after all, and I want full skin privileges.”

“Skin privileges? And those are?”

“The right to touch you—like a lover. And not only in bed.” He took her hand off his chest and brushed his mouth over her knuckles like a knight of antiquity. Women liked that.

V studied his face, searching for something. Confused. “Have you negotiated such parameters before? You’re pretty good at this.”

He smiled and restated, “No past or future.” Of course, he hadn’t done this before. Someone had always negotiated the parameters for him. Without his consent. Troy wanted this, and he wanted V. And winning her over was just another taste of freedom.

She searched his eyes some more. Troy could tell she was wavering. “No past or future?” she asked.

“So, do we agree?” He smiled broadly, tasting victory.

V’s lips flattened into a straight line. So she was considering his proposition, but it didn’t appear to be weighing in his favor. Troy’s smile gradually faded.

“Only when we rest and until we reach the Landing. No distractions while we’re traveling and out in the open. Understood?”

A satisfied grin spread across his face. She had given her consent. “Okay then.” He moved closer and slowly met her lips with his own. Troy had never been so engulfed in a woman before—like a flame burned inside of him and her slightest touch might trigger an explosion. Even now, his entire body shook with anticipation at the mere brush of her mouth against his. This was going to hurt *so* good.

But before he could dive in, she pulled back and placed her index finger over his lips.

“But not tonight. Tonight, we will rest. We negotiated four days and those start tomorrow.”

Troy nipped at her finger. “But we have all afternoon,” he practically pouted, then waggled his eyebrows playfully. “We’ll both sleep better after coming,” he promised.

This brought color to her cheeks but made her chuckle. “You’re very confident. I’ll give you that.”

“You came once with me right there beside you. Why couldn’t you come again with me right there, inside you? The odds are pretty good.”

“Maybe it was a fluke? Did that ever occur to you? Could be I’ve been so tightly wound for some time now that my body took over and my walls temporarily fell, hmm?”

He gave her a wounded look. “She of little faith.”

“Maybe later,” she capitulated. “First—our gear. And I don’t need any distractions. So you’re just going to have to wait.”

“Oh, I can wait.” He smirked.

DESIRE

V

CRAWLING out of the bunker and into the outside world felt surreal. Inside, they'd created their own little pocket of sensuality, but now they were leaving it behind and were back in reality.

V took deep breaths of fresh, clean air and raised her face to the sun. It shone brightly down on her through the sparse branches as if to welcome her back into the world. The air was crisp, and still on the warmer side for February.

Over the recent decades, the seasons sometimes shifted. Only last year, V was surprised to see a caterpillar crawling across a pathway in the middle of February. But as they were traveling northwest, she expected the weather to cool. She hoped it wouldn't snow, but the weather was always so unpredictable.

Troy emerged in a jacket and a military shirt, which clung to his all-too-muscular physique, and wore his loose-fitting leather pants. She was grateful for the latter because she didn't want to be distracted by his fine ass the entire trek.

There'd been no signs of activity around the bunker or the surrounding area, so V made the executive decision to pass on wearing the ponchos to keep their visibility low. The makeshift raft must have worked like a charm and diverted the manhunt downriver.

V calculated that they would travel in the day, relying on the warm air to help mask their heat signatures from any

infrared sensors. At night, when it got cooler, they'd have to hunker down and use each other's body heat, which worked out with their current arrangement.

V tried not to reminisce about last night, but it was difficult to put it out of her head.

Troy had been very determined to get his kiss. As soon as they'd finished pulling the gear together for the next day, V found herself caught up in his arms. At first his lips had been hesitant, testing—then exploratory and relentless until he found his rhythm and his mouth consumed hers. V let him lead; his lips moved against hers, their tongues intertwining.

He kissed like a starved man.

At times, he trembled in her embrace, and she'd pull him closer until they were completely lost in one another, the world outside forgotten.

He lifted her off her feet, and she clung to him as he lowered them both onto the bunk bed. Their lips moved together as if they would never part.

Once they'd kissed to their hearts' content, they lay in stillness, exchanging soothing caresses. Eventually, they fell asleep, wrapped up in each other's embrace.

No sex, and no "pineapple" necessary.

AS THE SUN SET, their steps grew more sluggish. They'd trudged through meadows, navigated their way through a couple of towns, crossed a few streams, and now were under the cover of a dense forest. Frankie had input the coordinates into Troy's PI in advance, and now they were here—wherever "here" was.

"This is it." V stuffed the handheld into her jacket pocket, removed her rifle, and shucked off her backpack. Troy stepped up beside her and did the same.

"Let's set up our tent for the night." She gestured to a secluded area with her chin while pulling out a tarp from her backpack. "I have an Instafire kit in my bag if you can find me

some sticks and leaves for kindling. It should ignite easily and give off enough heat to last several hours with no smoke or telltale plumes that the Coalition might spot.”

“No problem,” he said, and scoured the grounds. Once he’d collected enough kindling, V showed Troy how to start the fire. It roared to life in moments, thanks to the inventive minds of the Coalition—its revolutionary design allowed it to ignite even with damp tinder.

“Fuck, that was a lot of walking,” Troy said as he plopped onto the ground next to V while she tended to the fire. He leaned back onto his hands, stretching out his long legs, and groaned with delight as the flames rose. “I don’t think I’ve ever walked so much.”

V rubbed her fingers together over the building flames. “It’s a good thing you’re in shape, princess,” she said offhandedly. “At least we only have three more days of this. Pray for no rain, or even worse, snow.” Evidence of the latter already blanketed parts of the grassy embankments surrounding them. If they had to trek over snow, it would double their time.

As the temperature dropped, their exhales grew more and more visible in the air, like wispy clouds of smoke. They needed to eat and move into the tent quickly to activate the military-grade insulation that would mask their heat signatures and help them stay warm.

V wanted to kick back and rest for the night, but it was generally understood that a man would want sex, even on his deathbed. She’d agreed to four days with Troy, and he would likely hold her to her promise. Although he had enjoyed a few bonus rounds back in the bunker. She ran her hand gingerly over the stubble burn he’d left around her mouth. V could always use her blemished skin as exhibit number one if she needed to negotiate some extra downtime.

After they finished eating a hamburger and fries concoction mixed with water, they both relieved themselves in the nearby woods, then stood examining the small tent that was their shelter for the next few nights. Two mummy bags

were already laid out on the floor, and with foresight, V had zipped them together along one side and turned the top layer down. Still, it was going to be a tight fit.

V shrugged. “Better strip then.”

“And get into what?” Troy asked. “I saw you pack some thermal underwear.”

“Nope—strip down to your undies and I’ll do the same. We’re relying on our body heat. The less we have on, the warmer we’ll be.”

Troy looked doubtful, but then he shot her a cheeky grin. “Oh, I know how to keep you warm. And if we’re going to be mostly naked, why not be naked all the way? That way, I don’t have to fight with a tiny scrap of fabric when I try for your pussy.”

V’s eyes widened at his choice of words, but Troy seemed oblivious. He was cruder than most men she was used to.

“Although fucking with underwear on is a thing.” He wagged his eyebrows.

V rolled her eyes at him and pursed her lips. What wasn’t?

“It can be pretty hot,” he assured her with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “But usually, it’s an eyes-on kind of situation—you have to watch what you’re doing. You need to make sure the cloth is in exactly the right position, so when you pull it from the back, it rubs the clitoris while your dick slides—”

“Got it!” V interrupted, clearing her throat. “And who said we’re having sex tonight?”

Troy furrowed his brows together, and in that split second, V yanked off her garments, stopping at her underwear before scrambling into the shelter. She wasn’t much of a tease but she delighted in her maneuver. She should have anticipated he would move just as fast. Already purged of his clothing, Troy had her pinned on her back within moments.

V realized that she’d seen Troy mostly naked, but he’d only caught a glimpse of her best assets in the bunker. Even though his hands had definitely gotten a good feel.

“You’ve got hair under your arms,” Troy declared. He pinned her arms over her head as he glanced from one small bush to the other as if he’d never seen anything like it.

“And I have hair down below and on my legs too.” V didn’t hide her annoyance. She had no reason to shave.

He gave her a look like, *I’m not stupid*. “It’s only that I’ve never been with a woman who didn’t shave before.”

“And?”

“It’s cute. But nothing compared to mine when it grows out.” Troy peeked under his own arms, but they were mere patches of stubble. “I get it. Not wanting to shave,” he sympathized. V knew he’d been itchy for days from the regrowth of his landscaped body.

“So, are we going—” It shouldn’t have surprised V when his nose ended up snug in her armpit. “Ugh, do you smell and lick everything?” she complained, but he retaliated.

“Do you? I remember you tasting my cum.”

V blushed and turned her face away.

“Don’t be embarrassed. I love that you tasted me,” he purred against her ear. “Did you like it?” he asked, his voice pitching dangerously low and husky.

V swallowed and then turned to face him, but she kept her eyes focused on his lips. They were cast in shadow so she could barely make them out at this close angle, but she felt his hot breath skimming over her lips.

What she’d really liked, but wouldn’t say, was when she’d tasted him; the way his tongue had plunged into her mouth, greedily chasing after his own flavor. “Stop. I need to make sure the area is secure before we take this any further,” V whispered, her eyes searching his out in the shadows. Pinned under his hard body, she could almost forget they were on the run and being hunted.

Troy eased off her. Lying on his side, he propped himself up on his forearm. V sat up and reached for her handheld in

her jacket pocket. The scanner gave off only a few faint signals, but nothing to indicate human activity.

“So?” he said, his face lit up by the device’s screen as he sat up beside her. “Are we good?”

She powered off the PI and darkness swallowed them. The only light that remained came from a few dying flames outside.

“We’re good.” She hadn’t been in the mood before, too tired from their long trek, but suddenly her libido roared to life, despite the odd exchange about her body hair and tasting cum.

V lay on her back, and without hesitation, Troy leaned over her. One hand reached underneath her shoulder to unsnap her bra with a swift pinch. Troy pulled it off before he tucked his face between her ample breasts.

“I like these,” he said as he fondled one of them, bringing the nipple to his mouth. V rarely enjoyed being suckled, but at that moment, she allowed it; especially when he pushed her thighs apart with his knee and placed his fingers between her legs.

“Just let go,” he murmured reassuringly as his tongue swirled around her wet nipple. He switched back and forth between her breasts, lavishing attention on both. A sudden warmth radiated through her stomach and speared down to her core, electrifying her in unexpected ways.

With his fingers placed at the thrumming bundle of nerves between her legs, V rolled into him, seeking the pressure she wanted.

“Fuck, I can smell your pussy from here.” Troy dove between her thighs, peeled off her underwear, and licked vigorously into her folds. Masterful fingers worked her clitoris, while his tongue, hot and wet, licked the small nub, adding to the building pleasure. V gasped, arching into his mouth, and on a silent cry—came. Wave after wave of pleasure shot through her body as she moaned wordlessly. Her

breath came out in ragged little gasps, and V swore she saw stars.

“How—how is that possible? That never happens,” she said, still struggling to catch her breath.

Troy didn't say a thing, but simply crawled up and nestled into her side. He didn't gloat or pound his chest in victory, and V wondered if that hadn't been part of the problem all along. Way too much time and attention spent on something that should have come so naturally.

Her.

Troy placed a hand over her mound and played with the short hairs. *That's new.* V smiled to herself, finding his familiarity with her body oddly soothing. He buried his face into the crook of her neck and planted small, wet kisses along her shoulder until he found a spot and settled in.

“What about you?” she asked, tipping her chin toward him. Stubble brushed gently against her cheek, and the evidence of his arousal pressed hard against her hip.

“Squeeze your tits together for me,” he whispered against her hair.

“Excuse me?”

“I said, I want you to squeeze your tits together for me.” His voice was hoarse seduction as he lifted away and loomed over her again.

She did as he asked, but when he straddled her rib cage, she gasped. V instantly released her breasts and clutched his thighs.

“What are you doing?” she exclaimed, her voice wavering. He leaned over her, gripping both sides of her head as he pressed his lips against hers and kissed her until she was breathless.

“I want to fuck your tits,” he spoke huskily against her mouth. Nipping at her lips, he cupped her breasts and lifted them together. A few moments later he pulled back and the

slick warmth of his member glided between her breasts and after a couple of strokes, he guided her hands to replace his.

“Press them together for me. Nice and tight.”

V had never done this before in all her years of having sex. Could it be pleasurable for a man? In answer to her question, Troy started making soft noises almost immediately, fanning V’s arousal. He pounded in between her pillowy tits, his thrusts growing more erratic and intense. She felt his tight testicles brush against the valley of her chest.

“Let go!” Troy cried out. Leaning in, he propped himself up with one hand while furiously pumping himself with the other. He arched his neck back.

Strings of hot semen crisscrossed over V’s collarbone and down her neck as he shuddered with bliss.

Once he was done, he loomed over her, panting. Troy reached for the fluid coating her skin and rubbed it over her breasts with his fingertips. Then, gripping her chin gently, he pushed one wet finger inside of her mouth.

The familiar tang of his semen was all she could taste, and right away, his lips were on hers, their tongues intertwined in a hungry kiss. Just like before, except this time she didn’t push him away. They had an agreement. Her heart was safe.

Troy sighed with satisfaction as he moved to lie down beside her. “Next time I want you to swallow every last drop,” he breathed before drifting off to sleep.

Waiting for his breath to take on a more even rhythm, V sat up and grabbed the wet washcloth she’d placed at the foot of the tent. She wiped her body clean before zipping up the sleeping bags for the night.

Troy lay on his side facing her; V mirrored his position, wishing she could decipher his features in the dark. Even though they’d walked for hours, she was no longer tired. For the first time in ages, V wanted more. Was this what it was like to truly desire sex? She hummed to herself before letting out a long sigh, turning around, and snuggling back into Troy’s lean body. He brought his arm around her waist and held her

against him, inhaling the scent of her hair. It felt right and unhurried.

V closed her eyes. He felt right, but she couldn't allow herself to think that way. This was just about sex. Fulfilling a physical need, nothing more. But her mind filled with thoughts of waking up in his arms, exploring his new world together, seeing him grow carefree, worries of the Coalition melting away with each passing day. V could have that, but not with him.

She nestled in closer, seeking the comfort of his body heat. Wanting to believe, if only for a little while, she was his. And he was hers.

Troy stirred, drawing her snugly against his body. He held tight, like he was reluctant to let go.

V sighed softly, yielding to his hold, and letting his breathing lull her to sleep. She shrugged internally. Why not enjoy the fantasy while it lasted?

WILL WONDERS NEVER CEASE?

NANCY

THE TECHNICIAN WENT over the collar's operating instructions with Nancy once again. It had only recently been developed by the Coalition's correctional services to restrain dangerous criminals and escapees alike, and to keep those males with a history of fleeing in check. Even though such males were usually branded with an R on their backs, the branding wasn't always enough to deter them. Two e-breeders had escaped within the last six months, and both had run before.

One of them was Troy.

The device, which was meant to be worn around their neck as a reminder of their runner status, employed GPS to regulate movement and could be removed only by a male's Keeper. If a male acted out, a female in authority could inflict varying degrees of punishment, from light strangulation to various degrees of shock. They could even fry their brains, if need be, but to kill a male in today's world would be such a waste.

Within the Department of Male Administration, the collars' main purpose would be to keep all potential escapees or actual runners in line. Nancy couldn't wait for the chance to get one around Troy's throat, given all the trouble he'd caused her. She liked the idea of seeing him on his knees, although it might mean having to shock him a bit here and there.

She'd even dreamed up an ingenious plan for exacting revenge without being too obvious. Nancy could easily explain

away a mild electrical burn on Troy's throat as a mechanical malfunction because of the newness of the contraption.

She ran her fingers over the successive pattern of lights embedded in the middle of the cuff. In her other hand, she held the control bracelet. Each time she amplified the voltage, the little red lights around the collar would spike higher, eliciting a sadistic smile from her. *I'm gonna love watching those lights ring your neck, Troy*, she thought with wistful satisfaction.

"This will work perfectly," Nancy said to the short technician standing next to her. The woman wore a white lab coat and sported a tight bun of blonde hair. She adjusted her data scrolling glasses and beamed with pride.

"I wish you luck with apprehending the breeder," she said. "Once you have this collar on him, he'll comply. A little display of force should be all it takes."

"Absolutely." Nancy hefted the device in her hand. It was surprisingly light.

"Oh, be gentle with it!" the technician cried out, her hands extending to catch the collar like a mother would a falling baby. "It's the first of its kind," she added before exhaling in relief as Nancy caught the band. She clung to it, damned if she'd give it up.

It had been a week since she and her task force had begun their manhunt for Troy, but they were still empty-handed. The enormous expanse of land they needed to comb through was rife with hiding places, littered with overgrown ghost towns and endless miles of woodlands.

Despite their best efforts, luck had yet to be on their side. But now that Nancy held this device in her hands, she and Cynthia were ready to begin the hunt again at point zero—the safe house. They would make their way through the hazardous Dead Zones and hope—*no, pray*—they'd find their man. No matter how long it took, Nancy wouldn't stop until justice was served. Her justice. Because everything she'd ever worked for, all her ambitions, hung in the balance of this manhunt. Evangeline had made it very clear if Nancy didn't retrieve Troy, she'd ruin her. Nancy counted herself lucky that the

Governor of Zone 7 had given her a chance to redeem herself. In the past, others hadn't been so fortunate.

Her fingers tightened around the device, and she smiled. Victory was within her grasp. Literally.

THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

TROY

TROY AND V walked cautiously over the broken pavement, their heavy boots echoing in the eerily silent streets. Shattered remains of buildings lay all around them, their broken-down walls and empty windows a testament to once-bustling towns. Rubble of various sizes littered the area, while small tufts of yellowed weeds grew between the cracks in the streets.

“The quiet is almost unbearable,” Troy said in a low voice, not wanting to disrupt the stillness of their surroundings.

“Yes. It’s like time has stopped.” V reached out and took his hand. The simple gesture was enough to bring Troy some comfort, but it wasn’t enough to quell the doubts taking root in his heart. Maybe running had been a mistake. Still, he listened intently as V shared her stories about Freedom’s Landing—tales of strength and courage that caused the withering seed of hope within him to grow and stir.

Most citizens of the Coalition were too scared to venture out into the Dead Zones, but there’d always been whispers of those who survived out here, off the grid. They built their homes from scavenged materials and grew their food in the fertile soil beneath their feet. Looking around, it was hard to imagine how anyone could live off this desolate land, but he had to believe. V was a testament to their survival.

Troy looked down at their intertwined fingers, and his heart swelled when V squeezed his hand in reassurance. Everything would be all right.

They settled down to eat their midday rations in front of a ramshackle building. The sun-bleached sign had once read “Jack’s Convenience Store.” Now only faded remnants of the letters remained. Troy and V sat next to the woods, surveying an open road littered with rusted skeletons of abandoned vehicles.

“Why’d you run?” V finally asked, perhaps sensing his melancholy.

“I wanted to be free.” As a C5 Elite Breeder, Troy lived a privileged lifestyle in the city, yet he wanted to reclaim what was rightfully his. His freedom, and his dignity as a man—as a human being. In the Coalition, Troy was nothing more than a slave to his gender.

“Did you know men were once free?” V inquired. “But they forbid us to talk to men about the old ways, so how could you.”

Troy’s brows furrowed together. “Sometimes I’d find a book lying around, here and there. Once I even came across a classic. Of course, I knew I wasn’t supposed to, but I read it anyway.” He remembered poring through the yellowed pages, reading of powerful men who’d contributed to society, and it was like a dam broke within him, flooding him with questions. Primarily, why were women the sole possessors of power when it hadn’t always been that way? Of course, he understood that Chimera had changed everything, but that didn’t mean he had to accept it.

“Is that what made you run the first time?”

“No.” Troy shifted his shoulder and twisted his neck. “The first time was a fluke.” He avoided thinking about the R symbol branded on his lower back, though it remained a perpetual reminder of his initial bid at freedom. It served as a cautionary tale to him and others like him, illustrating the consequences that would befall those who tried to escape.

“It must have been awful. How old were you?”

A lump in his throat constricted Troy’s words. “Awful” was an inadequate word to describe the experience accurately.

The cruelty of his branding had taken him completely off guard and rocked him to his core. The searing heat of the white-hot iron against his side. The sizzle of his skin as it was scorched, and the sickening smell of burning flesh. Tears welling in his eyes and streaming down his cheeks, and his voice hoarse from screaming. And when he thought it was over, they forced him to endure more suffering as they picked at the scabs to ensure it formed a keloid. For months he was in agony, unable to sleep through the night without the sheets clinging to his burned flesh.

V's hand curled around his forearm. "Troy? Where'd you go?"

"Sorry, got lost in my thoughts. What did you ask?"

"I asked, how old were you?"

"I was nineteen." The words slipped from his lips, heavy with the weight of regret. "I hadn't thought it out. A momentary lapse in judgment that changed my life forever." His eyes grew distant as he remembered that fateful night, the sounds and smells of the city coming back to him with vivid clarity. "I saw an opportunity and took it..." He trailed off, the memory too painful to bear. And yet, despite all the pain and suffering his actions had caused, he'd run again.

"I've seen a brand such as yours before, on the last e-breeder that came through. His name is Shadow. Have you heard of him?"

"Shadow." Troy's frown deepened as he shook his head. "Funny, every time I thought about freedom, it felt like I was the only one that wanted it, but obviously I was wrong."

"I'm so sorry for what happened to you, Troy." She looked at him with a solemn expression, and her voice was filled with compassion.

Troy shrugged. "It's not your doing. What they did to me only reinforced the injustice of the world I lived in, but now..." He took in his sorry surroundings. "I don't know what I've run to. These places feel so lonely. Empty and filled with despair."

“Things won’t be like this at the Landing,” V promised, reaching over to rub his arm. “You won’t be alone. It’ll be an adjustment, but you’ll make it work. You’ll find something that you do well on the farm and then use it to contribute to our community. Maybe working with metal?” She arched a brow suggestively. “A blacksmith who sweats and bangs away at their forge—I’d love to see that!” She hummed her approval before slyly winking at him.

Was she flirting with him? “You sound like a commercial for the Lottery.” He huffed. The Lottery was a Coalition-initiated game where ladies could win time with breeders and get pregnant the traditional way. Ads featured scantily clad men in alluring poses, often tangled in bedsheets, but never working over an open fire.

“Sorry, women still fantasize, even in the Dead Zones. And most blacksmiths are hot.”

Troy suppressed a smile. Women would be women, no matter where he was. “What do you do at Freedom’s Landing when you’re not undercover, collecting medical supplies, or helping citizens escape?”

“I thought these last few days were about no past, no future.”

“True. But you didn’t stick to that rule when you asked me about running.”

“It was your choice to answer.” She quirked a smile.

Troy tipped his head back and studied her. Was she being serious or pulling his leg?

She gave a slight shrug. “Fine. I work with cotton and wool—coloring it and spinning it mainly, but I particularly enjoy weaving it on the loom. Other than that, I help around the farm like everybody else does. It’ll be difficult to get another identity number and become anonymous in the Coalition’s system again, but I do my best work as an agent, and fieldwork is what I’m passionate about.”

Without thinking, Troy laced his fingers with hers. He liked V—a lot—and didn’t like the prospect of not having her

around.

“Ah, fuck, it’s starting to rain.” V looked skyward, then scanned the surrounding area. “Over there!” She pointed. “It’s an old bus shelter. We can put our ponchos on there.”

They hastily picked up their belongings and hurried to the shelter. Once they were safely shielded from the elements, V explained to Troy the importance of keeping his feet dry, as wet feet could lead to trench foot. They still had some distance to travel before they would call it a day.

For the rest of their trek, they stayed quiet, with their heads tucked low as the rain continuously pelted them in the face. Every so often, they would find shelter and take a few minutes to change their wet socks. At one point, V took a quick glance at his feet and her eyebrows knitted together.

“Are your feet hurting?” She dabbed his feet with a small towel.

“I feel fine,” he assured her.

She reached under her poncho, pulled out her handheld, and checked it. “We’ve got about an hour left to go for today, and then we’ll stop for the night. Can you manage?”

“I think so.”

V’s eyebrows drew together.

“Is there something you’re not telling me about my feet?”

Her mouth went flat. “They’re showing some minor signs of trench foot.”

“Let me see!” he exclaimed, but she held on tight. “What does trench foot mean, exactly?”

“Essentially, your feet are getting waterlogged. If they aren’t bothering you, then I don’t think it’s a good idea to look. Looking will only make matters worse.”

“That doesn’t sound encouraging.” He put on some fresh socks and did up his boots. Troy rose to stand. His feet tingled and felt more sensitive than they had before. Perhaps she was right. It was better not to look.

V AND TROY slogged through the rustling trees and endless downpour to locate a suitable campground for the night. V chose a diminutive hill with enough foliage to provide extra protection. The natural drainage prevented flooding, as the lower parts of the woodland were already waterlogged. They erected their tent beneath one of the larger coniferous trees in the area, and V produced an extra tarp for added protection.

She insisted Troy take off his soggy boots and socks right away, resting them close to the blaze to dry them out.

“Fuck!” Troy angled his foot so he could see the damage. His sole was barely recognizable: white, shriveled up, and wrinkled like a raisin from being in the water too long. Way, way too long.

“It could be worse. At least you don’t have any blisters, yet—just keep your fingers crossed it won’t come to that.”

Troy stared at V in disbelief. Was she actually suggesting that *this* was good?

She rummaged through her bag and retrieved a first aid kit and two towels. One towel she placed beneath his feet.

“Keep them clean and dry.” V took hold of one foot and carefully wiped the sole off before resting it in between the valley of her crossed legs. The heat of her hands warmed his skin as she tended to his foot. She did the same with the other one and then opened the first aid kit. V handed Troy some ibuprofen along with his water bottle, and Troy downed the painkillers immediately.

“Why aren’t yours like mine?” A few patches of discoloration were the only sign that she’d walked a long distance in damp boots.

“I grew up in the Dead Zones. My feet can handle a little rain.”

“A little rain?” Troy scoffed.

“Relax!” she chuckled. “Let’s put on a fresh pair of socks and get you into the tent for the night. Your feet will need to

be elevated to prevent swelling.”

“Elevated?” he repeated again, like a mimicking parrot. He had other plans for tonight, and none of them included elevating his feet.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him, “the longer you’re in the Dead Zones, the tougher your skin gets. In more ways than one.”

“How the hell are we supposed to fuck properly if my feet are elevated and out of commission?” he practically growled.

“Shouldn’t your first worry be about walking?” She looked at him like he was short a screw. “We still have tomorrow.”

“We still have tonight,” he reminded her and waggled his eyebrows. “You can climb on me. Might be a little awkward with my feet up in the air, but...”

V chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you tonight.” She leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips.

Troy cuffed her nape before she could pull away. Forehead to forehead, his voice husky with desire, he asked, “You’ll take care of me?”

“Yes.” She met his eyes, her pupils dilating. “I’ll take care of you.”

Troy closed his eyes and made little growly noises while he was breathing—something he never did. No woman had ever offered to take care of his needs before V. “I’d like that, but I don’t want our first time together to be about my feet. I want to dwell on what it feels like being inside of you—to be a part of you.” Troy wanted to connect with V, and not just on a physical level. He liked V. He liked her a lot.

“You’re a dangerous man, Troy—saying things like that.” And she kissed him. Tenderly enough to make his wrinkled toes curl and pinch.

“Ouch! Fucking feet!” he ground out, ending their kiss, and she laughed at his misfortune.

“Let me set up the perimeter, get dinner together, and we’ll see what we can do.”

Troy sighed heavily and released his hold on her, allowing her to get up. He rose to his feet and carefully padded over to the tarp-covered tent. Troy stepped inside, flopped back onto the open sleeping bags, and begrudgingly elevated his feet on his backpack.

TROY HAD V snuggled up against him, her body partially draped over his chest and her knee tucked under his elevated legs. She plucked at his pathetic chest hair.

“It’s too bristly.” She ran her hand down his lightly-haired torso to the line of growth she liked to call the “treasure trail” and closed her fingers around his semi-erect dick. It instantly hardened under her caress.

“Mmm, insta hard,” she whispered, giggling softly against his chest. V released his jutting sex and gently ran her fingers over the back of the shaft.

His penis twitched, eager to find out what she had planned for it. Whatever it was, it was ready and willing.

“You’re toying with me,” Troy grumbled on a frustrated sigh. He was feeling impatient and wanted to take the edge off, or he’d be dealing with aching feet plus blue balls.

Tonight, he’d hoped to crawl up inside of V, but his feet were on fire. She told him it was all part of the healing process.

But even worse, as the night grew colder, it snowed. That would make tomorrow’s trek a lot more difficult—*if* the snow didn’t melt. Troy certainly didn’t want his feet to deteriorate any further, because he was a man with plans. A man on a mission to get some.

Troy shifted up onto his elbows, ready to make his move, when V moved quickly and positioned herself between his legs, settling onto her knees.

“I said I’d take care of you.” With fanned fingers, V forced him to lie back. She braced herself on either side of his hips and stared into his eyes with a mischievous glint. She began to

sink down, her warm breath tickling his dick as it strained eagerly toward her mouth. V's hot, wet tongue swiped across the underside of his crown, and Troy let out a low moan. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, letting the pleasure overtake him as she wrapped her fist around the base of his shaft and sucked its head deep into her welcoming mouth.

With her hands, she began to pump.

Troy's features drew tight as his head moved erratically back and forth. He loved oral sex, but few women had done this in the past. Blow jobs were discouraged because an e-breeder could accidentally shoot his load into a woman's mouth, and viable semen was never to be squandered.

"Yes, suck it," he said in a low, gruff tone, and tangled his fingers in her hair. He was careful to let her explore him as she saw fit. Despite his control, his hips started to thrust, and his hands seemed to have minds of their own, pressing her down to take him deeper.

"That's it!" he growled, unable to contain himself. "Open your throat and swallow me whole."

V hummed around his dick, eliciting another low, throaty moan from him. She opened her mouth wider and swallowed until he was completely consumed by her wet heat.

Trembling, Troy gulped hard and groaned his approval. V enjoyed watching his reactions and hearing him vocalize, so he immersed himself in the sensations she was eliciting. His pleasure was hers.

E-breeders were taught to be keen observers of their partners, and Troy had earned his C5 ranking—the most prestigious standing a male could achieve. He knew how to satisfy a woman. To give her what she needed. Evangeline had chosen him because he'd proven he was a master in the sensual arts, and it had earned him a prestigious placement in her household.

But V didn't need to know his category. Troy never wanted V to look at him with the salacious, contemplative glaze in her

eyes most women got once they discovered what he was. A walking sex toy.

Troy wanted to savor his time with V, simply as lovers, with no ulterior motives.

And on that thought, Troy shut his eyes as his testicles constricted and a jolt of electricity surged down his spine and centered in his balls.

“I’m getting close,” he moaned, eyes glued to V’s head bobbing up and down between his thighs. He tightened his fists in her hair and groaned, “You need to stop, V.” But she drew harder on him, sucking him deeper, and he knew full well that she would not obey. His body shook, and he struggled to keep from coming. To release inside a woman’s mouth was a pleasure forbidden by the Coalition. But Troy had to remind himself he wasn’t in the Coalition anymore.

“I’m going to finish in your mouth!” It was both a warning and a promise now. Troy felt his orgasm growing as he fought his conditioning. He focused on breathing as V pulled on him more deeply, her mouth slippery but firm.

“Look at me,” he commanded as his climax approached. “Watch me come,” Troy shouted, jerking as the first burst of semen spouted from him and shot straight into her mouth. She accepted it and swallowed, her windpipe forming a seal around his dick, which provoked two further jets to pour down her throat.

Troy’s chest rose and fell chaotically as sweat coated his body. He looked down at V as she licked him clean like a cat, trying to keep his focus on her while she ingested all his cum. It was the most sexually charged thing he had ever seen. His head lolled back as his pants combined with the wet, sloppy suction created by her lips on his slick dick, sapped what energy he had left.

As soon as she was finished, V propped her head against his stomach and kissed his skin. “You see, I promised I’d take care of you. And I did.”

Troy wore an ecstatic grin. “Yes, you did, and that was absolutely amazing.” He dipped his chin and clasped her neck, pulling her up to press his lips to hers. After taking a moment to indulge in their kiss, the tang of his essence still on her tongue, Troy whispered against her mouth, “And now you.”

“No way,” she told him. “Tonight, I’ll take care of myself, too.”

It stunned Troy when her hand wandered down between them and fiddled with her clit.

“Are you serious?” This was a woman who, just days before, had insisted that she couldn’t bring herself to orgasm while in the company of a man.

Well, he was a man, and she was stroking herself, chasing her release in his arms. Troy’s chest swelled with male pride. He reached down, and like before, his fingers moved in tandem with hers.

She grabbed her lower lip with her teeth and bit down, eyes shut tight.

V was a reserved lover, but he adored the subtle changes in her breath, the tensing of her body, and the small whimpers that escaped from her lips. Tomorrow night, he’d make her scream his name as she milked him deep within that sweet, performance-anxiety-ridden pussy of hers. He’d use every trick up his sleeve to make her come.

V was evidently very aroused because almost as soon as she began, she suddenly stopped breathing and pressed her face into the side of his neck. Seconds later, she gasped for air, having reached her climax in no time at all.

“Remarkable,” he said in surprise. “That was fast.”

“Blowing you was really hot,” she murmured against his skin. Troy heard the smile in her voice and pulled her fingers against his nose, taking in her scent before closing his eyes and drawing them into his mouth.

