

MAD WORLD



BOOK
ONE

LAURA LASCARDO

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Published by

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Mad World

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DESCRIPTION

It's a mad, mad world, Kitten, but I'll do whatever I can to keep you safe.

It's been seven years since a rabies-like virus decimated the human population. Those who haven't turned Rabid from the fever are struggling to survive. When Cipher, leader of his band of misfits, encounters a young man digging in his garden in a sunny suburb of South Carolina, he doesn't know what to make of him. Alone and with all of his limbs intact, the teen seems to be thriving and yet, there is the matter of the Rabid-like groans emanating from the second-story window.

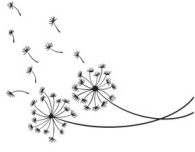
Joshua doesn't trust this rag-tag gang of youth who've infiltrated his home and nicknamed him "Kitten." He certainly doesn't trust the clever, black-eyed killer who's good with a blade, but he's tired of waiting for his brother to return home, and he'd rather join this band of scavengers than be left all alone. He'll journey with them to Atlanta and figure out his next moves from there.

Cipher's first priority is to protect his found family, which now includes this vexing young man who challenges his authority at every turn. How will he maintain order among his tribe? More importantly, how will he guard his heart?

MAD WORLD is a zombie-esque, gentle dystopian for those who crave survivalist stories with a dollop of angst and dash of spice. This new adult MM romance is the first book of a trilogy which will follow the same couple until they reach their hard-won happy ending.

Content warnings for death of a parent; some internalized ableism; violence and gore; young adults in peril, including the recounting and threat of sexual assault; recreational drug and alcohol use; addiction; disordered eating; mention of suicide, overdose, and death of family members; death of an animal (not the cat).

For the young ones and the young at heart.



ONE

CIPHER

THE BOY with the golden-brown curls kneeling in the patch of clover was a surprise, and I hated surprises.

Half-hidden by the trunk of a massive live oak tree, I smoked a cigarette idly as I watched the kid—more like a teenager—digging in the dirt with both hands, his little pink tongue wedged in the corner of his heart-shaped lips. The way his unruly hair stuck up in messy tufts reminded me of a cat, or rather, a kitten, which was also how I classified him in terms of threat level. He hummed softly to himself, a daydreamer, a woolgatherer, completely ignorant to his surroundings and oblivious to the fact that he was not alone.

Prey.

An actual calico cat slunk into view, wound its lithe body around the boy's kneeling form, and flicked its tail haughtily. The cat had only one eye, and its fur coat was patchy in places—mange or perhaps malnutrition. Clearly, the cat wasn't food but a pet, an indulgence that was practically unheard of these days, rare as a wild chicken, though just as coveted, and not for companionship.

The boy's expression remained focused as he dug. What did he expect to find there in the dirt? Buried treasure? A dead body? I watched him intently—only because I had nothing better to do. That tongue of his was really working when suddenly, a dazzling grin broke over his face and he yanked out a fat, round potato.

He laughed, a delighted little chortle, and the sound, like his mere presence, unnerved me. What did anyone have to laugh about these days? I couldn't remember the last time I laughed unless it was tinged with bitterness. A bit of black humor to get me through, the sort of unhinged giggle you released because if you didn't laugh, you might break down and start crying. But laughter from actual joy? Hardly.

The boy continued to dig, unearthing two dozen more dirt-crusted tubers while I made a few deductions: one, this was his home, his yard, and his garden that he'd been tending to for weeks; two, he had all of his limbs and no visible scars, which meant he'd managed to survive the plague relatively unscathed so far; three, I could have overpowered Kitten with one arm tied behind my back, but I didn't count on him being alone, which meant there was likely a bigger cat lurking somewhere nearby.

I scanned our surroundings. The neighborhood was a subdivision on the outskirts of Greenville, South Carolina, mostly two-story brick houses with ample lawns now overrun with weeds as well as old-growth trees like the one I leaned against. The subdivision butted up to the woods we'd been traveling for the last several weeks.

My crew and I had stopped here to restock on provisions for our journey south to Atlanta. The forest offered more cover than the main roads where the military patrolled, picking off Rabids and "recruiting" what they classified as able-bodied strays like us. Here, there were roving bands of miscreants such as ourselves to worry about, as well as the rando throng of Rabids that always seemed to pop up when you least expected it, but I'd take either of those threats over the U.S. government any day.

My compadres agreed.

I searched for any sign of my crew, but none were in sight. I turned down the volume on my two-way radio so as not to alert the boy to my presence, then skirted the tree line to the neighboring house. Shimmying through a gap in the wooden privacy fence, I found the usual markers of abandonment—a rusted swing set that had been picked over for spare parts,

busted-out windows not boarded up, missing wood siding, and soot and char on the second story where a fire must have broke out. Ominously, there was a plastic dog house too, but no Fido to fill it.

I crossed the neighbor's overgrown yard and made my way toward the boy's property. As quietly as I could, I anchored my boot into the chain-link fence separating the two lawns and swung my prosthetic leg over. Awkwardly shifting my weight, I landed clumsily on solid ground—I'd not yet perfected the art of climbing fences with an artificial limb—then sauntered over to his house and tried a window.

Locked.

Glancing up, I saw the second-story window directly above me was open, probably to let in the sluggish summer breeze, but there was no way in hell I was going to scale the side of the house, or even attempt it. My prosthetic leg was good for some things, like absorbing hard impacts, but not climbing brick walls.

I glanced toward the backyard to find the boy still kneeling on the ground with his back to me, some thirty feet away, tending to his garden without a care in the world. His sense of awareness was shit. He wouldn't last ten minutes alone in Rabid Country—even with all his limbs intact—unless he ran and hid. He didn't even look up as I rounded the corner of his house and entered in through the back porch.

The house was well-kept. Clean and homey with little sayings on the wall like, "Home Sweet Home" and "Live, Laugh, Love" and the most absurd one of all, "Blessed." I didn't know whether to cringe or gag. I passed by the kitchen and spotted a large soup pot and cutting board on top of the counter with some carrots that looked homegrown as well.

Soup.

The boy was making soup, something so ordinary and domestic. So... wholesome. He had a home, he had food, he was surviving, seemingly all on his own. That little kitten was *thriving*, snug as a bug in a rug, while the rest of us had to

scavenge and hunt for our next meal, hide from authorities while fending off raiders and slaying bloodthirsty Rabids.

What was his secret?

And then I heard an unmistakable groan of agony coming from the second story. Heading toward the sound, I kept my back to the wall as I climbed the stairs and skirted along the upstairs hallway. The walls were decorated with old family photos, and I suspected their family portrait sessions ended around the same time the electricity and internet went out, rendering most of our electronic devices obsolete. I checked the rooms as I passed by them, ensuring all were empty. The master bedroom must be at the end of the hallway, which was also the source of the moaning. The door was open.

Did I really want to go in there?

The odor hit me first, that of rotting flesh and bedsores, gastric acid and infection. I held my breath as I entered the room where the smell thickened like a fog, clinging to my skin, making my eyes water and my throat burn, even with the windows open. I gagged on the stench of human decay and shielded my nose and mouth with my bandana. Christ, I hated that smell.

The poor wretch on the bed was far past the point of saving. Eyes scored with white threads like a gossamer web stared at nothing, flesh so emaciated that it looked like their bones were trying to claw their way out of their skin. Huge blisters had swollen and erupted all over their body, and the open sores now oozed with pus and blood. The poor soul's chest rattled with every laborious breath, and whatever features once characterized their face were now blighted by the disease.

These were the advanced stages of Rabbit Fever, the highly transmissible asshole cousin of the rabies virus that brought the entire world to its knees roughly seven years ago. No one knew if the virus came from an actual rabbit or some other small rodent, but the scientific name was complicated as hell, so the name stuck. There were conspiracies that it was created in a lab and intentionally leaked by bio-terrorists in

whatever nation our government was at odds with on any given day. Or maybe it was an accident. Who the fuck knew? None of it mattered now because we were all dealing with the aftermath. Societal collapse, food shortages, disease-ridden cities, abandoned suburbs, a shit-ton of dead people, and the few of us who remained, barely surviving.

Oh, and then there were the Rabids.

There were three known ways to catch Rabbit Fever—eating the undercooked meat of an infected animal (or human), being bitten by a Rabid, or less common but still possible, contracting the disease through scratches or open wounds that had been exposed to Rabid saliva. Thankfully the disease wasn't airborne... yet.

If you caught a mild case of Rabbit Fever, and you were young enough with a healthy immune system, you might survive it. Or if, like me, you got bitten by a Rabid, you could stop it from spreading to your major organs—amputate an arm or a leg, and you were golden. But more often, the disease took hold all at once, attacking the brain stem like Genghis Khan's marauding army, scrambling your synapses and wreaking havoc on your central nervous system. The blisters and rash accompanied the excruciating nerve pain that was a side effect of the virus, and in the case of the person lying on the bed, their window for recovery, if ever there was one, closed a long time ago.

I glanced over to the night table, recently dusted, and saw a framed portrait of two parents, both white, and two little boys, both brown, all of them smiling. The younger boy I recognized as Kitten. The older boy resembled him as well, but neither looked like their parents. Adopted? Judging from the emaciated bone structure of the person on the bed, this must be Kitten's mother.

"Fuck," I muttered and swiped at the beads of sweat that had accumulated on my brow. "Fuck," I said again because I hated this shit.

The boy was foolish to have kept her alive for this long. Not only was he risking contracting the virus himself, but the

woman was only days away from her Last Gasp. That was when the body, fully suffused with the disease, became strong again, when the virulent parasite took full control of their central nervous system, and they woke up starving and willing to eat anything in their path, including their own beloved son's pretty face. Because of their diminished brain functioning, Rabids tended to meet their own demise fairly early due to some stupid shit like falling out of a window or gnawing off their own arm, but by then, the virus had found a new host.

I could walk away, pretend I was never here, and let the boy continue to nurse his corpse of a mother, knowing she might resurrect at any moment and attack him, infect him with the virus or, at the very least, mutilate him in a very *not* cool way.

Or I could do the right thing and put this woman out of her misery.

I went over to the window and pulled back the curtain. The woman groaned and turned her head away from the light, further evidence that she was beyond saving. The boy was now clipping various herbs for his carrot stew, merrily going about his chores. Damn him for fucking up my day, royally. I turned up the volume on my two-way and said quietly to my crew, "I have a situation at 232 Shady Oaks Drive. A teenage boy with no signs of the fever and a woman who is very near Rabid stage."

There was a lengthy pause while they interpreted the message, what was said as well as what was not.

"What are we going to do about it?" Artemis asked, because of all the options, doing nothing wasn't one of them.

I gritted my teeth and huffed with displeasure. "I'll subdue him. Meet me here as backup but stay out of sight."

I holstered the two-way, turning down the volume again. The woman gasped wetly and groaned in misery. I tried not to think of my mother or father or the many others I'd watched succumb to this wretched disease. I definitely didn't think about what I'd had to do to survive it.

I drew a deep breath, inhaling the putrid stench of death and despair, and cursed the world that had made me, at the tender age of nineteen, the Grim Reaper.

TWO

KITTEN

“HELLO, KITTEN.”

I startled and spun around to find a strange guy draped against my kitchen door frame. He was tall and lanky with crow-black hair and eyes like soot. Behind him was the front door, which I knew was locked, so where the hell did he come from?

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. I hadn’t seen anyone around here in months, not since before my brother left to get medicine for our mother.

“I’m from the neighborhood HOA. Your yard needs trimming.”

I stared at him, confused until I realized he was messing with me. The butcher knife was already in my hand, so I gripped it tighter, fist clenching around the handle until my knuckles paled. The guy’s beetle-black eyes subtly assessed the knife before returning to my face.

“What are you going to do with that, Kitten?” His voice was a low purr, and he managed to look both amused and bored at the same time. He was strapped all over with weapons—several knives, a gun holster slung around his slim waist with a piece in it, a hatchet on his hip, and a belt strapped across his chest that probably carried a much larger blade at his back. His hands were empty, but I sensed they were quick and nimble.

“I don’t have any ration cards, but I have food, and you can take whatever you want from the house.” My eyes

flickered to the stairwell behind him, which led upstairs to my mother's bedroom.

He moved like water, silent and graceful, to join me at the kitchen sink. Arms crossed, he leaned with his back against the counter as if this were a casual conversation. My knife was between us, pointed at his gut. No use in pretending we were friends.

“What's up there, pet?” he asked and nodded at the stairs.

“Nothing worth stealing.”

“Is that so?” He leaned over my soup pot and peered inside. “That's a lot of carrot stew you're making. Are you expecting company?”

“No,” I said, then realized my mistake. If he knew I was alone, there was no telling what he might do to me. I shouldn't have been outdoors. I should have waited until nightfall, but I'd been so excited to harvest the potatoes. I'd been impatient and reckless, and now I was going to pay for it.

“Have you ever killed someone before, Kitten?” he asked.

Suddenly, he was in front of me, with my knifepoint pressed against the soft part of his stomach, only his faded green t-shirt between my blade and his belly. My hand trembled so bad that the handle slipped in my grasp. He was tempting me to stab him, but I couldn't make myself do it.

“Didn't think so,” he said, then swooped in and grabbed my free hand, twirling me around the way my mother used to when I was little. Crossing my arms in front of me, he trapped me from behind, containing me within the cage of his sinewy arms and torso. He squeezed my wrist so tightly that I was forced to drop the knife, and it landed on the wood floor with a clatter. My gut followed, a sinking sensation that told me I was doomed.

“Please, don't hurt me.” I'd beg for my life if that's what it took.

“Shhhh,” he soothed, his warm breath ghosting over my good ear. “I'm not going to hurt you, but we need to talk about the elephant in the room, or rather, the Rabid upstairs.”

Anger flooded me as I twisted in his arms, unable to free myself but trying my hardest. He clamped down tighter, restricting my movement, and pulled me upward so that my feet barely touched the ground.

“That’s not a Rabid, it’s my mother,” I hissed, breathless from struggling in his iron grip.

“Both can be true,” he said in that same silky-soft voice. “How long ago did she contract the fever?”

“A week or so,” I lied.

“Kitten,” he softly admonished me. It was pointless to lie to him. He knew the truth already.

“Two months.”

“She’s not going to get better,” he said with a note of sympathy, almost as if he cared. My sinuses burned and my eyes welled with tears. What did he even know? He wasn’t a doctor.

“My brother is bringing home medicine. He’ll be back any minute. He’s big and nasty, and he won’t hesitate to slit your throat.” I imagined Santiago finding us like this. He’d go berserk. He’d shut this guy up before he could utter another poisonous word.

“There is no medicine that will save her. And the longer you leave her like that, the more likely she’ll turn on you. She’s suffering, Kitten, but I’m going to take care of it for you.”

I gulped down the knot in my throat, blinking through the tears at the sunshine streaming in through the kitchen window. It reminded me of a kaleidoscope I’d once found at a flea market, all the different shapes and colors blending and reforming before my very eyes, quicker than I could keep up with. This was all happening too fast.

“What are you going to do?” I asked shakily. I couldn’t lose her too.

“I’m going to give you a few minutes to say your goodbyes, and then I’m going to end her life.”

“The hell you are,” I growled. He finally let me go, and I spun around and snatched the pot off the counter, chucking it at him impulsively. He easily sidestepped it, so I grabbed the carrots and potatoes and did the same. They hit his lean torso, and I briefly recalled some comedy show from Before where they used to chuck vegetables at each other. The asshole didn’t even bother to dodge my attack, just casually swatted the vegetables away and smirked like this was some sort of game.

He nodded at someone behind me, and then two big, brawny arms grabbed me from behind and lifted me off my feet. I kicked with both legs like a donkey and tried to head butt him.

“A scrappy one,” the big guy said. “I like it.”

“Take him outside to cool off. Make sure he doesn’t grab anything that can be used as a weapon. You have one hour,” the asshole said to me. “Make it count.”

“Screw you,” I snarled while his friend dragged me, kicking and screaming, outside. “Screw you, you monster, you devil, screw you for living, for ever being born. I hope you catch the fever and die, you sick piece of—”

The arms holding me suddenly shifted and a hand clamped over my mouth, muffling my cries. The black-eyed demon gave me a cold, blank stare and said nothing.

THREE

CIPHER

“WHAT THE HELL is he doing now?” I griped, irritated at what appeared to be a delay tactic. After taking a few minutes to compose himself, Kitten was now back in the garden.

“He’s picking flowers,” Artemis said, sounding pissy as well—not at him but at me.

“Why are you looking at *me* like that?” I asked because she was acting as if I did something wrong.

“What did you say to him?”

“I introduced myself, pointed out that he had a Rabid on his hands, and offered to take care of it for him.”

“And you weren’t nasty about it?” she asked, dropping her chin in a way that said she didn’t believe me.

“I mean... there’s really no good way to tell someone you’re going to execute their mother.”

“I suppose.” Her attention shifted back to the young man in question. With a fistful of flowers, he turned and headed toward us, but only because we were standing in his way.

“You have a half hour remaining,” I reminded him curtly as he shot daggers at me with his eyes. If looks could kill.

“Screw you, demon,” he spat before stomping indoors.

“Charming,” I said to his back.

“Can we keep him?” Teresa asked. She’d been sitting in a bed of clover with the skirt of her long dress shielding her legs from the sun. She must have scavenged the sunhat she was

wearing as well. Good. Hopefully it would keep her fair skin from burning. The boy's calico cat was luxuriating in her lap, its one eye staring up at her adoringly while she stroked its stomach.

"The cat or the boy?" I asked.

"Both?" she asked hopefully.

"No. Absolutely not."

"We can't just leave him here," Macon chimed in. We'd left our packs back at our overnight campsite in the woods, but he had his axe draped across his shoulders, sweat staining his pits and both beefy arms hooked over the handle like some sort of apocalyptic pinup model. He was currently on watch in case a friendly neighborhood Rabid attacked.

"Why not?" I demanded. "He was doing well enough without us."

"He's all alone," Macon said. "He's a sitting duck for some band of raiders."

"We're a band of raiders," I reminded him, though we were more like scavengers than raiders. Raiders tended to steal from the living, rape, and murder, rather than just quietly burglarize empty homes and move along. "And besides, he has a brother. A big, nasty brother who will be here any minute to slit my throat."

"He's been on his own for a while now," Artemis said, because I'd briefed her already. "His brother's probably not coming back."

The same thought had occurred to me, but I wasn't going to give a double dose of bad news to Kitten.

"Don't we have enough mouths to feed?" I asked, appealing to her common sense.

"He can help us scavenge," Teresa said.

"And he knows how to grow stuff," Macon added. "That'll be useful when we reach Promised Land."

“*If* we reach it,” I said because I still wasn’t convinced that the place existed, and even if it did, how did we know that this supposed colony of homesteaders was any safer than what we’d been doing? “Besides, who says the little brat won’t gut me in my sleep?” I spied the upstairs window, making sure there wasn’t a rifle pointed in my direction.

“He’ll cool off,” Artemis said in her typical self-assured way, “and besides, that’s why we keep watch.”

Did I really want the kid’s presence to be a constant reminder of being a mother killer? To have to look into those fiery brown eyes and see my own callousness staring back at me? Not fucking really. Hit a little too close to home, if I was being honest. Sensing the public opinion was not on my side, I appealed to our only other company member who was as pragmatic as me. “Gizmo, what do you say?”

He glanced up from the radio he’d been fiddling with and adjusted his glasses. “What?”

“That hissy, spitting little kitty upstairs. Do we take him with us or leave him behind?”

Gizmo shrugged because unless it had wires, batteries, or a microchip, he couldn’t be bothered. “I dunno. Ask him what he wants to do.”

“With him we’ll have six,” Macon said, “which is better for team sports, and you won’t have to be alone anymore when we pair off for scavenging.”

“Respectfully, we’re not building a little league team here, and I don’t see him increasing my threat potential. I’m fine on my own,” I said staunchly.

“Great, then it’s settled,” Artemis said with a nod. “We can ask him tomorrow, once things have calmed down.”

“Someone is going to have to collect dinner off the kitchen floor,” I grumbled. “The little bastard threw everything but the kitchen sink at me.” It was kind of cute, actually. Not that I would admit it to anyone else.

“I’ll take over once you’ve... you know,” Artemis said. “Wrap the body tightly. Burn the bedding too. Macon can

help.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo,” I growled.

“Mine neither,” Macon grunted.

If I was the reaper, then Macon was the undertaker, mainly because he was the only one of us strong enough to haul the corpses. It was a community service we provided, burning the dead bodies of Rabids. It killed the virus and prevented scavenging animals from feasting on their tainted flesh and spreading the disease. We all had to do our part.

I glanced at the sky and determined from the position of the sun that the boy’s time was up. I donned my snug, leather gloves to protect any open cuts on my hands and raised my bandana to cover my mouth and nose, mostly to dampen the smell.

“I’m headed upstairs,” I told them.

Artemis laid a hand on my shoulder. “Thank you for doing this. I know it’s not easy.”

I glowered at her and clomped through the house as a warning to the little master. Inside the upstairs bedroom, Kitten had laid flowers all over his mother’s rotting body, some threaded in the limp locks of her hair. It was a sweet gesture and fitting tribute, but I was bitter at him for making my job harder.

“Are you finished?” I asked gruffly. His hand was holding hers, softly stroking her paper-thin skin.

“How will you do it?” he asked, meeting my eyes at last, arresting me with his liquid amber gaze. His eyelashes were still wet with tears, and they clumped together in spiky triangles. It twisted my cold, black heart to look at him. I hated it.

“Gently,” I said, withdrawing my best hunting knife, recently sharpened. “As painlessly as possible.”

His breath caught at the sight of my blade. “I want to be here for it.”

“You don’t have to.” I took no pride in these killings, and I would have preferred not to have an audience.

“I want to be here. For her.”

I nodded and steeled my nerves for the execution. “Anything more you want to say before we do this?”

He shook his head and began to hum. I didn’t recognize the tune. Maybe it was a church hymn, in which case, I wouldn’t know it. The woman’s head turned slightly in his direction, and I hoped that she could hear him in her final moments.

“I love you, Mom,” he whispered, his voice choked with grief.

I cupped the back of her head, supporting the skull at the nape. Her chapped lips parted, mouth opening as if to allow her soul to escape. Her opaque eyes stared heavenward. Gripping the knife handle tightly, I took a deep breath and dragged the razor-sharp edge across her throat, making sure to exert enough pressure to slice through her internal jugulars in one go. A quick death. They tore like rubber bands, and she emitted a wet gurgle right before blood began pouring out of her mouth, mingling with the blood from her neck. I drew back both hands to avoid the spill.

Later, I would sever her spinal cord to ensure that the body could not resurrect, but that was messy business and Kitten didn’t need to see it. Her head slumped against the pillow in a soft sigh, head angled sideways like a broken doll. I shut both her bruised eyelids as the rest of her human life force drained away.

Rest in peace, I said to myself on her behalf. As trite as it may seem, the words were sincere.

Kitten was crying again, muffled, wet little whimpers and sniffles that made my lethal arms want to wrap around him. But no one wants comfort from their mother’s killer. Instead, I took a step back and wiped my blade on the bed sheets before sheathing it again, remembering the cutesy sayings posted in their living room.

Blessed.

Instead of cringing or gagging, I felt like weeping.

And I hated it.

FOUR

KITTEN

MY MOTHER WAS GONE.

I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Tears leaked out the corners of my eyes and trailed down my temples. My nose was clogged but I didn't bother blowing it. I couldn't move, my limbs heavy and my heart weighing me down like a stone inside my chest. I didn't plan on leaving my bed ever again.

Some part of me knew this was how it might end, but through it all, I had held out hope that Santiago would return with medicine, or a doctor, or news of a treatment. That hope was gone. The kid with the dead eyes had snuffed it out, just as he had my mother's life.

I rolled onto my stomach and buried my face in my arms. Why did those jerks have to come here? Why now? We'd managed to avoid being found for so long. In the early months of the plague when gasoline and food became scarce, neighbors had worked together to hunt and gather water and defend our territory against looters and thieves. Then the power and internet went out, and we lost touch with the outside world. I knew Rabids existed, but I'd never seen one up close. As things got worse, our parents tried to shield us from it, which meant a lot of hushed conversations when they thought we weren't listening.

Then people started getting sick and leaving. But not us. We stayed. After my father died, it was just my mother, my brother, and me. We'd been on guard for any signs of strangers passing through and hid in the basement until trouble had passed. My mother always said it was through the grace of

God alone that we'd never been discovered. Then we'd all gotten sick, and after Santiago and I recovered, he left to go find medicine, and I stayed behind to take care of our mother, but I should have been more careful.

This was my fault.

I was alone, even more so than ever before, and what if something bad had happened to Santiago along the way? The possibility that I may have lost my brother too was overwhelming. How was I ever going to survive on my own?

“Ahem.”

I rolled onto my back and found the strange, pale-skinned girl standing over me, my cat in her arms. The girl looked to be a little younger than me, wearing a navy dress patterned with big, pink flowers. Her wide-brimmed hat covered most of her hair, except for two braids of the palest blond, almost silver, that lay across her shoulders.

“She missed you,” the girl said before dumping Little Miss Purrfect onto my stomach. The weight of my cat comforted me as she kneaded her claws into my chest. I didn't mind the little pricks of pain; they reminded me that I was real, and necessary, if only to feed and take care of her.

“What's her name?” she asked.

“Little Miss Purrfect.”

“That's a good name.” She sat on the edge of my bed and stroked along Little Miss Purrfect's spine. My cat arched up to meet her touch, never one to turn down pets.

“Artemis is making dinner,” she said.

“I don't care.” I swallowed despite the rawness of my throat. The food had been meant for my mother and me, though she hadn't been eating much lately. I'd been hoping to at least feed her some of the broth. I'd been so excited this morning to find new potatoes in the garden. Damn that black-hearted monster for ruining my harvest.

“Do you have any dollies?” the girl asked.

I studied her to see if she was serious. “No.”

“That’s too bad.”

She sighed and glanced around my room as if to make sure. She seemed younger than her age, or maybe developmentally delayed. My mother said it was common among our generation, since none of us were given a real childhood. We hadn’t had school since I was in fifth grade, and other than my one friend Lucas, there hadn’t been many chances to interact with people outside of our family. My mom had to teach us from whatever books we could find. I wondered if it was the same for this girl and the others.

“What about dresses?” she asked.

“My mother,” I began, my throat closing up again. “My mother has some in her room.”

She took off her hat and held it primly in front of her, and I saw her eyes for the first time, a shade of blue that was almost violet. “Could I have one of your mother’s dresses? Pretty please?” she asked with a polite little curtsy.

I shrugged and continued petting Little Miss Purrfect, now rumbling on my chest like a generator.

She smiled and left while I zoned out for a while, thinking about when my brother and I found Little Miss Purrfect hiding in the storm drain after a downpour. She’d been mewling pitifully, skin and bones from starvation, and only able to see out of one eye because the other one was infected. I’d begged our mom to help me nurse her back to health. She was against it at first. Food was scarce already and she didn’t want the cat dander to trigger my asthma, but I was so persistent that eventually, she came around.

I sensed another presence in my room and turned my head to find the demon lingering in the doorway. How long had he been there? My hearing hadn’t been the same since I contracted the fever. As if sensing the Devil himself were present, Little Miss Purrfect lifted her head and hissed at him. I appreciated her solidarity.

His eyes flicked from her to me again. “Food will be ready soon.”

I hadn't noticed before, but he must have been missing a leg. Instead of a matching combat boot, there was a curved metal contraption sticking out of the bottom of his pant leg. The older girl with dark skin and braids had an arm made of metal, and the red-headed boy with freckles had a hand like a Swiss-Army knife. I knew there were a lot of amputees thanks to the fever, but we'd been so isolated out here that I hadn't met any. I hadn't seen another kid my age in years.

"I'm not hungry," I told him.

His eyes flicked over me as I lay in my bed, then darted to the four corners of my room as if looking for any hidden threats. "Suit yourself. More for me."

I rolled away from him, taking Little Miss Purrfect with me and cuddling her warm, furry body in my arms while giving him my back. Maybe he'd sink a knife into it. Maybe he already had.



I WOKE UP SOMETIME LATER, throat dry and with a throbbing headache. It was morning, judging from the weak light coming in through the window. Little Miss Purrfect was nowhere in sight, which meant someone else must have fed her.

I stood in my rumpled clothing and patted my hair, not bothering with a comb. I kept a jug of boiled water next to my bed, and I drank from it until my stomach was sloshy and full, then made my way to the bathroom. Where the toilet used to be, there was now just a big ceramic bowl with a drain at its center. My father had built an outhouse for when we needed to go number two. After relieving myself, I headed downstairs, hearing voices coming from the dining room, and found my unwanted house guests sitting around the table, discussing something in hushed tones. All but the demon.

They stopped talking when they saw me, the older girl inviting me to sit at my own table with a queenly wave of her hand.

“No thanks.”

“We need to talk,” she said, and something in her voice, her mere presence, made me think I should listen. I wondered if she was the leader of their gang, if there was a leader at all.

I took the seat across from her, where my father used to sit, remembering how we used to say our prayers every night before meals, all of us with our heads bowed. That was Before. My father contracted the fever first, bitten by a neighbor a few months after the lights went out. The hospitals were already turning people away, and they hadn’t yet set up the quarantine shelters, so my mother cared for him as the disease slowly spread. He was in a lot of pain. Nighttime was the worst. I could hear his cries from my bedroom down the hall, and I often crawled into my brother’s bed just so I wouldn’t have to be alone.

My dad shot himself in the shed before the fever could kill him. They’d told me he’d had an accident, and at the time, I believed it. It broke my mother’s heart.

Years later the table was full of chips and scrapes, and only two of the original chairs remained. The invaders had brought in a few more to make room for them all. The blonde girl left the table and came back with a bowl of soup, which she set in front of me. It was cold but it smelled good—spicy and fragrant. I ignored it.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Introductions first. I’m Artemis,” the older girl said briskly then went around the table. The red-headed one with glasses and the metal hand was Gizmo, the tanned, muscular one who was built like a football player was Macon, and the little blonde wearing one of my mother’s dresses was Teresa. She had cinched the dress with a belt, but even still, it was too big for her slender frame, and it reminded me of when my brother and I used to dress in our father’s clothing and pretend to be grown men. With the exception of Teresa, they all looked

to be about my brother's age, a couple years older than me. They nodded cautiously in my direction. At least they weren't as arrogant as the jerk who killed my mother.

"Where is the other one?" I asked.

"Cipher's on duty," she said, though she didn't say what his duty might be.

Cipher, a fitting name for a wraith.

"And you are?" she asked.

"Joshua Perrin-Rogers," I said. None of them had told me their last names, and probably not their real names either, but my parents had always insisted I say my full name when meeting someone for the first time, to show respect for myself and my family.

"Nice to meet you, Joshua." She smiled at me, but I didn't trust it.

"What do you want?" I asked again. Or rather, "When are you leaving?"

"Soon," she said, then pressed her full lips together, seeming to choose her next words carefully. "We'd like you to come with us."

Of all the things I thought she might say, that wasn't it.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why not?"

"Where are you going?"

"Atlanta."

Atlanta was where my brother was headed. *It's a big city with doctors and hospitals. They're bound to have a cure, or some medicine at least. I'll come back as soon as I can, Joshua, I promise...*

"Why Atlanta?" I asked, shutting down his voice in my head.

"Cipher needs more bullets," Teresa piped up.

Artemis shot her a look. “We’re looking for information on a place called Promised Land. It’s a settlement in one of the southern states where civilians work together as a community without any government interference. We want to find its location and see if they’ll allow us to join them.”

“All you have to do is show up, and they’ll give you a place to live and a plot of land to farm,” Macon said.

“I have that already,” I told him.

“You’re defenseless here,” Artemis said. “You have your garden, and that’s good, but I doubt it’s enough by itself to feed you. And what if you get injured? What if the next band of scavengers who come through here isn’t as kind as us?”

“You’ve been kind?” I asked. The girl had some nerve. “At least they won’t murder my mother.”

She stared at me steadily, unapologetically. “It needed to be done, Joshua. You may not want to acknowledge it, but your life was in danger.”

I glared at a scratch on the wood’s surface. It didn’t make sense. Kill my mother then recruit me? “Why would you want me to come with you? How do you know I won’t murder you all in your sleep?”

She smiled coolly, then said, “You can try, but the truth is, we’re stronger together. We’d expect you to contribute, help with cooking, gather firewood and other camp chores. Nothing too strenuous. You may decide to stay in Atlanta or continue with us to Promised Land. At the very least you’ll have options. And you won’t be alone.”

“I’m not alone. I have my brother. I’m going to find him,” I said stubbornly.

“I’m going to build an IEU-5000,” Gizmo said.

I stared at him, perplexed.

“It’s a super-battery,” Artemis said.

“It’s an Independent Electrical Unit that can operate anything,” Gizmo continued. “Lights, refrigerator, electronics. Powered by wind and solar, maybe even a crank if necessary.”

It'll make power grids obsolete and put energy production in the hands of the people.”

I wasn't sure how that related to my current situation, but I wished him luck. I tried to read the intentions of the faces staring back at me. With the exception of Cipher, none of them had harmed me, not yet at least, and even Teresa, the smallest of the group, seemed healthy enough and well-fed.

“What would you expect of me?” I asked.

“You follow our rules,” Artemis replied. “We have them to keep us safe, individually and as a unit. When a conflict arises, we take a vote. You go along with the majority rule, no matter what. We honor consent, always. We don't mess with each other's belongings. If you act violent toward any of us, we will tie you to a tree and carry on without you.”

“Have you ever done that before?”

“We haven't had to yet,” she said, her tone a warning.

I licked my lips. Santiago might never return. The fact that he hadn't yet worried me, and the idea of having to wait here for him by myself made me want to claw my eyes out. This house was full of ghosts.

“Who made the decision to kill my mother?” I asked her.

“That's our protocol when we encounter Rabids. Cipher is the most skilled at killing.”

“I suppose that comes in handy.”

“It does,” she answered evenly and glanced around the table as if reluctant to speak on his behalf. “He provides an important service to us all.”

The fact that they all viewed my mother as just another Rabid really pissed me off. There were ways to reverse the disease. My brother told me. But whether I liked these people or not, I needed to find him, and I was done waiting around.

“I'll go with you,” I said.

She nodded as if she'd been expecting that answer all along. “We'll spend the morning gathering supplies. Pack

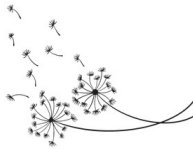
lightly and be ready to leave this afternoon.” She glanced behind me, and I turned to see Cipher haunting the doorway. That seemed to be his thing. His shoulders were slumped with exhaustion, and the hair that had come loose from his ponytail hung limply in his face. There was soot on his cheek and forehead and more of it streaked across his shirt; both hands were black with it. He must have been at it all night. Yesterday, I’d spotted Macon carrying my mother’s body into the woods. I knew what they did out there. My beloved mother, reduced to nothing but char and ash.

“What’s the good word?” he asked, glaring at me.

“He’s coming with us,” Artemis said as if she’d won something.

“Fantastic,” he deadpanned. “I’m going to bed. Do not disturb.”

“Asshole,” I muttered under my breath, and I’d swear the demon smiled.



HOURS LATER, the band of misfits had ransacked my home and piled their loot on the living room floor, Macon had skinned, disemboweled, and roasted a raccoon that Artemis hunted in the woods, and Teresa had cooked and mashed my remaining potatoes. Dinner was about to be served, but first, the group had to decide who was going to wake Cipher.

“Last time, he pulled a knife on me,” Macon said. “Fuck that. Send Gizmo.”

“He threw his leg at me,” Gizmo said. “It left a bruise on my shin. Send Teresa.”

“He growled at me, and it was scary.” She batted her big, blue eyes and pouted pitifully, a solid strategy. Being the baby of the family, I’d been known to pull out the sad puppy routine from time to time.

They all looked at Artemis, who turned to me. “Would you like to do the honors, Joshua? It is your house, and it’s something of a rite of passage for us all.”

“Everyone has to poke the bear at least once,” Macon said with a sporting grin.

“He’s quite irritable when woken,” Gizmo added.

“What’s he going to do to me?” I asked.

“Bitch and moan,” Macon said with a shrug. “That’s about it.”

“He might throw his leg at you, and his aim is pretty accurate,” Gizmo said.

“I’m not scared of him,” I said, feeling bold. I dared him to put his hands on me. Maybe I’d go up there and bang some pots together, really scare the bejesus out of him.

“Just make sure he’s unarmed,” Artemis warned.

I stomped upstairs and down the hallway to my brother’s bedroom where the dragon had made his lair. The door was locked, which was annoying because it was my damn house, so I grabbed a metal nail file from my dresser and picked it from the outside. My brother and I had figured out ages ago how to break into each other’s bedrooms.

I opened the door to find Cipher sprawled across my brother’s still-made bed, buck naked, well, except for his briefs, which were black and surprisingly... brief. The gun was laid across his chest, his hand over top of it with one sooty finger on the trigger. His other arm was splayed against the pillow, revealing a whorl of dark hair in his armpit. He was handsome, I hated to admit it, with a sharp jawline and broad shoulders, toned limbs that were slender but strong—I knew from our earlier encounter in the kitchen. He appeared to be of Asian descent with a strong browline that made him look grouchy even while sleeping.

Before passing out, he’d removed his artificial limb, which explained his leg-throwing habit, and where his right leg ended just above the knee, was a scarred, rounded nub, the healed flesh slightly puckered in places. His face and forearms

were tanner than the rest of his body, while the skin normally covered by clothing was as pale as buttermilk. Both thighs were dusted with the same fine dark hair as his arms and his torso was mostly hairless, except for a line of silky black hair that led right to his—

“Like what you see?” he murmured, dark eyes blinking open to catch me observing him.

“No,” I said quickly and turned toward the dresser. There I found a baggie of what looked like tobacco, rolling papers, and another tiny plastic bag of white powder. “What’s this?” I asked and pointed to his stash.

“I thought I locked the door.”

“I picked it.”

“Do you always go creeping into other people’s bedrooms uninvited?” he said in that taunting, velvety tone.

“It’s not your bedroom, and it’s my friggin house.”

“Mind your manners, Kitten.”

“Screw you.”

He sat up and set the gun aside, though not very far, then went about attaching his leg. I watched him in the mirror as he smoothed a liner over his thigh like a sock, then fit the molded plastic to the rounded part, using a second sleeve to secure it in place. In better lighting, I noticed that his eyes were a dark, mahogany brown, not black as I’d originally thought, but still with a hardened quality that made him seem much older.

“Are you turned on yet?” he asked, reaching for his discarded t-shirt and dragging it over his head. His muscles rippled, abdominals tightening under his fair skin, and I wondered if he was showing off.

“No.”

“Too bad.”

I spun around and glared at him because what the heck was that supposed to mean? Wearing only his shirt and underwear, he leaned back against the pillows and spread his arms across

the headboard like he owned the place. “What did you want, Kitten, if not to ogle me while I sleep?”

“I wasn’t...” I closed my mouth and tried again. “Artemis wanted me to wake you, and besides that...” I propped a folded piece of paper against my brother’s mirror, right next to his favorite baseball trading card so that it would be impossible for him to miss. The note was to tell him what had happened and where I was headed, along with the names and descriptions of my new companions in case I didn’t make it back. I went to my brother’s closet without looking at Cipher and dug around until I found his Gamecocks baseball hat. I planted it on my head, using the dresser mirror to tuck in my loose curls.

“Very pretty,” Cipher said in a mocking voice. “But what will you carry as a weapon?”

“I thought you were the weapon.” He certainly had enough of them.

He nodded as if indulging me. “True, but I can hardly be expected to protect all of you at once, can I?”

“Is that what you do? Protect us?”

“I try,” he said grimly, and the pain etched in his expression forced me to look away.

“I don’t have a weapon.”

“What about that soup pot?”

“Hardee har har,” I bit out.

“No guns in the house?” he asked, eyes sharpening with renewed interest.

“My dad had one, but my mom traded it for food.”

“What about ammo?”

“She traded that too.”

“That was short-sighted,” he said with a scowl.

“Yeah, well, starving is no fun either.”

He frowned and narrowed his eyes at me. “You need a weapon. For now, you can have one of mine. Come here.”

I approached his side of the bed cautiously and, after sizing me up, he reached for a belt on the night table, one of many. “Arms up,” he said.

I lifted my arms and he fed the strap of leather through my belt loops.

