

**STEPHANIE MYLCHREEST
MIKE KRAUS**



FAULTLINE

DAYS OF DESTRUCTION BOOK THREE

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Days of Destruction Series Book 3

STEPHANIE MYLCHREEST

MIKE KRAUS



FAULTLINE
Days of Destruction Series
Book 3
By
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CONTENTS

[Want More Awesome Books?](#)

[Special Thanks](#)

[Previously](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

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SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to my awesome beta team, without whom this book wouldn't be nearly as great.

Thank you!

-Mike

PREVIOUSLY

As a show of strength, Russia developed a massive nuclear weapon, many orders of magnitude more powerful than anything built previously, and planned to test it in the bottom of the Kola Superdeep Borehole in the north of Russia. The borehole had been expanded and deepened until it reached the Earth's mantle.

The bomb was detonated and a massive blowback spread outward from the borehole, unleashing a shower of intense heat and molten rock that lit up the sky, sending those at the site running for their lives. A shockwave rippled outward from the borehole, shaking the entire area with an intense force.

Thick cracks formed in the ground, splitting the land and spreading like wildfire. The destruction was only beginning as a terrifying chain of events had been set off that would lead to devastation beyond imagination: the extreme force of the nuclear weapon split the Eurasian Plate, starting a cascade of civilization ending catastrophes.

A new rift valley opened up from the Red Sea through Eastern Europe to the Kola borehole. Europe, instead of drifting east with Asia, reversed direction and started moving westward. Iceland now sat on a convergent plate boundary and became a subduction zone with far more violent eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis.

Meanwhile, the newly formed Asian plate started moving eastward even faster, increasing seismic activity in the North Pacific region, with earthquakes and tsunamis that caused havoc right around the Pacific.

Billions died in the first burst of seismic activity as entire cities were destroyed, but as the disaster continued to unfold and intensify, things would only get worse for the survivors.

CHAPTER ONE

Johannes

Seven Days After

Fatigue washed over Johannes in waves as the plane cruised over the North Atlantic Ocean. Camilla and the kids were asleep in one of the reclining chairs in the main cabin, while Storm had curled up in the co-pilot's seat beside him. He planned to head for Maine to refuel, and maybe even rest for a while; it seemed like a better bet safety-wise given the low population density, but who knew what they'd find when they got there.

The plane's engines droned on in a constant hum, a soothing harmony, even as it sliced through the air at hundreds of miles an hour, and Johannes blinked, feeling the pull to sleep, his eyes dry and sore. As the plane banked to the left, he angled his head to look out of the window.

Below, the ocean stretched out like a dark blue blanket, the rising sun behind him shining off the water in a sparkling, golden display. He pressed his thumb into his temple as he took in the sight, and sucked in a deep breath, trying not to think about Harriet and the fact they'd soon be burying her body.

As the sun rose higher, lighting up the US East Coast in front of him, Johannes felt a lump in his throat. They were almost home. *Home*. After everything they'd been through, sometimes he'd wondered if they'd ever get back to the United

States. To his right, Nova Scotia appeared, and he kept his eyes firmly on the land, looking for any signs of life, any landmarks that he could recognize. But there was nothing but bleak darkness.

He brought the plane lower, and the Maine coastline came into view. A deep sense of yearning to feel the ground of his homeland beneath his feet rolled through him, but as the details sharpened, what he saw sent a wedge of fear through him. The ocean seemed to have risen and swallowed much of the shore. Huge sections of cliff had just toppled into the sea, while the forests beyond looked like a giant had their fun, rolling through the woods with a lawnmower, while huge fissures cut through the earth.

Something white caught his eye, and when he looked closer, he saw a toppled lighthouse lying sideways in the water at the bottom of a rocky bay. Above, the sky was painted a dusty pink and yellow, the haze in the sky as thick as ever, while the ocean coiled and rippled along what was left of the coastline.

Before the networks went dark, Harriet had read on some of the news sites that tsunamis were battering the East Coast, and that seismic activity was expected, but nothing could have prepared Johannes for what lay below. The coast looked utterly destroyed, any homes and buildings demolished or washed away. The only unsurprising thing was the lack of electric lights; he knew the grid probably went down days ago.

Blowing out a breath, he shook his head and then raked a hand through his hair. He had been expecting the worst, but there had still been a small part of him that wanted to believe that things at home wouldn't be as bad as everywhere else. Now he could see the truth for himself, and he just had to hope that Matti was okay in California, and his parents in Texas were fine, too.

Perverse curiosity drew him to bring the plane lower and head for Portland. Soon, the city came into view and he was stunned. The lost city of Atlantis was suddenly in the back of his mind, and he had the urge to cry, his throat thick and tight. The Old Port waterfront had been completely wiped away, and

so had most of the city. The sea had engulfed huge sections, while the West End area was a wasteland of broken concrete and twisted metal.

One of the first things that struck Johannes was the color of the city. The wreckage had turned a reddish brown like rust or mud coated everything, the surface pitted with cracks everywhere he looked. The Portland skyline was gone, and everything close to the water had been swept away, consumed by the sea. Pulverized brick, cement, and floating detritus clogged Casco Bay.

Shaking his head, he eyed his nearly empty fuel gauge, and headed northwest, not bothering to stop at the Portland airport. It was likely ruined, anyway, and there were a number of smaller rural airports which would give them the best chance of refueling without running into any trouble.

He pulled the plane up and swung it in a wide arc just as Camilla entered the cockpit. She placed a loving hand on his shoulder and squeezed, and they both watched in silence as the plane flew over the decimated remains of Portland until the city was replaced by lakes, fields, and forests.

“You need to get some sleep,” she said, breaking the silence. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing okay. I’ll be better once we find some fuel. If it’s safe when we stop, we can rest awhile before we keep going. How are the kids?”

“They’re sleeping. They’ll be okay. Kids are resilient, right?”

“That’s what people say,” he replied, trying not to think about the last doctor they’d seen in Moscow before the nuclear test up at the Kola Borehole. The doctor who reassured them Benny wouldn’t be traumatized by the countless procedures and appointments because he was a kid and *resilient*.

Johannes glanced at his wife, taking in the soft planes of her tanned face, her dark hair pulled back in a hasty ponytail, the way she stroked Storm, loving on him like he was as important to her as any of them. She’d always be the most

beautiful woman in the world to him, both inside and out, and even now that she had dark circles under her eyes and stress lines in her forehead. Their short, awful journey had aged her, but she held herself with her old poise and grace, and Johannes knew he'd never find another woman like her.

He put one arm around her and pulled her close to him, savoring the feel of her body against his, counting his blessings, even as he glanced toward the ground on his left and saw more signs of devastation, more wrecked towns.

"Can you wake the kids?" he said, releasing his hold on her. "We're going to land soon, and I want them strapped in properly just in case I need to take off again quickly."

"I will," she replied, leaning down and kissing his cheek, the sensation of her lips brushing against his skin both familiar and exquisite. "I love you."

"Me, too." He listened to her walk back to the main cabin and felt his exhaustion return, his eyes gritty with fatigue. But he had to stay focused. There could be anyone waiting for them when they landed. And after Dubai, he had to be prepared for anything, because he alone was responsible for keeping his family safe.

He continued cruising for a while, losing himself in the routine of flying, watching the controls and scanning the gauges. When he finally looked back toward the ground, he noticed that it seemed to be vibrating, and he blinked, not sure at first if he was imagining it, but the vibration only intensified. *An earthquake.*

Watching the ground shake below him felt surreal. The patchwork of browns and greens, fields and forests, shifted and rearranged like the ground was a living thing. And even though they were safe in the air, he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that something was wrong. Something was coming. His hands were slick with sweat, and he felt his neck, his shirt, damp with perspiration. Beside him, Storm whined.

He forced himself to focus on the controls and the electronic maps loaded into the tablet he'd found in the pilot's flight bag, plotting his route to the nearest airport. It didn't

take long to cover the distance, and they neared the Greenville Municipal Airport, which was located close to Moosehead Lake. When he looked up, he could see the huge body of water up ahead.

Soon they were above the airport, and he brought the plane lower, listening to his children's voices drifting up from the main cabin. The ground underneath them had stopped shaking now, and when the airport came into view, he banked the plane to the right and descended, cutting through the air in a low arc and circling over it several times.

He examined the small airport as best he could from the air, not seeing any sign that anyone had been around in the last few days. The airport seemed deserted, the terminal partially collapsed with several small planes parked near the ruins.

“Hold on, guys,” he called back to his family. Then he glanced at Storm. “You, too, boy.”

He brought the plane lower and held his breath, his chest tight as an image of Kalevi as a toddler hurried through his mind, the memory faded like a photograph left in the sun. Trees rushed by below them and the ground opened up and the air strip appeared beneath them.

The tarmac was cracked and pockmarked, and Johannes brought the plane lower and lower, slowing it until the wheels hit the ground, the screech of rubber on the tarmac filling the plane. The rush of the air outside pushed against them until the plane skidded to a stop, the glare of the sun in his eyes.

He blew out a breath, shaking out his hands. Then he cut the engine and grabbed his rifle, Storm close behind, and hurried to the plane's door.

CHAPTER TWO

Johannes

Seven Days After

Johannes stood at the plane's door, adrenaline pulsing through him as he opened it and scanned the collapsed airport beyond, feeling the chill in the air as all senses were on high alert. Storm stood beside him, sniffing the air, body tense, while Camilla and the kids stayed back.

“You hear anything?” he asked in a low voice.

“No,” Camilla replied. “Looks like there's nobody here.”

“Okay. Stay in the plane and be ready for anything. If there's any sign of trouble, lock the door.”

He walked down the plane's steps, Storm close at his side, and could barely believe they'd made it this far. As doubts and worries swirled through his mind, there was no choice other than to convince himself that the next step, the one that carried him off the plane, would be the right one. He tried to ignore the unpleasant sensation in his gut, tried to shove away the lingering feeling that they were making another mistake.

His boot hit the ground, American soil, and his throat felt thick. He hadn't been home for more than a year and a half, and even then it had been a quick visit at Christmas time to see his mom and dad. They'd barely gotten over their jetlag before they were on a plane back to Russia.

With surprisingly raw emotions making his ribs tighten, he paused beside the plane. The air was pleasantly cool, a welcome change from the humid, hot air in Spain and Dubai, and he noticed the smell of smoke from distant smoldering fires drifting toward him on the breeze. He looked toward the runway and the small, half-collapsed terminal, searching for any sign of movement, and saw nothing.

Glancing over his shoulder, he caught Camilla's eye, his gaze moving to the kids, who clung to her legs and looked at him with their wide-eyed stares from the open plane door. He flashed them a smile and an encouraging thumbs up. The last thing he wanted was for them to worry. That was his and Camilla's burden. "I'll check everything out. I'll be back soon, guys. Just stay with Mommy."

With Storm at his side, he started across the fissured runway toward the terminal, passing several small planes that didn't look to be in a flyable condition. He made a note to come back and check them for fuel once he'd cleared the area. As he and Storm continued on, the air was filled with an eerie stillness, and it felt as though he was the only person left in the world.

They drew closer to the small terminal building, and a sound reached him in the wind: a faint sound of tapping, like someone knocking on a door in the distance.

Brow furrowed, Johannes quickened his pace and cautiously approached the terminal. He stepped inside with slow steps, rifle raised and eyes scanning for any sign of danger. Storm followed close beside him, muscles coiled tight with anticipation.

But as he moved deeper into the deserted airport, he soon found the source of the tapping: a small light still attached to the ceiling by an electrical cable, swayed by the breeze entering the building through broken windows, and bumping against the cracked walls.

Johannes let out a relieved breath and patted Storm on the head, before the two of them continued through what was left of the building. It soon became clear that there was no one

there—just silence and emptiness echoing through the terminal halls and corridors. He was struck by how strange it felt to be completely alone in a place normally busy with people, and his thoughts raced as he made his way back outside, walking through the shadows of the abandoned airport with the knowledge there probably wasn't another living soul around other than his family.

Johannes and Storm stepped outside a few moments later, and Johannes spotted a couple of houses across a distant field, watching them for a while, seeing no sign of life. Suddenly, he heard a noise behind him and spun around, heart in his throat. Storm was growling deep in his chest, hackles raised, and Johannes tensed, finger on the trigger guard of his rifle as his eyes flicked back and forth.

After a few moments of strained waiting, all he saw were a few birds flying overhead. “We’re both losing our minds, Stormy boy. We need some sleep.” He let out a breath and relaxed slightly, though he still felt on edge. The two of them walked back to the plane and saw Camilla and the kids waiting for them, anxious expressions on their faces.

“Is everything okay?” Camilla asked as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Yeah,” he said with a tired smile, looking up at his family in the dawn light, profoundly grateful that they had made it back in one piece and that they’d finally found a place where they could rest for a little bit, even if it meant not letting down their guard for a second. Because if there were two things he’d learned since the earthquakes started: trust no one, and expect the unexpected.

“Did you see anyone? Even in the distance?”

“Everything seems pretty safe here. I haven’t seen any sign that there’s anyone around, though we should probably stock up on some supplies before bedding in for a bit.”

“What about Harriet?”

Johannes swallowed. His exhaustion continued to hit him in unexpected waves, and he didn’t know if he had the

emotional strength to deal with saying goodbye to her until he'd had some sleep, a chance to recover physically and emotionally. But he nodded instead, knowing he owed it to his friend to lay her to rest.

He took a moment to look at his maps, seeing that the Lower Wilson Pond was less than half a mile from them. "I think it's safer if you and the kids stay here while I dig a grave for her. Is that okay?" He knew Camilla would want to stay together, but this was something he had to do alone. She nodded like she understood and tightened her grip on her rifle.

With Storm by his side, Johannes left the airport and soon reached the lake's shore, quickly finding a group of rustic cabins nestled between the trees. He stopped on the sandy, rocky bank and looked out across the water that reflected the hazy sky above and the green fir trees surrounding it. The lake's crystal clear water was a fabric of blue-green hues, the depths a shade darker than the surface, and he could see a shoal of fish swimming in the distance, their azure scales glinting in the low morning light.

As he took in the beautiful scenery, he knew for sure that it was the perfect place to bury Harriet. Peaceful and tranquil, exactly how she would want it. Johannes took a few moments to regain his composure and say a silent prayer. He'd never subscribed to any particular religion, but he was inclined to believe Kalevi and now Harriet were in a better place. *Heaven*, whatever that meant. And something about the surrounding landscape, the horrors they'd seen contrasted with the serene beauty all around, soothed his pained heart.

"Come on, Storm, let's search those cabins for a shovel."

He passed a small clearing on the shore and spotted a small log cabin not far from the water, somehow still standing. Its once-white paint was peeling off in places and its windows were shuttered. The cypress shingles on the roof were missing in places, but the front door was closed, the welcome mat still with a kind of clean newness.

Johannes tried the handle, but it was locked. He stepped back and looked at the cabin, trying to decide what to do. It

would be easy enough to break a window, but he didn't want to disturb the sense of almost unnatural peace that had settled over the place.

Instead, he walked around the side of the cabin and saw a small shed, which he found unlocked. Inside, a shovel leaned against the wall, like it was waiting for him. He picked it up, feeling the coldness of the metal handle in his bare hands. Now all he had to do was find a good spot to bury Harriet.

With the sun shining down on him and Storm at his side, Johannes began to dig, feeling a sense of wonder at the beauty and serenity of the lake, and a solidifying of his goals. He would bury Harriet and then make his way to California, where they could check on Camilla's mother and Matti. The thought of seeing his brother again sent a pulse like electricity through his heart, a mixture of nerves and dread and something he couldn't put his finger on.

And once they'd finished in California, it would be onward to Texas, where his parents would help him figure out how to get Benny the treatment he needed for his leukemia.

Johannes focused his attention on digging, letting the repetitive motion of the physical labor take priority. The sandy earth felt soft and cool against his hands as he slowly created a hole into which he could lay Harriet's body. He knew that she would soon be at peace, cradled by nature. And as he looked up at the distant mountains, Johannes couldn't help but feel awed by the sheer power and majesty of this world. Though it had been ravaged by violence, it was still a place of incredible beauty.

With that thought, he continued to dig the grave for his beloved friend, knowing that the time would soon come for them to leave and face the true, broken reality that lay ahead.

CHAPTER THREE

Johannes

Seven Days After

Johannes and his family stood around the fresh mound of sandy dirt where they'd just buried Harriet. The plane had been rolled to the far end of the runway and Johannes had locked it, taking a chance that the area was as deserted as it seemed so that they could bury Harriet properly.

He cleared his throat and locked eyes with Camilla, who held Noelle on her hip, then glanced back down at Harriet's final resting place.

"I'll miss you," he said, feeling Ben's small hand slip into his own as he stared at where they'd put her tenderly in the ground. "You were a good friend. The best." His words felt woefully inadequate given the sacrifice she'd made, and if he could build a time machine and change everything, he would in an instant. But he couldn't. And all they could do was keep moving forward.

Storm lowered his head and touched his nose to Harriet's grave, and Camilla reached down and ruffled his ears.

"She'll always be with us." Camilla reached up to press a hand over her heart.

Johannes felt tears slip down his cheeks. He couldn't imagine how they would go on without Harriet, but he knew that somehow, they would.

“I remember the first day that I met her. I’d only been on site for two days—”

“Johannes,” interrupted Camilla, holding up her hand. Her eyes darkened, her mouth a thin line, the creases around her eyes deepening. “Do you hear that?”

As her words faded away, there was a prickle on the back of Johannes’ neck, a dim awareness and the taste of uncertainty. He swallowed thickly, his throat suddenly dry. “I don’t hear anything.” The second he said it, the hairs on his arms stood up, and he froze. The distant sound of an approaching engine reached him, the noise strange in a world that had been completely emptied of human activity.