“You look so hedonistic when you do that,” she purred, her gaze fixed on his face.

When Troy opened his eyes, he knew he wore a mask of sensuality. He guided her hand down to his burgeoning hardness, grinning when he saw her wide-eyed reaction.

“You’re insatiable,” she uttered in a drowsy voice, but V was done for the night. Troy, on the other hand, rectified his problem using his own hand, finishing himself off for the second time in his adult life.

Well, practice makes perfect, he thought contentedly as he joined V in sleep.

FINALLY

V

AS SOON AS THEY WOKE, V examined Troy's feet. They were recovering nicely. To make sure that he didn't get blisters, they would have to stop and change his socks throughout the day. She wouldn't admit it, but V needed him in optimum condition because tonight she wanted sex.

She was ready for some serious sexual gratification, not just with his tongue or fingers—or her own—but with his girthy penis that was as solid as iron yet as smooth as silk.

Oh yeah, that kind of pleasure. V let out a soft laugh. The last time she'd been this enthusiastic about having sex was when she'd first lost her virginity to Mack, when everything was so new and exciting.

“You're excited about something today?” Troy asked as he fumbled with the laces on his boots.

“One more day of walking, that's all,” V lied. She'd never admit to wanting a man so desperately again. She glanced up at the cloudless sky and sighed in relief. “And not a cloud in sight.”

“I'm glad to hear that, but there's a light layer of snow on the ground. You said snow would slow us down.” He stood up with a stretch and a smile. “So let's go. We've got a destination to reach.”

THE FRESH AROMA of pine and damp earth filled V's nostrils as they passed through the dense wilderness. V and Troy carefully navigated the tall coniferous forest with its thick undergrowth as they made their way forward. Occasionally, they'd come across a decrepit structure that had once been a home, but now was just an assemblage of broken glass, dilapidated boards, and crumbling concrete.

Eventually, the sun broke through the canopy of pine needles, reaching its peak and filling the horizon with a golden glow as they trudged along. V didn't dare ask Troy why he stayed so quiet, maybe because she already knew. Tomorrow would bring an end to their arrangement and a new chapter to his life. Neither of them wanted to talk about it, but the thought hung between them like an invisible wall.

V tried not to let it bother her. Tried not to visualize him being intimate with someone else, doing the things they'd done together and so much more that she hadn't had the chance to experience. But what did she think was going to happen? Why would he want to stay with her when he could have his pick of women? She needed to get her head straight.

By lunchtime, they had covered several miles, leaving their boots and clothes splattered with mud. Despite this, they made good time, only making the occasional stop to attend to Troy's feet.

When they arrived at the rendezvous point, they discovered an antiquated motorcycle concealed under a pile of pine tree branches. Even though the temperature had improved, it would make for a chilly ride. But V was certain that Keith hadn't decided lightly, selecting a bike as their mode of transportation for the last leg of their journey. Motorcycles were more agile than cars, and although they hadn't encountered any Coalition soldiers yet, V feared the worst—that the Governor of Zone 7 hadn't given up on tracking Troy and was still in hot pursuit.

V sighed; her eyebrows knit together as she examined the bike. The Coalition hadn't pursued Shadow so aggressively—but then again, his Keeper didn't have nearly as much clout or influence as Troy's.

“You know, I love me a bike,” V said in a low, appreciative voice, “but it’s a harbinger of bad news, because it means they’re still hunting you. Usually, they stop searching for a runner after a few days, and you’ve been gone for over a week.”

Troy didn’t appear the least surprised by the news; instead, he walked around the motorcycle, his eyes wide with wonder. His hands moved over the sleek metal curves of the body like he was touching a woman. “This... is a motorcycle?” he asked in a hushed, almost reverent tone.

“Stunning, isn’t she? She’s a classic, but she’s been modified. All these babies have Elon2 batteries, so they ride like the wind but purr like a kitten.”

V was at once reminded of how most things would be a novelty for him for some time to come. Not that the Coalition didn’t have motorbikes; it was just that they were vastly different in appearance, far more aerodynamic, and the riders were enclosed within a protective dome.

V thought back to when Mack passed away from cancer. Rebuilding her life had been hard enough, but she hadn’t had to relinquish everything she’d ever known or face life alone. She always had the Landing, and Keith, both ever-present rocks in her life. Especially after her mother had moved north to be with Earl, and V was left to her own devices. Still, V couldn’t imagine having to desert everything and everyone she’d ever known, and confront the world all by herself. Alone.

“What will happen if they don’t stop searching for me?” Troy met her gaze.

“You might have to move on temporarily, away from the Landing, at least until you’re not such a hot commodity. The Network has safe houses, even in the Dead Zones. We can get you settled into one of those and keep you off the Coalition’s grid until they forget about you.”

Troy ran a tired hand over his face. “Alone?”

She tweaked a sad smile. “Don’t worry, you won’t be alone. If it comes to that, someone will accompany you and teach you how to survive. You’re one of us now.” V examined Troy for a few moments. “You seem upset.”

Troy shifted his gaze downward. “Someone, but not you.”

“No, not likely.” V’s cheeks heated as she shook her head in the negative. She’d love to be the one, but it wasn’t likely. “I’m not even supposed to be back at the Landing, remember? Keith will assign someone else to you.” V didn’t doubt for a minute that women would line up to be Troy’s guide. *Stuck in a safe house with a virile male. All by yourself, only God knows for how long.* The thought made V’s mouth sour, but outside of their arrangement, Troy wasn’t hers. V took his hand and gave it a tender squeeze. “Believe me when I say everything’s going to be okay.”

AS NIGHT FELL, V and Troy ate their dinner together in relative silence. After that, V attended to Troy’s feet, which weren’t much worse for wear, despite the day’s long journey.

They both settled into their sleeping bag, entwined in each other’s arms, skin to skin. Together they watched the fabric of the tent ceiling move with the breeze while they shared the intimate moment exchanging tender touches. Beyond the tent walls, the embers of the dying fire crackled, and somewhere, an owl hooted in the night.

A feeling of melancholy had settled between them. Did the heaviness that now weighed in the air mean she’d lost her chance to sleep with Troy? What if he was having second thoughts and no longer wanted her?

He rolled onto his side and looked into her eyes. The corners of his mouth lifted as he shifted closer, gently running the tip of his nose along the curve of hers.

V’s heart raced with anticipation at his tender touch. At that moment, she knew she was in deep trouble. V closed her eyes, choking up to the point of tears.

Along the way, she'd developed feelings for the e-breeder. The last time she'd felt anything remotely close to love was with Mack—and he'd taken her heart and smashed it into a million pieces.

“Did you think I forgot about you?” His voice was low, full of mischievous promise. V opened her eyelids, and her lashes were damp with tears, which she hastily brushed away.

“Hey.” His eyes skimmed over her face with concern. “What’s the matter?”

V shifted away from him, but Troy grabbed her firmly by the back of her neck, and his dominance rose. The duality of his nature made her uneasy. Most e-breeders were passive thanks to their upbringing, which made Troy a rarity. It was something to keep in mind and be wary of for the future.

But tonight wasn't about the future, V reminded herself. It was only about the here and the now.

“No sadness allowed tonight,” he whispered, searching her eyes.

Somewhere among her scattered thoughts, V recalled something about a safe word: “pineapple.” She started to say it, desperate to protect her heart, but his mouth closed over hers, silencing her with nimble kisses.

Before she could think, V was beneath him, and Troy was between her legs. He drew back onto his haunches and spread her knees wide until she was completely exposed.

V was unkempt there and grew self-conscious. She tried to squeeze her legs together, but Troy caught her by one knee, forcing her wide.

Then, easing his pelvis into the apex of her sex, his hard length slipped between her slick folds while he reached up and palmed her breast. He toyed with her core but didn't penetrate her.

Still, Troy's touch was possessive. One hand cupped her exposed neck, stroking down until it joined the other one at her breast, fingers molding the malleable flesh as if to claim each as his own. But with every rough touch, every brush of

his thumb over her tight nipples, a piercing wave of pleasure surged straight to V's clit.

Troy's expression was fierce, his face lost in a sensual haze. "Watch us," he murmured as he stared down between them, resting his palms on either side of her rib cage.

He lowered his head and nipped at the curve of her breast, then rubbed his stubbled chin in a comforting circle over the sensitive spot. V glanced down between them to see the broad head of his penis dragging over her swollen clit, passing over it repeatedly. With each stroke, an indescribable pleasure rose from deep within her center, as if she were touching the tingling nub herself.

How easily he played her body when no other man ever had. It was almost laughable. Almost. If it wasn't so terrifying.

Troy ducked his head and sipped at her mouth, coaxing, playing. Rocking into her the whole time. He kept his eyes closed, even as his arms snaked under her shoulders, pulling them closer, drawing them body to body. Skin to skin.

He pressed his face against the side of her neck, letting out a low growl of pleasure. Soon enough, they were moving in tandem—shifting and pushing against one another until V forgot about having sex entirely. She just wanted to get closer to Troy, to crawl into him, straining against him as they sought to climax together.

But as the heat built between their rocking bodies and V's sex swelled and bloomed for him, she knew it would take nothing for him to dip into her slick, welcoming pussy. She was so wet and ready for him. "I want you inside me."

And he obliged, nodding his head and groaning.

V was unprepared for the painful pleasure. At first, she winced and whimpered at the pinching invasion, and then relished it, as he filled her inch by slow inch, stretching her to the point of pain. Chest heaving, her body tentatively opened for his, unused to an onslaught of such magnitude.

"You feel so fucking good." He rubbed his face along the arch of her throat.

“Yes,” V croaked out loud, he did. “So very good.” So large and satisfying. She clawed at his shoulders with her dull fingernails. She was desperate for him, her whole body tightly strung, alive and on fire for more. Now, V ruefully thought, she knew what it was like to be impaled by a man.

Absolutely incredible. V threw her head back and sighed.

Troy drew her down farther beneath him, lowering his weight on top of her, he made love to her in a position as old as time. V wrapped her legs around his hips, and he forged into her with a newfound vigor that left them both gasping. Beneath him, V squirmed, fighting the familiarity of the position that had failed her for years—wanting something more. Wanting something different.

Troy slowed. “Easy, I’ve got you. Trust me,” he assured her. “Watch me.” He took her hand and used it to cup his cheek. Again, he kept his eyes closed and his expression flittered to various degrees of sensuality—from soft yearning to intense focus to stark desire.

“I’m going to come,” he announced on a guttural note, and V absorbed every sweet nuance on his face, savoring every jerk and contraction of his back muscles with her exploring hand. She reached down and grabbed his ass, curling her fingers into the taut flesh, feeling him ride her harder. His thrusts grew erratic until he plunged balls deep and froze, shooting his essence into her, filling her to her core. Troy cried out as he came.

“No!” she yelped in frustration because he had finished, and she still hadn’t climaxed. She was greedy to come and could hardly believe he’d failed her too. V shoved angrily at his shoulders, but he wasn’t having it. He took her arms and forcibly locked them above her head. Just as quickly, he pulled out and shifted, straddling the outsides of her thighs. From there, he reentered her in a downward thrust, and she gasped at the awkward invasion.

“Shh,” he cooed. “So impatient. Don’t you trust me?”

At this new angle, the length of his still-hard shaft glided over her clit, adding just the perfect amount of friction to the

swollen nub, and V quieted. A sudden warmth flooded through her limbs as Troy rocked back and forth with an unflagging intensity. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she wondered how was this even possible. Shouldn't he be going soft?

“Remember what I am,” he whispered against her ear as if he'd read her mind.

V's worries slipped away as her hips moved with his in perfect rhythm, and soon she was panting and desire had her clawing at his shoulders. Her orgasm was building up within her like a tidal wave getting ready to hit its peak.

And then it did.

In a few short pumps, V constricted around him, and she came on his dick, crying out as wave after wave of pleasure wracked her body.

“Shit, you're so tight!” Troy howled and followed shortly afterward, holding V tight against him as he pulsed inside of her a second time. Then collapsed beside her.

V lay there next to him for a few moments before she could utter a word, still reeling from the intense orgasm.

“That... was amazing,” she finally spoke, breaking the silence. Sublimely content, and yet so utterly destroyed. Troy had just given her the best sex of her life. Where did a female go from here? *I'm ruined*, she thought. No one else would ever measure up. He had taken ownership of her body and played it like an expert musician.

Troy smiled at her warmly. “It sure was.” He drew her closer so that their bodies were touching from head to toe. “I think we should do it again.”

They made love one more time during the night, and Troy worked her body tirelessly, so thoroughly, that she experienced two orgasms back to back. After the second time, tears rolled down V's cheeks. She was so shaken, but she would survive this. Survive him.

In a few more months, Troy would most likely go north, so V wouldn't have to see him around the compound. Maybe in

time, she'd get to resume her role as an agent, return to the Coalition, and stay there.

No wonder Evangeline was searching the Dead Zones like a madwoman. If V was free to be with Troy, she'd do the same. Scour the ends of the Earth.

Finally, listening to his steady breathing against her ear, she fell into a deep, sex-induced sleep, the thought of what tomorrow would bring pushed far to the back of her mind.

IT'S A MATTER OF TRUST

V

V HAD BEEN CARELESS, allowing herself to get so lost in sex she'd forgotten to keep an eye out. Now here she was, facing off with Becky Grimes. Both pointed their respective weapons at each other while Troy slumbered at V's back.

As soon as V awoke to movement outside their tent, she grabbed her rifle. With lightning-fast reflexes, she had the safety off and the barrel pointed directly at Becks when she opened the flap. The frigid morning air seeped into the tent, leaving V and Troy vulnerable to the elements and the end of Becks's double-barreled shotgun. V's fingers trembled as her knuckles turned white from gripping her rifle so tightly, while her blood boiled with rage.

It was a bitter way to wake up.

Out of all the agents Keith could have sent, it had to be Becky. She was Keith's second-in-command, but V and Becks had history. One, she'd slept with Mack. And two, she'd slept with Mack.

Dressed in her signature sweeper coat and Western hat, Becks gazed down at them, looking like a cat that had gotten into the cream. She practically licked her chops.

"Well, lookie here... somebody's been having fun. Double-dipping, are we, V?" Becks glanced over Troy's naked form and eyed the sex-crumpled sleeping bags beneath them before turning her gaze back to V, gun still in hand.

Troy grumbled and stirred from his sleep. V peeked over her shoulder as he turned onto his side, and realizing they had company, raised both his hands. His hair was an unruly mess, and his cheek was creased from lying on his face.

V reached back to push his hands down. Her eyes never wavered from Becks while she whispered to Troy, “Relax.”

Then V snarled, “Lower your gun, Becks. You’ve made your point, I could just as easily end you if I wanted to.”

Becks slowly reengaged the safety feature on her weapon and settled it into her thigh holster. “Ah, sweetheart, I wish Keith would have come along for this pickup.”

“Would you please take a step back and allow us some space?” V said, lowering her own weapon.

Becks gave a gesture of mock surrender. “As you wish, my lady.” She stepped back and bowed. It was annoying as all hell, but that was Becks.

Troy promptly shifted onto his backside and snatched his clothes up from the floor of the tent. He hurriedly put on his underwear, then stood, not appearing to mind at all that Becks eyed him like a piece of prime meat. She whistled her appreciation.

V didn’t like the way Becks leered at him, or that Troy seemed perfectly fine with it, even though she knew it was because of his upbringing. Who’d ever heard of a shy e-breeder?

V slipped into her top and pants and stood facing Becks, her hackles raised. “Cover up, Troy!” she barked at him over her shoulder.

Becks tilted her head, still eyeing Troy past V, and must have glimpsed the R branded on his lower back. She tried to step around V, reaching out to touch it. Without thinking, V growled at her and shielded him from Becks’s outstretched hand, baring her teeth.

“Possessive much? Not a good sign, V,” Becks said, stopping mid-step.

“You don’t get to touch him just because you feel like it,” V hissed in response.

“Seems like *you* did.” Becks’s nostrils flared. “What would Keith think about all this? You two reek of sex.”

“Keith and I are none of your business.” V narrowed her eyes at the irritating woman. “And whatever happened between Troy and me is none of your business either.”

“Keith?” Troy muttered behind V’s back. She glanced over her shoulder as he yanked down the hem of his shirt. “Why’s she bringing up Keith?”

Becks laughed.

“Didn’t V tell you about Keith, sweetheart? She must have really wanted to get in your pants if she kept that juicy tidbit from you—and hey, what a way to kick off your new life with us! Fucking the Captain’s girl. That’ll show ’em.”

“Becks!” V shouted to stop her from speaking, but she was too late. Becks had already twisted the truth about her relationship with Keith. She whirled around to face Troy, who paled in an instant. He yanked his bag out of their tent and stomped off, his bare feet barely touching the frigid earth as he stormed toward the nearby stream.

“You’re such a bitch!” V sneered at Becks while she scrambled to get her boots on and snagged his.

Hot on Troy’s heels, V caught up to him along the stream’s pebbled shoreline. “Troy, it’s not true,” she lamented breathlessly. “And you need to put on your boots.”

Troy spun on his heel, his face a maelstrom of rage. “Are you his woman?” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“No! We’re—we’re just friends. Friends with benefits. Sometimes we sleep together.” V confessed, heat radiating off her face like a furnace. “But it means nothing.”

“You mean like what we’re doing?” He searched her eyes. Her lips moved soundlessly. No, it wasn’t the same, but she could never admit to that, not without exposing her heart.

Troy gave her his profile and stared over the water. V watched his Adam's apple bob. "I thought maybe there was something a little more going on between us. For once, I hoped it could be more than just sex. That maybe you could be mine. Maybe we could be each other's."

V's heart dropped when she saw the hurt on his face, and for a moment, she was struck speechless. She could never be his, but she needed him to know she hadn't been unfaithful. That she wouldn't purposefully commit such a betrayal against anyone. Not after she'd been on the receiving end herself.

V didn't cheat.

"I'm not his girlfriend. But Keith wants more, that's all. Sometimes he forgets our arrangement." Troy's brow creased. Ah, jeez, she was fucking this up.

"Like I'm forgetting ours?" Troy knelt by the stream and doused his face with frigid water.

"Yes," V answered, whisper thin.

Troy's shoulders drooped as he brushed a hand down his face. Then he bolted upright, hurt quickly giving way to rage.

"Damn it! You should have warned me. How am I supposed to know what kind of hell this guy will rain down on me?"

V preferred angry Troy. Then she didn't have to contend with the hurt in his eyes.

"*You* wanted this arrangement—no past, no future—just our bodies to satisfy each other's desires!" she reminded him.

"Fair enough," he retaliated, locking his eyes with hers. "But wouldn't you say omitting this bit of information could significantly affect my future at Freedom's Landing?"

V couldn't deny it. Troy was right, she'd been thoughtless. V tried to put a hand on his shoulder, but that was a mistake. The moment she touched him, Troy jerked away.

"Skin privileges revoked," he hissed through clenched teeth, snatching his boots from her grasp and stalking hastily back toward the camp. Still barefoot.

It was silly, but the withdrawal of “privileges” stung V’s pride.

“It’s tough to be with somebody when you’re an undercover agent,” she called after Troy, stupidly trailing after him like a lost puppy. “Remember, I never intended to come back to the compound. I wasn’t even supposed to be your navigator!” She stopped in place, but he continued to storm ahead, ignoring her every step of the way. She yelled after him, “So, no, I’m not his girl, but what he tells other people in my absence is out of my control. And by the way, welcome to the rumor mill. You’ve just been introduced to small-town mentality!”

When V stomped past Becks at the campsite, Becks’s eyes trailed her with a smug expression on her face.

“Aww,” she said. “Lovers’ first tiff?”

V stopped in her tracks and spun around. “If you’re so in love with Keith, why don’t you go after him yourself? Oh yeah, you couldn’t do that. He probably wants nothing to do with a woman like you. Seeing how it’s hard to think of someone you haven’t slept with.”

“Shut up, V. At least Mack wanted to screw this bitch.” Becks swiped a hand down the length of her tall body. “Not a cold fish like you.”

V unleashed a torrent of rage as she charged at Becks, her fingers curling, searching for something to claw into. She prepared to deliver a blow that would knock Becks off her feet when an iron grip snaked around her waist, immobilizing her and pulling her tight against a wall of steel.

Troy.

He marched her effortlessly toward their tent.

“Let me go!” V screamed and wriggled frantically, but Troy’s grip was too strong. When he finally placed her back onto her feet a safe distance away from Becks, she crumpled to her knees.

“I hate her,” V fumed. She glared up at Troy. “And I don’t care how mad you are. You’re still riding with me.” Troy

could've refused, but thankfully, he nodded in agreement. She guessed he didn't want to ride bitch at Becky's back either.

"She's an antagonist. Someone who likes to provoke you. I know the type." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Yes," V murmured reluctantly, but hope bloomed in her chest. At least he was talking to her. "Troy, please let me explain about Keith."

Troy remained still as a mountain, his face unreadable and eyes focused ahead like he had at the stream. "I'm listening," he said in a voice chillier than the wintry morning air.

V leaped to her feet, grasping the opportunity. She locked eyes with him and her heart sank as she saw the scorn in his face.

"Ever since Mack passed away, Keith and I sometimes got together."

"You mean you fuck," Troy snapped, his eyes narrowed and piercing. His jaw twitched as he looked away.

V was on the brink of erupting. She had a temper and, at this moment, wanted to tell Troy to go to hell. How dare he judge her for sleeping with one man when he was an e-breeder? Who knew how many women Troy had fucked over the years? But V kept quiet. He wasn't afforded the same privilege as her, which made them unequal. Nonetheless, Troy chose to sleep with her, and his presence in her bed had rocked her world.

"Yes, we had sex," V reiterated sharply. "It was meant to stay casual, but he seems to expect something more, while I don't. I thought we'd agreed on that, but..."

Troy stayed silent for a few moments. He zipped and rolled up his sleeping bag and attached it to his backpack. Then he stood up and spoke words that broke V's heart.

"I believed in you," he murmured, his eyes full of anguish. "And look at where that got me." His shoulders slumped. "I should have known better than to trust a woman."

V silently gasped at his words, struck dumb. He might as well have punched her in the gut. She turned on her heel and walked away.

FREEDOM'S LANDING

TROY

WHEN V RETURNED from prepping the bike for their ride, Troy helped her pull the rest of the site together. As they worked, the forest was silent around them, save for the occasional rustle of branches or snap of a twig. They worked quickly, systematically dismantling their campsite. Becks tended to her own gear and kept her distance.

Although he was still angry and hurt, Troy appreciated the way V taught him. She was always patient and encouraging, never once doubting his ability to pick up and apply new skills. Troy didn't like being useless and took pride in doing things well. He liked to excel. It was why he had worked so hard to achieve C5 Elite Breeder status.

The campsite was relatively quiet despite the bad blood between the two women. Troy surreptitiously watched V, but her guarded expression was unreadable.

He felt hollow inside.

She'd been his rock, his sense of direction, and now he was adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Could it really be that she was only with him out of convenience? He refused to believe it. The way she tended to him, squeezed his hand when he needed reassurance. How they held each other close in the night. The way she watched him when she thought he wasn't looking. It wasn't just out of convenience. Troy scowled, frustration roiling through him because he was powerless to do

anything about it. They had an agreement, and that was where it ended.

Earlier, when she walked away, his mind and heart had raced in turmoil. He wanted to run after her, tell her how sorry he was for what he'd said. Yet he didn't move, his feet as heavy as lead. Instead, as she faded from view, all the emotions and frustrations within him bubbled over until they escaped in a roar of anger.

“Fuck it all to hell!” He gave his backpack a vicious kick, only for it to lift and tumble pathetically across the ground. He spun around, feeling trapped and completely alone. His eyes darted skyward. How could he fix this?

“Pretending it's her head?” Becks threw in the glib remark. Troy turned around to face the other woman, his animosity palpable. But his withering stare was enough to render her speechless, and she quickly shifted her focus back to organizing her things and making herself appear busy.

Troy was fed up with being a convenience. He didn't want to be an expendable toy, taken advantage of and used. He wanted V to acknowledge his value, to appreciate his unique skill set, and to recognize his worth.

Memories of when he pushed V beyond the boundaries of pleasure filled his mind; how she trembled in ecstasy as he drove her wild. He wanted to be the only man to break through her barriers and take her beyond the ordinary. He wanted his quiet lover to cry out his name in rapture. With a fierce determination, Troy wanted V to belong to him and only him.

“Well, I think we're almost ready to go,” V said as she surveyed the campsite. She'd walked the motorcycle over to their equipment. “Why is your backpack there?” She arched a curious brow at his bag lying off to the side.

“No reason!” Troy replied harshly, though his snappishness didn't faze V. She just shrugged, took hold of her bag, and returned to the bike.

“The e-breeder can come with me,” Becks stated offhandedly, smirking.

V froze in place, giving the other woman an icy stare.

“Troy is riding with me,” she said as she tossed her bag into the sidecar. V waved him over and secured his belongings in place next to hers.

She settled onto the motorcycle and flicked her chin over her shoulder toward the back. Taking the hint, Troy straddled the seat behind her, and she laid a possessive hand on his thigh. With the stone set of V’s features and her fingers curling into his thigh, there could be no doubt about her feelings, but her actions left him puzzled. He couldn’t figure out where their relationship stood.

Becks arched a brow. “I know you want to have your cake and eat it too, but it makes more sense if he comes with me.”

“I’ve rigged the sidecar. If I need to kick it off in a hurry, I will. So Troy stays with me,” V countered hotly.

“And waste all those supplies? Keith is going to be pissed. Oh yeah, but Keith is going to be pissed anyway. Once he gets a whiff of the two of you.” Becks grinned wickedly.

“Don’t threaten me,” V snarled. “If you’re so worried about the supplies, let’s switch up, and then they can be your problem. And regarding Troy, go fuck yourself. He stays with me.”

Troy quietly enjoyed the exchange. V’s possessiveness helped to soothe his frazzled nerves.

“Ouch, V. You know he’s my responsibility to start with. I’m supposed to be his navigator, not you. I waited three days for his fine ass to show up here before I headed back to the compound, only to hear that the shit had hit the fan.”

“Shut up, Becks. And his name is Troy. He’s a person, not a thing. Are we switching up or what?”

Becks worked her mouth. “No!” Conceding defeat, she shoved the helmet onto her head.

“Then piss off and move it.” V glanced over her shoulder at Troy. “Remember how I told you to put on the helmet?”

“Yup.” Troy put it on and tightened the straps.

“All good?” V asked. Troy nodded and gave her a thumbs-up before she put on her helmet. Her beautiful, long brown hair hung loosely in waves down her back. In her haste this morning, she must have forgotten to tie it up. She grabbed his gloved hands and pulled them around her middle.

“Hold on tight!” She kicked the starter on the bike. The engine hummed to life, and they lurched forward. Troy’s stomach twisted and turned as they bounced over the rocky terrain. As soon as they hit the paved path, V let out a little holler and twisted the accelerator. The wind whipped through her hair, and a thrill of excitement rolled over Troy as they sped down the highway.

“Fucking fantastic,” he murmured in his helmet. *Add learning how to ride a motorcycle to my checklist.* Troy adjusted himself until he was situated securely behind V’s smaller frame. She had surprising strength in her tight muscles hidden beneath those curves. They flexed and relaxed as she handled the bike with precision and ease.

For the rest of their journey, they drove up abandoned highways, winding around the rusted ruins of cars and trucks. The sky was darkening as they headed farther north, so they stopped to add layers against the winter chill. Troy blew warm air onto his fingertips but found no relief from the cold.

When he climbed back onto the bike and nestled against V, she told him over her shoulder, “Put your hands in my pockets.”

Troy slipped his hands into her pockets as she started the engine. The warmth of her body seeped into him, making him feel safe and secure.

She felt so right.

Troy gave her a quick hug and V softened against him before kickstarting the motorcycle. They continued to drive, only their engines cutting through the unnatural quiet of the abandoned roadways.

IT WAS STILL daylight when the landscape showed signs of life. Maintained fences, grazing cows, and other various livestock populated the fields they passed. Troy thought he caught glimpses of people through the occasional gaps in the trees. Finally, they turned right and drove up a gravel roadway, ending at a big house with a barn and a few smaller structures. Troy had only ever seen an actual barn in textbooks.

V stopped the bike in front of the two-story building, holding on to the handlebars as she kicked back the stand. She slid off the seat, set her helmet on the battery tank, and cast an eye at him over her shoulder. Her lips curled in a mischievous half smile as she said, “Welcome to Freedom’s Landing. Home sweet home.”

Troy shifted his weight and slipped off the motorcycle, unsteady on his feet from hours in the saddle. His butt felt like a lump of lead, and he couldn’t believe how incredibly numb it was.

Becks rolled up on her bike, shut off the engine, and hopped off.

A small crowd emerged from the shadows. Soon they were surrounded by a group of curious onlookers. Several people came to greet V, welcoming her back. They asked what kinds of supplies she’d brought as she handed her backpack off to a man who approached her like a friend and equal.

Men and women of all ages, sizes, and shapes mingled freely, and conversations and laughter abounded. Troy took it all in, acutely aware of the lack of sexual tension or showy displays of dominance—gone was any sense of hierarchy between the sexes. Couples laughed and flirted; a man had his arm draped freely over a woman’s shoulder as they talked, and another held a woman close against his body and whispered something into her ear that made her chuckle.

As V pulled some of their gear off the motorcycle, a group of younger women approached to offer their help. Every time they glanced in Troy’s direction, they blushed and giggled.

V laughed out loud and waved at Troy. “Ladies, meet Troy.”

They exploded into squeals and then introduced themselves to him all at once.

“Hey there,” he said with a smirk. His usual experience with women was like a game—they sized him up and made bets on who could bed him first—but this was different. A strange, innocent kind of shyness overcame him. “Nice to meet you.” That set them off on another blushing titter.

The crowd of people surged around them. Kids darted between the adults, running and laughing with each other, oblivious to the new arrival.

Troy stared at the children. Of course, he’d seen children in the facilities before, but all of them had been male. Logically, he even knew some of them could be his. But those children were strictly controlled and monitored—unlike here. These children raced around joyfully, free to associate with whomever they chose, and gender wasn’t a barrier.

The crowd parted to make way for a hulking figure, his face stern and determined. In his wake followed a formidable group of men and women, each one looking more menacing than the last. All wore expressions of absolute determination, as though they had descended onto this spot with one goal in mind.

And that goal was V.

The male strode purposefully toward her, the intensity of his gaze exposing the powerful connection between them. This man had to be Keith. Contrary to Troy’s expectations, the Captain was overwhelmingly handsome and sturdy, with an air of confidence that commanded respect. When V saw Keith, her face lit up, and she rushed toward him, ready to be embraced in his brawny arms. The Captain hugged her tightly, lifting her until her feet were dangling off the ground, a gesture that made Troy’s stomach clench.

“Hey, Keith.” V smiled up at him once he settled her back onto her feet. She was happy to see him, if a little demure about it.

“It’s so nice to see you,” he said, dabbing a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m so glad you arrived safely.”

She slapped at his chest. “You could have given me some forewarning. That would have helped a bit.”

Keith chuckled, looping his arm around V’s shoulder, claiming her as his own. “Where’s the fun in that?” he asked, giving her a slight pull to draw her even closer. “Now,” he said authoritatively, “introduce me to our new arrival.”

Becks, standing nearby, audibly exhaled, but remained silent.

V’s face flushed as she gestured toward Troy. “This is our newest member, Troy.”

Keith offered Troy his hand in a friendly handshake. His smile was massive and created two indents in his cheeks. Dimples.

“Welcome to Freedom’s Landing, Troy. Of course we know who you are. We’ve been expecting you.”

Troy found it hard to hold the other male’s gaze, feeling like a dirty dog who’d been fucking his woman. Just like Becks had said. But he manned up, stuck out his hand, and met Keith eye to eye. The other male’s eyes wrinkled warmly at the corners as he took Troy’s hand and shook it—heartily—in greeting.

Shaking hands was an outdated custom in the Coalition, but it apparently was still alive and well in the Dead Zones. Troy realized he’d have to work on his shake. He was accustomed to greeting others with only a brisk nod of his head.

“Thank you for taking me in.”

Troy couldn’t help but survey Keith’s good looks. He guessed him to be somewhere in his early thirties and wasn’t sure if he was virile or not—V never said, though women would certainly find him irresistible regardless. His body had a stocky yet muscular build, and he was tall—at least six feet in height—with pleasant masculine features and a warm smile. Troy could think of only one thing: competition.

Troy had to admire the self-assurance the male standing in front of him exuded as he graciously welcomed him into his community. But the woman tucked under his shoulder had still chosen to be intimate with Troy. And had enjoyed it immensely.

“Becks,” Keith acknowledged his second with an enthusiastic pat on the shoulder and an even bigger smile. Troy expected some trouble from Becks and was mentally bracing for the worst, imagining her spilling that she’d caught them postcoital in the tent. But to his surprise, Beck’s demeanor changed when faced with Keith: she was much more restrained and tactful. Troy knew Becks would eventually tell her boss, but here, in public, it was clear she held him in the highest regard.

“All right, let’s get you sorted and settled into a room.” Keith looked down at V, still tucked under his arm. “We’ll catch up later, okay?” Troy couldn’t deny the tenderness in Keith’s voice when he spoke to V, and his gut twisted. The truth hit him like a slap in the face—he was jealous.