“Does Teresa carry a knife?” I asked. It was hard to imagine a girl who looked for dresses and dollies also wielding a weapon.

“She carries two and she knows how to use them.” He tried to buckle the belt, but it was too large for my waist.

“That’s fine,” I said when he went to adjust it.

“Let me just...” He removed the belt in one deft tug and notched another hole in the leather with the tip of his knife, then fit me with it again, pulling the strap until it was snug. His hand gripped the front of my pants as he tugged, the backs of his knuckles brushing against my navel. I shivered from the contact—only because I was ticklish there. Finally satisfied with the fit, he attached a leather sheath with a blade already tucked inside and arranged it so that it lay flat against my hip.

“Is that the knife you used to—”

“No,” he said sharply. “Now, draw your weapon like you mean it.”

I made a grab for the handle and yanked it out clumsily, then held the knife in front of his face. It seemed sharp enough, like it could do some damage, but Cipher didn’t even flinch—he wasn’t scared of me at all. Still, his roving eyes examined me.

“Hold it like this.” He wrapped my fingers around the handle with my thumb just beneath the blade. “Like you’d hold a hammer. You don’t have as much control this way, but it’s a good grip for beginners.” Still holding my hand, he stood and circled me, blanketing my body with his own, like when he’d held me in the kitchen. His skin was warm, which stirred

up the wrong sort of interest, and he clearly knew what he was doing, but he was *not* my friend.

“This is how you jab.” He gripped my knife with his fingers on top of mine, modeling the motion with his arm pressed flush against my own. I tilted my head so that I could hear his instructions. He adjusted my positioning and tucked my elbows inward, closer to my body. “This is a protective stance. You’re short, so go for the gut. Soft places. Strike hard and with conviction, as many times as it takes. Get up under the rib cage if you can.” He guided my hand like a puppet, jabbing rapidly at an invisible assailant. “Now, you try it,” he said and stepped away.

I attempted the same motions, but it wasn’t nearly as fluid or fast.

“That’s good, but you can’t hesitate. If there’s a threat, a Rabid or someone else with bad intentions, you need to do as much damage as possible before they get a hold of you. Because once they do, it’s too late.”

I made a few more attempts, and he nodded with satisfaction. “We’ll practice more later. Always have it on you, even when you sleep or take a shit. Try to keep it clean and dry. But remember, in your case, your best bet is to run.”

“Run? Why not fight?”

His shrewd eyes appraised me from head to foot. “Respectfully, Kitten, a Rabid would make a Whopper Junior out of you.” I dropped my gaze, cheeks burning with embarrassment, and he said, “But I bet you’re a fast runner.”

“I am fast,” I said. I could sprint really well, though not for very long on account of my asthma.

“You could probably outrun a Rabid. Not me though.” He tapped his leg. “Which is why I had to get good at fighting.”

“Did someone bite you?” I asked, sheathing my knife while he inventoried his own weapons.

“Yeah.”

“Someone you knew?”

“Yes.” He glanced back at me, and I saw a flash of something in his eyes. Pain? Regret? “How about you, Kitten? Any disabilities I should be aware of?”

“No, none at all,” I was quick to assure him. He already thought I was feeble and weak. No need to give him proof.

“Ever had the fever?”

“We all came down with it at the same time. Santiago, my brother, thinks we got it from undercooked meat. He and I recovered. Mostly.”

“Mostly?” he asked.

I wasn't going to tell him I was hard of hearing in addition to having asthma and being small for my age. Not like he could do anything about it anyway, and that was just ammunition for him to use against me later. “Cipher's an interesting name. How'd you get it?”

“Well...” He brushed the back of one hand against his shirt. “It must be because I'm so... mysterious.”

I barked out a laugh. “You asked people to call you that because you thought it sounded cool?”

“Basically,” he said with a disarming smile.

For a moment, I was caught off-guard by how different he looked when he smiled, happy and almost... fun. But this was the same asshole who killed my mother just yesterday, then burned her body in the woods. We stared at each other, neither of us saying a word, and I remembered why I'd come up here in the first place. “Dinner's ready, and then we're leaving. There's a bucket of fresh water in the upstairs bathroom if you want to wash up.”

“Thanks for your hospitality, Kitten,” he said with a wink. The way he said my nickname made my stomach squirm. Probably just hunger pains.

“Hey,” he said as I turned to go. He held out a Ziploc bag for me to take.

“What's this for?”

“Pictures of your family. Put them in here so they’ll stay dry.”

Was this a trick? His attempt at an apology?

“Thanks,” I said cautiously.

“You’re welcome.”

FIVE

CIPHER

FUCK, was I just... flirting?

I blamed it on the residual effects of the painkillers I smoked to go to sleep. That was the only reason for my behavior. I shouldn't be doing drugs around him if I was going to act like... *that*. How embarrassing. But it wasn't as if I'd be able to get away from him any time soon either.

Fuck.

I made my way to the bathroom down the hall and found a five-gallon bucket of water sitting in the tub, just as Kitten promised, along with a sliver of soap, a washrag, and a towel. It was the fucking Four Seasons around here, and if we hadn't already agreed as a group to go to Atlanta, I might have even considered staying for a while.

I stripped, then sat on the side of the tub to remove my prosthesis before swinging my legs over the ledge. The water was cold but clean, and it felt good to scrub the dirt and grime from my body. I scoured myself from head to foot, then noticed a small scrub brush on the tub's ledge and used that to get the caked-up blood and dirt from underneath my fingernails. I wondered if Kitten might have a few Q-tips to spare. What I wouldn't give to clean the wax out of my ears. For now, I twisted up the corner of the washrag and did my best.

Once my body was clean, and with half the water left, I lowered myself into the tub to wet my hair using a plastic cup. Working up a lather, I rubbed the soap into my scalp, scraping

away the dead skin and oil that had accumulated in the weeks I'd gone without a real bath. Christ, it felt good to wash. I had no regrets about leaving the hellscape of D.C. I didn't even mind sleeping on the ground and scavenging for meals, but I did miss bathing.

Dressed in fresh clothing—thank you, Kitten's bro—and with my leg and weapons secured to my person, I felt like a new man. I was practically grinning as I descended the stairs and made my way to the dining room where everyone else had already started eating. My plate had been laid out for me, and I dug into it with gusto.

"Delicious," I remarked. "Is this rabbit?"

"Raccoon," Artemis said. "Got him right behind the ear."

"It was a beautiful shot," Macon said, grinning at her with admiration. "Good-sized one too."

Artemis used a metal crossbow for hunting, one that Gizmo had customized to accommodate her prosthetic arm. She had steady hands and great aim, and she was the most skilled at stalking prey. Well, besides me of course.

You might think we'd be terrified of eating animals, what with the fever and all, but if you cooked the carcass well enough, the virus couldn't survive, and I did love the taste of well-seasoned meat. Animals could be carriers of the disease but didn't seem to suffer from it, nor did they develop the same compulsion to feast on human flesh. Thank fucking Christ.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying their meal, and for the moment, I took pride in the fact that my crew was safe and well-fed. That was the goal after all, and not an easy one to accomplish. Then I noticed Kitten peeling off strips of his meat and hiding it under the table. The fuck was he doing? Saving it for later? A demanding meow floated up from below, and I realized he was feeding his damned cat.

"You should eat that yourself," I said to him. "You're thin enough as it is."

“Whatever you say, dad,” he clapped back, which must mean we were back to sniping at each other. Whatever. I’d rather him be pissy with me than whatever was happening between us upstairs.

“We’ve got lemon juice from concentrate and four Double-A batteries,” Artemis said, giving me the highlights of our scavenging efforts. The lemon juice was to ward off scurvy. The batteries were to power Gizmo’s various electronics, including our two-way radios, which we used sparingly.

“Any Ziplocs?” I asked.

She shook her head, smirking at my obsession with Ziploc baggies, but there was really nothing better for keeping things dry, essentials like gunpowder and painkillers.

“We’ll camp near where we were before,” she continued. “Should only take about an hour or so to hike in. It’ll give Joshua a chance to get acclimated.”

My eyebrows quirked at the name and I realized she’d meant Kitten. “Joshua,” I mused. “Who named you that?”

“My birth mother named me Josue, and my adopted mother changed it to Joshua. My brother and I are from Brazil.”

“Adopted?”

“Got a problem with it?” he asked sullenly.

“Did they change your brother’s name too?”

“He was older than me when we were adopted, so they kept his name. How about you, *Cipher*, what did your mother name you?”

“None of your fucking business,” I snapped. His eyes went wide and he drew back sharply as if I’d struck him. I probably should have apologized for my hostility, but I didn’t.

Artemis cleared her throat, then continued discussing the logistics of our trip. My good mood was fading fast. Something about this kid got right under my skin and turned me into a snarling, snapping hound.

We finished up with dinner and loaded up our packs. Mine felt twice as heavy as before but knowing it was full of food and necessities meant that I'd manage. We were just getting ready to set off when I noticed Kitten tying a jacket around his stomach in a weird way. At first, I figured it was just a strange local fashion, and then I saw him tucking his cat inside it.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked, stomping over to glare at him.

"I'm making a sling for Little Miss Purrfect." He scowled back at me mulishly.

"You're bringing your cat? No fucking way. No pets. House rule."

"Screw your rules. She's coming with me."

"Family meeting." I called everyone to attention. "Someone tell the little brat our rule about non-essential items."

"She's not an item, you bossy prick, she's my cat, and besides, are your drugs really an essential item?" He made air quotes around the last bit.

"You little fucker—"

"I found a dolly," Teresa said and pulled a baby doll from behind her back. The doll had seen better days—its hair was tangled and matted and only one of the eyes was working properly, kind of like the calico cat in question.

"The fuck is going on here?" I demanded of my companions. I went to sleep for a few hours and there was mutiny on my hands, and I knew who was at the root of it. I turned to him again. "We need to be able to fend off Rabids, *Joshua*, or ill-intentioned raiders, and you can't do that if you're loaded down with feline."

"I'm not leaving without her," he said, and the stubborn jut of his lower lip drove me absolutely insane.

"I guess this is a bad time to bring out these," Macon said and withdrew a pair of cowboy boots from his pack.

“The fuck are you going to do with those?” I hollered. “The boot-scootin’ boogie?”

“Maybe a little two-step,” he said with a grin, tipped his nonexistent cowboy hat, and shimmied in the tall grass with his hands on his hips.

“Artemis?” I said, appealing to her as the voice of reason.

“Let’s take a vote,” she said in her aggravatingly diplomatic way. “All those in favor of *one*, non-essential item, raise your hand.”

Kitten’s hand shot up first, no surprise there, as did Teresa’s and Macon’s. I looked to Gizmo and his wheelbarrow of electronic bric-a-brac.

“I kind of have a hoard of nonessential items already,” he said sheepishly.

“It’s settled then. Majority rules that you are allowed one non-essential item. However,” Artemis added, staring pointedly at Kitten. “You are responsible for carrying your own belongings, and if that cat gives us any trouble...”

“I’ll eat him,” I finished for her.

“It’s a her, asshole, and I’d like to see you try it.” Kitten laid his hand on his knife— suddenly a badass—and tried to look intimidating. As if on cue, the damned cat hissed at me again. Kitten followed suit, baring his sparkling white chompers, and then Teresa joined in, until it was a chorus of hissing, spitting kitties.

“Fuck this,” I said to the group. I grabbed my pack and stomped off toward the tree line to scout the path ahead of us. “I’ll see you fuckers there.”



A COUPLE HOURS LATER, we’d set up camp, distributed food, and started a fire. Artemis was on watch, and Macon

pulled out a bottle of whiskey he must have looted from one of Kitten's long-gone neighbors. This at least improved my mood. Macon passed it around, all of us taking a swig, except Gizmo, who was absorbed by the radio he'd been fiddling with all day. When the bottle reached Kitten, he swallowed, screwed up his face and almost choked, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Gross. What is that?" he asked.

"That's Mr. Jack Daniels to you, young man," Macon drawled. "Tennessee's finest. Boy, did my daddy love his whiskey. He'd sold the farm for a bottle of this stuff." Macon raised the bottle in tribute to his late father, kissing the glass before taking another swig.

"He's dead?" Kitten asked, peering up from underneath his long lashes.

"Yeah, the fever took him. Crazy bastard went down swinging though." Macon frowned and passed the bottle over to me.

"My dad died too," Kitten said. "Caught the fever, then shot himself. My brother was really angry, and my mom was sad. I was just confused because they told me he'd had an accident in the shed. I didn't find out the truth until much later."

"They shouldn't have lied to you," I said, angry on his behalf.

"They were trying to protect me, I guess. I was younger then. Are you all orphans?"

"More or less," Macon said, glancing around at the others.

"Is that why you're all together?" Kitten asked.

"Better than being alone. The world's fucked up, but at least I got my homies. Ain't that right, Cipher?" Macon nudged me, and I continued to stare at Kitten.

"That includes you too now," I reminded him, "for as long as you're with us." I passed him the bottle. He took another

swig and then, predictably, scrunched up his face at the whiskey's sour bite.

Across the fire, there was a crackle of static, and the radio hummed to life. Gizmo tinkered with the back of it, screwing the panel on with one of his modified fingers, then tried tuning it to a station. The first one he found was some kind of news program, and we listened for about two minutes to the depressing state of the world—food shortages, fever hot spots, skirmishes in the west—before Macon told him to find something we could dance to. Meanwhile, Kitten had migrated to Gizmo's side, his attention rapt as Gizmo adjusted the tuner.

How long had it been since Kitten had heard the radio or watched television? There was no power or internet outside of the major cities. The channels in D.C. were all public broadcasts, and most of the programming was from before the plague, but at least it was something.

A song came on then that Kitten and Macon recognized, and they both sang along. Then Artemis popped over to see what the noise was about, and they all started doing some silly dance routine that was popular way back when.

“Turn it up,” Kitten called with enthusiasm as he executed a cute little hop and hammer motion with one arm, face flushed from the alcohol, his curls wild. “My brother and I used to love this song.”

The three of them showed off their dance moves and I snagged another draught of whiskey, enjoying their revelry and the pleasant warmth blooming in my stomach. Teresa was making her doll dance along with them, and Gizmo was watching the three of them as if discovering a new species. Then suddenly the music cut out, which was followed by a chorus of groans. Even after shaking the radio and adjusting the batteries, Gizmo couldn't get it to play again.

“That was fun,” Kitten said, still with an exuberant air as he dropped down to his former spot between Teresa and me. He frowned suddenly. “I shouldn't be having fun, though. I should be sad about my mom.”

“It’ll come,” I said. “In fits and spurts and all at once until you feel like you can’t breathe, when you realize they’re gone for good and it’s just you now to carry the burden of memory, all the good times and all the bad resting on your very narrow shoulders.”

Kitten blinked, shocked silent by my sad little monologue.

“Liquor makes me melancholy,” I offered as my excuse.

“No shit,” Macon said and snatched the bottle from my hands. “You’re cut off, vibe-killer.”

Artemis went back to guarding our camp, and Macon sang a country song about drinking away your heartache. Teresa asked to play with Kitten’s hair, and he let her comb it out with her fingers until it tripled in size. The two of them giggled as she measured its height with her tiny hands, and I thought that maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to bring him along. Even the damned cat was curled up by the fire and behaving.

A little while later, after Teresa and Kitten went to bed and Gizmo retreated to his makeshift “workshop” that he’d set up under a tented tarp, Macon and I passed the bottle back and forth between us, having determined we were going to drink it to the bottom.

“What the fuck was that, Edgar Allen Woe?” Macon said about my earlier performance.

“Dunno. I was emoting.”

“Want to talk about it, man-to-man?”

He meant my family and how they died. The short answer was, the fever, the same sad song as everyone else.

“Not really.”

“Well, I’m here when you’re ready.”

“Copy that.”

I aimed my gaze at the fire, but my eyes inevitably strayed over to where Kitten was curled up on his sleeping bag. His mouth was part way open, hands folded under one soft cheek, face surrounded by a cloud of hair. I took off my leather jacket

and draped it over his shoulders then found one for Teresa as well. The cat flicked its tail in warning but didn't hiss at me this time.

"He's fitting in," Macon said, his Southern accent pouring out slow and drowsy in the quiet night.

"He's a menace," I said. Jury was still out on whether or not he gutted me in my sleep.

"You like him." Macon nudged me with the bottle's spout before offering it to me. I took a long swig and relished the burn of liquor as it scraped down my throat.

"I tolerate him, just like I tolerate the rest of you."

"Probably wouldn't take much to get him to like you too."

"Macon, I killed his mother."

"It was a mercy killing. Doesn't count."

"I doubt he'd agree."

"He is kind of cute though," Macon said, poking at the fire with a stick, sending up sparks of ash and stirring up the glowing embers. "You think he likes dick?"

"Fuck if I know," I answered testily. "Besides, he looks about fifteen."

"Nah, that's just malnutrition. He told Teresa he was seventeen."

"He's been living in isolation with only his mother and brother for company for years. He's like a homeschooled kid—worse than that, he's a plague kid."

"Plague kid or not, I'd bet he's horny as fuck. I know I was at that age."

"You're *still* that age," I reminded him because he was only a year older than Kitten, but to hear him tell it, he'd been a playboy since he first sprouted wood.

He flexed his biceps. "You think he appreciates a fine physique?"

“I think he likes being fed and kept safe, and we’re not going to take advantage of that.”

“We’re?” he asked with a wink.

“Fuck you,” I said and threw another stick on the fire.

“I’m just saying, your right hand must be getting tired by now.”

“This hand is immaculate,” I said and flexed my fingers.

“Artemis is like your sister. Teresa’s out of the question and Gizmo’s not interested. I could probably be convinced to swing your way, but... you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Macon and Artemis were a thing. Neither of them talked about it or expressed it openly, but I’d seen enough to draw my own conclusions.

“I’m not interested in bedding down with Kitten,” I told him. “And if I find out you’re trying to shoot your shot...”

“What’re you gonna do?” he asked with an arrogant smile.

“Challenge you to a duel at high noon,” I said because it was the one face-off with him I’d probably win.

“In other words, don’t touch your shit, eh? Heard, Romeo.” He stood and scratched his navel, belched and glanced around. “I gotta take a piss. You’ll take care of this for me?” He motioned to the fire.

“Yeah, I’ll keep it going.” Artemis’s shift would be over soon, and I needed to sober up before taking over. I heard the rasp of Macon’s zipper and then the symphony of him relieving himself in the underbrush. Returning to the haloed glow of the fire, he laid himself out on his sleeping bag, yawned like a bear, and was snoring within minutes. I was jealous of anyone who could fall asleep that easily. I could only manage a deep sleep every couple of days, and usually only with the aid of narcotics.

I took out my supplies and rolled a couple of cigarettes in between tending the fire. While I smoked, I watched Kitten’s

ribcage rise and fall with every breath. His lips were rather pretty when he wasn't hurling insults at me, and honestly, they were pretty even when he was.

I wasn't going to get attached to him though, no more than the others. I'd keep him safe and fed until we got to Atlanta, but any commitment beyond that was a losing game.

I was done with losing.

SIX

KITTEN

THERE WAS A RHYTHM TO THE SCAVENGERS' days. Macon, usually the first to rise, took over tending the fire shortly after dawn. Artemis went out to hunt while Teresa prepared breakfast—I helped with that. Gizmo crawled out of his tented tarp contraption around the time food was ready, which was also about the same time Cipher materialized from the woods and either Artemis or Macon replaced him to take watch.

After everyone was fed and watered, we packed up camp. Someone put out the fire, the trash was buried, and then we set to walking. Cipher scouted ahead of the group with his machete in hand to clear a path through the brush for the rest of us to follow. Macon brought up the rear, armed with an axe, and helped Gizmo carry his wheelbarrow over the rough patches. For two days, we didn't come across another living soul, but even still, none of them let their guard down or deviated from the path they'd set.

Cipher was too quiet when he moved. I usually didn't know he was right next to me until he called it to my attention. And although his voice was deep, he spoke softly. Most of the time, I didn't hear what he was saying the first time around and had to ask him to repeat himself. Whenever that happened, he accused me of daydreaming, and I let him believe that was the case.

On our third day of travel, we stopped earlier in the afternoon than usual and set up camp. Cipher said he had a surprise for us all and led us on a short hike to where there was

a waterfall spilling over a cascading tumble of rocks and gathering in a crystal-clear pool at its base. The summer heat meant that the water was refreshingly cool instead of just frigid as we stripped down to our underwear and climbed in.

Little Miss Purrfect occupied herself by hunting grasshoppers and other insects nearby, Artemis and Macon scaled the rocks to the top of the waterfall and jumped into the deepest part of the pool, and Cipher remained on guard, glancing over at us from time to time as if doing double duty as our life guard and sentry.

He did that a lot, I'd noticed, separated himself from the rest of the pack, choosing not to participate in order to stand watch. Gizmo often opted out as well, but he seemed to prefer tinkering with his gadgets.

"Aren't you going to swim?" I asked Cipher, who was now smoking a cigarette on the rocky ledge that surrounded us.

"Don't want to get my leg wet," he said and thumped it with one hand.

"Then take it off," I said and splashed him, forcing him to cup both hands over his cigarette so it didn't get wet. "Come on, dad."

I'd started calling him that whenever he acted too serious for his age, which was most of the time.

"How am I going to rescue you from danger with only one leg?" he asked.

"I'll protect you." I stood in the water and braced my hands on both hips like I was a caped superhero.

His gaze slid across my bare chest and down my stomach before flicking up to my eyes again. Thank God this water was cold because the heat that swept through me was intense.

"Let's go, old man." I splashed him again.

"Fine, brat," he said moodily and wedged the butt of his cigarette between two rocks. He slowly disarmed himself, unbuckling and unstrapping his various leathers and setting aside his weapons, away from the water but still nearby. The

machete he set right at the pool's edge, then yanked off his t-shirt and removed his boot and sock. His cargo pants were last to go, and I watched the slow production until he was wearing only his briefs, which weirdly belonged to my brother, but I tried not to get hung up on that.

"You got an amputee kink?" he asked as he sat down to remove his right leg.

"Maybe," I said. I definitely found him fascinating.

"This has got to be the world's saddest strip tease," he said as he laid his leg on top of his clothing.

I had nothing to say in response, but I admired the muscles in his shoulders and upper arms as he scooted to the edge of the pool and sunk into the water.

"Fuck, that's cold," he said.

"It'll shrink your pecker."

"Good thing I've got some length to spare," he said haughtily.

For that comment, I dunked him, and he came up spluttering. "Cheap shot, Kitten. I've only got one leg."

He made a grab for me, and I hopped along the bottom of the pool, careful to avoid the sharp points of rocks underneath us. He was quick, though, and determined, so it wasn't long before he'd grabbed me with both arms and body-slammed me into the water. Then Macon came over and showed us both who was the king of the castle, so we ganged up on him until we managed to take him down too. Macon lifted me over his shoulders like a strongman and threw me across the pool, and I took the opportunity to swim under the water and grab hold of Cipher's ankle, which scared the bejesus out of him, even though he tried to act tough about it.

Our lips were blue and our limbs like popsicles when we finally pulled ourselves onto the rocks to dry in the sun. Gizmo was nearby, and I asked to see his hand, which had all sorts of tools attached to it. He removed it to show me how it was constructed.

“You made this?” I asked. It was like a rubber-lined glove that fit over the parts of his hand that remained, but instead of four fingers, it had a screwdriver with removable heads, a retractable pocket knife, a slender piece of metal that resembled a lockpick, and a tiny little saw for the pinky with a rotating guard to cover it. (Gizmo cautioned me to be careful because it was very sharp.) The fingers were “jointed” too, and he could adjust them with his thumb and lock them into place.

“This is incredible,” I said.

“Its construction is really quite simple,” he said modestly. I returned it to him and he fitted it back into place. I didn’t ask who bit him or how, because Artemis had told me it was considered to be rude.

“He modified Artemis’s arm and my leg too,” Cipher said. “He was the go-to guy for the amputees at The Admiral.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It was a group home for the unsupervised youth of D.C.” Cipher said. “That’s where the three of us met, Artemis, Gizmo, and I.”

“What about Macon?”

“We picked him up along the way. He was heading north from his hometown, Macon, Georgia.”

“Does anyone around here use their real name?”

“Just you,” Cipher said.

“Why is that?”

“Most of us are leaving something behind and starting fresh. Meeting new people lets you be someone else. Clean slate, you know?”

“I don’t want to be anyone else,” I told him.

“Count your blessings, Kitten. Or should I call you Joshua?” he asked.

“Kitten is fine,” I said, feeling a little bashful about it. I didn’t want him to know how much I liked it. “What about Teresa? How did she come up with that name?”

“We named her Mother Teresa because she takes care of us all, and we needed something to call her because she didn’t say much in the beginning.”

“She didn’t speak?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

Cipher and Gizmo exchanged a glance. “It’s her story to tell,” Cipher said at last. “But I’d be careful about asking. She doesn’t like to talk about it.”

It must have been horrible to render her speechless like that. Some things I didn’t need to know.

“Why’d you leave D.C.?” I asked instead.

For a long, awkward moment, neither of them spoke, then Cipher said, “There was a fire at The Admiral. A bad one.”

“Did anyone get hurt?”

“Yes,” Cipher said while Gizmo fiddled with his bionic hand.

“Anyone you know?”

“*Everyone* we knew,” Cipher said.

“Did they—”

“Yes, Kitten, they did,” he said, cutting me off.

“I’m sorry.” I got the sense that I was being rude again; I only wanted to know more about them. “Do you know what started it?”

“Not what,” Cipher said darkly. “Who.”

He didn’t give me any more detail than that, and I figured I should probably stop asking questions. In the silence that followed, Gizmo said, “My prosthetics are adequate considering the materials I have to work with, but imagine a robotic limb powered by the body’s kinetic energy, made of a light-weight polymer and coated with a material that has the texture of skin with a network of electrodes that communicate

sensation to the brain. So comfortable to wear that you never need to remove it.”

“Keep reaching for the stars, Gizmo,” Cipher said, now reclined with both hands behind his head, showcasing his cut torso and lean physique, including the V-shaped muscles framing his groin—those held my attention for way too long. Cipher cleared his throat. Our eyes met and he lifted one eyebrow—I’d obviously been checking him out—but thankfully, he didn’t say anything.

To avoid further embarrassment, I pointed to my hat and said, “You all should have a name. Like a team name with a mascot and colors.”

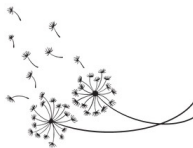
“The roosters?” Gizmo asked.

“This is a Gamecock,” I corrected.

“How about just the cocks?” Cipher said with a devilish grin.

“We should probably vote on it,” Gizmo said. “I’m not sure Artemis would appreciate that name.”

“You workshop that, Kitten, and get back to us.” Cipher rose to a sitting position and began the task of reassembling himself. I only watched him because I had nothing else to do. Finally he stood and offered me his hand. “Let’s gather up the troops and get back to camp before nightfall. I don’t want to get caught out after dark in an unfamiliar place.”



THAT NIGHT after dinner we were sitting around the campfire when Gizmo got the radio to start working again. All he could tune it to was a station that played classical music, but the sound was still so beautiful. I loved listening to music—one of the things I missed most from Before—so I moved as close to Gizmo as I could in order to hear it better. Cipher said

something to me, but I missed it because his voice was too damn low and besides that, he was on my right side.

“What?” I asked.

He said something to Gizmo, who then turned off the radio. Cipher grabbed my chin and turned my head so that I was facing him.

“When were you going to tell us that you can’t hear?” he demanded. His mouth was tense, and his eyes simmered with anger.

“I can hear,” I said because I could hear, just not that well. He leaned in and whispered something to me, but I could only feel the vibrations of his voice and the warmth of his breath.

“What did I say just now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I snapped and pushed him away. I didn’t appreciate him outing me to the rest of the group, making an example of me like this was some lesson I needed to learn.

“You can only hear in this ear.” He pointed to my left one. “All this time I thought you were ignoring me, or you had your head in the clouds.”

Everyone was listening, watching Cipher scold me like a child. “What does it matter? It’s not a big deal.”

“But it *is* a big deal,” he growled. “I asked you what your disabilities were, and you lied. What happens if a Rabid attacks you from this side?” He squeezed my right shoulder. “And you can’t hear them approaching? What are you going to do then?”

“I guess I’ll just get eaten.”

“Don’t be stupid. And don’t be a brat. What else do I need to know? And be honest with me this time.”

My lower lip felt thick as a slug and my eyes stung with worthless tears. I hated these questions. Even worse, I hated getting emotional in front of them. (Not very badass.) I searched the faces of my companions for help, but Gizmo seemed absorbed by the numbers on the radio dial, Teresa was petting Little Miss Purrfect, and even Artemis was blank-faced

and waiting for my response. I'd like to think Macon would have stepped in if he were there.

"We need to know these things," Artemis said to me in her calm, reassuring way, which somehow made it worse. "We're not judging you or looking down on you. This is just how we take care of each other."

"I have asthma," I said, "only when the pollen is up or the dust is bad or if I exercise too hard or if I get really upset about something."

"Do you have an inhaler?" Cipher asked, his mouth a grim line.

"No, I haven't had one for years. Usually if I can't get it under control, I'll just pass out for a few minutes, then wake up when it's over."

"Well, that is incredibly inconvenient when attempting to run away from danger," he snarled.

"Cipher," Artemis warned.

"Then just leave me behind," I shouted at him, at all of them. I walked over to Teresa and took back my cat, then dragged my sleeping bag with me away from the fire. I lay down with my back to them so I didn't have to listen to their stupid conversation. I heard Cipher tell Artemis to "add it to the list," which was probably an inventory of all my weaknesses. At least I had Little Miss Purrfect, who didn't care that I wasn't some tough-as-nails survivalist.

I couldn't wait to find my brother and leave these assholes behind.

SEVEN

CIPHER

“YOU COULD HAVE HANDLED THAT BETTER,” Artemis said as we were packing it in for the night. I was on first watch; she was on second. Kitten was pretending to be asleep, and for once, I wasn’t worried that he would overhear us talking.

“The little fucker lied to me,” I reminded her.

“You embarrassed him, Cipher. How would you like it if someone detailed your own disabilities in front of everyone else? People you’d just met?”

“I can’t exactly hide mine. And neither can you or Gizmo, so excuse me if I was a little pissed that he potentially put us all in danger by withholding important information.”

“You withhold information all the time,” she said.

“My personal life, yes, painful things about my past, sure, but not my capabilities. Or lack thereof.”

“You’re worried about him,” she said.

“I worry about all of you, including the asthmatic, hard-of-hearing, stubborn-as-hell pipsqueak who hasn’t left his gated community since he was ten years old.”

“Look, all I’m saying is you could be a little bit nicer to him.”

“I’m not the nice one, remember?”

“And you should apologize.”

“I’m not apologizing for shit. He owes *me* an apology.”

“Have it your way, but I think if you like him—”

“Who said I like him?”

She pursed her lips and gave me that all-knowing look of hers. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you laugh like you did today at the waterfall.”

“I wasn’t laughing, I was gasping for air. The little fucker took advantage of me.”

She shook her head and groaned with frustration. “You are exhausting. Apologize to Kitten. You could use the practice. I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll send Macon along after,” I told her, and she shot me a warning look. I held up both hands, not wanting to be on her bad side too.

I walked a little ways away from the fire to where Macon was perched on a pile of rocks. We kept a fire going throughout the night to ward off Rabids. Their eyes were sensitive to light, probably why they tended to hide in the daytime and attack after dark. We scouted this rocky outcropping earlier in the day when we’d set up camp. It had a good vantage point, and I could easily see where the others were sleeping, as well as anyone who might be approaching the clearing from the surrounding woods.

“Thank God you’re here. I’m about to pass the fuck out.” Macon stood and stretched out his arms, then handed me the night-vision goggles. The moon was out, casting a silver glow over the trees and brush, but I took them just in case. “What’d I miss?” he asked.

“Kitten’s got asthma and he can only hear in one ear, his left one, so we need to watch his three o’clock and find him a fucking inhaler.”

“Word. Nothing to report out here. Just me and the owls above making sweet, sweet love.”

“Good. Let’s hope it’s a quiet night.”

He left and I made myself comfortable on the rocks, machete in my lap, positioned so I could easily pivot and see

in all directions. I heard the owls hooting back and forth as I pulled out one of my cigarettes and lit it with a silver Zippo. One of my finest acquisitions, I'd bartered a bootleg porn DVD for this lighter back in D.C. The kid who traded it to me is dead now, burned alive in the fire that was supposed to have been caused by faulty wiring, which still doesn't explain why the fire alarms didn't trip and all the stairwells were locked.

There was a rustling of leaves to my right, and I said to him, "I know you're there, Kitten."

I'd seen him get up a few minutes ago and watched his back while he pissed on a tree. I then tracked his movements from our campfire to my crow's nest. Even if I hadn't seen him approaching, he made a shit-ton of noise when he moved around.

He said nothing in response, so I tried again. "Can't sleep?"

"No," he said sullenly, coming into view with the silver moonlight reflecting off his curls and kissing the apples of his cheeks like some beautiful gothic painting. His ringlets were tousled, and his pretty lips made the shape of that scowly pout he saved just for me.

"Want to come up here with me?" I scooted to one side to make room for him. He climbed up the rocks, refusing the hand I offered and slotted in right beside me. His body was warm, and I remembered earlier that day when we'd wrestled in the water, not only the smoothness of his skin but his strength of spirit in his determination to drown me.

"Are we still fighting?" I asked.

"Yes. Your group name is now the Assholes, your mascot is a huge anus, and your team color is poop brown."

I burst into laughter, the deep belly kind that rumbled up through my diaphragm and poured out unexpectedly. Kitten's lips quirked, trying to hide a grin. When that bit of madness passed, I decided to take Artemis's advice, and I said to him with more composure, "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Well, you did."

“You shouldn’t have lied.”

“If you’d known all of that, would you still have wanted me in your crew?” His heart-shaped face gazed up at me in earnestness.

I didn’t want you in our crew, I was about to say, but that would be a lie, and besides that, I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. “We all have our weaknesses. And our strengths. The goal of the pack is to balance each other out. Macon is strong. He carries shit. Gizmo is a whiz with technology. He fixes shit. I’m good with weapons, so I kill shit. Artemis hunts. You feel me?”

“What does Teresa do?”

“She cooks and makes camp and keeps things organized.”

“And what about me?”

You irritate the shit out of me, I almost said, but again, I refrained. “You’re pretty useless,” I teased, and he elbowed me in the ribs. “You start fights and feed your damned cat table scraps and take advantage of people with only one leg.”

This at least earned me a grin.

“But you are fun to have around,” I said and poked his side.

“You should tie me to a tree,” he said glumly.

“I’m sure you’ll be useful one day.” I reached out and ruffled his hair. He batted my hand away and ducked his head.

“Can I have a puff of that?” he said, eyeing my cigarette.

I spat out a piece of tobacco that ended up on my tongue. “Fuck no, you asthmatic little shit. I’m not hauling your ass around when you pass out because you can’t breathe. What is wrong with you?”

“I just want to try it.”

“Try something else. Cocaine or amphetamines. Not carcinogenic substances.”

“Is that what’s in the little baggie?” he asked, looking excited.

“No, those are painkillers. I crush them and mix it with the tobacco for my sleepytime cigarettes.”

“You need them to fall asleep?”

“Yeah, and to stay asleep. Nightmares.” I tapped my temple. “See, wouldn’t you rather be hard of hearing than mentally disturbed?”

“I don’t really have a choice.”

“No, none of us do.”

We sat in silence for a spell. The owl hooted and Kitten startled, grabbing hold of my arm. I didn’t mind it.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Just a Barred Owl, scaredy cat.”

“Why is it so loud?”

“Probably because he’s horny.”

We heard it again, so I mimicked the call. Kitten copied me, and we hooted back and forth with the owl for a while. Then, suddenly, it stopped. The forest fell silent, eerily so. The hairs raised on my arms, and I put my finger to my mouth to silence Kitten. I heard the crunch of leaves and scanned our campsite to find everyone still asleep. Jumping to my feet, I donned the night vision goggles to survey the woods around us. I had only managed to push Kitten behind me when the first Rabid came into view.

EIGHT

KITTEN

THEY CAME OUT OF NOWHERE—PEOPLE? No, not people. Rabids. Even as they stumbled and lurched, they moved swiftly, not caring if they tripped or fell in their pursuit. Some hobbled along, dragging their broken and dislocated limbs behind them. All of them were headed in our direction.

Instead of waiting for them to reach the rocks, Cipher hollered for the others, then leapt to the ground and met their attack head-on. With his machete in one hand and a knife in the other, he struck two at once, slicing one across one's neck while impaling the other in the gut. Blood gushed from their wounds as both shuddered and dropped to the ground where they twitched and seized with death spasms.

Three more attacked from behind and Cipher swiveled like a bullfighter and launched himself at the nearest one, driving his machete upward and slicing the Rabid in one brutal stroke. Their guts spilled out onto the ground, polluting the sweet summer air with the stink of blood, urine, and feces. I gagged and tried not to vomit as the Rabid dropped to their knees, uttering a sickening groan before face-planting in the dirt. The other two received a similar treatment. Blood and guts were strewn about like party decorations, but still there were more coming.

“Cipher, behind you,” I shouted, and suddenly there was a crash at my side. Macon and Artemis were there, armed to the teeth. Macon joined Cipher in the fray, swinging his axe as easily as he chopped firewood, lopping off limbs and bashing in heads. The sounds of bones breaking and skulls cracking

turned my stomach, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the battle. As more poured in from the woods, Artemis aimed her crossbow at the tree line and picked them off one-by-one with deadly precision. Kill shots, every one.

Cipher was fending off two more attackers, but there was a third approaching him from behind with its mouth already open and frothing with spit, its jaw so wide that it looked unhinged. Cipher couldn't possibly fight them all at once, so I scrambled down from the rocks with my knife in hand and ran at full-speed toward the Rabid. Knocking him off his feet, I pounced on him like Little Miss Purrfect and jabbed my blade deep into his guts as fast and as hard as I could, over and over, until we were both gory with blood.

"You got him, Kitten. He's dead," Cipher said as he pulled me off him.

The four of us faced outward with our backs to one another, prepared for another attack, but there seemed to be no more approaching. I couldn't hear *anything*, save for my blood pounding in my ears like a war drum, and the hammering of my own heart.

"Come and get it, you fucking cannibals," Macon shouted and beat his chest, raising his axe high in the air—the head of it was dripping with blood—but the woods were quiet. After another minute or so, the owl started hooting again.

Artemis stayed by my side, crossbow at the ready, while Cipher and Macon prodded and poked at the bodies on the ground, making sure all of them were dead. Those who weren't, received a final death blow. Then they set about severing their spinal cords, Macon with his axe and Cipher with his machete, while Artemis collected her arrows. I didn't watch that part, but swung my gaze over to the campsite where Gizmo stood armed with a harpoon with Teresa in front of him, a dagger in each hand. They appeared to be ready for action, eyes glittering ferociously in the camp's firelight. Luckily, the Rabids never made it that far.

My lungs finally caught up to me, my breath coming fast and shallow, and I reminded myself to breathe deeply, in

through my nose and out through my mouth so that I wouldn't hyperventilate and trigger an asthma attack.

"Did they bite you?" Cipher asked as he used a dry bit of his t-shirt to wipe the blood from my face. Still wearing his night-vision goggles, he placed his hands on my shoulders and inspected me all over.

"No." I shook my head. But my shirt was soaked through with blood. I pulled the fabric away from my chest where it clung to me. My stomach heaved and I gagged again.

"We'll burn it," he said, then pulled me into his arms and gripped me tightly. He seemed to realize he was hugging me and yanked me back sharply. "I told you to stay on the rocks."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"I didn't hear you," I said, which was the truth.

"You're lucky you weren't bitten or killed," he said sternly.

"*You're* lucky you weren't bitten or killed," I shot back.

"Short stack saved your life," Macon said and thumped me on the back.

"Thank you, Macon," I said and wiped my knife on the clothing of one of the bodies lying on the ground. They hardly looked human, and yet, they resembled my mother in her last days. Ghastly, twisted, starving versions of their former selves. They were sick. Sick human beings. They didn't want to become this, and they had no control over it happening. And now, they were dead. We killed them.

I started shaking at the enormity of it all. This was what had been happening all along to our friends and family, our parents and siblings, all over the world. Any of these people could have been my brother. The realization hit me as I searched their faces to make sure I didn't recognize any of them. Cipher removed his goggles and yanked me back by my shoulder.

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded.