“Back to the plane!” Johannes said in urgent tones, picking up Ben and hoisting him into a piggyback, then readying his rifle. He looked over his shoulder, seeing his son’s frightened face. “Hold on!”

Camilla held Noelle to her chest and had already started running. “Come on!” she shouted, while Storm raced ahead of them.

Johannes put on a burst of speed, running through a section of forest that ringed the lake, the ground uneven underfoot, the impact of each step jarring his knees. The trees were ringed with sunlight, the shade of the forested area casting long shadows that jumped about in his periphery as they sprinted for the plane.

They soon came upon a section of felled trees and a long fissure in the earth that stood in their way. “Go around,” Camilla said, “quickly!” As they all ran wide of it, Johannes’ breath was harsh in his ears, the sound of the approaching vehicle growing louder.

It didn’t take long to clear the trees, and he blinked as his eyes adjusted again to the hazy light, glancing sideways to see Camilla sprinting beside him. A red dirt field stretched out between them and the airport, sprouting brown tufts of grass where it had dried and cracked in the sun. He saw the black and gray patchwork of the collapsed terminal at the far end, their plane parked at the section of airstrip closest to them.

He put his head down, hearing the rumble of the engine, the crack of dry grass. His breath. His boots pounding. As he and Camilla reached the airstrip, an old Ford truck appeared beside the terminal, blue paint rusted in spots, heading straight for them. A seed of anger burst open inside Johannes. All they'd wanted was a few moments to bury Harriet, and there they were again, running for their lives.

He shouted a warning and Camilla veered off to the left, heading for the plane, Noelle crying as she clung to her mother. He followed close behind her, his heart pounding in his chest as he anticipated the sound of gunfire.

But none came.

He risked a glance over his shoulder as they reached the plane and saw the truck coming to a stop near where they'd just been standing. A man jumped out, hands raised above his head. "Hey!" came the voice. "Hey! Don't leave! Please! We just want to talk."

Johannes glanced back one more time, and seeing no weapon, slowed and turned to face the man, his chest heaving, rifle raised. The door on the other side of the truck opened, and a woman got out, also with her hands above her head. The couple looked to be a little older than Johannes—maybe in their forties, the man tall and thin and the woman short, heavier set than she probably used to be.

Keeping his rifle raised, Johannes stared at them, assessing them. Storm moved to stand beside him, the dog remaining quiet and alert, watching the strangers.

Both were fair, the woman's hair cut short and the man's scraggly, and they wore clothes that you could only buy at a small store down a dusty country lane. Neither of them looked like a threat, despite the fact that the man's arms raised above his head were roped with muscles, a farmer's strong arms, his no-nonsense face weathered by the long, cold Maine winters.

"Please," the man called out. "We're not here to hurt you."

Johannes hesitated, then kept his rifle up and stepped forward. "Who are you?"

“My name’s Hank,” the man called out. “This is my wife, Cindy. We live a couple of miles from here. We saw your plane land and just want to talk. Do you know if any help is coming?” He slowly lowered his hands and Cindy followed suit, neither of them moving forward.

Johannes and Camilla exchanged a look, and he could see the hint of reluctance in her eyes. She didn’t want to trust them, but he knew her instincts were to be polite, accommodating.

“I’m sorry,” Johannes called back. “No help is coming, and we don’t have any information. Please, just leave us alone. We don’t want any trouble.” He glanced over his shoulder. The plane was parked fifty yards away, the door locked, and Ben was still on Johannes’s back, his face pressed into his father’s shoulder. Noelle was crying, her arms around her mother’s neck.

“No trouble,” Hank said, taking a few steps forward. “We just want to talk. We are the only ones left that we’ve seen in days. A lot of people headed south hoping to find help. And a lot of people are dead.”

Johannes shook his head. “We’ve already talked to enough people. There are no answers, no help coming. I’m sorry. We can’t help you.”

“Well, maybe we can help you,” Cindy replied. “We’ve got plenty of fresh water and some food. Do your kids need anything?”

Johannes opened his mouth, then closed it. He’d seen so many people die, so many lives lost, and yet these two, even though they were strangers, were offering their help. He hesitated, then said, “Water would be great, thanks.”

“Just wait here,” Hank said, and then repeated himself, clearly worried they wouldn’t be there when he and his wife returned. Johannes watched them get in the truck and drive off, then he and Camilla got the kids into the plane. Johannes glanced longingly at one of the reclining chairs, but he needed to push through his fatigue just a little longer.

Less than ten minutes later, they heard the truck returning. Johannes stepped onto the airstrip, rifle readied, and watched Hank and Cindy emerge moments later, clutching bottles of water and something wrapped in a kitchen towel.

They approached cautiously, but with smiles on their faces, as if they really were just interested in helping out some strangers who'd landed in the middle of nowhere. He lowered his rifle and took the water with thanks, and then Cindy offered the wrapped parcel.

"It's a loaf of bread," she said. "Baked yesterday. You and your family are welcome to it."

Johannes took the bread and repeated his thanks, his heart softening toward the kindly couple. "Look, we really need to get some rest. But if you'd like to come back tomorrow morning, we'll wait for you before we leave. We can tell you everything we know."

"Thank you," replied Hank. "We sure do appreciate that."

Johannes nodded, and they got back in their truck before driving back toward their home. He watched them go, then took the last few steps back to the plane, getting inside and sitting in one of the chairs as Camilla shared the bread between herself, the kids and Storm.

"I just need to sleep for a while," he murmured, waving her away when she offered him a hunk of bread. "Please keep watch. Don't leave the plane."

As the last word died on his lips, he finally collapsed into a heavy sleep, into a place with no dimensions and no purpose, a reality with an all-embracing quietness as its only feature, a room as dense as a black hole, as dark as the vacuum of space, with no threats. No earthquakes. Just silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lilly

Eight Days After

Lilly watched closely as Matti climbed up into the back of the olive green army truck. The canvas sides had been closed and strapped down, but the rear of the truck was open, and he gripped the edge of the roof tightly as he ducked his head and stepped inside. He seemed better, but still weak and a little unsteady. Thankfully, Norman Prakoso, their new doctor friend, thought he'd be back to normal within a few days.

Pip climbed up next, and Lilly was the last to get in, glancing back one last time at the temporary camp that had been set up after the landslide, before entering the dark interior and taking a seat between Norman and Pip. Many faces stared back at her from inside the gloomy interior of the truck, both soldiers and civilians, most now familiar, and the small space already smelled of a mixture of sweat and unwashed bodies. But Lilly wasn't going to complain. They were the lucky ones who'd managed to snag a lift with the soldiers heading up the I-5 toward Utah.

"We're all set back here!" called out one of the soldiers sitting across from Lilly. A moment later, the truck engine grumbled to life, and they lurched forward, the vehicle moving slowly over the fissured road, jolting back and forth as it hit potholes and debris. The passengers spoke in low voices while

the truck's suspension creaked and clinked as it bumped across the fractured road.

Lilly blew out a breath, glad they were finally heading toward Soledad, away from the devastation of Los Angeles and toward her dad. But their arrival back at the mud-brick house where she'd left him a week ago wouldn't be without its own challenges. He'd almost be out of his meds by now, and Norman had told her that was something she *should* be worried about.

Lilly glanced over at Pip, trying to put her worry about her father out of her mind, and the two of them smiled at each other. They were together, and after the loss of their motorcycle and all of their supplies, including their weapons, Lilly found it comforting to be surrounded by familiar faces and people they could trust. Especially as they headed back in the midst of this new world that had been so vastly altered, and yet somehow felt the same in many ways.

There were still family and friends. Community and people pulling together. Death and grief. And love. She glanced sideways at Matti, taking in the handsome planes of his face that she'd come to know as well as her own. And she knew that no matter what lay ahead, there would always be something driving them to love; an emotion so ancient, so basic, that it was like it had been there before the start of the universe.

Lilly dragged her eyes away from Matti and shifted on the wooden seat, then let out a sigh, trying to get comfortable. The trip would ordinarily take about three hours by car, but with the roads and damage, they'd only just get close to Soledad—and their drop off point—at some point that evening. Which meant she had another ten, twelve or more hours ahead of her.

Once she was as comfortable as she was going to get, she turned to Norman. “Thank you again for getting us on this truck. We really owe you.”

An American educated doctor who was born in Indonesia, Norman had the eyes of a world traveler and a tattoo collection down his right arm to match. He leaned forward, balancing

himself with his hand on the back of the seat, and gave her one of his kind smiles. “You don’t need to thank me, Lilly. We’re all in this together now.”

“We’d have a long walk ahead of us if it wasn’t for you,” she replied, and he smiled again, patting her leg.

The truck jolted forward, and she grabbed hold of her seat, glancing through the open canvas flaps at the destruction moving past. What was left of the refugee camp was behind them now, and the highway had turned into a crooked road, a splintered mess of cracked blacktop and fissures that crept like spider webs across its surface.

Massive pieces of the road had buckled in ways Lilly had never imagined. As her eyes skimmed the damage, she saw a twisted chunk of concrete with a bumper and undercarriage of a vehicle visible beneath it. Lilly shook her head at the sight, trying not to think about what had happened to the driver and their passengers.

In an instant, everything had changed for everyone. So many of the things she’d once taken for granted were gone. And based on the chatter she’d heard around the camp over the last couple of days, the splitting of the Eurasian Plate meant that things weren’t over yet. Not by a longshot.

Despite that, she couldn’t help but reflect on how much people had pulled together in the wake of the disaster. Even with all the losses they’d sustained, everyone who’d survived the landslide at the refuge camp had worked tirelessly to help one another, banding together after the landslide, and the soldiers had tried to squeeze as many as they could onto the truck, wanting to help out everyone they could who was heading north.

A small jab to her ribs pulled Lilly’s attention, and she glanced at Pip beside her, who stared at her with a worried expression. “Hey, did you want to ask Norman more about what will happen with Dad if we don’t get him his meds?” Blond tendrils framed Pip’s pretty face, her features burdened with too much worry for someone her age.

“It’s fine,” Lilly replied, a sudden lump in her throat. “I already spoke to him at length last night. Try not to worry too much.”

And she had spoken to Norman, but the awful complications that could arise with their father suddenly stopping his meds were not something she was about to share with Pip. Her own worry gnawing at her gut was enough.

“It’s not just Dad I’m worried about.” Pip’s eyes moved to the dusty floor as they bumped and jostled their way over what was left of the road.

“Julia.”

“Yep.”

Lilly noticed Matti watching them from Pip’s other side. He’d met their step-mom before the two of them had left for LA to look for Pip and Elijah’s son, and he’d seen firsthand how difficult Julia could be. And he didn’t even know the half of it.

“Hey, Pip,” he said in that easy way of his. “You’ve got me and Lilly, who both have your back. And you never know, Julia could have changed. This disaster has brought a lot of things into focus for a lot of people. She could be a new and improved step-mom by the time we get back.” He wore a grin, but his words fell flat, neither Pip nor Lilly returning his smile.

“She’ll never change,” Pip replied, “But thanks, Matti.”

“People do change,” he said, his voice getting softer. Lilly had to lean forward to hear him over the sound of the engine. “When I got locked up with my buddy Elijah, we both thought money was the answer to all our problems. Just a bit more money. Another deal. We hurt a lot of people with the mistakes we made. But by the time we got to the conservation camp, we were both better men. And I know now what really matters.”

Lilly nodded. She knew Matti and Elijah’s story wasn’t true of every inmate, but the conservation camp was full of men who had turned their lives around.

“Well, I still don’t think she’s changed,” Pip insisted, her hands gripping each other where they rested in her lap. “Besides, you were good to begin with. You just made a mistake. Julia is mean right down to her core. If anything, this disaster is going to make her even worse.”

Matti swallowed and his lips parted and then closed, like he didn’t know what to say. Lilly reached for Pip’s hand. “We’ll find out soon enough. And remember, like Matti said, we’ve got each other’s backs, okay?”

“Okay.” Pip squeezed her hand, and they lapsed into silence for a while, the truck rumbling through the desolation of the broken landscape. With nothing else to do, Lilly looked out and watched the world go past.

Time seemed to slow as the truck drove carefully over the wreckage, crawling like a centipede with a broken leg. The landscape ahead was nothing but an endless sea of abandoned cars and broken homes, the wreckage sharp and jagged, the road a broken gray scar across it.

While Lilly watched it all, the world outside the truck seemed eerily quiet, and they only passed the occasional group on foot or on bikes. Above, the sky was a sheet of broken glass, bits of cloud illuminated by the haze of smoke and particulates that now clogged the sky. And the closer they got to the massive wildfires that burned somewhere nearby, the worse the air got. They stopped for the occasional break, but otherwise the soldiers continued driving up the I-5, getting closer to the place where they’d let Lilly and the others get off.

Just as Lilly’s eyes were starting to close, she heard Pip gasp. When Lilly glanced at her, Pip opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again, reaching across to squeeze Lilly’s hand while her eyes remained glued to the view out of the back of the truck. Lilly followed her gaze to the patch of smoldering rubble they were passing and saw what had upset Pip so much.

The burned remains of several bodies lay splayed on the edge of the road, a fireman’s helmet and charred police uniform still visible beneath the woven mess of its remains.

Pip turned away and Lilly did the same, leaving Matti to stare for a moment longer, his jaw flexing and eyes blinking rapidly.

Before Lilly could offer some words of comfort, she heard a shout of alarm. A moment later, the truck jerked sharply to the left, the harsh sound of the driver pumping the brakes filling the rear of the truck as the smell of burning rubber invaded every sense.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lilly

Eight Days After

Lilly cried out as the truck skidded, the tires slipping and sliding over the broken road as the ground beneath them rumbled and groaned. She gripped Pip's hand tightly as the driver struggled to keep control of the truck, their hearts pounding in tandem, people around them calling out in alarm.

The truck was thrown to the right, and Lilly lurched forward, panic gripping her as she realized what was happening. Another quake. The driver had to stop the truck somewhere well clear of any debris, but it sounded like he was having trouble getting control of the vehicle as the ground bucked beneath them.

She reached for Pip, who was now screaming hysterically, just as the truck crashed into something blocking the road. The impact jarred the truck and sent everyone flying off their seats helter-skelter, tearing Pip's hand out of her grasp.

Lilly knocked into two men, catching glimpses of frightened faces and bodies trying to right themselves. A moment later, she was thrown again, slamming into the side of the truck, people surrounding her in a sea of tossed bodies as she went down and then back up, landing on her knees with sudden, jolting pain.

“Pip!” she shouted, her voice hoarse and weak from shock and the dust that had been kicked up in the air. “Matti!”

“I’m here,” replied Pip, her voice high-pitched and frightened.

“Me too,” replied Matti, as the continued cries of those who were hurt and trapped filled the inside of the truck. And then a deep rumbling sound reached them that seemed to shake the very ground they were on as the truck finally slowed and came to a stop, no longer moving forward but now jolting side to side.

“What’s happening?” someone cried out in terror.

“It’s an earthquake, and it’s ratcheting up,” came Norman’s voice, loud and clear. Lilly looked in his direction, catching sight of his worried face. “It’s okay. Stay calm, everyone.”

Before anyone could answer, there was a loud cracking sound, and then the truck tilted sharply to one side as the ground beneath them seemed to fall away. Lilly screamed as the truck suddenly flipped, tumbling end over end, throwing them around like rag dolls as it shot out of control, its engine moaning like a dying animal.

Lilly hit her head on something hard as she was thrown in the air, and for a moment, everything went black. When she regained consciousness, it was to the sound of people moaning and crying in pain, the truck upside down and tilted at an awkward angle. Smoke filled the air, and Lilly’s throat constricted painfully, but the earthquake had stopped.

“Pip?” she croaked, her voice barely audible. “Matti?”

There was no answer, and Lilly’s head throbbed painfully as she tried to move. It was then that she realized her leg was stuck, and when she looked down, she saw the narrow piece of twisted metal attached to the frame of the truck that had impaled her calf.

A wave of nausea swept over her, but she fought it back, trying to focus. She had to get herself free, had to find Pip and Matti. Her thoughts were solid, something to grab onto as she stared at the metal that had embedded in her leg. For a few

seconds, Lilly struggled to break free, nearly passing out as she tried to pull her calf up and away. Blood seeped from the wound and she could feel her pulse racing in her ears as she grew light-headed.

She relaxed her body, forcing herself to still. “Pip!” she shouted again, louder this time. “Matti!”

This time there was a response, and Lilly felt a surge of relief as she heard their voices coming from the other side of the truck. With a Herculean effort, she grabbed her calf and braced herself against the truck’s metal frame, then pulled with all her might, trying to ignore the pain, the tearing sensation and the hot, sticky blood soaking her hands, and the smell of burning rubber and smoke coming from outside.

She’d finally managed to pull her leg free from the wreckage, gritting her teeth against the throbbing pain. After spotting Pip and Matti, she half crawled, half stumbled across the canvas roof of the truck, which was now the floor, navigating the tangle of limbs and bodies. Turning her head to the side, she saw a soldier who’d been sitting close to her. His neck was at an odd angle, and blood seeped steadily from beneath his head, soaking his uniform and neatly cut brown hair, his eyes open and unseeing.

Nausea nearly sent her into unconsciousness again, and she swallowed hard, her leg pulsing with pain. She took a moment to look out the open flap at the rear of the truck and saw nothing but a wall of earth, like they’d fallen inside a fissure in the road and ended the wrong way up.

All around her, people continued to cry, and the smoke continued to thicken, but Lilly kept going. She found Pip and Matti pushing themselves up on the other side of the truck, both looking dazed but not badly hurt, and she gathered them into her arms, tears of relief streaming down her face as they clung to each other for a few seconds.