Keith motioned for Troy to follow him, and they walked toward the main house, leaving V behind. Keith proudly spread his arms in a wide circle. “This area is called the Farmstead—it’s not very imaginative, I know,” he said with an easy chuckle. “But it makes navigating around the Landing easier. A couple of us stay here on rotation to make sure everything is as it should be. Everyone else lives by the lake at the Lodge.”

Keith pointed toward a small four-seater vehicle. He settled into the driver’s seat, then patted the seat next to him. Troy sat down and placed his backpack between his feet.

He was off to his new home. To start a new life.

But it felt strange leaving V behind without knowing if he would ever see her again—when he missed her already.

NEW BEGINNINGS

TROY

TROY STARED at the unfamiliar dashboard, trying to make sense of it. The open-air vehicle didn't have a single digital component, and where there should have been an instrument panel, there was a series of storage compartments instead.

"It's an old-world golf cart," Keith piped up from the driver's seat. "Damn things last forever—with the proper care." He shifted a stick, and the cart lurched forward. "So, how was the trip up?"

"It was pretty uneventful," Troy lied. Tilting his head sideways, he looked up and took in the vast web of camouflaged netting strung in between the trees. He felt the Captain's eyes on him.

"The netting covers most of the Landing. Cloaks the property against Coalition drones," Keith explained. "So far, it's worked. We don't get too much buzzing up this way. You know, there were a lot of search parties scouring the border looking for you. Initially, they were focused farther west, but they must have finally clued in that you weren't heading in that direction." Keith's mouth set into a firm line. "Now they're slowly bleeding deeper into the Dead Zones."

Troy kept his eyes fixed forward, scanning the woodlands. Tall trees stood like sentinels, guarding the uneven gravel roadway. What Keith was saying wasn't good news, although V had suspected as much already.

As they drove, Keith shared how the Landing operated. “We all work the land. If we can’t grow it or make it, we scavenge for it. And if we can’t find it, we take it through more calculated means. We rely on residents like V to bring us medical supplies and other items. And there are always the smugglers, but we use them mostly for fuel.” The vehicle jolted as it drove over a hole in the road, and they swayed with its momentum.

“These days, we don’t scavenge near the borders anymore,” Keith said. “Coalition patrols have caught a few of our teams. They always seize the men and leave the women behind.”

“I heard about those retrievals on the newsfeeds,” Troy responded. “But then there was too much backlash, so they stopped reporting them. Women wanted an explanation of how men were surviving in the wilderness without medical intervention.”

Keith sized up Troy with a hard look. “It’s the law of nature out here. Only the strongest survive. In the past, we had an awful lot of newborns who didn’t make it, but as time went on, more and more of us pulled through.” He flashed a brilliant smile. “And it’s better if the Coalition forgets about us. You’ll be lucky if the Governor forgets about you.”

Troy noted the muscle that flexed in Keith’s jaw, and the cautionary note in his voice.

“We know all about you,” Keith said, watching the roadway. “A Class 5 Elite Breeder. You’re the first of your caliber around here. Frankie, our tech specialist, collects all the data on any runners before we offer them shelter. We have to make sure they’re not spies. Plus, Marcy has a knack for assessing people.”

“Is Marcy okay?”

“As far as our intel tells us,” Keith replied. “We’re waiting for her to check in.”

“Is she late? Checking in?”

“No, she made contact soon after you ran. They questioned her but didn’t appear to suspect anything.”

Troy exhaled quietly. “That’s a relief. She was kind to me.” His eyebrows drew together. “Is it a problem that I’m here?” Troy wanted to be offered shelter, but not at the risk of hundreds of people’s lives.

Keith worked his mouth, his eyes focusing straight ahead. “We don’t know yet.”

They’d been driving around ten minutes when a building came into view. It was old, overgrown with vines, and remnants of white paint were peeling off its wood paneling, making it appear as derelict as any other building in the Dead Zones. They embedded the foundation of the building into the side of a steep escarpment, which dropped about two stories to a lake. The original building must have been beautiful in its time.

“We leave everything untouched on the outside, so the buildings don’t look inhabited,” Keith spoke as if he were privy to Troy’s thoughts.

They got out of the cart when they reached a short overpass that led to two double doors sheltered beneath a balcony. Keith shared that the property was first established by the Hudson’s Bay Company during the fur trade, and then had later served as a lodge for local holidaymakers. It made the perfect compound—it had single, double, and family housing units; a large kitchen equipped with all necessary amenities; plus, a separate building used for social events and dances, to keep morale high during the winter months.

The inside of the building seemed even larger than it appeared from the outside. The walls and floors were lined with pinewood planks, and long beams spanned the ceiling above them. Several people milled about, and they all turned to stare at Troy as he stepped inside. He drew in a deep breath and then let it out slowly to calm his nerves.

“I apologize for the fanfare,” Keith said to Troy. “We rarely get e-breeders. The ladies are curious, and the men have arrived to check out their newest competition.”

Keith referred to the interior of the Lodge as “cottage antique chic.” In the first room, off to the side, a welcoming fire burned in a stone hearth. A couple of tables with seating and a few wingback chairs surrounded it. Hard copies of books; relics of the past, lined the shelves, along with assorted colorful boxes, which Keith explained were board games. Whatever board games were, they appeared to be worn and well-loved.

A big male pushed his way through the crowd and headed straight for them.

“Troy, this is Shadow.” Keith gestured toward the male. “He’ll be your roommate until a singles unit opens up.”

Troy sized up his new roommate. V had mentioned this male—a fellow e-breeder. Shadow was maybe two inches shorter than Troy. He was younger and appeared to be of mixed heritage. Half Black, half Caucasian—if Troy were to guess. He was shaved bald, with a grumpy disposition and a body as sleek as a panther: muscular and powerful, with a fluid gait.

Shadow offered his hand in greeting. Troy took it and was met by an extremely firm handshake.

“Nice to meet you, but you’re going to have to work on your shake,” Shadow told him bluntly, in a deep, gravelly voice. Troy nodded, a little taken aback, wondering what he’d been communicating with his flimsy grip. He hadn’t wanted to appear too aggressive but may have inadvertently conveyed the opposite.

“Singles accommodations are limited at the Lodge, so it’ll be a wait if you were expecting one. I hope you understand,” Keith said, sounding genuinely regretful about the situation.

“I’m just grateful to have a place.”

Keith nodded approvingly. “Shadow is from Toronto City Central and just joined us a few months back.” Keith patted Shadow on the shoulder. Either Keith wasn’t great at reading people’s body language, or he just didn’t care, because judging

by the way Shadow flinched at the contact, it was obvious he didn't like to be touched.

Another male approached Keith and momentarily distracted him with some Landing business. In the meantime, Troy saw V enter the lobby. She stopped to talk to a group of ladies who seemed delighted to see her, but their eyes kept darting toward him. When she caught Troy looking, he gave her a small wave. V smiled demurely in response, and the women around her let out a few giggles.

It astounded Troy how V could move between two vastly different worlds without skipping a beat. Even though Troy knew she wasn't happy about her current situation, coming back to the Landing, she smiled through it all.

"Shadow will take over from here," Keith told Troy reassuringly. "It'll take some time for you to adjust, but I'm sure you'll do fine. Now, if you'll pardon me." And just like that, the Captain excused himself and inched his way out of the reception area.

"That woman has got him wrapped around her finger." Shadow gestured vaguely with his thumb over his shoulder.

Sure enough, Troy could see Keith drawing closer to V.

"Like a moth to a flame." Shadow glanced at Troy, narrowed his eyes, and sighed. "Grab your things and I'll show you to our unit. You'll be in the back room because first come, first served, but I'll leave the connecting door open, to be fair. How was your trip?"

"Good." Troy looked back toward V. She was so engrossed in her conversation with Keith that she didn't notice he was leaving; the two of them were talking amicably, then chuckling about something. Troy scowled. When he turned his attention back to Shadow, the male was staring at him.

"Bad way to start here, my man, chasing after the Captain's woman." They passed through a group of young females, all keenly checking them out, greeting Shadow as sweet as honey and welcoming Troy. "You've got lots of choice here if you need it, so I'd stop mooning over that one. I

don't understand it; does she have a magical vagina or something?"

Troy smirked at Shadow's remark. He guessed in some ways V did have a magic vagina, because it had certainly cast a spell over him.

Moments later, they were outside again, walking down some stairs and moving toward a two-story building Shadow called the "suites." Then, after unlocking a sliding door with keys, they entered a two-bedroom unit. "Forget about the little luxuries here," he said. "No more bioscanners and motion-sensor sliding doors. Everything is old-school here." He jiggled his keys, stressing his point. "I have spares, so you're good to go."

Inside, the apartment was divided into two units: a front and a back room. The back room was dingy, plainly furnished with a single bed, a sofa, a reading chair, a side table with an old-world lamp, a chest of drawers off to one side, and one small window without a view. It was all the same furniture as up in the front room, shabby from years of use, except that the bathroom was attached to Shadow's room, and there was an old-world entertainment unit on top of his dresser. And, of course, a wall of windows. So Shadow had all the natural light and a view of the lake.

The room had a pungent odor of sewage and mildew, a blend of decaying organic matter and stagnant water. Troy wrinkled his nose.

Catching Troy's look of distaste, Shadow explained, "The toilet runs on an old septic system. That's what you're smelling. You'll get used to it. Aside from that, there's a library on the upper level in the lounge, if you like to read," Shadow continued. "You can grab some books, or, if you feel like it, you can watch some old-world vid-flicks with me anytime. I've even scored an Xbox One with *Halo* loaded up and ready to go."

Troy sat down on the creaky bed, his mind a jumble of emotions. His fingers trailed over the crevices of the lumpy mattress, and he looked around the cramped quarters in

dismay. He didn't have a clue what he'd expected, but one thing was certain: he hadn't thought he'd start off at the Landing pining after someone else's woman.

"It doesn't look like much, but this is just phase one. In time, you'll have your own place unless you choose to cohabitate or marry." Shadow shook his head with amusement and grinned. "Can you believe men and women still marry out this way? Ring and all. Some men even hook up with more than one female." But Shadow cringed at that last piece of information. "Anyway, my point is, family units are available. Or if you're ambitious, in time you can build your own place. There's plenty of land. You just need to get the skill set. Tomorrow, when we're not working on the fences, I'll show you around some more, so you can see what people get up to."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that." Troy guessed he was starting with fence duty.

Shadow gave him a meaningful look and asked, "So, I hear you're an e-breeder like me. Is that right?"

Troy nodded.

"What class?"

"Five."

Shadow whistled through his teeth. "Shit, man. The ladies will be all over you. Be careful, because the next thing you know, there'll be a whole lot of baby Troylings running around the place. It's all good if you're not hooked up, but watch out if you do, the ladies have claws. They say they're all good with sharing and shit like that, but I've seen some serious drama go down. Will you be traveling farther north? Word is that it's safer for us virile males, father away from Coalition forces."

"I don't know—I'll have to see." Troy eyed the male curiously. "What level are you?"

"Two. I quit trying after that." A pained expression cast over Shadow's face, so Troy decided not to pry.

"And yeah, I've got the wood stove going so it feels warm enough in here. Someone will bring you some fresh clothes

and sheets, and you might want to crash until dinner after you clean up. There are too many of us to eat together, so we take our meals in shifts. We're on the third shift this month, at seven p.m. It changes monthly, so people can mingle." But Shadow wasn't finished yet.

"You'd better learn how to fight and fast, my man. I saw the way you were looking at V. Around here, men fight for what they want, and if that handshake is any kind of indicator, you're gonna get your ass kicked."

Then he was gone. Troy heard the sliding door open, close, and click shut, and he was left alone. It was the first time since he'd met V that he was all by himself. Troy remembered how frightened he was that first night. Terrified at any moment he'd be caught and branded. Again.

Troy lay on his bed, which was too small to really fit him comfortably, imagining V naked and wishing it were still morning. All he wanted to do was bury his face in her neck and inhale her sweet scent.

Troy ran his hand over his face. He was so screwed.

So very, very screwed.

IT'S COMPLICATED

V

“TROY!” V shook him, but he appeared to be in a deep sleep. She rocked him harder, which earned her a groan, and he finally stirred.

“V?” He rubbed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What are you doing here?” Troy propped himself up onto his forearms.

God, why was he so sexy when he just woke up? V thought. “I brought you some fresh clothes and sheets.” She tipped her head toward a pile on the chair next to his bed.

He pulled himself upright until he was seated and tried to shake the sleep off. He sniffed the air and frowned. “Have you been drinking?”

“I may have had a little wine with my dinner.” V pinched her fingers together to show a diminutive amount and giggled.

“How’d you get in here anyway? Didn’t Shadow lock up?”

“Most people don’t lock up around here.”

“He made such a show about having keys, I just assumed he’d secured the place when he left.”

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” V pouted, twisting a strand of hair around her finger.

Troy gave her a hard look, then launched into a tirade. “For crying out loud, V! What will Keith do when he finds out we were fucking around?” Troy sat up, draping his arms over

his knees. “You said he wasn’t your boyfriend, but you two sure looked friendly to me. You owe me an explanation.”

No beating around the bush here. “Do I?” V lunged at him, pushing him back onto the bed. She leaned in to kiss him but to her surprise, he held her back.

“We weren’t fucking around. I got caught up in the moment, trying to make you feel better—nothing more.” With a flirtatious wink, she nibbled on Troy’s lower lip.

He sniffed at her mouth. “You’re drunk.”

Troy let out a deep sigh as V glided her hands under his shirt, pushing the fabric up and over his chest. She pressed her face against the smoothness of his abdomen and caressed it.

“Your treasure trail is simply divine,” she whispered, nuzzling her face into his navel before flicking her tongue out and dragging it up to his nipple. Troy shuddered and sucked in a breath of air, his stomach muscles clenching involuntarily.

“What was that? The sound you just made. Are your nipples ticklish?” She smiled mischievously up at him.

He shook his head in denial. “Fuck, you’re making it hard to think.”

V reached down and undid his pants. “Hard to think. Hard to talk,” she whispered, and reaching inside, she stroked him. “Hmm, and hard all over.”

Troy groaned, momentarily succumbing to pleasure, but then he shook his head fiercely and pulled her hand out of his pants.

“I have a roommate.” His expression furrowed in concern and the words rushed out. “Are you trying to get me into more trouble? What if someone catches us?”

V crinkled her brow and studied him for a second. He was getting angry. It wasn’t the reaction she’d been hoping for. Even though they’d been apart for only a few short hours, V missed him terribly already. She came to say goodbye, but like an addict, she needed one last fix, and Troy was her drug of choice. She’d gotten into some wine to bolster her courage,

but it had the opposite effect, loosening her inhibitions and making him harder to resist. Here she was, throwing herself at him like a wanton floozie.

V placed her hand on Troy's thigh, needing the contact. "Shadow won't say a thing. It's not his style. Plus, he owes me one. He stopped at my station on his way up here."

"Better not have stopped at your station the way I did."

V leaned in and bit Troy's lower lip. He hissed but didn't stop her when she nuzzled into the side of his neck, nipping at the bulging cords, inhaling his scent. "I like it when you're jealous." She grabbed his hand and intertwined their fingers. "Did I ever tell you I love to be finger-fucked? I would have liked to experience that with you." *Oops! Did she say that out loud?*

"What?" He shook his head as if trying to register what she'd just said. Troy untangled their fingers and cupped her face, but V still managed to nip at his thumbs. "The time for fucking is over."

A look of misery overtook her features, and she straightened out on top of him, straddling his thighs.

"V?"

She slipped away from him and sat on the edge of his bed. His arousal, still evident, bulged in his pants. "All right, let's talk."

Troy blinked heavily. "How am I supposed to talk after all that? How am I even supposed to think?"

"You don't have to think." She smiled suggestively. "We could just—"

"Is Keith your boyfriend?" Troy ground out. "Tell me the truth."

V sighed mournfully. "We've always been close, but—no, I told you, we're friends. Nothing more. Friends with benefits." She shrugged. That much hadn't changed.

"Except what I saw when he looks at you isn't a benefit. It's a complication," Troy growled low in his throat. He

paused, his jaw clenching as if he was trying to control something wild inside of him. “Am I going to get my head pounded in? Shadow was talking about me needing to learn how to fight.”

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt to learn how to defend yourself. Around here, you never know when you’re going to need it.”

Troy stared at her, dumbfounded.

“I know, I know. You’re a lover, not a fighter.” V cast her eyes down to her feet. “Like all Coalition males. And don’t worry about Keith. I’ll talk to him and remind him we had an agreement. We haven’t slept together for months, not since I’ve been on assignment.” V sighed in frustration. “I don’t know why he’s suddenly changed his mind and is pushing for something more. I told him I only wanted to be friends.”

“I don’t understand. If he doesn’t satisfy you, why would you sleep with him?”

“Touch.” V glanced over at Troy and ran the backs of her fingers over his exposed abdomen. “Familiarity. Companionship,” she mused. “He and Mack used to be best friends. After Mack passed away so unexpectedly, I guess we sought solace in each other’s arms.”

“How did he die? Your Mack? You never told me.” His voice had gentled, but his features stayed tense.

“Cancer... One day he complained about a backache, and a few months later, he was gone. Just like that.” V tried to snap her fingers but it was noiseless. “He was so very sick.” V grew quiet, lost in her memories. She tried not to fixate on recollections of his withered body, but that image of him fading was always at the forefront of her mind. Or how his hands, once so large and capable, in the end, appeared so small in hers.

Troy reached for her chin, and she accepted his touch for a few beats before pushing his hand away and snuggling into his chest. She ran her fingertips over the springy stubble that grew there now.

“I loved him so much,” she whispered and hoped Troy couldn’t hear the ragged intake of her breath.

Troy stroked his fingers down her back.

“I’m sorry I got you involved, but sex is incredible with you. I lost my head. If things weren’t so complicated, I’d want to be with you, but we can never be together.”

“What are you talking about, V?”

She pushed up off his chest. “Stick with Shadow. He’s a good guy. He’ll show you the ropes and you’ll learn your way around the compound. Plenty of women are going to want to help you get acclimatized.” She reached meaningfully between his legs and cupped his partially exposed package. “You should be fine. Let me worry about Keith.”

V stood up to leave.

“What? What’s happening here?” Troy sputtered. “Why does it sound like you’re done with my services and packing me off to the next Keeper? When am I going to see you again?” Troy practically bolted off the bed, stuffing himself back into his pants. He stood so close, V had to crane her head back to read his expression.

He was scowling, obviously very pissed off.

“It was a mistake coming here.” V backstepped, but he grabbed her by the wrist.

“Wait.”

V shuttered her emotions and lowered her eyes. “I don’t think we should continue to see each other, except for... around. It’s better this way. Safer for you—for now, at least.” When she glanced upward, Troy looked at her with a gaze so fierce that she felt herself shrinking back. His nostrils flared.

“It was selfish of me, wanting to be with you. Even coming here tonight. I needed one last touch. I really didn’t think Keith and I were going to be a problem.”

“So you want to be friends *without* benefits!” Troy snapped. V flinched at the bitterness in his tone, but this time she met his angry gaze.

“Yes, Troy. It’ll all work out for the better, for everybody.” She took him by surprise when she went up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the lips tenderly. He leaned into it, but his mouth was demanding. Cruel. It was a punishing kiss, devouring her will to resist. V clasped his hands in hers as she ended it. “You’ll have so many women to choose from. You’ll forget about me soon enough, you’ll see.”

“What’s this really about, V?” Troy demanded. “You didn’t seem to be worried about Keith before.”

“I can’t do this now.” She shook her head. “I want you to settle in without any complications. I’m a complication. And if Keith gets it into his head, he can make things difficult for you.”

“Don’t do this,” Troy implored, searching her eyes with pained desperation, his demeanor changing from anger to despair. What had she done?

Suddenly Shadow walked in on them unexpectedly.

V hadn’t heard the sliding door open. She released her hold on Troy, and he turned his face away. An angry tic jumped in his jaw.

V turned to leave.

“Fuck me!” Shadow said, throwing up his arms. “Why don’t the two of you walk around with bulls eyes on your foreheads?”

V exhaled loudly. Shadow could be overly dramatic at times. “I was just leaving. Take care of him, Shadow, and if you need anything...” V directed her attention back to Troy, who kept his gaze averted. “You know where to find me.”

V stepped out of Troy’s room but stopped at the sliding doors to peek through the glass. She didn’t want to be seen leaving Troy’s suite. As she scanned the pathways, listening for passersby, she overheard Troy.

“Don’t worry, she only came to say goodbye.”

Shadow replied, his tone clearly disapproving. “I hope so, for your sake. V is good people, just not good for you.”

Shadow was right. She wasn't good for Troy. But Shadow was wrong about her being "good people." A better person would have kept her hands off Troy, even though it was only meant to be a bit of fun. How well had that worked out with Keith? V shook her head. She should have known it would backfire. But how could she predict she'd develop feelings for the e-breeder? Either way, it was over. It had to be, for both their sakes. There were things that Troy didn't know about V. Reasons why they would never work.

Fucking the Captain's girl was no way to start at the Landing. Just like Becks had said when she'd caught the two of them naked together. V knew that's what the residents called her behind her back, even if she wasn't. Although V had never denied it, because it kept other suitors at bay. She wasn't ready to settle yet. If ever. At least so she'd thought, but she never imagined she'd develop feelings for another man. And a virile one to boot.

V cared deeply about Keith. They were tried and true friends. But now?

V slid the door open and slipped through when the coast was clear to jog back to her apartment.

She'd always known Keith had feelings for her. More than friendship. More than friends with benefits. This whole situation was going to be hard to navigate because she was used to Keith. To his hugs. Touches. And lately, even his kisses. Who knew how he'd react once he found out about Troy? What he might be capable of doing?

V was going to have to play this out carefully to minimize any resentment Keith might harbor toward Troy. She owed Troy at least that much.

STRONGER THAN YESTERDAY

TROY

FOR THE NEXT MONTH, Troy kept his distance from V and Keith. He didn't like it, but he followed Shadow's advice and kept a low profile. Shadow's motto of "out of sight, out of mind" seemed to be the key to navigating the situation.

Troy could tell when Becks finally told Keith about him and V. It was roughly three days following his arrival. After that, Keith's warm attitude toward him had cooled considerably. Troy heard about a heated argument between V and Keith and expected the Captain to confront him "mano a mano," to Shadow's words. But it never happened. But the thought of Keith and V sleeping together again kept Troy perpetually on edge.

But at least it didn't come as a surprise when he got tagged with mucking up after the pigs. It gave Shadow a laugh, and the male had the gall to say, "Count your blessings. It might have been worse. Could've been septic system duty. He cut you a break!" So, really, Troy had gotten off easy for messing with V.

Despite being warmly welcomed, as the days progressed, Troy came to understand that Shadow had a cynical view of the resident-born males on the compound. He believed they acted out of envy and inadequacy, especially the sterile ones. With no hope of ever fathering children, they were threatened by virile males who might entice their female partners to leave them. This was why, every day after finishing whatever duties they'd been assigned, Troy, Shadow, and Sam (a resident-born

virile male who'd befriended Shadow a few months prior) would spar in the barn. The stench of horse manure filled the dank interior, but there was ample room, it was relatively warm, and soft hay covered the floor, creating a makeshift ring for their practice bouts.

The duo's brawls initially drew a few female onlookers, but with Troy joining their ranks, making it a trio, more and more women gathered to watch each day. Shadow blamed Troy for the growing crowd because he was still a novelty. And in the barn, women could stare their fill as they boxed and wrestled shirtless. The brands on their backs fascinated the females and they reached for them often, carefully tracing over the R with their fingertips. Troy recalled that both V and Becks had done the same thing. Something drew them to the brands, yet simultaneously repelled them. As if the markings were a perverse badge of honor.

Shadow made it clear his brand was off limits. Troy and Shadow were complete opposites in this respect; one wanting nothing more than a woman's touch, the other refusing it entirely. Many women tried to sway Shadow from his stance, but their words fell on deaf ears, and he dismissed them with cold civility. Troy never asked Shadow about his past, although anyone could tell that something traumatic had happened to the male.

Troy would never admit it, but V had been right about his size. His toned physique offered flexibility, enabling him to dodge punches with ease. But he needed to pack on some extra pounds to deal out more powerful hits and be a force to be reckoned with.

Shadow was an unforgiving opponent. He had a lot of pent-up anger, which he liked to unleash on Troy's face. It was likely that Keith left Troy alone because it was common knowledge throughout the Landing that he was getting pummeled daily, as the bruises and cuts on his face would attest, though the women certainly seemed to love it. At least they loved the opportunity to care for Troy and/or Sam after Shadow landed them with another shiner or a split upper lip for the umpteenth time.

Troy admittedly enjoyed their attention, the tender touches, but none of the women were V. He scanned the growing crowd daily, hoping to catch sight of her, but she never came.

Eventually, the stakes grew higher, as a few of the resident-born males in the compound paid to fight. Troy didn't do well at first. However, as he started to bulk up, he won more fights than he lost. This earned him some credits, although he had no idea what to do with them.

During one fight with a particularly large resident-born male, Troy spotted Shadow gesturing toward the back of the barn. He caught sight of V leaning against a stall jamb before he pinned his opponent down, but when Troy looked again, she was gone.

After being proclaimed the victor, Troy jogged over to Shadow. He braced his weight on his knees, still winded from the fight.

“Where'd she go?”

“She's gone, my friend. She told me to let you know you're looking strong,” Shadow said. “And then she winked and blew you a kiss, but on that, I'll pass.”

Troy tipped his chin forward and slowly shook his head. He berated himself for not being able to move on, to get over V. It was what she wanted, wasn't it? So why'd she show up here?

HE'D BEEN at the Landing for just over a month, but with Shadow and Sam by his side, Troy found his footing fast. Just as V and Shadow had said at the start, Troy had no shortage of potential partners if he wanted one; some women he even considered friends but he hadn't taken a lover. Because despite his best efforts, Troy couldn't stop thinking about V.

Even though he kept his hands to himself; he did give in one time, with a female who looked so much like V it made his heart ache. Her name was Gwendolyn, but she went by Gwen. Although she was younger than V, she had similar eyes

and hair. But she didn't have the same presence or power over him that V did.

Troy thought maybe he could convince himself otherwise, but when Gwen cornered him for a kiss and he'd allowed it—it wasn't the same.

She wasn't V. He didn't feel that soul-deep need to crawl into her and burrow under her skin. He'd kissed Gwen gently enough, and she seemed to love it, but in the end, he apologized and said he wasn't ready. In the evenings, he perfected the art of masturbation.

Whereas V seemed fine without him.

She was still friendly with Keith, but Troy had seen him chatting up other women, and sometimes it even looked like he took them home for the evening. Apparently they were both in the same doghouse—delegated to the friend zone, as Shadow put it.

Tonight, Troy was helping put up string lights for the monthly dance. He had several fine women stroking his ego, and anything else they could civilly get their hands on, while they admired his height and the way it made it easy for him to hang the fixtures up.

Shadow stood by, leaning against an old piano, getting a kick out of Troy's plight, though most males wouldn't call it a hardship. It was, however, when Troy pined over one female.

"So many women and so little time," Shadow grumbled. "Should have just said no when they asked you to help." Shadow leaned all the way away from Kyra when she tried to draw him into decorating. He'd shaken his head in a "hell no" before he couldn't take the proximity anymore and stormed off.

Troy had to admit these women were persistent. Despite Shadow's obvious reluctance, they still showed him care and compassion. No matter the sexual predilections of his Keepers, other than the R brandished on his back, no one had ever misused Troy. But Shadow had been scarred.

When they were alone in their unit, the male would remove the leather bracelets he wore around his wrists. Beneath those bands, his skin was wrecked, as if he'd been tied up and fought against those restraints until they cut into his flesh. Troy never asked about the scars, respecting Shadow's privacy and pain.

Some Keepers were never meant to have a male. Whatever was done to Shadow was punishable, even by Coalition standards.

Kyra pouted at Shadow's prompt departure, at first looking a little wounded, then she shrugged and turned her attention to Troy with a broad smile spreading across her pretty face. Shadow said Troy was too nice. "Haven't you had enough of women taking advantage of you?" he'd asked on more than one occasion.

"Helping to set up isn't being taken advantage of." Plus, he enjoyed the attention, because it helped to ease the loneliness and longing he felt for the one woman who wanted nothing to do with him.

During the preparations, V wasn't anywhere to be seen, but Troy knew she'd be at the dance. He was banking on it. Shadow said V attended all the dances whenever she returned to the compound because she loved to listen to the band's innovative covers. Old world and new.

Troy longed for her company. He missed having meaningful conversations with her, laughing until his sides hurt, and the comfortable silence that existed only between two kindred spirits—basking in each other's presence. But most of all, he craved the passionate intimacy they'd shared.

It had been too long.

V had retreated into a world of her own, avoiding the community. Troy rarely saw her unless she was working at the weaving shed, where he would catch glimpses of her smiling while conversing with her co-workers. Aside from those brief moments, she mostly kept to herself.

V hadn't been lying when she said she wasn't Keith's woman, even though many in the Landing still called her the Captain's girl. Everyone knew Keith had a thing for V, but that didn't make her his.

Troy knew he had to make the first move with V—no more keeping his head down, no more skulking around—tonight, he'd play his hand. Catching the occasional glimpse of her wasn't enough. He needed to assure her that whatever obstacle she felt was in their way, they could overcome it together. Troy needed to breathe her in, get inside of her to know he was home. He was in love with her, and it was time to man up. Shadow said, that in the Landing, a man had to fight for what he wanted, and Troy wanted V.

KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

V

V KEPT HER EYES DOWN. She didn't want to appear to be scanning the crowd for anyone in particular. Certainly not for *him*.

There was already a lot of speculation about her and Troy. Especially after she and Keith had it out outside the singles quarters before they took the argument inside.

Of course Becks couldn't resist messing with V and had told Keith all about the naked tangle of limbs in which she'd found them. Keith was unduly upset as a friend with benefits. Sometimes it was hard to accept the parameters.

"I thought we had something, V?"

It was more an accusation than a question. Where had she heard that before? *Troy*. After this she was cutting out all casual sex; she was tired of repeating herself. "I told you no strings attached, Keith. We were clear on that from the beginning. Plus, I'm out in the field most of the time. And don't tell me you've kept your dick in your pants the whole time I was gone."

V rarely talked to Keith like that, but her patience was wearing thin. He'd made the executive decision that she was *his* "girl," and she'd been dealing with the repercussions of it ever since. Lips tight, Keith's expression spoke volumes: even though he wanted V, he'd still fucked around.

“I thought so,” V muttered, disgusted by the double standard. Men were such hypocrites.

“I told you before that I had feelings for you, even when you were with Mack. If you’d only commit to us, I’d never stray.”

“Never say never.” V stepped up to him, narrowing her eyes, but then she softened her gaze. “I just don’t think I’m enough for you. You need someone as committed to the Landing as you are. So it could be your baby together.”

“That’s exactly it, V. Neither of us wants kids. We’d be happy together—without all that added pressure.”

She cast her gaze downward and fixed an undone button on his shirt. It wasn’t that she didn’t want children, she just couldn’t have them—there was the difference. Keith had accepted his lot in life as a sterile male, but because of his status in the community, it didn’t diminish his attractiveness to the opposite sex in the least. Of course, it also didn’t hurt that he was so wholesomely good-looking either. Hot, but not her kind of hot.

“Just think about it—us—a little longer before you shut us down, okay?” He leaned in and captured her mouth with his—and nothing. No heat. Not a tingle. Not a sigh. In the few times they’d been together, she’d never felt much after the initial novelty of their first kiss. Which was nice but underwhelming.

“You and I, we’re good together.”

V licked her lips. “If I take time to consider us, are you going to leave Troy out of the equation?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “For now,” Keith grumbled as he walked out and left her to wonder.

THAT WAS at the start of the month. Afterward, V watched Troy from afar when she had a chance. One night, she snuck away to see him fight, and he was incredible. His chest glistened with perspiration, and his face set hard in concentration as he threw and deflected blows. She couldn’t

help but be impressed by how well-rounded his skills were; e-breeders were known to be soft but Troy could take a punch.

Luckily Sam, a resident virile male, had taken up the mantle of training the two e-breeders. He was aware of how vital it was for them to protect themselves. Virile males were prized, but jealousies among the other men often erupted when it came to women, leading to violent disagreements.

Of course V understood why women were always around Troy, tending to him and fawning over his every move. She couldn't help but feel envious. They got to cheer him on and celebrate his victories, while V secluded herself in her quarters, thoughts drifting to him constantly.

V inwardly crossed her fingers and wished he'd show up at the dance—she just wanted to lay her eyes on him, up close, again. She'd be polite, say hi, and that would be the extent of it. They'd had their time together, and it had to be enough.

V fantasized about Troy regularly though. Keith had accidentally let it slip during one of their many arguments about Troy that he was a Class 5 Elite Breeder—highly trained in the ways of the sensual arts. It didn't surprise V. With his skill set, he'd created a wanton girl out of her, and she spent a lot of time imagining him doing things that she still wanted to experience. Good thing she had her own apartment, where she could explore her body and no one else could hear her calling out his name. V sighed—she was in such a bad way.

Her heart skipped a beat when she first caught sight of him at the party, and a swarm of butterflies filled her stomach. When their eyes met, V offered him a tentative smile, then diverted her gaze like a shy teenager girl.

Troy stood with a beer in each hand, flanked by two women looking up at him with blatant admiration. He raised a bottle to V in greeting, smiled at her, then winked. His gaze was unwavering and his demeanor, confident and unbothered.