“N-nothing,” I said, my teeth beginning to chatter. “I just wanted to see if I knew them.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“No.”

Artemis said to Cipher, “Take Kitten to the river to wash up. Macon and I will take care of the bodies.”

“I’m on watch,” Cipher said.

“You haven’t slept in two days, and Kitten just experienced his first Rabid attack. Take it easy for tonight. Make sure you both get warm. We’ll handle it.”

Cipher pulled me toward him, one arm wrapped around me like he was trying to warm me up or afraid to let me go. “There were a lot of them,” I said at last.

“There were,” he agreed while surveying the dead bodies. “They attacked in a pack. They’ve never done that before.”

“Maybe they’re evolving,” Artemis said. “All the more reason to get to Atlanta as soon as we can.”

“Atlanta is a different kind of monster,” Cipher said.

“We can argue about it later. Now, go get cleaned up.”

“Come on, Killer,” Cipher said and grabbed hold of my hand, dragging me along with him to the campsite. His other hand still held the machete. Gizmo and Teresa were by the fire, sitting with their backs to each other so they could monitor our surroundings. Little Miss Purrfect was curled up beside them, asleep.

“That damned cat probably slept through the whole thing,” Cipher grumbled. “Grab some clean clothes.”

“And soap?”

“You brought soap?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s essential.”

He nodded, a wry smile on his face. “Then yes, bring your soap too.”

I gathered up my things as well as a scrap of fabric to use for drying off while he retrieved a change of clothes for himself. He took my hand again as we entered the forest. “I can see you,” I said.

“I don’t care. There are Rabids in these woods.”

“Don’t you need both hands in case more come?”

“I’ll manage. I don’t want you getting lost. Now, hurry up. The sooner we get clean, the sooner we can get warm.”

At the river, I peeled off my shirt and stepped out of my blood-splattered pants. I removed my underwear too in case the blood had soaked through. I didn’t want any of it touching me. We turned our backs to each other while we scrubbed ourselves down. The water was shallow enough that we wouldn’t get swept away by the current. Farther up was the waterfall we’d visited earlier that day, which seemed like so long ago. Cipher stood with only one foot in the stream, trying to keep his prosthesis dry and his weapons within reach. In the moonlight, I could make out the broad line of his shoulders and the arrow of his back, the curve where his waist met his backside. He glanced over his shoulder at me, then winked when he caught me looking. Not knowing what else to do, I scowled back at him.

There was a boy once named Lucas who lived in my neighborhood. We’d fought as children—he was bigger than me, arrogant and bossy, always telling me what to do and laughing at me when I made a mistake, but around the time we were twelve, we were the only kids left besides my brother, so we became friends out of necessity. We fought a lot about petty things, like who should go first when we were playing a game or who had won at whatever competition we’d invented for ourselves. Then one day, after arguing over who’d finished first at an obstacle course (I had), he backed me up against a tree and rubbed his thigh against my crotch until I got hard. He held me there so that I couldn’t escape. I didn’t really understand what was happening, but I also knew that I didn’t want it to stop. He told me to keep going, so I rubbed against him until I came in my pants, my first time ever. Confused by my response and a little ashamed too, I finally met his eyes.

Lucas had been watching me the whole time, and he said with a smug smile, “I knew you were gay.”

I had to ask my mom what it meant. She was very matter-of-fact about it, “it’s a boy who likes other boys.” Of course that led to many more questions, which she was patient in answering. We were religious, yes, but my mother always said there was no room for hate in our household.

It probably would’ve happened between us again, but Lucas died a couple weeks later, got appendicitis and didn’t make it to the hospital in time. I cried more than I had when my dad died. He was my only friend, even if we’d fought like crazy, and he was gone forever. He’d also triggered something inside of me, my sexual awakening, I guess. For months after, whenever I masturbated, I thought about that incident with Lucas and the tree, and I always felt a little sad about it afterward.

I didn’t know if I was gay but Cipher inspired the same sort of wild, desperate yearning that Lucas had, desire mixed with anger and frustration. I wanted to fight him as much as I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to trap him underneath me and rub against him until we both got off. I wanted to see him naked and touch him all over and have him touch me too. And I didn’t want that with any of the others. I only wanted him.

I turned back to the task at hand. Even with soap, my hands were still dirty, my fingernails caked with blood, so I used a clean part of my shirt to scrub them as much as I possibly could. I was suddenly so exhausted that I could barely keep my eyes open.

“Finish up,” Cipher said sharply, probably seeing the glazed look in my eyes. “I don’t want you catching hypothermia on top of everything else.”

I managed to redress myself with clumsy fingers. Cipher instructed me to grab my soiled clothes, saying we’d burn them in the fire, then scavenge for more along the way. Some things, like batteries and bullets, were hard to come by, but apparently clothing was not.

I zoned out during our walk back to the campsite. Cipher held my hand and guided me through the dark forest, making sure I didn't stumble on any tree limbs or exposed roots. Back at camp, he wrapped the sleeping bag around my shoulders then fed the fire so that it was blazing and warm. He rubbed along my arms until I was no longer trembling, not even thinking of himself.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked.

"I'm fine."

"Can you sleep here tonight?" I asked. Cipher usually liked to sleep on his own, away from the others inside a tarp he wrapped around himself like a human burrito.

"Me?" he asked.

"I don't want to be alone. Please?"

Without answering, he rearranged our sleeping bags so that we were lying on top of one and using the other as a blanket. I faced the fire with him at my back, tucked in tightly behind me. Cipher let me use his arm as a pillow with his other arm draped across my chest. I grabbed his hand and clutched his fingers to me, needing something solid to hold onto.

"Their eyes... the way they moved, it was like they were blind. Can they see us?" I asked.

"Not very well. From what I understand, they mostly track movement, and light repels them, which is why we keep a fire going through the night."

"How did they find us?"

"Probably sniffed us out or heard us when we were making camp and waited for it to get dark. Usually it's only a few at a time who will ambush you with no rhyme or reason. Tonight's attack seemed almost coordinated. They're getting bolder. Or hungrier."

"I've never killed anyone before," I confessed.

"I know," he said softly, mouth close to my left ear so that I could hear him. He must have arranged us with that in mind, just like when he invited me to sit with him on the rocks.

“I thought I’d feel worse about it,” I said.

“If that were a person, you probably would, but it was a Rabid and it was self-defense. They wanted to eat us, and there was no reasoning with them. With Rabids, it’s kill or be killed.”

Rationally, I knew he was telling the truth, but the sounds they’d made as they died sounded very human to me.

“Is that what my mother would have become?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I tried to absorb the violence and terror of the night, the relief I’d felt when it was over and the Rabids were all dead, and my gratitude that none of my friends had been hurt. “I wouldn’t have wanted her to die like that,” I said at last.

“No, me neither. That was brutal and ugly. Not a nice way to go.”

“Is there any medicine to make them better?” Santiago had said that there was, but he may have just wanted me to feel better about him leaving.

“Not yet, but maybe there will be one day.”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so too, but in the meantime, we have to protect ourselves and each other. You probably saved my life tonight, even though I told you to stay on the rocks.”

“I didn’t hear you,” I said again.

“Next time, let me handle it.”

“No.”

“No?”

“You can’t be the only one fighting off Rabids. Who’s going to protect you?” I asked.

He sighed, and I could just imagine the look on his face, part amusement, part exasperation. “I have the feeling you’re going to be a pain in my ass for as long as I know you, aren’t you, Kitten?”

“Probably.” I turned a little so that I could see him. “Will you stay?”

“I’ll stay here till morning.”

I settled back into the cradle of his warm embrace. He gripped me tightly to him, as if knowing it was what I needed, and buried his nose in the top of my hair. I stared at the fire, getting drowsier by the second.

“You were very brave,” I said, remembering how he jumped down to meet our attackers, probably to prevent them from getting to me.

“So were you. Perhaps you are useful after all.”

“I told you I would be.”

He huffed a little laugh. “I shouldn’t have doubted you. Go to sleep now, Kitten. Put that ugly Rabid business out of your head and dream of happier things.”

My eyelids grew heavy. The flames made the shapes of people dancing or dying. Cocooned by the warmth of the fire and Cipher’s arms, I finally fell asleep.

NINE

CIPHER

“YOU SEEM TO HAVE A GROUPIE,” Macon said. Nudging my side, he nodded at Kitten, just a few paces behind. My little shadow. I’d woken up this morning with the kid’s ass cheeks nestled snugly against my crotch. I was aghast at my raging boner trying to bust through several layers of fabric to reach him. Luckily, Kitten was still asleep when I crawled out from under the sleeping bag, shame-faced, found a tree off in the cut, and furiously jacked off. Of course, Macon had caught me red-handed while gathering firewood, then pointed and laughed like a huge dickhead. There was no goddamned privacy with these fuckers.

“I hadn’t noticed,” I said to Macon, when in fact, I *had* noticed.

“Really? He’s been following you all morning.”

“So? Everybody follows me.”

“He sits next to you whenever we eat or take a water break.”

“He’s probably worried about Rabids attacking us again, and he knows I’m his best shot at survival.”

“Hey now,” Macon said, elbowing me in the ribs.

Our mission that day was to find an out-of-the-way subdivision to scavenge. Our supplies were running low, and we could all use a change of clothing and more nonperishable food. An inhaler for Kitten would be like a gift from God, and

I was continually looking to restock our medical kit, which included my sleeptime painkillers. Also, Ziplocs.

We each had an idea of the needs versus wants. Teresa had a sweet tooth, Gizmo liked any sort of gadget he could fix or take apart, Macon enjoyed hard liquor and beef jerky, Artemis liked her spices, and I obviously had a thing for weaponry and quality-made leather goods.

“What are you hoping to find today, Kitten?” I asked when he’d caught up with me. This would be his first official scavenging mission.

“I don’t know. Maybe a cat toy for Little Miss Purrfect?”

I bit my tongue at the utter impracticality of that, not to mention it was breaking our *one* nonessential item rule, but I reasoned that he did just kill a Rabid on my behalf the night before and if he wanted a damn cat toy, then so be it.

“Why didn’t you use your gun?” he asked, clearly still processing the gruesome events of the night before. “With the Rabids, I mean?”

“Guns make a shit-ton of noise, which tends to attract more Rabids. And bullets are hard to come by. Better to save your gun for when you really need it.”

He looked slightly perplexed by that, but I didn’t go into any more detail. Hopefully, he’d never have to find out what the gun was for.

We were heading south, skirting alongside the woods bordering US 29, when we happened upon a fancy gated community situated on a golf course outside of Anderson, South Carolina. Expensive homes were hit or miss in terms of practical items, and many of them had already been picked over. But sometimes you’d find a real treasure trove, like the one time we stumbled upon a stocked wine cellar and got absolutely shit-faced. Other times, the houses were bone dry.

We stopped at the edge of the weedy, overgrown golf turf and hid our packs under a pile of brush, then split into teams of two to search the McMansions.

“I’ll take Kitten,” I said before any other arrangement could be made. Macon gave me some side-eye, and I pointed to my ear to remind him that the kid couldn’t hear, whereas I could hear exceptionally well, which was only partly due to my extreme paranoia. I laid my hand on Kitten’s shoulder, should anyone want to challenge my claim, and he grinned up at me like I was some sort of hero. I removed my hand promptly. I didn’t want him getting the wrong idea.

I learned pretty quickly that Kitten was not a very good scavenger. He spent way too long looking at family photos and marveling over shiny baubles and trinkets. I supposed I was the same way during my first few hunts, curious about other people’s lives and wondering what became of them. I still lifted jewelry when I came across it for the sole purpose of trading, but to linger over family memorabilia now just made me sad.

For our first house, the family must have left in a hurry because their Christmas decorations were still up, including a trimmed tree—a fake one, of course. Kitten was entranced by the many ornaments and garland strung around its plastic bows and asked me if I remember Christmas.

“Sure, I remember Christmas,” I said.

“We kept the tradition going for a while, decorating the inside of our house and making each other gifts, but when more people started getting sick and leaving, we didn’t want strangers to know we were living there, so we stopped. I miss it.” He touched one of the silver balls on the tree, causing my own eyes to get a little misty. Damn his sentimentality.

“We’ll have Christmas again someday,” I told him and hoped that it was true.

“You think so?”

“Yes. Now, can you scooch on over to the kitchen and check the cupboards for food?”

He meandered into the kitchen and started rooting around in the pantry on all fours. His cat was nearby, watching him with interest. “Jackpot,” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” I came nearer to peer over his shoulder.

“Cat food,” he said with a triumphant smile and held up several cans of Fancy Feast. I suppressed a groan and scanned the pantry to find that the rest of the shelves were bare.

“Feed your cat one can now and you can take three more with you, but that’s it. We have to save room for people food.”

I wasn’t above eating cat food in a pinch, but I’d really rather not. Kitten frowned, but for once didn’t argue with me. He did take forever reading all the different varieties and asking his cat which one it would prefer. I’d searched the entire downstairs while he was still making his selection.

“Tuna is always a winner,” I said to him.

He nodded and opened the can. At least the damned cat had a sense of urgency and set about eating as if it hadn’t had three square meals a day, every day, since Greenville.

“Come with me upstairs,” I told Kitten because I didn’t want to leave him down there alone.

“Remember Thanksgiving? Remember Halloween?” he said with a soft smile as I guided him up the fancy curving staircase. I resolved that today’s tasks would simply take longer.

“Yeah,” I said. “One time my sister and I dressed up as Princess Azula and Prince Zuko from *Avatar*, mainly because I wanted a pair of double broadswords, even though they were only plastic.”

“You have a sister?” he asked.

“Had,” I corrected.

“She died too?” he said, his pretty eyes getting gloomy.

“She did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. That was our favorite show growing up.” I left it at that, since bawling in the middle of a mission was never a good look, and instead asked him, “What was your favorite Halloween costume?”

“I was Pikachu one year. My mom found me a yellow jumper and made me ears to go with it. She painted my face too.”

“That’s cute.”

“My mom thought so. She took a ton of pictures.”

“I’d like to see them.” For once, I allowed myself to remember life before the virus, when my biggest concern had been how to take the perfect selfie and which jeans were cool enough to wear to school. I didn’t even have any pictures of my family, not anymore. They’d all burned in the fire at The Admiral.

“I’ll show you sometime,” he said, “if we ever get back to my house.”

“I’m sure we will,” I said, though I really had no idea.

He followed me from room to room as I took a quick inventory of what might be useful. Most of the medications in the bathrooms had expired long ago, but I did grab some mouthwash—that shit lasted forever. There were a couple of used toothbrushes too, and though I was tempted to grab one for myself, I’d hold out a little while longer. No floss, but I still had some from previous hunts. For whatever reason, toothpaste was a rarity, and there was none there either. While I searched, I told Kitten the importance of good oral hygiene, mainly because a good dentist was hard to find and anesthesia was even rarer. “Artemis can pull a tooth in a pinch,” I said because I’d seen her do it before. Gizmo fashioned her a little curved set of pliers that she attached to the hand of her prosthetic arm. Then it was just “say ahhhh” and yank the fucker out.

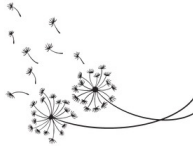
“Are you serious?” Kitten asked, horrorstruck, and I considered it a teachable moment.

“Dead serious. That’s why you should always remember to brush and floss your teeth before bed.”

We were finally finishing up with the house—must have taken two hours or more—when Macon busted through the

backdoor like the goddamned police and shouted, “Guys, I found a football and a pump. The game is fucking on.”

Kitten stared at me, dumbfounded, and I shook my head. Macon with a ball was a menace.



MACON INSISTED on assigning team captains, who were—no surprise—himself and Artemis, due to the fact they considered themselves the most athletic of the bunch. What followed was embarrassing to say the least. They picked the asthmatic and the guy with only one hand before they picked me. Teresa was actually pretty good, so I wasn’t offended that she got snatched up.

“That stings,” I said, joining Macon’s team by default.

“Sorry, bro, but you don’t have the hustle.”

It was true. I was terrible at team sports. I’d like to blame my scarcity of limbs, but I was shit at sports even when I had two fully functioning legs. Despite being exceptional at killing Rabids, I lacked the coordination required to catch a ball and run it down the field. I supposed when survival wasn’t on the line, I was just a bit lazy.

Kitten was fast, though, and consistently caught Artemis’s passes. He’d probably played with his brother growing up. Macon hollered at me to “tag him, bro” and I got a sudden surge of motivation to follow through. Kitten went down—I’d forgotten how light he was, and I fell on top of him, both of us sweating and out of breath. Kitten smiled mischievously and licked his lips, then pumped his hips in a way that was *not at all* sweet or innocent. I was so stunned by his brazenness that I didn’t move.

“It’s two-touch, Cipher,” Artemis said. “Not tackle. I can’t have you injuring my star player.” I rolled off him and stared at the clouds for a moment, picturing a Rabid’s teeth sinking

into my testicles so that I didn't sprout wood. Artemis offered Kitten her hand and he took it, throwing me a sassy little smirk over one shoulder as he strutted over to the line.

The fuck was that?

We ended up losing, which was probably my fault, but I took zero responsibility for it. Macon was a good sport, thrilled just to have been able to organize a team sport. "MVP," he said to Kitten with a fist bump since he'd scored the most touchdowns. "Next time I'm picking you for my team."

We scavenged a few more homes before meeting back at the "Christmas" house, where we washed up with well water from a spigot Macon had discovered and changed into our new clothes for dinner. Teresa came downstairs wearing a frilly gown that she'd acquired from the lavish walk-in closet in the master bedroom.

"You look just like a beauty queen," Kitten said to her, awestruck.

"Remember the Miss America pageant," Macon asked the group. "Got my first boner during the swimsuit competition. Hello, Miss Texas."

"Remember the wave?" Artemis asked and modeled it by cupping her hand and smiling like a doll.

"We should do it," Kitten said. "We should dress up like it's a beauty pageant."

I expected Artemis to shut it down, but something about the excitement of the day and our high spirits must have gotten into her, and they all tramped upstairs, with the exception of yours truly, who was the designated "judge." And as I told them, someone had to be strapped in case the Rabids made a house call.

Teresa descended the stairs first, wearing yet another floofy ball gown with a hat that didn't match in the slightest, nor did her heels. She walked slowly down the stairs, announced herself as Miss Equestria, which was the fictional home of the My Little Ponies, and said that what she wanted

most for humankind was an endless supply of candy. I smiled and applauded while she took her place to the right of the banister.

Artemis came next, wearing a slinky black number and strappy heels that threw me for a loop because it was sexy as hell and she was kind of like my sister. I had the urge to cover up her cleavage, but damn, she sure did know how to work it.

“Miss Baltimore,” she said flatly, “And my hope for our species is a motherfucking cure for this motherfucking virus.”

“Word,” I said.

Gizmo was next, which was a surprise because he rarely participated in this sort of thing. He was wearing a satin smoking jacket and slippers, announced that he was from a galaxy far, far away, which may have been true, and that his hope for humanity was world peace. I think he was being serious. “Leisure wear suits you,” I complimented and he returned it with a distinguished nod of his head.

Macon followed soon after wearing a tight-as-hell red cocktail dress that fit him like a sausage casing. I couldn’t imagine how he’d squeezed that dress around his thick thighs and big ole booty. “I’m Miss Georgia, y’all, and I want a plot of land to farm, a pretty little lady by my side, and an endless waterfall of whiskey.”

“I love that you are secure enough in your manhood to wear that dress,” I told him.

“The clothing makes the man,” he said with a salacious wink.

Finally, it was Kitten’s turn, and I found myself sitting up a little straighter, wondering what sort of outfit he’d chosen. He appeared on the upper landing and struck a sassy pose at the top of the stairs, arms raised, lips pushed out in an exaggerated pout—was he wearing lipstick too? His dress was cream-colored, scandalously short, and practically translucent. I could see the entire outline of his compact body when the rays of sunlight hit him just right, not that I was looking. Unlike the others, he was barefoot, and I didn’t think I’d ever seen a nicer

pair of feet. There was also a flower crown in his hair, and he looked, quite honestly, like my masturbation fodder for the next several weeks.

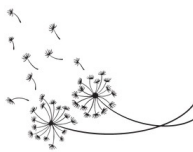
His eyes met mine and he smiled mischievously. “I’m Miss South Carolina, naturally, and my hope for humanity is to heal all the sick people in the world.”

Did I mention the dress was short? So short that it rode up in the front every time he descended another stair.

“Is that lingerie?” I asked, unable to tear my eyes away from his silky, brown thighs.

He shrugged and spun, causing the dress to flutter up even higher. I glimpsed the bottoms of both ass cheeks and wondered if he was wearing anything at all underneath that dress. I imagined running my hands up those smooth thighs, cupping his balls and stroking him, kissing along his neck with his head thrown back, the noises he’d make as I brought him off and the dewy look in his eyes right after he came, his murmurs of gratitude as he said my name in that soft, breathless way. My dick inflated like a helium balloon and somewhere in the miasma of fantasy and desire, they asked me to choose a winner.

“I need a cigarette,” I announced. I shot out of my seat like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs and hobbled my horny ass out the front door.



“HOW COULD you let him dress like that?” I asked Artemis hours later when we were trading out the night shift. I’d taken first watch on account of needing some “alone time.”

“Let him?” she asked. “Since when do we police what people wear?”

“He was practically naked,” I insisted.

“We were all practically naked at the waterfall the other day. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s summertime in the South.”

“That dress was... suggestive,” I said.

“What did it suggest to you, Cipher?”

“It *suggested* that Kitten is a thirsty little thot.”

She laughed long and hard at that.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“I’ve just never seen you like this. You’re really tied up in knots about him, aren’t you?”

“Artemis, come on, you know it ain’t right.”

“What isn’t right?”

“Kitten looking all sexy. I think he’s trying to seduce me.”

She laughed again and when she’d finally sobered up, she said, “Life is short. You know that better than anyone else. You blink and another one of your friends or family is gone. Why not enjoy what we have when we have it?”

“Is that what you and Macon are doing?”

She looked me dead in the eyes. “Yep,” she said, making the word pop.

I really had no response to that. We should all be living life like there was no tomorrow. Often, there wasn’t.

I passed off the night-vision goggles and left her to it. Inside the house, everyone was asleep already on the living room floor. They must have dragged the mattresses from the bedrooms and made camp downstairs so everyone could be together, which was smart. Kitten was curled up on one of the beds with his cat, still wearing that scandalous slip of a dress, which was now hiked up around his waist, revealing matching silk panties that barely covered his little bubble butt.

There was no way I could sleep next to him with what he was wearing. I’d pop a blood vessel. My balls would literally explode.

“Where are you going?” he asked, sitting up and yawning. His hair was messy. One of the straps slid off his shoulder, framing a collarbone that looked smooth as satin. I bit the inside of my cheek.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” I said as I took off my boot.

“I made room for you.” He patted the empty spot beside him and waited for me to join him there. The material of his dress was so clingy that I could see the nub of one nipple pressing against it. My gaze zeroed in on it like a target while my mouth went dry.

“I don’t think I can sleep there with the way you’re dressed.”

He glanced down as if just remembering he looked like a goddamned wet dream. “You don’t like it?” he asked, pulling out the doe-eyed routine.

Breathe, Cipher. Deep breaths.

“I mean, it’s fine.”

“I wore it for you.” The little scamp smiled and dragged his hand along the slip’s satin hem.

“Joshua,” I warned, using his given name to make a point.

His lips pursed and his eyes widened in mock astonishment. “Uh oh, am I in trouble again, dad?”

“This...” I motioned between us, “is not happening.”

He frowned, and with his charms, I’d bet he wasn’t used to the word, no.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because you’re... *young*.” I latched onto it as the first thing that came to mind.

“I thought you were nineteen,” he said, eyebrows scrunching.

“I am.”

“I’ll be eighteen soon.”

“You’re... *innocent*,” I said.

He leaned toward me, practically on his hands and knees now. “I bet you could show me a thing or two, oh wise one.” He licked his lips with his little, pink tongue, and I swore to God, I was not built to defend myself against this sort of attack.

“Joshua, I’m the first guy you’ve met in years who’s not a blood relation. I promise you there are other fish in the sea.”

“Do you like boys?” he asked.

“Irrelevant.”

“It’s pretty relevant to me.”

“I’m not coming near you until you straighten up and behave.”

He sighed and slouched back on both hands. The dress rode up in the front, offering me a glimpse of his bulge, which was definitely... bulging. He saw where my gaze had landed and lifted the dress higher, showing off the outline of his erection.

“Stop that,” I said as if the words had been scraped from my lungs.

“Why?” he asked, cupping his cock and balls with one hand and squeezing them over the thin material of his underwear.

“Because it’s inappropriate,” I said, sounding like a dad for real.

“But it hurts,” he said with a needy, little whine.

“Then go to the bathroom and take care of it.” I stared at his eyes, only his eyes.

“Want to come with me?” he asked with a coy smile.

Yes, yes, yes.

“No.”

He sighed, rolled onto his feet, and padded over to the bathroom, the pink soles of his feet flashing in the dark. Like the perv I was, I waited until he’d gone inside, then stood

outside the door where I listened to the sounds of him beating off-skin slapping skin-along with his quiet groans and gasps of pleasure. “Cipher,” I thought I heard him whisper with a breathy moan, but it was probably just my lurid imagination. I turned around and pressed my shoulder blades against the door.

Fuck me.

By the time he came back out, I was in my former position, rolling up a sleepytime cigarette and giving away absolutely nothing. “Feel better?” I asked.

“A little,” he said with a bashful smile. “I’d rather you do it for me, though.”

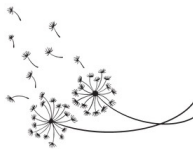
I coughed (more like choked) then cleared my throat. “I don’t think so.”

He shrugged and curled up in his little nest of pillows and blankets. The damned cat made itself comfortable as well, both of them rolled up together like a cinnamon bun. He let out a big yawn and said, “Now, will you sleep here with me?”

“In a few minutes.”

I waited until I knew he was asleep, then stared at the curve of his ass, where the silky material clung to his juicy peach of a rump. I studied him until the shape of him was burned into my brain and I could draw him from memory alone.

There was no harm in looking.



MY SLEEP that night was restless, even with my sleep aids. I had a recurring nightmare that my sister and I were running away from Rabids, but she kept tripping in our mad dash to get away and slowing us down. Finally, when it seemed both of us would not escape their pursuit, I told her to carry on without

me, and then I turned and faced our pursuers, drawing my knives with the intent to tear them apart, except that they all wore the face of my mother, and just as her teeth were about to sink into my flesh, I jolted awake.

“I made you coffee,” Kitten said. He was dressed in his normal day clothes—thank the Lord—and holding a mug of steaming hot coffee.

“Thanks,” I said groggily. I hadn’t had coffee in ages. It was a luxury, not a necessity.

“Were you having a bad dream?” he asked.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“You were all twitchy and moany.”

“Could you hear what I said?”

“No, but it sounded like trouble.”

“Sounds about right.”

I nursed my coffee while he and Teresa served breakfast. Pancakes, another indulgence. We ate together on our mound of bedding, and then Kitten announced that he had a surprise for everyone. He dashed upstairs and came back with a pillowcase slung over one shoulder and a bowlegged swagger to his walk.

“Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas,” he announced with glee and began passing out the contents of the sack. Gifts, for all of us. They were even wrapped with holiday paper, and some had little bows and other decorations on them. He gave one or two to each of us, then sat down in the middle to wait while we opened them.

“Where did you get all this?” I asked.

“While we were scavenging yesterday. I waited until you weren’t looking. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

He was far stealthier than I’d given him credit for. Macon’s gift was a tennis ball, Teresa received a dress and a hair bow for her baby doll, Gizmo got a spool of wire, and Artemis

received two plastic containers of spices—chili powder and another called Calypso blend.

“Open yours,” Kitten said, sitting right in front of me with his head cocked to one side.

“Q-tips?” I asked as I unwrapped the festive paper.

“You kept asking me if I had any, so I thought you must need them for something.”

“For cleaning out my ears. I should clean out yours too. Maybe then you’ll hear me better.”

Grinning, he said, “Open the other one.”

I unwrapped a toothbrush, still in the plastic packaging, three Ziplocs of varying sizes, and a half-full tube of toothpaste.

“The toothbrush is new,” he said. “I had to clean out the bags, but there was nothing gross inside them. I was hoping you might share the toothpaste?” He batted his eyes. As if I could deny him good oral hygiene.

“Thank you, Kitten. This was really thoughtful of you.” There was a lump in my throat as I stared back at him, completely disarmed by the care he’d taken in selecting these gifts for each of us. “Where is your present?” I asked.

He gestured to all of us. “You all are my present. I haven’t had friends in so long. We’re friends, right?”

I nodded and he smiled. The kid had a beautiful smile—open, trusting, joyous. It was a little thing, a smile, but I knew for certain that smile was going to break me. Those expressive amber eyes would break me. His bratty sass and clueless questions and sweet, unexpected gestures, all of those would break me.

And if *anyone* tried to dim the light in his eyes, I would absolutely break them.

“Stop frowning, old man,” he said and punched my shoulder playfully. “It’s Christmas.”

TEN

KITTEN

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF CIPHER?” I asked Teresa. We were at the back of the pack as we left behind the fancy houses and headed toward our next destination. Cipher was in the lead, as usual, and even though his hearing was good, I didn’t think it was *that* good. Little Miss Purrfect was draped across my shoulders, tail flicking my ear every so often.

“He’s tall,” Teresa said.

“Yeah, what else?”

“He has pretty hair.”

“Also true,” I agreed.

“Sometimes he’s scary, like when he first wakes up.” She made her hands into claws and growled like a bear. “But he keeps us safe and he’s good at killing Rabids.”

“He’s very competent,” I agreed, something I’d appreciated about him from the beginning. “He’s funny too, don’t you think?”

“Funny looking,” she said with a snicker.

“I thought he was a jerk when we first met.” I tried not to think of him as the person who ended my mother’s life. I’d thought about it a lot since that day and could now admit to myself that she’d been suffering terribly, and even if there was some medicine that could have helped her, we didn’t have it. It was better that she died quietly by his hand, than being left to become what we encountered in the woods.

“What do *you* think of Cipher?” Teresa asked.

“He’s handsome,” I said, not even trying to hide my infatuation. Annoyingly handsome and annoyingly stubborn. I knew that there were a lot of painful memories he didn’t want to share, and I respected that. But I wished he would give me a chance. Maybe he didn’t want to have to teach me about sex. I obviously wasn’t an expert, but I’d seen animals do it, and my mother had always been good about answering my questions, even those about sex between men. One pitches, one catches, as my brother once said. Pictures would be helpful. Or an instructional video. I bet Macon knew all about it. He might tell me. “Do you like him?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said without any hesitation.

“Would you want him as a boyfriend?”

She made a sour face. “Ew, gross. I don’t want a boyfriend or a girlfriend. I just want new dresses and dolls, and maybe another cat or five. And cake. And candy. And ice cream. Do you think there will be ice cream in Atlanta?”

“Maybe, though I’d be happy with running water.”

The biggest city I’d ever been to was Greenville, where there was a huge waterfall that cut right through the center of the downtown and a big suspension bridge you could walk across to get to the other side of the river. I wondered if it was still there or if some natural disaster might have brought it down. Some cities in America had been bombed, but not ours, not as far as I knew. I wasn’t sure about Atlanta, since we didn’t really have access to news, just had to rely on word of mouth. Most of all, I hoped my brother was there, that he was safe, and that I’d be able to find him.

We each shared what we knew about Atlanta, which wasn’t a lot, and speculated on all the possible comforts and delights awaiting us there. Eventually, I caught up to Gizmo, determined to crack the case of Cipher’s sexuality.

“Does Cipher like boys?” I asked Gizmo, point-blank.

He pondered it for a moment, then said, “Cipher likes weapons, cigarettes, and Ziploc bags.”

“Have you ever seen him with a boy, like, kissing and stuff?”

“I haven’t, but I typically avoid watching others engage in sexual activity.”

“Does he ever talk about boys or girls, like wanting to make out with them?”

“Not to me, which is how I prefer it.”

He gave me a look, and I took the hint.

I sidled up to Artemis. She glanced over at me, a smile on her face already. She probably heard us talking.

“What?” I asked innocently.

“Go ahead,” she said like she already knew what was coming.

“Has Cipher ever had a girlfriend? Or a boyfriend?”

“That is an excellent question,” she said, but before I could get my hopes up, she continued with, “You should ask him that yourself.”

“Not helpful,” I grumbled, and she laughed.

“I’m not in the habit of telling other people’s business,” she said with a pointed look.

“If he shared more, I wouldn’t have to ask around,” I complained.

“That’s why we call him Cipher.”

The man in question had disappeared into the forest to scout our path to the river, so I dropped back to where Macon was bringing up the rear. Of them all, he seemed the most knowledgeable on all things Cipher, and he was willing to talk. According to him, Cipher did like boys, and though Macon had never known him to have had a boyfriend, he thought he might be open to the possibility.

“What’s his type?” I asked.

Macon screwed up his face. “About this tall,” he said, placing his hand at the top of my head, “curly-haired, smart-

mouthed, cat-lover.”

I shoved his shoulder. “You’re just describing me.”

“Exactly.”

“You think he likes me?” I’d thought so too, but then, there weren’t a whole lot of options out here in what they called “Rabid Country.” I did wake up yesterday morning with Cipher’s stiffy poking into my back, but as soon as I shifted to rub on it a little, he jumped out of bed like his hair was on fire. And last night, he seemed very much Not Interested. In fact, he kind of Hurt My Feelings.

I used to dream that a handsome, tattooed stud would come roaring into my neighborhood on a Harley Davidson, or maybe even a horse. Obviously, he’d be thirsty from his travels and in need of fresh drinking water, which I would happily provide, and it would just so happen that he had room on his motorcycle-slash-horse for one more, so I’d climb on top of his preferred mode of transportation, grab hold of his thick, muscular middle, and hold on for dear life as he spirited me away from my loneliness. And we would go on our Great Adventure, which would include sexy times, where he would be patient, but also very knowledgeable, and it would be the Best Sex Ever, our first time and every time after.

Cipher had rescued me from my lonesomeness and defended me with his life. I liked it when he held me close and ruffled my hair and I even liked it when he teased me. I loved his hands and his smile, the smell of him when we were cuddled up together in our sleeping bags. I wanted to kiss him and nuzzle his neck and play with his hair and rub his erection against mine, see what his dick felt like in my hands and maybe even in my mouth, and I just... wanted him.

“I know he likes you,” Macon said, “but Cipher’s not going to be the one to make the first move.”

“Why not?”

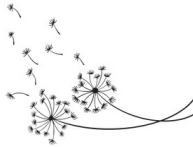
“Because he’s a pussy,” he said, then glanced up to make sure Artemis hadn’t heard him say it.

I said to Macon, “I tried wearing a skimpy dress and he ran away. I showed him my boner, and he told me to go take care of it myself. I thought maybe he wasn’t into guys, but you’re telling me he is, so maybe he’s just not into me.”

“Oh, he’s interested. I can guar-an-tee it.”

“He has a weird way of showing it. I don’t know what else to do. I’m running out of ideas. And this constant rejection is really not good for my self-esteem.”

Macon smiled and squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t worry, short stack. I got you.”



A LITTLE WHILE LATER, still following the path Cipher laid out for us, Cipher suddenly reappeared, running toward us as if a swarm of bees were chasing him, though even moving rapidly through the forest, he hardly made any noise. He signaled for all of us to be quiet and then pulled Artemis, Macon, and Teresa into a huddle. I could only hear fragments of their conversation, but it sounded like we were not alone in the woods. It wasn’t Rabids this time, but raiders. And they didn’t sound friendly.

“There’s only one place to safely cross the river, and they’re guarding it,” Cipher said.

“Are they armed?” Artemis asked.

“Yes, with guns.”

“How many?”

“Three men that I’ve identified, all with assault rifles.”

“Can you take them alone?”

“Maybe.”

“I can help,” Macon said.

The four of them devised a plan. Gizmo seemed nervous but not upset that he'd been left out of the conversation. I also didn't know what I could add, especially because I was frozen with fear and feeling very much like the new guy. Cipher had shown me a few more basic defensive and attacking moves since the Christmas house, but I didn't feel at all prepared to fight people with guns. Knowing this was a danger was different from confronting it head-on.

I caught the last bit of their conversation when Cipher said to Teresa, "You know what to do. Don't worry about a thing. I've got you."

She nodded, blinking rapidly as if she were about to cry. Cipher came over to me, grabbed both my shoulders and leaned in so that I could hear. "Stay at the back of the pack, as much out of sight as you can. Do *not* leave the huddle. Trust us to handle it, okay?"

I nodded, jittery and out of sorts. This was the reason we'd hid in our basement so many days and nights with few provisions, because of people with guns coming to rape and kill us, maybe eat us too. The cannibalistic boogeyman of our worst nightmares.

"Deep breaths, everyone," Artemis said, looking pointedly at me, maybe because of my asthma, maybe because I was obviously terrified. Cipher disappeared into the woods again, and we continued along the path, though slightly more cautious. My movements were jerky and uncoordinated, and I had to remind myself that they'd been doing this for months now, surviving in the wild.

Just as I caught a glimpse of the river up ahead, we were approached by three men with guns—big ones. They weren't pointing their weapons at us, but they were holding them as if they might. Their clothing was camouflaged but there was nothing else to signify them as military or police. They looked weathered, hard, and ruthless.

"Good day, gentlemen," Macon said, forcing a cheerful expression. Holding his axe aloft, he was the only one of us with an obvious weapon.

“Hello, stranger,” said the one in front with a cruel sneer. “I’m afraid it’s not going to be a good day for you.”

“Oh no? Why is that?” Macon asked.

“Well, you see, we’ve claimed this river as our own, and in order for you to pass, you’ll have to pay a toll.”

“How about we just back up and go the long way around?” Macon said.

“That’s not going to be possible, partner. You’ve entered into our territory, and now you’ll have to pay.”

“What’s the toll?”

The man assessed our group. His gaze crawled across my skin like maggots and sized me up like a cut of meat. I had the urge to stab him in the gut like I had that Rabid.

“We want your women,” he said.

The forest was silent—it seemed even the birds had stopped chirping—but inside, my brain was a riot of panic and confusion. Maybe I’d heard him wrong.

“No can do,” Macon said. “You can have our packs and our weapons, but the women stay with us.”

The man laughed, a deep raspy chuckle. Another joined in. The third glowered at us with bad intentions and licked his lips like he was preparing for his next meal.

“We’re not negotiating with you, pretty boy. We have the guns, and you have...” He scanned us again with scorn. “A wheelbarrow of junk, an axe, and a cat?”

“We will not be pleasant company,” Artemis said to him coldly.

The man strolled over to her and dragged his grubby fingers along her face. She stared back at him with hatred, not flinching. “I’m going to enjoy breaking you in, Black Beauty,” he said.

“Fuck you,” she snarled.

He grabbed her arm and tried to yank her away from the group while another one made a move toward Teresa. Teresa let loose a blood-curdling scream, momentarily stunning everyone. Her scream went on and on without end, piercing my fog of terror like an ice pick to the brain. Artemis took advantage of their confusion and shoved her attacker away. Macon lunged after him, axe raised, as one of the men dropped to the ground, then the other. I heard the gunshots afterward, echoes sounding through the forest. With another sickening thud from Macon's axe, all three men were lying there dead, two with a single bullet hole in their heads, and the third with Macon's axe blade embedded in his skull. Blood ran out of their wounds in rivers of red and mixed with the dead leaves littering the forest floor. For the final act, I doubled over and puked my breakfast onto the ground.

"It's okay," Artemis said, one hand on my shoulder. "You're okay."

By the time I stood up again, Teresa had come over and taken hold of my hand.

We waited there, me in shocked silence, for more of them to arrive, for footsteps to come crashing through the forest. I wiped my mouth. I didn't know how much time had passed before Cipher finally returned, somber and silent. He glanced briefly at the bodies on the ground and said, "Everyone all right?" His discerning gaze assessed everyone in turn, until his eyes landed on me. "What's wrong with you? Are you hurt?"

He checked me over for injuries as I was shaking and crying and having a hard time breathing. "I'm just... scared," I bawled, not even caring that I sounded like a baby. That shit was terrifying. I was lucky I hadn't peed my pants.

Cipher took hold of my shoulders and dragged me to him, wrapped me tightly in his arms. "Deep breaths" he said, rubbing slow circles on my back. "Come on, Kitten, just breathe. I know you can do it."