“We’re going to get out of here,” she whispered, more to herself than to them.

Despite the pain in her leg, Lilly managed to reach the open back side of the truck with Pip and Matti in tow. They

crawled out of the truck and found themselves standing at the bottom of a crevice that had opened up in the road.

Lilly covered her mouth with her shirt, trying to keep herself from breathing in the acrid fumes from the smoking engine, while Matti stood with his hands on his hips, coughing and half bent over as he looked up at the road above. “Let’s see if we can find a way out of here,” he said.

“Climb on top of the truck,” came a familiar voice from above. Lilly looked up to see Norman about ten feet above them, leaning over the hole beside a woman with a pale, stunned face. “I just got out myself. Come on, I’ll help you.”

“Okay,” Matti called back, before he helped Lilly and Pip get on top of the upside-down truck, then climbed up himself, his face red with exertion. They stood on one of the truck’s big wheels and then grabbed the edge of the fissure, hoisting themselves up one by one.

As they climbed out of the jagged gash in the road, they were met by Norman and the young woman, who seemed disoriented. The five of them were covered in scrapes and bruises but relatively uninjured, given the catastrophic accident.

“We have to get the others out,” Lilly said, looking back down at the truck where a couple of soldiers were climbing out of the cabin. One looked up and caught her eye; a handsome young guy with dark hair and a stubbled beard. He gave her a weak smile and a nod, then clambered out of the truck and disappeared around the side.

“Yep, we have to get them out of there now,” Norman said. “I’ll head down with Matti first. You three can stay here and help haul the injured up, okay?”

As Lilly nodded, she realized the engine was still running, and it hummed along like a wasp’s nest, like a swarm trying to escape, tendrils of ominous smoke rising from deep within. Her eyes raked the accident, trying to figure out the best place to help those inside out, listening to the muffled cries for help of the people in the truck, their voices echoing and rebounding off the walls of the trench.

The fissure that the truck had fallen into was jagged and rocky, with dirt and roots sticking out of it like the filaments of a spider's web. As she took it all in, the air seemed to thicken with smoke and the smell of gasoline, and Lilly's stomach turned, her worry for those inside deepening. She covered her mouth as her eyes began to water.

"Hold on. Your leg is bleeding." Norman crouched down to look at her calf as Lilly assured him she was fine.

Without a word, Matti removed his T-shirt and passed it to Norman. "Here, use this."

Before Lilly could object, Norman had tied the T-shirt around her leg to staunch the flow of blood, and they all turned back to the truck which lay ten feet below them, readying themselves to get the rest of the people out.

"Woah, steady," Matti said, locking his knees as an aftershock hit them.

Before Lilly had time to get her balance, a loud roar sounded from below. A burst of fire and small pieces of debris shot out from the truck, and Lilly screamed as she felt searing heat on her face.

Norman grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the edge just as the truck exploded, the blast throwing them all to the ground. She was momentarily blinded by the heat, and when she could see again, flames had engulfed the truck. People were still shouting from inside, their screams gradually drowned out by the inferno.

Norman grabbed her arm, his face streaked with dirt and sweat and tears. "Come on, we have to go!"

He pulled her away from the edge as the ground shook beneath their feet, stopping a couple of feet away. Lilly resisted. She wanted to go back for the people who were still trapped, and even though he tugged her away, she held firm, watching the truck, looking for a way to help, bile rising in her throat.

The screams of those inside the truck mixed with the howl of the fire, the sound of air being forced from lungs into the

flames that were now consuming the vehicle, and Lilly knew it was over. She squeezed her eyes shut, the ground finally stilling, but she could still see the orange flames flaring through her eyelids.

It wasn't until she felt Norman's arm around her shoulders that she opened her eyes again. When she did, she wished she hadn't.

"Come on," Norman said in a soothing voice that did nothing to calm the panic and shock splicing through Lilly. "Take your sister's hand. We have to get out of here."

Lilly tried to turn back to the truck one last time, but Norman shook his head, dark eyes horror-stricken. "There's nothing we can do now. Come on."

"No! We can't leave them! What if someone's still alive." She tore free from Norman's grasp and tried to reach for the flaming truck, even though part of her knew nothing could be done, but Norman grabbed her by the waist, pulling her away, his eyes rimmed in red.

"No, Lilly!" she heard Pip shout. "Come on!"

Her vision blurred by tears and smoke, Lilly tried to fight Norman off, her emotions getting the better of her, but he was stronger than she was, and eventually he got her off the road and into the charred forest beside it, where wildfires and earthquakes had already torn their way through the area, leaving nothing but ash and dust and the blackened husks of trees.

Lilly sucked in ragged breaths of the hazy air, turning to look at Matti, Pip, Norman and the young woman she didn't know, her eyes flicking between them one at a time. It was just the five of them stranded somewhere off the I-5, with no provisions, no vehicle, and the lingering memory of the screams of those who'd survived the accident only to succumb to the fire.

CHAPTER SIX

Noah

Eight Days After

Noah glared at his bike handles, feeling the ache in his legs and back from riding for two full days while Aaliyah and Bella bickered from the bikes beside him. It had been Aaliyah's idea to take Rhys' bike and trailer, but the bike was still a bit too big for her even on the lowest settings, and her bike was too big for Bella, and the two of them had been complaining and arguing pretty much non-stop since they'd left Carpinteria and it was driving him crazy.

They'd just passed Santa Maria, which Aaliyah had told him was about the halfway mark on their journey to Soledad to look for his dad, and the sun was going down. Which meant they needed to make camp pretty soon. He looked across at Aaliyah, taking in her lips forming a straight line and the sweat beading on her brow. He'd never thought of her as particularly delicate, but the way she was hunched over the handlebars, her face knotted in a scowl, told him how much this was starting to take out of her.

"We need to take a break," he said, still pedaling, his eyes on the road ahead looking out for debris and cracks. On the other side of Aaliyah, Bella nodded her head. Her freckled face looked red from heat and exertion and she bit her lower lip.

“It’s not like the distance is going to go away while we’re sleeping, you know,” Aaliyah said, not bothering to keep the irritation out of her voice. “If we keep stopping, we’re never going to get to your dad.”

“We’re not going to get that much further today,” Noah replied, “and we all agreed it was too risky to ride at night.”

He slowed and stopped beside a crooked sign pointing to the *Oceano Dunes Natural Preserve* and the others stopped beside him. He gestured to the sign, his mouth dry and parched, head foggy from dehydration and tiredness. “Come on. We all like the beach. Let’s head down now before it gets dark and we can find a place to sleep for the night.”

“Great idea,” Bella said, her smile seeming to grow larger the more unhappy Aaliyah looked. “You always have the best ideas, Noah.”

“It’s the dumbest idea, actually,” Aaliyah countered. “We have to cycle through Arroyo Grande and there could be people around. Bad people. So both of you get a brain cell, please.”

“We can go around the city,” Noah insisted. “We need to stop, Aaliyah. None of us want to go any further.” He looked up at the gloomy, hazy sky, the late afternoon sun doing little to illuminate the churning currents of smoke and dust. They’d been getting closer to the wildfires with every passing hour, and it was difficult to know how far away they were now.

The thought of being caught anywhere near a wildfire in the dark sent a shiver down his back. And he was trying hard not to think about the fact that the fires might have already torn through Soledad and the conservation camp, just like he tried hard not to think about his mom. Sometimes it was easier just to pretend the bad things weren’t really happening.

For a moment, the three of them stared in the direction of Soledad, saying nothing. The air smelled like smoke and the faint but nauseating stench of burning rubber and sulfur, his breath bitter on the back of Noah’s throat.

Aaliyah coughed once and finally nodded. “Fine, Noah. We’ll stop here and head down to the stupid beach. But if we get into trouble, it’s on you. Okay?”

He wanted to ask why she was so mad at him. It’s not like he made her agree to Bella joining their group. She’d promised Rhys just like he had. But he didn’t say any of that and just nodded. “Okay.”

She pulled her backpack off and pulled out a large plastic bottle that they’d refilled the previous night with water they’d collected from a murky pond at the back of an abandoned property. The water still had a greenish tinge and funny taste, even though they’d boiled and cooled it. But no one had gotten sick yet.

The bottle in Aaliyah’s hands was less than a quarter full, now. He looked at it and licked his chapped lips. “Are the other bottles empty?”

“Yep. This is all we have left. The empties are inside the trailer.” She took a long drink and then offered it to them. Noah savored each sip, feeling the warm water slide down his throat and settle in his empty stomach, making it feel less like it had been stuffed with rocks. Bella drained the last of the water and capped it, tucking it inside the trailer with the other bottles.

“Let’s go,” Aaliyah said, angling her bike down the road that led toward Oceano Dunes. “And I hope you’re both happy you talked me into this.”

She started cycling again, and Noah and Bella followed, Noah feeling the weariness creep into his body as they continued in the direction of the ocean, the slow, regular crash of the waves growing louder.

Bella cycled beside him and said his name softly. When he caught her eye, she continued in a low voice. “I think it’s a really good idea to stop here. I love sleeping on the beach. It’s kind of like one of those adventure holidays, don’t you think?”

“I guess so,” he replied, even though he’d never really taken a holiday before.

They continued riding their bikes, taking the long way around what was left of the city, all of them cycling in silence as they stayed alert for any sign of others in the ruined remains. The small seaside town had been mostly destroyed by the earthquakes. Homes had been reduced to piles of rubble, broken concrete and glass everywhere, with huge gashes in the roads, street lamps and trees felled; the whole scene resembled a war zone.

As the sound of the ocean grew louder, Aaliyah suddenly braked hard and motioned for them to get down. Bella and Noah exchanged glances, unsure what had prompted her to stop without warning but instinctively following her lead, getting off their bikes and dropping low.

“What is it?” Bella whispered.

Aaliyah gestured to a group of people in the distance, making their way along one of the roads littered with debris. They didn’t appear to have seen Aaliyah and the others yet, but there was no mistaking their dark clothing and menacing air as they scanned their surroundings.

Noah’s heart began to pound in his chest. “Hide,” he said quietly. “We don’t want them to see us.”

The three of them lay their bikes down gently, then crouched behind the piles of debris, concealing themselves in a long, dark shadow cast by someone’s broken front door. Tense moments passed as they waited for the group to move on, and Noah noticed a vein pulsing in Aaliyah’s forehead. As they watched in silence, the ominous figures continued onward until they disappeared around a bend in the road and were lost from view once more.

Noah stood first, scanning their surroundings and seeing no sign of anyone else around. He let out a breath and shook his hands, releasing the tension that had snaked its way through his fingers. As he returned his focus to the rubble in front of him, he realized they were looking at part of a kitchen. “Guys, look,” he said, pointing to the corner of a fridge sticking up between broken tiles and plasterboard.

“Some of the cabinets are still intact,” Bella said, her voice barely above a whisper, eyes alight. “Let’s see if we can find anything!”

As they began to dig through the rubble, Aaliyah let out a small sigh. “You guys are nuts if you think we’re actually going to find any food in this mess,” she muttered. “And what we really need is water. We’re out.”

But just as her words faded away, Bella let out an excited gasp, holding up a couple of cans of pasta and soup buried beneath the broken plates and shattered glass. Excitement buzzed between them as they uncovered several more, finding enough for all three of them to have a decent meal that night and the next.

“Now we just need to find some water,” Aaliyah said, her voice still a little gruff, although she couldn’t hide the smile on her face every time she looked at the can of tomato soup they’d set on the ground at their feet.

With renewed energy, the three of them continued searching through the rubble, desperately hoping to find a water source while they still had some daylight. Right when he was about to tell the others they should look somewhere else, Noah spotted something red that made his mouth water.

“Guys, look!” he cried out, scrambling toward what looked like a can of soda half-buried beneath the dirt. Without waiting for them to catch up, he brushed away the debris and picked it up in his hands.

A can of soda had never looked so good. It felt heavy in his hands, and he popped it open, hearing the fizz of bubbles as an orange tang filled the air, sweet with a hint of tartness. The other two crowded around him with wide smiles on their faces.

Noah took the first sip, the bubbles like a spark of electricity, dancing on his tongue and the flavor filling his mouth. He passed it to Aaliyah, who then handed it to Bella. They each took sips from the can, drinking until it was all gone.

“Well that was good,” Noah said with a grin, licking the last of the sweet orange flavor from his lips before raising his arm to toss the soda can back into the debris.

“Wait!” Bella reached up and plucked the can from his hands. “I have an idea about how we can make some drinking water.”

“Make some drinking water,” scoffed Aaliyah. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Don’t you remember the survival units we did in Girl Scouts?”

Aaliyah shook her head in disgust. “We didn’t all get to spend our weekends selling cookies and learning how to sew. Get a grip, Bella. You live in a fantasy land most of the time.”

Noah saw the hurt in Bella’s eyes and stepped in before she could say anything sharp in return. “I think it’s a great idea,” he said firmly. “Tell us what else you need, Bella.”

He didn’t look at Aaliyah as Bella went on to explain her simple idea of turning seawater into drinking water, although an uncomfortable sensation had settled in his gut that had nothing to do with hunger.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Noah

Eight Days After

Noah and the others passed through the edge of Arroyo Grande and then Oceano toward the beach as the sun settled low on the horizon. The last of the buildings came into sight, giving way to a rolling plain of sand that spread out to their left and right, with the sparkling ocean just beyond the dunes.

The road beneath them had narrowed into a strip of crumbling asphalt with tufts of dry grass growing from between the cracks. Noah rode ahead and strained his eyes in the dying light, still on high alert for any other people, thankful not to see anyone else around. When they reached the end of the road, he jumped off his bike, walking it toward a large pile of debris that had once been a home with a great view.

Pausing beside the rubble, he could sense the others behind him, and he waited for them to catch up before starting to shift pieces of debris to hide the bikes. They worked in silence, lifting up sheets of plasterboard and burying the bikes out of sight.

Before they finished, Aaliyah reached into the bike trailer and grabbed three of the cans they'd just found, and Bella took the empty soda can and one of the empty plastic bottles of water. Noah put the last piece of plasterboard in place,

covering their things completely, then stood, palming his hips. “Dinner time!”

“My favorite time of the day,” Bella replied, raising herself up on her toes. “My mom is a really good cook. She makes the best spaghetti. I really wish she was here to make us all some.” Her hand strayed to the locket around her neck that Noah knew contained her mom’s photograph, and Noah wanted to ask her more about her mom, but couldn’t find the words. His hand moved to his own neck, and he wished he still had the silver cross his mom had given him.

Aaliyah rolled her eyes. “Come on, you two. Let’s go.”

“We’re coming,” replied Noah, glancing one last time at where they’d hidden the bikes.

Breathing in the salty air, still tinged with smoke and tiny flecks of ash, they headed down to the beach just as the sun dipped below the horizon. Beautiful, striking shades of orange and lavender spread across the horizon like a painter had come along with a wide brush, shading everything with yellow and gold where the light and dark met. In that moment, it was almost easy for Noah to forget about their troubles and simply enjoy being there with his friends under the hazy, darkening sky.

As they reached the shoreline, the sun disappeared below the horizon and the sky turned a deep shade of purple. The waves rolled in, crashing against the sand with a soothing sound that even seemed to calm Aaliyah as she stopped walking and stared at the ocean in silence.

“Let’s eat,” Bella said, taking another couple of steps and settling on the sand about twenty yards from the waterline.

Noah took a moment to glance up and down the beach, but they were alone as far as he could tell. His stomach complaining loudly, he dropped down beside her. Sand got in his shoes but he didn’t even care: they were at the beach and they had food and a plan to get water. As far as he was concerned, things were going pretty well for once.

“Dibs on the tomato soup,” Aaliyah said, letting go of the other two cans in front of Bella and Noah. They dropped into the sand with a dull thud.

Disappointment flitted across Bella’s face. “I found it. I should get the first choice, and that’s the one I wanted.”

Knowing he was better off staying out of this one, Noah clamped his lips closed and kept his hands in his lap, even though he wanted to grab one of the cans and tear into it. He didn’t care what it was. He just wanted to eat.

As if sensing his thoughts, Aaliyah shot him a triumphant look. “Looks like Noah isn’t going to rush to defend you, Bella. It’s mine.”

With a low sound in the back of her throat like a growl, Bella turned away from them and stared out at the ocean, her jaw set in a firm line, arms crossed over her chest. But Noah could see the hurt written all over her face, and he felt his own heart twist in response.

Even though he was only a year older than her, Bella seemed a lot younger than eleven most of the time. She certainly didn’t have Aaliyah’s street smarts or his own sense of self-preservation, and she’d only just lost Rhys and her mom, even if she wouldn’t admit that her mom was dead.

“There’s ravioli or chili left,” Noah said in a placating tone. “Which one do you want, Bella?”

“You pick. I don’t care.”

Noah shrugged. He’d tried. Stomach grumbling in anticipation, he grabbed the chili, using the ring pull to get it open and then his fingers to shovel the cold beans and some kind of meat into his mouth. At some point, Bella begrudgingly reached for the ravioli and started eating it, and the food and repetitive sounds of the ocean soon calmed everyone’s tempers.

“So how do you make this drinking water thingy?” Noah asked, wiping his chin with his bare arm. He turned the can upside down and then shook the last of the beans and sauce clinging to the bottom into his mouth. Beside him, Aaliyah

had gone quiet, looking at the empty can of tomato soup like it meant a whole lot more to her than just a hollow victory over Bella. Noah wanted to ask her about it, but he sensed it probably had something to do with her life before the earthquakes, and he knew she hated to talk about that.