The Landing community had embraced Troy. His sociable and warm personality was the polar opposite of Shadow's stand-offish, reserved one. He had grown close with Sam and Shadow, and as V had predicted, there were plenty of admirers

for him to choose from in the Dead Zones. His strength, strong work ethic, and attractiveness made him an ideal partner for any sane woman. Adding to his appeal was the likelihood of having children—something many women dreamed of—and clout, which would likely come with time. V was sure of it. There was just something about the male.

V tilted her head and snuck another peek. She was so foolishly enamored with him, just like all the other ladies spinning around his orbit. How could they not be when he grew more good looking with each passing day? His short hair had grown out slightly and curled at the ends. His face looked younger and fuller, his chin gruff, and his body had filled out to a more healthy size.

V often overheard the resident-born males discussing the two e-breeders. Naturally suspicious of newcomers, they found themselves surprised by the two males' aptitudes for learning new skills. They quickly advanced in fighting and shooting, and it was rumored that Sam had recently taught them how to ride motorcycles. They were like mini celebrities and word traveled fast about everything they did.

Troy especially was the subject of all sorts of speculation, such as his attempts at wooing the ladies, with Gwen and Kyra among his conquests. Nothing serious had yet transpired between them though. V was sure Becks would be the first to inform her when something substantial finally happened—just so she could gloat.

“V, why don't you come and join us at our table?” Keith spoke up and grabbed her shoulder lightly. V jumped a bit. She'd been so wrapped up in her own narrow world since meeting Troy and having this whole complicated situation with Keith. She'd done her best to avoid them both and locked herself away in the weaving shed until the tips of her fingers stung from overwork.

V was caught between a rock and a hard place when it came to these two men. She felt as though she had to conceal her every look, every action, in case it be judged in favor of one over the other. When, really, she had neither of them.

When she didn't move, Keith insisted. "Then come dance with me instead." He pulled her toward the makeshift dance floor when the acoustic band began to strum. In a matter of minutes, they were lost in a crowd of swaying bodies. V rested her forehead against Keith's chest and inhaled his familiar scent. They'd always been so comfortable with each other. So easy.

She remembered the way things used to be before Mack had begun to wander. Keith had been wilder back then, yet out of nowhere, in a bout of drunkenness, he'd proclaimed that if she was ever his, he'd never betray her like Mack. Even though he'd been intoxicated, it felt genuine, and V always thought it was true. How foolish she was.

Keith placed his hand on her cheek and tilted her head up toward him, caressing her skin with his thumb. "Remembering all the good times we used to share?" he whispered, before leaning in and kissing her. The kiss was chaste enough, but yearning. And judging by the way the hairs stood up on the back of her neck, Troy was watching.

"Hey, Captain," Becks called out, "the beer keg is jammed, and Travis needs some help."

"I'm dancing with V right now," Keith replied sharply and turned his back on his second—something he rarely did.

"It's okay, Keith. We have all night," V told him, which was a lie. She wasn't planning on staying, especially after that kiss.

"You sure? The song's almost over."

V nodded. "What's a few minutes?"

Keith searched her eyes. "Okay then." He kissed her forehead. "But save a few dances for me."

"Of course." She smiled affectionately at him, and then he was gone. V glanced around the dance floor as a sudden pang of loneliness struck her. Spotting the bar in the corner, she headed over when a pair of powerful arms wrapped around her waist and spun her into a crisp, white shirt.

Oh, she knew these arms.

Without looking, V touched the fabric and recognized the weave as one of hers. The shirt gapped open near the collar, and inside she saw a sprinkle of brown chest hair. The last time she'd been this close, he'd had only a prickly regrowth.

“Troy,” she said in an airy breath and peeked up.

He was staring down at her with possession in his eyes.

The moment she smelled him, her toes curled in pleasure, and she instinctively wanted to nestle into him. V inhaled deeply; it felt like ages since she had been around his uniquely masculine scent, an intoxicating blend of cinnamon and musk. V's panties instantly grew wet with anticipation.

V closed her eyes, and a quiet sigh escaped her lips. Every ounce of her being craved his touch.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he turned her around, walking her deeper into the swaying crowd.

“I want to dance with you, but not with your lover watching us.” V peeked behind them and saw Keith fiddling with some beer kegs that wouldn't cooperate, while Travis stood nearby, scratching his head.

“Keith's not my lover,” V grumbled under her breath, glancing back at Troy with a challenge in her gaze.

Troy gripped her waist and spun her around to face him again.

“Kissing you in public looks like a lover to me.” She'd known Troy had been watching.

V placed both of her palms on his pecs, intending to put a more comfortable distance between them. But her hands stayed there of their own volition, while her traitorous body rocked with his. The song changed to a slower, sultrier, silk-sheet vibe, and she swayed along to it, despite herself.

“Nobody owns me,” she whispered, toying with his collar, trying not to meet his eyes, but then her gaze drew upward. His hazel eyes, currently a brilliant shade of blue, bore into hers.

“Can I kiss you on the mouth then?” Troy’s amicable tone lowered to a slight growl, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. The wrinkles flared at their corners for the briefest moment, only adding to his allure.

V was tempted to say yes but steered the topic in a different direction instead.

“You’ve been doing well for yourself. You and Shadow are hot topics around the Landing.”

“Are we?” Troy countered coolly, twirling her around. He brought her up close against his body with her back to him. Looping one of her hands around the back of his neck, he dragged his fingers down her arm to settle on her hip. They must have taught him how to dance in the facilities where breeders were raised because he moved with a sensual, seductive grace.

“At least with the ladies,” V replied as her fingers toyed with a few wisps of unruly hair at his nape.

“Are you jealous?”

Yes, absolutely! she cried out inside, but she reminded herself that they had no future. No matter how much she yearned for this man. Wanted him. “No, because I told you there can be nothing between us.”

Troy stopped in his tracks and fixed her with a glare of sharpened steel. Instead of making a scene, he snatched V’s hand in an iron grip and dragged her outside, his strides long and purposeful as they made their way toward the table she’d spotted him at earlier.

They passed by Shadow, who tossed Troy his jacket.

Troy caught it with ease and continued to drag V toward the exit, guiding her out the door before she could protest.

The night air chilled V to the bone; their every breath, clouding around them. Troy draped his jacket across V’s shoulders before she could refuse, but to keep warm, she slipped her arms into the overly long sleeves. Instantly, his scent filled her lungs and brought her back to when they were entwined and naked together, exploring every inch of each

other's bodies with desperate touches and fervent kisses. V's body hummed to life, and she sighed to herself. Coming tonight had been a terrible mistake.

The dance was being held in the meeting room on the eastern side of the compound. V looked to her right and caught sight of the winter bonfire burning outside the dining hall. A few couples were hanging around the fire, laughing, drinking and admiring the warm, orange glow radiating from the open flames. They sounded carefree, like they hadn't a care in the world, and V wished she could be so light-hearted again.

She cast her gaze in Troy's direction, and the air between them seemed to stand still. His features were like granite, with a determination that cut through the heavy silence like a blade. V could feel it seeping into her bones: there was no stopping him tonight—he was ready to argue.

Troy gestured toward the back of the building and V followed. He'd stopped and she passed by him, stepping up onto a jutting rock formation, keenly aware of his presence at her back. From this elevated spot, she could take in the night sky, with its moonlight glimmering off the still lake below. Even the cold air did nothing to lessen the grandeur of the sight.

V turned to face Troy. Maybe she shouldn't have because he was even more beautiful than she remembered in her dreams. He'd adjusted well to the brisk March climate. His cheeks took on just that extra touch of heat, growing ruddy, making him even sexier.

“Tell me why?”

At this very moment, V was angry with her lot in life, and she was tired of all the pain—the heartache. She wanted to lash out. Make Troy hurt as much as she was.

“I'm sure you've heard the speculations.”

“Trust me, I wanted to ask about you, but Shadow wouldn't let me... rock the boat. He liked to remind me it wouldn't go over well if the Captain found out I was asking about his girl,” Troy sneered. “So no.”

“Smart man, your friend.” V turned away and stared out over the lake, ignoring the bitterness in his voice. “Okay then, you want to know... I told you my husband was like you.”

“You did. A breeder. I know he cheated on you, but that’s not reason enough. I’m not him.”

No, you’re not him, she thought appreciatively to herself. Suddenly, it occurred to her that she really hadn’t thought of Mack since Troy’s arrival. But that didn’t make things any better. Or easier.

“If... I could have had children, he never would have strayed.” V didn’t meet Troy’s eyes and kept her gaze on the winter sky as if she hadn’t just dropped a bomb.

“Sorry, what was that?” he asked with a note of incredulity.

“I said, I’m—inferile,” V said and inhaled sharply, the cold air burning her lungs.

How many times had she said it in her head, but never out loud? It was at once devastating and freeing to speak the truth. V whispered it one more time, mostly to substantiate the truth. “I can’t have kids... I’m barren.”

“No—you’re not!” He didn’t understand yet, but he would soon enough.

V turned to him and said, “I can’t have children, Troy. You know I was married to Mack for over five years—we were together nearly ten if you include all the time when we were kids. But do you see any children? I never conceived—not once, ever!”

His facial features crumbled. “You really mustn’t want to be with me—”

“I want nothing more than to be with you. Even more than I ever wanted to be with Mack. But I won’t *ever* be with a breeder again. Watching woman after woman bear your children for you. Seeing little versions of you everywhere, yet none that would be mine. Never mine. I can’t do it again and endure all the favors that come along with it—”

“Favors?”

“Ask Shadow. He knows what I’m talking about.” V shook her head. “I can’t be with you, Troy. Forget about me.” She sighed softly and said dejectedly, “Let me go. I can see by your reaction you want children. I won’t ever be able to give you a child, and I can’t live like that again. I’ll never be enough for you—not ever.”

“And that’s why you’re with Keith, because he’s like you?” Troy asked, his voice trembling with hurt and anger.

“Yes, we have a lot in common. Now you know the truth and you can forget about there ever being an us.” She sighed. “Please don’t make this any harder for me. I want to be with you, but I can’t—I can’t take the heartache again. I was never enough woman for Mack, and I’ll never be enough woman for you.”

V glanced downward, searching for the quickest route of escape. In a flash, she skittered down the rock wall and vanished around the front of the meeting hall, leaving Troy behind.

MANO A MANO

TROY

TROY STARED up at the starlit sky and let out a deafening bellow. It didn't surprise him when he heard the heavy footfalls approach. Or when Keith rounded the corner of the building.

The leader of the Landing shucked off his coat and tossed it onto the snow-covered ground. "I've heard you've been honing your fighting skills," Keith said, cracking his knuckles. "How about we finally settle this once and for all? I'm sick of you messing with V's head."

"You've got that wrong," Troy huffed. "I never messed with her head. It's the other way around. But I'll gladly fight you." Troy popped his neck and rolled his shoulders. "I'm sure you heard V doesn't want me. She made that abundantly clear."

Smarting from V's rejection, Troy was hurting for a fight. He wanted to inflict some serious pain, and who better than Keith to use as a punching bag?

"Oh yeah, I heard. Half the Landing heard."

The two of them squared off, pacing from side to side, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

"You ready for this, e-breeder?" Keith taunted.

"Absolutely, S Breed." Troy's blood boiled at the derogatory use of his status, but he could give as good as he got.

“Fucker,” Kieth snarled, spitting on the ground between them.

Troy smirked before he advanced on Keith, swinging and delivering an audible punch to the Captain’s square jaw.

Keith stumbled back but quickly regained his composure. A shocked expression crossed over his features as he reached up and touched a bloody lip. He scowled and retaliated with a powerful left hook that sent Troy reeling. But Troy relished the pain.

The two continued trading blows like prize fighters, locked in a furious exchange of punches to prove their worthiness, each strike echoing the pain in their hearts and souls as if all their suffering physically manifested under the light of the waning moon. Their grunts and strikes were drowned out by the band singing the old-world classic, “Knocking on Heaven’s Door.”

In between punches, Troy thought bitterly, that V was his heaven. He’d knocked and she’d slammed the door in his face.

Neither stopped until finally, they both were winded and exhausted. Troy collapsed onto his hands and knees, while Keith stood slumped over, catching his breath.

Straightening, Keith staggered over to Troy and gave him one last kick to his ribs. With an “oomph,” Troy flipped onto his back and sprawled out on the snow, cradling his side. He didn’t think his ribs were broken, but they hurt like a motherfucker.

Keith reached for his jacket and straightened up. He glared at Troy. “She’s mine now, not yours! You got that?”

Troy nodded and turned to watch Keith limp away from view. He didn’t care about winning—he’d already lost what mattered most.

V.

FINALLY

TROY

NOT EVEN TWO days after the dance, the Landing was all abuzz about Keith and V shacking up together.

Gwen had remained with Troy after Keith had left him injured in the snow. He accepted her help, and she stayed over for two nights to tend to him. Now, lying beside him, Gwen was in V's rightful spot.

Shadow was peeved about Gwen and was very vocal about it. He thought it was a knee-jerk reaction on Troy's part and warned him he'd regret it. By now it was all over the compound, and V had probably already heard. It was an asshole move, Troy knew it, but he wanted to hurt V regardless.

Shadow had waited for Gwen to leave before he got into the real nitty-gritty with Troy.

"V is going to think that you slept with Gwen," Shadow speculated out loud as he played Halo. "It's all over the compound that she stayed two nights."

"I did sleep with Gwen," Troy grumbled half-heartedly, scratching his pec indifferently.

"Did you fuck her? Because you know that's what I'm talking about, my man."

Troy just stared at the wall in front of him, trying to ignore the conversation that was unfolding between them.

“Stop being an ass. Everyone is gonna think you and Gwen hooked up, regardless of whatever she says. Becks is probably salivating—you know how much she loves to give it to V.” Shadow paused for a second to swat away some video baddies on his game console. It was incredible that Shadow could lecture him about life while he furiously mashed buttons on his controller. Anyway, Troy wasn’t the one moving in with another lover, V was.

“Fuck, I’m taking damage here! They’re all coming at me from behind. Face me, motherfuckers!”

Troy plopped himself down on the couch beside Shadow and sighed.

“What happened between you and V at the dance?” Shadow asked between shots, giving Troy the side-eye. “She dumped your ass for real this time?”

“Yeah, she ended it with me. Again.” Troy refused to meet Shadow’s gaze; he focused on the screen in front of him. “She said she was barren and wanted nothing to do with a breeder. She made that very clear!”

Shadow angrily eliminated two of the Banished. “Oh, shit! My shield is getting drained, but I got two points. Yes!” Shadow rocked his controller in his hand as he maneuvered the map. He got hit, and his Spartan dropped to respawn. “So you’re saying she can’t have kids? And you just let her go? Don’t you have enough children?”

“She wants nothing to do with me!” Troy bypassed the point Shadow was trying to make. Shadow’s Spartan was up and shooting again. “She doesn’t care what I want. She’s already moving in with Keith.”

“Good thing she got rid of your dumb ass—shit! Face me, you bastards!”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Good thing she got rid of me?” Troy countered. “Fuck, man. I thought you had my back.” Troy pushed off the couch and stormed back toward his room.

“You don’t really love her. If you did, nothing would keep you two apart. You want children more than a future with V, that’s all.” Troy shifted, so he was looking toward Shadow, whose gaze remained fixed on the television. The male had opened a menu and was scrolling through armor.

“I may have hundreds of kids out there somewhere, but I only got the chance to see one—one time!” Troy balled his hand into a fist, jabbing his index finger in the air. “I want to raise some of my own children, start a family. But V didn’t give me any time to think about it.”

“You’re a greedy motherfucker, you know that?” Shadow’s gaze darted over to Troy. “You were luckier than most of us. I saw none of mine. So the question stands, what’s more important to you? Being with V or having kids? Because if it’s the latter, she did you a service.”

“What about you?” Troy said irritably, not in the mood to be lectured.

“Me? This isn’t about me.” Shadow chuckled before replying, “I can’t even handle being touched by a woman, and you’re talking babies?” He balked.

“Why does everything always have to be so hard?” Troy sighed in frustration, staring up at the ceiling.

“Because life’s not fair.” Shadow lowered his controller and shifted to look at Troy. “Not in the Coalition, and not out here in the Dead Zones. No way around it, my man. It’s not fair to you—and it certainly isn’t fair to V. But I totally see why she wouldn’t want to get with you. If you want kids more than you want her” —Shadow shrugged and shook his head— “then leave her alone. Go get busy with a fine woman like Gwen. Looks like you’ve already started. Just watch out who you stick your dick into around here. The ladies don’t like to use contraceptives. You might become a baby daddy before you know it.”

Troy brushed his hand down his face. He didn’t want to have babies with Gwen. The only thing they’d done together was sleep. Quite literally. Troy wasn’t ready for anything more. Not unless it was with V.

He was in love with V. Felt it with every fiber of his being, every time he saw her. Got close to her. Even now, he was desperate to touch her while as she was preparing to shack up with the Captain. But why? She didn't love Keith. Nobody could ever satisfy her as Troy could.

True, Troy could try to get another woman pregnant, like Shadow said, only to discover they were infertile. Did he really want children more than he wanted V? He scowled, furious with himself. No—he didn't.

“V mentioned something about favors. Said you'd know.”

Shadow smirked and then snorted.

“Are there things you should be telling me, Shadow?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “favors happen, but no one ever asks me.” Shadow grinned, clearly amused with himself. “It's straightforward. If a couple is having trouble conceiving, the man might ask you to sleep with his woman until she gets pregnant. It's just like the Lottery, but Dead Zone style. Women want babies, and men want to make their women happy, and without being able to do fertility treatments here, it's a simple solution. I've heard stories about groups of virile males who do one female, so no one knows whose baby it is, unless the child obviously looks like one of them.” Shadow pointed to his skin color as an example.

“I'm so fucked. What am I going to do?”

“You're going to man up and decide what you want. And then you're going to do it before it's too late. If it isn't already.”

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

V

THE SCREEN DOOR CREAKED OPEN, and when V turned her head to investigate, Troy stood leaning in the doorway.

Since his arrival at Freedom's Landing, he hadn't visited her apartment, not once, but then again, she hadn't extended an invitation either. She hoped that by keeping her distance it would help to protect her heart, but her efforts had been futile. An utter failure.

She studied Troy for a few seconds, then resumed packing. "You look like shit."

Troy was noticeably bruised and battered, more so than Keith. One eye was swollen shut, with a bruise blossoming beneath the lid like a flower, and his nose looked a little out of joint, though that could be for an entirely different reason.

Obviously Gwen didn't know how to tend to a black eye.

Oh yeah, V had heard all about Troy and Gwen, and how she'd stayed over. Becks had been drooling at the bit when she told V the details, always happy to poke the bear.

After her initial appraisal of Troy, V got straight back to work, packing the remaining items she was taking over to the cottage she and Keith had been assigned.

"What can I do for you, Troy?" she asked, folding a sweater. In her mind's eye, she visualized him crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"Why are you doing it, V?"

“Doing what exactly?” She kept packing.

“Moving in with Keith? You said you weren’t sleeping with him.”

“Maybe we started up again. How’s it any of your business?” She stopped folding the sweater and glared back at him. It was a mistake. The look he gave her was full reproach. He reached up with one hand and gripped the top of the door jamb, swoon-worthy muscles flexing. V swore she heard the wood crack.

“I don’t believe you,” he said, his tone deepening.

V shrugged. He didn’t have to believe her. She’d decided to move in with Keith when he’d showed up on her doorstep a bloody mess and professed his undying love for her. It was a welcome balm to her wounded pride after Troy had made it abundantly clear that children were more important than she was.

V shouldn’t have been surprised by Troy’s reaction to her news. She knew better than most what virile men were like and what they wanted. But that night, that old familiar heartache began to resurface, burning in her chest. Somehow, he’d broken through the barricade she’d put up around her heart. And V couldn’t bear to go through it again. He’d already felt her feeling like half a woman.

She hadn’t given in to Keith’s advances yet. But they were good enough together. Keith was safe, and V wanted safe.

V turned to face Troy, the sweater hanging loose in her hands. “You’re fucking people. I’m fucking people. So we’re good, right?”

Troy didn’t answer her questioning stare, but a muscle ticked angrily in his tense jaw. “If that’s the way you want to play it. But I don’t believe you. You don’t look well fucked to me.”

V turned away from Troy and tossed the sweater into the box, sighing heavily. “What brings you here?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper. She stared up at the blank wall in front

of her, swallowing hard, her heart pounding like a drum in her chest.

“I wanted to give it one last try. Give us a chance, V.” His voice was determined and earnest.

V scoffed. “There’s nothing left to consider. I told you the way it is.” She grabbed the antique picture frame perched on top of a low bookshelf and slammed it into the crate. Luckily, the sweater softened the blow. She liked that damn frame.

V spun on her heel to face Troy again, crossing her arms over her chest. “I heard Gwen shacked up with you for a couple of nights. It’s all over the Landing. Won’t she be upset?”

“I’m not the one moving in with my *friend*,” Troy protested, air quotes and all. “I kept my hands to myself until you rejected me. Twice!”

“Well, there’s a reason we’re not going to happen, and I told you why. So it really doesn’t matter either way, now does it?” V went back to packing.

“I didn’t run from the Coalition only to have other people decide things for me,” he retorted. Behind her V heard the hardwood panels creak under his footsteps. She spun around and glared at him, throwing her hand out.

“Don’t come any closer.”

Troy stopped in his tracks. “V,” he implored, “you’re not giving me a chance to think things through. Instead, you keep on deciding what’s best for me.”

“It was obvious by your reaction two nights ago, me not being able to have children is a deal breaker.” V’s eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms under her chest and impatiently tapped her toes, challenging him to dispute the matter.

“Fair enough.” He raised his hands in submission. “I admit I was surprised. I wasn’t expecting it. But I’m here now. I want to be with you, V. Children or not, and I think you feel the same about me.”

She looked him over as if considering him. Then she deflated, and her shoulders dropped.

“It’s not enough, Troy. We’ve got too much working against us. Plus, it would be selfish of me to be with a virile male, while knowing all along I can’t have kids. People would pressure us and guilt us into doing favors. In the long run, I couldn’t live with it.” She turned back to the open crate and resumed packing.

“Stop packing!” Troy was on her before she could protest. He grabbed her by her arm and forced her to face him. He caught her by the chin and leveled his eyes with hers. “V, I promise, I will only be with you. There’s no other woman for me. I don’t have to wonder what it’s like to sow my oats. And I think it’s safe to say I’ve done my duty to humankind when it comes to reproduction. I’ve earned the right for a good thing in my life. And for me, that’s you. Choose me, V. Don’t move in with Keith.”

She touched his face. V saw the sincerity in his eyes. She ran her hand down his cheek and grazed her thumb under his jawline, lowering her eyes. “I’m sorry, Troy, but I can’t.”

She wanted to believe his promises, but after Mack, she was wary. Loving Mack had brought her nothing but misery, and the feelings she had for Troy ran deeper than anything she’d ever felt for Mack. When things finally went sideways, she’d be left with only a shell of herself.

His grip on her tightened. “Troy, you’re hurting me.”

“Am I? Hurting you? Oh, I’m sorry.” V didn’t like the insincerity in his tone. “But it’s nothing close to how you’re hurting me. Once I leave here, you don’t own my heart anymore—none of me. Is that what you want?”

V’s heart and body protested. She could barely choke out the words, but she said them anyway. “Yes, that’s what I want.” But she couldn’t look him in the eyes when she said it.

And like that, he released her and stormed out the door. She felt a dizzying sense of loss and absolutely desolate, like she’d just made the biggest mistake in her life.

MAKING A CHOICE

TROY

FED UP with V's rejections, Troy stewed in his anger for a couple of hours before he'd decided to end his sexual drought. It didn't take long to track Gwen down. Troy found her mucking out one of the horse stalls. Alone.

Until now, he'd been faithful to V, refusing to be intimate with any other woman. Only jacking off at night to sate his own needs. Hadn't he gone to her, again, and worn his heart on his sleeve, again? Even so, she'd rejected him, again. Turned him down completely.

Troy couldn't understand it and spiraled, desperate to lash out. To hurt somebody—to hurt V and rightfully earn her rejection.

He grabbed the shovel from Gwen's hand and tossed it to the ground as he dragged her farther into the stall. She giggled all the way, even though he was sure there wasn't an ounce of humor in his fierce expression. As soon as his backside hit the wall, he leaned against it and discarded his top.

Gwen bit her lower lip, eyeing him with blatant appreciation, and quickly reciprocated, whipping her top off, she let it fall to the floor. Gwen had small, high breasts and didn't wear a bra, which suited Troy just fine. He tugged her closer by the waistband of her jeans, flicking the tab open with ease as he sucked on one of her pert nipples. He pushed down her pants, impatient to fuck, and as always, Gwen was very obliging. Always there, always waiting.

“Fuck her,” he grumbled under his breath as Gwen undid his button and zipper, pushing his jeans and underwear down over his hips in one fell swoop. His cock was still only semi-erect. With V, he would have been hard by now.

“No, don’t fuck her,” Gwen repeated eagerly against his mouth. “Fuck me instead.”

Troy hadn’t hidden his affection for V from Gwen, and she’d stuck by him through all of it. The way V should have, instead of finding solace in another man’s arms. In Keith’s arms. This was Troy’s way of lashing out, for her not seeing him as a man of integrity. Worthy of a woman like her.

Naked, Gwen straddled Troy’s legs. He cupped her bare ass and drew her sex up his thighs. She reached down between the two of them and grabbed his dick.

“My God, your—” He silenced her with his mouth. He didn’t care what she thought of his size. His only thought was getting into her pussy. It had been too long, but it was like his dick had different plans. Gwen pumped him hard with her hands, and when she didn’t produce the desired results, she crouched down and sucked him into her mouth.

Troy moaned, his eyes fluttering closed. His sex jolted to life inside the heat of her mouth. Humming, Gwen rose to her tiptoes. She straddled his legs, and he bent to penetrate her. He held himself and shoved at her entrance, rubbing the head of his dick into her slick folds, but as he tried to push inside, all he felt was the emptiness of the act. He longed for the connection he felt with V. The intimacy.

His V.

His Veronica.

Troy groaned and stilled, his penis going limp beneath Gwen. He worked it ferociously in his hand, but it stayed soft. “Damn it,” he swore at the world. V ruined him for other women. He groaned in frustration, roughly fondling one of her tits. Anything to get him hard.

“Don’t stop!” Gwen pleaded, rubbing against his now-unmoving hips. “Try again!”

“Gwen, it’s not—”

And then he heard her from the stall entrance. “Yes. Please don’t stop. Not for me, at least. You’d think you’d keep it in your pants for a little while longer.”

V’s voice, not Gwen’s.

“V?”

Troy looked around Gwen. V leaned against the stall’s entrance, taking in the scene. Arms wrapped casually under her breasts. “I thought about what you said, and how silly I was being, but now I see what a fool I am. I should have known better.”

“No, no, no!” Troy shouted. “This isn’t what it looks like!” Although it was exactly what it looked like—an epic failure. Troy pushed Gwen off unceremoniously. She stumbled backward and landed on her ass with an “oomph.” Troy stuffed himself back into his pants and did up his jeans. Anyone could see his dick wasn’t erect. He reached down to Gwen, offering her a hand, which she took begrudgingly.

“I’m so sorry. This isn’t going to work.”

“Asshole,” she whispered under her breath. Troy knew he deserved that, but he’d have to apologize later.

V turned and stormed out of the barn, but Troy was fast. He lunged after her, grabbing her by the hand and dragging her back inside.

She turned on him, lashing out, “I can’t believe how stupid I am! I don’t believe you! I went and told Keith I made a mistake, and here I find you fucking another woman.”

Gwen tried to look as diminutive as possible as she slipped past the two of them arguing. V didn’t look angry with the younger woman, rightfully placing all the blame on him.

“You’re not being fair, V. You rejected me—*again*,” he growled, his brow setting into a deep frown. “When all I ever wanted was to be with you. From the very beginning, you held back from me. Kept your secrets. Never shared what was hurting you.” Troy dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms

around her hips. Hugging her close, he pressed his cheek against the soft curve of her abdomen. She held her hands off to the side, refusing to touch him. “Please, give us a chance. We’ve both made mistakes—let this be mine.”

“I just caught you fucking Gwen. No matter how messed up things were between us, I haven’t slept with Keith—not once since being with you.”

“What?” He looked up, confusion etched on his features. “Only today you said you were fucking people.”

“I was lying. Lashing out!” V countered angrily. She gripped his shoulders. “You hurt me, Troy! I turned to Keith because he’s safe. I don’t want to be broken again. It took me a long time to pick up the pieces after Mack. Look at me, I’m still doing it!” She shook her head in frustration.

“*Ah fuck,*” a gravelly voice cut in from behind them, and Shadow stepped into the entrance, completely unaffected by the drama unfolding before him. “You two are pathetic. Give the boy a chance, V. You know we’re not the same as your resident-born males. Too many crossed wires. The poor guy is in love with you. And if you don’t care for him, you need to let him go.”

“I care for him. But I’ve loved a man before, and it almost destroyed me,” she snapped at Shadow.

“Then the two of you need to get together, work through your shit, and leave innocent bystanders like Gwen and Keith out of it. Anyway, I’m heading over to the Farmstead, doing my rounds for the next couple of nights. Feel free to use our place, but no hanky-panky in my bed,” he growled and then left them as he found them.

Troy still clung to her, his arms tightening around his hips. This was the moment. V could go with her heart, risk getting it shattered again, and gamble everything to be with him. Or she could truly end this and let him go. Forever.

AND THE TABLES TURN

V

EXCEPT TROY TURNED THE TABLES.

He unraveled and stood at his full height, a serious expression overtaking his features.

V swallowed hard. Troy looked unapologetic and in control, like a lever had been switched. Like he was done with confusion and uncertainty—done with playing.

Of course, her traitorous body responded to this more dominant side of his nature and hummed with pleasure. V didn't want to be in control. She wanted to relinquish all her power and let him decide for them both.

Troy returned to the stall and came out, tugging his shirt down over his lean abdomen. Then he reached for his jacket, which hung on a hook just outside the stall, and stalked toward V. He grabbed her hand and drew her outside, over to a motorcycle parked around the back of the barn. A refurbished, black old-style Harley—a low rider. Troy straddled it, kicked the bike stand, and started the engine, and looked at her pointedly. When she didn't move, he arched a questioning brow.

“You scared?” he taunted in a dangerously low whisper.

V's back stiffened, and her chin lifted a notch. Was she going to do this? Let him take the lead? She huffed out an exhale, and before she could stop herself, she was wordlessly straddling the seat behind him. Troy handed her a helmet over

his shoulder, looking askance at her. It bothered V that he had a spare, and she wondered who else he'd been giving lifts to.

V frowned. Visions of Gwen straddling him swam before her eyes. *This is a mistake*. She moved to get off the bike, but Troy's hand flew to her thigh.

"You're not going anywhere except to my place. And to my bed." He grabbed her hand and then twisted in the other direction to shackle the other one, drawing them both around his middle. Against her better judgment, V rested her cheek on his back and inhaled his scent, even more masculine now. *Troy*, all leather and spice. God, she'd missed him something awful.

He put on a half helmet and adjusted a bandanna over the lower half of his face, and revving the engine, they took off. V indulged in the feel of him driving down the gravel roadway, unhurried and easy. Damn, but she loved a man on a motorbike.

Once they arrived at his unit, Troy removed their gear, took V by the hand, and pulled her into his suite. V stopped just inside the entrance, her heart hammering in her chest as Troy loomed over her. He reached past her shoulder, slid the door closed and locked the latch at her back, caging her between his large body and the glass.

"Wait for me here," he whispered into her ear, his breath tickling her skin. Troy slowly backed away, gaze locked on V as if she might bolt. He stepped inside the bathroom, and the tap turned on abruptly. From where she stood, V could hear him moving around in the small space.

When Troy stepped out, he was shirtless, with his zipper undone. His chest and abdomen were glistening with water, and he used a small towel to dry himself off. Troy pushed it beneath his open waistband, and V realized he'd been washing away the remnants of Gwen. Who, less than an hour ago, straddled him, naked. V should have been appalled, but she found herself captivated by the movements of his hand. The way it swiped over his abdomen, wiping away all the evidence with a sensual grace that stirred something deep within her.

Troy tossed the damp towel onto the floor and adjusted the goods in his pants. The whole time he'd been watching V watching him with a wolfish gleam in his eyes.

V trembled. She should have run. Instead, her feet rooted in place, and her heart pounded like a jackhammer as Troy stepped into her space. He held her face in his hands before lowering his head to take possession of her mouth. Softly, tentatively at first, then he ravaged hers with a punishing kiss, all teeth and tongue and savage desire. V's body ached for him. Instead of pushing him away, which she should have done, she clung to him as though he were air itself.

V ended the kiss, shaking her head, trying to regain her senses.

"There's no reason for us not to be together, and you're going to forgive me my one indiscretion," he whispered against her mouth. "I couldn't even fuck her. My dick went limp."

He took her jawline into his hands and tilted her face upward until she stared into his eyes. "And I won't apologize again."

V nodded almost helplessly, knowing she was partially to blame for rejecting him repeatedly. He'd been right. She shouldn't have made choices for him without talking to him. She was just so desperate to protect her heart.

"You know I want you and only you." Troy brushed his lips along the seam of hers before he plundered her mouth again, and she met him, with each forceful plunge of his tongue, loving every second of the sharp need riding them both.