I shook my head, trying to speak while gasping for breath. My head was spinning, and I couldn't stop wheezing. "It

happened so fast. They were going to take Artemis and Teresa and... and now they're... they're dead."

"I know. I'm sorry you had to witness that, but you know what they would have done if Macon and I hadn't acted, right?"

I nodded. Some part of me didn't want to believe people would be so cruel, but I saw it in their eyes. They would have done terrible things to Artemis and Teresa, and maybe killed the rest of us too.

"Will you get in trouble for it?" I asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. The military patrols the roads and the police keep order in the cities, but out here it's everyone for themselves, which is why we have situations like these." He swept his hand over the three dead men and said to Macon, "Check their guns, would you?"

Macon lifted each of their weapons and shook his head. "No ammo."

"Fucking dumbasses," Cipher said. "I'm down to three bullets. Hopefully there isn't any more of this bullshit before Atlanta."

Cipher continued to hold me while he and Artemis discussed whether to bury the bodies or leave them to decompose on the ground. Then Artemis led Teresa, Gizmo, and me to the river to have lunch and go for a swim. The weather was hot and the water refreshing, but I experienced it all in a sort of daze. The forest was so pretty—birds chirping, insects buzzing, and wildflowers blooming all around us—but it was hard to reconcile our peaceful surroundings with the brutality of what just happened.

Macon and Cipher returned a while later to wash up. Judging from the dirt streaked across their arms and faces, they must have decided on a burial.

"We'll cross the river and camp on the other side tonight," Cipher said. "Head out in the morning."

The mood around the campfire that night was subdued. I was sitting so close to Cipher that I was practically in his lap,

but he didn't push me away. Even though it felt a little selfish, I needed to be near him. Macon produced a bottle of what he called "emergency tequila" and even though I liked it even less than the whiskey, it did help numb the horrors of the day. This had been worse than the Rabids because those were real, rational people. The Rabids couldn't help what they had become, but those men could.

"Are all people like that?" I asked Cipher. I hadn't really known anyone outside our neighborhood since I was little, and even before then, my memories of strangers were dim.

"No, but some are. We were lucky they made themselves known right away. The worst kind of people are those who hide their cruelty. They're more difficult to spot and harder to handle."

"Have you killed a lot of people?" I was grateful for what he did, but also anxious about tomorrow—would people be looking for him? Authorities, or friends of the men we killed?

"Rabids, yes. People, no. But I haven't killed anyone who didn't deserve it."

Those were bad men. He'd acted in our defense.

"I'm glad you were there. You protected us, just like you promised. Me too."

"Of course, I did. You're part of our tribe now. Our little band of Assholes."

He smiled and held out his hand for me to take. The pressure of his fingers reassured me. He wasn't going to abandon me or leave me in the woods to fend for myself. I was one of them now. I leaned toward him and he drew me closer, wrapping one arm around my shoulder so that I could lean against his chest. He smelled like tobacco smoke and cedar, and his strong grip reminded me of my father, solid and steady. I couldn't believe I'd ever thought of him as heartless.

"I was wrong about you," I said as tears brimmed in my eyes. I never could control my emotions, and when I tried to hold them in, I ended up feeling worse, like I was choking on them.

“It’s okay. We didn’t meet under the best circumstances. And I was a bit of a dick.” He smiled and I snorted an accidental laugh. He lifted my chin, then wiped away my tears with his thumb, so gentle that I almost started crying again.

“It’s a mad, mad world, Kitten, but I’ll do whatever I can to keep you safe.”

I nodded, my heart swelling with gratitude. “Thank you.”

ELEVEN

CIPHER

LIKE MOST MORNINGS as of late, I woke with my nose buried in Kitten's curls and my dick prodding his ass. Usually, I slunk out of our shared sleeping bag situation before he woke and went and jerked off in the forest, but I was far too comfortable to move at the moment. Kitten was warm in my embrace, and he smelled like honeysuckle and summertime.

It had been a week since we crossed the Savannah River, a week since that nasty business with the raiders, and we'd made good progress. We'd come across a pile of decomposing bodies, Rabids most likely, which Macon and I burned in the nighttime while on watch. And while scouting ahead for our crew one afternoon, I'd found a live Rabid caught in a rudimentary bear trap that I'd dispatched of myself, which was more a mercy killing than anything else. It had been a pitiful thing, cowering in pain and unable to even open its eyes due to the sunlight. I'd felt monstrous slitting its throat while it was lying there so defenseless, but it had to be done.

Despite all of that, thankfully, there were no more Rabid attacks and no more unfriendly encounters with the locals.

We'd met a couple heading north on the trail and traded some supplies, and then a pair of siblings on their way to Florida who traveled with us for a couple of days before we parted ways in Danielsville. We were now 40 miles east of Atlanta, and if all went well, would be arriving in the city in a few days.

I had mixed feelings about it.

“Mmmm...” Kitten murmured and rubbed his ass against me in a way that sent the exact wrong message to my morning wood. “You’re still here.”

“My arm is asleep.”

He wiggled his rump, sending jolts of heat and desire through me. It required all of my restraint not to thrust against him in response. He rolled over and smiled at me, blinking the sleep from his eyes. “Can I touch it?”

“No.”

“Will you touch mine?” he asked, rubbing his dick along my thigh.

“No.”

He shifted until he was slyly sliding our cocks alongside one another. I swallowed, my throat parched and my head buzzing. I should have stopped him, but I didn’t.

“Young man,” I said. He laughed and continued rocking into me in a lazy sort of way. The ache in my balls intensified and my dick was ultra sensitive where it touched the fabric of my underwear. My jeans were tight enough to offer some resistance, and Kitten was at just the right angle. I could easily get off like this, especially with the pressure building in my balls...

“What day is it?” he asked, stopping suddenly.

“No idea.” I resisted the urge to grab hold of his ass cheeks and mash him against me. I needed just a little bit more friction to bring me to completion. I didn’t even care about the potential discomfort of having to hike ten miles in sticky, cum-stained underwear.

“It’s August 3rd,” Macon said from where he was squatting a few yards away, coaxing his pyramid of firewood to burn. He winked at me from behind Kitten’s shoulder, and I groaned at the lack of privacy.

“Today is my birthday,” Kitten announced.

“Happy Birthday,” I said and kissed the top of his head. It was a friendly kiss, that was it.

“Will you kiss my mouth?” he asked and angled his chin upward.

“No.”

“Birthday spankings?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Pretty please?”

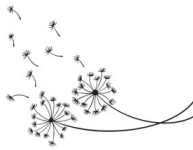
My willpower was only so strong, so I disentangled myself from his grabby hands and stood with my dick uncomfortably hard in my too-tight pants. It was obvious to everyone present what was going on here. Luckily, Artemis was on watch and Gizmo and Teresa were still sleeping.

“Off for your morning wank?” Macon asked, grinning like an idiot.

“Fuck off,” I growled. “Ask Teresa to make something special for breakfast when she gets up. For the birthday boy.”

Kitten smiled up at me, gaze dropping down to my dick. Licking his lips, he said, “I know what I want for my birthday.”

“Bad Kitten,” I said and stomped off into the woods to find some relief.



THE DAY WAS one of those exceptionally humid summer afternoons where the sun was beating down on us relentlessly and even the forest shade offered very little relief. Our limited water wasn't enough to keep us cool and the gang was broody, all of us wishing there was a river nearby or even a pond where we could submerge ourselves long enough to cool off for a bit. Loaded down with our packs, we'd barely made any progress under the blazing sun. Gizmo and Teresa both wore hats, but even still, their exposed skin was pinking to a burn, and Gizmo's freckles seemed to have multiplied.

“I can’t take much more of this,” Macon complained, his shirt saturated with sweat and his blond hair dampened at his temples to a shade of brown. “We need to find shade, at least for a couple of hours.”

We altered our path to skirt closer to the road, hoping to find some sort of abandoned building or industrial warehouse to take cover. It wasn’t long before we came across a squat, concrete structure painted bubblegum pink. Where the windows had been busted up, vines had crawled across and taken over. The asphalt in the parking lot was similarly cracked and broken, with large chunks missing and weeds growing out of the gaps.

“Holy shit,” Macon exclaimed. “A nudie bar.”

Pink Pony had been the establishment’s name, or so I assumed, since a couple of the sign’s letters were missing, resembling a barroom brawler’s broken smile. I’d never been to a strip club before, but I’d been an avid gamer prior to the plague and had seen my fair share of porn back in D.C. I said to Macon, “I don’t think there are any strippers inside, buddy, unless they’ve gone Rabid.”

“I don’t care. Let’s check it out,” he said, already heading toward it.

“Me first,” I reminded him, since I was the one with the gun. “You come in behind. Let’s make sure there are no unfriendlies nesting inside. Everyone else, wait out here, red alert.”

Gizmo handed me the night-vision goggles, but once I’d managed to lever open the door with a piece of rebar, I found I didn’t need them. The windows allowed enough sunlight inside to see fairly well. There were some broken bottles by the bar and a few overturned tables and chairs. The sickly-sweet smell of spilled, fermented liquor permeated the air. I checked out the back rooms meant for private dances and found them empty, as were the bathrooms. In the dressing room, there were costumes on clothing racks and a long countertop lined with mirrors where the dancers must have gotten ready. Most of the mirrors were broken too, and I didn’t

look for long because even though I wasn't religious, I was a bit superstitious.

"All clear," I told Macon, who relayed it to the rest of our crew. They filtered inside, stepping cautiously around the broken glass and debris. Kitten and Teresa were fascinated by the podiums mounted with stripper poles. Kitten climbed onto one of them and managed to swing himself around by hooking one knee on the metal. His other arm was thrown out in a dramatic pose. Teresa giggled and encouraged his clowning.

Meanwhile, Gizmo was inspecting the cash machines, probably to see how they worked since U.S. money was no longer recognized as a national currency but minted within each of the hundred or so major metropolitan areas to be used within city limits. The smaller cities that were still functioning tended to rely on trade or barter systems, but many of those had become outposts for raiders who trafficked in humans, weapons, and drugs. The military would go in every once in a while to make arrests and blow shit up, but the criminal element inevitably returned.

Macon was searching behind the bar for any surviving bottles of liquor, and Artemis had found a broom and was sweeping the broken glass into a corner. Such a mom.

"Let's take the rest of the afternoon off," Artemis said. "Camp here tonight and start fresh in the morning."

I nodded, eyes veering back to Kitten as he languidly twirled on the pole with his face angled toward the ceiling and his head thrown back in rapture.

"I'll take first watch," I announced to the group and headed back outdoors.

Outside, I chose the slanted lid of a dumpster that was partially shaded by a mossy tree as my place to roost. There, I rolled a couple of cigarettes, my senses alert for any presence other than our own. I thought about Kitten's advances that morning and all the others he'd made in the past few days. It was getting harder to resist him, especially when he was so obviously interested and rubbing on me like a ram in rut.

We should probably stop sleeping together, but I liked having him close—we never knew when Rabids or raiders might attack. And the few times I'd woken up from a nightmare, his familiar presence and smell had calmed me enough that I'd been able to drift back to sleep.

I was getting soft in my old age.

But what would happen when we reached the city? Maybe I could convince him to come with us to Promised Land—if the place even existed. There were so many unknowns. This would be a really bad time to start something with him. And was it even me that he wanted, or did I just fill the protector role for him? He was probably confusing his reliance on me for romantic feelings. Adrenaline was a powerful aphrodisiac. And as far as him waking up hard every morning, well, that was just biology.

Yes, it'd be best to cut that shit out, pronto.

Committed to this new course of action, I finished my smoke, then climbed down from the dumpster and took another stroll around the perimeter of the building. I heard music coming from inside, which meant they must have gotten the radio working again. That was good. Hopefully they were having fun and burning off some steam.

An hour or so later, Artemis found me perched like a gargoyle on the dumpster, long before my shift was due to end.

“What's up?” I asked, primed for danger.

“I want you to know, I had nothing to do with this.”

“With what?”

“Your presence is requested inside. I'll take over from here,” she said. I gave her a look. She gave me a look, then jerked her thumb toward the building. “Go on. Give the birthday boy what he wants.”

I tramped indoors where Macon greeted me, shirtless, wearing a boat captain's hat and red pantyhose tied messily around his neck. The sloppy grin on his face told me that he'd clearly been hitting the sauce.

“Welcome, sir,” he said with a little bow. “You look like a gentleman of both status and means. May I interest you in a private dance?”

“A what?” I asked. He grabbed my arm and dragged me toward one of the back rooms. Once there he shoved me onto a ripped vinyl couch and flicked on a couple of flashlights that had been set up around the room.

“We really can’t afford to waste batteries like this,” I reminded him.

“Shut up and drink this.” He handed me a bottle of—I’m not even sure what it was—but it was the color of concentrated piss and tasted like several liquors mixed together, nasty but probably wouldn’t kill me. The last thing he did before leaving was turn on the radio. “Enjoy the show,” he said and shut the door behind him.

“What the fuck is going on?” I said aloud to the empty room, which was when I noticed a movement from the curtain in the corner of the room. From behind it, a hand emerged. The hand wore a black, netted glove with the fingertips cut out. The hand made a claw.

“Meow,” the voice said.

“Kitten?” I asked.

He emerged from behind the curtain and did a little turn. And Christ Almighty, he must have been trying to kill me because he was wearing the tightest pink booty shorts I’d ever seen, so tight they crawled up the crack of his ass and molded like a second skin around his little bubble butt. “Pink Pony” was scrawled across his pert cheeks, and his cock and balls were wrapped up like candy in the pink Lycra. Instead of a shirt, he was wearing a sheer bikini triangle top which did nothing to hide his little brown nips. On his head were black cat ears and at the base of his spine, a fluffy tail that he swished back and forth like a feather boa as he approached. The final touch was a pink satin ribbon tied around his neck. He was the prettiest package I’d ever seen, and my dick was so hard that it hurt as he climbed the small circular platform, still wearing the hand-me-down high tops that he’d told me

belonged to his brother. Gracefully, he grabbed hold of the pole overhead, hooked one knee around the metal and began to twirl.

Honestly, he could have just stood there in his cute little cat outfit, and it would have been mind-blowing enough, but the birthday boy was taking no prisoners. He rolled his hips in time with the music while his lithe arms supported him from above, then wrapped both legs around the pole and leaned back, one arm flung wide to let his momentum carry him in a graceful spin. He rose up and grabbed the pole with both hands, then thrust with his pelvis. Slowly, sensually, he grinded against the pole like it was a big, randy dick, his body coiling like a serpent, limbs wrapped around the metal as if it were a lover. I'd never wanted to be a stripper pole as much as I did right then.

I took another gulp of the burning mystery liquor, adjusted my throbbing erection, and resolved to sit back and enjoy the show. Kitten finished one song, and then started another. He was built lean and compact like a gymnast with a natural athleticism that showed with the way he was able to support his weight using the strength of his arms and his core. Occasionally, he'd glance over at me with a shy smile, but otherwise, he was entranced by the music, a natural performer, in love with his body and the movements the music inspired.

I was so fucked.

When a commercial came on the radio, he dismounted, climbed down from the podium, and sauntered my way. The shorts were more like a bikini now, hiked up high on his thighs and tented in front by his erection. His eyes were blazing with heat and lust, his unruly hair a mane around his flushed face, and I wouldn't have been surprised in the least if he'd thrown back his head and roared.

"Did you like my dance?" he asked, as he climbed onto my lap and fit his knees squarely on either side of my hips, not bothering to wait for an invitation.

"Yes," I rasped, unable to articulate anything beyond that. I sounded like I was dying, a hooked fish in its final throes, as a

strange paralysis came over me that was part liquor, part uncontrollable lust.

“And my outfit?” He laid his tail across my lap, then grabbed hold of my hand, which had been gripping the torn vinyl for dear life, and laid it on top of the tail. I stroked the soft, synthetic fur, my eyes devouring every inch of his tawny skin, taking in the pointed black ears, the ribbon encircling his throat. His nipples were hard, little peaks surrounded by dark areolas that were clearly visible through the mesh top.

“Very nice,” I said and set aside the bottle of liquor because I needed two hands for this.

He smiled. “Teresa helped me pick it out. She said I was no longer a kitten, but a cat.” He made a little claw with his hand. “Rawr.”

“This top is...” I swallowed thickly. “Something else.”

“Thank you,” he practically purred.

Without thinking, I licked the pad of my thumb and pressed it against one nipple. He inhaled sharply and hissed through his teeth. “Do you like that?” I asked, rolling the nub under my thumb; it was hard as a pebble beneath the clingy, netted material.

“Yes.” He leaned into the touch, so I gave his other nipple the same treatment, then both at the same time with my fingers laddered along his ribs, like fine tuning an instrument. He raised both arms so that his wrists were crossed behind his head. I wanted to memorize the shape of him, every ridge of bone and curve of muscle, feast on him with my eyes and then with my hands, and eventually, my lips.

“These shorts are very tight,” I said. There was a wet spot on the front where the tip of his cock kissed the stretchy fabric. What might he taste like?

“They’re kind of giving me a wedgie.”

I laughed and tugged at the bottom hem, adjusting the fabric for him. From there, my fingers slid up over the soft curve of his ass, coming to rest on the small of his back. My

hands fit just right, his skin as smooth as silk under my calloused palms.

“Your dance, did you have to practice it?” I asked.

“A little.” He drilled down into my lap with his pelvis so that his stiff cock nudged my own. “Would you pay me to dance for you if you had the money?”

“I’d give you anything you wanted. My last bullet, my gun, my machete, all my Ziploc bags, even my toothpaste. Maybe you could let me keep my leg?”

“Maybe.” He smiled, dropping his head to one side shyly, and placed both hands on my shoulders. He leaned in and whispered, “Are you going to kiss me now, Cipher?”

The struggle was real. My body and my mind were at odds, and my heart was too weak to say no.

“I don’t think I should, cutie.”

The pout was back in full force, and a little divot wrinkled his otherwise smooth brow. “Why not?”

I flicked one of his loose ringlets. “You seem like the type to break hearts.”

He shrugged, said with a smile, “I wouldn’t know, but I think we should give it a try.”

“You do, huh?”

He nodded, then placed my hand against his cheek, then lower, to cup his pointed chin, his neck, the hollow of his throat. My fingertips danced across one nipple, my knuckles brushed the bare skin of his stomach. I swallowed down a moan, and he bit his lower lip.

“Feels good,” he said, rolling his neck. “Doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I bet you’re a good kisser.” He was staring at my mouth with anticipation.

“We’ll be reaching Atlanta soon,” I reminded him.

“So?”

“What if you meet someone there?” I asked. The mere thought of it was a gut punch. My faceless, hypothetical rival ignited my possessive streak. My hand landed on his upper thigh and squeezed.

“I don’t want anyone else,” he said, frowning. “Do you want someone else?”

“No,” I said with absolute certainty.

“Then kiss me, Cipher. I’m eighteen years old, and I’ve never been kissed. Isn’t that a shame?”

He closed his eyes and leaned in, and I thought, fuck it. I deserved something good, if only for a little while. I met his mouth with my own and gave him a single, chaste kiss, just a soft press of lips. His eyes flew open. Looking a little startled, he placed one hand over his lips. “I didn’t think you’d do it.”

I smiled at how quickly he turned shy. “Happy Birthday, Kitten.”

“Kiss me again but with tongue,” he said, angling his face my way.

“Bossy,” I remarked, not at all surprised

If this was really going to happen, then we were going to do it right. There would be no half-assing Kitten’s first kiss. I reached around him, one hand at the small of his back and the other guiding his nape. Our noses bumped against each other, and he giggled, nervous. His little pink tongue poked between his lips as he teased me with it, running it along the seam of my mouth like a cheeky invitation. I parted my mouth and tasted him—sweeter than a ripe strawberry. With a little more encouragement, he opened up for me with the same tenacity he attempted everything else. Our tongues were playful, tussling in a sensuous give and take that quickly grew heated.

I imagined doing this, only this, in a bed with soft pillows in a room flooded with sunlight, where we could explore each other without the threat of danger always looming. I wanted to kiss him everywhere, tease out every little shiver and moan of pleasure, see how his body might react to my attention. I

kissed him like tomorrow was guaranteed. I wanted to give him tomorrow and the day after and the day after that...

We broke away to catch our breath. He looked dazed, pleasantly so, and I admired this beautiful boy who'd tunneled his way into my heart, elbows out, feisty as an alley cat and sweeter than summer rain.

"Can we do that again?" he asked, his lips swollen from our kiss.

"Why not?" I said with a wide grin.

"You're smiling," he said happily, then came at me again, with teeth this time, a little nip to my lower lip followed by a soothing lick. Even in this, he was testing me, so I matched his intensity, thrusting my tongue in deep, hollowing him out just enough to remind him who was boss. His skin was dewy with sweat and hot to the touch where he pressed his body flush against mine. His gentle thrusts escalated as he moaned into my mouth and wrapped his arms around my neck.

"Can I..." He was panting, grinding on my lap just as he'd done on the pole.

"Yeah." I positioned his hips so he could use me to get off. He rubbed against me, his cock and balls prominent in those shrink-wrapped shorts. I kissed both his flushed cheeks and his forehead. I kissed his curls, damp against his temple, and the satin ribbon around his throat. I licked along his jaw and brushed my lips against the delicate triangle under his chin where his pulse throbbed. I tasted the salt of his skin and the sweetness of his desire.

"Cipher," he moaned as he arched his spine right before coming in his little pink hotpants, so much that some of it seeped through the fabric. He whimpered with pleasure as his hips staggered to a sluggish roll. I rubbed his sweaty back while he caught his breath, then unknotted my bandana from around my neck and handed it to him. Bashful again, he wiped himself off.

"Do you want it back?" he asked.

“Yep.” I balled up the soiled cloth and tucked it into my pocket.

“What about you?” He traced the outline of my dick with his thumb.

“I don’t need anything at the moment.”

“Later?” he asked hopefully.

“Maybe. Right now, I just want this.”

I tugged him to me, and he melted in my arms as we cuddled in a warm, sweaty embrace. The radio had quit working a while ago, and all but one flashlight had run out of batteries. I traced along his spine and kissed his hair. Neither of us felt the need to speak. Eventually, I pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

“Let me have some,” he said, head popping up to watch me.

“No.”

“One puff?” His amber eyes were beseeching. “Please? I just want to try it once.”

“One hit,” I told him sternly. “And don’t breathe in too deeply.”

I turned the cigarette toward him, and he sucked the tip daintily, eyes going wide. He exhaled a wisp of smoke and coughed up a lung. I thumped his back a few times; I should have known better.

“Tastes bitter,” he said. “Hurts my chest.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t do it. They’re bad for you.” I knew the risks to my health. I’d quit in my twenties, if I survived. I was living for today.

“I like the smell. Reminds me of you.”

“Are you sweet-talking me, Kitten?”

“Maybe,” he said with a little laugh.

I was half reclined on the couch with him laid out on top of me. His chin was propped up on one hand, watching me while

I smoked. I tried not to blow any of it into his face. I didn't want to trigger his asthma.

"You're handsome," he said, reaching up to trace his finger along my jaw.

I'd never given much thought to my appearance—I had more important things on my mind—but I was glad that the attraction was mutual. I touched his hair and wondered if he might have imprinted on me like a duckling, if I was a substitute for his big brother. I hoped it wasn't just that.

"Do you think I'm handsome?" he asked, and I didn't think he was fishing for compliments. More likely, no one had ever told him he was beautiful, except maybe his mother.

"Very handsome," I said. He grinned and lowered his head, bashful all of a sudden. I tipped up his chin with my index finger. "You're gorgeous, Kitten. A real piece of work too."

His smile widened and he flipped onto his back. I laid my hand across his warm belly, and he moved it to the center of his chest. His sweet little nipples were like magnets for my fingertips, and I teased them with light touches.

"Macon told me this would work," he said, and I shook my head at their scheming.

"Yeah well, he's right sometimes," I reluctantly admitted. The meddling little shit.

"I really want to touch your dick." He tilted his head to look at me. "Maybe even put it in my mouth?"

I chuckled at his enthusiasm. My previous romantic encounters had been stressed, desperate, and brief, usually with the transactional expectation of getting each other off and nothing more. I didn't want that with him. I wanted to take my time, make it special for us both. Didn't I deserve that? He absolutely did.

"We'll get there," I said.

"So, are we boyfriends now?" he asked.

I'd never had a boyfriend before, never wanted one either—too much risk and responsibility, too great a possibility I

might lose them to an early and unfortunate demise. But despite the odds, I wanted him. I could have him today and tomorrow and maybe the day after. For a little while at least, he could be mine.

“Yeah, I guess we are.”

He beamed, casting his light on my dark, shadowy places.
“That was my birthday wish. That and a cure for the virus.”

“One out of two ain’t bad.”

TWELVE

KITTEN

CIPHER, our chief navigator (and also my boyfriend), was keeper of the map, and he showed it to me whenever I asked to see it, which he said was the equivalent to me asking “are we there yet?” And so, it became our habit. Every evening after our hike, he’d point to the map and tell me how far we’d gone that day and I’d marvel at how it had seemed like so much longer on foot.

Last night he’d said we’d be in Atlanta by this afternoon, but now that the day had finally arrived, I was having mixed feelings about it. I’d gotten used to life in Rabid Country. Sure, my shoes were shredded and I missed sleeping in a bed, the Rabids were a bummer and the raiders were a friggin nightmare, but at least I knew what to expect. Atlanta was a whole new animal. Hopefully my brother was there, and I’d find him.

“What’s it like?” I asked Macon. We were collecting wood for the morning fire, and I was pestering him for information while trying not to let my nervousness show.

“Dunno. Never been. My hometown and Rabid Country is all I know.”

“Like me?”

“Yep, that’s why I’m not too keen on staying in Atlanta for long. I’d rather we get what we need and continue on to Promised Land.”

“What have you heard about Promised Land?”

“It’s like a commune where everyone helps out with chores—cooking or farming or raising animals, probably masonry and carpentry too. They work together to keep out the Rabids and live peacefully with each other. Could be just the place for us to settle down and build something more permanent. Maybe even start a family.” His wistful gaze turned toward the woods where Artemis was keeping watch. We saw her in profile, crossbow at her side, ever vigilant in protecting our little pack. I had a hunch that I wasn’t the only one with a big ole crush.

“Kind of reminds me of our neighborhood before everyone started leaving.” For a while we’d made do, bartering and sharing what we had. Neighbors would hunt for deer and other game in packs and divvy up what they’d brought back amongst the few families who remained. “But then people started getting sick, and we had to keep to ourselves more.”

“Sounds too good to be true, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“Maybe, but why couldn’t a place like that exist?”

“I agree, but we have to make sure that it’s real, not just some fairytale for desperate wanderers.”

Macon, even more so than the others, seemed to want a place of his own where he could farm and tinker and build. “Why did you leave your home?” I asked.

“My daddy’s land was in the middle of nowhere. I could have survived hunting and fishing, but I was lonely as hell. Especially after he was gone. Damn near went nutty from the isolation.” His blue eyes shined with sincerity. I knew exactly what he meant.

“We need other people,” I said.

“Right as rain, short stack,” he said and gave me a fist bump.

“If Promised Land doesn’t exist, maybe we could start our own commune?”

He nodded and flashed a boyish grin. “Not a bad idea. But hey, if you want to know what big city living is like, you should ask your boyfriend, after you go and wake him up.”

“Me?” I protested. “Why?”

“That’s part of your new duties.”

“You never told me that.”

“Your boyfriend, your problem.” He slapped my back and nodded to where Cipher was currently buried beneath a pile of sleeping bags like a bear in hibernation. He hadn’t thrown his leg at me yet, but he was awfully cranky upon waking.

“Go on, get to it,” Macon said. “We gotta get moving soon.”

I dropped off my wood in the pile and made my way over to our sleep spot where I infiltrated Cipher’s fortress by squirming my way into his tunnel of bedding like a rabbit. It was cozy in there, and it smelled like my boyfriend, sleepy and warm. Cipher hardly stirred, so I cuddled up against him, relishing his body heat and lack of defenses. He was wound so tightly in the daytime, hyper-alert for any sign of danger. Like this, he was soft and almost sweet. He was also unconscious, which helped. I hooked one foot around his bionic leg and angled my groin so I could rub up on him. I figured it wasn’t the worst way to be woken up.

“Ci-pher,” I sang and blew on his face. His nostrils flared, eyes still closed, so I leaned in and kissed the tip of his nose. His sleep-swollen eyes opened a crack with a look of impending doom. He saw that it was me and continued to glare.

“Good morning, boyfriend.” I gave him a great big squeeze around the middle. He unclenched enough to open his arms and embrace me.

“Be quiet and let me sleep for another half hour,” he croaked, probably hoarse from smoking too many cigarettes while on watch the night before.

“I can’t. Macon wants everyone up.”

“Shhhhh.” He placed one hand over my mouth and dragged me to his chest.

I removed his hand and said, “What is it like?”

“What is *what* like?”

“Atlanta?”

He sighed. “Like any other city, I’m guessing. Dirty, weirdly desolate, and crawling with pigs.”

“They have bacon there?”

He chuckled. “Not the animal, Kitten. Police. Pigs is a rather rude name for them, on account of them being fascist and full-bodied from eating too many donuts.”

“What does fascist mean?”

“Shhhh, my little Padawan. Save the questions for when I’m awake.”

I gave him a few more minutes to rest, then kissed the tip of his nose again. He groaned and pinched my sides. “You’re a menace.”

“Teresa said there’d be ice cream in Atlanta.”

“Maybe.”

“Where will we stay?”

“Government housing, most likely. Hopefully there won’t be too many roaches. That’s one advantage to having a cat, I guess. She can catch the vermin.”

“Will they let her in?”

“Probably. They might want to give her some shots. Have you had all your shots?”

“I don’t know.”

“They’re going to want to check you over too.” He poked at my stomach. “Make sure you’ve got all your ribs,” he said, tickling me. I tried squirming away but he held me fast. My laughter helped ease my nervousness at the many unknowns awaiting us.

“Will they let you bring your weapons?” I asked.

“My knives, yes, but not my gun.”

Cipher loved his gun, almost as much as his machete.

“What will you do with it?”

“We’ll have to smuggle it in. You’ll have to hide it up your asshole, I guess.”

“What?” I shouted.

“Yeah, that’s the new guy’s job. Didn’t anyone tell you?”

His mischievous smile gave him away. “Don’t tease me like that. It’s not nice.”

He laughed, eyes crinkling at the edges like folded paper. I liked it when he wasn’t trying to be a lethal badass, but he was pretty hot when he was doing that too.

“Seriously, what are you going to do with it?” I asked.

“I’ll dig a little unmarked grave and bury it for now. Good thing you got me those Ziplocs, huh?”

I returned his smile, happy to have been helpful. I let him in on my own mission. “Before he left, my brother said he was headed to Atlanta. That’s why I came with you guys, to try and find him, so that’s what I’m going to do.” His eyebrows quirked and he frowned a little at my admission. “What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said and smoothed one thumb over my cheek. “You have a bit of ash here.”

I leaned into his touch. “I like that,” I told him.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I think I have some on my weiner too.”

“Your what?”

“My weiner,” I said and Cipher laughed. “My dick? What should I call it?”

“Weiner is fine. It’s just not a word I hear very often. Not since I was, like, five.”

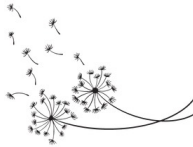
“You’ll have to teach me how to be a cool city kid like you.”

“I don’t know if it can be taught, cutie.”

“So, will you touch my weiner?”

“Oh my God, get a room,” Macon brayed from a few feet away where he was tending the fire.

I smiled temptingly at my boyfriend. If that was what we had in store for us, then I couldn't wait.



ARRIVING in Atlanta was like entering the land of Oz. The buildings were huge with so many windows, reflecting sunlight and stretching toward the sky like Jacob's ladder. I imagined having to climb all those stairs to reach the top, such dizzying heights. What must it look like from up there, gazing down on the people below as if you were king of the world?

The streets were enormous too, intersecting and overlapping like one of Gizmo's circuit boards. And the cars—so many cars, trucks, and vans, all lined up like ants on the march, but none of them moving.

“Why are all the doors open?” I asked Cipher. It looked odd, as if the drivers had abandoned their vehicles in the middle of a traffic jam.

“So that Rabids don't nest in them during daylight,” he said.

My parents had owned cars, but when gas ran out, there wasn't much we could do with them, so my brother and I used them as forts or pirate ships, each of us trying to conquer the other. Lucas joined us too sometimes, though they tended to gang up against me—Lucas always wanted to impress Santiago at my expense.

Here the vehicles had been shoved to the side to make one narrow lane between them, and that was how we traveled the last few miles of our journey into the beating heart of the city, all of us piled in the back of a military Jeep.

United Forces was what they called themselves now, on account of there not being enough people left to operate all the former divisions of the military. Their uniforms were olive green with a red embroidered UF with a white star in between the letters. The Jeep was decorated in a similar way. Two patrols had picked us up on the outskirts of the city and insisted on escorting us to the populated area of downtown. I was grateful for the ride, but Cipher had been twitchy ever since, surveying the scenery while strapped with all but his gun, which he buried somewhere in the woods, only he knew where.

Little Miss Purrfect was of a similar mind, and her nails dug in through the layers of fabric to latch onto my abdomen in terror because she'd never ridden in a moving vehicle before. I kept a tight grip on her so she wouldn't try to escape.

"Look at it all," I marveled aloud to Teresa, who was sitting beside me and holding onto her hat so the wind wouldn't take it. Like me, she was staring all around us in wide-eyed wonder. "There used to be this many people?" I asked Artemis, and she nodded, a pinched expression on her face.

"How many people are left?" I asked because I really didn't know.

"Ten percent of the world's population remains," Gizmo said, "either having recovered from the virus or never having contracted it at all. There's a small segment of the population who have some natural immunity, but it's hard to determine due to the lack of reporting systems. An unknown number of people have turned Rabid, also difficult to track due to the recommended method for body disposal."

That was why Macon and Cipher had burned my mother's body instead of burying it, to prevent the virus from spreading. At the time, I'd been bitter about it, but now I understood.

"It sounds like there are more Rabids than people," I said to them. Artemis nodded gravely.

That was a depressing thought, all the more reason why we needed a vaccine *and* a cure. "What happened over there?" I

asked and pointed to a couple city blocks of buildings that were half falling down and blackened by fire. An overpass was a pile of rubble, the edge of it sticking out like a broken bone, and several cars were smashed to bits as well.

“Must have been bombed,” Cipher said.

“By who?”

“The U.S. government most likely. In the early days of the plague, the cities were at war with the federal government, who tried to come in and take over in a very not cool way.”

“We bombed our own cities?” I asked.

“Yeah, until they realized they were killing off the few taxpayers they had left. Now the metro police control the city centers and the military have authority over everything outside of it, including Rabid Country. That’s where we’re headed.” Cipher pointed with his machete to a concrete building with no windows, situated outside the barbed wire fence that extended on both sides for as far as I could see. It appeared as though the entire city center was surrounded by fencing.

“Is that to keep out the Rabids?” I asked.

“And the riff-raff,” Macon said.

“Riff-raff?”

“Shitty raiders, like those guys at the river,” Macon said.

My throat dried at the memory of it.

“Let’s not mention those guys to the authorities,” Cipher said as we gathered up our belongings. “Stick together. If they try to separate us, we leave. If they try to hold us, we run. Everyone got it?”

We all nodded in response. One of the soldiers lowered the tailgate and helped Teresa then Artemis out of the Jeep. “You’re lucky you got here in the daytime,” the soldier said to us. “The Rabids like to gather at the fence after dark. We think it’s the smell of the sewers that attracts them. It’s easy pickins then. Just point and shoot like target practice. Makes it real easy to meet our quota.”

Quota? For killing Rabids? I saw several dark splotches and smears on the pavement, which must have been the bloodstains of the Rabids they'd gunned down. I smelled something burning and saw a large fire in the distance with plumes of smoke reaching like ghost hands toward the sky. It reminded me of one of my dad's burn piles, but I didn't think it was brush that they were burning.

"Is that..." I pointed to the fire.

"Yep," the soldier said with a nod. "Last night's haul. Takes forever to burn the bodies. Doesn't smell too pleasant either."

It sure looked like a lot of bodies, and from just one night?

"Are there any quarantine protocols?" Cipher asked, tearing his eyes away from the fiery funeral to scan the building we were about to enter.

"They'll test you for the virus on arrival. If you're negative, they'll let you join gen pop with daily screenings. If not, you'll be quarantined, and between you and me, those quarantine shelters are a fucking nightmare. I'd rather take my chances in Rabid Country." The soldier then turned to Macon and said with a smile, "Last chance to join one of the proud and ever faithful."

"I'll give it some thought," Macon said. "First, I got to get my family to safety."

They'd been trying to recruit Macon ever since they picked us up on the road to Atlanta.

I didn't know if he was truly considering joining, or if he was just trying to let them down gently. The fact that they weren't trying to recruit Cipher or Artemis was kind of surprising to me, but Cipher told me the military had a bias against amputees. When I read over the pamphlet they'd shoved into Macon's hand, "able-bodied" was part of their criteria, whatever that meant.

The same two soldiers then escorted us to the building but didn't accompany us inside. When I asked about it, Cipher

said it was because they weren't permitted within the city limits.

"Let me do the talking," Artemis said as we approached the counter and Cipher motioned for her to lead the way.

The woman at the front desk wore a navy blue police uniform with a flashy silver badge pinned to her lapel. She asked a lot of questions, most of which I couldn't hear because I was at the back of the group. Artemis answered them with her usual calm composure. There were several more officers inside the building, sitting or standing behind desks or guarding doors and elevators, all of them wearing matching uniforms, neat and clean with trimmed hair and fit bodies, whereas we looked like we'd just hiked 150 miles.

Next, we were led to an empty room with several long tables where they instructed us to put our things. Then they patted us down, paying extra attention to Cipher on account of all his weapons, and even going so far as to make him lift his pant leg in order to inspect his prosthesis.

"These aren't standard-issue," one of the officers said.

"Standard issues are shit," Cipher said flatly, then raised his eyebrows. "Come on, you have to agree."

The officer lifted his pant leg and showed off a bulky-looking prosthetic.

"They're letting amputees onto the police force now?" Cipher asked.

"Just started," the officer said. "Interested in joining?"

"No thanks," he replied.

They inspected Gizmo's hand as well, to make sure there were no hidden weapons inside, along with Artemis's arm. I was surprised that they let her keep her crossbow, but apparently, only guns and explosives were outlawed. They seemed alarmed by my cat, and they warned me to keep her inside, in case someone tried to eat her. They'd also be giving her a shot to protect against Rabbit Fever transmission from rats and other rodents. Too bad the shot didn't work on

humans. When I asked Gizmo about it, he said that was one of the things researchers were trying to figure out.

Once we'd all been patted down, they sent our packs through an x-ray machine, then took our pictures for our I.D. cards which we are to keep on us, *at all times*. There was a recorded orientation video that went over all the rules of city living (there were a lot), followed by a brief medical exam where they aimed a penlight in our eyes and ears and swabbed our nostrils and throats. The nurse took vials of blood from each of us to test for STI's, and the girls had to give urine samples to be tested for pregnancy, which Cipher said was nobody's fucking business but their own. Gizmo said they'd probably use our blood samples to track the virus's genome too.

"What's a genome?" I asked.

"A genome is the unique chemical recipe that guides an organism's growth and development," Gizmo said. "Researchers want to see if the virus is evolving, becoming more or less hostile to its host."

Less hostile, I hoped.

Our next stop was a waiting room where there were rows of plastic chairs occupied by tired-looking people waiting for their turn at the counter. A television broadcast of an old game show was playing, one where you had to guess the price of common household goods while pretty women showed off what you might win. Macon was outraged at the price of a treadmill and said to the rest of us, "Can you believe people paid money for something like that? When you can chop wood or run away from Rabids for free?" He shook his head, arms crossed, but he continued to guess the prices along with the rest of us.

It was incredible all of the things people used to purchase to decorate their homes and enhance their lives. Cipher commented on the waste and extravagance of it all, but I certainly wouldn't turn down an all-expenses paid trip to the Caribbean or a brand new car, and besides, who wouldn't want to make their home a little bit nicer?

“I’ve never been to the beach before,” I said. I wasn’t the only one.

“I’ll take you someday,” Cipher said casually, and I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face.

I was called up to the counter soon after and Cipher came with me while Teresa took over cat-sitting duties. The woman greeted us with a frown and said, “You’re not in our database.” She was dressed differently than the rest, not a police officer or a nurse, but still with some sort of authority.