After setting aside her can of ravioli, Bella picked up the plastic bottle and used her finger to draw a line around the bottom. “I’m going back to that kitchen to look for a knife in the morning. I’m going to cut the bottle around the bottom along here, so the whole bottom drops off. Then I’m going to roll the bottom edge up inside itself to make an inner gutter, a few inches tall.”

“What about the soda can?” Noah picked it up and turned it over in his hands, the faint smell of orange lingering in the air.

“I’ll cut the top off and then fill it with seawater and put it inside the bottle. We leave it in the sun for a little while and as the water evaporates, it condenses on the plastic bottle then collects in the gutter.”

“Condenses.” Aaliyah’s gaze had moved to the ocean, which had turned an inky black as the sun finally disappeared.

“What?” Noah turned his head to face her.

“Bella means condenses. Not consensus.”

“Whatever,” Bella said, a defensive edge in her tone. “I did it in girl scouts and it worked. We just need the sun to heat the seawater.”

“So we won’t have water until the morning? I wish you’d said that before we drank the last of our water.” Aaliyah shook her head, muttering *idiot* under her breath.

“I’m going to the toilet,” Bella said, standing abruptly. She poked her tongue out at Aaliyah and then scrunched up her face like she was trying not to cry before running toward the sand dunes.

Noah turned and watched her, waiting until she was out of earshot before looking back at Aaliyah. “You shouldn’t give her a hard time all the time.”

“I’m not giving her a hard time. I’m just saying the truth. And sometimes I wonder if we made a big mistake agreeing to let her tag along with us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Something about the way Aaliyah was looking at him made his insides clench in a bad way.

A frustrated tic pulled at the side of her mouth. “She’s just a kid. She needs looking after. And we have our hands full looking after ourselves. She’s going to get us killed or in trouble. Trust me, we’re better off without her.”

“We promised Rhys.”

Aaliyah rolled her eyes. “That’s a moment I wish I could take back. Look, the next nice group we find, let’s convince her to stay with them. She’ll be better off. She’s just a kid. She’s not cut out for this. All she needs is a replacement mommy or replacement Rhys to do everything for her. And I don’t want that job, Noah.”

“She’s eleven. I’m twelve, and I’m not a kid either.”

“You two are very different. Trust me.”

“Why do you hate her so much?”

“She’s an entitled brat. She has no idea what the real world is like.”

A lump formed in Noah’s throat and he swallowed it down. He knew Aaliyah was being unreasonably harsh, but nothing he said was going to change her mind. “We can’t just ditch her, Aaliyah. She thinks she’s part of our team. And she did come up with that water thing.”

“Oh great, so we can sit around for hours waiting for a sip of water. Sure thing, if you never want to get back to your dad —”

“What are you guys talking about?” Bella asked as she appeared out of the darkness and dropped down next to Noah again.

He glanced at Aaliyah, but she was looking at the ocean, her face stony.

“Nothing,” Noah said quickly, not wanting the two of them to get into another fight. “How about we get some sleep? I’ll take the first watch.”

“I’ll take second,” Aaliyah said, her voice clipped.

“Okay.” Bella yawned and scooted closer to Noah. “Wake me up when it’s my turn, okay?”

He nodded, feeling a blend of guilt and frustration as he watched her curl up into a ball and close her eyes. He had the urge to reach out and pat her back or tell her to sleep well, but didn’t dare chance it with Aaliyah watching them so closely.

The night wore on slowly and painfully. At some point, Aaliyah dozed off, leaving Noah to keep watch by himself. He stayed awake, his mind churning with worry as he stared out at the thick black swell of ocean. Unlike his mind, the water was eerily calm, the only sound coming from the occasional crashing of waves against the shore.

Noah stared up at the starless sky, wishing he had someone who could help him figure some of this stuff out. He didn’t want to believe that Aaliyah would actually ditch Bella, but he could tell that she was seriously considering it. And the thought of being separated from either one of them made his stomach hurt. He had to find a way to keep them both together. But how?

And when he looked north, he thought he could see the faint glow of wildfires burning out of control, which made a fresh band of worry tighten his chest. The fires had been burning ever since the earthquakes had started. And that meant everything up north could be destroyed. For the first time, he started to really worry about what he’d do if he got to the conservation camp and his dad wasn’t there.

With that thought, Noah woke Aaliyah and settled down to get some rest, even though sleep didn’t come easily. He couldn’t stop thinking about Bella and the wildfires, and when he finally fell asleep, his dreams were filled with images of his dad running into a burning building trying to save Aaliyah. But there was no way out, and the fire grew stronger, until

both of them were trapped and there was no one to help, no way to reach either of them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Erin

Eight Days After

There were only a few more minutes left in the day, and Erin sat on the sofa in her front room in the gloom, staring at the clock on the wall as the second hand moved its way around the clock's face. Time ticked away in a muffled beat, a fading rhythm like footsteps of someone walking away, and Erin allowed herself a few moments to worry about Matti and Johannes.

She needed her sons to get home, and it was hard to let go of all control in that regard. Hard to acknowledge that it was completely out of her hands as to *when* or even *if* they would make it back to Texas. She let out a weary sigh, sinking deeper into the comfortable, well-worn sofa.

On one side of her lay Otto, and her rifle sat on her other side, while Tapio and Fiona were asleep in the bedrooms at the back of the house. As the clock ticked to midnight, her gaze flicked to the window, drapes opened, and she looked past the table they'd laid on its side for cover over the bottom half of the glass. She could see the front of her property, and her eyes scanned the pond, an inky spot in the distance, and then moved to trace the driveway and the perimeter fence. All was quiet, just as it should be.

It had been two days since the men had arrived on the electric ATV and tried to rob her and Tapio. Two days since

those same men—likely brothers—had broken into Fiona and Ian’s place and killed Ian, before Fiona had shot them in retaliation. And Erin knew it was only a matter of time before someone came looking for the brothers.

As she scanned the property once again, she wished Paul and Martha had agreed to come and move into their place. The house was small, but they’d be safer all together, and comfort was a small price to pay for security. She could understand their decision though. After they’d all rebuffed George Vander’s offer to store their supplies on his property, Paul and Martha had been reluctant to rock the boat.

Otto twitched in his sleep, the German Wirehaired Pointer’s leg pedaling in the air. Erin reached out and stroked Otto’s flank, and the dog’s leg immediately stilled before he shuffled closer to her. For a few moments they sat in peaceful silence, her fingers running along Otto’s coat, the dog relaxed and content.

Without warning, Otto sat up with a start, his ears pricked and body tense. The sudden movement sent a pulse of adrenaline through Erin. “What is it, boy?”

Otto pointed his head toward the door and whined, and Erin felt a cold chill pass over her skin just as she felt the first tremor beneath her. “Tapio, Fiona!” Erin leaped to her feet and ran down the hallway, stumbling as she tried to stay upright, the floor shaking beneath her feet and Otto close behind her. “Wake up! An earthquake!”

She paused in the hallway beside the kitchen and the glass in the window rattled as the shaking intensified. Trees swayed back and forth in the darkness, leaves and small branches scratching against the glass. The guest bedroom door burst open and Fiona appeared in the hallway a second later, looking scared and pale, Tapio emerging from their bedroom just behind her.

“What do we do?” Fiona asked as she reached for Erin and clutched her arm.

“We need to get under the table and stay calm, just like we discussed,” Erin said, already ducking under the sturdy kitchen

table. She slung her rifle over her shoulder and called to Otto, trying to steady herself with one hand. “Come on, boy!”

Otto hesitated for a moment, then ran to her and lay beside her under the table. Fiona and Tapio both followed, and once they were all safely underneath, Erin wrapped her arm around Fiona’s shoulder as the shaking intensified.

“It’s going to be okay,” Erin said, trying to sound calm even though her heart was pounding in her chest. “Just breathe and stay with me.”

Fiona nodded, her eyes wide and fixed on Erin’s face. Tapio had crawled over to the other side of the table and was holding on to one of the legs, his eyes on the wall opposite.

The world outside the kitchen window was a blur of shadows and flashes of movement, and even with the base isolation engineered into the foundation of the house, it seemed like their home was being torn apart. Erin looped one arm around the table leg, keeping the other around Fiona, feeling like she was on a boat in the middle of a storm, holding on for dear life.

As she lost all sense of time, the wood and bricks around her creaked, metal groaned, and plates rattled. It was like being caught in the mouth of an ancient, wakening beast, imagined and terrifying, but too huge to conceive of completely.

The earthquake seemed to go on forever, but eventually it started to subside, until finally it stopped altogether. The silence that followed was thick and oppressive, as if it were a tangible thing. It hummed in Erin’s ears and she squinted into the gloom, through the air thick with dust, everything diffuse and gray.

She let out a shallow breath, hearing Fiona and Tapio’s own breaths in the darkness that seemed to come and go in waves, the stunned quiet like long fingers raking over their skin.

“Just stay here a moment longer,” Tapio finally said, his voice betraying his worry at the intensity of the earthquake.

“There could be aftershocks.”

But the world remained still as they stayed under the table for a few more minutes, just to be safe, before cautiously emerging. The relief, when it came, was weightless, frail, and made Erin feel naked and small; the shaking had taken a piece of her, a reminder of how vulnerable they were, and how vulnerable their house was.

Erin looked around her kitchen, eyes moving over the photographs of her children on the wall, and sighed when she saw the only damage was several yellow plates they'd bought at a discount from Walmart, which had fallen out of the cupboards and shattered on the floor. As she moved to sweep them up, she knew they were the lucky ones. Things could have been a whole lot worse, and if Tapio's predictions were correct, things would get pretty bad before they got better.

“Is everyone okay?” she asked, looking at Fiona.

Fiona nodded, but she was visibly shaken and trembling. “I think so,” she said. “Just a little rattled.”

Erin put her arm around Fiona's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “You did great,” she said. “Just breathe. It's over now.”

Fiona folded her arms over her chest and nodded, looking around at the pile of broken plates that Erin had swept into the corner. “We're going to have to clean this up.”

“Yeah, we are,” Erin said with a rueful smile. “But first, let's check on the animals and then the rest of the house and make sure everything is okay.”

They followed Tapio and Otto outside, and Erin noted the cracks and damage to the porch. As they stepped down onto the grass, Fiona's dogs ran to them, crowding around Fiona. “It's okay,” she said, dropping to her knees and checking them over one by one.

Tapio had switched on a flashlight, and Erin watched him move down to the pond with Otto where the animals seemed to have gathered; donkeys, goats, chickens, ducks, and Erin and Tapio's two horses had all fled the barn and congregated

around the water as the earthquake stilled. The darkness pulsed with an eerie quiet that amplified the sounds of the anxious animals.

Only the rabbits were still in their hutch, and Erin left Fiona surrounded by her dogs, turning on her own flashlight and walking around the house to their pen. She found all the rabbits huddled together in a corner, their eyes glowing as she moved the flashlight over them and confirmed they were all okay.

As she turned to return to the others, her light briefly caught the barn. They had left the doors open so the animals could flee if they needed to, and it was a good thing they'd done so. The barn leaned at an almost forty-five degree angle, on its way to collapsing into a pile of splintered wood. Erin clicked her tongue and shook her head, but there was nothing she could do right then. It would be an issue to deal with in the morning.

Once they'd finished outside, they checked the house over and then met back at the kitchen table, each taking a seat as Erin poured some of the pond water they'd purified earlier in the day by boiling it and then adding a few drops of unscented liquid bleach. The sun would be up in a few hours, but none of them felt like sleeping.

Fiona took a sip of water and then reached down to scratch her black labrador Soot behind the ears before clearing her throat. "I know it's like asking how long a piece of string is... But I have to ask. How much longer will this keep going, realistically?"

"There's going to be increased seismic activity, and everything that comes with that, for years," Erin replied, wishing she had another answer. "Things are never going back to normal."

"Years—"

Erin held up her hand. "Tapio has been checking the shortwave radio when he switches on the generator, gathering anecdotal evidence about the location and severity of earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions from survivors.

Obviously, we don't have a complete picture, but he's done some modeling based on the information we do have."

She looked over at Tapio and raised an eyebrow. He smiled at her, holding her gaze a few moments longer than necessary, like he used to do when they were at college together, before looking at Fiona. "I think things are going to keep getting worse for a good six to twelve months as the two parts of what were the Eurasian Plate continue to move away from one another. None of this is an exact science, of course, and the Pacific Rim and Iceland are going to continue to be hot spots of activity for decades. Centuries. But the worst should peak within the next year, with increased seismic activity for a long time after that."

Fiona's brow creased. "So, how bad is it going to get?"

"What we just experienced is a warm up for the main event. And if we didn't build this place to withstand an earthquake, the house would have fallen down around us by now."

A stunned silence filled the room until they all seemed to have the same thought at the same time.

"Paul and Martha!" Tapio and Erin said in unison, Fiona already getting to her feet.

CHAPTER NINE

Erin

Nine Days After

With her heart pulsing in her ears, Erin hurried through the house and out onto the porch with Tapio, Fiona and the two dogs close behind. They'd all grabbed weapons on the way out, and Tapio locked the door after himself. There was no time to think about security beyond that simple act: Paul and Martha could be in trouble, and Fiona's dogs would help to keep anyone away.

Erin shouldered her rifle and switched on her flashlight as they descended the couple of steps, the beam flickering through the darkness and painting the way for them. Crickets chirped while fireflies danced in the nearby field. From across the yard, Fiona's other dogs started barking, and Fiona quickly hushed them, while Soot ran off to join the pack.

They'd agreed to only use the truck in an emergency, and Tapio didn't even need to ask if the others agreed as he hurried to the vehicle and got the engine started. Paul and Martha's home had already suffered damage, and this latest quake might have pulled it all the way down. Their seven-year-old granddaughter, Daniella, was there too, and the thought made Erin's blood run cold.

"I hope they're okay," Fiona said, almost whispering as she climbed into the truck. "Do you think they're okay?"

“They’re tough, they’ll be fine,” Erin said, although she couldn’t deny the deep worry that gnawed at her gut. She climbed into the truck beside Fiona, and Otto settled at her feet before she pulled the door closed.

With a growl, the engine came to life, and the truck lurched forward, heading up the driveway toward the road that ran between their property and the Hill’s. They reached the top of their drive and Erin hurried to unlock the gate, noticing a couple of sections of fence they’d have to repair in the daylight, then jogged back to the truck, squinting against the bright headlights.

Once she was back inside, Tapio pumped the gas and turned right. As they made their way down the road, Tapio being careful to avoid damage and debris on the road, Erin kept glancing out of the side window into the darkness. Her eyes strained to make out shapes in the landscape whipping past, her hands clutched tightly in her lap.

Finally, they rounded a bend in the road and saw the Hill’s familiar fence line and gate. “Oh dang it,” Tapio said as he no doubt took in the long section of fence that had come down, blocking the driveway.

Erin already had her door open, a sense of purpose pulling her into action and clarifying her thoughts. “Come on, it won’t take long to clear!” She hurried to the gravel driveway and started hauling the fence posts and wire out of the way, while the others joined her, Otto sniffing the air and keeping watch.

As they worked, Erin kept glancing over her shoulder in the direction of the Hill’s place, dread filling her heart, praying that when they got to the house, she wouldn’t see it had collapsed. She’d seen what that looked like first hand when the Walmart had come down, and she didn’t want to see it again.

Once the driveway was cleared, they drove the rest of the way down into the Hill’s property. As the house came into sight, Tapio swore softly under his breath. Erin bit back a curse of her own.

He parked the truck beside the mound of rubble, and moments later, the three of them were walking toward what

was left of the Hill's house, flashlight beams bouncing across the ruins and churned-up ground. The air was so still, Erin could hear the sound of insects chirping and livestock calling out to one another.

"This is so much worse than I imagined," Fiona said, eyes blinking rapidly. "I bet my home collapsed too, and the Vanders' place. We'll have to check on them after we..."

"After we find Paul, Martha, and their darling granddaughter," Erin replied firmly.

As they walked around the house, Erin's heart seemed to constrict in on itself, despite the confidence she'd projected for Fiona's benefit. The wooden beams of the house were snapped like matchsticks, the walls had fallen in, and the window frames the flashlight picked up were shattered and empty. Felled trees lay around the house and the air was thick, like syrup, waiting for just the right moment to spill out and drown her.

With her eyes raking the wreckage, she squashed down her doubts and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Martha! Paul!"

The others stopped just ahead of her and Erin caught up to them, coughing as she inhaled the cloud of fine dust that covered everything. Fiona continued to call out to Martha and Paul, while Tapio's flashlight probed the debris, coming to stop on the cracked remains of the Hill's modest LCD television.

Otto lowered his head, sniffing at the decimated house, then set off around the wreckage. "Hello! Paul? Martha?" Fiona called out as they headed after the dog. But there was no answer, just an eerie silence that filled Erin with dread.

Then Otto let out a low bark, and he sped up, nose down, as he headed into the wreckage.

"Otto, slow down!" Erin called after him, her thoughts racing as she imagined the worst. But Otto kept moving forward, and they followed, scrambling over the debris while searching for any sign of their neighbors.

At last they emerged onto a pile of fallen beams and slats of wood, half buried under piles of drywall and plaster. And lying in the middle of it all was Martha Hill, barely conscious and covered in dust. No doubt she'd been knocked down when their house had collapsed, but somehow she'd managed to survive.

They hurried to move the sheets of drywall and Erin reached out a hand to help Martha up, relieved at having found her neighbor alive and relatively well. Martha's dark hair streaked with gray now looked white from dust, her tanned, sun-weathered face coated in fine powder. As Martha blinked her eyes open and dragged a sleeve across her face, she seemed confused. "Where's Paul? Daniella?" she managed to rasp out.

"We'll find them," Erin replied, her arm around Martha's shoulder and wishing she'd remembered to bring some water. "When did you see them last?"