Next thing V knew, Troy wrapped his arms around her hips. Hefting her up, he walked them toward his single bed. She braced her hands on his broad shoulders and stared into his ever-changing eyes: this time, a dark, turbulent green.

He turned them around and sunk down on his bed. It creaked under their combined weight as he eased V onto her feet between his knees.

“Take your clothes off.”

A demand.

With her chest rising and falling, V stripped for him for the first time since they'd been together. Feeling a little shy and awkward, she slowly peeled off her top and allowed him to look his fill at her full, swaying breasts, her nipples pebbling as if reaching out for him. Gwen may be slimmer than V, but V knew she had better tits. She toed off her boots, pushed down her pants and stood completely naked in front of him.

Troy hissed, and without hesitation tugged her forward, and as if he'd always owned them, sucked a nipple into his hot, wet mouth. One taut nipple, and then the other, lapping at them greedily, worshipping each distended bud with his tongue while making appreciative moans.

As always, the sound of him took her to the edge of desire. V loved how he showed her the pleasure he was gaining from her body.

Troy cupped her breasts in his hands, calloused from hours of working on the farm. Adding to the sensation when he greedily squeezed both peaks together into his voracious mouth. He wasn't gentle either.

V gripped his shoulders, making little mewling sounds as his mouth tugged hungrily at her body, his stubble abrading the undersides of her breasts and sending shock waves shooting down to the very tips of her toes and pooling heavily between her legs.

“Oh my God, I think I'm going to come,” V gasped, her clit thrumming with excitement, already on the edge of climax. “I—I can't...” V felt unable to breathe and arched farther into his wicked mouth. Troy shifted and positioned her over one muscular thigh.

“Come on me,” he growled at her, and she shook her head in refusal. She didn't come on command. “Fucking—come on my thigh, V!”

The pull of his mouth on her tits was spectacular, and the next thing V knew, he'd forced her down until she rode the

rough denim fabric on his hard thigh, grinding her naked pussy onto him with such ferocity she came within seconds.

“Troy,” she gasped, jerking in his arms, his mouth releasing her tits with a pop. He tucked his face into the line of her throat, thumbs brushing roughly over the wet, pebbling peaks, drawing out the sensations until he twisted and laid her back on his bed.

V stared up at the ceiling, reveling in the aftermath. She closed her eyes and stroked down the backs of his damp shoulders and arms.

“My turn,” he said greedily. She heard the thud of his boots hit the floor, and with a tug, V was sprawled out beneath him, spread eagle, and suddenly he was inside her, filling her so fast, to the point of pain—moving, grinding into her, until she felt him come deep, trembling as he thrust into her once, twice, three times. His hands gripped her hips, fingers biting into her soft flesh with each forceful ejaculation.

He spun them around until she was on top of him, and she adjusted to the new position. With her legs cupping the outside of his thighs, she leaned over him, contentedly resting her chin on her clasped fingers, snuggled against his chest and watched him. Troy still had his pants on and impatiently kicked them off beneath her until they were both completely naked. V jerked when he unexpectedly reached down over the crack of her backside and tested her folds where his dick still lingered inside her body.

“Easy, I’m making sure it’s real. My dick inside your pussy.” He gave her a languid smile. “Making sure we’re real.”

V muttered, “You’re going to think I’m ungrateful” —she rubbed her chin against his chest— “but I think I can come again.”

“Really? Who’s got a greedy little cunt?” he teased.

V raised her eyebrows, always a little surprised by his choice of words, but she could see him grinning sideways and arching his brow playfully. He pulled out with a groan, rolling

them both onto their sides and reached down to touch her clit. “I see. You’re still swollen.”

She moaned at his featherlight touch. She was so primed and ready.

Troy scooted off the bed and dragged her pelvis to the end of the mattress. “Open for me.”

Without a second thought, V draped her legs over his shoulders, and Troy shoved his face into her sex, rubbing his stubble against her inner thigh. “I love the way you smell. Like a horny female. All musky and fucked.” Then he lapped at her clit. “And you taste like—*hmm*—like V. And a bit of me.” He licked into her again. “A lot of me.”

“You like rhyming, do you?” she asked with a hitched sigh. He said such outrageous things. All rational thought left as he penetrated her with two fingers, while his hot tongue lapped at the hood of her clit. In a few wet strokes, she came into his mouth with his fingers curled deep into her sex, rubbing what had to be her G-spot and prolonging her orgasm. The orgasm was different, riding so close on the tails of the other one that it stole her breath away. It was sharper, deeper, as her sex clamped down on his fingers, pulsing greedily and drawing them in.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t inside of you for that one,” he muttered shamelessly against her pussy, before planting an innocent kiss on it. “You came hard on my fingers.”

V glanced down at him, and for a while, they were silent until he met her gaze. Of course, he brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them.

V swallowed, not about to be distracted. “I heard many things about you, Troy. Over this past month... is there anything else I should know?”

Troy’s lips thinned as he looped his arms around her thighs and rested his chin against her mound. He studied her for a moment. “You want to know about Gwen?”

V nodded. “And about... the others?”

Troy frowned. “I only kissed Gwen because I was curious.”

“And...?”

“It was nothing—nothing—like when I kiss you.” That wasn’t what she meant by “and,” but V liked his answer. She just naturally assumed there were more women than Gwen.

“And what about you? You kissed Keith right in front of me. More than once.” He crawled up her body, his face lingering between her breasts before he settled on top of her, and rested his cheek there.

V huffed. “Those weren’t passionate kisses. Just friendly, familiar kisses.”

“On the lips?” Troy lifted himself up and glared down at her, his features tight. “To be clear, the only one with skin privileges from now on is me. I don’t care how comfortable you are with Keith.”

“I like it when you’re possessive,” V admitted.

“Good, because you’re mine now, and I don’t want to share.” Troy sounded deadly serious, and that was fine by V. She didn’t want to share either.

“Okay.” She propped herself onto her forearms and gently kissed his mouth. “Neither do I. And on that subject, did you sleep with her? Gwen?”

“I didn’t fuck her if that’s what you want to know. She stayed with me after you rejected me the second time at the dance. I was angry... so I let her sleep over for a couple of nights. Today is the closest I came to...”

“All right, we’ve already covered that one, but never let me catch you between another woman’s legs again—because there are no more excuses, angry or not.” She reached down between his legs. “Because these” —she weighed his balls in the palm of her hand— “are mine.”

UNINVITED GUESTS

TROY

THEY LAY in each other's arms, the soft and inviting duvet still under them, providing welcome cushioning from the bumpy mattress. The wood stove in the room's corner whispered and crackled as it burned, its faint light casting an orange glow over their naked, glistening bodies.

"Now what?" Troy rubbed his chin into her hair. He inhaled the scent of his woman, and she was *his* woman now. With her in his arms, he was sublimely content.

"Well, I know there's a couples accommodation open since Keith and I will no longer be needing it. It's a small cabin, but big enough for the two of us. Plus, it has a queen-size bed. Anything has to be better than this." She jostled her backside, and the narrow bed frame groaned beneath them. She hadn't noticed the noise earlier, too distracted by Troy.

Troy stared down at his feet and wiggled his toes. He chuckled to himself, having grown accustomed to the sensation of his heels hanging off the end of the bed.

"The first thing we need to get is a bigger bed," V said, pursing her lips. "Maybe a king?"

"Either way, I'm going to fuck you every which way I can on that bed." A sly grin grew on Troy's face.

"Promises, promises, baby."

"Did you just call me baby?" He arched a brow at her.

“Yes, I did. Or maybe I’ll call you babes.” V circled a finger in his springy patch of chest hair, enjoying the feel of its length.

“And what am I supposed to call you?” Troy pursed his lips and pulled them sideways. “I’ve never had to think of a pet name before. Maybe—”

“Shh, was that a knock on the door?” V lifted onto her forearm.

They stopped and listened intently.

“You expecting somebody? Wouldn’t be Shadow, would it? Let’s pretend like we’re not here,” V whispered, giggling quietly as she flopped back down, pressing her lush breasts into his side.

The knocking came again. Louder and more insistent than before. Whomever it was, it didn’t sound like they were going away.

“Trust me, Shadow wouldn’t knock.” Troy sighed and begrudgingly sat up. “Ahhh, I’ll go check,” he groaned, scratching his chest. “What time is it anyway?” He checked the alarm clock on the nightstand. “It’s late, could be about dinner?” He stood up with an audible stretch, earning him a hum of appreciation from V.

“You’ve got the nicest ass,” she said.

Troy scratched it, winking back at her, before finding a pair of sweats and pulling them on. He cracked open the dividing door and peered out to see who it was, but Shadow had pulled the curtains shut.

Troy padded over to the curtains and drew a panel to the side. Outside, Keith, Becks, and Sam stood waiting—all with grim faces.

“Who is it?” V leaned against the doorjamb, clutching a blanket around her body. From where she stood, she glimpsed Keith.

“Jeez, I don’t think this has anything to do with us.” She gestured quickly between the two of them. “He looks worried

about something, not mad.”

Keith knocked again. “I can hear the two of you whispering in there. Open up! It’s important.”

Troy let out a long breath. “You better get dressed, because whatever it is, they look pretty serious.”

V PULLED on one of Troy’s T-shirts, which came down to her mid-thighs, displaying her lean legs. “Maybe you should put on some pants,” he suggested.

“Keith has seen me in less, remember” V retorted. “Plus this is perfectly acceptable.” Troy narrowed his eyes, ready to argue about her attire, or better, lack thereof, when a hand banged impatiently on the glass.

Troy cautiously opened the sliding door. His eyes, one still puffy from his run-in with Keith, surveyed the newcomers with caution. He was relieved to see that Keith looked just as banged up as he did; one of his eyes was still mostly swollen shut and an angry gash ran along his temple.

“What is it?” Troy peered out with his good eye.

Keith replied first, “Bad news.” He looked past Troy to V and couldn’t disguise his disappointment at finding her there. He sighed. “We’ve got movement on the grid.”

“Now?” V marched into the center of the room. She motioned with her chin for Troy to open the sliding door fully. He pushed the curtain to one side so everyone had a clear view of each other. “It’s kind of convenient, Keith, don’t you think?” She folded her arms across her chest and cocked an eyebrow accusingly.

Raw frustration flashed in Keith’s eyes as he stared at V. “Come on, V, you know I can’t make this shit up. Both of you need to come to the control room. And now. You can check the monitors for yourselves if you don’t believe me.”

Troy ran a hand through his hair as he spoke up, trying to ease the tension in the room. “What’s the activity?”

Becks answered this time but spoke directly to V. “The Coalition is coming in strong. They’ve picked up canvassing for runners. It looks like they haven’t abandoned their search for your man.” Becks flicked her eyes at Troy. “News coming through the wire is that they’re cracking down on escapees. We have two pregnant females en route now, but if they keep pushing north, it’ll put us all at risk.”

“What does this mean for me?” Troy looked to V for some kind of response. But she stayed quiet, her gaze directed at the ground, eyes creased as if she was thinking hard.

“It means it’s time for you to leave. Temporarily,” Keith clarified. “And the Landing will go underground for a while.”

“Underground?”

“Bunkers. Like the one you and V stayed in, outside the safe house.”

V stepped up beside Troy and placed a reassuring hand on his forearm.

Keith went on, “We’ve got a few safe houses west of the Landing. We’re hoping we can lure them farther away until they give up on the chase. We’ve got teams set up for this type of situation, but we will need to use you, Shadow, and some of our more recent arrivals to act as bait. There are too many families, virile males, and children to risk here at the Landing.”

“I understand,” Troy replied with a crushed expression.

V stepped in even closer to him, her eyes meeting his. She stood on her toes and pushed the stray locks of hair out of his face. “You don’t have to do this alone, Troy. We’ll have each other.”

“We?” He shook his head. “No, you’re not coming with me.”

Keith gave a slight nod in agreement, and V frowned in displeasure. “Just today, you were saying how freedom was having the power to choose things for yourself. Well, count me in, big boy, because I’m not staying here without you.”

Troy embraced her in a tight hug, not wanting to let go. He whispered in her ear, “We can discuss this, right?”

“Yes, honey. We can talk about it for as long as you need,” V replied before looking over at Keith. “Give us a few moments to pull ourselves together, and then we’ll join you in the control room.”

Keith nodded and turned to leave. Sam stepped out behind him, but Becks lingered. She waited to meet V’s gaze, and said unexpectedly, “I’m truly sorry about all this,” then left with the rest of them.

BREADCRUMBS

TROY

LATER THAT EVENING, Keith led them into the control room, which was a flurry of activity. Several small monitors lined the walls and flickered, showing visuals from security cameras placed throughout the Dead Zones. Some screens were dark and lifeless, their cameras obviously disabled. It was a disaster. The Coalition had discovered the system and was actively working to dismantle it.

There was talk about the grid around the compound. The Network had an encrypted system of its own, separate from the Coalition's. Although it was limited, they had motion sensors spread throughout key parts of the region. As well as a series of strategically placed outdoor cameras, which they tapped into and used the live feeds for surveillance. So, it would appear the Dead Zones weren't as technologically obsolete as the Coalition wanted everyone to believe.

Troy had never stepped foot into a control room before. He only ever caught glimpses of them during his years at the facilities, when the guards opened the door to hurry in or out of the mysterious rooms filled with beeping and flashing lights.

Troy had heard mention of a surveillance room at the Landing, but he'd never seen it for himself. All this time it had been tucked away in a small corner of the Lodge, just opposite the lounge.

Inside the compact room, jumbled wires snaked across the floor and ran up to the ceiling, connecting the monitors bracketed to the walls. Some screens were decades old, with thick glass surfaces and knobs on their sides. Others were sleek and modern, their faces aglow with the light from constantly scrolling black-and-white images. Here, a deserted street. There, a cluster of trees.

A technical mastermind named Frankie oversaw the entire system. V had described Frankie to Troy as a genius with an offbeat sense of humor. As it was, Frankie was a young male with a slim and wiry build. A worn pair of coveralls engulfed his compact frame, and wire-rimmed glasses sat haphazardly on the bridge of his narrow nose. Troy was still getting accustomed to seeing such scrawny, gangly males. In the Coalition, all men were required to follow a strict physical regime and stay in peak condition. In his current state, Frankie would have been deemed unacceptable by Coalition standards, possibly leading to indefinite rehabilitation.

“Good to finally meet you, Keymaster.” Frankie held out his hand to Troy once V formally introduced them. Troy clasped the male’s hand and gave it a firm shake.

Frankie pulled his hand away with a wince. “You’ve got an iron grip.” He shook out his fingers and smiled at V. “So... what’s new with my favorite Gatekeeper?” His gaze strayed between Troy and V before he winked and grinned mischievously.

“Shouldn’t you be worrying about the sensors and live feeds malfunctioning, and not my sex life?” V asked with an unexpected hint of playfulness in her voice. It was obvious she had a fondness for the small male.

“As you wish.” Frankie stood ramrod straight and gave V a mock salute. “It’s only that I’ve heard the key has opened the gates of love.”

V rolled her eyes and teasingly pinched his bicep.

“Ouch!” He rubbed at the offended spot.

“Be grateful it’s only a pinch. Now make yourself useful.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Frankie changed direction and returned to his duties; his lightheartedness evaporated instantly, and he was all business.

“Come on, babes.” V smiled. She reached for Troy’s hand, interlaced their fingers, and led him out of the control room.

As they crossed the corridor and into the lounge, Troy drew the back of V’s hand up to his lips for a kiss that lingered just long enough to catch the attention of some onlookers. Shadow, who was sitting at a nearby table, cracked an amused smile. Sam, seated next to him, gave Troy a polite nod of acknowledgment. On the other side of the table, Becks huffed. Keith hadn’t seen the quick exchange, but when he turned away from looking at a map, his expression shifted. Sparks of envy lit his eyes as they darted toward Troy and V’s clasped hands. It took Troy every ounce of restraint not to pound his chest with pride.

She had chosen him.

Regaining his composure, Troy noticed a stranger sat amid the group. She was petite, with delicate features, light brown eyes, a button nose, and freckles that dusted her golden cheeks. She wore her mousy blonde hair in a blunt cut that ended just above her ears. Although pretty, she was a wash of the same palette. When their eyes met, she nodded almost imperceptibly before refocusing on the conversation.

V pulled out the chair next to Keith and patted the cushion, inviting Troy to take the seat. She then spun around in one smooth motion and perched herself on his knee. Troy’s hand caught her thigh to steady her as she leaned forward to examine the map with Keith.

The Captain may have had her attention at that moment, but V was Troy’s. He loved the way her tousled hair fell over her shoulders and the natural radiance of her skin that seemed to come from within. Her insatiable sexual appetite matched his own. But with V, it wasn’t just about physical release but was more about the connection they shared during sex. A bone-deep intimacy that couldn’t be replicated with anyone else.

Still, it felt odd, being demonstrative in public. Women of the Coalition could touch and fondle men freely, unless the males' Keepers forbade them from touching their breeders. But they expected men to keep their hands to themselves, unless granted express permission to do otherwise.

Troy's mouth twisted as years of memories of being groped and violated bombarded him. He couldn't, wouldn't, allow it to happen again. Not after tasting freedom. Not after finding love. Finding V.

"You all right, my man?" Shadow interrupted Troy's spiraling thoughts.

"Yeah, sure." Troy shifted slightly in his seat, trying not to jostle V, and replaced his scowl with an affable grin.

"Because for a moment there, you looked like you were going to rip somebody's head off," Shadow chuckled, then resumed talking to Sam.

While V and Keith spoke in hushed tones, occasionally pointing at something on the map, Troy's gaze swept across the room. Females sat at every table, apart from their own. A parade of Landing residents moved down the corridor, carrying supplies, preparing to go underground. The Lodge hummed with activity.

Troy's gaze settled on the unknown female who sat across from him. "So, who are you?"

She stared at him, not uttering a single word.

Shadow's voice was heavy with resignation as he flippantly gestured to the woman. "This is Eve," he said. She'll be taking Sam's place. Keith is adamant about not allowing resident-born breeders on the team. Instead, Sam will provide remote assistance from the control room. And fuck, man, we couldn't ask for better than that." Shadow patted Sam on the shoulder.

"You know I got you, Shade." A wide grin spread across Sam's face and his chest puffed out with pride.

Troy watched the two males together and wondered, not for the first time, whether there was something more between

them. The Coalition forbade homosexuality among men, whereas it was commonplace and encouraged between women. But in the Dead Zones, love was love for both genders—as it should be everywhere, because if it was acceptable for women, then why not for men?

Shadow resumed explaining Eve's presence, "Apparently she's a skilled fighter, part of the Landing's patrol crew, but hardly speaks."

"Strike out apparently, and I can speak perfectly fine when I want to," Eve corrected Shadow, her voice unexpectedly gentle and melodic, in stark contrast to her cool, reserved persona.

"And did I mention that she's an absolute delight?" Shadow said.

Was Shadow subtly bantering with a woman? Who'd have thought? Troy gave V's thigh a quick squeeze, causing her to squirm her curvaceous derriere against him. She took hold of his hand and held it. "And," she announced to the team, "we're finished."

Keith leaned back in his chair and glanced around the table. "Okay," he began, and everyone in the small group ceased their conversations to give him their full attention. "This is how it's going to go down. Each group will move in different directions. Yours will head west. Our goal is to keep the Coalition away from Freedom's Landing and stretch out their resources as much as possible."

"So, we'll be heading west, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs? And how?" Shadow inquired.

Troy subtly watched the dynamics play out between Shadow and Eve. Eve kept a close eye on Shadow as if he were an untamed animal, something that could lash out at any moment. As strange as it seemed, Shadow responded in kind, refraining from locking eyes with her. Both were visibly uncomfortable with the presence of the other.

Troy smirked. If the situation weren't so dire, then the two of them would have been fun to watch.

“Your scent will be the breadcrumbs. If they have hounds, we can get them on your trail, easy, and moving west... This thing has to peter out eventually.” Keith sighed heavily. “Once we convince the Coalition not to look this way, we’ll start covering your tracks and bring you back home.”

“Home,” Troy repeated quietly, and met Keith’s gaze. He never had a place he could truly call a home of his own.

Keith nodded. “We have an empty cabin waiting for the two of you to come back to, so...” He scanned over the map and chewed the inside of his cheek.

V reached for Keith’s hand, and she gave it a gentle squeeze. When he looked up at her, his expression grew solemn, but his eyes said everything—the admiration and love he had for her was still evident. Keith, it turned out, was an honorable man. If their situations had been reversed, Troy doubted he could have been so forgiving.

Earlier in his arms, V confided in him about her conversation with Keith. At first, he’d reacted poorly, consumed by a mix of anger, hurt, and jealousy. But his outrage subsided, and he came to the realization that they’d never work out if she had feelings for Troy. Not wanting to lose face as the Captain of Freedom’s Landing, he’d begrudgingly agreed to a strictly platonic friendship and even offered them the cabin he’d earmarked for himself and V. To say Troy had been shocked by Keith’s unexpected generosity was an understatement, but Keith made it clear that if Troy ever hurt V, he’d make things difficult for him at the Landing.

“You’ll all be on motorbikes,” Keith continued. “Easier to split up if you need to in a hurry. And this is where you’re heading.” Keith tapped on the map. “Frankie has uploaded the coordinates to your handhelds, so you’ll know where to go. Just be cautious. Over the years, we’ve picked up activity out that way and have yet to figure out who it is. Our best guess is other survivors, living off-grid like us but not part of the Network.”

“Great, as if we didn’t have enough worries,” Shadow stated what they were all probably thinking. “So, unless

you've got some more good news for us, Cap, I guess it's time we pull our shit together." Shadow pushed out of his chair. "The faster we get started, the better." He looked over at Eve and winced. He was not happy about her.

"Stay the night," Keith said. "Get a hot meal into you. And you'll start first thing in the morning. I don't want you traveling in the dark."

"Thanks, Keith," V said, and rose out of Troy's lap. He stood up with her and reached for her hand.

"Well," Shadow said, "here's to a good dinner tonight."

Food was a necessity, but Troy had other things he planned on eating.

ONCE THE TEAM had their gear in order and were prepared to leave for the next day, it was time for dinner. Dining room policy was, if you weren't planning to eat dinner within your allotted slot, you could always collect a plate and help yourself.

Troy and V stayed in his suite for dinner so that they could enjoy each other's company for the rest of the night. Another resident had already taken over V's apartment.

Once their plates were empty, Troy laid a naked V back onto his narrow mattress, lightly teasing the gentle arches of her feet with kisses, while she wiggled and complained of being ticklish. Grinning up at her, he sank down to the floor between her legs and took her pussy with a single worshipful lick. Giggles bubbled up from V's throat as he grabbed her hips and drew her down to better meet his mouth. With her legs draped over his shoulders, Troy leaned in and ate around her clit, his tongue darting around the distended nub as she held his hair and rolled her cunt into his face. He stayed there, tasting every inch of her until she came with a soft moan. After wiping his face off on the insides of her thighs, Troy went in for seconds, even though he knew her clit was ultra sensitive. V wrung her fingers through his hair and tugged at

the short strands, her head thrashing back and forth as she tried to shove him away.

“This feels different, Troy. I think I need to pee.”

V’s body started to tense and buck against Troy’s mouth as he applied increased pressure with his tongue and lips, expertly manipulating her most intimate bud. She let out a desperate cry of pleasure and dug her fingernails into the sheets, muffling her moans by biting her bottom lip.

“Troy,” she called out, heedless of Shadow in the next room. Over an hour ago, the sliding door had opened and closed. He’d showered and then must have headed straight to bed.

Still, Troy reached up and covered her mouth with the palm of his hand, muffling her cries of pleasure. As a fellow e-breeder, Shadow was accustomed to the sounds of sex, but V was Troy’s woman, and her sounds were his and his alone.

Troy quickened his pace, the suction of his mouth and tongue intensifying as her hips rose off the mattress. Her breathing became labored, and a steady stream of mindless pleas exhaled from her parted lips. Troy relentlessly pursued the peaks and valleys of her pleasure until a liquid jet shot out of her sex and spilled down his chin, neck, and chest, followed by violent throes of ecstasy that shook her entire body. Troy rode the wave of euphoria with her, continuing to tongue her sensitive bud until it nearly disappeared into her arousal-slicked sex. She moaned against his hand, gasping for air as her body twitched in bliss.

Troy gingerly removed his hand and crawled up her heaving body, his mouth swooping in to swallow her dying cries.

Once she caught her breath, she gazed up into his eyes in a sexual stupor. “I’m so sorry. I’ve never done that before... I had to pee so bad and it—”

“That wasn’t urine, Valentine. You just ejaculated for me,” he said with a wide, arrogant smirk and smug male satisfaction as he crawled up her body.

She ran her fingers along his shoulders and down to the dimples above his ass, but she refused to meet his gaze. “I know it happens, but certainly not for me.”

“Well, it just did. And spectacularly.”

She huffed, and then glanced up at him as he braced himself on his forearms above her. “So, Valentine? Is that it? My new pet name?”

“Yep. Came to me just like that.” Troy snapped his fingers and nudged her a bit. She shimmied over and made space for him to rest on his back and draped over him as soon as he settled.

V hummed, “I guess it could be worse.” She stroked down his belly. A line of gooseflesh trailed after her fanned-out fingertips, his stomach contracting beneath the featherlight caress.

Troy could almost hear the wheels turning in V’s mind.

“I want to do the same for you.”

“What? Call me Valentine? Sorry, babes, it’s already taken.” His lips hitched up at the corners.

“No, make you come and rock your world.” She pushed herself up, nimbly straddling his hips, and playfully swiped at his chest. Reaching between their bodies, she took hold of his now fully erect member and tucked its weeping head into her slick channel. She churned over him and threw her head back when he surged upward, penetrating her so deep, Troy swore he felt the opening to her uterus.

“So unfair. I wanted to draw it out. Make it good for you.”

Troy rotated his hips against hers, and she gasped, her head arching back. Since they’d started fucking, she’d grown easier and easier to please.

“Trust me, as long as it’s you on the end of my dick, it’s all good.” Troy grinned to himself as he felt her body cling to his girth. Every movement he made was for a singular purpose; to make her come. But the sensations caused by each shuttling pump were out of this world, and Troy became more and more

fevered. He placed his palms around her face, encouraging her to move closer until their foreheads met. His once-quiet lover moaned incessantly, and the sound drove him wild.

Troy increased his tempo, pounding into her until he felt himself tipping over the edge. He reached between them and found her swollen nub. With a few well-placed flicks of his thumb, she became putty in his hands.

“Stop playing!” V rode him harder, her face a mask of sheer concentration.

Troy’s balls tightened as she mercilessly slammed down on him, and he cried out as he came despite himself. She lifted off him and they both watched as ropes of cum spurted out. Some coating her belly and thighs, while the rest landed on his abdomen.

Troy closed his eyes and drew a few ragged breaths, trying to regain his composure before resuming their lovemaking. But once he cracked them open, V was already arching back while caressing her clit with deft fingers. Her eyes were tightly shut, as if she was savoring every sensation that coursed through her. Her chest heaved up and down, the warmth of passion radiating from deep within and flushing her skin a rosy pink. She bit down on her full lower lip in ecstasy, and trembles ran through her toned legs as she tightened them around his thighs. With a quiver and almost pained exhale, she became boneless and collapsed onto his chest.

She was utterly breathtaking.

Troy pushed aside a couple of damp strands that clung to the side of her neck as V hummed contently. He could detect a smile in her voice as she whispered against his chest, “Now *that* was dinner.”

“I enjoyed it too. Coming on you makes me feel like a rule-breaker. I’ve never had sex like that before,” he said with a crooked smile, gazing down at her.

V silenced him by placing her finger on his lips. “*Shh*. I don’t want to hear about your past sexual experiences right now. I want to enjoy this feeling.”

“No? *Hmm?* Everything feels like the first time with you,” he said against her finger, which smelled of him, so he sucked it into his mouth and nipped. With a kiss to her fingertip, Troy took a breath and looked up at the ceiling, the immensity of what he was about to say enveloping him. It was something he’d always hoped he’d have the chance to utter, but in the darkest days of his captivity, he could never have dreamed he’d get the chance. Be so lucky.

“I love you, V. I truly love you.”

V twisted, slipping onto her side, and met his eyes. “I love you too,” she told him with a contented sigh.

Troy leaned in to kiss her. “My love,” he whispered, and had her under him in a split second, just where he liked her. “I’m going to fuck you one more time tonight.” It was a promise.

“You looking to make tomorrow a hard ride for me? I’m still recovering from the orgasms you’ve already given me.” She chuckled softly.

“How about I make it quick and painless?” he whispered, and had her under him in a split second, just where he liked her. “If you let me, I can come again in a few quick strokes?” Troy gave her his best endearing smile, hoping to convince her.

“How is that even possible?” she countered. “You just came.”

Troy thrust his hardening length strategically over her clitoris. “Oversexed e-breeder, remember?”

“Of course. How could I forget?” V withdrew her sensitive nub away from his ministrations. “*That* is a problem, needing to come.” She brushed back a few damp strands clinging to his forehead. “But I don’t think I can come again so quickly.”

Troy smiled. “Challenge accepted, again.”

But soon she maneuvered him onto his back and, before he knew it, took his dick into her mouth. Troy wasn’t about to complain. He closed his eyes, relishing the sensation of her lips wrapped around his length, and the way her tongue moved

in a slow, steady rhythm up and down his shaft. Troy felt a familiar ache in his groin as she deepened her suction. And just like that, he was close to release.

Heat radiated from her body as she moved against him, her mouth working its magic on his cock. With a deep guttural moan, he reached his climax, and she swallowed his seed, licking him clean. She was so incredibly sexy. He felt a wave of pleasure wash over him, and he lay there, panting, eyes still closed, basking in the afterglow of his orgasm.

When he opened his eyes, V was looking at him with a satisfied smile on her face. “You were right—a few quick strokes.”

Troy flipped V on her back within seconds. “Your turn, sweet Valentine.”

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

V

V PERCHED GINGERLY on her motorcycle's saddle. She hadn't been joking when she'd told Troy he was going to make it hard for her to ride the next day. While she enjoyed the pleasure he'd brought her the night before, but her lady bits weren't used to such a vigorous workout. By the time they'd stop to set up camp, she was sure her genitalia would be numb.

V let out a quiet snort of frustration.

It wasn't only her lower extremities that were suffering, her stomach was off too. Since V had woken up, she'd been fighting off nausea. She ate her standard breakfast of toast and eggs, but the queasiness hadn't gone away. Something had upset her stomach. At least that was what V was hoping for, because the last thing she needed was to be sick while they were on the road and on the run.

"Looking good, Valentine." Troy pulled up on his motorcycle, the perfect combination of man and machine. He was dressed in black/brown camo, his leather bandanna masked the lower part of his face, and those chameleon eyes of his danced with delight. V wanted to jump off her bike and ride him instead.

The corners of his eyes crinkled, and an emerald spark glinted in their depths, as though he could read her mind. V loved his ever-changing eyes. She licked her lips as she gave him a playful meow. He was so fucking sexy.

Troy chuckled.

“Sure you don’t want to ride bitch?” V arched a brow, which earned her a dubious look.

“How about you ride bitch with me instead?” Troy countered. “I’ve got room in the back.” He tipped his chin over his shoulder.

“The only bitch here is me,” Shadow interrupted when he pulled up on his bike with Eve on his tail. “For getting no shut-eye because of you two going at it like rabbits for most of the night.”

“Always such a way with words, Shadow.” V blinked at him with innocent eyes and held her helmet above her head. “I see you’ve got your girl with you.” She winked just before she put it on and covered her face.

Shadow blanched. “Do not start with me, V!” He slammed on his helmet.

Keith and Becks walked over, and everyone cut their engines.

“Everyone got what they need?” Keith asked, scanning over the group.

“We’re good, Captain,” Troy spoke up, and it was the first time V had ever heard him address Keith by his title. It was a show of respect that Troy hadn’t expressed before. Keith gave him a brief nod, no warmth in his face, but then, they didn’t need to be bosom buddies.

Keith looked from one person to the next. “We need you all to come back safe,” he said seriously. “Listen to Eve. She might not talk much, but she’s got good instincts. That’s why I put her on your team. And the safe house should be stocked enough to get you through the next few weeks.”

“We’ll be back before you know it.” V’s voice sounded hollow from behind the helmet. She pulled on her gloves and reached for the ignition. She ran it up and down, listening for anything off, but everything was as it should be. V gave Keith a thumbs-up and started forward, the entire team falling in line behind her. And then they were gone.

IT HAD BEEN LESS than an hour since they'd begun their journey when V signaled an unplanned stop.

“Are you okay?” Troy stopped and stepped off his bike, tugging his bandanna below his chin. V read the concern in his eyes. He knew she was feeling under the weather.

She lifted her helmet off her head and shook out her hair. “A bit nauseous. I need some air and I have to pee, so...” She gestured toward the trees, her face wrinkling up as the urge to vomit came on even stronger. “I won't be gone long,” she assured him, but barely made it into the woods before she had to stop and toss her cookies.

V bent over and retched; the sourness of bile rising in her throat. She heaved until she was spent. Heaved until sweat dripped down her forehead and into her eyes. Her stomach clenched, and her legs shook as she gripped a tree trunk for support. God, she hated being sick. And with no tissues in hand, she wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her jacket.

Straightening out, V stumbled over to another tree, upwind from the stench, and leaned back against it. She took deep, steadying breaths while her gaze drew to the sky above. White billowy clouds dotted the brilliant blue canvas. With a sigh, she found comfort in the simple display of nature. Somehow it helped to quell her queasiness but the horrible aftertaste still lingered at the back of her tongue.