Cipher said to the woman, “He wouldn’t be. He’s from the suburbs of Greenville, South Carolina. We found him surviving on his own.”

“Do you have your birth certificate or social security card with you?” the woman asked, and I shook my head because I hadn’t thought to pack those in my haste to make ready for our journey.

“Can you check to see if his brother arrived already?” Cipher asked. “Santiago Perrin-Rogers?”

She narrowed her eyes at his request. “I can only give that information to immediate family members.” When Cipher pointed to me, she said, “You have no proof.”

I pulled out my Ziploc bag of photographs and laid one of Santiago and me on the counter. It was a little worn from our travels, taken several years ago when he was ten and I was seven. In it, we were both wearing party hats and I was blowing out the candles on my birthday cake.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” she asked sharply.

“You have Santiago’s picture in your database. Compare the two,” Cipher said.

The woman scrutinized her screen and then me. “Santiago Perrin-Rogers registered with the Atlanta Division of Living Persons roughly three months ago. I can’t tell you anything more than that.”

My heart leapt at that information. Santiago had made it—I knew he would.

“Are you sure about that?” Cipher said and slid a sparkling sapphire ring in her direction. I had no idea where he’d gotten it, must have been something he’d scavenged along the way. “Maybe you could give us his last-known address?”

She shot him another annoyed look but pocketed the ring and said, “He was assigned government housing at Prosperity Tower on Walton Street.”

“Thank you, ma’am, you’ve been very helpful.” Cipher said politely, though I wondered if he was being sincere.

“We’ll need to do a full medical exam and bloodwork panel before we can issue him his identification.” The woman then addressed me, “Do you know what vaccinations you’ve had?” I shook my head. She huffed and asked me another question but I couldn’t hear her because she’d moved away from the counter to retrieve a clipboard.

“Well?” she asked impatiently.

“He’s hard of hearing,” Cipher said, “And asthmatic, so an inhaler would be great.”

“We’ll need to run some tests.”

“Do what you need to do, but I’m staying with him as his plus one.”

The woman scowled, but I was grateful to have Cipher with me. He informed the rest of our crew what was going on, and I dug my fingers into one of his numerous belts to hold onto him as the woman led us through a maze of hallways to another area of the building that looked more like a clinic. Here there were more nurses than police officers, and everyone looked really, super busy. A nurse led us to a private room and told me to undress so the doctor could examine me. She gave me a thin cloth gown to put on instead of my clothing, which was weird and embarrassing. After I’d changed, Cipher offered me his leather jacket to wear while we waited. It smelled like campfire and pine needles, and I missed the woods already.

“I see now what you mean about cities,” I said to him. Even the bright lights were giving me a headache.

He ruffled my hair. “When we’re done here, I’ll find you something good to eat, better than racoon kebabs.”

“I like racoon kebabs.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty easy to please.”

Our easy banter lifted my spirits enough to endure the doctor’s examination. The doctor poked me all over, even squeezed my balls and told me to cough. I looked to Cipher to see if this was some kind of sick joke, and he only nodded with a smirk on his face. “What are you looking for?” I asked the doctor.

“Lumps or swelling,” he said. “Any tenderness?”

“It’s kind of a tender place.”

He massaged my sad little shriveled up sac, and I squirmed under his impersonal, gloved hand. Finally satisfied, he nodded and typed up his report on a tablet. That was how phones used to work too, but ours died a long time ago, so we could only pretend.

“You have Internet here?” Cipher asked the doctor.

“Government and social services have limited access at certain times of day. We have to preserve the bandwidth. But citizens have electricity, access to broadcast radio and television, and running water within the city limits.”

He had said it so casually, as if it were nothing. Growing up, I hadn’t realized how isolated we were or how difficult it was to survive. Several other families had moved to one of the bigger cities early on, but my mom chose to stay. Would she still be alive today if we had left? Would my brother and I still be together?

“You have asthma?” the doctor asked.

“Yes, sir.”

He made me blow into a machine to measure my lung capacity. Afterward, he said. “I’ll put in a request for an inhaler, but it might take a couple weeks to arrive.”

“What about a hearing aid?” Cipher asked.

“You’d have to see a specialist for that. Appointments can take years, but I’ll put him on a waiting list. I’m going to recommend some vaccine boosters and a tetanus shot. Meningitis too, since you’ll be living in close quarters with others. Ever had Lyssavirus cuniculus?”

“What?” I asked and not because I didn’t hear him.

“Rabbit Fever,” Cipher said.

“Yeah, a couple months back. I got over it, except for not being able to hear in one ear.”

“Lucky,” the doctor said and I thought back to my mother, too weak to get out of bed, immobilized by pain and gasping for every breath. I used to climb into that same bed with her in the middle of the night when I’d had a bad dream. Now, I couldn’t think about that bedroom without feeling sick to my stomach.

When the doctor finally left, I said to Cipher, “I’ve never gotten a shot before, not that I can remember, and the doctor said I need five.”

“I’ll hold your hand, and if you’re good, I’ll get you some ice cream after.”

“Teresa’s going to want some too,” I said, since that was practically all we’d talked about on our way here.

“Then we’ll make sure to include her.”

We waited for the doctor to return, but it was a nurse instead, and apparently, the shots were less painful if injected in a fatty area, specifically my butt cheeks, so I hiked up my gown and bent over the examining table. Cipher held my hand, and I tried to remember what ice cream tasted like to distract me from the discomfort and humiliation.

“You’re doing very well,” Cipher said midway through.

“I don’t like it,” I said.

“No one likes shots,” the nurse said.

The nurse finished, and Cipher handed me my clothes to get dressed. I remembered the first time I found him sleeping

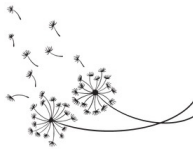
in my brother's bedroom with his leg off.

“Are you turned on yet?” I asked as I shrugged back into my clothing.

“By you, always,” he said with a wink that made my cheeks burn. “But there's a time and place for everything, Kitten. At least you're not a walking Typhoid Mary now.”

“A what?”

He shook his head and steered me out of the room. “Come on. Maybe we can find you some racoon-flavored ice cream.”



IT SEEMED like hours later when we were finally able to leave that building, each of us with a bundle of clothing and bedding and a room assignment at a nearby dormitory. Inside the dorm, there were several people our age milling about or else gathered in common areas watching television. We'd been watching this same program after the game show ended, a sitcom about some friends who lived in New York City and complained about everything, but in a funny way.

Several of the building's inhabitants stared at us as we entered, though none of them approached, probably on account of all the weaponry. They eyed my cat too. I held her closer to me.

Our room assignments were on the fourth floor, and Cipher suggested we get used to taking the stairs because elevators in these types of buildings were “old as shit” and we didn't want to get trapped in one. Gizmo got a pass on account of the wheelbarrow of tech that he had to transport.

We dropped off our stuff in our assigned rooms and discussed a game plan. Gizmo would fashion better locks for our rooms and figure out a security system, Artemis would ask around about the local black market for trading goods and weapons, and Macon would use his natural charm and

charisma to get information on Promised Land. Cipher was taking Teresa and I out for ice cream, though he called it, “scouting the local terrain.” She’d had to get shots too, and Macon as well, though he hadn’t complained about his at all. Watching Cipher have to ask another tough-looking youth about where he could score some ice cream was the highlight of my day, until we arrived at the ice cream shop itself.

The shop was cheery-looking, though perhaps in need of a fresh coat of paint. Some of the vinyl chairs were ripped in places and several of the floor tiles were broken, but it was like that everywhere, really. Things fell apart and you didn’t have the parts or know-how to fix it. It took me forever to pick just one from the six flavors they offered, so long that Cipher said he’d get one too and let me try it. I finally settled on strawberry because I knew already that I liked it, and it seemed less risky than the others. Cipher ordered butter pecan, and I ended up liking his more, so he switched with me. When I asked where they’d gotten the milk to make ice cream, Cipher said there were likely factory farms somewhere outside the city that were guarded by the military. It sounded like an awful situation for the cows, and I felt a little bad about enjoying the ice cream, but it was very delicious and something I hadn’t tasted since Before.

“You’re a good boyfriend,” I told him while Teresa and I knocked our feet together underneath the table, both of us savoring every single lick. She ordered peppermint, and she let me try it, which confirmed for me that butter pecan was the way to go. We talked about all the marvels of the city—television, hot showers, lights illuminating the rooms even when it was dark outside, people walking up and down the streets, and not a Rabid in sight.

“Just because you don’t see Rabids doesn’t mean they’re not here,” Cipher said. “Carry your weapons with you wherever you go.”

“Do you think we’ll be safe here?” Teresa asked.

“Same rules apply. Don’t go out alone or without a radio. Always tell the group where you’re going and when you’ll be back.”

“I thought the whole reason to move to the cities was to be safe,” I said.

“There is no ‘safe,’” he said gravely. “Not when dealing with people either. Be aware of your surroundings. Don’t hesitate to call for backup. And be on the lookout for any signs of the virus. If an outbreak happens, we’re getting the hell out of here.”

We moved into our rooms properly a little while later. We were all on the same floor—I think Cipher bribed the desk lady to make it so—and I was bunking with Cipher, actual bunk beds, which was kind of fun, even though I’d hoped we’d be sharing a bed. After Cipher inspected every nook and cranny of our room, I unpacked our things, separating the soiled clothing from the clean—laundry, another perk of city living. I folded our few items of clothing and arranged our belongings and other gear in the dresser drawers, reserving one especially for Cipher’s weapons, as instructed.

When everything was tidy with clean sheets on both beds, I went over to the window where Cipher stood outside on the fire escape, smoking a cigarette and surveying the street below us. His slender form was a dark silhouette against the night sky, and I remembered when we first met and I thought he was a demon. Even though I knew him better now, there were still a million things I didn’t know.

“It’s okay,” he said and offered his hand. “It’ll hold both of us.”

I climbed out the window and joined him there on the fire escape. I was glad we weren’t any higher up in the building. Even from the fourth floor, it was a little scary looking down. I gripped the edge of the rusted metal with both hands and glanced up at the sky.

“Where are the stars?” I asked.

“Light pollution. You can’t see them as well in the city. I hadn’t known what star-gazing was until the lights went out in D.C.”

“Can you believe people used to travel to space?” I said.

“The hubris of man,” Cipher remarked. “Always wanting to discover new frontiers.”

“We’re doing the same, in a way. Do you think Promised Land is real?”

“I hope so. I’d like to find a place where we can put down roots.”

“But I thought you were a lone wanderer, Mr. Mysterious.”

“I like my alone time, but I wouldn’t mind having a little help taking care of you knuckleheads. Being able to sleep at night knowing you’re safe.”

“Are you tired now?” I asked. He didn’t sleep nearly enough. The bags under his eyes were always there, at times more prominent than others. “You can rest too, you know. You don’t always have to keep watch.”

“That’s when they get you, Kitten, as soon as you let down your guard.”

Maybe it was true, but the stress couldn’t be good for him. I circled one arm around his waist, and he rested his cheek on my head.

“This is our escape plan.” He gestured to the series of metal ladders below us, and it reminded me of the obstacle courses my brother and I used to build. Our mother had hated it, always terrified we’d break a bone, then die from our injuries.

“In case there’s a fire?” I asked.

“Yeah or any other situation where we’d need to get the fuck out of here fast.”

I waited for him to tell me about the fire at The Admiral that caused him, Artemis, and Gizmo to leave D.C. and travel here, but he didn’t, so instead I asked, “What will you do for a job?”

The desk lady had said we had a month to find employment and the video said the same. Otherwise, our ration cards wouldn’t renew. There were several rules, including daily med checks in the building’s front lobby, along

with many more restrictions that I didn't understand, but it was made clear to us that "living off the government" wasn't an option.

"I don't plan for us to be here that long," Cipher said.

"You think you'll find bullets by then?"

"All I need is gunpowder and shells, and I can make my own."

"And my brother?" I asked hopefully.

"I'll start looking for him tomorrow."

"I can help you."

"I'd rather you stay here with the crew, help them along."

The idea of finding Santiago filled me with hope, but going back to Greenville without Cipher and the gang didn't feel right.

"What do you think of Atlanta so far?" I asked Cipher.

"It's like any other city. Too many cops and too many rules. Those ration cards they gave us have GPS trackers embedded in them, according to Gizmo, something they didn't tell us, and God knows what other ways they're watching us." He glanced back toward our room. "They probably have cameras in every corner of this building."

"What happens if they catch us doing something bad?"

"They might ship us off to a factory farm to slaughter animals or an oil rig or a canning factory, wherever there's a need for cheap labor. That's why I don't want to stay here for too long. It's all a trap. Even those shots they gave you. How do we know for sure what it was? They could be shooting you up with some experimental vaccine, then waiting to see if you get sick." He paused there and took a drag from his cigarette. "You can't trust the government, Kitten. You can't trust anyone."

"I trust you," I said, my voice sounding a bit wobbly. There were so many things I didn't know or understand. It made me feel vulnerable and a little bit scared.

He turned to me and nodded. "I'm glad. I don't mean to worry you. These are just my sleep-deprived thoughts." He dragged one hand down his face, looking haggard and worn. "The thing is, I can't tell if my concerns are rational or if it's just my paranoia that's making me crazy. In Rabid Country, I knew what the threats were, and I could protect you. In here, I'm not so sure that I can."

He stubbed out his cigarette and sat down on the top step of the fire escape, dragging me onto his lap. He'd been keeping all these fears to himself. No wonder he was always so anxious. If I had those thoughts running through my head, I probably wouldn't be able to sleep either. I wrapped my arms around his neck and breathed in his smoky scent. "You smell like cooked meat," I said.

"You hungry again?" he asked with a chuckle.

"A little. I'm a growing boy."

"I'll get you some noodles."

"You will?"

"Yeah, but only if you give me a kiss."

I answered him with a wet smack of my lips, then pulled back and said, "We'll be okay, Cipher. We'll look out for each other, just like we have been."

"I hope you're right," he said, but his eyes looked distant and sad.

THIRTEEN

CIPHER

I DIDN'T GET much sleep during our first night in the city. I never did in a place with four walls, not since that fire at The Admiral.

My memories of that night in D.C. were fresh in my mind as I lay there in the dark with Kitten snuggled up against me. I'd woken from a deep sleep choking, eyes burning and unable to see beyond the wall of smoke at my bedside. Running blindly out of my room, I'd found my floormates huddled on either end of the hallway, trying desperately to open the stairwell door, but the exits were locked. Even stranger, no fire alarms were sounding, and the sprinkler systems hadn't been activated either. We were on the tenth floor of a building without fire escapes, so the only alternative was to jump. I grabbed my bedsheet and used it as a makeshift parachute, aiming for the roof of the building next door, which was a floor or two lower than my window. I made it, just barely, landing on the prosthetic Gizmo had built for me, which was jarring as hell, but it meant that I could walk away from the fall.

I should have rounded up the others and told them to do the same. That I'd let them burn alive in that godforsaken fire haunted me to this day.

By the time I'd made it to ground, the fire trucks were just arriving and moving way too sluggishly in setting up their hoses. It was already too late. The building was an inferno with kids jumping out of windows to their deaths to escape being burned alive.

At the time, Artemis was just a cool chick I'd seen a few times in passing. Gizmo I knew because he'd fashioned my leg in exchange for a steady supply of hot dogs and ramen. Both of them were down there with me. Artemis had snuck out the night before and returned to find the building ablaze. Gizmo had been awake and tinkering when the fire first started and jumped from his room on the second floor. We huddled together under my bed sheet with tears streaming down our faces and when the police asked us who we were, we gave them false names and said we were from the building next door.

We'd lost everything in that fire, including several friends who'd begun to feel like family, and we all shared the same suspicion. Our building had become a fever hotspot and had been placed under quarantine for the past few weeks. There was no room in the hospitals or shelters to house our sick, and they didn't want a Rabid problem on their hands.

Their solution was to burn us alive. None of us had parents or family who would protest. All of us were refugees and orphans, the unsupervised youth of our nation's capital.

We fucked around for a few more months in D.C., coming up with a plan. Artemis wanted to go back to Baltimore, where she'd been relocated from originally, and I wanted to try our hand at surviving in the wild. We stayed together in a one-room hostel, taking turns being on watch. Gizmo built things we could trade for weapons and supplies until we had what we needed. Then, we got the fuck out of there.

Within the first few weeks of our travels, we'd met Macon, then Teresa. Macon had heard of a place called Promised Land, and it gave us hope that there might be a community where we could do more than just survive.

I climbed out of bed, careful not to disturb Kitten, and watched the morning light filter in between the narrow gaps of the neighboring buildings. It wasn't the same as watching the sun rise over a forest of pine or a lake as smooth as glass. It didn't fill me with gratitude, but with a mounting unease. I hadn't meant to scare Kitten with my doomsday speech the day before, certainly not on his first day in a new city, but that

knot between my shoulders was back. I could defend our tribe against a Rabid attack or raiders, but when it came to the police or U.S. military, we were fucked.

Which meant the sooner we left, the better.

I smoked a cigarette and considered the day's plan of action. I'd have Kitten tag along with the others while I checked out his brother's last-known address. It shouldn't be too hard to locate Santiago in a city of this size, if he'd survived, and I hoped for Kitten's sake that he had. Family meant everything.

I was at the sink shaving a little while later when Kitten woke up and climbed out of bed. We were sleeping together on the bottom bunk, a tight fit, but I wanted him close. Wearing only his briefs despite the chill of morning, he had his arms wrapped tightly across his chest with his hands tucked into his armpits, shielding his nipples but exposing his smooth flat stomach. The contours of his bottom few ribs showed more prominently whenever he inhaled. Hopefully, here in the city, he'd be able to put on a little more weight.

"You do that with your hunting knife?" he asked, lifting his chin to see under his mop of bed head. "Badass."

I wasn't *trying* to be a badass, but I didn't have much facial hair and the edge of my knife did the trick.

"Do me," he said and hopped up on the counter where there was barely enough room for him to squeeze his ass cheeks between the sink and the wall. We didn't have a full bathroom, just a sink and a mirror. There were communal toilets and showers down the hall, something I planned to take full advantage of later.

"Tilt your head up," I said and angled his chin so I could get at the peach fuzz on his upper lip. He assisted me by sucking in his mouth. I turned his face this way and that, scraping away the soft, downy fuzz that lined his jaw. He was so docile and trusting as I scraped along the delicate skin of his throat. I marveled again that he was mine, and I worried, again, that it was for all the wrong reasons, but he'd chosen

me as his boyfriend, so I'd do whatever I could not to fuck it up.

By the time I was finished, his face was as smooth as polished wood. Also, he had an erection.

He looked up at me guiltily and said, "What? I can't help it. You didn't give me any special attention last night."

"You fell asleep before I even got into bed."

"You take forever to brush your teeth, and I had a belly full of noodles."

Watching Kitten slurp down a bowlful of noodles had been an exercise in restraint all its own. I'd indulged in some dirty fantasies while lying in bed next to him, then came fast and hard and wiped myself down with a dirty sock.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," he said with a coy smile.

"What are we, ten?"

He reached for the elastic band of his underwear and slowly tugged it down, until his cock popped out, smooth and circumcised with a little patch of brown curls at its base. "Your turn," he said, staring up at me with lust-drunk eyes.

"You want some special attention now?" I asked and he nodded, still with a dazed smile on his face. I reached for a bath towel and dropped it on the peeling linoleum floor. With some effort, I went down to my knees and enveloped his sweet, stiff prick in my mouth, tasting a burst of his essence as it danced across my tongue.

"Cipher." He squirmed in his seat with one hand splayed against the medicine cabinet and the other gripping my shoulder. His smooth legs wrapped around my neck as I took him in deep, working my tongue along the underside of his shaft and sucking the dew from his plump, mushroom tip.

"Oh my gosh," he gasped when I pulled his underpants down to his thighs, so I could really smother my face in his groin. His soft balls cushioned my chin as I bobbed on his shaft. It didn't take long for his ass to tense and his cock to go

rigid in my mouth. He arched back, panting in between pleading with me to continue—fuck, he'd better not have an asthma attack—urging me on like a jockey with both heels digging into my spine and his fingertips clutching my shoulder.

“Cipher, please. Oh, yes, please. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

His politeness charmed me; he was a good boy who'd been raised right. I'd make it good for him, whatever it was. His keening cries escalated to a single high note as warm cum flooded my mouth. For the first time in my cocksucking career, I swallowed it down, every last drop. (That was how much I liked him.) Kitten was a quivering mess and a little bit shell-shocked as I nursed him through the final tremors of his first blowjob.

When his legs finally unlocked and he released me from his grip, I stood and scooped him into my arms. He was hot all over and his cheeks were pink.

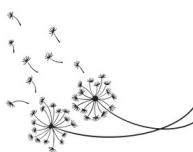
“How was that, sleepy head?” I murmured into his ear.

“So good. I liked it a lot. I've never done that before. Was I too fast?”

“You came right on time, cutie, I promise.”

“Okay, that's good. Can I do you now?”

The thought of Kitten on his knees with his pink lips wrapped around my cock made my dick throb even harder, but chasing after it was guilt. Right now, I was his best shot at survival, and he knew it. Not to mention what it might do to me if some other guy (or girl) caught his eye. It seemed risky, even if we were boyfriends, so instead of allowing my fantasy to take shape, I kissed his blushing cheek and said, “Later, sweetness. I've got a big brother to find.”



I DROPPED Kitten off with Artemis and Teresa, who were going with Macon to check out the local markets, both sanctioned and not. Tucking my weapons underneath my clothing discreetly, as well as a couple of Kitten's childhood photographs, I managed to get past the security at the Prosperity Tower by chatting up a resident and walking in alongside them.

Once inside the building, which did *not* have fire escapes, I showed whomever I encountered Santiago's picture and asked if they'd seen him around. Surprisingly, no one had.

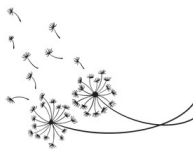
I rode the elevator next, even though I'd developed a slight phobia after being trapped in an elevator for several hours in D.C. with an individual I suspected was very near Rabid stage. They didn't attack me, but the experience had left me a tad claustrophobic.

Maintaining a stiff upper lip while the elevator rattled and lurched, I talked to everyone who got on or off, but still no leads. I could only conclude that Santiago was no longer a resident of Prosperity Tower on Walton Street, if he ever was one, since literally no one claimed to have seen him. Maybe the woman at the intake desk had lied to me about his last-known address, but why?

It didn't make any sense

I grabbed what was advertised as a "chicken salad sandwich" from the deli down the street and spent the rest of the afternoon questioning the shop owners and residents of neighboring buildings, but it seemed Santiago was a ghost. The only conclusion I could draw was that if Santiago had been assigned government housing, he didn't stay long.

Tomorrow, I'd try the hospitals and after that, the morgue.



THREE DAYS LATER, I was no closer to uncovering big brother's location. Neither the hospitals nor the morgue had any record of him, so I could only assume that he wasn't injured and he wasn't dead. Kitten was relieved when I gave him that update, though still worried that I hadn't yet been able to find him.

Day four in Atlanta dawned, and I was going over the possibilities of Santiago's whereabouts while Kitten slumbered in my arms. His cat was laying across my foot, which seemed to be her favorite spot to sleep. I'd taken off my prosthetic leg to let the skin of my stump breathe, and the loss of mobility always made me restless. Kitten stirred at last, yawning like a lion, and smiled sweetly up at me. "Did you sleep?" he asked.

"A little," I said, though hardly at all. The lack of good sleep was catching up with me. I was exhausted at day's end but unable to relax, needing to stay vigilant in case of fire or some other unexpected catastrophe.

"That's not good," he said.

"I'll manage."

"I have an idea. You take the day off. Smoke one of your sleepytime cigarettes and I'll stand guard."

"You don't have to do that," I told him.

"I want to. It's not good for you to go without sleep."

"What about your brother?"

"The search can wait until tomorrow. Let me take care of you. I'll be right back." After making himself decent, he left and returned a few minutes later with a bagel, toasted and slathered with some kind of oil and spices, likely one of Artemis's creations.

"Where'd you get this?" I asked, sitting up on one elbow.

"The girls' room. We went shopping. They're keeping the food in there, since the rest of us are slobs. Also there's no room in Gizmo and Macon's room because his workshop exploded. You should see all the projects he's working on.

I smiled and opened the covers for Kitten to slide in beside me. He fed me the bagel, taking only a couple of bites for himself, which was a feat of restraint on his part. “Today you’re going to sleep,” he insisted, “and I won’t leave the room, I promise. I’ll pee in the sink if it’ll make you feel better.”

I smiled at his bossiness. “I’ll try, but wake me in a few hours, okay?”

I attached my leg, grabbed one of my sleepytime cigarettes, and smoked it outside. I was frustrated with my lack of progress. In the woods, I could build a fire or hunt. I could slay Rabids and scout a path for the others. Here, my skills were wasted. I couldn’t even track down one missing person.

“Back to bed,” Kitten said, herding me back inside. He pointed to our tiny, single bed still rumped from the night before. The drugs were beginning to take effect, making me sleepy and loopy all at once.

“Come cuddle up to me, Kitten. Let me pet you as I fall asleep.”

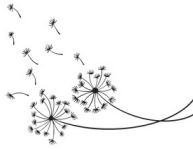
Smiling wide, he snuggled up against me, so warm and so soft. His hair smelled like strawberries—how was that possible? A familiar contentment enveloped me. Even on the nights when I couldn’t sleep, just holding and smelling him made me feel more at ease. I couldn’t believe I’d ever considered leaving him behind. Only a dumbass would do that.

“You did?” he asked. I must have said it out loud.

“I was wrong. Don’t leave me, okay?” My voice—it didn’t sound like me, too needy, too desperate.

“I won’t leave you, tough guy, I promise.”

He thought I’d meant right then, but I might have meant forever.



I WOKE UP HOURS LATER, early afternoon judging from the slant of the sun. It shined in through the window and lit up Kitten's curls where his head was bowed slightly over a book.

"Whatcha reading, cutie?" I asked.

"You're going to laugh at me," he said without glancing up.

"Maybe. Tell me anyway."

"*Twilight*," he said as if it were a question.

"The book about vampires?"

"And werewolves," he said defensively. I chuckled and he shot me a look. "What? It's *compelling*. Teresa and Artemis are working on getting the whole set. There are movies too. Have you seen them?"

"No," I said, but I appreciated the normalcy of it all. He should be getting lost in fantasy worlds, not dealing with our bleak reality. "No judgment here, Kitten. Read whatever makes you happy."

"Do you need anything right now? I'm kind of in the middle of a good part."

"Oh yeah? What's happening?"

"Edward is telling Bella about when he was made into a vampire, during the Spanish Influenza."

"Do you think vampires are sexy, Kitten?"

"I mean, a little."

"Yeah, why's that?"

"They're all broody and mysterious and lethal. Kind of like you actually. Also, Edward keeps saving Bella's life, which is super hot."

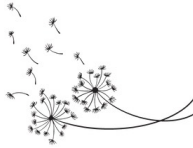
I smiled and scratched my stomach. I must have removed my leg before passing out, though I couldn't remember doing it. That happened sometimes when the drugs took effect, also why I only used them when I knew I was safe. As I was putting myself back together, I noticed Kitten scratching his head. At first I thought it was only an absent-minded habit, but then he kept at it, not seeming to realize he was doing it.

“Stay still,” I said, moving toward him.

“What is it?”

I angled his head toward the light and sifted through his cloud of curls to find the part in his hair. Suspicion confirmed. Lice. The little bastards had infiltrated and reproduced like maniacs. Suddenly, my scalp was itchy as well. We slept side-by-side every night, so of course, if Kitten had lice, then I probably had it too. I scanned our room—all the bedding, towels, and clothes strewn about, all of it had to go.

I reached for my two-way radio. “Attention, Assholes, we have a situation.”



LUCKILY, Kitten and I were the only ones who were afflicted. The girls were spared, thank God, as were Macon and Gizmo. Something like lice shampoo would have to be requested through the health department and it might take weeks to arrive. The easiest way to get rid of lice, as far as I knew, was to shave our heads. Gizmo had fixed a pair of clippers and Macon handed them off to me at our door. We'd bundled up all of our clothing and bedding into a huge pile to be laundered in the building's basement.

Kitten was shuffling from foot to foot. He looked like he was about to cry.

“Why the face?” I asked.

“I feel like it's my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. This sort of thing just happens sometimes, especially in places like this where there are a lot of people living close together. Are you upset about having to cut your hair?”

“No, that’s fine.”

“I’ll go first, okay?”

He nodded and released a big sigh. I made quick work of the job, dragging the clippers over my head every which way until I’d given myself a short buzz cut. I trimmed the sides to a light fade, then asked Kitten to do the same in the back. It reminded me of when I’d first shown up at the youth shelter in D.C., alone, with only a duffle bag of my belongings. Fifteen years old with my mother and sister recently deceased and my leg freshly amputated, the first thing they did was shave my head, probably for this very reason.

“How do I look?” I asked Kitten.

“Scary,” he said. “More so than usual.”

I made my hands into claws and grabbed him around the waist, tickling his ribs and his tummy until he was squirming and giggling; the sound of it always cheered me up too.

“All right, Killer, your turn.” He stepped up to the plate with a brave face. I turned on the clippers, intent on making my first cut, but gazing down on all those golden-brown curls, the same ones that had grabbed me by the throat that very first day, I just couldn’t do it.

“Do you want me to do it myself?” he asked, probably noticing my hesitation.

“No.” I turned off the clippers and grabbed the two-way again. “Artemis, you there?”

“I’m here, Cipher, what do you need?”

“Do you know how to get rid of lice with, like, home remedies or whatever?”

A moment later she said, “Teresa does. Send him over here, and we’ll take care of it.”

Somehow, she knew I was talking about Kitten.

FOURTEEN

KITTEN

WITH A T-SHIRT TIED around my head, I was marched over to the girls to get properly deloused, even though I told Cipher I was fine with having my head shaved. When I asked why he wouldn't do it, he told me he was worried I might have a lumpy head.

Rude.

At the girls' door, I was greeted with pop music and the aroma of freshly-baked cookies that they must have cooked in the floor's common kitchen. I could eat the air, it smelled so tasty.

"Goody, you're here. We're going to have a makeover," Teresa said as she pulled me inside and placed a sugar cookie in my hand. The butter and sugar melted on my tongue and the flavor reminded me of Christmas, which made me happy but also a little bit sad.

"Delicious," I said, wanting to smell and devour it all at once.

"You look like a delinquent," Artemis said to Cipher, which was true, but I kind of liked the bad boy look.

He rubbed one hand over top of his short hair, and said irritably. "Just take care of Kitten, please. I'll be in the laundry room." He leaned down as if to kiss me, then decided against it and patted my butt instead. "Be good," he said.

The first order of business, after setting me down in a straight-backed chair, was to smear mayonnaise over all my

hair, gobs and gobs of it, in order to smother the lice to death. Teresa gave me one of her many stuffed animals to hold onto to make me feel better. I asked her where she got all the toys, and she said there was a church nearby that gave away toys and child-sized clothing. It was rare to see a child these days, even rarer to see a baby. The playgrounds were empty, as were the schoolyards. A lot of children had died when the plague first spread and a lot of elderly people too, those with weakened immune systems as well as those who couldn't get away from the Rabids. We had listened to the news reports with our doors locked, my dad in his recliner with his gun in his lap.

Many more children were orphaned or abandoned. Several died from common illnesses and other diseases because they couldn't get to a hospital, like my friend Lucas. A few others were bitten by Rabid family members. I couldn't remember seeing any Rabids in the neighborhood myself, but there was a crew of men, my father included, who patrolled our streets at night and were sent to infected households. When I'd asked about my friends, my parents told me they moved away. Then my father died, and within the span of a couple years, we were the only ones left.

"Can cats get lice?" I asked them since Little Miss Purrfect liked to lay across my shoulders, which was definitely in the danger zone.

"No," Artemis says.

"What about dogs?"

"Nope. Just humans get human lice. Animals have their own set of parasites to worry about."

After the mayonnaise treatment, they wrapped my hair in plastic to suffocate any surviving bugs. *Die, jerks*, was my attitude about it. No mercy. The girls pulled out a bottle of pink nail polish and we took turns painting each other's fingernails and toenails. I liked the way it looked, all sparkly and lavish like that outfit at Pink Pony.

"Pink is my favorite color," I told them. I'd been toying with the idea for years and decided it was finally time to make

it known.

“Mine too,” Teresa said.

“Mine is purple,” Artemis said.

“Dark purple?” I asked.

“More like lavender, like the color of dawn just before the sun comes up over the horizon.”

“I know exactly the color you mean.” I thought about why I’d never shared my true favorite color before. When anyone ever asked me, I’d always said it was blue. “Do you ever feel sometimes that you have to choose? Like, pink is for girls, so if I like pink, then I must be girly.”

“What’s wrong with being girly?” Teresa asked.

“Nothing. I like being girly, and I like hanging out with you two, but I also want Cipher to respect me as a boy, as a man. And Macon too. They’re big, you know, and I’m not. I’m not very good at fighting or hunting. I can’t split a log with one blow the way Macon can. I can’t even fix things like Gizmo, and I cry a lot. I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

I chewed on my lower lip, getting lost in my thoughts, and Artemis said, “Always comparing yourself to others will make you crazy. You should like the things you like and not worry too much about what other people think. We all like you for who you are, and so does Cipher.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“I hunt and fight and rarely cry,” Artemis said. “Does that make me manly?”

“No, it makes you badass,” I said and she smiled.

“Just be you, Joshua. And fuck all the haters.”

“Yeah, fuck the haters,” Teresa said, then covered her mouth.

“Fuck the haters,” I said and hoped my mother wasn’t listening.

They passed around Cokes next, ice cold from the refrigerator, and we toasted to the color pink. The soda was just as sweet as I remembered, and it burned my throat going down but in the best possible way. Their radio was the same one Gizmo had been tinkering with for the past few weeks, but now it was plugged into the wall, which meant we didn't have to worry about the batteries running out. I recognized most of the songs and sang along. I started feeling a little nostalgic for the Before, when everything was easy and carefree, and we didn't have to worry about Rabids or raiders or getting sick from the plague. I'd had a family who loved me and friends to play with and we all went to school. My mom and dad took care of us, and even when they argued, you could tell they still really loved each other.

I thought of my brother, who was somewhere in this city right now. What if he was hungry or in pain? What if he needed me?

"Do you guys ever feel guilty for having fun when your family is dead? When so many people's families are dead?" I asked them.

"I like to think our families are watching us, kind of like we're a television program," Artemis said. "Would you rather watch your loved ones crying and suffering all the time, or would you like to see them having fun with their friends?"

"Definitely having fun," I said. "I miss them, though. I miss the way things used to be."

"You can mourn for your family and your life as it was, and still make new memories. It's not disloyal to your family to have fun with us, and it's not disloyal to us to miss them."

"Do you miss school?" I asked.

Artemis nodded. "I never thought I would, but I miss going to class and cutting up with my friends. I played basketball for my school. I was really good."

I believed it. Artemis was athletic and fierce with a take-no-prisoners attitude.

"Do you think there will ever be school again?" I asked.

“Probably, once there are enough children to teach.”

“I don’t miss my family,” Teresa said. Her violet eyes went blank for a moment, her mouth drawn into a deep frown. I exchanged a glance with Artemis, who only smiled softly. “Artemis says it doesn’t matter where you come from, only where you’re going.” Teresa said. “She’s my sister now. You can be my brother.”

Teresa reached for my hand, and we were careful not to smudge our painted nails. I’d rather hug them both, but they didn’t want to get too close to my head. Lice liked to travel.

The wrap came off at last and Teresa sat behind me with a fine-toothed metal comb that they’d gotten from Gizmo’s workshop. She slowly combed through all my curls to collect the dead bugs and nits. Between those and the mayonnaise, it was pretty disgusting.

“Cipher should have just shaved my head,” I said.

“But he couldn’t because he thinks you’re sooooo pretty,” Teresa teased and batted her eyes obnoxiously.

Was that the real reason? Then why had he seemed so irritated?

“Lollypop?” Teresa said and thrust one into my hand.

We sucked on lollipops and discussed the developing love triangle in *Twilight*. I was Team Edward, obviously, Artemis was Team Jacob, and Teresa was Team Alice, and we each defended our positions with passionate arguments and evidence to back up our claims. Teresa then made me try a red candy without telling me what it was. Turns out, it was really, really spicy. So hot that my eyes started to water and my mouth burned like it was on fire. Teresa laughed like a loon and Artemis fussed at her for tricking me.

Once Teresa had finished combing through my hair, they made me stand with my head over the sink so they could wash out the rest of the mayonnaise. With my hair mostly dried, the girls confirmed that the lice and their eggs were gone. Artemis decided that I could use a haircut, so I went back to our room to retrieve the clippers so we could disinfect them. Cipher

wasn't there—probably still doing laundry. I couldn't find my copy of *Twilight* either, even though I'd swear I left it by the window.

Back in the girls' room, Teresa showed me another recent find of hers, a fashion magazine called *Atlanta Style* with pretty models—guys, girls, and others whose gender I couldn't decide. “Androgynous,” Artemis informed me. Some of the models were amputees, which was cool. They'd even found ways to embellish their prosthetics, like gold bangles on their wrists and drawn-on tattoos.

“Would you ever get a tattoo?” I asked, recalling the recent incident with the five needles in my butt. Not pleasant.

“Maybe if it was something pretty, like a flower or a unicorn,” Teresa said.

“What about you?” I asked Artemis.

“I'd probably get a piercing before I got a tattoo. Those you can remove.”

“Practical,” I said. “We should all get tattoos, for our tribe.”

“Tattoos of an asshole?” Artemis said. She was less than enthusiastic about our tribal name, though it wasn't official yet because we hadn't voted on it.

“Or a flower,” I said. “A dandelion?” Teresa and I had picked them on one of our hikes through the woods and made wishes before blowing their seeds into the wind. We'd both liked the idea of each of those seeds being another possibility of our wishes coming true. “When you think about it, each of us are like dandelion seeds in the wind, but fate blew us all together.”

“I love it,” Teresa said with a mad light in her eyes. “Dandelions for everyone.”

She made me pinky-promise to get one with her one day, and Artemis said we both needed to lay off the sugar.

After my haircut, they turned me to the mirror so that I might admire Artemis's handiwork, curly on top and short on

the sides. I pursed my lips and hollowed out my cheeks like the models in the magazines. “Do you think Cipher will like it?” I asked them.

“Who cares if he likes it?” Teresa said. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, looks good.” I turned my head from side to side. “Do you think I look older?”

“Eighteen and two months,” Artemis teased.

We ate bagel pizzas for dinner, the girls’ own creation, and I wasn’t even lying when I told them it was my favorite of their dishes. We made up a tray and distributed them to the others. Gizmo was holed up in his “workshop” tinkering under the light of a desk lamp, and Macon was antsy from being indoors all day, so we took a walk with him around the block, all of us holding hands. It had only been a few hours, but I missed Cipher already. We stopped at a park with a playground and Macon pushed Teresa on the swing. I tried swinging too, but it made me nauseous, so Artemis and I sat together on a park bench, and I talked to her about something that had been on my mind, even though Cipher probably would have preferred it if I didn’t.

“So, he touches me,” I said, trying not to give too much detail. “And he makes me feel good, really good, but when I try to do the same for him, he won’t let me.”

Artemis tilted her head, her thinking face. “My first advice, as always, is to talk to him about it.”

“I know, but I don’t want him to freak out, and according to that magazine article, a new relationship is like a delicate succulent still trying to grow roots.”

She shook her head at that. “Difficult conversations can be uncomfortable, but they’re important to have. What I do know is that Cipher carries a lot of guilt around with him, for things that happened in his past that probably weren’t even his fault. He’s angry at himself for being the only member of his family to survive.”

“He doesn’t talk to me about his family.”

“He doesn’t talk to anyone about it. Cipher likes to think of himself as a solitary unit. That’s his whole thing, you know, self-reliance. But underneath all that leather and attitude, we both know how soft he is.”

Tender and sweet, thoughtful and caring too.

“So, what should I do?” I asked.

“Be patient with him. You know how he works really hard to make you feel safe?” I nodded. “Well, you have to do the same for him, emotionally. Know what I mean?”

“I think so?”

“He needs a lot of assurance that you like him and want to be with him and care about his thoughts and feelings. When he feels safe, I think he’ll open up.”