"The earthquake started, and Paul went to wake Daniella. That's the last I saw of them." Martha's bloodshot eyes stared at Erin through the dark, her gaze intense.

"Okay, we'll find them. I promise." Erin glanced at Tapio, who nodded. They would search the house until they found Paul and Daniella, no matter how long it took. She turned to Fiona, who crouched on Martha's other side. "Fiona, will you stay here with Martha? Try to get her more comfortable?"

There was no hesitation as Fiona nodded, her expression determined. "Of course. Go find the others."

As Erin, Tapio and Otto headed back into the wreckage, the thought of little Daniella trapped in the rubble filled Erin with rage at the unfairness of it all, fueling her determination to find Paul and the little girl before it was too late. They continued to be led by Otto, picking their way through the dark rubble with flashlights until the sun started to rise on the horizon.

Amid the chaos and destruction, Erin refused to give up hope, knowing that somewhere in that ruined house were two people she desperately needed to save. They combed through

every room and crevice, calling out for Paul and Daniella as they searched.

And finally, as the dawning sun's rays cast long shadows through the detritus, they pulled back a large sheet of plasterboard and found them under Daniella's bed, Paul unconscious but alive, and Daniella curled up in the crook of his arm, looking at them with wide, scared eyes. Erin's heart swelled with relief, and with Tapio's help, she managed to carefully lift Paul out from under the rubble so he could breathe easier and they could tend to his injuries while trying to wake him up. As they shifted him, Daniella crawled out from under the bed and started to cry.

"It's going to be okay," Erin said as she picked up the girl. She was small for her age, and Erin hardly felt her weight. "You and Grammy and Grandpop are going to come and stay at our place now. It's going to be okay, little one."

Even though Paul and Martha had already said no, wanting to avoid a situation that looked like they were forming an alliance against George and his family, there was no choice now. They needed to stick together more than ever, and the Hills had nowhere else to go.

And as Daniella lay her head on Erin's shoulder, she knew they needed to take the Hills and their granddaughter back to her house, and then check on the Vanders. She might hate George and feel uncomfortable around Kimmy and their two red-haired sons, but she wasn't a monster, and the Vanders might need their help.

Feeling tired and drained, she started to head back through the rubble, tracing her way around broken furniture and shattered pieces of the Hill's house, little Daniella cradled in her arms.

CHAPTER TEN

Johannes

Nine Days After

Johannes and his family sat opposite Hank and Cindy, who Johannes had learned were dairy farmers. They'd gathered around a red and white striped blanket that Cindy had laid on the grass in the field beside the airstrip, just before she and Hank had produced a breakfast of wild blueberries and lobster rolls in homemade bread, which she'd told Johannes was a Maine specialty.

Yesterday, Johannes and Camilla had agreed with their suggestion to stay one more day to rest and recuperate, and they'd spent the day napping and eating the food that Hank and Cindy, two strangers, had generously shared, as well as refueling the Embraer Praetor with fuel they siphoned from the wrecked planes. After everything they'd been through, the calm, quiet day was exactly what they all needed, and also gave Johannes a chance to say goodbye to Harriet properly.

But now it was their last meal together, and Johannes could tell Hank and Cindy had put a lot of care into the preparation of the food. The lobster was fresh, and succulent, covered in homemade mayonnaise. And even though the buns were a little charred from the wood-fired oven, he'd honestly never tasted anything so good.

"This food is incredible," Camilla said, taking the words right out of Johannes' mouth. "Thank you so much for your

generosity.” She smiled as the cool morning air rolled over them, the sky overhead hazy and the morning sun low in the sky. Beside her, Storm happily chewed on pieces of lobster that Cindy had brought especially for him.

“It’s nothing,” Cindy said, her eyes on Noelle and Ben. “We couldn’t let those sweet angels leave without a final taste of Maine hospitality and full bellies.”

Johannes chewed the last bite of his roll and cast his eyes over his children, both happily eating, before washing his food down with a mouthful of fresh milk. It brought him back to his days on his parent’s ranch, when their neighbors Paul and Martha would send their daughter over with bottles of fresh, raw milk every Sunday morning.

Feeling relaxed and rested for the first time since the nuclear test, Johannes sat back on his elbows and looked at Cindy and Hank. “So, were there any other questions you had for us before we head off?”

Hank’s broad frame twisted to look at Johannes, and he scratched his head, frowning. They’d already talked at length yesterday about what the Russians had done, and what happened at the Kola Borehole after the nuke was detonated. “Well, I’d really like to know what’s going on in the rest of the world. Are things as bad as they are here?”

Johannes nodded, feeling his tension return as quickly as it had briefly receded. He closed his eyes for a moment, seeing the images of smashed cities and broken lives they’d experienced over and over again. Roads folded like paper, crumbs of black asphalt scattered among the remnants of buildings. In the distance, the still smoking cities of Berlin, Paris, London and Moscow, the smoldering of the fires casting a heavy haze over the vast, dark and dead continent.

As the memories continued to bombard him, a shudder passed over Johannes. When he opened his eyes, Hank stared at him, and Johannes cleared his throat, swallowing at the lump that had formed there. “From what we can tell, Europe seems to be even worse off than here. And that’s saying a lot. The US East Coast looked pretty bad when we flew over it.”

“Portland is gone,” Camilla added in a low voice.

“Gone?” Cindy’s hand rushed up to cover her mouth. “What do you mean, gone?”

“Tsunamis destroyed the coast, and the earthquakes felled whatever was left,” Camilla replied. “I’m sorry.”

“But why is it impacting us all the way over here?” Hank reached out and took his wife’s hand. “Maine couldn’t be farther from that borehole.”

Johannes thought back to some of the conversations he’d had with Harriet. “The earth’s tectonic plates are in a constant state of flux, all of them moving over the hot mantle, some of them grinding up against each other or pulling apart. Now, I’m not an expert, but a dear friend of ours believed that when the bomb was detonated—”

“Those damn fools,” Hank said, his features darkening. Cindy patted the back of his hand, looking equally disgusted.

Johannes nodded his agreement. “Well, when they split the Eurasian Plate, the newly formed Asian Plate started moving eastward even faster, while the North American Plate was given a push by the newly formed European Plate, and it started speeding up, too, causing a lot of the impacts we’re feeling now. The earthquakes are likely most intense closest to the test site where they detonated that massive nuke, as well as along the new rift valley, where the Eurasian Plate was split. But everyone will have felt the effects by now.”

Cindy leaned forward. “Do you think anywhere is safe? Everyone we know has left. Headed south once we all realized no help was coming.”

“It’s unlikely anywhere in the US is safe. At least not for a while.” Johannes lifted his gaze to the horizon, looking south, before glancing back at Hank and Cindy. “Maybe there’s somewhere safe out there. But you’re going to have to prepare for the earthquakes to keep coming for now.”

Hank and Cindy asked more questions, and they went over again what happened at the Kola Superdeep Borehole, while Johannes tried to tone down the horror of what he’d seen for

Ben and Noelle's benefit. Then Hank and Cindy shared their experience of the first earthquake, how they'd made it through unscathed, and then the next one, which had brought their house down.

Cindy wiped away a tear, the tip of her nose red. "We're just so glad to see other people again. Sometimes it feels like we might be the last ones left alive."

"I had a thought," Hank said, leaning forward and glancing at the plane. "Did you get anyone on that plane's radio?"

"I checked this morning when I woke up," Johannes replied, shaking his head. "Nothing except a recorded message telling people to shelter in place." He let out a bitter laugh. "Like that advice is going to help anyone. Shelter in place. Go looking for assistance. It's all the same. The earthquakes are going to get you."

"Johannes." Camilla held his gaze and then glanced at the children, her lips lightly pursed.

"Sorry," he muttered, then turned his attention back to Cindy and Hank. "Look, we're going to have to get out of here pretty soon. And you've been nothing but kind to us since we arrived. Would you like us to give you a lift to California? That's our next stop." He pushed himself to his feet, and the others followed, the adults all standing around the picnic blanket while the children and Storm ran a short way through the field, laughing and barking like they hadn't just eaten breakfast in the shadow of the fallen terminal.

Johannes knew what Hank and Cindy were going to say to his proposal before Hank even opened his mouth. "Thanks for the kind offer," Hank replied. "But this is our home, and we're not leaving. We'll take our chances here."

Cindy nodded, her eyes wide and sincere. "We appreciate you taking the time to stop and talk to us, but we're going to stay. We've always lived here, and we'll happily spend our last days here, even if it's just the two of us and even if our days are numbered." She gave Camilla a smile and pulled her into an embrace. "Thank you, though. We're so glad to have met you. And your little ones." She then turned to Johannes. "I'm

sure you'll get to your brother and parents. You'll be alright." She leaned closer and gave him a hug. "Good luck."

Johannes felt like he wanted to say something. He wanted to tell them how nervous he was about seeing Matti again. It had been so long since he'd seen his brother, and there was so much left unsaid from the decades of distance between them. And how he was frightened for the lives of his children, his wife, and his parents. How he didn't know what kind of future any of them could have.

He didn't say any of those things, though. Instead, he simply nodded and gave her a hug in return. Then he watched as the couple packed up their things, leaving them an extra loaf of bread and bottle of milk. He waved as they headed for their truck.

As the truck drove away, Johannes looked around the peaceful setting, understanding why Hank and Cindy wanted to stay where they were. The rolling hills and deep lakes made way for paths that wound through forest heavy with the smell of rich soil and pine. Branches swayed in a gentle breeze, as if a handful of ballerinas danced on their tips, even despite the obvious destruction caused by the earthquakes.

It was peaceful and calm, and part of him wished they could stay, too. He could visit Harriet's grave and contemplate life as the seasons changed, and the lakes froze. Years could go by. There would be more quakes, of course, and other threats, but something about the place felt resilient and tough, like Hank and Cindy could well be the last ones standing once it was all said and done.

But he couldn't stay. He had people he needed to find. Places he needed to be.

He glanced over his shoulder at the air terminal that now seemed to mock him, a hulking reminder of how civilization had ended, then let his eyes feast one last time on the field his children ran through. Covered over with a tide of abundant grass the color of dreams at midnight, it stretched out over the hills. The rich flora reminded him of a truly ancient sea, many

millions of tendrils of grass as yet untouched by the earthquakes that were still to come.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Johannes

Six Years Earlier

Johannes hadn't planned on going to Matti and Elijah's sentencing hearing. He'd wanted to just get on that plane to Qatar and never think about the whole mess again. But Camilla had persuaded him in that quiet way of hers, and there he was in a shirt and tie in the middle of the day, walking toward the courthouse so he could report back to his parents as soon as it was done.

The street was colored by the last gasp of summer, the air thick, hot, and humid, and Johannes kept his eyes on the courthouse up ahead as he navigated the busy sidewalk. He stepped around a lady in a pale purple dress and down the curb, and a taxi driver leaned on his horn as Johannes crossed the street and reached the solid stone building.

He paused for a beat and looked up. The courthouse looked like it had been built in the 1950s, the type of government building that required a key to enter the top floors. He thought it had a stately aura, like it was built with a purpose and that purpose had not changed over the decades.

Johannes climbed the steps out front and walked inside, a bit breathless from the heat. A strange feeling washed over him as he stood in the lobby, like he was about to pass a point of no return. Once Matti was sentenced, there would be no going back to the way things were ever again.

A mix of anger and bitter sadness swept through him. The emptiness left behind by his brother's arrest had infected their family all over again, leaving them broken and floundering in a way that felt fresh and new. It was like the scar left behind by Kalevi's death had been opened up again, leaving the vulnerable flesh beneath exposed and open to the air.

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried not to think about his little brother, about his own guilt and the green Mustang that had started this whole thing, set his life on a trajectory that seemed to have inevitably led him to that very moment, with his adoptive brother about to be sent to prison.

Blowing out the air in his chest, he pushed his feet into his shoes, feeling the hard floor beneath the soles, and tried to ground himself in the present. A couple more breaths helped, and he opened his eyes again, shaking out his hands and glancing around.

The walls of the lobby were covered in ceiling-high wooden panels and the floor sheathed in a dark marble tile that reflected the light from the fluorescent fixtures above. It felt like a place where history was made, where lives were forever changed, and justice sometimes served.

With its tinges of tarnished bronze and the lingering smell of cigarettes smoked many years ago, a smell that would never really disappear, the sounds in the courthouse were muted. Johannes heard hushed voices, the scuff of shoes against marble, and the occasional beep of a cell phone.

Johannes nodded to the security guard and passed through the metal detector, then paused in a sea of people hurrying to be where they needed to be, his eyes scanning for the right courtroom. After orienting himself, he swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth and forced himself to keep walking. He really didn't want to be there. But he'd promised Camilla and told his mom he'd call once it was done.

He hadn't gone far down the hallway when he saw two familiar figures sitting on a bench: Remy, Elijah's girlfriend, and their little boy, Noah.

Johannes' step faltered. He'd hoped to slip into the back of the courtroom and avoid having to see her or anyone else he knew at all, but he was too close to turn around now. At any moment, she'd look up and lock eyes with him. Plastering a somber expression on his face to mask the anxious churn in his gut, Johannes continued on.

He couldn't help but stare at her as he closed the distance between them. Remy was a striking woman, tall and statuesque, with an angular model's face and a dancer's body. Her skin was the color of deep caramel, and shoulder-length braids hung around her face.

He forced himself to keep walking, his heart pounding in his chest as he drew nearer. Remy finally looked up and saw him. Her expression instantly changed, eyes narrowed and lips pulled into a tight line. She leaned down to Noah. "Stay here for a minute. Do not move. Do you understand? Don't move from here while I speak to Johannes."

Noah nodded, his six-year-old legs too short to reach the floor. He swung them back and forth as he watched his mom walk toward Johannes, fingers curled around the edge of the bench.

With no option but to stop, Johannes moved beside the wall to avoid blocking the hallway. He jammed his hands into his pockets as she moved just in front of him, her eyes flashing. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. Her voice was sharp, but her words were quiet, as if she didn't want anyone to hear.

"I came to see Matti," he replied, glancing around to see if anyone other than Noah was watching them. But everyone in the courthouse had their own dramas, their own point of focus.

"You shouldn't have come." She glared at him, her voice shaking with emotion. "This is going to be hard enough without you here. And for the record, I have no idea why they're both protecting you."

Johannes' throat ached at her words. He didn't know what to say, so he just stood there, silent and awkward. "I'm sorry,"

he finally managed to croak out. “But you have to know I had nothing to do with this.”

Remy scoffed, her eyes narrowing to slits. “I know better than to believe that,” she spat. “Don’t think I don’t know who that backpack belonged to, Johannes. I wasn’t born yesterday. You and Matti might not be of the same blood, but you’re both as dysfunctional as the other. And you may be brothers in name, but there’s no way Matti and Elijah should be taking a hit for you. You’ve never done a damn thing for either of them.”

Johannes shook his head. She was wrong. He and Matti were nothing alike, and he had nothing to do with what happened. *Nothing*. He didn’t know why her words stung so much. “Look,” he said. “If I’d known what they had planned, I would have stopped them. You have to believe me.”

Remy’s face twisted with anger. “I don’t believe you. All you care about is yourself and your *bright future*. You should have stopped Matti long before they got themselves in this deep. I was the only one who tried to tell them this was a bad idea. You were quite happy to just let them keep sinking until they hit rock bottom.”

“That’s not true.” Johannes’ mouth gaped open and then closed again. She had no idea what Matti was like. He’d always been the one to get in trouble, single-minded with too many hare-brained ideas. It wasn’t Johannes’ responsibility to try to save Matti from himself.

Remy shook her head, tears shining in her eyes. “And just so there’s no doubt, I hate you for what you’re doing to my family. Those extra years Elijah will be behind bars mean a heck of a lot to me and my son.” She grimaced at him before turning on her heel and walking back toward Noah.

Johannes stood there stunned as he watched Remy stride away, his cheeks burning with shame and anger. Without thinking, he stepped forward and grabbed Remy by the arm, spinning her around to face him, not sure what he was going to say to her but knowing he didn’t want to leave things like that.

“What are you doing?” she said in a low voice. Without warning, she raised her hand and slapped him hard across the face. “Don’t you touch me!”

Johannes let go of her arm and took a step backward. He stared at her in disbelief, shocked by the violence of her reaction and the strength with which she’d slapped him. The whole courthouse seemed to fall silent as he stood there, cheek stinging.

But Remy didn’t even seem fazed by what she’d done. She turned again and marched back to Noah, murmuring something under her breath as she swept past him. The little boy stared at Johannes, wide eyed, before hurrying after his mother.

Johannes was left reeling, his heart racing in his chest as he stared at their retreating backs. He’d never been involved in Matti and Elijah’s troubles, it was true: his hands were clean. But maybe he should have come forward and told the truth about the backpack, about where the stuff the police had found in there had come from.

But what about his job offer? Throw enough mud and some of it would stick, right? And his old friends would no doubt turn on him if he named them to the cops. He’d never have gotten out of it unscathed. With that thought, he pushed his sudden doubts down. He couldn’t jeopardize his future. Matti and Elijah brought this entire thing on themselves.

He pressed a hand to his cheek and then shook his head. There was nothing left to do but go inside and watch Matti’s sentencing, knowing that whatever happened next would be the end of their relationship. As far as Johannes was concerned, they were no longer brothers. And all he could hope was he’d never have to see Matti or Elijah again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Johannes

Nine Days After

“It feels so strange leaving Harriet behind,” Johannes said to Camilla sitting in the co-pilot’s seat. They’d left Maine several hours ago, and the countryside had grown smaller below them as they’d gained altitude. He’d glanced one last time at the lake where they’d buried her, feeling her loss like iced fingernails scratching his heart.