Heavy footfalls approached from behind.

“V?” Troy's voice sounded anxious.

“I'm here,” she replied.

Troy came into view, holding some rags. His eyes widened with concern when he saw her leaning against the tree trunk. “Did you throw up?”

“I didn't even get to pee,” she murmured wearily. “I think I'm coming down with something. I hope it isn't the flu.” She shut her eyes for a second and pressed her lips together.

Troy stood before her, his gaze filled with worry. He gently lifted her chin and touched the back of his hand to her forehead.

“At least you don’t feel feverish,” he said, kissing her brow.

“Who taught you how to take a temperature?” V realized the question was insensitive, considering Troy had never known his mother. They took all Coalition males into facility care upon their birth, ripped away from their mothers’ tender embrace. This was why many pregnant women risked running away from the system once they found out they were carrying a male child. Even though it was dangerous and could prove fatal, some moms simply couldn’t relinquish their sons.

“Some of our nurses were like mothers.” A sombre look settled into his eyes. “They taught us a thing or two.”

“I’m sorry. Sometimes I say things without thinking.”

Troy grinned down at her like she’d just stated the obvious. He offered her a wipe and V took it. She ran it over her mouth before cleaning off her sleeve. V balled it up and stowed it in her jacket pocket.

“I’m about to ask something really embarrassing...” V stole a glance at Troy.

He raised his eyebrows as if he knew the question before she asked it. Her face burned with embarrassment. “Do you —” V hesitated and looked away bashfully, then repeated, “Do you think it’s possible that my body didn’t react well to swallowing your semen?”

Troy’s eyes grew wide, then he roared with laughter. His laughter was so loud that Shadow called out to them.

“You two okay?”

“Never been better,” Troy replied, wiping tears away from the corners of his eyes.

V glared at Troy, waiting for his laughing fit to subside. “I didn’t think it was outside the realm of possibilities!”

“No.” He shook his head, eyes dancing with mirth. “I’m sure it’s a thing.” And then he had his arms around her waist, drawing her close. “We can always test your theory, but only after your stomach settles.” He ducked down for a kiss, but V pushed his face away.

“No kisses until I rinse.”

“Okay,” he answered and rubbed his face into her hair. Part of V wanted to shove him away for finding her question ridiculous, but being embraced by him, feeling his warmth envelop her weary body, was too good to resist.

After a short while, Shadow piped in again.

“You two fucking?”

“No, Shadow!” they both responded in exasperated unison.

WONDER OF WONDERS

TROY

TROY WISHED V had agreed to ride with him, because after their first rest stop, even though she denied it, it was obvious driving the motorbike was beginning to wear her out. By nightfall, she'd fallen asleep by the fire without touching her dinner. She lay curled up on a soft blanket, one hand tucked beneath her cheek while her head rested on Troy's lap. He ran his fingers gently through her unbound hair.

Shadow sat down next to Troy and stared over at V. "She okay?"

Troy shrugged and tested her forehead with the backs of his fingers. "I don't know. Still no temperature, so we'll see in the morning."

Eve spoke up from across the fire, "Maybe we should wake her up and make her eat. At least drink some water. It's important to keep momma hydrated when she has morning sickness."

"Well, shit," Shadow hummed, considering Eve. She looped her arms around her bent knees and shifted uncomfortably under the weight of his gaze. "You don't say much, but when you do..." Shadow shot Troy a speculative look. "Eve could be right on the mark. What do you think, my man?"

Troy shook his head in denial. "She can't be pregnant." But then, hadn't he wondered the very same thing himself when he'd found her in the woods vomiting? Even now, he

couldn't stop himself from speculating. As an e-breeder, he knew all the signs. It was why he'd broken out laughing when she'd suggested his semen had upset her stomach. He'd thought she was going to suggest that she might be pregnant.

"Why not?" Shadow frowned. "The way you've been eyeing V from the start, I thought for sure the two of you got busy on the trip up. And that was over a month ago. So it's possible."

Troy raised his brows and studied her sleeping face. She complained of feeling ill, but her skin was glowing, and her cheeks were rosy.

Eve spoke up, her voice soft but resolute, "I've heard rumors about V, so I understand why you might think she's infertile. However, it looks to me like morning sickness. If Shadow is correct, the timing is perfect."

Troy looked down at V and stroked a few loose strands of hair away from her temple. She looked so peaceful in her sleep.

"It doesn't make sense." He scowled, confused. "Why with me and not with her husband?"

"V was married?" Shadow looked incredulous. "I had no idea. Who was the lucky guy?" He took a swig from his water bottle.

"He's... dead," Troy clarified. "His name was Mack."

"Huh," Shadow snorted, the corners of his lips turning downward.

"Mack was a virile male, but the two of them had no children," Eve said thoughtfully, her eyes fixed on the fire. "Most people figured that V was barren, but it's possible they just weren't compatible. It happens sometimes."

"Well, I'll be damned. Things you learn on a road trip." Shadow met Troy's equally dumbfounded expression, and after a few beats, he said, "Congrats, my man. Isn't this what you wanted?"

Troy's brows furrowed together as he glanced down at V. It was too good to be true. Too much to hope for. "We can't be certain." Just a few days ago, the fact that V couldn't have children seemed like an insurmountable roadblock. And now, here she was, possibly pregnant with their baby.

"Trust your e-breeder gut. If she were your Keeper, what would you think?"

Troy exhaled. "I'd think she was expecting. Last night, she had an aversion to the chicken on my plate."

Shadow nodded his head in understanding. "Ever happen before?"

Troy shook his head. "Not to my knowledge."

The group fell into a contemplative silence.

"What am I supposed to do now? How am I going to protect her? *Them?* Out here in the middle of nowhere. On the run?" Troy gazed down at the soundly sleeping V.

"We're in this together, my man," Shadow said, giving Troy's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "What was that old-world expression? The children are our future and all that?"

"Agreed," Eve chimed in. "Together."

CONVALESCENCE

V

V OPENED her eyes to find herself cuddled up in Troy's safe embrace. While she had no recollection of drifting off to sleep last night, she remembered the sound of the campfire crackling and the smoke wafting up into the air. But her growling stomach reminded her she'd missed dinner.

"I'm starving," she murmured, her head resting on Troy's chest. Thinking he was still asleep, she'd mostly been talking to herself. When he answered, his voice groggy and slightly muffled by her hair, V was pleasantly surprised.

"I'm sure you are." He yawned. "How are you feeling? Any better?"

"Umm, yeah, I think so. I want to eat something, but I'm so warm and cozy in here with you. Plus, it's *brrr* outside!"

"The joys of early spring. Still feels like winter." He smiled and scratched his beard. "Why don't you stay in the tent? I can hear Eve and Shadow moving around out there, so there should be hot water ready. The food is all that desiccated crap anyway, but I'll make you a coffee in the meantime—then some mush to eat."

"You would do that for me? Bring me coffee and some mush?" She smiled and burrowed deeper into his chest. God, she loved him and he smelled so good.

V groaned in protest when Troy untangled himself from her limbs, but then sighed contentedly as he rearranged the

sleeping bags, cocooning her in their comfy heat. V sunk deeper into their warm depths.

“Mmm, I feel like I’m getting spoiled. I should get sick more often,” she purred from inside her warm nest.

Troy chuckled. “That you should.” He dug in deep enough to kiss the top of her head. “It’s my pleasure to spoil you, Valentine.”

AFTER EATING HER FILL, V emerged from their tent and felt like a bug under a magnifying glass. Everybody stopped what they were doing to stare.

Her eyes darted from one person to the next, a curious expression on all their faces. “What? Do I have something on my forehead?” V brushed her fingers over her brow. When it produced nothing, she flattened her mouth and waited for a response. “So? What is it?”

“How are you feeling this morning?” Eve asked quietly.

V smiled and stretched her arms over her head as she cracked her back with an audible pop. “I’m feeling much better, thank you. Just a little queasy.” She didn’t miss the private looks exchanged between the three of them. V looked around pointedly, raising one eyebrow and pursing her lips. “Everyone gets sick now and then. Did I grow a third head in my sleep or something?”

“V,” Shadow piped up, “we thought that maybe, with you being unwell, we’d ditch your bike, and you can ride with Troy.”

The silence was deafening for a moment as V braced her hands on her hips. The group shifted nervously as they waited for her response.

“Nope! I’m not doing it,” she said firmly. “I’m not an invalid. I’m more than capable of riding a motorcycle.” She cut her eyes at Troy, who at least had the grace to look sheepish.

“You in on this, babes?” She glared at him, the others watching her cautiously like *she* was the one being unreasonable.

V threw her hands up. “How about if I’m too sick to make it to tonight’s camp, we’ll ditch my bike.” *Not very likely*, she muttered to herself, but it seemed to appease the group. They all nodded readily in agreement, clearly relieved.

AROUND THE SAME time as the day before, V signaled for another unscheduled stop. It was the second time that morning her stomach had rebelled. The wheels of the motorcycle screeched against the pavement as she braked before scrambling off the bike. V stumbled into the nearby woods, her stomach heaving. She lunged forward and vomited behind a bush.

V heard Troy’s telltale footsteps before she could utter a word. Catching her breath, she grumbled over her shoulder, waving him off. “Go away!”

But then he was suddenly there, pulling her hair out of her face, while she dry heaved until she was sobbing. Once she was done, he held her close and rocked her gently, pressing kisses to her forehead as she cried into his shoulder. Her breathing calmed into a hiccupping rhythm. V sniffled into his jacket and felt pathetic.

“I hate feeling weak,” she muttered against his chest.

V liked to hold her own, but she couldn’t shake this—whatever it was—and it was sapping her energy. As it was, V struggled to keep her eyes open while driving. She hadn’t admitted to anyone about how it was taking its toll on her, but she knew she was taking a risk.

“I know.” Troy stroked the ends of her hair.

“Okay,” she groaned, “I’ll ride with you, but only because all of you seem so intent on it.” That earned her a broad smile from Troy that reached his eyes.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she snuggled back into the warmth of his embrace. “That’s my Valentine,” he whispered in her ear. She felt his chest rise and fall with each breath as he held her close. His hands moved down to grip her waist, pulling her even closer. She could feel the heat radiating from him, and it sent warm shivers down her spine. The world fell away, and it was only the two of them, holding on to each other as if their lives depended on it. “I like you being at my back,” he murmured, “feeling you pressed up against me. Your arms wrapped around my waist. It’s all good.”

And in that moment, V didn’t mind giving up her ride all that much. Troy was right. As long as they were together, it was all good. If he were ill, she’d do the same for him.

V could lean on him. She wasn’t alone in the world anymore.

They had each other.

VIGILANCE

TROY

THEY'D BEEN on the road for two days, the bleak landscape passing them by under an overcast sky. Troy was exhausted, but his spirits lifted when the sun broke through the clouds and warmed his chilled skin. V clung to him, her arms wrapped tightly around his middle, her cheek nestled against the tip between his shoulders. He leaned back, cherishing her presence and the comfort it brought him. But even through their layers of clothing, he could feel the tension in her grip. The morning sickness she'd been suffering from—because Troy decided that's what it was—hadn't subsided yet, and the physical effort of their journey was taking its toll, despite their frequent stops to stretch their legs and rest.

But V still had it in her to cause mischief. The last thing Troy expected was the slow glide of her hands slipping inside his jacket. Blunt nails teased the lines of his chest through his shirt and ran down his abdomen until she found what she was looking for below the waistline of his pants. Troy let out a low groan and tried not to wiggle as her hands tugged at the tab, drew the zipper down, and delved inside.

V cupped and massaged his crotch mercilessly. Heat flooded up from the pit of his stomach until he was painfully aroused. Troy shifted uncomfortably on his seat, swerved out of his lane a few times, and eventually had to signal the others to pull over.

He pulled his motorcycle off the road, killed the engine and turned to V, hoping she could read the heat of his desire

burning in his eyes. V smiled at him innocently, her lips curved in a beguiling invitation.

Troy wasted no time in jumping off his bike, hefting her off, wrapping her legs around his middle, and stalking toward the woods. Once they were out of view from prying eyes, his mouth descended on hers in an urgent, passionate kiss. He groaned as his hands roved across her body. With a primal growl, he pinned her against the tree trunk, pressing his body into hers. Not wanting to waste another second, he moved his hands to her pants and unsnapped them, shoving them down to her ankles before turning her around.

His hands cupped her ass as he thrust into her with a deep need that was equal parts desire and desperation. She gripped the tree trunk, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps as his movements became more passionate and urgent.

He'd never taken her like this. So rough. So desperate. When they were done, he curled over her and nuzzled his cheek into the crook of her neck.

V coughed out a breathless laugh. "Uh-ha. That was different."

He heard the smile in her tone. Troy seized the opportunity to leave his mark and gave her ass a sharp slap.

"What was that for?" V yelped.

"That was for fucking with me while I was driving," he teased, rubbing the reddening spot.

V wiggled her ass and Troy groaned when his cock slipped out.

"Well, if that's my punishment" —she gazed over her shoulder, arching an eyebrow playfully— "I'll have to do it more often."

THANKFULLY SHADOW and Eve kept their comments to themselves when Troy and V rejoined them.

On the last leg of their journey, Eve had become increasingly more uneasy, saying she didn't like the vibe of the

land. Whatever that meant.

Yesterday they'd crossed into the area that Keith mentioned had some unknown activity in it. Shadow had a direct line to Sam in the control room, and as far as Sam was concerned, nothing had tripped any of the nearby monitors.

But Eve was adamant that they remain highly vigilant after making camp. They kept a close eye on their PI devices, and Eve tirelessly patrolled the outskirts of their camp. To ensure safety during the night, they took turns standing guard. But it still wasn't enough.

NO ESCAPE

V

V GRIPPED the tree trunk for support, barely able to keep her balance. Her empty stomach convulsed again, and she retched onto the frozen ground beneath her feet. Tears stung her eyes as she cursed under her breath. “When is this going to end?”

She fumbled in her pocket for the half-empty water bottle hidden there, took a sip, and swished it around her mouth before spitting it out, trying to get rid of the bitter taste of bile that lingered on her tongue. With one hand pressed against the trunk for support, V sighed. The familiar feeling of exhaustion washed over her as she steeled herself for more rounds of retching.

Through the trees, she spotted Troy standing in the camp, chatting with Shadow. But V could sense his attention on her. Always on her. Watching.

She knew he was worried, and so was she. *Maybe I’ve contracted a virus somehow?* Ever since Chimera, it was everyone’s greatest fear. V shook the thought from her mind—surely it was just a cold. V mustered a small wave at Troy and felt herself relax slightly when he gave a quick nod in response, along with an almost imperceptible smile.

V knew, up close his eyes would crinkle at the corners. She never thought laugh lines would captivate her, but they made his already beautiful eyes even more expressive. V loved to trace over the fine flare of lines when they were alone together.

With Troy, V had it bad.

Feeling the nausea subside, she steadied herself on her feet, ready to walk back toward the campsite, when she heard a branch break overhead. V's gaze shot up just in time to see a flurry of figures zipping down from the treetops on ropes. They were silent and swift as spiders, cloaked in netted camo with their faces concealed. V opened her mouth to scream, but one of them gagged her with a cloth before she could make a sound. In the blink of an eye, they kicked her legs out from under her. V crumpled to the ground while they bound her wrists behind her back. Fear made it hard for her to count, but she estimated there were at least ten people involved in the ambush—maybe even more.

They forced V to her feet, but her ankle gave out and she fell onto her knees. A piercing pain shot through her shin, and she inhaled sharply behind the gag. In her desperation, V struggled against their grip, slamming her shoulders back and forth as hot tears rolled down her cheeks. She thrashed against them despite the stabbing pain, spitting muffled curses with each shuddering breath. But there was no escape, and she was yanked up on her feet again.

“Move!” A rough hand shoved V forward, and she faltered, nearly tripping on her sprained ankle. She winced but hobbled onward, attempting to overhear the brief exchange between the intruders. Going by their voices, they were female.

One thing was for certain: they weren't Coalition. The Coalition would have left V for dead. They had absolutely no regard for women's lives in the Dead Zones.

A BARGAIN STRUCK

TROY

TROY'S HEART raced as he saw V coming toward the camp with a group of hooded interlopers in tow, and his feet froze in place. Gaze locked on to V, Troy slapped Shadow on the shoulder to get his attention. Suddenly Eve emerged from the woods brandishing her firearm, one eye narrowed and ready to shoot.

Shadow whipped around to see the intruders. His eyes widened. "What the fuck?" His hand shot to his gun, holstered on his thigh. "Where the hell did they come from?"

"I have no idea." Troy's eyes burned with determination as he grabbed his own weapon and leveled it at the intruders.

V hobbled forward, her left leg trembling with every step. Slowly, the limp became more pronounced. Troy snarled.

She was hurt.

Troy was absolutely terrified for V, but he forced himself to stay calm, finger tense on the trigger. "I looked away for one second," he growled, his gaze never wavering from the approaching group. Altogether, there were at least ten intruders—but the thought of losing V made him fearless. Braver than he ever thought he could be. He'd never aimed a gun at another human being before, but if it meant protecting V, he wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

"Throw down your weapons!" a female voice cut through the tension in the air. Troy didn't know which one of them had

spoken, concealed as they all were behind thick netting.

One of them shoved V forward and she stumbled to her knees. V let out a muffled protest as she tried to stand up, struggling against the bindings that held her hands together. Her face winced in pain as her gaze met Troy's. She shifted her eyes toward the treetops before jutting her chin upward, trying to communicate something to him.

Eve uttered in disbelief, "They were up in the trees! I knew something was off!" she cursed.

Troy carefully set his gun on the ground and stepped forward, cautiously raising his arms in surrender. "Don't hurt her. We don't want any trouble." His throat was tight with fear. He'd just won V back, and she was carrying his child. There was no way he could lose her now. The world couldn't be that cruel.

One intruder stepped forward and angled her head in Eve's direction. "Then call off your bitch."

Troy shifted his gaze toward Eve. He could tell she was hesitant to relinquish her shotgun, but eventually she complied, placing it down and stepping away from it, hands up in the air.

"And him too." The woman tipped her chin toward Shadow.

Shadow put his gun down on the ground, nudging it away with his foot. He grabbed Troy by his jacket's sleeve and drew him back to his side.

The woman pulled off the shroud of netting covering her face. Her features hinted at a South Asian heritage, and she looked to be in her early thirties. The intruder closest to V grabbed her and yanked her upright, brandishing a blade against her throat. V stopped struggling. "Who does the pregnant woman belong to?" the leader demanded.

V's eyes widened in shock at the woman's proclamation. She stared incredulously at their leader and shook her head. V uttered a muffled cry as her captor pushed the blade harder against her skin.

“She belongs to the man beside me, but the baby is mine,” Shadow stated flatly, sidestepping Troy, and partially concealing him with his body.

V’s eyes flew open. “*What?*” followed by a frantic, “*Oh, no, no, no,*” escaped her lips around the gag as she increased her efforts to break free. V continued to struggle against her captor, completely ignoring the point of the blade resting against her throat. Another cloaked figure grabbed hold of her shoulders, but she kept fighting. Horrified, Troy watched a single line of blood slowly trickle down V’s neck.

Overcome with fear, he attempted to push past Shadow, but the male stopped him with an extended arm and shook his head. “No. She’s okay. It’s just a scratch.”

“V,” Troy implored sternly. “You *need* to stop struggling. Now!” He said, his voice tight. V looked at him with sheer panic in her eyes, panting shallowly and blinking back tears. Troy held her gaze, trying to calm her down by sheer willpower alone.

“They’re not Coalition,” Shadow whispered to him. “If they were, they would take out our women first and leave us alive. Let’s see what they want.”

Once assured V wouldn’t cause herself any further harm, Troy scanned the strangers, noting their tattered and outdated attire. Shadow was right; these weren’t Coalition forces. They always equipped their enforcement and military personnel with the most innovative tech. No, this group was something else entirely.

Troy shot Shadow a sidelong glance, his eyes narrowing and his lips pressing together in disapproval. He was aware of what Shadow was attempting to do by claiming to have fathered the baby. He was giving himself up for Troy’s sake. No matter what, women always had the same goal in mind; reproduction. Producing healthy babies was the only thing that mattered in this world. And these women certainly wouldn’t be an exception.

“You don’t have to do this, Shade,” Troy hissed quietly, so only he could hear his words.

Shadow ignored him. “No use the two of us going down, my man. I have nothing to lose.”

Troy squinted his eyes at the male and groaned. It was a blatant lie. Shadow was risking his peace of mind. Maybe even his sanity.

The leader tilted her head toward Troy with a speculative look in her eyes. “You sure you didn’t father this child?”

Before Troy could answer, Shadow shot back forcefully, “I said the baby is mine!”

“Then... we propose an exchange. We need virile males to reproduce.” And there it was. Troy’s nostrils flared, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

“The other woman, is she yours?” the leader asked Shadow, eyeing Eve.

Shadow cast a sidelong glance at Eve, his expression unreadable. “I don’t have a woman,” he stated matter-of-factly, gesturing toward V. “I slept with her as a favor between friends.”

Shadow let out an exasperated sigh. His gaze roamed over the group as if he were losing patience. “We’re being hunted. What can you offer us in exchange for sex?”

Troy stayed focused on V but had to admit that Shadow was ballsy. Calm, cool, and collected. It hadn’t even occurred to Troy to negotiate. Troy would have fucked the world if it meant saving V and their baby, regardless of the toll it would take on their relationship—so fresh and fragile as it was.

Shadow understood that.

“Other than your lives?” The leader thoughtfully assessed Shadow. Then the edges of her lips curved upward. “Stay with us and we will take care of your pursuers. Until then, you can service my females.”

“*Females?*” Troy heard V mutter against her gag as she shook her head violently in the negative.

“How many?” Shadow inquired.

“About twenty.”

Troy sucked in his breath. Accounting for the refractory period, that was a couple of days’ worth of fucking.

Shadow blew out a deep breath. “Where?”

“Our grounds aren’t too far from here.”

“I’ll do it,” Shadow conceded, “but there’ll be some conditions I want to discuss in private. Also, my friends—I’ll need to know they’re safe. If you want this deal to stand up?” he hinted suggestively, arching a brow.

Really? Troy couldn’t believe what he was hearing—was Shadow joking about going back to the life that almost broke him? Even if it was for a short while? Apparently, Shadow sensed Troy’s confusion. “Laugh so you don’t cry, my man. Remember that.”

“Your friends are welcome to stay with us in our village. Away from the Coalition trackers canvassing the area. And yes, we know about them. In fact, they’re watching us now, even as we speak.”

“What the hell?” Shadow said quietly, knowing better than to draw attention by looking around for signs of the Coalition. If what the leader was saying was true, none of them wanted to give away their suspicions.

The leader smiled smugly. “As for the parameters of our agreement, we’ll discuss those once we’re in the village.”

Shadow nodded as he grew deathly serious. “First, you need to release the woman back into our care.” He stared pointedly at V.

V was lifted and steadied on her uninjured leg. They let go of her, and she teetered forward. Troy bolted to her side, scooping her up into his arms. He hoisted her off the ground, carrying her over his shoulder so his hands were free, while he backed away toward Shadow. When they were close enough, Troy settled V back onto her good foot and supported her as Shadow quickly undid her gag and bonds. Once she was freed, Troy gathered V into his arms once again, embracing her as if it were a matter of life or death.

V immediately babbled quietly in his arms, but Troy shushed her, and she stopped, nuzzling closer to his chest. He wondered what had frightened her more. Being held captive at knifepoint? The bargain Shadow had struck with the intruders? Or was it the thought that she might be pregnant? Troy suspected it was the last of the three.

UNDER SIEGE

NANCY

NANCY AND CYNTHIA lay on their bellies at the edge of a clearing, sniper scopes trained on the dwellers' camp. For the past few days, the rebels Troy was traveling with had grown suspiciously complacent in covering their tracks. But at least she had Troy in sight.

Nancy and Cynthia were determined to take out the camp, even though they knew it could be a trap. But just as they braced themselves to attack, a team of strangers ghosted through the site with an efficiency that would make even the most hardened soldier take notice. They had competition.

But none of that mattered—not anymore, not when her chance to apprehend the man at the center of it all was in sight. She tensed with anticipation and steeled herself for the fight that lay ahead.

Nancy scowled as she watched the newcomers antagonize their targets, but her eyes kept going back to Troy. She peered through the scope at his transformation. His once-smooth jaw was lightly stubbled. Soft waves of hair curled at his nape and around his forehead. Muscles, which were once sinewy and lean, had grown robust and bulged with strength. He seemed a brand-new male.

As the hostage takers trudged forward with the rebel woman in their grasp, Troy stood confident, gun cocked and ready. From his steady aim, she could tell he now knew how to

use one. She'd found him attractive before, but this newer version of Troy was even more appealing.

The hostage lurching forward was *his* woman. The one Troy shared a tent with and kept a devoted, vigilant watch over. It was ironic how the gender roles were reversed in the Dead Zones. Usually, women were the ones to watch over their breeders.

Nancy scoffed as Troy raced to the gagged woman and hoisted her up.

“Fucking Network.” *Tiffany*, Nancy grumbled to herself. She recognized the female from the identification key they'd found at the safe house.

Troy backed away from the intruders with the woman over his shoulder until he reached the other male in his group, who helped remove her gag and binds. As soon as she was free, Troy scooped her back up into his arms. His stance, fierce and possessive.

Nancy sighed, regretting the missed opportunity to shoot the bitch. “I should have taken the shot while it was open,” she relayed to Cynthia, her voice heavy with malice. “We could have avoided this whole hostage situation and had these fuckers scrambling.”

Nancy stared at Troy with the other woman, her emotions spiraling out of control. She'd expected to feel nothing but animosity for her ex-lover, but an unexpected wave of jealousy crashed over her, shaking her to the core. She was completely unprepared for the intensity of the feelings surging through her veins like molten lava.

“Better to use her as leverage,” Cynthia suggested, cool and collected. “He'll be more willing to comply if he has something to lose.”

“Looks like he does, if the way he holds her is a sign,” Nancy snarled. “And you're right, we should use her.” Her mouth curled into a cruel smirk. “To hurt him.”

“Do you think the other man in the group is a breeder?”

Cynthia had asked this question multiple times by now, and Nancy's tolerance was wearing thin. She exhaled heavily; her lips drawn into a tight line. "As I told you before, it doesn't matter whether he's fertile—I don't want any complications. Another male is extra work. We're here for Troy."

"It could make us look good in the eyes of the Governor, if we came back with two men instead of one. Might ease things with the Council as well. One thing's for certain—he sure is fine and looks healthy. I bet he'd do well in a Himeros House. I know I'd fuck him."

Nancy's brow creased. It was becoming blatantly clear that Cynthia was smitten with the other male in the group.

And, of course, she was right. Two males would be better than one, but until now, Troy had been a slippery bastard who eluded capture. The manhunt was already taking its toll on resources. What was it now? Almost two months and no success? Evangeline was livid.

"We only have one collar," Nancy reminded Cynthia.

"What do you suggest we do then?" Cynthia asked, but before Nancy could answer, a voice devoid of sentiment spoke up from behind them, and they turned around to stare down the barrels of multiple guns.

A single figure strode forward, face shrouded under a veil that resembled withered foliage.

"Coalition scum," a woman's voice said with contempt as she motioned with the tip of a barrel for Nancy and Cynthia to raise their hands in surrender.

Nancy glanced around. They were outnumbered at least three to one. All the newcomers were women, as far as she could tell. More of them had entered the area behind them and were already rummaging through their gear.

"Sit up and back away from your weapons," the woman yelled, keeping her gun pointed at Nancy and Cynthia. The atmosphere was thick with tension, but Nancy kept her

composure. If they wanted to survive, they needed to follow orders without question.

Both of them did as the woman told them, edging away from their sniper rifles. The invaders descended upon them, quickly tying their hands behind their backs with tight knots that dug into Nancy's skin.

“Easy,” Nancy said. “We won't fight.”

“Good,” the leader shouted, and it was the last thing Nancy heard before the butt of a rifle slammed into Cynthia's skull, followed by hers.

UNSAVORY PACTS

V

THE LEADER of the group walked toward Shadow and introduced herself as Asha of the Highland Trek Walkers. She offered him a handshake as her gaze drifted over him with admiration.

He glanced at her outstretched hand but didn't take it. "I've never heard of your people."

Asha shrugged indifferently, coolly eyeing Shadow.

V leaned deeper into Troy, balancing on her good foot, wishing their current predicament away. It was ridiculous that they thought she was pregnant. However, it explained why the team had been acting so strangely. They were being overprotective, even though the likelihood of it being true was low.

That Shadow had offered to bed a bunch of women when he couldn't even stand to be touched by one wasn't any better. Nobody knew his full backstory, only that his Keeper had broken him in ways that seemed irreparable. He never discussed his past and avoided females like the plague. If he ever desired physical touch, he kept it under wraps.

"I'm Shadow," he introduced himself. "This is Troy."

Troy gave a slight incline of his head.

"The woman in his arms is V. And the 'bitch' off to the side is Eve."

Asha smirked at Eve's introduction.

“We’re part of the Dead Zones Network,” Eve said, stepping up and wedging herself between Shadow and Asha, giving the leader a stern look. There was an unfamiliar edge to Eve’s voice. She gripped Asha’s outstretched hand, shaking it lengthily as they held on to each other until their knuckles grew white. Both women locked eyes in a silent power struggle.

“Eve,” Troy chastised.

Eve released Asha’s hand, but not before shooting her an evil glance.

V buried her face back into the base of Troy’s throat, guilt weighing heavily on her chest. She had to be the worst person in the world, because she couldn’t help but feel relieved it wasn’t Troy who was being called upon to save their asses. If Shadow went through with the deal, she’d be forever indebted to him.

ONCE THEY REACHED the Trek Walker village, V insisted Troy put her down and he did, though not without immediately taking her hand and protectively tucking her behind his back. She leaned into his side and, balancing on her good foot, tried to peek past his body for a better view.

The Trek Walkers had made themselves a home in an old-world adventure park and built onto it over the many years since Chimera. Its tree canopy was alive with activity as rope pathways and plank bridges looped between the trunks, connecting a series of treehouses tucked away beneath a network of branches. Some were on stilts, while others were built on jutting balconies. No wonder the Landing couldn’t track them—they didn’t set their grid sensors to detect movement from above.

Upon their arrival, a flock of women soared down from the branches, encircling the Landing group in a tight formation. The whizzing of their climbing mechanisms set V on edge, as the women landed and focused all their attention on Troy and Shadow.

Evidently, Eve didn't like the way they were closing in on either and stepped protectively in front of Shadow, shielding him from their groping hands. She even resorted to smacking a few away. V followed Eve's example, limping in front of Troy as best she could, snarling at the women who reached for him, eager to cop a feel.

Mine, V wanted to hiss as the women pressed around Troy and shamelessly pawed him. Yet Troy silently kept his composure despite the growing number of females.

Finally, Shadow bellowed a "Hell, no!" and soon a female yelped and writhed on the ground in pain, her hand twisted painfully at an awkward angle in his.

"Tell them to keep their hands off!" Shadow growled, seeking Asha's gaze. She'd fallen back, behind the crowd, allowing her women to circle the men like vultures.

"Keep your hands to yourselves, ladies," Asha spoke up. "They're our guests and are to be treated respectfully."

Thank God for that, V thought as the women parted to make way for the men. She'd been uncertain if the Trek Walker leader would intervene. Asha pointed to a rope ladder stretching upward to a large platform.

"This will be your accommodation while you stay. Follow me." Asha began her ascent, her movements swift and precise. The rickety ladder creaked and shifted under her weight. With one last look over her shoulder, Asha beckoned for them to follow her up before continuing.

Shadow and Eve scaled the ladder easily enough. As V watched them, her stomach sank. She thought of her ankle.

Troy crouched down in front of her and offered his back. "Jump on. I'll carry you."

V stared at the wobbly ladder again. Shadow and Eve had made it to the platform without incident, proving the ladder could sustain both their weights.

V reluctantly accepted Troy's offer. She looped her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing her cheek against his shoulder as he effortlessly lifted

her up. Soon they joined the others. When Troy lowered V to the platform, she clung to him for support.

V scanned the sprawling branches overhead and took in their new environment. A flurry of activity surrounded them as Trek Walkers swung from ropes, moved along suspended walkways, and perched on platforms. V spotted a few men among them, their sharp eyes equally as curious about their visitors as those of their womenfolk, and they didn't seem to be subservient in any kind of way. Still, V felt like she was on another planet.

Just as Asha was about to lead them inside a tree house, a cacophony of loud cheers and hollers filled the air from the clearing below. Asha peered over the balcony's railing with the rest of the Landing team stepping up beside her.

A group of women burst into the clearing, shouting battle cries, and their faces twisted with exhilaration. Two Coalition soldiers were in tow, their high-tech camouflage and PI devices identifying them clearly. One woman wore a metallic band around her neck, which pulsed with two flashing lights, almost like a distress beacon.

"We took them by surprise outside the men's camp and found these!" one woman spoke up. She held up a huge sniper rifle over her head, pride and excitement glinting in her eyes.

"Good job," Asha shouted. A moment later, she went silent and looked pensive. "What's that flashing around the redhead's neck? Is it sending out a signal?"

The woman below answered, "We thought it was a tracking device and tried to pry it off. There's a disabler attached to disrupt the frequency, just in case."

Asha creased her brow. "Put them into the hole for now, then move their gear to the supply shed. And make sure Lily inspects that collar right away."