“He’s the best, isn’t he?” I said, getting all dreamy-eyed just thinking about him, my boyfriend. And then, as if he had heard me pining for him, the man himself came sauntering across the playground, all broody swagger and scowly face with his new bad-boy buzz cut.

“Where have you all been?” he asked Artemis as I jumped up and hugged him fiercely. His arms wrapped around me tightly, then he pulled me back to inspect me all over. “What happened to your hair?”

“I got a makeover. Do you like it?” I smiled and showed off my fingernails too.

He nodded, looking pained, and said, “You’re gorgeous, Kitten, as always. Are the lice gone?”

“Clean as a whistle,” Artemis said.

“I made you bagel pizzas and left them in our room. Have you seen my copy of *Twilight*?”

Cipher, looking guilty, pulled my copy from behind his back.

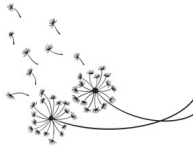
“You were reading it?” I exclaimed.

“I didn’t have anything better to do while I was waiting for the laundry to dry.”

“Which team are you on?” I asked.

“Team Charlie,” he said. “Edward’s an asshole. And Bella’s a dipshit.”

Artemis laughed, and I did too. I loved our little band of Assholes.



AFTER A GOURMET MEAL of bagel pizzas, I gave Cipher one of the spicy red candies and told him he wasn’t allowed to spit it out. He acted tough at first, but eventually caved, rushing to the sink to get a glass of water.

“Those girls are a bad influence on you,” he said, wiping his mouth.

I made up our bed with clean sheets, not bothering with the top bunk since no one slept up there, and Cipher inspected everything from top to bottom. I brushed my teeth and climbed into bed, waiting for him to go through his complicated nighttime routine. When at last we were cozied up together, I said to him, “I like you.”

With one arm behind his head and the other wrapped around me, he glanced down suspiciously and said, “Do you want something? Noodles?”

“Do you think I’m telling you that I like you just because I want something?” I asked with mock offense.

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“I like you because I like you. That’s it.”

“Okay. I like you too.”

“But you know what would make me happy?” I said.

“What’s that?”

“If you would let me touch you.”

“You’re touching me right now.”

“I want to touch you in a sexy way.”

“Really?” He shifted a little in bed.

“Do you like making me come?”

“Yes?” he answered as if it were a trick question.

“Well, I want to make you come too. That would make me really happy.”

Before he was able to respond, I rolled on top of him. Little Miss Purrfect hissed and jumped off the foot of the bed. We were already under the covers, both of us in only our underwear, and I took a moment to admire how handsome he was, with his dark eyes and stern mouth, lying there with a wary look on his face, wanting to trust me but unable to let go of his fears.

“Can I touch you?” I asked as my hand hovered just above his smooth skin.

“Yeah.” He swallowed, the knob of his throat bobbing enticingly.

“Here?” I said and laid one hand gently on the center of his sternum, bracing myself so that I didn’t hit my head on the bottom of the upper bunk.

“Yes.”

“How about here?” I laid my other hand over the bulge in his underwear and gently squeezed.

“That’s fine too.”

“Artemis says it’s okay to make new memories.”

“All right.”

“It’s okay to feel pleasure and to want things.”

“I know,” he said, even while tensing underneath me.

“Do you?”

“Sure.”

“So, do you want me, Cipher?”

FIFTEEN

CIPHER

“DO YOU WANT ME, CIPHER?”

Kitten was straddling my hips with his hand on my cock. My mouth was dry and my tongue was tied as my desires warred with my conscience.

“Well?” he asked and reached out to grab hold of the top of the bed frame for leverage while rocking his groin against mine, rolling his hips the same way he’d worked that stripper pole.

“I want you,” I said.

“I can’t hear you,” he replied, the little shit, so I fisted his curls and dragged his ear to my lips.

“I want you, brat.”

He smiled. “Let’s get naked.”

He stripped off his underwear with enthusiasm, then helped me with my own. We’d never been completely naked together, except in the showers, when I growled and snapped at anyone who came too near. His warm, velvety skin slid against my own as he crawled back on top of me.

“Relax,” he said, noticing the tension in my body. I was like a robot, all stiff joints and jerky limbs.

“It’s not easy for me to relax,” I said.

“I know. Try for me, though, okay?”

Taking deep breaths, I concentrated on calming my body. Liquor would have helped with this, or drugs, but I wanted to

be completely sober. I didn't want to fuck this up.

Lying with our groins warm against each other and our cocks hard, Kitten kissed my neck, then rolled one of my nipples between his fingers as I had done to him before. He was a quick learner.

“How's this?” he asked.

“Good.”

“We're safe here, Cipher.”

I nodded, wanting to believe it. I reached around his back to hold on as my other hand clamped down on his ass. I recalled watching the nurse administer those shots while trying to think about anything other than Kitten bent over, ass bared. So soft, he felt so good. Holding him like this gave me a deep sense of rightness, like when your stomach was full or you were warm in your blankets, when you first lay down in your bed at night. All those sayings his mother had on their walls, I understood it now. Home sweet home, that was my Kitten. No matter where we were, even in this drafty, concrete cell of a dorm room, he made me feel better about life, more optimistic. Fucking live, laugh, love.

“You're not circumcised,” he said as he squirted some lotion onto his hand and wrapped all five fingers around my stiff prick.

“Nope.”

“I always wondered what it might feel like to hold one.”

It was warm and slick inside the cocoon of fingers, and I rocked a little on the mattress to meet his slow strokes. Was this what it might feel like to be inside him? Did I want that? Did *he* want that? Shit, I was starting to spiral. I needed to get out of my own head.

“So, what do you think?” I asked him.

“Slippery.”

“Mmmm.”

“Do you like it?” Kitten asked, watching me closely.

“Yeah,” I said with a nervous little tremor. A low-frequency buzz of arousal snaked through me and concentrated in my groin. His tempo was just right—not too fast and not too slow. I liked for the sensation to build; it gave my brain just enough time to shut down. “That’s good, baby,” I said. My cutie, my baby, my sweetness and light. He could do whatever he wanted to me—I’d let him.

“I am your baby, and you take such good care of me. I want to take care of you too.” Holding my head with his free hand, he leaned down to kiss me, not at all shy about thrusting his tongue inside my mouth and marking his territory. With one hand jerking my dick and his mouth claiming mine, he was definitely the one in control. Kitten knew how to get what he wanted, something I’d admired and respected because he was bold and direct in ways that I wasn’t.

“I’m going to get you off,” he said with complete confidence. “We’re going to do it like this, and I want you to come first, Cipher. That’s your only job right now. Got it?”

“Yeah,” I gasped, fingers scrabbling across his smooth skin for a place to hold on.

His grip tightened, working me over while his mouth left little love bites on my neck and shoulders. “So fucking nice,” I said and grabbed his ass cheeks to grind him against me. He was good with his hand, the perfect amount of friction working my foreskin up over the crown of my head, the lotion and precum making for a nice and easy glide. I opened my eyes to see Kitten staring at me intently, anticipating my orgasm.

This is for you, his expression seemed to say, *only for you.*

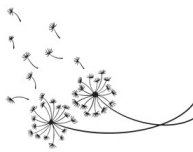
My hips lurched forward, sinking into the heat of his hand, and he whispered right next to my ear, “Give it to me, Cipher. I want it so bad.”

My climax burned through me like a Roman candle, all hot blaze and fiery explosion, sparks of light and shivery thrills of excitement racing through me as I spurted long ropes of cum onto my chest. Kitten continued to milk me gently, using my

ejaculate as lubricant, while his other hand jerked furiously on his cock, giving me dinner *and* a show.

I swiped my finger through my release and painted his bottom lip with it. His initial shock morphed into a heated stare as his sex noises rose to a fevered pitch. I placed one hand over his mouth to muffle the sound so our neighbors wouldn't hear. He giggled and licked my hand, then smiled wide and blew his very impressive load on top of mine.

I was sweaty and covered in cum, the sexy little monster above me glowing with triumph. Leaning down until we were nose-to-nose, he said to me smugly, "Good job."



EVERYONE WANTED to pet the cat. Not Kitten but Little Miss Purrfect. They held court in the common area, the cat basking in her status of local god, and Kitten her human handler. No matter who passed through, the cat was down for pets, and Kitten charmed them all.

Was I jealous? Fuck yes. I wanted to whip out my dick and piss all over my boyfriend to mark him as my territory. I wanted to drag him, caveman style, into our bedroom and lock the door behind me. I wanted to shield him with my body and make everyone answer a riddle before speaking to him like a troll under a bridge, and then tell them all to go fuck off.

But no sane person would do that.

Meanwhile, I'd made zero headway with Operation Find Kitten's Brother, though I had made progress in securing gunpowder to make my own bullets. Gizmo was fashioning me a press, and I already had a lead on a firing range that would sell me their empty casings. Only the police and local militia were allowed firearms within city limits, and the sale of ammo was banned as well, which was bullshit. Rabid attacks were still a thing, as was the need for self-defense.

The other good news was that Kitten's inhaler had arrived, and we picked it up from the health department the very same day. I had Gizmo affix a little chain with a carabiner to hook to his belt loop, so it was always on him.

Which left me with a lot of time to read vampire novels and spy on my boyfriend.

"Why are you always lurking in doorways, weirdo?" Macon asked, shining with sweat and fresh from the fields or the court or wherever it was that he'd found a pick-up game involving a ball he could chase. His mission was to find out as much as he could about Promised Land—where it was located, what it took to get inside, and whether it was some creepy religious cult or just some good, old-fashioned prepper types. So far, all we had was: Alabama.

"I'm not lurking," I told him. "I'm just keeping an eye on Kitten."

"Well, why don't you go in there and sit with him instead of spying on him like a pervy stalker."

"I'm not interested in making friends."

"But you're so good at it," he said and punched my shoulder. "Dinner is rice and beans tonight. Teresa keeps blowing our money on candy. Artemis had to have a talk with her today, so if you see her sneaking sweets, give a heads-up."

I was far more concerned about the sweet-talking currently happening between Kitten and a strapping youth with a toothsome smile and all his limbs. Just to rub salt in the wound, the young man was clearly fascinated by Kitten's pussy. It was only a cat for Chrissakes.

"At least pretend to watch television," Macon said.

I took his advice and slouched to the opposite end of the couch from Kitten, not wanting to give the appearance of cramping his style, except that I definitely was because after a few menacing glares, his paramours scattered like Rabids in the light. Kitten immediately slid over and plastered himself to my side, so I reached my arm around him, not even minding when the cat rubbed up against me as well. Seat's taken, as far

as I was concerned. *Forrest Gump* happened to be playing on the television. It was a ridiculous movie, but Kitten enjoyed it, so I endured.

“My family and I used to celebrate Hanksgiving,” Kitten said to me during a commercial break. The ad was a piece of military propaganda trying to recruit people to the United Forces by showing a couple of idiots cruising around in a Humvee wielding assault rifles, presumably to snipe Rabids like it was some kind of video game. Listen, I got that the Rabid population needed to be brought under control, but these were people’s mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. These were people’s children, for Chrissakes. Maybe we could show just a little respect?

“What’s Hanksgiving?” I asked Kitten.

“We’d pick a Tom Hanks movie to watch after Thanksgiving dinner. This one was always my favorite. My brother liked *Castaway*, and my mom liked *Sleepless In Seattle* or *You’ve Got Mail*.”

“What about your dad?”

“He liked *Toy Story*, but he usually just let the three of us battle it out. What’s your favorite Tom Hanks movie?”

“Probably *A League of Their Own*.”

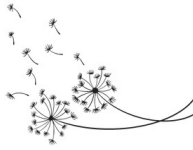
“That’s a good one,” he agreed.

“There’s no crying in baseball,” I reminded him and chucked his chin.

We went back to watching the movie, but it was long as hell, especially with the commercials, and just when it was getting to the sad part—fucking *Jenny*—I reached up to find tears in my eyes and my goddamned nose was clogged, and this was why I didn’t watch Tom Hanks’ movies. They were the perfect blend of heart and bittersweetness. Like, you thought you were doing fine and holding it together and then it just hit you.

I glanced down to see Kitten had fallen asleep with his head in my lap, spared the turmoil of Jenny’s untimely

departure. I swiped at my eyes. Ugh, these fucking feelings would be my undoing.



“I NEED to tell you something, but you can’t get mad about it.”

We were making bullets in Gizmo’s bedroom when Kitten approached me with this request.

“Okay,” I said and waited for him to continue.

“In private.”

Gizmo glanced up at me and adjusted his safety goggles. His green eyes looked huge behind the plastic lenses, and his eyebrows were raised as if there might be trouble brewing. Gizmo and I connected on a lot of things, namely security and our common interest in tools and gear that would make our lives easier and last longer. That said, he tended to shy away from the interpersonal drama of our crew.

“All right,” I said to Kitten. “Let’s go to our room.”

I followed Kitten to our bedroom and shut the door behind us, wondering if he had a rash or something. He was tugging at his shirt, his cat lounging like a fur stole around his shoulders, which was a weird way to hold a cat, but what did I know?

“So, I was talking to this guy,” he began.

“Yeah?” I said, crossing my arms out of habit. Who the fuck was this guy and what was I going to have to do about it?

“He said I looked familiar and asked if I had a brother. I said that I did and I told him his name, and he said that he knew him, that they’d been on the same floor at Prosperity Tower.”

“Go on.”

“So, I asked him if he knew where he was now, and this guy...” He bit down on his lower lip and shuffled around like he was nervous.

“Is your brother all right?” I asked.

“I don’t know. He said he’d only tell me if I did something for him.”

My shoulders tensed up straightaway, temper flaring as my fingertips tingled with the urge to inflict violence. I had murder on my mind. “So, what did he want?” I asked, having my suspicions already.

“He wanted me to give him a blowjob.”

I swallowed and braced myself for the answer to my next question. “And did you?”

“What? No.” He scowled, eyebrows slanted downward. “You really think I’d do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would *you* do that?” he demanded hotly.

“No.”

“Then why do you think that *I’d* do that?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asked.”

“Well I didn’t.”

“Okay,” I said, not wanting to get him worked up. My anger I could handle, but Kitten’s temper was extremely upsetting to me. Anything other than his smiles and laughs put me in a tailspin. “So, just to review, he offered to trade you information for a blowjob, and you said...”

“No,” he practically shouted, hands balled into fists.

I nodded. “So, maybe this guy has information, maybe he doesn’t. Either way he’s a creep, so describe him to me so I can separate him from his balls.”

“Cipher,” he exclaimed. “You can’t do that.”

I was already thinking about logistics, the alleyway beside our building was relatively secluded. If I could lure him there

unsuspectingly...

“Cipher,” Kitten said again. “Stop thinking what you’re thinking. This is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Of course you should tell me if some creep is creeping on you.”

“All he did was try to get a blowjob.”

“From my boyfriend.”

“He doesn’t know that.”

“*Everyone* knows that.”

Kitten rolled his eyes. “He didn’t force me to do anything. He only made the offer. You told me before that’s how things worked at The Admiral.”

I regretted having told him that. Kitten asked too many damn questions, usually when I was high. “Your point?” I said huffily.

“Are you going to get over yourself and talk to him? In a nonviolent way?”

I took a deep breath and tried to regain my composure. Kitten was making some good arguments, and it wouldn’t help our mission to get my ass thrown in jail. “Yes, I’ll talk to him, but if he tries anything with you—”

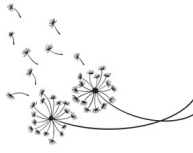
“I know how to defend myself.”

I channeled Artemis’s gift for diplomacy and elected not to argue.

“Promise me you’re not going to do anything reckless and get shipped off to Timbuktu,” he said with a pout, his not-so-secret weapon. “Promise me,” he insisted when I was slow to answer.

“I’ll be civil.”

“You’d better be.”



KNOW THY ENEMY, or at least know the fool who's been hitting on your boyfriend and clearly has a death wish. I stalked the two-bit hustler for the better part of three days, seeing where he lived, who he talked to, and where he spent his time. Ansel was his name, a resident of the fifth floor. What he was doing on our floor was a mystery, unless it was for the sole purpose of seducing my boyfriend.

Ansel worked at the Coca-Cola bottling plant that was just down the road. In packing, I presumed, as I watched him unload crates of empty glass bottles from the back of a delivery truck. With the collapse of the global economy, oil—and by extension, plastic too—was in short supply, which was not only good for the oceans, but it meant that people actually recycled their glass bottles nowadays.

Cities and rural areas had also gone back to their roots, growing and manufacturing whatever they could to feed their dwindling populations and trade with other local economies. Atlanta used to be a logistics and supply chain hub, but because oil and gasoline were scarce, most of the trucks and airplanes sat empty. Around here Coca-Cola was king. Also peanut butter, since Georgia grew a shit-ton of peanuts.

But in the case of one Ansel from the fifth floor, his lunch break was approaching, and after he ate his PB&J sandwich, he'd likely go off on his own for a smoke—we happened to have that particular vice in common—and that was where I planned to appeal to his better nature in giving me the information he may or may not have regarding Kitten's brother.

“Hey there,” I said to the youth, roughly my age, though still with all of his limbs. It wasn't as if I went around constantly comparing limb counts, but a potential rival, certainly. He was, in fact, the same straight-toothed suitor from the day I got bamboozled into watching a Tom Hanks

movie, and I couldn't help but wonder, who was better equipped to care for Kitten? Here was a seemingly well-adjusted young man, holding down a steady job, probably slept at night like a normal person rather than haunting hallways and fire escapes, smiled like he meant it and likely wasn't low-key addicted to opioids.

Who would I become if I stayed here in Atlanta? I didn't see myself toiling at the daily grind for loose change or joining any sort of government entity. I could trade in the black markets, figure out the criminal underbelly of who was truly pulling the strings in this city and do odd jobs for them—nothing too violent or murderous. Stealing from the robber barons who'd managed to hold onto their fortunes sounded right up my alley. A modern-day Robin Hood perhaps?

“You roll your own?” Ansel asked, spying my own choice of slow death.

“Yeah, got into the habit out in Rabid Country.” I used to smoke cigarettes, but when we started scavenging, cigars were sometimes easier to come by, so I'd empty out the tobacco and stuff it in a Ziploc to keep it fresh.

“Out there?” he asked, nodding in the general direction of the chain-link fence that surrounded the city.

“Yeah, I'm from D.C. originally.” I held out my hand. “Cipher.”

“Cipher. Cool name. I'm Ansel.”

“Yeah, I know. You're the guy who tried to get my boyfriend to suck his dick.”

His brow dipped as if trying to remember, and I wondered if he made a habit of soliciting pretty young things for sexual favors on the regular.

“Oh, yeah, well, I'm not sure what he told you—”

“It's fine, Ansel. It's not like you forced him, right?” My smile was all teeth.

“I didn't, I swear.”

He cleared his throat, looking nervous as hell, so I decided to barrel on. “But we are looking for his brother, and if you have any information, I’m willing to trade you for it, not with sex, but with something you can use or sell.”

He studied me, perhaps trying to decide if this was a trick, but the kid seemed relatively unguarded about everything, which was why I’d chosen the direct approach.

“I could really use a mini-fridge,” he said. “Mine doesn’t keep anything cold anymore.”

I snapped my fingers. “Consider it done. Meet me in the fourth-floor common room after your shift, and we’ll talk more then.”

“Cool, hey. Can I try one of those?” He motioned to my cigarettes, so I handed him one I’d already rolled and decided I may as well have another as a reward for sealing the deal. “Your boyfriend’s really cute. Sweet too.”

“I know,” I said and wondered if I was going to have to break this kid’s arm after all.

“Him and his cat.” Ansel smiled, shaking his head. “He reminds me of what people used to be like, you know? People make fun of plague kids, but they’re like, pure.”

I nodded and hoped that he and I didn’t share some sort of plague kid fetish.

“I felt bad about asking, and I didn’t know you two were a thing. I thought maybe you were stalking him or something. You gotta admit, you two make an odd couple. Anyway, I thought maybe he’d be into it. He wasn’t though. Loyalty like that is hard to come by these days.”

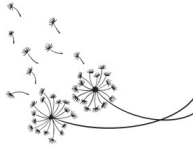
“Sure is,” I said, stumbling over the “odd couple” comment.

He glanced down at his watch. “I better get back or they’ll dock my pay. Think you can throw a couple of those hand-rolled cigs into the deal?”

“You betcha,” I said amiably. Ansel and I were well on our way to being BFFs. “But your information had better be

good.”

“It is. I swear it.”



A FEW HOURS LATER, I was in possession of one refurbished mini-fridge with fresh coolant, thanks to Gizmo, wizard of all things mechanical or technological. Kitten was climbing the walls of the common area, impatient to learn the whereabouts of his brother.

“Do you think we’re an odd couple?” I asked him. The comment had bothered me all day, and I wasn’t sure why.

“Because we’re both boys?” he asked quizzically.

“No, because we’re... different.”

“How are we different?” he asked, and the fact that he didn’t see our differences made me feel a whole hell of a lot better about it all.

“You’re... Team Edward,” I said, reaching for something trivial, “and you like cats.”

“So do you,” he said, almost accusingly. I may have been caught out petting the beastie from time to time. She was a good mouser and tended to peacock about it. “Besides, why does that matter?” he asked.

“It doesn’t, I guess.”

He seemed to be getting more agitated by the second, so I dropped that line of questioning.

“I don’t know why he couldn’t just tell you what he knew when you asked him,” he said.

“Information is currency, sweetness.”

“Must be why you’re so stingy with it,” he snapped, a cool look aimed in my direction.

“That’s not very nice,” I said. I was used to his bratty attitude from time to time, but that barb felt pretty personal. “What’s the problem, Kitten?”

“I tell you everything, even when guys ask me to give them blowjobs, and you don’t tell me anything. Like, where have you been the past three days? All you say is, ‘I’m going out,’ but you don’t tell me where. Yet, you have to know where I am every minute of every day? How is that fair? Don’t you think I worry too?”

Okay, so maybe I didn’t want to admit to him that I’d been stalking his admirer, but I needed to assess Ansel’s threat potential before I approached him, and I was curious about what sort of life the other half lives. Part of me wondered if I could do it too, work a factory job, return to my concrete box, lay down my knives and weapons and just... assimilate.

Regardless, Kitten had really worked himself into a state. I hadn’t realized my absence was bothering him so much. He knew he could reach me by two-way radio any time of day.

“Some of what I do requires secrecy,” I said to him. “And if you were to tell anyone, we both might get into trouble.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“You’re not good at keeping secrets, which is something I really appreciate about you. It’s the reason *why* I trust you, because I don’t have to worry that you’re lying to me.”

Arms crossed, he continued to sulk.

“Come here,” I said, and he reluctantly shuffled over. “I told you I was going to find your brother, and I am. The other thing I’m doing,” and here I nodded pointedly because I didn’t like to mention the bullet-making factory set up just down the hallway, “is technically illegal, and we could get in a lot of trouble if people found out.”

“I feel like you’re hiding things from me,” he said, hurting my heart with his sincerity.

He wasn’t wrong, but I had my reasons. “I arranged for Ansel to meet us here so that you could ask questions too, and hear the story for yourself.”

“That was nice of you.”

“Best boyfriend ever?” I asked hopefully.

“Pretty good,” he conceded.

Ansel arrived a few minutes later, still wearing his red Coca-Cola jumper, and the petty part of me wondered if he was showing off the fact that he could hold down a steady job and fit in with society. Would Kitten prefer to live here with running water and television and ice cream? To be able to go to the supermarket and library with access to a hospital in case of an emergency. His survival rate was probably much higher in the city, if he could learn to watch his back. The sort of life I could offer him was limited in many ways, even if we reached Promised Land.

“Sweet,” Ansel exclaimed, opening and shutting the fridge door. I’d placed an ice-cold bottle of Coke inside to prove its pristine freshness.

“You’d think I’d get tired of these, but I don’t,” he said, twisting the metal cap off the glass bottle using only the pressure of his muscular forearm. I nearly rolled my eyes at that cute parlor trick. Let us see how he did in a cage-full of Rabids.

“So, you knew Santiago?” I asked, getting right to the point.

“Yeah, we were assigned to the same floor in Prosperity Tower. He said he’d left behind his mother and brother, and that his mother was sick, but he didn’t say where he was from, exactly.”

“Was he healthy?” Kitten asked. “Was he well?”

“A little skinny, but otherwise, okay. We went looking for jobs together. He started at the plant with me, but he didn’t last long. He said the work was too hard and the pay was shit, which is true. By the time I’ve paid for rent and food, I barely have enough for a pack of cigarettes.”

“So then what happened?” I asked, not wishing to get into the finer points of Ansel’s budgetary constraints.

“There was a recruiter who came through Prosperity and was offering us all jobs for easy money and a bonus when it was all through.”

“Who was doing the recruiting? Military? Police? Factory work?” I asked.

“None of those,” Ansel said. “It wasn’t the usual kind of gig.”

I wished he would get to the fucking point, especially with the worry etched on Kitten’s face.

“So, what kind of work was it?” I asked.

“Lab work. There’s a team of researchers working on a vaccine over at the university.”

“They needed lab workers?” Kitten asked.

“Not exactly. They needed test subjects. They were doing human trials on a vaccine, and they needed young, healthy people to poke and see how they reacted. They were working with a live virus, so you had to stay onsite to prevent any transmission. And they were paying really, *really* well.”

Kitten was gnawing on his lower lip and fisting the fabric of his shirt. I grabbed one of his hands and squeezed.

“So, did he sign on?” I asked.

“I don’t know for sure, but I never saw him again after that. That was probably two months ago.”

It sounded like easy money for a plague kid new to the city and confused by the many complexities of state-run capitalism, but at what cost?

“Anything you can offer as proof that it was really him?” I asked before we got too invested in his story.

Ansel stared at Kitten. “He said your favorite show growing up was *iCarly*, and that he pretended to hate it, but secretly, he didn’t.”

Kitten gulped and nodded, blinking back tears.

“You got any questions for Ansel?” I asked Kitten.

“Did he ever say if he was coming home?” Kitten asked.

Ansel glanced at me briefly, his tell. “He might’ve said so. I... I don’t really remember.”

Kitten was silent at that so I nodded and said, “Thanks for the intel. I hope you and your mini-fridge are very happy together.” I handed over a few cigarettes as promised.

“Thanks, man, and I hope you find your brother, Josh.” He patted Kitten’s shoulder, and it was fine. It was *just fine*.

After Ansel left, I turned to Kitten. “I’ll figure out which lab it is and see if he’s there. We’ll find him.”

“Why would he do that? Why would he stay here when he was only supposed to get medicine and bring it back home?”

Why would he leave me? That was the real question he was asking.

“I don’t know, sweetness, but I hope you can ask him that yourself real soon.”

SIXTEEN

KITTEN

TWO DAYS after our meeting with Ansel, Cipher came back home with good news. He'd found Santiago at a research facility on the Emory campus, and signed us up for visiting hours the very next day.

Now, after so many months apart, I was finally sitting across from my brother, separated by only a thick, plexiglass window. He appeared to be healthy and well-fed, and other than a shaved head and hospital scrubs, he looked just as I remembered him. I wished that I could hug him, but it was against the rules. My germs might contaminate their study.

“Joshy,” he said with a big smile. “It’s so good to see you, little bro. How you been?”

I was about to launch into a long, rambling story about my adventures with the Assholes leading up to the point at which we arrived here in the city, when I realized he hadn’t asked about Mom.

“Mom is dead,” I said.

“The fever?” Santiago asked, his expression turning grim, but he didn’t seem surprised.

“Yeah.” The fever was the reason her life ended. I waited for him to apologize for not being there or ask me how it happened, but he didn’t.

“So, how did you get to Atlanta?” he said, and the immediate shift in conversation rubbed me wrong.

“A group of scavengers found me and invited me to come along with them. I’m staying with them here in the city. Cipher, the guy you saw, he’s the one who found you for me. He’s my boyfriend.” I glanced out the window to where Cipher was pacing the little courtyard between brick buildings. He said he didn’t like hospitals, probably worried they were going to try to poke him too.

“Boyfriend?” Santiago asked, spreading his legs wider and crossing his arms, making himself bigger. Cipher did the same thing too.

“Yes. Boyfriend,” I said, daring him to challenge me on it. “He’s one of the scavengers who found me.” Cipher could have kept on going and ignored me altogether, but he saw that I was in danger, and he stepped in to help because that’s just who he was.

“Is he nice to you?” Santiago asked.

“He’s very nice to me. How about you? How’d you get here so fast?”

“I hitched a ride with a military convoy that was headed to Fort Benning. They dropped me off here. Tried pretty hard to recruit me first.”

It had probably taken him two days at most to get here, which meant he could have scouted around for medicine and come back home, but he hadn’t. He’d stayed, knowing the trouble I was in at home. We stared at each other for a moment, and I worked up the nerve to ask what I’d been wondering all along. “Why did you leave?”

“To get medicine.”

“But there is no medicine. And no cure. And no vaccine.”

“I guess I wanted to believe there might be,” he said.

I had wanted to believe it too, so I let him convince me.

“But then you got here, and realized there wasn’t, and still you stayed?” I asked.

Santiago stared down at his hands. His fingernails were clean, no dried blood from killing Rabids, or caked-in dirt

from burying the bodies of raiders, no soot from tending a fire or calluses from chopping wood.

“It was really hard, Josh. Being there with her while she was sick, watching her slowly die and knowing there was nothing I could do about it. I had to get out of there. We should have left a long time ago.”

All of that may have been true, but it still didn't explain why he'd abandoned me.

“It was hard for me too,” I said, “even harder after you left. Why didn't you take me with you?”

“You didn't want to go. You didn't want to leave Mom behind.”

“You could have convinced me.”

“I wasn't sure we could make it out there on our own, and I didn't want something to happen to me and leave you all alone.”

“But you did leave me all alone,” I said with a knot in my chest. “I was waiting for you to come home.”

Santiago nodded, dropping his gaze. “I know. I'm sorry.”

There wasn't much more he could say. It was hard for us both. Santiago chose to leave, and I chose to stay. I could hold a grudge, but family was in short supply, and I was lucky to still have my brother.

“Are you really okay in here?” I asked. He was paler than usual and his eyes looked a bit dull.

“The nurses here are really nice. We've got a television in our rooms and a game room and library to help pass the time. They let us interact with some of the other patients too, so it doesn't get too lonely.”

“Are you sick?”

“So far, so good. The doctors say I have a strong immune system. I've been exposed to a few variants already, and nothing yet.”

“What happens if you catch the fever?”

“The chance of that happening is very low.”

According to them, I thought, and recognized Cipher’s voice in my head. In some ways, my brother was a hero for risking his life to help the researchers find a vaccine, but again I couldn’t help thinking, what about me?

“Why would you choose to do this instead of getting a normal job?” I asked.

“I felt guilty for leaving you. I thought if I made enough money, I could get us set up here and then come get you.”

“You wanted me here?”

“Of course I want you here. You’re all I’ve got left.”

Everyone went away. My dad, my mom, my friends and neighbors, even my own brother left. Cipher and the others would be heading off to Promised Land soon, and where would I be then?

“How much longer do you have to stay in here?” I asked.

“Six more weeks. If I don’t get sick by then, they can monitor me remotely. They want me to stay in the city, though. They’ll provide housing, food, everything. We’ll be set up.”

Cipher had returned and was hanging out near the reception area to give me and my brother some privacy, keeping an eye on me, nonetheless. Always standing guard. My brother glanced over at Cipher, eyes narrowed, then looked at me again.

“So, will you hang around for me, Josh?” Santiago asked.

“You didn’t ask about Little Miss Purrfect,” I said, thinking of all the times Cipher gave me his leftovers so that I could feed some of it to my cat, how he congratulated her every time she caught a roach or a mouse and didn’t complain about the smell of the litter box in our room. He watched out for her, just like he did the rest of us, and even let her sleep in our bed with us at night. And every once in a while, I’d catch him scratching her head.

“You brought her with you?” Santiago asked, shocked that I would do such a thing.

“Of course I did. She’s part of our family.”

“Wow, okay. So, how is she?” he asked.

I looked him hard in the eye. “She’s fantastic.”



“HOW WAS YOUR VISIT?” Cipher asked me once we’d left the lab and were making our way back home.

“Fine.”

He glanced over, probably expecting my usual detailed play-by-play, but I’d left my brother feeling conflicted and more than a little gloomy. He wanted me to wait for him. Again. And his reason for leaving me was that he didn’t think he could take care of me, or that I could take care of myself, so what had changed?

I said to Cipher, “He’s halfway through the trial. He’ll be released in six weeks. He says we’ll be set up by then. The lab wants him to stay here so they can monitor him.” I watched him, looking for any sort of reaction, but he was closed off and quiet.

“So, you’re going to stay here?” he asked after a while.

Is that what he wanted? Was he relieved to be moving on without me? If I stayed here, that was one less mouth to feed, and one less person he had to care for. Maybe that was why he’d been so motivated to help me find my brother, to be rid of me like everyone else.

“I guess so,” I said, hoping he’d try to argue me out of it.

He didn’t.



TERESA HAD BEEN HOARDING candy ever since we arrived in Atlanta. The morning after visiting my brother, Artemis found her in bed with almost an entire frosted birthday cake that the church ladies had given her as leftovers, a fork in each hand, and half of it already eaten. She wouldn't let Artemis take it away from her, even after she puked from eating too much. Teresa told me her side of the story while I helped her clean up. Artemis put the remainder of the cake in the common area for someone else to eat, which upset Teresa even more. Now, Teresa was bawling and Artemis was trying to explain to her why the human body needed more than just sugar to function. I decided it was probably best to give them some space.

Cipher and Macon had already left that morning to gather intel on Promised Land without me. I wanted to go to the library and see if I could find the third book in our vampire series, but I wasn't supposed to go out alone, so I knocked on Gizmo's door, hoping I could convince him to leave his room for a bit.

“Gizmo, you in there? It's me, Kitten.”

The door unlocked automatically thanks to some contraption Gizmo worked up when we first arrived, on account of him not wanting to get up every time someone was at the door. The room looked like the Death Star exploded, with disassembled appliances and bits of tech scattered everywhere. The only part of the room that was absent of wires and metal contraptions was the top bunk, which belonged to Macon.

Gizmo was hunched over his work table with a jeweler's loupe over one eye and the light shining on the very tiny pieces of a watch face. Gizmo had tooled all sorts of attachments for his hand-tweezers, a scalpel, tiny pliers, and even a soldering iron, and now had a side hustle of repairing watches in addition to modifying prostheses. People paid him in food or money or bartered with other broken objects that he could fix or take apart. A lot of times, he did it for free.

No disrespect to Gizmo, but their room smelled rank—a mixture of body odor and spoiled food. Gizmo rarely left his

room, so we delivered his breakfast, lunch, and dinner to him every day. If we didn't, he'd forget to eat. But we didn't clean up after him, and there were bags of old takeout and piles of dirty clothes everywhere. Not only that, I could smell him from across the room. Gizmo was a no-nonsense sort of guy, so I asked him, straight up, "When's the last time you showered?"

"Showered?" he said like it had never occurred to him.

"Had a bath?"

"How long have we been here?"

"Almost three weeks. Have you not showered since we got here?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to get my hand wet."

"Can't you remove it?"

"I don't want anyone to steal it."

Gizmo and Cipher both had an intense fear that someone would take their prostheses. Cipher usually slept wearing his in case there was an emergency in the middle of the night, and Gizmo stored his hand under his pillow. Artemis seemed less concerned about her arm, but I rarely saw her without it.

"I can hold onto it for you," I offered.

He glanced up for the first time. "I'd prefer if Cipher did it."

I didn't blame him. I'd want Cipher watching my back too.

"What about Artemis?" I asked.

"She wouldn't hurt someone to prevent a theft."

"But Cipher would?"

He set down the watch he'd been working on and turned to me. "Artemis sees her arm as a tool that can be replaced. I see my hand as a functioning part of my body that is critical to my

survival. Cipher feels the same way about his leg and would act accordingly.”

“Do you think someone might do that?”

“There are a lot of people in this city in need of hands.”

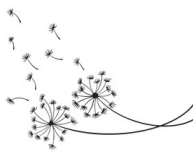
“Good point.”

I mulled it over, and decided that if the goal was to get Gizmo to shower, I was going to need to call in reinforcements.

“Cipher,” I said into the two-way radio. “We have a situation.”

He responded almost immediately. “What is it? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, but Gizmo needs a hand.”



GIZMO WASN'T JOKING about being protective of his prosthetic hand. He wouldn't even let us keep it in the bedroom but insisted that we bring it with us into the shower so he could have eyes on it while he bathed. It smelled a little funky, and I hoped he planned to clean it too.

“He hasn't showered since we got here?” Cipher whispered in my ear so that Gizmo wouldn't overhear us discussing it.

“Nope.”

“I didn't realize it had gotten this bad.”

“I don't think he leaves his room very often either. And there was another situation this morning with Teresa.” I relayed the cake incident and the fight between her and Artemis.

Cipher shook his head. “We've gotta get out of here. I hope Macon is having better luck than me.”

I tried not to take it personally that he was so anxious to leave. This was their plan all along, one they made long before they met me. As if on cue, Macon rounded the corner of the bathroom, limping and red faced and snorting like a wounded bull. His clothes were dirty, his lip was split, and one of his cheeks was swollen too.

“What the hell happened to you?” Cipher asked.

“I got into a fight. Some shitheads tried to take my goddamned shoes.”

“Kids?”

“No, three grown-ass men.”

“The fuck? I told you not to get such nice shoes.”

“I need the arch support.”

“So, who won the fight?”

“I was doing all right until one of them pulled a knife. I could have done the same, but I got the fuck out of there instead.”

“Fuck,” Cipher said. “Why didn’t you call us?”

“I dropped my two-way in the scuffle.”

“Did you tell the cops?”

“Fuck no. I’m not trying to get my ass in trouble, especially not now.” He smiled, causing his lip to start bleeding again. “I got a location on Promised Land, though, confirmed by two separate sources. It’s about 50 miles north of Birmingham, straight up State Road 65. No reports of murder, cannibalism, or incest, just hard work and good, strong morals.”

“Morality is subjective, but that is good overall.” Cipher said, clapping him on the back. He then stared at me with a curious look.

“What the fuck’s going on here anyway?” Macon asked, eyeing the two of us, both fully dressed and acting as bodyguards for Gizmo, who was now wrapping up his shower.

“Did you know Gizmo hasn’t been showering or leaving your room?”

“He hasn’t been sleeping either,” Macon said. “He stays up all night working on body parts like he’s fucking Dr. Frankenstein.”

“Let’s go get Artemis. We need to make a plan.”

After Cipher returned Gizmo’s hand, and I politely suggested that he swab it out with some rubbing alcohol, I went back with Gizmo to his room and helped him clean up the trash and sort through his dirty clothes while Cipher and Macon went to Artemis’s room to discuss preparations. When their meeting was finished, and everyone was clear on what they must do to get ready for the trip, Cipher collected me and brought me back to our bedroom. He offered to get me some noodles, but I wasn’t feeling well, so I told him I was tired, then buried myself under the covers and tried not to cry.

I was grateful to Cipher for helping me find my brother and to the rest of our crew for caring for me while we made our way here, but my sadness overwhelmed my gratitude. This was the end of our journey together. They’d go on to Promised Land and start a new life there, and I’d be stuck here, waiting for my brother to be released from the lab.

If the fever didn’t get him first.

SEVENTEEN

CIPHER

“WE CAN’T JUST LEAVE him here,” I said to Macon during a lull in between customers. We were selling the last of Gizmo’s creations in preparation for our trip to Promised Land in two days. Since Atlanta money was only good within the city limits, whatever we made here would be spent on food and supplies. I was trying to arrange for transport from here to Birmingham for our crew, and I may have had a lead with a Coca-Cola delivery driver through Ansel. Our only loose end now was Kitten.

“I still can’t believe he doesn’t want to come with us,” Macon said.

“His brother is here,” I reminded him.

“The same brother who left his ass in South Carolina.”

“Yeah, it’s fucked up, but that’s his family.”

“I don’t know, man. Seems to me like *we’re* his family,” Macon grumbled.

I couldn’t argue with that. “It’s not like I can force him to come with us,” I said, though I had thought about it. Kitten might be pissed at me for abducting him, but at least he’d be safe. As for me, it was a punch to the nuts whenever I thought about not having him to cuddle in bed, not seeing that gorgeous smile of his light up the room, or even arguing with him over every little thing from what to eat for dinner to how to fold our towels.

“Does he know we want him to come with us?” Macon asked.