But he wouldn’t let grief take over. He knew from experience that it was like a shroud: a smoky, featureless thing that would encircle him and block everything else out if he let it. And he still had his family to take care of. So he’d focused on containing his grief and flown the plane toward California, just as he should, and now they were approaching the border between Colorado and Wyoming.

“We’ll all miss her a lot,” Camilla replied, glancing out the window at the patchwork brown and green landscape below. “Especially Storm. She was a special woman.” Her voice trailed off, and she bit her bottom lip.

The kids were napping in the back, with Storm also taking the chance to curl up in one of the soft leather recliners. Johannes half turned his head toward the main cabin out of instinct, listening for any sign his children had woken. But all was quiet.

He turned his attention back to Camilla. “I think Storm misses Harriet the most, you know.”

“You’re probably right,” she replied.

He imagined the dog curled up in Harriet’s lap, his head resting on her hand, and a wave of guilt and sadness swept through him, taking him off guard. He focused his attention on the plane’s controls, on the low vibrations of the engine, and tried not to picture the gunshot that had pierced Harriet’s torso. The way the fine mist of her blood had hung in the air for a few seconds, like time had stopped and might never restart again. But it had restarted, and gravity had pushed the spray of crimson to the ground and then Harriet after it, and she’d never gotten back up.

They lapsed into silence for a few moments, the ground rushing past below them, before Camilla looked toward the mountain ranges rising to their left. “Aren’t we close to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex? I wonder if they evacuated the president there?”

“I doubt Washington is still standing, so it’s possible,” replied Johannes. “If he got airborne in time, it’s probably the safest place for him to be. I remember my dad telling me once that the buildings inside the mountain are made of steel and set on top of massive coil springs to absorb the shock of an earthquake or nuclear blast. I think there’s like a thousand springs under it.”

“Even with all that, would the buildings survive earthquakes of this magnitude?”

“I like to think so. But if a massive quake hits this area directly, the buildings might survive while the exits are blocked under tons of fallen rock. It’s hard to say, really. I don’t know enough about the place.” Johannes flicked on the plane’s radio, curiosity driving him to scan the channels to see if they were in range for an emergency broadcast coming directly from Cheyenne Mountain itself.

He turned the knob slowly, the static growing louder and then fading away again as he moved across the dial. And then,

just as he was about to give up, a faint voice came through the speakers.

“This is an emergency broadcast from the Office of the President. I repeat, this is an emergency broadcast from the Office of the President—”

Johannes’ heart leaped into his throat and he fumbled with the volume knob, turning it up a little higher. Camilla sat up straighter in her seat, her eyes wide.

“—Following the unprecedented national emergency, we are instructing all citizens to remain calm. If you are hearing this message, it means that the Federal government is working to provide aid and assistance as soon as possible. For your safety, please stay at home and secure your homes as best you can until further instructions are given...”

The last word cut off in a hiss of static, the message unable to come through clearly. Johannes tried to tune in the broadcast’s source again, turning the knob back and forth and cursing the poor reception, until the recorded message returned.

“—We will soon advise of any specific instructions when the time comes to evacuate. We urge you to bring food, water, and warm clothing with you when you leave. Again, this is an emergency broadcast from the Office of the President. Thank you, and God be with you.”

The static returned, drowning out the last words of the broadcast, and Camilla and Johannes sat in silence for a few moments, staring at the radio.

“I wonder how old that message is?” he asked.

“And I wonder if there really are plans to evacuate anyone,” Camilla added.

As he contemplated her words, he sensed Camilla suddenly sit up in her seat. “Johannes, look.”

He glanced in the direction she pointed and felt a sudden stab of fear. On the horizon, coming from the direction of Wyoming, sat a rapidly expanding, black and white cloud streaked with red. The cloud was a swirling, churning monster

that seemed to pulse with the same rhythm as his heart. As they watched for a few moments in stunned silence, the cloud began to look like a tidal wave, forming into a giant wall that stretched across the horizon and looked to be heading straight for them.

“What is that?” Camilla asked, her voice low and strained.

Johannes consulted his map before replying, a shard of dread wedging in his throat. “Yellowstone’s erupted.”

They both stared at the massive storm of ash and super-heated gasses that seemed to be rushing across the sky. Then Johannes’ training kicked in. “We’ve got to land!”

“What, no! We’ve got to keep going, get away from it.” Camilla’s voice had taken on a panicked edge.

“The air will be full of ash and particles that can clog the fuel system. We fly low and as far away from it as we can, but we’re going to have to stop soon and take stock.” He was already flicking switches and adjusting the controls.

“But won’t this ground us for a long time?”

“I don’t know. Right now, I just need to keep us safe and get us down on the ground before we experience engine failure. If the volcanic ash gets sucked into the engine, it can cause damage and even form a glassy coating over the fuel nozzle and turbines that could stop fuel getting through and cause the engines to seize up.” He cursed, eyes on the ash cloud. “This is bad, Camilla. Really bad.”

She was silent for a long moment before she responded. “I trust you, Johannes. Just get us down safely.”

He nodded and turned his attention back to flying the plane. They flew in silence, both of them watching the cloud grow larger and move ever closer. Johannes could feel the tension in the cockpit, could sense Camilla’s fear. He tried to stay focused on flying the plane, on getting them to safety, but his mind kept turning to the impossible question of what they’d do next. They needed the plane, and he’d have to figure out the safest way to keep it flying.

“Mommy!” called Ben’s voice from the main cabin. “There’s a big storm out there. I’m scared.”

Camilla hurried to stand and headed back to where the kids were waking up. Johannes could imagine Ben’s little pale face staring at the oncoming ash cloud.

“It’s alright,” came Camilla’s voice. “We’re going to be fine. It’s nothing to worry about. Come, let’s give Storm a cuddle and think about something else.”

The ash was getting closer, too close, and Johannes knew it could soon be swirling around the plane like a blanket of death. He could imagine it starting to coat the windshield, making it harder to see, while the engine coughed and spluttered. They were running out of time.

“I’m going to have to land us now,” he called back to his family, his voice strained. “I can’t risk flying any further. Please make sure everyone is buckled in.”

“I’m doing that right now,” replied Camilla.

Johannes heard a soft woof and looked down to see Storm looking up at him with his deep brown, soulful eyes. He rested his head on the edge of Johannes’ seat, and Johannes rubbed Storm’s favorite spot right between his ears at the back of his head, drawing comfort from the dog just like he always had.

“Time to settle down, boy,” Johannes said.

Storm jumped into the copilot’s seat and Johannes leaned across and wrapped the seatbelt around Storm’s body.

“Hang on, everyone,” Johannes called as he started to descend.

They went down rapidly, the plane shuddering as it hit pockets of turbulence. Johannes could see the ash swirling like a dark fog in his periphery. He fought to keep the plane steady, his eyes glued to the windshield. The engines could start coughing and spluttering at any moment, and Johannes knew he had to get them down fast.

He could see a huge body of water coming up ahead, with low flat plains beside it, and he brought the plane lower, his

heart in his mouth and Kalevi's face staring at him with dead eyes. The plane hit the ground with a jolt and Johannes fought to keep it steady as they bounced along the uneven ground. They finally came to a stop and he let out a long breath, shoulders slumping in relief. They were down, but now they had to figure out what to do next.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Erin

Nine Days After

Erin sat beside Tapio in the driver's seat with Otto at her feet as he slowed their truck. In front of them, a large tree blocked the road leading to the Vanders' house, no doubt felled in the earthquakes.

Tapio stopped the truck and turned off the engine. Shaking his head, he climbed out of the vehicle, Erin and Otto following. The fallen tree was large, the bark thick and twisted at the base, dark brown and covered in moss, like an ancient creature pulled from the depths of the earth.

Palming his hips, Tapio looked between the tree's gnarled limbs and the ditch beside it. "I'm going to have to cut away some of the branches so we can get through. We're not going to get the truck down to the Vanders' house, otherwise."

A few moments later, he'd retrieved the axe from the back of the truck and started chopping at the tree's branches, hacking through the tangle of leaves and clearing space for the truck to get through. As she watched him, a bad feeling started in Erin's gut and spread like oil over a hot road.

She swallowed and glanced around, her instincts telling her it was a bad idea to go searching for the Vanders. Maybe she was just trying to avoid the reality that they might be dead,

but she couldn't stop the little voice in her head telling her to turn around.

Unable to quell her feeling of dread, she turned her back on Tapio and scanned the road from where they'd just come, listening for any sign of anyone approaching, Otto beside her sniffing the air. The road leading back to their place stretched out under the hazy sky, cracked and broken from the quakes, while felled trees lay either side of the road like tripwires, the green of the trees fading, the leaves falling and lying in a carpet. A tangle of fencing caught her eye, and she tried not to think about all the work that lay ahead of them, or whether it would even be worth trying to repair everything.

But there was still beauty in the destruction, in the dry summer heat, in the peace and ageless wisdom of the hot, still land. Erin had always loved their little corner of Texas, and she always would, regardless of what came next. She stood for a moment, calming herself, watching the grasses move to the rhythm of the wind, while several birds soared overhead. A dog barked in the distance; a forlorn and lonely sound.

Tapio grunted behind her as he chopped at the tree, and she turned to find him cutting away at the final large branch that lay wedged across the road. He chewed on his lower lip as he concentrated on the task at hand, his work-roughened hands gripping the axe with ease, his arms braced as he took a swing at the thick branch.

All traces of the tremor that had plagued him were gone, and he looked years younger as the axe bit into the bark and he levered it free, before swinging it again. The branch split, bending at an angle as it fell to the road, and Tapio picked it up and dragged it off the road, before straightening.

"Let's go check on our neighbors," he said, grim determination narrowing his eyes.

They both climbed back into the truck with Otto jumping on Erin's lap, and Tapio started the engine again, steering the vehicle between the ditch and what remained of the tree. Once they'd cleared it and returned to the driveway, Tapio's jaw flexed. "I hope they're all okay down there."

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Erin replied. She picked at the hem of her shirt and glanced at Otto, running her hand over his wiry coat, suddenly nervous about saying the next words out loud. “I tried Johannes on his satellite phone again just before we left. It’s been switched off for days now and I can’t get through to him.”

Tapio swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “Maybe they ran out of battery and couldn’t recharge.”

“Maybe,” she replied. “And there’s no way to get hold of Matti. I haven’t spoken to him since before the earthquakes started. He and Johannes could be anywhere. The kids... Ben and Noelle...” Her words trailed off and her throat felt like a wedge of barbed wire had lodged there.

Tapio was silent, perhaps debating whether to raise the subject that was clearly on his mind. He cleared his throat, swallowed another couple of times. “What if they don’t come home, Erin?”

She stared straight ahead, out the windshield at the land bumping past. “I don’t know.” They were quiet for a while, the truck jostling its way down the driveway toward the Vanders’ property.

“I need to see them again,” Tapio said in a quiet voice. “I have some things I need to say to them.”

Erin nodded and shut her eyes for a few seconds. She wanted to switch off the part of her brain that was whispering in her ear that all was not well, that her sons might never come home. The thought of never seeing them again was too much to bear, and she wrapped her arms around Otto, holding him tight as Tapio kept driving.

Tapio cursed softly a moment later, and Erin swung her head around to where the Vanders’ sprawling ranch home should have been, her eyes flicking open. But she could only make out the side of the partially collapsed structure. A cascade of rubble and a cloud of white dust hid the rest of the house.

Shaking his head as they continued on, Tapio drove the truck down the remainder of the driveway and parked outside the destroyed house. Erin hurried to open the door and jumped out after Otto, her fears that the Vanders might be dead quickly vanquished as George Vander appeared around the side of the house, his two red-haired sons, Piers and Louis, walking behind them.

“About time you turned up,” George called out. Kimmy popped her head up from behind a pile of rubble, unable to hide her scowl as the family of four converged on the truck. They were covered in dust but seemed uninjured. Erin let out a relieved breath. “George, Kimmy. Are you okay?”

George made a non-committal noise.

Their younger, cockier son Piers stepped up beside his father, his hair flaming in the hazy light. “Half the day is gone already. We thought you’d turn up a little sooner than this. What if we’d been trapped or injured?”

“And where are the others?” George asked, looking around like the Hills or Fiona might step out from the wreckage. The lines in his forehead deepened.

Erin and Tapio stood a couple of feet away from them, and Erin grabbed Otto’s collar, feeling the dog tense beside her. “Is everything okay, George?” Tapio asked, his jaw flexed defensively. “We came as soon as we could.”

“Oh, we’re just fine,” George replied. “Better than fine, actually. This little shakeup has been a blessing in disguise.”

“A blessing?” Erin repeated, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Of course,” George said, his voice turning bitter with sarcasm. “Now we can finally get rid of all this old junk and start fresh.” He gestured expansively at the house. “It was due for a renovation, anyway.”

“We came as soon as we could,” Erin repeated, trying to keep herself calm and not respond in kind to George. “The Hills and their granddaughter were trapped in their home when it collapsed. We’ve been helping them.”

“They weren’t the only ones in trouble,” George said, gesturing at the wreckage behind them. “You said you came as soon as you could. But it sure as hell wasn’t soon enough.”

“What do you want us to do?” Erin asked, pursing her lips, her chest tight.

“For starters, you can help us clear this mess,” George said. “We’re going to need your truck to shift things to our new location down by the river. All our supplies are in there somewhere.”

“Sorry, George,” Tapio replied firmly. “We’re happy to help with whatever you need, but we’re saving the truck for emergencies only. Running back and forth between the house and the river will use up too much fuel.”

Piers cocked his head. “What about that little electric ATV those men left? I can hook a trailer onto it. I’ve already pulled one out of the barn, which also collapsed by the way, in case you were wondering.”

Erin felt a flare of worry. “I think it’s too soon.”

“There’s no one around,” Louis said, glancing sideways at his dad like he was waiting for his approval. George gave a subtle nod, and Louis puffed out his chest a little and rubbed the back of his neck like he had a crick. “We don’t know what you’re so worried about, Erin. Just bring the ATV here, if you actually want to be neighborly, like you claim.”

Erin shared a look with Tapio. She could tell he thought it was a bad idea, too. As the moment stretched, Louis shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The Vanders’ oldest son had always come across as defensive and a little insecure to Erin, like he knew he didn’t quite measure up to his dad’s impossible standards, and he certainly didn’t have the bravado of his younger brother and dad.

“Look, we’ll get the ATV and come over and help you,” Tapio finally said, his reluctance clear. Erin knew his desire to help was warring with his naturally cautious personality. “But you need to be ready to hide it, okay?”

“I think you can trust us to handle ourselves,” Piers replied with open disdain.

Erin sucked in a breath. She didn’t want to give them a pass for their rudeness, but they’d just lost their home, and stress did strange things to people. Although part of her recognized that this was pretty close to the Vanders’ normal approach to life and had little to do with the fact their house was in ruins.

Otto seemed to have relaxed beside her, so she let go of his collar and shook out her hands, looking across the rubble and meeting Kimmy’s gaze. “How are you doing?”

“As well as can be expected,” Kimmy replied, with no warmth in her eyes.

Erin grit her teeth, knowing she had to at least make the offer for the Vanders to stay with them, even though she hoped the answer was a resounding *no*. “Look, the Hills and Fiona are staying at our place now. You’re welcome to come, too, if you’d like. Our home is still standing.”

She didn’t miss the significant look that passed between George and Piers at the mention of their home, before George shook his head. “Thanks, but no thanks, Erin. We’ve got to protect our water source and property, and my boys are made of tough stuff. They’re going to enjoy this little camping trip.”

Erin felt her brow furrow, and looked between the Vanders. Louis looked down at the ground, avoiding her gaze as he shuffled his feet in the dirt and small pieces of broken plasterboard, while Piers stared at her with an appraising look.

Beside her, Tapio nodded, folding his arms across his chest. “Well, if there’s anything you need, we’re here to help.”

“That’s very kind,” George said coolly.

A long, awkward silence followed until Erin stepped forward and took Kimmy’s hand. “Why don’t you and I go and get the ATV, Kimmy? Tapio can stay here and start helping out. It will give you a chance to get cleaned up at my place. Fiona’s there looking after the Hills and their granddaughter.”

Kimmy looked a little surprised but nodded, and Tapio called Otto to his side before the two women set off toward the truck. Erin tried not to look back at Tapio, hoping he'd understand why she'd asked Kimmy to go with her.

As much as it pained her to reach out to Kimmy, any chance of establishing a peaceful and cohesive group seemed to be fast disappearing. This could be her last chance to mend the bridge between the Vanders and everyone else, before things fell apart completely, and they were cut off from the nearest fresh water supply while security in their area was compromised.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Erin

Nine Days After

Erin and Kimmy had just dropped off the ATV at the Vanders' property, and were headed back to Erin's place so Kimmy could clean up and get some food supplies. Erin drove in silence beside Kimmy for a few moments before turning to glance at the other woman. Her cherry red hair had been pulled back in a ponytail, revealing cheeks sprinkled with freckles and a slight blush. She should have been beautiful, but her mouth was set in a thin line and her delicate eyes held no warmth.

"I'm really sorry about your home, Kimmy," Erin said, her hands gripping the steering wheel as she drove around debris on the road. "If there's anything I can do to help—"

Kimmy held up a hand. "If you're going to ask again if I want to come stay at your place, I'd rather you not."

"No, no," Erin replied, shaking her head and trying to keep her tone light. "I can understand why you want to protect your property. We're all in this together, and we'll help you in any way that we can."

Kimmy nodded and for a while the only sound was the truck's engine and the bump of the tires over the pitted and fissured road. They passed the felled tree that Tapio had partly

cleared and soon reached the road that ran between their properties, where Erin stopped the truck.