The woman gave Asha a curt nod, then addressed the group. "Listen up, ladies! You heard Asha!"

Asha glanced to the side, seeking Shadow out. "It looks like we've already fulfilled our end of the agreement."

He met her eyes. “Yes. We owe you one.”

“Twenty, to be precise,” Asha informed him with a tinge of self-satisfaction in her voice. “Twenty.”

V peered down from the balcony at the bustling activity below. Troy stood beside her, his hands clutching the banister with enough force to turn his knuckles white. When she looked up at him, he was staring at the soldier, a peculiar cast to his features.

“What is it?” V asked. Troy didn’t look right.

He leaned in until his breath tickled her earlobe, then whispered, “I know one of them. They’re here for me.”

The hairs on V’s arms stood up like soldiers at attention. “Which one?” She glanced down at the two prone women who were being unceremoniously dragged away by their feet.

“The redhead knows who and what I am. She works for the Governor. She’s part of Evangeline’s security detail.”

V blanched at his revelation. Currently, the woman was out cold, but once she woke, she could divulge that they were searching for Troy. And that he was an Elite Breeder. If the Trek Walkers found out they’d lied about Troy being a sterile male, who knew what would happen?

Asha interrupted V’s line of thought.

“Well, what an eventful day. We’re not used to having so many guests.” She stepped away from the railing and waved them over to enter the treehouse. Inside it felt cramped, especially with two hulking men taking up much of the space. A handful of oversized cushions scattered haphazardly on the floor appeared to be the only furnishing.

A second woman stepped in. “This is Sonya,” Asha introduced her. “She’s my right-hand man, so to speak.”

Shadow stopped to frown at her play on gender, then cast a critical eye around the sparse interior. He folded his arms under his chest and fixed Asha with a stern expression. “Is this where we’re going to do it? I have terms.”

“You said that earlier. So let’s hear them, breeder.”

“No unnecessary touching, no kissing, and absolutely no spectators.”

“Fair enough.” Then Asha turned her attention to Troy, a coy look in her eyes. “Care to join us? We have plenty of attractive women here. Even if we can’t breed you, we do like to fuck.”

“I’m taken.” Troy’s expression brooked no room for further discussion.

Asha’s mouth curved downward. “If you reconsider...” She gave a little shake of her hips, arching her eyebrows suggestively.

“Piss off,” V snapped, but it only earned her a smug snicker from Asha.

“Long gone are those days when a woman doesn’t share her man, but I’ll leave him in peace... for now. Only because this one” —Asha looked pointedly at Shadow— “has already agreed to accommodate us.”

“Are there other breeders?” Sonya inquired. “Where you come from?”

V looked at Eve for guidance, unsure how much she should divulge about the Landing. Eve gave her a small nod, but she was still reluctant to share. Keith had said to trust Eve’s instincts.

“There are, but you’ll need to speak to Keith, the leader of our community. But he doesn’t approve of force. It’s not our way.”

Asha’s eyes widened in surprise. “A man? Is your leader? How very... old-world.” She appeared lost in thought for a beat. “Force isn’t usually our way either, but sometimes we must make exceptions. Virile men don’t just fall out of trees.” She chuckled at her own joke. “The three of you will stay here, and Shadow will come with us. We’ll be a few treehouses over. Are you ready?” Asha asked Shadow, arching a brow.

Shadow exhaled loudly and his eyes lingered on Eve for a split second, before he squared his jaw and nodded

determinedly. “Let’s do this.”

V could have sworn she caught a flicker of regret in Shadow’s eyes, although it was fleeting.

And with that, they were off. Sonya, fast on Shadow’s heels.

After his departure, an awkward silence hung in the air. V turned to face Troy and swallowed hard. “You know I’m not pregnant.”

Troy didn’t respond, but his heavy sigh betrayed that he thought differently.

“I told you it’s impossible.”

Troy lifted her chin. “Well, actually—no... What you said was, it never happened before. But we’ll see soon enough, because, if you’re pregnant, you’ll start to show. And then there won’t be any more doubt.”

“Troy, I love you, but our relationship is so new,” V countered. “We can’t be throwing a baby into the mix. A baby is a whole other level. Anyway, I don’t believe it—I can’t. I—”

Troy gently drew her into his arms, whispering words of comfort. She felt the warmth of his embrace and the strength of his body.

His lips touched the crown of her head. “How about we stay in the moment and get through this situation first? Okay, Valentine?” He said softly, his words sincere.

V pressed deeper into him. He was her safe haven.

“I don’t believe they’ll harm us,” Eve said confidently.

V turned in Troy’s arms to face her and raised an eyebrow skeptically.

“Not with the possibility of getting acquainted with more breeders.” Eve clarified. “They’ll want to keep us in their good graces—as much as they can.” Her voice was low and laced with undisguised anger as she crossed her arms over her chest. “But I don’t like any of this.”

“None of us do.” Troy let out a long breath and released his hold on V, caressing her arms.

Something inside V’s chest tightened as she studied his face. She reached up and ran her fingertips along his jawline. “Troy. What is it?”

Troy pulled her fingers to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. When their eyes met, she knew she wasn’t going to like what he was about to say.

“It’s about the Coalition soldier,” Troy said, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “We have history.”

And with that, V’s heart dropped into her stomach. She knew what that meant. He’d slept with her.

GHOSTS

TROY

SINCE RUNNING FROM THE COALITION, Troy rarely spoke of his past. All the years of indoctrination, all the countless women he'd had sex with as part of his patriotic duty, was something he didn't like to think about. Keepers used him like an object, taking turns with his body as if he was nothing more than a plaything to meet their needs, a mere tool to satisfy the government-issued breeding quotas. All of it had taken its toll on him.

Although women still fawned over him at the Landing, Troy didn't mind the attention as long as he could say no. As long as the choice was his. In theory, in the Coalition, he could decline certain sexual acts. But to refuse when his primary purpose was to reproduce? To breed? If he said no, he'd risk being rehabilitated. And no one ever came back the same. He certainly hadn't.

Troy tensed at the recollection of his first escape attempt and his subsequent rehabilitation. He unconsciously ran his fingers over the R symbol branded on the lower section of his back.

They'd hoisted him onto a cold steel table, forced him face down, and strapped him so tightly that he could barely breathe. He thrashed against the unforgiving bonds that dug into his skin, desperate to get free. Fear crawling through him like a wild thing. But the white-coated women were undeterred. They loomed over him like vultures with tweezers, pecking away at the scabs on his lower back until his skin was raw.

Each agonizing tear reminded him how vulnerable he was. But they wanted the R they'd branded into his flesh to heal as smooth as silk, as flawless as a newborn's unblemished skin. Even in their cruelty, they sought perfection.

V placed her hand on his shoulder, stroking it. Bringing him back. "It's okay, Troy." She searched his face, as if sensing his thoughts had gone to a dark place. Worry filled her gaze, despite her words of reassurance.

In the advent of Nancy's capture, Troy was coming face to face with his past. It wasn't a coincidence that Nancy was the soldier hunting him, and it was more than likely she'd divulge his identity. Who knew what Nancy was willing to barter with the Trek Walkers for his return?

Evangeline used to tell him, as they lay in bed talking after she'd had a long day, "Everyone has their price." So why should the people living in the Dead Zones be any different?

Troy nervously cleared his throat, unable to meet V's gaze. He still held her hands beneath his lips. "I used her to escape from the gala." His stomach churned as he glanced at V, fearful of how she might react. V's mouth pulled back at one corner, and she studied him with solemn eyes. But then she slipped her slender fingers around his nape and drew him in for a tender kiss. A wave of relief crashed over Troy, and his shoulders relaxed.

"So," Eve interrupted as V rested his hands on his shoulders, "it means that anytime now they'll discover you're virile, and trade you for something else. Or at the very least, use you as a pawn." Eve sighed heavily, meeting V's eyes. "We've got to get out of here."

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

NANCY

NANCY'S CHEST heaved as she tried to catch her breath, her body contorted into a fetal position on the cold, damp wooden floor. She could feel the uneven planks against her cheek as she surveyed the room. Streaks of dusty light filtered through the cracks in the walls and cobwebs dangled in the upper corners.

The dweller who was grilling her was a burly woman who had already landed multiple kicks to Nancy's gut. Nancy tried to shield herself by curling up into a ball. She clenched her teeth, attempting to ignore the stinging pain in her ribs as she struggled against the tight ropes binding her wrists behind her back. Meanwhile, Cynthia lay unconscious beside her, mercifully unaware of the situation.

Lucky bitch.

Nancy coughed up some blood. She spat it out onto the floor, but the coppery tang lingered inside her mouth.

"I can offer you food, top-of-the-line medical supplies, and guns. All in exchange for one e-breeder," Nancy cried out hoarsely, trying to stay focused despite the pain. It wouldn't surprise her if she had a broken rib or two.

The dweller shook her head. "We need men more than what you're offering. Can the Coalition give us children?"

Nancy knit her eyebrows together. They could, but it wasn't likely they'd exchange one breeder for another.

The dweller crouched down in front of Nancy on the balls of her feet and sneered. Long white hair framed a youthful face. Her lips curled into a lurid grin. “Your man’s a little busy at the moment—you know, fucking our women.”

Nancy moaned in frustration.

“Fucked him myself. All that beautiful, smooth, dark skin. I could hardly keep my hands to myself.”

Dark skin? Nancy limply twisted her head to meet the dweller’s eyes. “Are we talking about the same male? The e-breeder I’m looking for is tall, with hazel eyes, and has a light complexion.”

The dweller’s eyes widened with surprise before she quickly recovered and pushed herself to a standing position. She turned to another woman, who stood behind her.

“Do you think she’s referring to the other male? The one with the woman?” Nancy’s tormentor asked.

“Asha will want to know about this.”

Nancy watched helplessly as the two women talking began to blur and blend together. She squeezed her eyes shut several times, in a vain attempt to clear her vision, but every time she opened her eyes, it was like looking through a prism.

A door creaked open and shut, and then she was alone with her adversary again. The burly woman was back in her face, grabbing her neck cuff and angling her up by it.

“What’s with this collar around your neck? Is it a tracking device? Should we chop off your head and have a look at it?”

“It’s a medical apparatus.” She’d worn it throughout their mission, knowing that if they were ever captured, it would stay within her grasp.

The bitch shook Nancy by the collar once more. “Spill it!”

“I have fits. It monitors and regulates my body, so I don’t have seizures when I’m out in the field.” The grip on her collar loosened, and Nancy dropped to the ground with a whoosh.

The dweller rose as the door was pushed open again. Nancy heard another female voice. Someone new.

“Carrie, Asha wants to speak with you.”

“Now?”

The newcomer must have given an affirming gesture, because Carrie grumbled something under her breath. Moments later, the door creaked open and slammed shut with an echoing bang that made Nancy jerk and wriggle on the floor like a worm.

Someone was pissed. She chuckled to herself, despite being bound and beaten.

Light footsteps padded toward her, and another woman, this one slightly built and a pretty blonde, knelt down in Nancy’s line of vision.

“I’m in.”

“What?” Nancy sputtered, cracking her eyes open but the newcomer just swam in front of her eyes.

“We need babies. Obviously. But we also need medical supplies and weapons. I’ll get you that e-breeder.”

Nancy released a deep breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Finally, someone had taken the bait. If push came to shove, Nancy could fulfill her promises to this newcomer, but she would say and do anything to retrieve her man. But the best outcome would get Troy back without costing Evangeline a single credit.

“What’s your name?” Nancy asked.

“You don’t need to know.”

“Anything you need. I can get it for you!” Nancy promised. “You give me the drop-off coordinates, and we’ll work this out.”

The woman responded with a curt nod, or at least Nancy thought she did.

“How are we going to do this?”

“All I need is for you to get the Instafire kit for me that’s in my pack. And loosen my binds,” Nancy told her. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Medical and weapons,” the newcomer reiterated.

“Medical and weapons,” Nancy confirmed. It was a deal.

The woman let out a long breath and loosened Nancy’s binds, allowing her to move forward with her scheme. Now, all she and Cynthia had to do was find Troy and fit him with the collar.

Once it was around his neck, he’d have no other option but to return to the Coalition.

A WELCOME INTERRUPTION

V

ASHA KEPT HER PROMISE, and they were treated as honored guests—although restricted ones, with guards standing on sentry duty outside their door. She'd sent the village healer to wrap and tend to V's ankle, and in just two days, V could bear some weight on it again. The guards brought them their meals like clockwork and provided V with a daily concoction to help ease the nausea.

The Trek Walkers seemed to have adopted a policy of silence, refusing to answer most questions. They'd seen no sign of Shadow ever since he'd left with Asha, and despite their inquiries, only words of assurance were offered regarding his well-being. They were even more tight-lipped about the Coalition soldiers.

Even though they were all permitted to leave the hut, Eve was the only one who roamed the Trek Walker grounds, provided escorts accompanied her. But they limited her to certain areas. No matter where Eve looked, she couldn't find Shadow, which made any attempt at escape impossible, since they weren't leaving without him.

Sonya checked in on them regularly for the first two days.

On the third morning, Asha finally appeared.

“Where is he? Where's Shadow?” Eve surged to her feet, her body alive with tension, her hands clenched tightly at her sides. Her voice, usually so sweet and calm, had sharpened into a terse rasp.

Troy shifted his position on the pillows next to V, turning to face the leader of the Trek Walkers. V could sense the tightly coiled energy beneath his deceptively calm exterior. His hands were clasped loosely between his knees, his gaze steady. The only thing that betrayed his readiness for action was the hint of steel in his eyes.

“Shadow didn’t want to come back. Said he’d prefer to wait until we were finished,” Asha said with a sly grin, suggesting she found the whole situation amusing instead of repugnant. “In case you think I didn’t offer.”

Eve nodded, but V didn’t miss the flare of her nostrils. “Take me with you when you leave. I want to see for myself that he’s safe. So far, no one will show me where he is.”

Asha chuckled as she spoke, “You’re welcome to come with me, but you might not like what you see. He is a little indisposed, as you can imagine. And he did state no spectators.”

Eve’s face flushed red at the implication. “I don’t want to watch,” she countered hotly, her voice tight with unrestrained emotion.

Asha cocked her head to the side, studying Eve closely. A knowing look crossed her face as she murmured, “Ah... you are fond of him. Is he more than a friend?” When Eve didn’t take the bait, Asha sighed softly. “If you don’t see him, then how will you be assured that he’s okay?”

Eve’s eyes flashed and her body stiffened as she gritted her teeth, readying to pounce.

Troy shifted, readying to stand, but stopped under the weight of V’s palm on his chest. Her gaze filled with a silent plea. “No, you’re staying right here with me,” she whispered. “Eve can handle herself.”

Asha’s eyes narrowed on V’s hand lingering on Troy’s chest. “The invitation to join us is still open,” she sneered. “You’re welcome anytime, breeder.”

V clenched her jaw and narrowed her gaze. There was a distinct note of salaciousness in Asha’s words that made her

stomach turn. “That won’t be happening,” she growled. Then the realization struck her like a thunderbolt—what Asha had called Troy? “Breeder.” V shifted her gaze to Troy, whose face was a mask of carefully guarded emotions.

“Coalition soldiers will say just about anything to get more men.” His reply was terse.

“Curious thing is...” Asha purred like a feline playing with a mouse. “They aren’t interested in Shadow. Only you. Why would that be?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I’ve increased the guards around this treehouse, should you suddenly be in a hurry to leave.” Then Asha eyed Eve with glee and swept one hand toward the exit. “Shall we?”

Eve clenched her jaw, radiating so much animosity that it almost choked the air. Through gritted teeth, Eve said, “After you,” and she followed her out.

Troy kept his eyes fixed on the door as it shut with a heavy finality. “I feel helpless, sitting here and doing nothing,” he hissed.

V cupped his cheeks and forced him to look into her eyes. “Tell me what you can do to make this any better.”

“You know what I can do.” Troy held her gaze meaningfully. “We both know what this is doing to Shadow. I can stop this! She knows, V. You heard what she called me—a breeder—it’s all I’ll ever be.”

V opened her mouth to disagree—

“I need to prove that I’m useful,” Troy interjected, never giving V a chance. “So they won’t think about handing me over to the Coalition.”

“Why would they do that?” V whispered, searching his eyes, the injustice of it all tearing at her insides. He’d only just begun to taste freedom for it to be stripped away so suddenly.

He wanted to agree to sleep with other women—the very reason V swore she’d never get involved with a virile male

again. But V was in love with Troy. He was *her* man now, whose unborn child she might be carrying.

“Nancy can be very persuasive when she wants to be. I’m sure Evangeline has provided her with a lot of bargaining chips.”

“No, Troy. You can’t do this!” V insisted, but she knew, with every fiber of her being, nothing she said would change his mind.

Troy could surrender his body, his seed, and V could survive it. They would survive it together. Wouldn’t they? But the thought of him being used and exploited in such a way was too much to bear. Yet here they were, failing Shadow, unable to protect him from the harsh reality of their situation.

“Shadow knew what he was doing when he volunteered, Troy. He was giving us a chance. If you admit to being virile now, he’ll have done it for nothing.” V hoped Troy would see reason. See Shadow’s sacrifice, but he seemed determined to join his friend.

V leaned in to distract him with a kiss, anything to stop this madness. When their mouths met, for a moment it seemed to work, but then his hands drew her tight and he ate at her mouth, with such desperation, as if he might never taste her again. There was a profound sense of loss to their kiss, as though it was their last. Troy pulled his mouth away and rolled his forehead against hers, chest heaving.

“Asha knows what I am.” He breathed. “I can’t go back to the Coalition—I can’t leave you. I won’t be a slave again.”

V didn’t like the finality she heard in his voice.

The treehouse shook with the rumbling of something from outside, a commotion like they’d heard some days before. Did they capture more soldiers? Or was Eve in trouble? She’d been so angry when she’d left with Asha.

Sonya burst in through the door. “Our people have found some visitors snooping around your campsite. They say they’re from your Network, so I figured you’d like to see them.”

At the sound of Keith's bellow, calling V's name, they stood up in unison.

SONYA DIRECTED them out of their accommodations. As they gazed over the platform railing, V was greeted by a group of familiar faces. Keith, Becks, and a few other residents from the Lodge, and this time, even Sam was among them.

"Keith!" V shouted down to him. He looked up, relief on his face when he saw her.

"Thank God. When you went offline, we got concerned," he hollered up, craning his head back. "The activity has moved farther east, and we wanted to pull you back, but you disappeared. And now I see why," he said, his eyes roaming angrily over the group of camouflaged women surrounding his team. Keith's face held an expression of clear disgust.

V and Troy climbed down the ladder while Sonya and her companions slid down the nearby ropes hanging off the tree limbs. As soon as she touched the ground, V limped over into Keith's arms. He gave her an enormous bear hug, lifting her off her feet.

"I'm so glad you're all right." He looked over at Troy and acknowledged him with a curt nod, which Troy reciprocated. But this time, when Keith released V, he extended his hand to Troy, and once Troy took it, Keith pulled him in, clapping his back. Troy appeared to be pleasantly surprised by the greeting, as was V. And she smiled up at him with pride.

"You're Keith, Captain of the Network," Asha said as the crowd opened for her. She assessed him appreciatively. "You're very pleasing to look at. Surely you have better things to do with your time than lead."

"I'm both," he said without hesitation before releasing V. "And you are?" he asked, as confident as ever, unfazed by her attempt to reduce him to a sexual thing. And that was why he was the Captain, V thought to herself.

"I am Asha. Leader of the Highland Trek Walkers, and this is my village."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said with a note of insincerity that wasn’t lost on Asha. Keith peeked upward at the surrounding platforms and raised his eyebrows. “Where are the rest of my people?”

“We’re breeding the one you call Shadow,” Asha announced.

“What the fuck? That needs to stop, now.” Keith scowled, his eyes drilling into Asha, totally undaunted by her air of superiority.

Asha shook her head. “In exchange for the pregnant female, and to deal with those hunting them, your man, Shadow, agreed to breed some of our women. We followed through on our half of the arrangement, and he has almost concluded his.”

Keith narrowed his eyes at Asha. “We don’t condone such exchanges.”

“It was given willingly. As a *favor*.” She tipped her head sideways at him. But Keith didn’t blink, just stared at her coolly.

She smiled appreciatively.

“And Eve? Where is she?” He inquired.

“She’s watching over her man.”

Keith blinked but didn’t bite. “And what the hell did you say about a pregnant woman?”

“This one—” Asha flicked her hand toward V. “She is pregnant.”

Keith’s eyes settled on V with a look of astonishment. Under his scrutiny, V’s cheeks flamed a bright red, but she neither confirmed nor denied Asha’s accusation. Troy stepped up behind her, and as if reading her discomfort, pulled her into the cradle of his body.

Keith turned away, a muscle ticking in his jaw. His gaze refocused on Asha. “Release my man you’ve put under obligation, and let’s see what other arrangement we can come to.”

Asha considered him thoughtfully as if debating whether to respect his authority or not. Deciding, she looked over her shoulder at the female standing at her back and nodded. “Let Shadow know he has fulfilled his duty, for now.”

In an instant, the female was up the rope with incredible agility. All the Highland villagers had exceptional upper body strength and then some.

“Are there no males here?” Keith asked.

“We have some, but few are virile. We are seeking men we can breed.”

Keith glanced at V, then his eyes settled on Troy. His mouth worked with displeasure.

Asha followed his line of vision. “Ah yes, the breeder. The one the Coalition soldiers seek. Your man, Shadow, lied to protect him. Why would he do that?”

Keith’s gaze flicked to V, and she caught the same question in his eyes before he returned his attention to Asha. “You have Coalition soldiers here?”

“Why, yes. They are here for him.” Asha glanced at Troy. “What makes him so special?”

Keith grimaced with unveiled annoyance. “He’s a Class 3 Elite Breeder. His Keeper is powerful and wants him back.”

Keith downplayed Troy’s status, and V was grateful for it. A C3 Elite Breeder was a catch, but a C5 Elite Breeder? Now that was hitting the jackpot. V should know.

Obviously, Nancy hadn’t shared Troy’s status. Likely because it would’ve made bartering for him more of a challenge.

“Ah, I see,” Asha said, her eyes roaming over Troy. Bile rose in V’s throat, and she stepped in front of him as if she could protect him from the woman’s hungry gaze. “No ordinary e-breeder then, but a Class 3. No wonder. Trained in the ways of pleasure.”

Thankfully, Keith interrupted whatever Asha was thinking because whatever it was, it couldn’t have been good.

“Perhaps we can arrange something more mutually beneficial than the use of force,” Keith offered. “Our compound has enough young, virile men who would willingly service your women. Plus, the Network could do with more satellite sites. The more eyes we have on the pulse of the land, the better we can safeguard our people against the Coalition.”

Asha blinked rapidly. She looked to be considering his proposal. “Yes. Let’s discuss this further. I should like to hear what you have to offer.”

“In the meantime, I want Shadow brought to us immediately. And no more nonconsensual sex,” Keith stated.

“You are very demanding for a... outsider.” Asha scowled, then raised a brow. “And who said it wasn’t consensual?”

Sam suddenly spoke up, “I know Shadow. He may have agreed to service your women, but I can guarantee he didn’t do it willingly.”

Asha’s eyes shot to Sam. “And who is this?” she asked with a purr, her fingers reaching out to brush down the front of his shirt.

“This is Sam.” Keith’s tone was curt.

“Are you a breeder too, Sam?” Asha asked with saccharine sweetness.

Sam stiffened and stared down his nose at Asha. “You’ll never find out,” he said sharply, stepping away from her languid caress.

Her smile widened. “We’ll see about that. I always like a challenge.”

NO WORDS

V

ONCE KEITH and Asha found some common ground and came to an agreement, the Trek Walker leader invited the entire Landing party to join her for an early dinner to celebrate. Shadow had been escorted back to their tree house, but refused to join them for dinner, not wanting to be anywhere within the same vicinity as Asha.

“I don’t want to discuss it!” was the first thing Shadow had said a few hours earlier as he stormed into the tiny structure, his face flushed and a vein pulsing in his forehead. Troy and V jumped to their feet from where they sat waiting for Keith and Asha to finish their negotiations.

“Shadow—” V stepped forward, elated to see him, but he cut her off.

“As far as I’m concerned, it didn’t happen. You get me?”

V froze on the spot as he eyed her with a pointed glare. Troy caught V by the hips and drew her back, away from Shadow. Shadow deflated slightly at Troy’s protective gesture, his expression softening into one of weary resignation.

Eve stood in the doorway, silently observing the scene, but Shadow ignored her. Where before there’d been a budding connection between the two of them—now, there was nothing. At least not on his part. He appeared to have shut her out completely.

Shadow's deep brown eyes softened. "I'm sorry, V. I didn't mean to take it out on you. How you holding up, momma?"

"I'm okay," V answered reluctantly, "but I'm still not convinced I'm pregnant." Shadow's gaze flicked to Troy, who shrugged. What could he say? V knew she was being stubborn.

Shadow pursed his lips tightly and considered V for a moment. "Good, I'm glad to hear you're well—even if you're still in denial." He gathered his backpack and hoisted it over his shoulder. "And now I'd like to get the hell out of here," he announced, and left the treehouse in a haste, pushing past Eve, practically knocking her off her feet in process. Not even sparing her a second glance in his wake to see if she was okay.

Now the Landing party sat in the Trek Walker dining hall, which back in its day, must have functioned as some sort of management office or souvenir shop. Currently, it only was used for special occasions.

Dressed rather elegantly in a patchwork gown, Asha moved with poise through the dining area as if she were a queen presiding over her court. Asha's eyes sparkled with delight as her guests entered and waved them toward a long communal table. Crafted out of sturdy wood and polished to a glossy finish, the table gleamed brightly in the light of the wall lanterns. But just as everyone was about to take their seats, an alarm rang out and echoed throughout the room.

Already seated in an elaborately carved chair at the head of the table, Asha was on her feet within seconds. "A fire!"

A pretty, young blonde villager raced into the room. "It's the hole!"

Asha's eyebrows furrowed together. "And the Coalition soldiers? Did they make it out?"

The villager shook her head, nervously wringing her hands. "We don't know."

Asha gave a sharp nod before pushing her chair back with a screech and storming out of the hall. Everyone followed her lead.

Outside, the smell of burning pine saturated the air as they made their way to the edge of the fire. A rickety hut, which the Trek Walkers called the hole, had been constructed of old-world timber which had ignited quickly. V and Troy stood in awe of the blaze consuming the small hut where the Coalition soldiers had been kept. Angry orange tongues of fire licked upward, and thick black smoke choked the sky.

“Gather all the buckets. Anything to extinguish the flames!” Asha shouted at the growing crowd of Trek Walkers, her voice choked with angry emotion.

“Do you think they’re still inside?” V asked Troy. Something in her gut told her this fire was too much of a coincidence with two Coalition trackers inside.

Troy stared into the flames with a worried expression. “If they didn’t make it out of there...” he said, trailing off. Probably not wanting to say what they both were thinking. That it would be for the best.

“But if they did,” Troy continued. “We won’t know until they’re either caught, or they come for me.”

All around them, villagers began to form bucket brigades to douse the flames, hauling water from a nearby well.

Troy held out his hand. “Let’s help.”

V curled her fingers around his and followed Troy into the fray. They joined Keith, Becks, and Eve and worked a line to pass water from one person to the next until it reached the blaze.

It seemed like hours before the fire was extinguished and only smoldering cinders were left. They surveyed the grim scene. All that was left of the hut was a skeletal mass of remains, but nothing that appeared to be human.

Afterward, with everyone accounted for the Trek Walkers gathered together and took solace in the knowledge that no one from their village had been hurt or perished in the fire.

A villager at the edge of the crowd caught V’s attention, gesturing for her to come over. V pointed to herself, her eyes skirting over the crowd to make sure the woman hadn’t

mistaken her for someone else. The villager responded with a nod. Curious, V walked over, leaving the Landing party behind.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a metal collar snapped shut around her neck and V yelped in surprise. She clawed at it frantically, searching for the person who'd placed it there. V's heart dropped into the pit of her stomach when she spotted Nancy, sooty from the fire, standing next to the villager who'd called her over. The truth dawned on her: the woman wasn't a Trek Walker but the second Coalition soldier. The one V hadn't really paid attention to because she'd been so focused on Nancy.

Fear ran through her veins as she realized that the fire had been a ruse all along. She should have followed her gut instinct.

Nancy smiled at V sadistically. "A little payback for playing with my toy, Tiffany. Or whatever your name is," she hissed. "Your precious e-breeder is coming with us... and you're going to be all the leverage we need to ensure that he does. That collar around your neck was meant for him, but you'll do just as well. If not better." Nancy held up a device in her hand and pressed a button.

V's knees buckled under her as an electric jolt surged through the collar. She gasped for air, her throat constricting under the searing heat emanating from the metal band. With bleary eyes, she sought Nancy out, hoping she'd stop, but as soon as her vision cleared, V knew she was lost. Nancy's eyes burned with delight as a diabolical smile spread across her battered face.

Desperate, V continued to claw at the collar, but the action only seemed to make it constrict tighter. She fought to breathe, barely hearing Troy's voice calling out to her as she collapsed onto her back, writhing in pain on the ground.

Asha's voice sliced through the chaos. "Let the Network woman die! Restrain the breeder and take down the Coalition scum!"

A fearsome “no” broke over the din of the crowd. Troy screaming her name. Keith’s tirade, forceful, and menacing. Something about dishonoring an agreement. Asha’s sharp, angry retorts, and bitter laughter.

Nancy addressed the milling crowd, holding up another control in her hand. “We’ve rigged your grounds. I wouldn’t suggest messing with us unless you want to see the whole place burn!”

A wave of outraged voices washed over V.

“Release the breeder!” Asha cried out.

Heavy boots thundered closer, and instinctively V knew it was Troy.

“V!” he called out to her, but she weakly waved for him to stay back.

“Don’t... touch me,” she begged in a whimper, her eyes wide. V locked her fingers around the collar, and slowly the restriction around her neck eased. She stopped struggling and concentrated on dragging air into her lungs.

Once her panicked breathing subsided, she could just make out the inaudible murmurs of the surrounding villagers. V pictured them forming a menacing crowd around the two soldiers who had wreaked havoc on their village.

Once V could think clearly again, she followed the sound of Troy’s footsteps until he stood in front of her. She could make out the back of his ash-covered boots as he faced Nancy. A scurry of quick footfalls rushed up behind her and Eve crouched at her back.

“Don’t touch me,” V croaked.

“Shh, V. Just keep breathing.” Eve’s face came in and out of focus. V heard her reassurances that everything was going to be alright, but V knew better.

Nothing but pretty lies, she murmured to herself. She couldn’t lose Troy to these monstrous women.

“Please, no,” V wept, barely making any sound at all; her mouth tasted like metal and bitter despair. Her heart twisted

painfully in her chest as she met Troy's regretful gaze as he glanced down at her. It was then that V saw the resignation in his beautiful eyes. He would sacrifice everything for her and their baby. Even if it meant returning to Evangeline, to his old life, anything to keep them both safe.

V turned away, unable to watch him walk out of her life—forever. She'd been so wrong. Losing Mack had been nothing, nothing compared to the mere thought of losing Troy.

“Kill me,” she whispered, over and over again.

THE PRICE OF BETRAYAL

NANCY

NANCY'S EYES blazed with malicious intent as she eyeballed the e-breeder and the woman he shielded behind his body. There was nothing he could do to stop the electric pulses surging through the collar clamped around her neck. He'd have to pry the controller out of Nancy's hand, and for that, he'd have to kill her first. But if she was going to die, she'd be damned if she wasn't taking his woman with her.

Troy raised his hands in surrender. "Don't hurt her anymore. I'll do whatever you want."

Yes, Nancy thought, grovel for me, baby. A swell of power coursed through her as she relished the moment. Victory *was* sweet indeed.

"You know why we're here," she sneered. "Evangeline wants her beloved Elite Breeder back." She gestured to the collar around the whimpering woman's neck. Sparks of electricity danced up and down the metallic surface. "I brought that device to ring your pretty neck, but it looks good on your woman, don't you think?"

Nancy held the controller up in her hand, and with a smirk, she pressed the activation button again. Troy looked on in horror as his lover writhed in agony. The air was heavy with the stench of burning flesh as electricity seared the delicate skin at her neck.

"Enough!" His voice cracked as he looked at Nancy, eyes wide and pleading. "I said I'd do whatever you want! Please,

just stop!” Desperation set in the lines of his face. Surely he could hear his woman begging to die.

Nancy could.

She released the button, and the number of lights along the band faded to zero. The tension in the woman’s body eased as she turned her face away from the e-breeder. Her pathetic moans a balm to Nancy’s ears. The woman was delirious.

Troy swallowed hard, his eyes darting between his lover and Nancy. Finally, he fixed his gaze on Nancy and nervously licked his lower lip, his anxiety palpable.

“You come with us. Nice and easy. That’s what we want,” Nancy said, “or that collar will fry her brain. I could make it constrict so tightly around that pretty little throat of hers that her eyes bug out. You don’t want that, now do you, lover?”

Troy’s eyes never wavered from Nancy as he shook his head in the negative. “No, I don’t want that.” His tone was placating, his hands still up in the air. “I’ll come with you, but first remove the collar and put it on me. It’s me you want.”

Nancy’s laughter rang hollow, like a broken bell. “Oh, there’s no way I’m removing it. It suits her, don’t you think?” She narrowed her eyes. “No. You come willingly with us. The collar will fail once we’re a safe enough distance away, and they can pry it off her then. Same for the explosives, so don’t tamper with those either,” she shouted to the crowd, vibrating with menace.