“Of course he knows.”

“But did you, like, say it to him explicitly?”

“I mean, I guess not, but isn’t it obvious?”

Macon shook his head. “Cipher, you’re one of the smartest guys I know while also being the biggest idiot. Your feelings aren’t obvious to anyone, not even yourself half the time. The kid probably thinks he’s not wanted.”

“How could he possibly think that?” I’d wanted him since the beginning and more with each passing day. I’d barter, beg, and steal to keep him with me. I might even kidnap him for his own good.

“I’ve been wondering why he seems sad as hell lately. It’s because you’ve been so caught up with getting the fuck out of here that he thinks you want to leave him,” Macon said.

“That’s ridiculous. He’s one of us. He knows that.”

“Listen, my dude, you gotta make this right.”

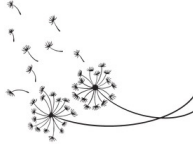
“Okay, but how?” I was starting to panic. What if I’d already fucked things up beyond repair?

“Ask him to dinner tonight. Take him somewhere nice. I know a little Italian bistro, very romantic. Let him order whatever he wants, dessert too. Don’t be cheap. And while you’re there, ask him to come with us. Make sure he knows he’s wanted.”

“I’ve never asked him on a date before,” I admitted, another fuck up on my part. I’d been so focused on finding his brother and keeping all of us out of trouble that I hadn’t done anything to make him feel special.

“No offense, but you kind of have tunnel vision for surviving,” Macon said. “I appreciate that about you, but surviving ain’t living, it’s just staying alive, you know what I mean?”

I gave him a blank look at that convoluted pearl of wisdom and he clapped my back heartily. “Fix this thing with our boy and get Kitten on the train to Promised Land.”



WHEN WE RETURNED to the dormitory, I found Kitten hanging with the girls in the laundry room, helping them wash, dry, and fold everything we’d need for our trip. How could he think he wasn’t wanted? He’d been with us every step of the way since we met nearly three months ago. Of course he was part of our tribe. He named us, for Chrissakes.

How could I possibly leave him behind?

“Hey, cutie, how was your day?” I asked as I sidled up behind him where he was folding clothes into neat little piles. I wrapped my arms around his waist, hooked my thumbs on his belt loops, and kissed the top of his head.

“Fine,” he said, hardly acknowledging me. Artemis gave me a look—she must have noticed the icy chill in the air—and I wondered if he’d said anything to her.

“I want to take you out to dinner tonight, sweetness, something special, so let’s go get cleaned up.”

“You do?” he asked as if it was out of the realm of possibility.

“Yep, I’ve got some money to burn, and I want to spend it on you.”

“Okay,” he said cautiously, while the girls smiled and nodded at him in encouragement. “Where will we go?” he asked as I hooked my arm around his shoulders to lead him away.

“A little Italian place around the corner. You like pasta?”

“I love pasta. And garlic bread. And meatballs.”

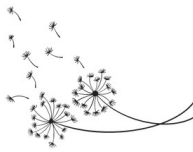
“How many meatballs can you fit in that tummy of yours?” I asked and poked his middle.

“A lot,” he said with a smile.

“I bet.”

“Mmmmm, I’m hungry already,” he said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

One thing I knew about my guy, the way to his heart was through his stomach.



AN HOUR OR SO LATER, we were both cleaned up and dressed in our city best. Kitten was sitting across from me with his hair still damp from the shower. The candlelight gave his warm brown skin a golden glow. Morning, afternoon, or night, I hadn’t found a light yet that didn’t flatter him. So soft and lovely, he had no idea the effect he had on me or those around him. Pure, as Ansel had said, but fierce too.

Looking over the menu, he tilted his head to one side and he said absently, “I know this song.”

I hadn’t even realized music was playing, but Kitten heard music wherever he went, and always commented on whether he knew the song or not, as if looking for some cultural touchstone to connect him with the rest of society after being in isolation for so long.

“Would you ever want to learn an instrument?” I asked. I could do more than simply keep him housed and fed. In the right environment—somewhere safe—I could help him discover his talents and pursue his interests.

“I’ve played around on a few instruments. I like the sound a guitar makes. You can feel it in your fingers and in your bones.”

I almost told him that there would be instruments in Promised Land and people who might be able to teach him how to play, but I held my tongue.

“There are so many options to choose from,” he said, returning his attention to the menu. “Most of these I’ve never tried before.”

“Do you want me to help you pick?” I asked and he nodded gratefully. “Do you like white sauce or red sauce?”

“Both?”

“How about we order one of each and share?”

“Okay.”

When the server returned, I ordered the classics, spaghetti with meatballs and chicken Alfredo with extra garlic bread. Kitten still needed fattening up, especially if we were going to be hiking part of the way to Promised Land. But even if he decided to stay here, winter was coming, and the heating in these buildings wasn’t so great.

The thought of Kitten alone in that concrete box put a hollow ache in my stomach.

After ordering for us both, I laid my hand across the table as an invitation for him to take it. He smiled shyly and twined his fingers with mine. How could I possibly give up the simple pleasure of holding his hand?

“You look very handsome,” I said. With his new haircut, his curls were now relegated to the top of his head, shaped in an artful way. At the moment his ringlets were neat and tidy, but I also liked the messy bed head look he had going in the mornings.

“Thank you. You look nice too. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear a shirt with a collar before.”

I popped it for effect and Kitten smiled.

“I realized today that I’ve never taken you out on a proper date,” I said. “I’m new at this boyfriend stuff, so you’ll have to let me know when I’m doing it wrong.”

“You’re not,” he said, eyes shining and with a note of melancholy to his voice that was likely due to our looming departure.

“You’ve seemed a little bit down ever since you saw your brother,” I said, hoping he’d open up to me before I laid it all on the line.

“I’m sort of mad at him,” he said softly, as though he was ashamed to admit it.

I was pissed at Santiago too. As the eldest, he should have handled their mother’s situation himself or taken Kitten with him, not left him all alone to bear the burden of her death. It was dangerous for Santiago to leave him like that, and selfish, but I kept all of that to myself. Besides, it wasn’t like I had the moral high ground after what I did to my own family.

“Because he left?” I asked. Kitten nodded, blinking rapidly, probably to stave off tears. “It’s okay to be mad at him. He shouldn’t have left you behind.”

“Everyone leaves,” Kitten said with a note of finality. He sighed and pulled his hand away. Macon was right. He was feeling lost and abandoned, thinking we—or I—didn’t want him, but he was wrong.

“Today Macon pointed out something that I did that was very foolish of me,” I said.

His gaze returned to me, open and curious. “What’s that?”

“I didn’t tell you how much it would upset me if you didn’t come with us. How I wouldn’t want to stargaze in the woods without you, and how empty my sleeping bag would be, how I’d rather lose my leg than lose you.”

“Which leg?” he asked with a teasing grin, the little shit.

“Either one. Both. I knew you’d be a heartbreaker, but I didn’t think you’d be breaking mine so soon.”

He bit his plush lower lip and said cautiously, “You want me to come with you?”

“Yes. I thought you knew that already because you *are* one of us. You are wanted by everyone, and me especially. I never

want to lose you. And if you're not ready to come right away, I can stay here with you and work at the bottling plant until your brother gets out."

"You can't abandon the others."

"I might be able to convince them to stay, or we can meet up with them later."

"I wouldn't want you to have to choose, Cipher. They're your family."

"You're my family too, and don't tell anyone else this, but you might be my favorite."

He smiled, and wiped at his eyes. "You might be my favorite too. Most of the time."

I took his hand again and we sat in silence, simply staring at each other. If there were a plate of spaghetti between us, we'd probably be sucking on the same noodle.

"So, what do you want to do, cutie? I'm up for making a new plan, so long as we're together."

"I want to go with you to Promised Land, to see it for myself. Maybe it is a place where we can be safe and happy."

"What about your brother?"

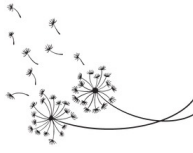
"If I tell him where we're going, he can join us later, can't he?"

"Of course. We might even be able to come back and visit."

"That's what I want then, to go with you."

My heart squeezed and I absently rubbed at my chest. The smile on my face was so big it made my cheeks hurt. "You got it," I said.

After so many years of just surviving, I finally felt like I had something—and someone—to live for.



TRUE TO HIS PROMISE, Kitten demolished the meatballs and did a number on the chicken Alfredo too. The garlic bread was a goner. He was studying the dessert menu when something across the patio caught his attention. I followed his gaze to where a middle-aged man sat, eyes red-rimmed and watery, skin a little sallow. There were beads of sweat dotting his forehead despite the chill of the evening. He wore a suit and tie, the latter of which was now undone and knotted loosely around his neck like a noose. Most suspicious of all, was the way he stared hungrily at Kitten, and for once, I didn't think it was in a sexual manner.

“Cipher, do you think he's—” Kitten said at the same time the man lunged from his chair and began to shamble his way in a decidedly Rabid-like fashion toward us. I leapt from my seat and flipped the table to put a barrier between the man and ourselves. Dishes shattered and silverware went flying as I angled the tabletop like a shield. The restaurant's patrons and staff started screaming and running in all directions. Some had climbed on tables and were shrieking for help.

“Stay down,” I shouted at Kitten loud enough for him to hear me above the chaos. My machete in one hand and my hunting knife in the other, I played a game of chicken with the Rabid, each of us dodging and parrying from left to right.

“Come and get it, big guy,” I said to the Rabid. Now that he was up close I could see the pearlescent film forming over his eyes and the faint white webbing in his irises. A foamy spit gathered at the corners of his mouth as he snapped at me, in hunger or frustration. The virulent parasite had taken over.

I faked left and he lunged, grasping for me with both arms. I pulled back and it took only a split-second for him to right himself and lunge at me again. Distantly, I heard a man shouting, “Everyone please remain calm and do not engage

with the Rabid. Authorities are on the way. Again, please do not engage...”

But by the time Rabid Control arrived, this man would have made a chicken dinner out of any one of us, and it sure as shit wasn't going to be me or Kitten.

“You hungry? Come on then, big fella,” I said and beckoned him closer. The Rabid growled and bared his teeth in response; long gobs of drool hung from his lower lip like a Saint Brenard. I swiveled the table so that Kitten remained shielded, then dropped low to the ground. Crouching down on my prosthetic leg (and appreciating the souped-up hydraulics of my bionic knee), I swung out with my other leg and swept the Rabid's ankles out from under him. He landed on the cobblestone with a magnificent thud, and before he could regain his footing, I was on him. One long vertical slash from the navel upward, like gutting an animal. Messy but effective, the maneuver incapacitated him long enough for me to sever his spinal cord and ensure the fucker was dead as a doornail.

I was sitting on a pile of guts and gore, still catching my breath when the police and Rabid Control finally arrived. The law of the land was that you called the authorities whenever a Rabid was spotted but were allowed to defend yourself if attacked. Luckily there were a few witnesses who'd hung around and offered testimony on my behalf. The man had been dining alone, so there was no companion to question or charge. Whoever let this man out on the streets was definitely getting paid a visit.

One of the staff offered me a change of clothing, but I didn't want to remove my weapons in case there happened to be another attack. Kitten, still crouched behind the overturned table, was visibly shaken and had already hit the inhaler a few times when I leaned down and said to him, “If you puke up that fancy meal, you're not getting dessert.”

He managed a weak smile, and gazing up at me, said, “I can't tell if I'm terrified or turned on right now.”

I dragged him to me by his shirt collar and kissed him, gently, on the mouth. “Why not both?”



WE TOOK our dessert to go, and the restaurant even comped our meal. I told the manager she might want to invest in better security and screening, to prevent something like that from happening again. Having a Rabid on the loose really fucked up the dining experience. I'd be deducting one star from my Yelp review.

Kitten's appetite returned once we arrived home, and he devoured both the tiramisù and a cannoli with the tenacity of a lioness with her kill. "Stress eating," he said, though he did offer me a few bites.

After we'd showered, cleaned my weapons, bagged my clothing for the local incinerator, and brushed our teeth, we lay in bed together with our stomachs uncomfortably full and Kitten said to me, "That was bananas. One minute we were figuring out what to get for dessert and the next minute, you were defending our lives."

Even with the Rabid attack, I considered our first date a success. I hadn't expected to have to go into combat mode while romancing Kitten, but that was the problem with city living: you were lulled into a false sense of security and then boom, there was a Rabid munching on your throat.

"That's why you need to always have a weapon with you," I told him. "You don't have to be afraid, but you need to be aware."

"If you hadn't been there..."

"Then you would have run, and the Rabid would have gone after someone else."

"That's not what you did."

"We talked about this already. I've been doing on-the-job training. You're still an apprentice."

“But how will I get better if I don’t practice?”

“We’ll work more on self defense when we get to Promised Land, but you also have to know when you’re outgunned.”

His thoughtful look turned sly, and his eyelids dipped coquettishly. “You were so hot back there.”

My neck grew warm, bashful all of a sudden at his praise. I should be used to Kitten’s advances, but he always managed to catch me off-guard. “You like it when I save your life, huh?” I slid a hand across his navel, to a place where he was particularly sensitive, and he shivered under my light touch.

“Yeah, turns me on. I wish I wasn’t so full right now, or I might have to do something about it.”

My mind ran through a number of creative sex positions until Kitten threw me for another loop and asked, “Do you think there might be children in Promised Land?”

I hadn’t really considered it. I guess I’d gotten used to not seeing them around. “Maybe. There might even be a school.”

“I wonder what I’ll do there. I can’t read vampire novels and eat ice cream all day.”

He did a hell of a lot more than that, and he was always willing to help out where needed. “There will be chores, I’m sure. Hopefully you’ll find something you like.”

“What about you? What will you do if there are no Rabids to slay?”

“I guess I’ll have to retire.”

He smiled. “Take up wood carving?”

“Why not?”

But it did get me thinking. What would a guy like me do in a place like Promised Land? Milk cows? Slaughter animals. I was good at killing Rabids, but I wouldn’t say I enjoyed it. Surely there were people acting in a security capacity or something similar. Maybe I could do that?

I turned onto my side so that I could gaze down on him. My fingers drifted lazily over his smooth skin, across his collarbone and down the center of his chest. I blew on his nipples just to see them pop up like little brown buttons.

“Do you like pitching or catching?” he asked as his own hand meandered southward and edged under the waistband of his briefs.

What an odd question, I thought. “Neither. I can barely swing a bat.” He shot me a perplexed look. “Are we talking about baseball?” I asked.

He giggled and without knowing why, I found myself smiling too.

“Sex, Cipher. One person pitches and one catches.”

“Oh,” I said, still a little lost. “Ohhhh. I guess I don’t know for sure. I haven’t done either yet, but it would probably take some serious drugs or alcohol for me to relax enough to catch. I’m wound a bit tight.”

“You haven’t done that before?”

“Nope.”

“But I thought you were, like...”

“A slut?”

“I didn’t say *that*.”

“Anal takes some preparation, and a bit of recovery too until you get used to it, or so I’ve heard. I’ve never trusted anyone with that or expected anyone to trust me. You’re the first person I’ve ever fallen asleep with, Kitten. In case you hadn’t noticed, my armor has armor.”

He smiled. “That actually makes me feel a little better. I thought you were waiting for me to catch up.”

“I told you before, I don’t want to rush anything with you. Having this,” I motioned between us, “is more important to me than sex.”

“You don’t mind if we wait?”

“No. Not at all.”

“I’m worried about it hurting. That’s a sensitive place. And what if I have to poop?”

I smiled at his lack of filter. I wouldn’t want it any other way. “I don’t know about pooping, but you definitely don’t want to be running away from Rabids right after anal.”

“Remember when people used to say, ‘up your butt and around the corner?’”

“Yeah,” I chuckled.

“That’s literally where your dick goes.”

“Pretty much.”

I waited for him to say more, content to watch him work his way through the mysteries of anal sex.

“But I know that I want it to be you,” he said at last. “My first time up the butt and around the corner. You can’t get mad at me though if I poop on your dick.”

“That’s almost as sexy as when you say weiner,” I teased.

“Yeah, I’m hard,” he said and pulled down his underwear to show me.

“Same here.” I placed his hand against my own.

“You want to race me to the finish line? We can see who blows first.”

Without waiting for me to catch up, he squirted some lotion onto his hand, wrapped his fingers around his dick, and with a rushed countdown, started tugging. I grabbed for my own, then rolled over on top of him, squishing him despite his laughing protests that he might puke. I pinned him underneath me so that I could kiss him while we both stroked ourselves feverishly to get off.

“I win,” Kitten said, chest heaving, while I reached for a t-shirt to wipe us off. “Not that shirt. I just washed it.” He rolled out of bed and padded over to the sink for a damp rag, then considerately cleaned both of us.

“Thanks, cutie. That was fun. Come back to bed now. I’m lonely.”

He snuggled back under the covers, and I kissed his forehead and the tip of his nose. Was I doting on him? Fuck yes. With his eyelids growing heavy, content in his post-orgasm bliss, I predicted he’d pass out at any moment.

“Do you ever want children?” he asked sleepily, surprising me yet again.

“I don’t know. Seems like hard times for raising kids. And I don’t know if I’d be a good dad.”

“You’d be good at it though.”

I flicked at one of the curls that perpetually kissed his forehead. There wasn’t enough time in the day for all the ways I wanted to touch him. “Yeah? How do you know?”

“From the way you take care of me and Little Miss Purrfect and Teresa, and the others too. I hope there are kids there. I miss the sound of children laughing. Is that weird?”

“No, it’s not weird at all. It’s beautiful and sort of tragic.”

He burrowed down deeper against my chest with his soft exhales ghosting against my skin. I listened to his breathing even out, the rhythm of his heart beating alongside my own.

“I hope there are children there,” he murmured again before his eyes closed for good.

“Me too, sweetness.”

EIGHTEEN

KITTEN

WE VISITED Santiago at the lab again the next day so that I could say goodbye to him before we left. Like before, he sat across from us behind the plexiglass barrier, looking tired but alert.

“This is Cipher,” I said to my brother. I wanted to introduce them, and for Santiago to know I was in good hands.

“Good to meet you, man,” Santiago said. “I’d shake your hand but...”

“It’s cool,” Cipher said. Slouched back in the visitor’s chair, he studied my brother with the same cool, assessing gaze he gave to any stranger.

“Thanks for taking care of my brother,” Santiago said.

“You’re welcome.”

Neither of them said another word, so I broke the awkward silence with, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Santiago said. “Bored as hell, but no signs of the fever.”

“That’s good, and just five more weeks until you get out?”

“If all goes as planned.”

“And if it doesn’t?” I asked.

“Then they’ll keep me in here longer.”

What did that mean, exactly? That if he contracted the fever, they’d keep him here indefinitely? What if he didn’t get

better?

“What if the vaccine doesn’t work?” I asked, but Santiago only shrugged his shoulders. “Are you scared?” After seeing what the virus did to our mother, I knew exactly how terrible it could get. I wouldn’t want my brother to go through that. I wouldn’t want *anyone* to go through that.

Santiago shrugged again. He’d always had a habit of hiding his emotions, just like Cipher, in a way. “It is what it is,” he said at last.

I glanced between my brother and my boyfriend, two brick walls in the shape of men, and decided to forge ahead with telling Santiago my plans. “I’m not staying in Atlanta, Santi.”

He sat up a little straighter. “Where are you going?”

“To a place called Promised Land. We’re leaving tomorrow. I’m sorry I can’t wait for you to get out, but you’re welcome to join us when your contract with the lab is up.”

“What’s Promised Land?” he said.

“It’s a commune north of Birmingham,” Cipher said. “We’re going to go check it out, see if it’s friendly, and if it is, we may stay for a while.”

“And you’re taking my brother with you?” Santiago asked, eyes narrowed with suspicion. I wasn’t sure if his reaction was because he was worried about me or because he didn’t think I could handle the trip.

“Yeah, I am,” Cipher said. He knocked his knee against mine and stared at my brother as if daring him to say something about it.

“Can I talk to my brother alone?” Santiago said.

Cipher glanced at me, and I nodded. He squeezed my hand and said, “I’ll be outside if you need me,” then sauntered toward the exit with his typical tough guy swagger.

“How well do you know this guy, Josh?” Santiago asked after Cipher had left.

“He’s saved my life three or four times now, so I’d say we’re pretty tight.”

Santiago searched my face for a moment, then said, “You’re mad at me.”

I shrugged because we both knew it was true.

“I said I was sorry,” he said.

“I know.”

“Is that why you’re leaving?”

“No. I want to be with Cipher, but I also want to stay with our other friends too. We take care of each other, like a family, and I don’t want to be left behind.” Santiago swallowed and I could tell he was upset, but I believed this was what was best for me, just as he’d decided what was best for him. “I’m going to leave a map with Ansel in case you want to join us. He still works for the bottling plant. You can find him there.”

“So, you’ve made up your mind already?”

“Yeah, I have. I’m sorry I can’t wait for you.”

He nodded and pursed his lips. “Was it bad?” he said after a moment. “When Mom died?”

It was bad, but it could have been so much worse.

“She was really sick in the end. She would have turned Rabid except for Cipher...” I turned to where his shadow haunted the courtyard. I could tell from his stiff gait and the compulsive way he smoked his cigarette that he was stressed. “Cipher took care of her for me. For us.” I glanced back at my brother and he nodded, staring down at his lap.

Santiago said to me, “Remember when we built that tree fort with Lucas and the two of us decided you were too little to come up and hang with us, so we made you prove yourself by getting random stuff from around the neighborhood and even after you did, we still wouldn’t let you up?”

They’d sent me all over the place to get everything from a dog’s squeaky toy to a live tadpole. “Yeah, you guys were jerks.”

“And you told Mom about it and she gave me extra chores, so I called you a baby brat, and you tried to fight me, but I ended up pinning you until you cried uncle. But then the very next day we were over it, and we were playing with your Pokémon cards and you showed me your favorite one and said that I could keep it.”

Eevee, the fox-like creature who had the power to evolve. It wasn't a particularly powerful card, but I liked it because it was cute.

“I remember,” I said.

Santiago pulled his wallet out of his scrubs and dug into its folds. He held up the tattered and faded card that I recognized as the one I'd given him years ago.

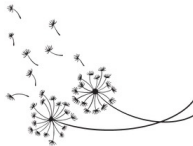
“You kept it?” I asked.

“Of course I kept it. It was your favorite one. Even now when I look at it, it reminds me of you.”

I smiled at his gesture and tried very hard not to cry. I didn't want him to think I was a baby. I'd always wanted to impress my big brother, and now Cipher too, but maybe the only person I needed to prove anything to was myself.

“I hope you find what you're looking for,” Santiago said, “and I hope you know you can always come back to me. Even when I am a jerky big brother, I'm still rooting for you.”

I nodded, choked with emotion. “I'm rooting for you too.”



I WAS FEELING a little sad on our walk back to the dorms. Cipher asked if I wanted to talk about it, but I didn't know what to say. I loved my brother and I was torn about leaving him, especially not knowing if he might still get sick, but I wanted to continue on to Promised Land with the Assholes. I wanted to have my Great Adventure.

Did that make me selfish?

I was loyal to our crew, and to Cipher especially, but was it foolish of me to follow my heart? There were a ton of country songs written about people like me—a small town girl (or guy) carried off by a handsome cowboy and left high and dry, blown about like tumbleweed in the desert wind. Romantic but tragic. I didn't think Cipher would do that to me, but then, anything could happen out in Rabid Country.

I didn't know if this was the best decision, but it felt right in my gut. *Pay attention to what your gut is telling you, my mother always told me, and listen to the angel on your shoulder.*

The rest of our crew was packing when we got back. Teresa was having a hard time parting with her stuffed animal collection, so I joined her on her bed while the others made plans for the morning. We buried ourselves in the mountain of plush animals and took turns hugging each and every one. Little Miss Purrfect joined us, having picked a particularly plump whale as her favorite that she bunted against then curled up with and took a nap.

"I don't know how I'm going to leave them all behind," Teresa said woefully, and I sympathized with her sense of longing. Even though our future in Promised Land seemed bright, it still meant leaving some special things behind. "How can I possibly pick just one to bring with me?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, not envious of her predicament in the least. "Do you have a favorite?"

"They're *all* my favorites."

"You could pick one at random, like drawing numbers from a hat. Then the others won't be jealous."

"You pick one for me," she said and buried her head in her pillow. I perused her collection and finally chose the bear that had gotten me through the delousing. I presented it to her and she opened her eyes. "Sugar Bear is a solid choice, but his best friend is Gooseberry and I couldn't possibly separate them." She grabbed the animal that looked more like a duck than a

goose, then groaned and fell back on the bed dramatically. I sighed along with her and played with her white-gold hair while she agonized over this terrible dilemma.

“Do you think we’ll have to grow up in Promised Land?” Teresa asked after a while. I knew that Artemis babied her and Cipher probably babied me too, but that didn’t mean we didn’t also pull our own weight.

“I don’t know. What does growing up mean?”

“Not being allowed to play with dolls or stuffed animals. Having to eat things like oatmeal and broccoli instead of ice cream and cake and not singing and dancing whenever we feel like it.”

“I hope not,” I said. She made being a grown up sound pretty bleak. “But you should probably cut back on the sweets. Cipher says you’re a cavity waiting to happen.”

“I know,” she said miserably, “but it tastes so good. And I want it.”

I had terrible cravings too. When I wasn’t thinking about Cipher, I was usually fantasizing about food.

“I eat too much sometimes,” I said. “For a long time I was so hungry, and we had to be careful about every little thing we ate so that we wouldn’t run out. When I see food now, I feel like I have to eat it all at once or I’ll never have it again, even when it makes me sick.”

“Me too,” she said. “And it gets the taste out of my mouth.”

“What taste?”

“Of them.” Her face went slack and the light in her eyes dimmed. She did that sometimes, checked out for a while. I placed a stuffed animal in her lap and she squeezed it tightly, rocking in the bed, before her eyes finally came back into focus.

“They were pretty awful, huh?” I said carefully.

“Yes. I don’t like to talk about it, but Artemis knows. Artemis saved me.” Teresa grabbed my face with both hands

and whispered in my ear, “She killed them. Every single one.”

A chill raced down my spine and I said to her, “They must have deserved it.”

“They did. And that’s why she’s my big sister. Because she takes care of me.”

“And you take care of her too,” I said.

“We’re a team. The Dream Team.”

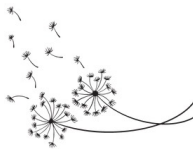
“That’s why she doesn’t want you to eat too many sweets,” I said. “Because she doesn’t want to have to yank out all your teeth.”

“I know,” Teresa said fondly. “She’s the best.” She surveyed her collection again. “Artemis said I could only bring one, but she didn’t say that you couldn’t bring one too.”

I smiled at her cleverness.

“So you take Sugar Bear and I’ll take Gooseberry, and then we won’t have to separate them. Deal?”

“Deal.”



“Do you think I need to grow up?” I asked Cipher later that night while we were in bed. Everything was packed and ready to go. All we had to do now was catch a ride in the morning with a delivery truck heading west, then walk another 50 miles north to Promised Land. Cipher had traded for a pair of lightly used hiking boots for me, and I had already been working on breaking them in.

“No, why? Do you think you need to grow up?” Cipher said.

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“You were pretty isolated out there in the burbs, but that wasn’t your fault. It might take a couple of years to catch up to

the rest of us, but that's fine. No need to rush it."

"I can take care of myself," I said because it seemed important to say it.

"You were taking care of yourself and your mother long before I met you. That doesn't mean you can't rely on other people for some things."

I thought about that while he rubbed my back. "I wish I could be more like you," I said, my jealousy getting the better of me again.

"Oh yeah and how's that?"

"Strong and brave."

"You are strong and brave, Kitten. How many Rabid attacks have you survived so far?"

"Two."

"And how many cats have you managed to keep alive all these years?"

"One."

"How many miles did you hike to get here?"

"Way too many."

"Small but mighty," he said. "With that inhaler, I bet you could run twice as fast as me."

I smiled because even though he was only saying those things to make me feel better, it worked, nonetheless. "That's nice of you to say."

"I'm a nice guy sometimes."

"All the time." I yawned, suddenly exhausted. "I'm going to get big and buff in Promised Land."

"You did say you were still growing," he said and squeezed one of my biceps.

"And you can teach me how to fight and I'll chop wood every morning like Macon and eat ten eggs for breakfast."

“That’s ambitious, but even if you don’t get big and buff right away, you’re still strong in the ways that matter.”

“I hope so,” I said sleepily.

“I know so,” he said and kissed my temple as I drifted off to sleep.

NINETEEN

CIPHER

THE GIFT WAS practical if nothing else. Whenever we traveled, Little Miss Purrfect scratched the hell out of Kitten's chest, so I made him a sling made of canvas with air holes sewn in, including a zipper so he could shut the little beastie inside if she was acting a fool. I'd been working on it during my many sleepless nights, and I presented it to him on the morning we were set to head out.

"Merry Christmas," I said, recalling the Christmas house when he'd given us all gifts and called us his friends for the first time. "Happy Birthday too. Check inside."

He opened the sling to find a battered copy of the third book of his vampire series, *our* series, since all of us were reading it, except Gizmo, who'd seen the movies already and was firmly Team Jasper.

"I've been looking everywhere for this," Kitten said.

"I know. I got first dibs after you read it. No spoilers."

"Thank you." He leapt into my arms and kissed me with enthusiasm, and I returned his affection, even while the rest of our crew milled about. It was just before dawn and we were waiting at a seldom-used loading dock near the Coca-Cola plant for our ride to arrive. A delivery driver had agreed to take us as far as Birmingham on her way to Dallas. All it cost us was an arm and a leg, literally. Gizmo hooked up the driver with new and improved prostheses customized for long stints on the road.

A red container truck emblazoned with the Coca-Cola logo rumbled up then, its hydraulics hissing as it came to a stop just in front of the loading dock. “All aboard,” Juanita called, then climbed down from the cab and sauntered around the back to roll up the metal door. There was room among the cartons of soda for us to sit comfortably enough for the three-hour drive. She’d even agreed to stop on the outskirts of town so that I could retrieve my gun.

We climbed inside and settled in for the long haul. Between the ammo in my pack and the boy on my lap, currently using up my headlamp’s batteries to read his book aloud to the rest of us, I was feeling pretty dang good about life.

Promised Land, here we come.



FIVE DAYS LATER, with blistered feet and dwindling supplies, we arrived in Promised Land. Juanita couldn’t take us any farther north than Birmingham, so we walked the rest of the way on foot.

Upon reaching the coordinates Gizmo was able to triangulate from Macon’s intel, we were confronted by a huge stockade-style fence that extended for acres and acres on either side; the thing must have surrounded twenty city blocks at least. The forest around their encampment had been harvested for wood and with the trees cleared, offered a clear view for spotting threats. Additionally, the tree stumps had been sharpened to knee-to-waist-level pikes, a solid defense against Rabids, who tended to rely more on their sense of smell and hearing than sight. All in all, I appreciated the commitment to a secure compound. Their construction was legit.

The sun was beginning to set, which made me more wary, as it was the time of day when the Rabids grew bolder and emerged from their hiding places to hunt. I wanted us to make

camp in the woods and spend a day or two doing recon on this place, but the troops were eager to meet our new neighbors and I was outvoted.

Promised Land's security setup included a couple of deer stands mounted at the top of the fence, manned with live lookouts. Guns were slung across their chests but not aimed in our direction. As for my own piece, it was holstered, though well within reach. It seemed we all agreed that pointing guns at each other wouldn't make a good first impression.

"State your business," one of the guards shouted down to us.

Macon had been preparing for this moment, so he stepped up on our behalf. "We want to join your settlement."

"All of you?" the guard asked.

"All of us," Macon said.

There was some discussion being had on the other side of the wall. I pulled Kitten closer to me, shielding him with my body just in case the locals turned hostile.

"Brother Larry will see you."

I had assumed that a place named Promised Land might have religious roots, not to mention we were smack dab in the middle of the Bible Belt, but hopefully this settlement was without the bigotry disguised as righteousness or any of the -isms that had managed to survive a plague when so many people hadn't—humankind did love its petty hatreds. Macon's initial reports on the tolerant nature of this settlement sounded promising, but I was a skeptic through and through.

The gates opened slowly, and Gizmo's head perked up with renewed interest at the sound of creaking machinery, probably already thinking about a way to modernize it. I insisted on going first. I was undoubtedly outnumbered, but if something went wrong, I'd do whatever it took to buy the others some time to get away. Once we were through the first gate, we saw yet another fence that appeared to be a replica of the first, and I wondered just how many layers there were to this protective onion.

“Impressive,” I said aloud. Whoever designed this compound had a mind for security and a healthy amount of paranoia to boot.

The guards, each armed with assault rifles and various weapons meant for close combat, introduced themselves by name and led us to a covered pavilion, which included a picnic bench replete with a tablecloth and fresh-cut flowers. There, we laid down our packs as the guards offered us refreshments.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” I told our crew, “and don’t drink that,” I said regarding the beverages they offered us.

“It’s lemonade,” one of the guards said, drinking down an entire glass in one go. “It’ll keep you from getting scurvy.”

“Good enough for me,” Macon said and followed suit.

I set mine aside. Don’t eat the food and don’t drink the water was the first rule of any new encounter. Kitten obeyed my order, but his longing look at the lemonade told me he’d rather not.

“Cipher, look.” Kitten grabbed my arm and pointed at the cows grazing in the fields that surrounded us, calves too, which was a sight to see. Beyond the pastures were rows and rows of food crops. They had produce and livestock, which meant meat, milk, cheese, fresh vegetables, and a sustainable way to produce food without having to hunt and scavenge. Teresa and Kitten especially could benefit from a steady diet.

But I was getting ahead of myself.

The man I assumed to be Brother Larry emerged from the interior fence soon after, riding a bicycle along a paved pathway that looked as if it used to be a country road or a very long driveway. There were no roads to Promised Land as far as I could tell, which only heightened my curiosity as to this settlement’s origin story.

I’d expected Brother Larry to be wearing something clerical or cult-leader adjacent, but he had on faded blue jeans and a workman’s button-down with a pair of sturdy leather boots, a tool belt too, as though we’d interrupted him in the middle of some home repair project. The wide-brimmed hat on

his head threw his face into shadow, but he removed it once he'd docked his bike. Judging from his salt-and-pepper hair and the deep grooves in his face, I put him in his late fifties, which was somewhat rare these days. He had the look of a weathered sea captain, maybe even a former military man, definitely someone who didn't mind getting his hands dirty.

"Greetings," the man said and shook hands all around. His palms were rough and calloused with scabbed cuts on his fingers that were still healing over and dirt caked underneath his fingernails. Growing up in the city, I'd never appreciated people who could grow things or build things or work with their hands—I was something of a wiseass baby gamer when the plague hit—but I sure as shit did now.

We made our own round of introductions and the man said, "I'm Lawrence Young. Brother Larry around here." He grabbed a mason jar and filled it with lemonade from the five-gallon dispenser, then drank it down. He wiped the sweat from his brow. "Refreshing, isn't it?"

I'd positioned myself at the front of the pack, and it seemed the others, even Macon, were waiting for me to speak, but I was still scoping things out.

"I was told you kids are looking to join our Fellowship," Larry said. I nodded and he pointed to the cloth-covered picnic bench. "Care to join me?"

A quick exchange of glances and a nod from Artemis confirmed that Macon and I would proceed while she hung back. Kitten looked nervous as hell, holding onto his cat like she was a life preserver. I shot him a wink.

"So, where do you hail from, gentlemen?" Larry asked once we were all seated.

Macon replied in long-answer form, citing his multiple generations of land-ownership on American soil, and I said simply, "D.C."

"Our nation's capital," Larry said, nodding amicably, though there wasn't much of an organized government left, and the major cities that remained were definitely not united in

any way, all of them defending their turf while trying to swindle their neighbors. Our “one nation under God” was a match strike away from burning to the ground, but Larry seemed like the patriotic sort, so I kept my pessimistic thoughts to myself.

Macon told him about our experience in Atlanta, as well as the long walk we took to get here, and Brother Larry, to his credit, listened intently. He was giving off friendly grandfather vibes, but I remained suspicious.

At a break in our collective life stories, Larry said, “Well, I’m impressed that you kids have made it this far. We’re a bit selective about who we offer permanent shelter to here. Oftentimes, people will stop by for a meal and a bit of fellowship before moseying along.”

“We’re looking for a place to settle,” Macon said. “Somewhere we can build a home.”

“I can appreciate that. We’re a tight-knit community though. No Rabids, no crime, and no nonsense. We like to keep it that way.”

“We’re not afraid of hard work, sir,” Macon said, his sincere respect for authority shining through. “I got farming in my blood, Artemis can hunt and trap like no other, and Gizmo can fix almost anything. We found Kitten surviving alone.” He nodded to Kitten, currently petting the yearling who was nibbling grass at the edge of the pavilion while Little Miss Purrfect snaked her body between his ankles, never one to be left out of the action.

“And how about you, young man?” Brother Larry addressed me directly. “You any good with those knives?”

I met his wisened gaze and got the distinct impression that he was sizing me up.

“Cipher’s a Rabid-slayer and expert tracker,” Macon said on my behalf.

“Is that so? How many Rabids have you killed, Cipher?” Larry asked.

“I don’t know,” I said evenly. “I don’t notch them on my belt.”

Larry nodded. “I can respect that. Most folks think killing Rabids is some kind of recreational bloodsport, but those are people’s kin. I tell all my brothers and sisters here in Promised Land that killing is a mortal sin, but when it comes to Rabids, it’s us or them.”

Amen to that, Brother Larry.

“That said,” he continued with a nod to me, “we store our weapons in the armory. No need for guns or blades amongst the Fellowship.”

“But how do you clear out weeds or slice a melon?” I asked.

Larry gave me an affable grin. “I appreciate your reluctance to lay down arms, my young friend. In Rabid Country, it’s a death sentence. Hopefully, with time, you’ll see that you’re safe inside these walls, and that the only thing you have to fear is out there.”

He pointed to the world beyond his well-constructed fencing, but my gaze remained focused on him. “I know what’s out there already, Brother Larry. It’s what’s in here that remains a mystery.”

His smile widened. “You’ve got spunk, kid, and I appreciate what you’ve done here, taking care of your family. All of them look well-fed, no signs of the fever, no thousand-yard stares. It’s not easy being the leader. No one knows that more than me.”

“I’m not the leader. We work as a team.”

“Every team has a leader, whether it’s stated or not. Here’s the thing, boys. We’re close to capacity right now, and with winter coming we have to be conservative with our food stores. However, if you could accomplish a very important job for me, I may be able to convince the Council to make room for you six.”

“And one cat?” I said.

His gaze swung from me to the cat and back, eyeing me like a con-man to his mark. “And one cat,” he affirmed.

“What’s the job?” I said, appreciating this exchange more than the polite chit-chat that had preceded it. Transactions, I understood. Reciprocity, I respected. If this man were to let us into his kingdom with no conditions or guarantees, I’d think him unfit to lead.

It seemed Larry appreciated my directness as well, and he dropped the cheery geezer act to say soberly, “We were expecting a midwife to arrive about a week ago. We’ve got a few ladies who are with child, and our country doctor’s experience with labor and delivery is limited to livestock. Unfortunately she never showed, so I sent out a search party a few days ago. We found her escort, torn all to bits. We think Rabids attacked them. We’re not sure if she got away and maybe got lost in the woods. If you could find her for us, prove your tracking ability, then I think we could accommodate you and your friends.”

“Another fucking side quest,” Macon muttered, but I was intrigued by the challenge, and the prideful part of me wanted to prove myself capable to the elder man.

“I’m game,” I said.

“I’ll come with,” Macon said.

“No, you stay here with our crew.”

I wanted more than just Artemis here if shit went sideways, and there was no sense in putting us both in danger. I was also faster and stealthier when working alone.

I pulled out my map, unfolded it, and laid it flat on the table. “Where’d you find the body?” I asked Brother Larry and he pointed to an area a couple miles east of here. I marked it with my knifepoint and folded up my map. “I’ll get rid of my gun,” I said to him. “Find a place to bury it in the woods before entering your compound, but I’m keeping my knives.”

The man squinted at me with hard, cunning eyes. “I pride myself in instilling a sense of safety in my flock.”

“My knives make me feel safe, and I have a sixth-sense for spotting Rabids. You never know when one might turn up.”

He pursed his lips and nodded. “Your party can camp here in the pastures while you’re gone. We’ll provide them with meals and protection, and for you, food to take with you on your search.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. I’d sleep here tonight, within the guarded walls of Promised Land, and set out at first light.