“Do you mind if I take a quick detour while I have the truck out? I want to check on Kalevi’s place.” She didn’t know what possessed her to invite Kimmy to a spot that had always been sacred to her family, but it felt like a chance to really reach Kimmy, connect with her as a mother and a woman. And even though they’d be wasting a bit of fuel, the distance was short and the payoff could be worth it.

Kimmy nodded, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. “Sure.”

Erin turned the truck away from her home and drove down the road toward the place where Kalevi had been struck by the hit-and-run driver, the place where she felt most connected to her son. She slowed as she reached the quiet spot on the road, and released a breath she’d held tight in her chest: by a stroke of luck, the white cross by the ditch still stood, and Erin stared at it as she stopped the vehicle and killed the engine.

“I was worried it might be broken,” she said in a low voice. It felt like only yesterday that Tapio had emerged from their shed with red eyes and smelling of paint, the small white cross in his hands. Kimmy didn’t say anything, but when Erin shouldered her rifle, just in case, and stepped out into the quiet stretch of country road, she followed.

To their right, the road continued on ahead for a quarter mile to a bend, Kalevi’s white cross by the ditch the only break in the surrounding green and brown mosaic. Some of the trees had been felled by the earthquake, but the clearing retained the same sense of reverence it had held since that day Tapio had erected the cross and it had taken on a hallowed meaning.

As she walked closer, the grass beneath Erin’s boots was golden, with green shoots and small wildflowers poking up around the edges of a narrow fissure through the earth. Insects and butterflies of vivid colors landed and took off from each flower, and the trees that remained standing were lush, the hazy sunlight hitting their tops, filtering through to the ground below.

The scent of fresh earth, of grass and soil and trees and flowers, felt overwhelming. Everything seemed so alive and vibrant and full of life. Erin continued toward Kalevi's cross, unable to shake the memory of her arms wrapped around Kalevi's small frame, her eyes squeezed shut against the horror of it all.

She'd screamed that day, his blood everywhere and his small, broken body a sight she could never unsee. She'd held him tight, ignoring the blood that coated her arms, her clothing, her face, her hair—it had been everywhere, an ocean of blood that soaked her in its cold embrace.

“Are you okay?”

Kimmy's voice drew Erin's attention, and she nodded, swallowing a couple of times. “I'm fine.”

“So this is where it happened? We'd just bought our property when he died. I've never stopped here before, but we've driven past plenty of times. It must be so painful to keep driving past here year after year, day after day.”

Erin looked over her shoulder in surprise, seeing a mix of sadness and empathy in Kimmy's eyes that she'd never seen before. “We draw a lot of comfort from this place, actually,” she replied, unsure how to explain it to someone other than Tapio. “It's hard of course. But this is where he died, the place where he took his last breath. It feels like part of him is still here, somehow. I, uh...”

Kimmy nodded like she understood. “It's okay. You don't need to talk about it. I think I get it.”

Erin gave Kimmy a grateful nod, and then kneeled in front of the cross, scooping up the dead flowers that had been flung around in the last earthquake. She heard Kimmy move closer and then start to speak. “I've lost children, too,” she said, her voice almost a whisper. “Miscarriages, which I know aren't the same thing as what you've been through, but they were... hard.”

Erin looked up at her, seeing the tears that brimmed in Kimmy's eyes, and felt her heart soften toward the woman.

“It’s funny,” Kimmy continued. “People always say that time heals all wounds, but it doesn’t. You just learn to live with the loss, to keep going even when you feel like you can’t.”

“Yeah,” Erin replied, her voice catching. “That’s exactly it.”

She didn’t know how long they sat there together, both lost in their own thoughts, but eventually Erin stood and dusted off her jeans. “We should probably head back,” she said, glancing at Kimmy. “Look, I know we haven’t been the closest in the past, but I would love to change that going forward. We all need each other now more than ever.”

Kimmy seemed to stiffen. “What do you mean?”

“Well, our place is vulnerable, even though the house is still standing. If someone were to attack, it would be hard for us to defend it by ourselves. And I think you and your family will be vulnerable, too. If we can work together to secure our little area, it’s one less thing we need to worry about. One more way we can protect ourselves, even though these earthquakes are going to keep coming.”

Kimmy tilted her head to one side, unable to hide the calculating look in her eyes. “Your place is vulnerable? How so?”

Erin felt a cold chill as she looked at the woman. She’d misread the situation clearly. “I just meant in a general sense,” she replied with a wave of her hand, suddenly wishing she’d never brought Kimmy to Kalevi’s place. “How about we head back now?”

“Sounds good,” replied Kimmy, although Erin couldn’t help but notice how any empathy that the woman had felt had been quickly replaced by something else entirely.

As the two women started walking back to the truck, the unmistakable sound of an approaching vehicle cut through the birdsong. “Who do you think that is?” Kimmy’s shoulders had stiffened and she paused midstep.

Erin readied her rifle as she spoke, “Hopefully a friendly face. But let’s not take any chances.”

Kimmy nodded and they hurried to the truck, both dropping low behind the front bumper.

“Stay down,” Erin said, her eyes on the bend up ahead until an old, unfamiliar black Volvo cruised into sight, patches of rust marring the hood. As the car approached, she held her breath, watching as it slowed to a stop behind her truck on the side of the road.

The engine cut and someone cracked the door open, boots hitting gravel. “Hello?” called a male voice.

Erin raised herself up to see an older man in a pale yellow cowboy hat and a blue checkered shirt standing beside the Volvo. He was tall, probably in his late fifties, with a thick, stocky build and a cleft chin. He had pale, milky eyes behind small, round glasses and a tan face, with two deep lines running across his forehead.

“Don’t come any closer,” she called out. “We’re armed.”

“Oh, I’m not looking for any trouble,” the man replied, holding his hands in the air, his sleeve sliding down his forearm to reveal the bottom half of a distinctive bear tattoo that Erin had seen twice before. All the blood drained from her face, and she took in the pistol holstered on his hip. “My name’s Randy Ulrich. I’m just looking for my sons. Have you seen them? Two young guys, both in their twenties, they might have been through here a couple of days ago.”

Her eyes widening and pulse racing, Erin swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. The rifle started to tremble ever so slightly in her hands. She knew exactly who the man was and who he was looking for. This was bad. Really bad. “We haven’t seen them,” she replied, struggling to keep her voice from betraying her. “Please move along, now.”

“Sorry to trouble you, ma’am.” He looked at her for a long moment, his eyes intense and searching. Then he got back into his car and started the engine, spinning the wheels and

spraying gravel as he tore off down the road toward their homes.

Erin cursed.

“What is it?”

“We have to get back to your place before he sees that dang ATV!” Erin spoke through gritted teeth as she got to her feet. Once Randy turned down their road, the Vanders’ driveway was the first one he’d reach, and chances were good he’d head down there.

“Who was that?” Kimmy asked.

“Someone who’s bad news for all of us,” Erin replied. “Those guys who shot Ian? That’s their father.”

“Oh no,” Kimmy replied, her face paling.

Erin hurried around the truck and climbed into the driver’s seat. The door on the passenger’s side opened and Kimmy jumped in, the engine roaring to life before she had even shut the door.

“Go!” Kimmy shouted as Erin slammed her foot down on the accelerator and they tore off down the broken road toward Kimmy’s house, the pinched feeling of worry inside Erin growing with each second.

They turned onto the Vanders’ driveway, maneuvering around the felled tree, and Erin drove as fast as she dared until the black Volvo came into view, idling near the house. The sight sent a sharp wedge of fear through Erin, and her hands tightened on the steering wheel. A few seconds later, the vehicle reversed abruptly, the back tires kicking up dirt as it headed straight for them.

In the distance, the electric ATV moved slowly toward the river, George Vander driving with a trailer attached to the back filled with supplies they’d salvaged from the wreckage. Erin knew in an instant that Randy Ulrich had seen the ATV, had recognized it as belonging to his sons.

Erin slammed on the brakes and pulled the truck over to the side of the driveway. She shot a glance at Kimmy. “Get

down! Stay down and don't move!"

Kimmy ducked below the dashboard as Erin grabbed her rifle and leaned out the window, taking aim. The Volvo was coming fast, but she held the rifle steady, watching it as it slowed and stopped just a few feet in front of her.

For a long moment, Randy Ulrich stared at her through the windshield, eyes cold and hard.

"We don't want any trouble!" Erin shouted through her open window. "Keep driving."

A vein pulsed in Randy's forehead. "I know my sons have been here. Where are they?"

"We haven't seen any strangers around here. You're mistaken," Erin replied, her voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through her, the thudding of her heart in her ears. "Now move on."

The man's eyes narrowed, and he started to reach for something inside the car. Erin knew she didn't have time to hesitate. She inhaled sharply and pulled the trigger, aiming at the car but away from Randy.

The sound of the gunshot was deafening in the small space and the force of the recoil knocked Erin back against the seat. The front windshield of the Volvo exploded, sudden, violent and shocking, showering Randy with glass.

A couple of seconds later, Randy revved the engine, the car lurching forward as it accelerated around her. Erin held the rifle steady, aimed at his head as he rolled past. He stared at her, his face contorted in rage.

"You'll regret that," he spat. "And I'm coming for my sons."

He sped away and Erin watched him go, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew she had just made a dangerous enemy who'd be out for revenge, and there was nothing she could do but wait for him to make good on his promise to come back. And something told her that day would be sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Noah

Nine Days After

It was late afternoon when Noah, Aaliyah, and Bella stopped at the shore of Lake Nacimiento. The haze from the fires had gotten so bad, even Aaliyah knew they couldn't keep cycling without a break. Smoke, thick and black as night, billowed up in an expanding plume from the Big Sur state park just up ahead, like an unstoppable force, a tsunami wave.

A family had pitched a tent on the shore of the lake one hundred yards away from where Noah and the others stood. The mother and father both eyed them with suspicion, but made no move to talk to them. Noah noticed the parents seemed to be taking turns keeping watch, handing a black pistol back and forth, while the other kept their young children in the tent. They had their own pair of bikes and child seats, which lay on the rocks beside the tent.

As Noah set his bike down on the barren shore, his leg muscles weak and a bit shaky, a sense of unease gripped him. The surface of the water was dark and choppy, and an ominous silence hung over the land as the wind carried bits of soot and swirls of ash from the fires.

“What is it?” Bella whispered, as if sensing his discomfort. Her hand strayed to Noah's arm and squeezed. She was always touching him and being affectionate in ways Noah wasn't used

to, but liked. Random hugs and holding his hand—she felt like the little sister he'd never known he needed.

“I don't know.” He scanned the shoreline, trying to spot any signs of danger, but everything appeared calm. “Something doesn't feel right. Maybe it's the fires. They're close now.” He tried not to think about the fact that his dad was somewhere up north, close to where the fires were burning.

Bella nodded, like she knew exactly what he was talking about. “Yeah, that thick smoke is creepy. We should set up camp here for the night. I don't know about you guys, but I'm exhausted.”

Aaliyah rolled her eyes. “We could have gotten a lot farther if we didn't have to stop every hour for you to rest or have a drink.” She turned and scanned the surrounding area. “And if we're stopping here, we need to be careful. We don't know who or what is out there.”

Bella ignored Aaliyah's acerbic tone and smiled at Noah. “We should build a fire so we can purify some water. Rhys always used to say water should be our number one priority. And my mom always wants me to listen to him.”

“And a fire will let everyone within a ten-mile radius know exactly where we are,” Aaliyah countered, arms folded over her chest.

“It's not like there's anyone out here,” Bella replied, wrinkling her freckled nose. “Except for that family over there, and they don't look like they're in the mood to talk.”

Noah could see the frustration building in both girls, and he knew he had to do something before it exploded. *Again*. “A fire isn't that risky, given all the smoke in the air. Why don't we split up the work?” He glanced at Aaliyah, silently pleading with her to just let it go and agree with him. “Bella can start gathering wood for the fire, and you and I can set up a place to sleep, if you want?”

There was a long pause as the two girls looked at each other, and then Aaliyah nodded, unable to hide her bitter tone.

“All right,” she said. “But if anything happens because we lit the fire, we’re going to hold *her* responsible.” She stared at Bella with a venomous gaze.

All Noah could do was nod. He knew the journey so far had been hard on all of them, but he couldn’t help feeling torn between his friends. He wanted to make everyone happy, but it seemed like no matter what he did, someone was always mad.

As Bella walked across the bleak shore of the lake toward the scrubby trees to gather some firewood, he turned to Aaliyah, making small talk in an effort to smooth things over. “The fires look like they’re really close, now, don’t you think? I wish we were already with my dad. He’s been working as a firefighter, and he’d know the right things to do. Like, I bet there’s some kind of fire-proof shelter we could build if we need to.”

“I thought he was in prison.” Aaliyah turned her back to Noah as she started to clear rocks to make a place for them to sleep. “You and Bella need to stop living in a fantasy land. You know, I don’t think she’s even admitted her mom is dead. And you keep talking about your dad, the great heroic firefighter.” She finally turned to face him and made a twirling motion with one finger at the side of her head.

“She’s not crazy and neither am I,” Noah replied, feeling his defenses rise. “She’s just sad about losing everyone.”

“Aren’t we all,” replied Aaliyah. She shot a significant look at the family with the tent. “They look like they might take Bella on so we don’t have to babysit her anymore. Should I go over and speak to them?”

“We aren’t leaving her here,” he replied, his anger turning into something hard in his gut. “I used to think you were so nice, Aaliyah... but now...” He inhaled sharply, trying to steady himself. “You’re just like everyone else. All you seem to care about is yourself. You think Bella is weak and stupid, but I know that she’s strong and brave, and you should try to see that, too.”

“I never said she was weak or stupid,” Aaliyah shot back, stabbing her fingers in his direction. “But you need to be

realistic about this whole situation. You can't keep holding on to fantasies forever. Your dad probably isn't even there anymore, and Bella is going to get us killed. She's slow and annoying and has the worst ideas. We are better off without her, trust me."

Noah felt a surge of anger inside. He clenched his jaw and glared at Aaliyah as he moved some more rocks. "You just want me to be alone, like you are. That's why you want to get rid of her. And my dad is going to be there. Trust me. There's no way he wouldn't wait for me."

Aaliyah's eyes flashed with fury and she stepped toward him, her fists clenched at her sides.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that," she seethed. "You have no idea what I've been through or what I'm still going through. Having that little brat around is like torture. She's constantly reminding me of all the things I'll never have. All the experiences I never had. She might have lost her mom and Rhys, but at least she had them in the first place."

Noah felt his own anger reach a crescendo, fed by the stinging tears in his eyes and the swirling smoke and heat that pulsed around them. He didn't want to fight with Aaliyah, but he was done. She always thought she was such a victim, like everyone was out to get her.

"I've been through bad stuff, too," he replied in a low voice, the rocks now forgotten. "But you don't see me acting like you. I thought we were friends, but obviously we aren't. If anyone should stay behind, maybe it's you."

Aaliyah's face grew dark and twisted, and she swallowed a couple of times. The silence grew and stretched into something tense and dangerous, and Noah sucked in a breath, half expecting Aaliyah to explode with violence. In his experience, anger always led that way, and he braced himself for the inevitable hit he knew was coming.

Aaliyah's hands clenched into fists, but a few moments later, she turned away from him and took several steps toward the water's edge. Noah didn't let his guard down, but he felt

some of the tension dissipate, like maybe she wasn't going to hit him after all.

In the low afternoon light, the sky churning with smoke, the water in front of Aaliyah looked inky black. In a swift, surprising movement, she pulled off her hoodie and dropped it beside her, then removed her shoes. "I'm going in the water," she said, her voice deadpan.

Before Noah could say anything, Aaliyah turned and walked into the lake. He stood on the shore, unsure of what to do, as she waded deeper and deeper. The water rose up her thighs, her waist, her chest, until it was lapping at her chin.

"Aaliyah, come back!" Noah called out. "You're too deep."

But she didn't turn around or say anything; she just kept walking until she was completely submerged. For a few long seconds, Noah stared at the place where she'd disappeared.

"Aaliyah!" he shouted.

Bella turned to face him from where she stood farther down the shore and palmed her hips, staring at him like she was trying to figure out what was going on. Over by the tent, the mom stood looking at the water where Aaliyah had disappeared.

Noah kept waiting for her to reappear. But there was no sign of her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Noah

Nine Days After

As Noah stared at the patch of water where he'd last seen Aaliyah, he felt like he was being squeezed from every direction. He took a step and then another, but he felt his feet growing heavier and heavier, like they were sinking into the hard ground and he couldn't move, unable to decide what to do, where to go. Where was she?

"Aaliyah!" Fear rose up within him in a choking cloud, and he looked at Bella in the distance. Her face had turned pale, and she stared back at Noah with frightened eyes.

"Aaliyah!" he shouted again, finally breaking free of his stupor. He took a few steps toward the edge. The water was still and dark, and there was no sign of her. He sucked in a deep breath and kicked off his shoes, then started running through the water, kicking up droplets as he lifted his knees high.

Despite the heat, the water felt colder than he expected. He inhaled sharply as it reached his chest and he pushed himself off the bottom. It was hard to tell if he was swimming or sinking, and the awful smoke was burning his eyes and throat, but he forced his arms to keep moving.

As he neared the place she'd gone under, an explosion of bubbles broke the surface, and Aaliyah's face soon followed,

gasping for breath. She looked up at him, her eyes pleading. Her lips moved as she tried to form words.

His relief flowed across his eyes, but he blinked the tears away. He could see that Aaliyah was still struggling to get her head above water, and he dove quickly, reaching for her as her head went under again and yanking her up.