Troy bowed his head in acceptance and defeat. He had no other choice but to obey Nancy’s orders.

When the e-breeder lifted his gaze again, a flicker of defiance sparked in his eye. “How do I know you’ll stick to your end of the bargain?”

“You don’t,” Nancy replied. “But what choice do you have?”

He worked his mouth. “I don’t.”

“Good,” Nancy said darkly. “Let’s go then. Together.” She scanned over the surrounding dwellers. “And if anyone tries to

interfere,” she shouted out at the angry crowd so there was no misunderstanding, “she’s as good as dead and you can kiss your trapeze-on-steroids village, goodbye.”

Nancy leered at Troy, curling her fingers in a come-hither motion. He lowered his hands. “That’s it, big boy, come along like a good e-breeder. Playtime is over. It’s time to go home to your Keeper.”

Troy’s eyes watered in unspoken rage, but ultimately, he was the cause of all this—simply by running. He turned back and gave his woman one last glance before he stepped over to Nancy and Cynthia. The crowd opened, giving them a wide berth. But Nancy wasn’t oblivious to the hatred that resonated in the dwellers’ eyes as they let them pass into the night.

THEY’D BEEN WALKING MOST of the night through the dark and treacherous forest, their feet heavy with exhaustion as they trudged through the cold, murky landscape. The moon had long since vanished behind a thick layer of clouds, leaving only pinpricks of starlight to guide them.

Still, in the dim light, the trees cast long, looming shadows across their path. Now and then, they heard the rustle of leaves and the crack of twigs, a constant reminder they were never alone. No doubt the dwellers would be in hot pursuit as soon as the collar deactivated, but for now, they’d kept their distance.

Nancy glanced sideways at the e-breeder who trailed behind them. Finally, she asked him the question that had long been burning in her mind. “Why the hell would you choose life in the Dead Zones over the Coalition, when you could live in luxury and fuck all the time?”

Troy shook head his sadly at her. “Choice.”

“What?” she balked. “What kind of cryptic answer is that?”

“None of it was my choice. I had no say in anything. Everything was decided for me.”

Nancy snorted. “You’re a male. All you need is food and sex. You’ll stick your dick into anything.”

Nancy caught the bitter set of Troy’s mouth. “That’s what you think. If I had had a choice, I wouldn’t have stuck my dick into you.”

Without thinking Nancy spun around and struck Troy across the face. The strike sounded like a clap of thunder, echoing through the still night air, but the e-breeder never made a sound. Didn’t even wince. He just stood his ground and had the audacity to smirk at her despite the red welt blooming on his face.

“Is that all you’ve got?”

“How dare you?” Nancy seethed, raising her hand, but Cynthia caught her wrist before she could strike him again.

“You’re leaving marks!” Cynthia hissed. “Evangeline won’t like it.”

Nancy huffed and looked at Troy pointedly, her chest rising and falling with each angry breath, fighting the impulse to put the e-breeder in his place. “I’ll deal with you later.” She turned on her heel and stormed ahead, still steaming from the altercation. Imagine, a man who thought he deserved to have a choice in life. Ungrateful bastard. After all the Coalition did for his gender.

As they plowed on, Nancy double-checked their coordinates on the PI she’d swiped from the dwellers. They were still a day away from the retrieval point. Nancy sighed heavily; they had a lot of ground to cover, and they were all tired. They needed to rest.

As if reading Nancy’s mind, Cynthia gestured toward a dense patch of trees. “How about we camp here for the night?”

“It’s good enough,” Nancy agreed. “As long as we’re linked to that collar, it will keep the fuckers at bay. We should be good for a few more hours.”

Troy slumped against a tree trunk and slid down onto his haunches, stretching out his legs, exhaustion clear in every tired line of his body.

“And what do we do with the target?” Cynthia gestured toward Troy with her chin.

“Easy.” Nancy pulled some rope from her pocket. She approached Troy. “Give me your wrists.”

“I’m not in the mood for rope play tonight, sweetheart,” he drawled, but he presented his wrists to her anyway. Nancy quickly tied them together and secured the knot to the tree at his back. She stepped back to admire her handiwork.

Troy leaned his head against the trunk, eyes smoldering like embers. “Like what you see?”

Another time, Nancy would have creamed her panties at the invitation in his eyes and the sultry note in his voice. But now she tilted her head and studied him. The words were right, but the undertone was all wrong. Sexual, but bitter. He was a man struggling with his “new” reality. *Good*. He deserved to be miserable. After all, hadn’t he ruined her life? He was the reason she was out here in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere.

“Stop wasting your time with him,” Cynthia interjected sharply.

Nancy nodded and turned away from Troy, focusing her attention on more important tasks, like setting up camp and mapping out their route for the following day’s trek.

Even though her gaze was elsewhere, Nancy felt Troy’s eyes lingering on her as she moved around the camp. It was a predatory stare that made her want to break him down to his former self.

Troy needed reminding that men weren’t the apex predators anymore—women were, and Nancy would be the one to do it.

DESPAIR

TROY

TROY'S FISTS clenched as he watched Nancy go through the motions of setting up camp. He hadn't hated her before, when he used her to flee the gala, but he despised her now with a burning rage. Anger bubbled up inside of him like a volcano waiting to erupt. She'd collared V and caused her unimaginable pain, surely jeopardizing their baby. Nancy was stripping him of everything. His freedom. His family. His friends. And his humanity.

Troy wanted to lash out and hurt her—so she'd feel the same sense of powerlessness eating away at him now. But he knew Nancy still held V's life in her hands, so he simply glared at her from his spot against the tree.

Though their eyes would occasionally lock in a silent struggle, Nancy seemed unaffected by his withering stare. She held his gaze, her lips curling into a knowing smirk as if to say, "You won't win this battle." Despite himself, Troy continued to track Nancy's movements and listened intently when she and Cynthia talked quietly about their plans for the next day. Because knowledge was power.

Troy tugged at his binds. Shifting into a more comfortable position, he closed his weary eyes. For V's sake, he'd agreed to go willingly. Troy clenched his teeth as he tried not to think about tomorrow. About how he may never see V again. Or their child. His chest tightened at the thought, but he shut the feeling down quickly. He couldn't spiral into a well of despair.

He needed to rest. He had to stay strong.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night, a tug on the rope binding his wrists roused Troy from his fitful sleep. He opened groggy eyes to find Nancy standing beside him, her face a mask of concentration as she deftly yanked his bound wrists over his head. He felt powerless and exposed as she worked, brushing her fingers over the sensitive skin under the binds in ways he found disturbingly intimate.

Once she'd secured his arms over his head, she stepped back and looked at him appraisingly, but instead of being lustful, her gaze was stony and calculating. Troy felt a chill run up his spine—he knew whatever plans she had in mind, they weren't good.

When she crouched down in front of him and leered into his face, Troy forced himself to stay calm.

“You ruined my career, and now I'm going to ruin you, motherfucker.” With those words, she reached for his belt buckle—a bleak reminder he was completely at her mercy. A wave of nausea engulfed him. He swallowed hard as Nancy stood back up and stared down at him with an expression of morbid satisfaction.

For a moment, all was silent except for the sound of their breathing. Then finally, Nancy stepped forward and bent level to his face again. “I want you to remember this moment for the rest of your life,” she hissed, dragging one finger down his shirt as she spoke. “I want you to know that I am not someone who can be taken lightly... not by anyone.”

And with those last words ringing in his ears, Nancy straightened up, toed off her boots, and pushed down her pants. Troy felt a wave of dread wash over him as he realized what Nancy was about to do. As if in a trance, he watched her peel off her underwear until she stood completely naked. She tossed the scrap of fabric at his face, and he shook it off.

“Ah, don't tell me you don't like the smell of pussy anymore.” Nancy pouted. Slowly she stepped forward and

straddled his thighs. Her eyes bore into his, her gaze, so intense and unwavering. Troy's heart raced as Nancy leaned in and whispered in his ear, "I am going to make you regret the day you ever crossed me."

Troy couldn't shake the ominous intentions behind her words as she ground her hips against his pelvis and let out a low moan. He turned his head away as she unzipped his pants and plunged her hands into the opening, gripping his dick tightly. He hissed at the rough management of the tender organ. Her grip was tight and controlling, demanding compliance as her hips moved back and forth against his. His breathing became increasingly more labored as he felt himself slipping further and further into the sensations she was creating. This is what they conditioned him to do.

Troy closed his eyes tightly, desperate to fight the unwanted reactions that Nancy's body was eliciting. He wanted to protest, wanted to tell her to stop, but he had to think of V and her safety. If he pissed Nancy off, V could die with a simple press of a button. So instead, he bit his tongue, struggling in vain against the pleasure that was overtaking him.

Nancy would not be denied. She continued her relentless assault on Troy's body, grinding her hips harder into his as she whispered in his ear again, "That's it. Get hard for me, e-breeder. I can feel you thickening in my hand."

Suddenly, Nancy pulled away from him, her face triumphant. "You see how your body remembers me," she said smugly. "You're nothing more than *my* slave now." Her words stung deeper than a slap to his face, shattering the last vestige of his resolve. Troy groaned in misery. His cock was throbbing and growing heavy in her hand, and he knew that he couldn't resist for much longer. So he bucked her off, sending her sprawling, naked-assed, onto the ground with a resounding thump.

"You bastard!" she shrieked, surely waking the dead, and then Nancy did the unthinkable. She slammed her heel into his testicles.

Red-hot pain lanced through Troy, leaving him curled in a heaving ball against the base of the tree. Once he was lucid enough to think past the debilitating pain, he fought his binds. Teeth bared, he foamed at the mouth as the ropes whined from his efforts to break free.

Troy blinked back angry tears, determined not to show weakness, wanting to give Nancy nothing, but he was breathing hard and sweating profusely. Ultimately, the pain and frustration were too much and he screamed; a gruff, angry sound, filling the night with his outrage.

Nancy glared down at him with a satisfied smirk on her face before scooping up her pants and walking away.

“Fuck you!” Troy hollered after her as he watched her leave, seething with impotent rage for the woman who had just assaulted and humiliated him. If he could see red, Troy saw it.

Gradually, the pain subsided, but Troy felt weak and even more vulnerable than before. He yanked half-heartedly at his binds, but the rope refused to give. Taking deep breaths, he looked around desperately for something he could use to free himself but found nothing. Exhausted, he slumped back in defeat.

Troy knew now that there was no escape. Nancy was right. He was a slave. A slave to his gender, and that’s all he’d ever be. A breeder. Nothing more than a sexual object to be used and passed around like a commodity.

Footfalls approached. Troy refused to raise his head, even when gentle hands reached for his limp shaft, still peeking out of his open zipper. “Fuck off,” he muttered, all out of steam, and tried to shuffle away.

“I just wanted to do you up,” Cynthia said quietly, referring to the undone zipper of his pants.

Troy sighed in resignation and allowed the other woman to tuck him in and zip his pants up. All the while, he looked away, refusing to see the pity in her eyes. When she was done, she stepped away without another word. She stormed over to Nancy, and the two women began to argue.

KICK A MAN WHEN HE'S DOWN

SHADOW

“SON OF A BITCH! Did you see that?” Shadow whispered, whipping the binoculars away from his eyes. Even he was crouching a bit awkwardly as if to protect his own balls. Any sane man would feel sympathy for a brother getting kicked like that. “She’s a real piece of work.”

“Yeah, she sure is.” Keith cringed and adjusted his own junk as he peered over the boulder overlooking the Coalition soldiers’ campsite. “That must have hurt like a motherfucker.”

“For sure.” Shadow braced both his elbows against the rough rock, peering through the binoculars once more. “I think my balls just pulled up into my stomach after watching that,” he grumbled.

Keith huffed, “Mine too.”

“We need to get to him before she does more serious damage,” Shadow declared, his voice low and intense.

Keith gave a sharp nod and then cast his gaze toward the campsite, where the two women were engaged in a heated argument. The redhead stood with her arms crossed over her chest and shook her head in disagreement while the other woman gestured angrily, pointing toward Troy. Keith looked to the Landing party behind him, hunched low and poised for action.

“It’s time to go,” he said, and with a forward wave. And they moved in like thieves in the night.

WELCOME TO THE DEAD ZONES

TROY

TROY HELD HIS BREATH, eyes shut tight as he listened carefully to the sounds of the forest. Relief washed over him as he heard multiple sets of footsteps swiftly approach from the surrounding woods. It couldn't be just some pain-induced hallucination. Troy hoped desperately it was a rescue team, and that they were here to free him, which meant V was safe.

In an instant, a group of war-painted figures raced past Troy and burst into the camp, brandishing weapons and encircling the unsuspecting women. Troy recognized Keith's voice immediately. Then Shadow stepped out of the darkness, his face smudged with angry lines of soot. He pulled a knife from his belt, crouched down in front of Troy, and, with deft movements, sawed at the rope binding him.

"Shit, man, are you okay?" Shadow asked as he tugged off the binds. "I saw what she did to you."

"I'll survive," Troy said in a gruff voice as he slowly stood up, every muscle in his body screaming in pain. He winced and shifted his weight, his sore groin still throbbing from the killer kick. "How's V? Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Shadow reassured him. "As soon as the link to the collar was severed, we cut it off. She's hurting, but more scared for you than anything else. It took a lot to persuade her to stay back at the village."

Sagging back against the tree, Troy pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes as relief washed over him. V was safe.

His family was safe. Troy was filled with gratitude. He straightened out and grasped Shadow by the shoulder, steadying himself on his feet. Surprised that the male tolerated his touch for once.

“Thanks, man. For watching out for her,” Troy said, his voice still laced with pain as he looked Shadow in the eyes. “Now give me your gun.”

Shadow studied him grimly. “You sure?”

Troy’s hand trembled as he held it out. “Give me the gun,” he said again, his voice low and steady.

Shadow hesitated before he took his pistol out of its holster and handed it over to him. Troy’s fingers curled around the cold metal grip. His expression hardened as he studied the weapon in his hand.

Troy released the safety and met Shadow’s concerned gaze, but the male nodded. Troy reciprocated the gesture and marched forward. Cutting through the small crowd standing around Nancy, Troy stepped forward and aimed the gun directly between her eyes.

“Everyone needs to back away,” he told the Landing party, gathered around the two Coalition soldiers, resting on their knees. Nobody interfered or tried to talk him down.

Troy’s heart hammered wildly against his chest, but he refused to back down. Nancy stared at him with an air of superiority, her lips curling into that smug grin again. But Troy’s gaze remained fixed on her, unflinching, determined to make her pay for what she’d done to him, and especially for what she’d done to V.

“Like you could ever shoot me, breeder,” she sneered. “I can see your hand shaking. You’re pathetic, just like all your kind. All your good for is a fuck.”

Troy glared at Nancy, his face flushed with anger. She’d done a lot of damage, and some of it perhaps irreparable. He steadied his stance and pulled the trigger.

Shock registered on her face as the shot ripped through the air like lightning. Warm blood splattered onto his hands,

clothing, and face. And as if in slow motion, Nancy's body crumpled to the ground, a bloody, lifeless mass.

He'd never killed another human being before and the impact of what he'd done hit him like a ton of bricks, but all Troy could do was stand there. He was still in a daze when Keith stepped up and pried the gun from his fingers. The crack of another gunshot tore Troy out of his trance, as did the thud of another body falling. Nancy's companion.

"There was no other choice," Keith remarked. "They knew too much. The last thing we want is the Coalition knocking at our doors." He studied Troy with sympathy. "Welcome to the Dead Zones, my brother." Then the Captain swung back and started to shout out orders.

Shadow looped a strong arm around Troy's shoulders, walking him away from the two dead women. "It's time to head home, T. Back to your woman."

Back to V.

THEY WERE RECEIVED with cheers at the Trek Walker village.

V broke out of the crowd and rushed toward Troy as soon as she saw him. She embraced him tightly, as if her life depended upon it, before pulling away to look at him. Worry strained her features.

"Are you hurt?" she asked softly, her voice sounding hoarse. "You're covered with blood." She ran her hands over his splattered shirt, checking for wounds. Finding nothing, she wiped at the remnants of blood on his face.

Troy gave her a reassuring smile. "It's not my blood. I'm fine." He dabbed his fingers over the gauze wrapped around her throat. His eyes met hers. Questioning.

"I'm all right," she assured him. "Luckily, it's only a second-degree burn. Although it's not pretty under the bandage."

Troy's mouth set in a grim line. He took her hands into his, drew her knuckles up to his lips and kissed them. "Everything

about you is beautiful to me.”

V scanned his face, and after a few seconds, nodded. “You killed her, didn’t you?” she asked. When he nodded resolutely, she leaned in and gingerly placed her cheek against his chest.

“I’m so sorry, babes,” she soothed, both hands running over the stiff muscles of his back.

Troy buried his chin in her hair, and the scent of her filled his lungs as gratitude overwhelmed him. He was home. V was home.

“And the baby?”

V stiffened in his arms, probably getting ready to insist there was no baby. She was stubborn, his V. But maybe now, especially after what her body had endured, she was right and there was no baby.

But she surprised him. “I haven’t bled, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Troy tightened his hold on V and exhaled loudly, relieved. Yes, that was what he wanted to know. That his family was all right.

The villagers started clapping and rejoicing again, and Troy grinned as V took his hand and led them to the village hall, where they were welcomed with even more applause. They were served food and given the chance to rest in one of the Trek Walkers’ houses for the night before leaving in the morning.

All Troy wanted to do was lie down with V in his arms and breathe her in—his woman. His everything.

I CHOOSE YOU

TROY

TROY GLANCED OVER THE RAILING. Down below, Keith and Becks, along with the other members of the Landing party, were preparing to leave. Keith had agreed to bring some of Asha's females back to Freedom's Landing to see what would happen after some discussion about Asha's willingness to sacrifice V to the Coalition soldier.

In exchange, Asha offered to act as eyes for the Landing to increase the Network's visual range. That way, if the Coalition circumvented their security protocols again, Asha could report it.

Despite the damage that the collar had inflicted on V, she'd shown incredible resilience. Although a thick angry red welt ran around the circumference of her throat, the hope was that once it healed, it would eventually fade.

By the time the Landing party finally returned to the compound, V's nausea had mostly dissipated, and she'd come to terms with the likelihood she was pregnant. Even though Troy feared she would miscarry after the shocks she'd endured, but her body was strong.

After getting a positive pregnancy test, at first V was filled with joy but her elation gradually faded, and she grew more introverted and pensive.

And Troy began to worry about her state of mind.

True to his word, Keith had made sure their cabin was ready for them when they arrived back at the Landing. Shadow settled into V's old quarters, and he told Troy that having his own space was worth all the trouble they'd gone through with the Trek Walkers. "Debt repaid" were his exact words. After all, he wouldn't have to hear V and Troy "going at it" in the next room when he wanted to get some shut-eye.

This morning, V woke up early and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of their wood burning stove. She stared reflectively into the flickering flames, nursing a steaming mug of coffee. She looked comfy in her sweatshirt and pajama bottoms, her cheeks rosy from the fire. Troy padded over and settled in behind her, cradling her between his knees and resting his chin on her shoulder.

Although she'd sought solace from him during their trip back home, they hadn't had sex since leaving the Highland village, and Troy yearned for the intimacy of being one with her again.

But to his surprise, he didn't feel the overwhelming need to fuck. No pent-up urges. Nothing, except for...

"I miss you," he whispered, gently kissing the side of her throat, mindful of the tender skin there. "I thought you'd be happy to be pregnant, but you don't seem to be."

She nestled the side of her face against his. Her skin was so soft in contrast to his. "I'd given up hope of this ever happening years ago. Now it feels so surreal, like at any moment I'll wake up and it will all be gone—you, the baby, just taken away."

"V, I want you to be happy, not sad about this—about us. About the baby," he told her. Troy scooted over to her side so he could read the expressions on her face. He took her hand into his.

"Life is so unpredictable, so we've got to hold on to every minute." Troy leaned in, cupping her cheek and turning her face to his. He kissed her tenderly, then pressed his forehead against hers. "Haven't you wanted to be with me? Haven't you missed us?"

She smiled at him sadly, tracing over his stubbled jawline.

“Of course I have. I want to be with you. You’re everything to me. When I lost Mack, I thought that was bad. But you—you’ve ruined me forever. What if they come for you again?” She bit her lower lip, her expression crumbling under the weight of her worries. “And I lose you? What if—?”

“What-ifs will paralyze you, V,” he interjected. “I should know. They kept me from running for all those years. What if I got caught again? But here I am. With the woman I love, and a baby on the way. A family. A home. A community and a sense of belonging. Even in my wildest fantasies, I could never have hoped for so much.”

She leaned one shoulder into the valley of his chest. “I’m just really scared. What if we have sex and it hurts the baby?” she whispered. “It’s already a miracle that I didn’t lose her.”

“Her?”

V smiled shyly. “She feels like a her to me.”

Troy nipped V lightly on the lips. “A girl sounds perfect to me.” But there it was. The source of V’s reluctance. Troy laughed gently. She was afraid of losing the baby.

“What are you laughing at?”

“The spasms of pleasure are nothing like labor contractions. The baby is very safe inside you.” Troy touched the curve of her belly, which was just beginning to show the slightest bump. “I thought you would know that. Didn’t you work at a fertility clinic?”

“Yes, but I was only a clerk. I didn’t counsel anyone.” She met his eyes and raised his chin with her fingers when his gaze kept dropping to her mouth. They were such a sweet distraction.

He met her eyes. “E-breeders are schooled in all things related to sex, not just in the act itself. This is to make sure we can read the signs and know when we’ve fulfilled our duties. Despite that, Keepers sometimes keep us around for the duration of their pregnancies, as some women become more

aroused during pregnancy and want to indulge. My Keeper never lost her baby because we had sex.”

“You stayed with one of your Keepers throughout their pregnancy?” she asked, surprise evident on her face.

“Do you really want to know?” he responded huskily, his attention returning to her lips.

V nodded.

“Then yes,” he said softly, his eyes lifting to hers. “But I only got to see the baby once—a beautiful little girl named Ella.” His heart ached at the memory. “My Keeper was kind enough to let me hold her for a few moments. I remember how small she was, snug in my arms, and how good she smelled, like warm milk. Her skin was so rosy and warm.” He paused, regret lacing his voice. “All the other times I’d been moved by the time my Keepers gave birth.”

“I’m so sorry, Troy.” She placed her palm over his heart.

“Don’t be, Valentine. I have you now. And a baby on the way. I couldn’t ask for more.” He sighed and pressed his lips together. “Remember no past, no future?”

She traced a finger over his lower lip. “Only the present,” she finished.

Troy swallowed hard, then fished around in his pajama pocket and pulled out a burgundy swath of cloth. He felt his skin flush as he unwrapped the precious object inside it. V’s eyes tracked his fingers’ movement. When he was on the cusp of revealing what lay inside, Troy met V’s gaze. “Remember when Shadow, Sam, and I would fight?” His gaze searched hers.

V nodded quietly.

“Well, I collected quite a bit of credit. Once I started winning, that is.” He snorted. “And I had this made for you.” In the palm of his hand, he revealed a golden wedding band.

V was hesitant as she reached for it, her fingers trembling as she picked it up.

“Troy?” she whispered.

He gave her a bashful smile. “It’s inscribed. Read what it says on the inside.”

She turned the band in her fingers and read out loud, “I choose you.” V studied it for a few beats before she lifted teary eyes. “It’s beautiful, Troy.”

“I want you to be my wife.”

V swallowed hard and nodded.

Troy arched a brow. “Is that a yes?”

She nodded more vigorously and smiled, her eyes glittering with joy. “Absolutely, it’s a yes.”

Troy plucked the band from her shaking fingers and placed it on her engagement finger. V leaned in and hugged him for a long moment. She felt so right in his arms.

Once she pulled away, Troy spoke again, “So, I was thinking about how’d we try living in the moment again? Right here, and right now. Starting a family is new for both of us, but we can do this together, as husband and wife.” He placed his palm on her stomach. “We can learn it together—have faith in us, V.” Troy’s hand wandered lower as he pushed his fingers into the front of her pajama bottoms and slid them further inside.

“Let me help you forget your troubles,” he breathed into her hair. His skilled fingers easily found her slick nub and teased it. V let out a low moan and pink bloomed up her neck as she arched greedily against him, chasing her pleasure. Troy gripped her ass as ground against his working fingers. Mesmerized, he watched her give in to the sensations he was creating.

“Just like you know I can make you come, I want you to believe that everything is going to be all right. Can you do that for us?”

She nodded, her breath hitching in her chest.

“Yes. Please—” she murmured, her eyelashes fluttering closed against her skin as she leaned forward and pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

“What do you want, V?” he asked in a hushed tone against her exposed neck, all the while, plucking her clit.

“Fuck me,” she replied. “I want you to fuck me.”

“How, sweet Valentine?” he teased. “Should I use my fingers, my mouth, my dick? What do you want?”

“Use your fingers,” she moaned as her breath grew more shallow, impatient for him to make his move.

“Like this?” he asked as he inserted his middle finger deep into her slick pussy, up to the knuckles, and moved it inside her tight and clingy channel. She rode him, making small, needy noises.

“More,” she pleaded airily. “It’s not enough.”

“More what?”

“Fingers.”

Troy added his index finger, stretching her, scissoring her open to prepare her for his cock. She wanted his fingers, but he wanted to re-create the connection between them. He was readying her so he could burrow deep inside his woman, his Valentine, in the most intimate of ways.

He fucked into her body, fingering the spongy tissue just inside her upper walls that would drive her crazy. Moisture dripped on his hand, the inside of her sex quivering around his digits as she neared orgasm. Troy withdrew his fingers, and she emitted a cry of displeasure. She was a greedy lover.

Desperate for release, V shoved Troy onto his back. He laughed as she tucked his pajama bottoms beneath his scrotum. V shimmied out of her clothing, and as soon as she was completely naked, she grabbed hold of his fully engorged dick and crawled onto his lap. Without hesitation, she thrust down onto him without mercy.

“Ah! Damn it!” he cursed, gritting his teeth in frustration as he tried to adjust her body on top of his. She was so tight. So primed and ready. V squirmed on him impatiently, eager to get going, and he gripped her hips, helping her find a rhythm that they both liked. Troy’s nails dug into the softness of her

hips, encouraging her to move faster, their bodies slapping together. Troy felt himself reaching for ecstasy as she rode him hard.

She absolutely owned him.

Troy knew with every essence of his being that when he was inside of her, he was home. Wherever she was. Whether that be at the Landing, up north, or on the run. V was home.

Ironically, he'd sought freedom only to become a slave to this one woman. Troy yearned to experience true love, and he knew it now, when their bodies and souls were completely intertwined. When he didn't know where he ended and she began.

Neither of them knew what the future had in store for them, yet as long as Troy had V and their new family by his side, he believed he could conquer anything.

His muscles tensed with anticipation, and her body quivered, chasing her pleasure. Troy felt himself swell inside of her as they both reached an explosive, simultaneous climax, crying out together.

V dropped forward, slick and sweaty, panting against his chest, both of them enjoying the postcoital bliss and the clarity that came with it. Troy knew what a lucky bastard he was. As it turned out, the Dead Zones weren't so dead after all, but thriving with love and brimming with life and hope.

UNFULFILLED

EVANGELINE

EVANGELINE WOKE in a bed of tangled sheets and limbs. She lay wedged between two sleeping men, aware of the third man sleeping behind the one at her back. The room was still dark but reeked of musk and sex.

Evangeline enjoyed their youthful enthusiasm. They'd pleased her, caressing her with their hands and tongues, filling her pussy, mouth and ass completely, all the while whispering crude and obscene words into her ears. Just the way she liked it.

And when she was done with them and duly satisfied, Evangeline watched them fuck one another, marveling at the beauty of their corded muscles and relishing in the exquisite pleasure they took in the act of penetrating each other in the most taboo of ways. Sodomy was permissible among S category males, as they were infertile and couldn't reproduce. And Evangeline was a dirty girl, making each of them eat her out while the other two fuck each other in the ass and jacked off repeatedly. Even now, they were caked with semen.

As the light of morning peeked through the windows of her personal suite in the Zone 7 Himeros House, she stretched, suddenly aware of her body's aches and pains. And her thoughts turned to Troy as they always did. She smiled to herself, luxuriating in the knowledge that he'd be home soon. Despite her proclivity for multiple partners, none of them were Troy. Evangeline missed him terribly. His scent, his touch, his body. His presence in her home and in her bed.

As she slowly untangled herself from the men and the twisted sheets, her PI hummed with an incoming communication. Evangeline reached over the broad expanse of male shoulders to the nightstand and eagerly lifted the device.

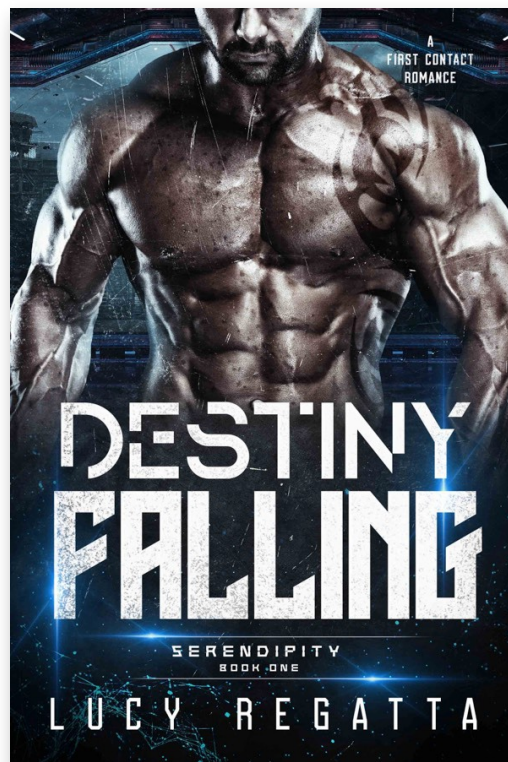
Hmm. A message from her head of security. Evangeline's heart skipped a beat until she read the text and realized the gravity of the situation. The words "two dead bodies" and "Nancy O'Neill and Cynthia Cruise" made her stomach sink. And Troy, Evangeline's e-breeder, was nowhere to be found.

Anger churned in her belly and rose to choke her until she could barely breathe. Evangeline threw the device across the room and flopped back onto the bed. "Damn it all to hell!" She'd put her reputation on the line to get Troy back and failed. Anger, hurt, and betrayal burned hot in her veins.

In her fitful state, she reached over to the man nearest her and dug her fingers into his side. The man grunted and shifted position, rolling onto his side to escape her grasp. Despite the force of her fingers, he remained asleep, oblivious to her rage but she'd be sure to hurt him once he woke up. Yes, she'd inflict a little pain on all of them, simply, because she could and somebody needed to pay.

For now, she would have to give up on Troy, having exhausted her resources. But Evangeline was nothing if not persistent. This wasn't over yet—not by a long shot.

READ DESTINY FALLING



Freedom's Landing is the prequel and companion series to *Serendipity*. If you're curious about where this series is heading, without giving too much away, read *Destiny Falling*, a first contact fated mates romance and the first installment in the *Serendipity* series.

And yes, eventually these two worlds do collide.

If you loved Troy and are curious about whose story could be next, watch out for my newsletter and get an opportunity to vote for the character you'd like to read about the most.

Coming February 2024, FREE BONUS epilogue for Troy.

www.lucyregatta.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As adventurous as a goldfish in a fishbowl, Lucy Regatta is content to be on the inside looking out. But every now and then, she gets a little restless and likes to make waves.

She jokes about being a “rebel without a cause,” so it’s no surprise her female protagonists can be rebellious. Women who aren’t afraid to challenge the status quo. Or the men in their lives... who are as hot as Hades.

Lucy dreams of a future where she can kick back, relax, and live a virtual life of adventure. Until then, she enjoys a gentle breeze on a warm summer’s night. Driving with the windows down and tunes blaring, wind whipping through her hair. Naps with her forever puppies and good meals with even better company.

Her small world revolves around a remarkably patient husband, two wonderfully quirky sons, a pair of crazy man-eating Potcakes, one tiny yet super sassy Shiba Inu who rules the roost, and some incredibly dear friends.

During her spare time, Lucy is frequently found holed up in her favorite coffee haunts.... nose to the grindstone, writing away, and nursing a once-hot cup of java.

If you ever feel like reaching out, Lucy enjoys connecting with readers and getting their feedback. She can usually be found lurking on Facebook but you can also email her at author@lucyregatta.com.

Visit Lucy Regatta’s website at www.lucyregatta.com.

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And always, to my dearest friend, A. Popik, who passed away on November 8, 2021. I still think about you every day. I miss you and wish with all my heart you were still here with us, but your words of encouragement stay with me. So until we meet again.

Last but certainly not least, I'd like to thank all my readers who have patiently stuck by me ever since *Destiny Falling*. Thank you for your patience, all your support, for your kind words and for reaching out. I'm so glad that you enjoy the world of *Serendipity*, and I hope you'll like *Troy*—although his series has a different vibe. I promise that I'm diligently working on book two of the *Serendipity* series and hope to release it in the spring of 2024.

ALSO BY LUCY REGATTA

SERENDIPITY SERIES

[Destiny Falling](#) (Kindle and Print)

Taking Risk (2024)

FREEDOM'S LANDING SERIES

Troy (Kindle, Print and KU)

TBA (2024)

DISCREET COVERS

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