With that settled, Larry stood and offered his hand. “Good luck to you, Brother Cipher. Your people will be safe here in your absence.”

“I appreciate that, Brother Larry.”

They’d fucking better be.



BROTHER LARRY RETURNED to his inner sanctum or whatever the hell was behind the interior fence, and Macon and I rejoined the others. I pulled Kitten aside because I had a feeling he was going to have some objections to this plan.

“Their noses are so soft,” Kitten said about the calf that was now eating bunches of grass directly from his hand. “Feel it.”

I rubbed the calf’s nose, and it was soft, as soft as velvet, as soft as Kitten’s cheek, and I thought back to Ansel’s comment about Kitten and I being an odd couple. We were, in a way, because he was a life-bringer, a nurturer at heart, and I was a life-taker. Kitten was thinking about raising children and feeding animals, and I was contemplating how to eradicate the local Rabid population. I suspected that I was far less suited to this simple, pastoral way of life than that of Rabid Country, but for my family, I’d adapt.

“What did Brother Larry say?” he asked.

“He’s going to let us in, but I have to do something for him first.”

“What is it?”

“There’s a midwife who may be lost in the woods. I’m going to track her down.”

“Why you?”

“Because finding people is what I do.”

“Who’s going with you?”

“No one. Artemis and Macon are staying behind.”

“Let me come. I can help.”

“I’m going alone,” I said firmly. It was too dangerous, not to mention he had a heavy foot and bad hearing. “I need you to stay here with the others.”

“Why can’t I come with you?”

“Because I can’t be worried about you while I’m out there, and I want you here, where it’s safe.”

“But it’s okay for me to worry about you? It’s okay for you not to be safe?”

“Kitten...”

“No.” He shoved my hands away from where I’d tried to reach out to him. “I’m tired of you always putting yourself in danger. That is *not* good boyfriend behavior.”

He turned and ran from the pavilion, sprinting across the green grass until he reached a lone live oak tree, similar to the one I’d been resting against when I first spotted him digging in his garden months ago. There he sat in a huddle, knees to his chin, probably crying.

“Give him some space,” Artemis said. Macon must have briefed her on the condition for us to enter Promised Land.

“It should be a straightforward mission,” I told her, “but in case it isn’t...”

“We’ll take care of him, Cipher, of course we will. He’s one of us.”

TWENTY

KITTEN

CIPHER and I were in a fight, even if he refused to acknowledge it. I was pissed, mainly at him, but at Macon too for letting him make a deal like that. And I was pissed at the other Assholes for not backing me up when I brought it to a vote later that evening. They were unanimously against me, which never felt good.

Why couldn't we search for this missing person as a group? Why did Cipher always have to go off on dangerous missions alone?

The cows were asleep so I asked these questions to Little Miss Purrfect as I teased her with a cat toy. The "Fellowship" helped us set up tents to camp in overnight, and I was hiding out in one of them, avoiding the rest of our crew even though I smelled meat cooking.

My stomach was growling, but I was on a hunger strike.

The tent flap opened and the source of my irritation entered. "I brought you dinner," Cipher said, carrying a sandwich on a plate, along with a bowl of soup.

"I'm not hungry."

I made the yarn mouse at the end of the string jump. Little Miss Purrfect quit the game and rubbed herself along Cipher's ankles, probably hoping for a reward, which he gave her in the form of a strip of meat. My stomach growled again.

"Are you sure you're not hungry? There's bacon."

I glared up at him, swallowing the saliva as it flooded my mouth. I hadn't had bacon in a really long time. There had been a shortage of bacon for years, and even in Atlanta, it was impossible to find. Cipher knew it was my weakness.

"Should I eat it?" Cipher asked, holding up a perfectly crisped strip. The first time he'd tried to tempt me with food was right after he'd taken care of my mother—out of mercy, I reminded myself. I'd sworn back then I'd never eat again or get out of bed or smile, but I'd done all of those things, so maybe I was just full of crap.

"I'm mad at you," I said and stared at my socked feet. There was a hole in one where my big toe poked through and I wiggled it. If this was our last night together, I didn't want to spend it in a fight, but I didn't want to make up with him either.

"I know." Dropping down next to me, he set the plate in between us and shooed the ravenous Little Miss Purrfect away. "Maybe you'd be less mad at me if you ate something?"

"You can't fix everything with food."

"I can fix *some* things with food."

I took a piece of bacon from the plate. It was salty and delicious and I felt a little bad eating it, as I did whenever I ate meat, because I also loved the animals who'd been slaughtered for our meal, like that little calf in the pasture who was being raised to one day be our food. My dad used to say a prayer every evening before dinner, thanking the animal for its sacrifice, but they really had no say in it at all.

"You know the woman I'm going to look for is a midwife," Cipher said.

"I know. You told me."

"If I don't find her, who's going to deliver all those babies?" he asked. I stared up at him as he continued. "We're going to be part of a community, Kitten, and in a community, everyone makes sacrifices for the benefit of the whole, some bigger than others."

“But you’re mine,” I argued, “and you shouldn’t have to sacrifice your life.”

“You must not have much faith in me,” he said.

“It’s not that and you know it.”

“This won’t be much different from when we travel in the woods and I scout ahead for the group.”

“Macon said there are Rabids out there and that her escort was ‘torn all to bits.’” I made air quotes around his exact wording.

Cipher shook his head and grunted. “Macon’s got a big-ass mouth. But let’s just say that I find this woman, and I’m able to bring her back. Then all of us can have a place to live, and those babies have a better chance of surviving, their mothers will too. That’s a lot of lives saved.”

There was no sense in pretending I wasn’t going to eat, so I picked up the BLT sandwich and savored the taste of homemade bread toasted to perfection and slathered in mayonnaise. The tomato was ripe and juicy, the lettuce was crisp, and there was a bowl of tomato soup too, which was excellent for dipping. I polished off the meal as I thought about Cipher’s reasoning.

“How would you feel if it were me going into the woods alone?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t like it.”

“Exactly.”

“But tracking people isn’t your expertise.”

“Because I’m hard of hearing?”

“Because you’re loud as hell and you have a terrible sense of direction.” He had a point, but I scowled at him regardless. “But I would trust you to do a lot of other things, like plant a garden or take care of a wounded animal. Remember what I said about each of us playing to our strengths.”

“Yes,” I said with some reluctance.

“If I were a soldier who had to go on a tour of duty, would you still be mad at me?”

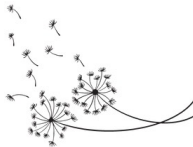
“Probably,” I said. My eyes lowered because it felt greedy and selfish to demand it, but I wanted him to stay, nonetheless.

He raised my chin with his fingertip. “Sometimes sacrifices must be made to ensure that our family is safe. This is something I have to do.”

I nodded, because I understood his reasons. Even still... “That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Fair enough. You have a right to be angry, and I won’t try to change your mind, but I want you to come outside with me now, Kitten. The stars are out, and I want to look at them with you.”

He stood and held out his hand. I took it. Of course, I took it.



WE GAZED AT THE STARS, each of us pointing out the constellations we knew—Taurus, the bull and Orion, the hunter. When the lights first went out, my dad would take my brother and me outside to stargaze in the backyard and tell us what he knew about the heavens, and we would make wishes on shooting stars, which were really just meteoroids burning up in the earth’s atmosphere; that was before the first Rabids started attacking.

Cipher had some marijuana he’d gotten in Atlanta and rolled a joint with it. I asked for a puff, but instead, he had me sit in his lap with my knees on either side of him and gave me what he called a shotgun. Close enough to kiss, he opened his mouth to exhale. The smoke traveled from his lips to mine as I inhaled deeply, feeling the slight burn in my chest and the floaty feeling that came afterward. His dark eyes focused on mine intently, conveying feelings neither of us could put into

words, and even though I was mad at him and we were technically still in a fight, I may have also been falling in love.

Now we were lying on the blanket with my head against his chest as he stroked my hair. The weed had calmed me, and I was a little bit hungry too, even with dinner. I tried not to think about tomorrow morning when Cipher would pack up to leave, and I'd tell him to be careful, to please come back to me. I'd kiss him goodbye, maybe for the last time, and have to hope for the best.

I tried to be brave for us both.

"I miss being tucked into bed," I said to him. These quiet nights caused my mind to wander back to the Before. "The ritual of it, my mother's words."

"There is something precious about wishing someone sweet dreams, knowing they're going to a place where you can't follow, and you want them to be safe."

"Did your mother tuck you into bed?" I asked and hoped the question wouldn't cause him too much pain.

"My father," he said. "He was the more affectionate one. My mother was very driven. They both were, in fact. They met at med school and were researchers together at Georgetown University. Their lab was doing cancer research when the plague hit. They quickly shifted their focus to study the fever."

"What happened to them?" I asked and held my breath.

"My dad was attacked by a Rabid late one night on his way home from work. This was before we knew about being able to cut out the infection before it spreads. My mom took the opportunity to study him, kept him housed at the lab with the other patients. She brought us there once to visit him, near the end. He was strapped to the gurney. I don't think he even knew who we were anymore. He wasn't himself and his face was... well, you know."

"Yeah," I said as I tried not to think about it too vividly. I rolled onto my stomach and gazed into Cipher's downcast eyes.

“We said goodbye to him, though we weren’t allowed to get too close. It shocked us both, my sister and me. We hadn’t seen the fever up close like that before. We’d heard about it and seen the news reports, but watching it happen to our own father was something else.”

I knew exactly what he meant. Every morning, I used to greet my mother hoping she’d turned a corner, some sign that her body was healing, but every day she was sicker and less herself.

“What was your sister like?” I asked.

“She was my best friend. We were only a year apart, she was older, and we fought like cats and dogs until the plague hit. Then it was just the two of us. Our parents were always at the lab. They even slept there some nights, so we had to take care of ourselves. We were under quarantine and there was no school, so we got into our parents’ medicine cabinet and did a lot of drugs, watched a lot of television, and read a lot of books, burned a lot of meals. We argued about stupid shit, and we confided in each other too, and we tried to make sense of what was going on.”

“What was her name?” I asked.

“Aiko.”

“Did she catch the fever too?”

“No, but my mom did. She’d been bitten in the neck, but neither of us knew about it because she didn’t tell us, and she wore a scarf to hide it. I didn’t realize...” His eyes pooled with tears. Wincing, he pinched the bridge of his nose savagely. “I’m the one who killed her, Kitten.”

He sat up, arms curled around his knees, his shoulders shaking with muffled sobs. I pulled him to me and held him tight.

“She bit me,” he said, sounding like a lost little boy, “and I didn’t know what else to do, so I ran into the kitchen and grabbed a knife. She ran right into it, mindlessly, still trying to get to me.”

I'd held the point of my knife to Cipher's stomach that first day we met, and he'd tempted me to use it, as though he were asking for it, as if some part of him wanted it.

"It was self-defense," I said. "Remember what you told me? It's kill or be killed. She attacked you, Cipher."

"I know, but she was still my mother."

I couldn't have done it. Even near the end, there was no way I'd have had the strength to end my own mother's life, even if she'd attacked me. I probably would have just rolled over and let it happen. That was why there were so many Rabids nowadays. Killing strangers was one thing, but your own family? Your own child?

"I'm so sorry, Cipher." I wished I could do more for him than just listen and hold him. If only I could free him from this guilt and pain.

"Aiko came in right after. She screamed." He shook his head. "She just... lost it. I didn't know what to do or who to call for help. The hospitals and quarantine shelters were full. But I knew a guy who would take care of my leg for me, so I went there. He tied a tourniquet around my thigh and sawed off my leg, no anesthesia. The pain was..."

He started crying again, so I rocked him gently and petted his hair like my mother used to do for me.

"I came back home on crutches a couple days later and Aiko..." His voice was broken, choked with sobs. "She was dead. She'd taken too many pills and overdosed."

He buried his head in my shoulder and I kissed the top of his head.

"I was so pissed at her for leaving me, for not including me in her plans. We could have done it together, you know?"

I blinked back tears and thanked God that Cipher hadn't chosen that path.

"So I took a couple pills to dull the pain and hobbled my ass to the closest youth shelter. Eventually, I was placed at The

Admiral where I met Gizmo and then Artemis. The fire happened, and then we left.”

He sagged against me, and I rocked him for a long time, until his sniffles quieted and his breathing evened out. I didn’t know what to say to make him feel better, and I didn’t want to say the wrong thing and make it worse, but I hoped he’d know that we were in this together.

He pulled away eventually and wiped his face with his t-shirt. “So, that’s why I’ve got trust issues,” he said with a watery smile. “And that’s why I don’t talk about my family.”

I nodded. “Come here,” I said and laid down with him. I grabbed another blanket and pulled it over top of us, so that we were cocooned inside of it. “Thank you for telling me what happened. I’m sorry that you had to go through all of that alone. This may be selfish, but I’m glad you made those choices, because that’s what led you to me and the rest of our crew. We can’t replace your family, but we can be that for you now. We all love you and care about you, Cipher, and you have to know that you are irreplaceable.”

“Thank you for saying that,” he said as his fingertip traced my lips.

“What did your family call you?”

“Nikkō,” he said. “Ironically enough, it means sunshine in Japanese.”

“Nikkō.” I said his name with care. “What’s your last name?”

“Kanemoto.”

“Nikkō Kanemoto. That’s beautiful.” He smiled and I said, “I’m here now to tuck you in, and I’ll be here when you wake up tomorrow morning. I won’t leave you, Nikkō, I promise. I’m staying right here no matter what.”

He nodded, looking younger and more vulnerable than I’d ever seen him before, and I realized that underneath it all, Cipher was just as scared and lonely as me. And he needed protection too, to be cared for and loved and tucked into bed at

night, to be kept safe and sound from all the monsters in the world in whatever form they took.

“Sing me to sleep?” he asked quietly.

I sang a song my mother used to sing to me, one that was fitting for the name he’d been given, not the name he’d chosen for himself as a way to cope with his past.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” Cipher closed his eyes and sighed deeply, and I sang through all of the verses I knew so that when I finally reached the last line, it felt more like a prayer than a children’s lullaby. “Please don’t take my sunshine away.”



DAWN BROKE in a beautiful kaleidoscope of color over the green, green pastures, the silhouettes of the cows the only shadows breaking up the sun’s gorgeous light. The ground was wet with dew, and so were our sleeping bags. Cipher was still asleep beside me, curled up like a roly poly. Usually at this hour, I’d be up and helping Macon gather wood for the morning fire, but not today. Today, I wasn’t leaving Cipher’s side.

“Good morning,” I said to him when he began to stir.

“Morning,” he said in a scratchy voice and squinted at the sun. The sky was huge here, surrounding us on all sides, with cotton candy clouds that looked close enough to reach out and touch.

“What’s your favorite color?” I asked him.

“Green.”

“What kind of green?”

“Dark green. The color of pine trees when the sun shines on them from behind. How about you?”

“Pink because it’s pretty and soft.”

“Like you,” he said and opened his arms. I didn’t mind being called pretty and soft, not with the tender way he said it. I cuddled up to him while he dozed for a bit longer, until eventually, he sat up and stretched out the stiffness from the night before and gave me a cautious smile.

“Last night was a lot,” he said.

“Yeah, but I’m glad it happened.”

He nodded. “Me too.”

During our morning routine, neither of us spoke about what he had shared, but we were both a little more careful with each other. I poured him tea and brought breakfast to our tent where he was cleaning and assembling his weapons, wanting to have a little more time with him before we joined the others.

“Thank you,” he said almost shyly.

“You’re welcome.”

After breakfast, I helped him pack his things, insisting he take an extra sock and a second container of water too. I packed him the rest of our beef jerky, along with various nuts and dried fruit that were our staples when we’d hiked north from Birmingham.

“There’s just one more thing I need,” he said when his pack was ready to go.

“What is it?” I asked, glancing around at the mess we’d made of our tent.

“A kiss from my baby.”

I tugged him to me and poured all of my feelings into that kiss, hoping he’d know how proud I was of him and how much I adored him, the closeness I felt and the confidence we shared, and maybe even that I loved him.

“Come back in one piece,” I said, but really I just wanted him to come back. “Keep the radio turned on.”

“Wouldn’t want to fall behind on the gossip.”

“Check in with us,” I said sternly. “Remember, you’re not a lone wolf. You’re part of a pack.”

“I am alpha though,” he said.

I rolled my eyes at that. “Sure, you’re alpha.”

He said goodbye to the rest of our crew, each of them saying something encouraging in return, and I walked with him to the exterior gate. The doors opened on their rusty hinges and he continued on alone, pausing once to glance back at me. He smiled and waved and blew me a kiss. I caught it in my hand and held it to my heart.

Then the doors closed and he was gone.

TWENTY-ONE

CIPHER

AFTER MY BREAKDOWN the night before, I thought the physical space would do me some good, but I missed Kitten as soon as the doors to Promised Land closed behind me. His bravery and his capacity for understanding continued to amaze me. He'd forgiven me for killing his mother, he'd followed me two hundred miles, most of them on foot, to a place he'd never been before, and he'd treated me with nothing but compassion when I'd confessed my most shameful secrets.

For the first time since the plague hit, I felt truly blessed. Not in any religious sense, more like... gratitude. Thank you, universe, for sending me this person to show me how to have fun and make me laugh and remind me how to be young and carefree again. Kitten had seen several sides of me now, not all of them pretty, and he hadn't high-tailed it yet. Knowing he was waiting for me was the motivation I needed to track down this midwife and secure our spots within the gates of Promised Land.

But something was stalking me in these woods. Some being with more cunning and patience than a Rabid, but if it was a raider, I wasn't sure what they wanted. If they'd wanted to steal my gear, or God forbid, rape and murder me, they could have tried it already. Perhaps they were waiting for me to let down my guard. Or maybe they wanted to take me alive.

I'd packed light for this trip, not wanting to be weighed down in case I needed to run. I had my tarp and an extra dry sock that Kitten insisted I take, two canisters of water, a filter

to purify more, and my food. Most of my weight was from my weaponry, but I was used to that by now.

Could my stalker be a bear or some other wild animal? When the power went out, which was around the same time as the first Rabid onslaught, the zoos and animal preserves went haywire. For a long time there were big game hunters bringing down exotic animals for a bounty. They'd tried to do the same with Rabids, but taking trophies spread the virus. And a lot of innocent, healthy people were murdered just for the money—a bad idea all around.

I tried to shake off this feeling of being watched, hoping it was all in my head, but just in case, I varied my route to see if I could elude my pursuer or flush them out. Even still, the sense that I was being hunted remained.

During my first night in the woods I built a fire, though I hardly slept. I'd trained my body to go for a couple days without anything more than cat naps. It wasn't good for me, but neither was smoking cigarettes or relying on narcotics to sleep. While feeding the fire, I reflected on my confession to Kitten. It felt good to get it off my chest, the fact that I'd destroyed my entire family and killed my sister. Of course it was her choice to overdose, but I'd driven her to the brink. And my mother... Kitten told me it wasn't my fault and even seemed to believe it.

I hoped to one day believe it too.

I tore into a piece of beef jerky and heard something moving behind me in the woods. Grabbing my night-vision goggles, I slowly walked the perimeter of the clearing, listening closely for any sounds in the forest beyond my camp. There was the snap of a broken twig and then another, but the sounds indicated that my unwanted guest was rapidly retreating.

What the hell was that about?

“Cipher, you there?”

Kitten's voice on our two-way radio startled me out of my thoughts. “I'm here, babe. How's things?”

“Fine. Missing you.”

“I’m missing you too. What’d you have for dinner?”

“Hot dogs and baked beans.”

“Sounds good.”

“It was all right. Have you found the midwife yet?”

“Not yet, but I’ve made some good progress. Hoping to pick up the trail tomorrow.”

There was no trail to speak of, not yet, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. I also decided not to mention the mysterious (and somewhat ominous) presence in the woods.

“Are you being careful out there?” he asked.

“You betcha. How’re things campside? Got any news for me?”

“Macon has gas and he’s farting like crazy...” I heard laughter in the background and felt a stab of homesickness. “We’re voting him off the island.”

“I don’t blame you. Hey, if you don’t hear from me tomorrow it’s because I’ve gone out of range.”

“You’ll check in as soon as you can though, right?”

“I will. Since I’m not there to tuck you in, I wanted to tell you good night and sweet dreams.”

“Thank you. Sweet dreams to you too.”

I smiled, lovesick to my core, and stared at the fire, imagining them all huddled around a fire of their own, talking shit and trading jokes. Then my two-way cackled to life and Macon said with a sickly-sweet drawl, “Sweet dreams, Cipher,” followed by his raucous laughter.

I shook my head. Assholes.



I WAS PACKED up and on the trail at first light, following the triangular route I'd set with the site of the attack at its center. If the midwife was injured, she couldn't have made it more than a few miles in any direction, but Larry had said they were traveling with pack horses, and neither of the animals had been found, even after following their tracks. On horseback, she could have gotten a lot farther.

During the afternoon on the second day of my search, I found what may have been a lead, a splatter of blood to the side of a game trail, and just ahead of it, what looked like a partial bloody handprint on a pine tree. The blood was dried, but fairly recently and not yet flaking underneath my fingernail. If the handprint belonged to my missing person, then she was definitely hurt and bleeding badly. I followed the game trail, looking for any other signs of distress, and just when I thought I'd lost track, I noticed a couple broken twigs off to one side where the victim must have veered off the trail. From there, the path was erratic, zig-zagging back and forth as if running away from an attacker.

Deeper into the woods I traveled, until the sun began to set over the pines. My favorite color, I thought fondly. A close second was Kitten's eyes, but I'd keep that one to myself. I was just deciding where to make camp for the night when I smelled smoke, carried by the wind. I turned toward its source and sniffed the air. Was that the crackle and hiss of burning wood? Did the fire belong to a camp of raiders, or was it my own missing person? Donning the night vision goggles again, I cautiously made my way toward the scent. I sensed that my former pursuer had not given up, but may in fact be closing in.

A few minutes later, I spied the source of the fire in a small clearing surrounded on multiple sides by old-growth trees, and sitting with her back against one of those sturdy tree trunks was a woman who matched Larry's description. Her tank top was stained with sweat, and it looked as if her shirt or some other fabric had been torn and used as a bandage that wound tightly around her midsection. The makeshift bandages had soaked through with blood, and there was more of it on the waistband of her cargo pants. The woman looked feverish and

unwell, with beads of sweat on her forehead and a waxy complexion.

Even more unusual than the injured woman was the horse hovering nearby, not tied to anything, nor weighed down by a pack or saddle. It seemed reluctant to leave the circle of light provided by the fire, unusual behavior for a horse.

“Hello,” I called, still poised on the edge of her campsite. I didn’t want to startle her or cause her to act reflexively. My gun was holstered as were my knives, though I was ready should I need them.

“Hello,” she said in a parched and raspy voice. “You have water?”

I approached slowly to where she was sitting and passed my container over to her. Seeing that her one hand was attempting to apply pressure to her wound, I unscrewed the lid and offered it again. Avoiding the rim, she poured a little into her mouth, taking small swallows and wincing from the pain it caused her. She then offered the bottle back to me.

“Keep it,” I said, grateful for Kitten’s insistence that I take two. “I’ve got another one.”

“Much appreciated,” she said with a nod. “Marion Langley. I’d shake your hand, but it’s probably better if I don’t.”

“Cipher,” I said, unsure as to what to do next. Here was a woman who’d been attacked by Rabids in a bad way and was showing the initial signs of the fever, though not yet Rabid herself. My instructions from Brother Larry were to find her. Beyond that, it was anyone’s guess.

“Pull up a trunk,” she said, helping me through my moment of indecision. She waved to a tree nearby. “Feed the fire, if you would.”

I did as she asked, impressed that she’d been able to gather wood and start a fire in her present condition. “It’s a good fire,” I said

“Thanks. Are you from the Fellowship?”

The answer to that question was complicated, so I said, “Brother Larry sent me to find you. His search party had no luck. How long have you been out here?”

“Five days.”

Five days was a long time to be alone in Rabid Country, wounded and without food or water.

“I have food. Would you like some?”

She waved me off. “Not sure my stomach could handle it right now, but thanks anyway. Did they find Stephen?”

I guessed that Stephen was her escort, the one who’d been torn to bits. “Yes, they found his body. He’s dead.”

She nodded and cleared her throat, glanced away briefly, then stared at the fire again.

“They came out of nowhere. It was nighttime and I’d stepped away from the fire to relieve myself, when I heard a crash behind me. I scarcely knew what was happening before... this.” She motioned to her midsection and the blood-stained bandages covering her wound. “I ran and my horse followed me, but we got turned around.”

The horse stomped one hoof and whinnied, looking nervous and out of sorts.

“She’s not tied up,” I observed.

“Strange, isn’t it? When we got here, I removed her pack and slapped her rump, told her she was free to go, but other than some light grazing, she hasn’t left my side.”

I breathed deeply and considered how to proceed. “I can take you back to Promised Land. There might be something they can do for you there.”

She smiled and shook her head sadly. “I appreciate the offer, Cipher, but I’m not going to risk infecting others, especially not pregnant women. I’ve made my peace.”

I nodded, respecting her wishes, though still unsure as to what that meant for me.

“Perhaps you could even help me along?” She nodded to the machete I’d laid beside me. A gunshot to the head would be quicker, but they made a lot of noise and attracted unwanted attention.

“Angel of death,” I murmured.

“Angel of mercy,” she said. “But we’ve got time. Tell me about yourself. Nothing tragic. Tell me something good.”

Something good. The first thing that came to mind was Kitten, followed by the rest of our tribe, so I told her about them—Teresa’s sweet tooth and her affinity for dolls and pretty dresses, how she was the baby of the family until Kitten came along. Now they shared that designation. I told her about Artemis’s talent with a crossbow and how she can nail a squirrel between the ears from 40 yards away, how fashionable and cool she was back in D.C. before I even knew her name. I told her about Macon’s generosity, always willing to lend a hand and carry more than his share to help out the others. And Gizmo, who, if anyone could save humanity from itself, it was surely him.

And I told her about Kitten and how, when the sun hit him just right, it lit up his curls with a golden glow. How he was stubborn but sweet and how he’d insisted on bringing his cat with us on our journey and carried that animal from Greenville, South Carolina to Atlanta, Georgia, and then onward to Promised Land. He was loyal and resilient and fiercely protective of our family. I told her about his love of Tom Hanks movies and his tendency to eat too much and then complain about a belly ache, but then be hungry again an hour or so later. I told her that he misses the sound of children laughing and I admitted to her that I did too.

Marion nodded, unshed tears in her eyes. “There’s nothing like it,” she said softly. Marion told me about her two daughters, both of whom she lost to the fever, but who were forever in her heart, how she could still hear their laughter from time to time. She told me about her hopes for the future, that every baby born was a new life with limitless potential.

“Do you ever feel bad, though?” I asked. “Bringing a child into a world like this?”

She smiled softly and said, “There is still love in this world and compassion. There is beauty, always beauty.”

We lapsed into silence as I reflected on her words. The forest was quiet save for the occasional hoot of an owl or croak of a frog. Marion dozed for a bit and I fed the fire. As she’d said, there was no need to rush, but when she came back to consciousness a little before dawn, she smiled at me and said, “I think I’m ready now.”

“I’m not so sure that I am.”

“You’ve had to grow up too fast. You strike me as someone who does the right thing, even when it’s difficult. I’m sorry to place this burden on your shoulders.”

“I’m sorry too.”

We could have lingered for hours, trading stories and philosophizing on life, but Marion seemed anxious to get this over with and maybe I was too.

She scooted a little to one side and patted the ground next to her. I stood and donned my leather gloves, trying to hold it together for her sake. I’d fall apart after, no need for her to feel guilt over something she couldn’t have prevented.

I sat behind her and angled her body so that it was bracketed by my own. I’d held Kitten this way countless times before, when we’d sit around the campfire or when he’d drowse for a bit in a grassy meadow and I’d try to count the individual lashes on his eyelids. I could almost smell his strawberry-scented hair.

“There you go,” Marion said softly and patted my hand. “You can do it.”

I unsheathed my hunting knife, and the foreboding was back, the sense that we were being watched. I almost asked Marion if she felt it too, but then her horse began snuffling and stomping its hooves, the way prey does when a predator is nearby.

“Are you sure it was Rabids that attacked you? Did you actually get a good look at them?”

She considered it for a moment. “It happened so fast and they attacked me from behind, but what else could it be?”

Just then there was a flash of movement from beyond the dying fire. Something leapt out of the brush and landed on the horse’s back, sinking its fangs into the beast’s neck, then riding the horse’s flank while it stomped and tried to shake the thing off.

Not just a thing, not even a Rabid. It was a fucking tiger, larger than a man, with massive paws that dug deep into the horse’s flesh as it dragged the animal to the ground. Marion and I sat there, frozen with fear and the shock of something so unexpected. The tiger’s teeth were still lodged into horseflesh, and it cradled its kill possessively, its sharp, predatory eyes daring us to challenge its claim.

The horse’s whinnies of pain subsided and its body went limp at last. Using the strength of its hindquarters and its powerful jaw, the tiger yanked its kill backward into the brush, dragging it in great, heaving thrusts until both had disappeared entirely from the clearing and there was only a trail of blood left in its wake.

“Holy fucking shit,” I said, so relieved by this revelation that I could cry.

“Will wonders never cease?” Marion murmured.

TWENTY-TWO

KITTEN

WE CAMPED inside the outer wall of Promised Land for three days, in the pastures with the cows, each of us trying to pretend that everything was normal and fine while members of the Fellowship kept us watered and fed.

Macon invented a game that was a cross between hot potato and dodge ball—bruises all around—and Teresa taught me how to weave a daisy-chain crown. Gizmo paced a lot and commandeered the pavilion as his temporary workshop, though he found it difficult to concentrate, and Artemis organized our gear. Even with all of these distractions, my vigil at the outer gate continued as I prayed for Cipher's safe return. He hadn't communicated with us since the beginning of the second day, but that only meant he was out of range, not that he was in danger. Not that he was hurt or...

He was fine, and he'd be home soon.

It was the middle of the night when we heard the lookouts call down, followed by the stubborn groan of the gate doors opening. Cipher was there, pale as a ghost in the moonlight, carrying a woman who looked to be dead or close to it in his arms. Brother Larry and several others were on them before the outer doors had closed behind him. The Fellowship loaded the woman onto a stretcher and rushed her inside the interior gates. Cipher, having just passed the woman to the medics, waved off their attention, and by that time I had bullied my way through the crowd and thrown my arms around him.

"Cipher," I called, nearly tearful with joy and relief at seeing him.

“Hi, baby,” he replied and buried his face in my hair.

“Are you hurt?” I asked because he was leaning on me heavily. I looked him over. Other than dirt streaked across his face and the sweat and grime from three days in Rabid Country, he appeared to be okay.

“I’m fine, Kitten, but I’m so tired. I haven’t slept since I left. Can you make everyone go away for a few hours?”

The girls helped me guide him into our tent where our bedding was already arranged. Once inside, I stripped off his clothing and then his leg because he said it was killing him after such a long hike. Teresa brought me a cloth and a bucket of water warmed by the fire, and I scrubbed him thoroughly, in the way he would want me to, removing all traces of sweat and dirt from his body.

“Whose blood is this?” I asked about the streaks across his chest.

“Marion, the midwife.”

“Was she attacked by Rabids?”

“No, sweetness, a tiger.”

“A tiger?” I exclaimed and wondered if the woman might have been mistaken.

“I wouldn’t have believed it either, but we saw it attack her horse. It was a beautiful, terrible thing.”

“Cipher, you saved her life.”

“Maybe. She was badly hurt and had already lost a lot of blood when I found her.”

“The Fellowship will fix her.”

I wanted to ask more questions, but he could barely keep his eyes open during his bath. Once he’d been cleaned and dried, I helped him to brush his teeth and made sure he was hydrated too. Then, I laid him down on our bedding and gave him one of his sleepytime cigarettes. Before he could fish around for his lighter, I’d found it for him and lit the end of it.

“You’re too good to me, Kitten. Christ, my leg is sore.”

His thigh was swollen and bruised, probably from the added weight of carrying another person for such a long distance.

“Can I rub it out for you?”

He nodded, a drowsy, dazed look on his face. I grabbed the lotion and massaged it for him, taking care to go slowly and with a light pressure because I didn't want to make it worse.

“How's this?” I asked.

“Feels good,” he said in that loopy way of his. “You're the only other person to ever touch me there.”

“Is that okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you,” I said, then shut my mouth at my accidental confession.

He smiled sweetly back at me. “I love you too, baby, so, so much. All I did out there was think about you, all the sweet, silly things that you do, all our little arguments.”

He was delirious with exhaustion and probably a little emotional too from the waning adrenaline, so I wouldn't hold him to it. Still, I felt like I was floating on clouds as I tended to him.

“Roll over,” I said and then went to work on his back, running my hands over his broad shoulders and digging into the lean muscle along his spine. He was so tight, knotted and tense. I massaged him until his shoulders slumped into our sleeping bag and his eyes drifted shut. Just when I thought he'd fallen asleep, he rolled onto his side and opened his arms.

“Come here,” he said, drawing me to him. “Is that my t-shirt you're wearing?”

“Yeah, I haven't taken it off since you left.”

“Good. You belong to me, Kitten, the one thing I want in this world more than anything else.”

“More than bullets?” I teased.

“Bullets mean nothing to me compared to you. You know I’d do anything for you, don’t you?”

“I know, except listen to me when I tell you not to risk your life.”

“Yeah, except that,” he said with a sleepy smile.

“Will you do me a favor?” I asked.

“Anything.”

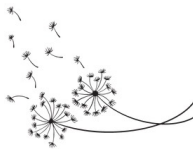
“Would you go to sleep for me now?”

He smiled and kissed my hair. “Sure, baby. Mmmm, you smell like strawberries. How do you do that?”

“I don’t know. Probably my shampoo.” I sat up and arranged him so that his head was cradled by my lap. I drew my fingers along his scalp until his eyes grew heavier and finally closed for the last time.

“Love you,” he murmured.

“Sweet dreams.” I kissed his forehead and quietly hummed him to sleep.



CIPHER WOKE NEARLY twelve hours later, which was a long stretch of time, especially for him. The others had all packed up and gone inside Promised Land proper, escorted by Brother Larry himself. Larry offered to have the lookouts watch over Cipher until he woke, but there was no way I was leaving him behind.

“You’re still here,” Cipher said with a smile, still groggy with sleep.

“I promised you I would be.”

He rose to one elbow and squinted to where the late morning light shone in; I’d pinned back the tent flap to let in

the breeze. “Where are the others?” he asked as he reached for his leg.

“Inside.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“I didn’t want to go without you.”

Setting aside his leg, he made a grab for me and pulled me into our bedding, kissing my forehead and my cheeks, squeezing me tightly and smothering me with affection until I was laughing in protest.

“I love you,” he said and I was suddenly shy, because even though he’d said it to me the night before, I hadn’t expected him to remember. “Do you love me?” he asked.

“More than anything.”

He kissed me again, first with fondness and then with heat. It seemed his hands had multiplied as he undressed me, tearing at my clothing impatiently and yanking my pants down my legs. We couldn’t get naked fast enough. He shucked off his underwear as I crawled over to the door to drop the tent flap. He reached for me again, grabbed my leg and pulled me back to him, then rolled with me on our bedding until I was flattened underneath him, right where I wanted to be. We made out with urgency, pawing at each other, him on top of me, me on top of him. I mauled his mouth with my own and dug my fingers into the same muscles I’d massaged for him the night before. I was delirious with desire and hungry for his every touch.

I pounced on top of him and his shoulders hit the ground. Grabbing hold of my erection at last, he brought me to the edge of climax with his fist, then squeezed my ass with both hands and dragged me to him so that he could take me in his mouth. He sucked me off eagerly, messily, and my gaze was magnetized by his coal-black eyes staring up at me. I begged him for more. Drunk on pleasure and the heady knowledge that he loved me, I came long and hard down his throat. Deftly, he guided me onto my stomach, supporting himself from behind with his arms and one knee.

“Stay there,” he said roughly. “Squeeze your thighs together for me.”

“Like this?” I said, breathless and still reeling from my own orgasm. I heard the sounds of lotion being squirted onto my butt cheeks. He spread it between my upper thighs, working it in with his hand, then lay down on top of me. His erection snaked between my legs and nudged at my balls. I gasped from the sensation.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“No, just surprised me.” I imagined Cipher taking me like this, only with his cock inside of me. A hot fluttery feeling overtook me along with a primal longing to be filled.

“Make it tight for me, Kitten. Flex your asscheeks and squeeze me.”

I did as he commanded, making a nice cozy channel for him to slide between my cheeks and upper thighs. He began to thrust, his hips rolling in a sensual movement that made me hard all over again. I arched my back and raised my ass to give him room to maneuver and he growled appreciatively in my ear.

“That’s it, baby. Feels so good. You all right with this?”

“Yeah, I’m hard again.” The way he took control had my body in flames. I reached underneath me to grab hold of my erection and Cipher stopped me.

“Let me do it. Stay right there and squeeze me tight. Yeah, just like that. So sweet. So fucking nice.”

I braced myself with both hands as Cipher continued to hump my backside; the squishing sounds of his cock working between my thighs filled our quiet tent while his harsh pants warmed the back of my neck. His hand slid against my stomach and his fingers wrapped possessively around my shaft. He tugged roughly, like it was his own dick he was jerking. My cries of pleasure escalated as the sensation built, and he didn’t even try to quiet me this time, probably because he didn’t have enough hands.

“Tell me you love me,” he said.

“I love you.”

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

My thighs burned from the friction and my balls ached with a mounting pressure. Cipher pounded his hips against my bottom a few more times, then shuddered magnificently. My thighs were flooded with his warm release, the backs of my balls wet with it too. Without missing a beat, he stroked me, until my insides melted and my dick was spurting again.

“Goddamn,” he said, and I had to agree. “That was perfect.” He thrust a little more as if to keep me in place. “You feel so good. I want to taste you everywhere.”

He licked me from the base of my back to my nape, one long, wet stripe up my spine that made me shiver with delight. Then he anchored his teeth into the muscle between my neck and shoulder and bit me. I groaned from the sensation, pain edged with pleasure, and with my cheek still pressed against the blankets, he claimed my mouth, sucking the air from my lungs and dissolving all thought. We kissed until I had to pull away to catch my breath or risk passing out. He rolled me over so that we were nose-to-nose.

“I love you,” he said and pecked my forehead.

“I know. You’ve said it three times now.”

“Thank you for waiting for me.”

“I told you I wouldn’t leave you.”

“You’re filthy,” he said with a satisfied smile. My stomach was sticky, between my legs too, and I was lying in the wet spot.

“You made this mess. Now, clean it up,” I said and he grabbed for the washrag and pail of water, now cold, and did his best.

“You smell like me,” he said.

“Good. I want to smell like you.”

“I hope they have a laundry room because this sleeping bag is foul.” He wrinkled his nose.

“I’ll figure out a way to wash it.”

He smiled, staring down at me, and he was so beautiful my heart nearly burst.

“Come on and get dressed, Kitten, and let me escort you inside Promised Land.”

“All right,” I said, “Best boyfriend ever.”

His smile widened as he helped me sit up. Cipher attached his leg and I scrounged up some clean clothing for us to wear—the rest we’d figure it out later. Outside our tent Cipher offered me his arm like a gentleman and we walked up to the tall, wooden gates that marked the inner realm of Promised Land. They opened with a loud groan and we got our first glimpse of our new home—green grass and lush trees and flower beds lining the sidewalks with pretty little houses all in a row, and best of all, people just like us going about their day.

Could we make a life here? Could this be our new home?

“Do you hear that, Kitten?” Cipher said, leaning down to whisper in my ear.

I tilted my head and beyond the birdsong and chattering of squirrels, I heard the music carried on the breeze; it was the sound of children laughing and it was beautiful.

END OF BOOK ONE

COMING SOON

Cipher and Kitten's adventures continue in *Promised Land: Book Two* of the *Mad World* trilogy, publishing in the summer of 2023.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Lascarso wants you to stay up *way* past your bedtime reading her stories. She aims to inspire more questions than answers in her fiction and believes in the power of storytelling to heal and transform a society. When not writing, Laura can be found screaming “finish” on the soccer fields, rewatching *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and trying to convince politicians to act on climate change. She lives in North Florida with her darling husband and two kids. She loves hearing from readers, and she’d be delighted to hear from you.

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