“Are you all right?” he asked, fighting to keep the panic from his voice as they held each other, both treading water.

Aaliyah nodded, still coughing and sputtering a little. She wrapped her arms around Noah and clung to him, her breathing ragged as he dragged her back to the shallower waters.

“I went under,” she whispered, as her eyes went round. “And for a while I thought I could just stay down there and it would all be over. I’m tired, Noah.”

“You’ll be okay,” he replied, feeling lost and unsure of what to say as his feet touched the silty bottom. He held her arm as they kept walking toward the shore, the water now down to their waists.

“I’m sick of feeling like I don’t matter,” she said softly. Her hands crossed over her chest and rubbed the circular scars on her forearms, and she shuddered. “Even with a fresh start, a chance to be someone else, I’m never going to be anyone.”

“That’s not true,” Noah said, his voice quiet but determined. “We have a chance to be who we want to be now. You’re the one who told me that.”

“I don’t think anyone would want the person I am,” she replied, her words barely above a whisper. “I’m broken, Noah.”

“Why would you say that?” he asked, feeling his own heart ache as he heard the tremor in her voice. Aaliyah had been so strong. He didn’t like seeing her like this.

“Because it’s the truth,” she said, her voice flat.

As they reached the shore, Bella rushed toward them, her face pinched with worry. “What happened?” she asked.

“Aaliyah, are you okay?”

“I just needed some space, Bella,” Aaliyah said, her voice thin and reedy. “And that means from you. I don’t need to hear about your girl scouts or how your mom is out there somewhere. She’s dead, Bella. Your mom is dead.” Aaliyah was shivering now, her teeth clacking together even though the hot air pulsed with smoke and heat.

Bella looked as though she’d been slapped, but seemed to recover quickly, waving Aaliyah off like she was delirious. “We need to get her warmed up. A fire will help.” She pointed to the stack of wood she’d collected. Noah nodded and herded Aaliyah toward their partially cleared camp site.

“Is everything okay?” the mom at the tent called out, sounding like she didn’t really want to get involved but felt obliged to check on them.

“We’re fine,” replied Bella, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Thanks for asking. Have a nice day!”

Bella had soon lit a fire, and they sat in silence around it, staring out at the dark water and watching the smoke billow into the sky. As they sat there, Noah felt his heart growing heavier and heavier, unsure of what to say to Aaliyah or how to make her feel better.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind rushed across the lake and blew a cloud of ash toward them. As he coughed into his arm, he realized the smoke had gotten thicker. A red ember dropped from the sky like a molten bullet, and then another one.

“What the heck,” Noah said, looking up, panic scything through him.

“We have to get out of here.” Bella scrambled to her feet. “Come on!”

Noah couldn’t take his eyes off the fire, which had moved closer, the red glow from the flames visible just over the next rise. Bella elbowed him, pulling him out of his trance, and he hurried to gather their gear as Bella coughed and shouted out a warning to the family. The mom took one look in the direction

of the fire and started shrieking, calling for her family to *Get up. Hurry!*

Within moments, the fire was so close that he could see the orange flames licking the tops of the trees. He could hear the snapping and crackling of the branches, feel the heat as it drew closer and closer, the reflection a red glow on the lake. They hurried to pack their belongings in Aaliyah's trailer, haphazardly tossing things in, each of them moving with frantic movements, Aaliyah's scare in the lake just moments before now forgotten.

With his heart jackhammering against his ribs, his lungs scratchy and sore from the horrible air, Noah picked up his bike, scanning the ground to make sure they had everything. "Come on, guys! Get moving."

"We're coming," Aaliyah replied, her voice hoarse, hair in a wild frizz around her head.

Bella and Aaliyah mounted their bikes, and the three of them cycled away from the lake, looking to put as much distance between them and the fire as possible, the family just a short distance behind them. They soon reached the road, fissured and broken just like everywhere else, and paused. Aaliyah pulled her T-shirt over her mouth to help filter out some of the smoke, and Noah hurried to copy her.

The dry leaves behind them shrieked and popped under the flames, and the air around them felt hot and stifling, burning with the intensity of a furnace, the heat radiating off the road and trees, the asphalt and rocks. "We need to head for Route 101, keep going to Soledad," Noah shouted, his throat dry and itchy.

"That's where the fire is coming from," Aaliyah replied, shaking her head. "We need to head back the way we came."

"We'll find a way through," Noah said, already getting back on his bike. "Come on!" He couldn't go back. Not when they were so close to getting to Soledad. When he looked over his shoulder, he felt relieved to see Bella and Aaliyah were following him, although there was no sign of the family, and he hoped they'd made it somewhere safe.

As they rode, the smoke grew thicker, making it hard to see or even breathe, and Noah worried he'd made a bad decision. He missed his mom more than ever, and wished his dad was there to protect him, to help him figure out a way to safety. And as his head spun and chest ached, he couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever see his father again.

The sky above them filled with a red glow, casting an eerie light on the road ahead, and when Noah looked back, the way to the lake was blocked by flames. His eyes stung and lungs burned as he pedaled frantically through the smoke and gloom, trying to find an escape from the raging inferno behind them. And through it all, Noah could hear Aaliyah crying, a harsh, ugly sound that ate at his heart.

As Noah rode blindly and hoped he was taking them in the right direction, the sky to his left suddenly erupted into a wall of flame. He felt the heat on his cheeks, heard Bella scream.

“Keep going!” he shouted, drawing in a ragged breath.

And just when it seemed like there was no way out, Noah spotted a road that led away from the fire. He took a chance and followed it, the others close behind him, their bike wheels crunching over dry branches and twigs until the road opened up onto the highway. The air was still thick with smoke, but clearer than it had been, and he stopped, breathing hard, still trying to believe they'd really made it.

With a backward glance to be sure they were well clear of the fire, Noah dropped his bike and sat on the edge of the cracked road, coughing, tears streaming down his cheeks. He felt Bella sit beside him and slip her hand into his, then she laid her head on his shoulder.

A few moments later, Aaliyah sat on his other side, stiff and staring straight ahead as the fire continued to burn behind them, winds driving the flames away from them. “So, what do we do now?”

“We go a bit farther and find somewhere safe to stop, and then sleep, I guess.” Noah shrugged, feeling lost and hopeless. “We don't even have any water.”

“We’ll find some,” replied Bella. She smiled and hugged him. “We just have to stay positive.”

In his periphery, he saw Aaliyah’s jaw tightening. They’d made it onto the highway, gotten away from the fire... Noah could only hope their uneasy truce would last long enough for him to find his dad.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lilly

Nine Days After

Except for a brief rest, Lilly and the others had been walking ever since the army truck crashed, heading for Sandy's place just outside of Soledad, the one location they knew they'd find shelter and refuge. By unspoken agreement, they'd continued to plod along, all of them wanting to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the horrors they'd left behind on the I-5.

But the water they'd boiled back at the abandoned farmhouse where they'd slept for a few hours last night was gone. And Vanessa—the young woman that Norman had pulled from the army truck before it exploded—looked like she was about to pass out as they continued through Pinnacles National Park, hiking along the Moses Spring trail toward the Bear Gulch Reservoir.

Lilly stared at the quiet young woman, and Matti followed Lilly's concerned gaze. "Vanessa," he called out. "Do you need a hand? I can walk beside you if you like. You can lean on me."

Vanessa shook her head, but her face was pale, and the bruising on her temple where she'd hit her head during the crash had turned an ugly shade of blue, and seemed to be getting worse.

“I’m okay,” she said, a tongue darting out to lick her chapped lips. “I guess I’m just a little dehydrated. My head hurts and I feel a bit dizzy.”

“We’ll be there soon,” Pip said, pointing to the trail that disappeared behind the blackened trees up ahead, their branches dark and heavy in the late summer heat, the stench of the fire that had passed through lingering. Lilly couldn’t help but smile at her sister. Pip’s resilience had impressed her, the teenager walking without complaint despite the shocking accident they’d narrowly survived.

From farther up the trail, Norman glanced at Vanessa with concern, then flicked his eyes toward Lilly. She held his gaze, ignoring the spike of pain in her leg from the accident. Thankfully, he’d found a tube of recently expired antibiotic ointment in the farmhouse last night, together with some other supplies they’d taken with them, including cans of beans and vegetables, and he had been applying the cream to Lilly’s wound every four or five hours when they stopped to rest.

“How are you both holding up?” Norman asked.

“I’m fine,” Lilly replied.

“Me too.” Vanessa sucked in a couple of shallow breaths. “How much farther do you think we have to go?” She winced and rubbed her temples with the heel of her hand as they continued down the trail, then coughed, the air hazy and full of smoke from fires burning in what looked like the direction of the Big Sur.

Vanessa was a couple of years older than Lilly, and had worked as a cashier in a hardware store while trying to get her teaching diploma. Lilly wished she’d known Vanessa before the earthquakes. She seemed good and kind, even though she was obviously in a state of shock and had barely spoken a word since they’d started walking yesterday afternoon.

“We’ve probably got an hour until we reach the reservoir,” Lilly replied, glancing around. The burned out track made it difficult to orient herself, even though she and Pip knew the National Park pretty well. Their dad had taken them hiking there many times before he’d met Julia and then gotten sick,

and Lilly and Pip had taken their own trips over the years, reminiscing about how things used to be.

Vanessa nodded weakly and Lilly felt glad to see Matti move closer to her, offering her a stick to lean on as they continued along the blackened hiking path. The surrounding land looked like a charcoal painting, and Lilly knew the wildfire that was still burning—leaving a dark haze in the sky and the air tasting like ash—had already come through there, consuming everything in its path.

Twisted, gnarled trees stood like totems over blackened boulders. The air held a faint whiff of barbecued meat and the scent of a giant bonfire. It was like someone had made a campfire, but had used all the trees instead of just logs. Birds had stopped singing, the insects were dead silent, and even the wind seemed to have died down. Nothing moved except the five of them across the harsh and unforgiving landscape.

Lilly hurried to fall in step with Norman, conscious they still had another day or so of non-stop walking before they got back to Sandy's place. Her heels had rubbed raw, blisters bursting on top of blisters, and every muscle ached. But nothing was going to stop her from getting back to her father, from pushing through the ache in her calf and the pains in the rest of her body, until she was sure he was okay.

"Norman," Lilly said quietly, glancing over her shoulder at Pip, who walked just behind Vanessa and Matti. She was pretty sure Pip couldn't hear them, but leaned a bit closer to Norman and dropped her voice, just to be sure. "My dad will be out of his meds tomorrow, unless he's spread them out a little to make them last longer. What am I going to do? The chances of finding what he needs are next to none, especially now almost every town around us has been destroyed by earthquakes and the fires have taken what's left."

"Things will get bad pretty fast," Norman replied in an equally low voice. "I just want to be honest with you and prepare you for that. He's going to have withdrawal symptoms, and those can be fatal."

Lilly had heard Norman say those words before, but it still hit her like a gut punch, just like the first time. “Fatal? So what can I do? Please. Tell me. I’ll do anything.”

“Let’s get there first, then we can figure out our best course of action,” he replied in a soothing voice. He had the perfect bedside manner for a doctor who worked with often terminally ill cancer patients, and not for the first time, Lilly felt drawn to his quiet strength and kindness. “Right now, we need water and a chance to get some sleep. Try not to worry too much about what the future holds, okay?”

“Easier said than done,” Lilly replied grimly. “I only want to stop for four or five hours maximum, just like last night. We can rest when we finally get to Sandy’s place. Because right now, time is against us.”

“I understand, and I agree. I don’t want to be caught out here if there’s another earthquake.”

“Norman! Lilly!” Pip’s plaintive cry from behind them stopped Lilly mid-step. She turned to see Vanessa face down on the path, motionless, her hair splayed around her head on the ground.

“Vanessa!” Lilly took off running toward the woman, barely registering Norman close on her heels. She reached Vanessa’s unmoving form just as Norman did, and she stepped aside to let him through first.

“What’s wrong with her?” Pip asked, dropping down on Vanessa’s other side as Norman rolled her over and felt her neck for a pulse. Blackened earth clung to her cheeks and her cracked lips remained slightly parted, like there was still something she needed to say.

Lilly and Matti crouched down, too, and Lilly brushed the dirt from Vanessa’s cheeks and took her hand, which remained limp in Lilly’s own.

“Her pulse is weak, thready,” Norman said, pulling up her eyelids to look into her eyes. He cursed. “Maybe it’s just exhaustion or dehydration. Or that bump to the head she got in the accident could have caused a hematoma.” He looked her

over again, his gaze lingering on the blue bruise on the side of her head. “I think it’s a hematoma,” he whispered, his features tightening like he was mad at himself.

“What is that?” Pip asked, her lower lip quivering. She dragged the back of her hand across her eyes.

“A bleed on the brain,” Norman replied. “It can be very serious.” He sat back on his heels and looked at Lilly and Matti. “There’s nothing we can do for her out here. Her vital signs are going downhill fast.”

“What are you saying?” Lilly asked, already knowing the answer. Matti reached a hand around her, and she felt the comforting weight of it on her shoulder.

“I’m saying that she needs a hospital, and she needs it now,” Norman replied in a low voice. Exhaustion and worry lined his face. Lilly wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the light, but she thought she saw Norman’s hand shaking ever so slightly as he felt for Vanessa’s pulse again.

“She’s not going to make it, is she?” Pip whispered, her voice breaking into a sob.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Norman replied. But his words sounded hollow.

Lilly sat next to Vanessa, clutching her hand as she watched the life slowly slip away from the woman she’d barely known. As Vanessa took a shallow breath for the last time, Lilly felt a deep sense of loss and sadness that washed over her in a debilitating wave.

It wasn’t just about Vanessa. As her tears fell, as Vanessa’s heartbeat finally ceased beating, Lilly grieved everything they’d lost, everything they were losing, and everything they were still fighting to save.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lilly

Nine Days After

Lilly sat beside Matti on the edge of the Bear Gulch Reservoir tending to a small fire. They'd kept the cans from the food they'd found at the farmhouse and filled them with water, setting them on the fire to boil. Large boulders surrounded them on all sides, the water a smooth sheet of glass reflecting the brown, hazy sky, most of the surrounding foliage burned away, the landscape black and dreary.

Overhead, the sky stretched over the horizon, a canvas of ash and dust churning with gray clouds. Coils of smoke twisted upward in the distance, swirling like specters as wildfires continued to burn. Lilly reached out to take Matti's hand, wanting human connection more than ever after they'd just buried Vanessa in the soot-stained earth. A light breeze whistled past, the wind rustling the ashes and the bare trees and the sparse, dry grass left at the edge of the reservoir.

"Do you think they'll catch anything?" Matti stared at Pip and Norman standing in the shallows on the other side of the reservoir, his thumb running over the back of her hand in small circles. Norman had stretched his T-shirt across a forked stick and was trying to use the makeshift net to catch some of the small three-spined stickleback fish that inhabited the shallow, weedy water.

“I hope so. We still have a couple of cans of food left, but it would be good to save them. We won’t get back to Sandy’s place until tomorrow, at least.”

“What do you suppose that is?” He motioned with his head in a northeasterly direction toward a dark stain in the distant sky.

“Maybe another fire? I’m not sure.”

Matti let out a bitter laugh. “Just what we need, huh?”

“I thought you were supposed to be the cheerful optimist,” Lilly countered.

His features darkened as he looked into the distance. “How much more are we supposed to take, Lilly? I had to watch Elijah die. Failed to find his son. Noah died because I didn’t get to him quick enough. Every day there’s another death, another situation to deal with. We just buried a woman we barely know. Her family doesn’t even know she’s dead... and that’s if they’re even alive themselves.”

“I don’t have any answers,” Lilly said as she let go of his hand and reached up to brush the side of his face with her fingertips. “But I know what you’re feeling. I feel it, too. I’m just hoping that when we get to Sandy’s place, we can make a real plan, figure out what to do next, and do something to save ourselves and the people we care about.”

She didn’t tell Matti about her dad, about the fact he’d almost be out of his Parkinson’s meds and could be in a lot of trouble, even though she wanted to confide in him. He didn’t need to be burdened anymore than he already was, and it felt like the worry was building inside of her—rapidly expanding to the point that if she let some of it out, shared it with Matti, she wouldn’t be able to stop the torrent that followed.

Lilly glanced at Norman and Pip where they leaned over the makeshift net, picking out the small fish they’d snagged and setting them inside an indentation in one of the boulders, and tried to slow the rapid firings of her heart. It was like a switch had turned on, and she could feel the presence of

something dark and awful growing inside of herself, squeezing her from the inside out and making it hard to breathe.

“Were you serious when you said you’d help me find my parents and get to Texas?”

Matti’s voice pulled her back out of her own head, and she turned to look at him. The handsome planes of his face were tinged with the kind of sorrow she’d seen in Pip and Norman, a deep emotion that seemed to have set in as a permanent aspect of their faces. Only partially illuminated by the weak sunlight, his features appeared more stark and intense than usual, and Lilly lifted her gaze to meet his eyes.

“Yeah, I was serious,” she replied, saying the words and hoping her voice wouldn’t betray her. “I’ll help you get to your parents.” In truth, she had no idea how she’d help her father *and* Matti. How she’d get her father to Texas or convince Julia it was a good idea. “I want to find them, too. I’ll help you, whatever happens, Matti. You’re family now.”

Matti shook his head, and a tired smile played around the edges of his mouth. “Thank you. I’m lucky to have you, Lilly.” He paused. “It’s not going to be easy going home. I burned a lot of bridges when I got arrested. I don’t know if my dad and brother are going to welcome me back with open arms. In fact, they might just tell me to keep going.”

“You might be surprised. When people are faced with what we’re dealing with... I think they’ll just be happy to see you alive. The past is the past.”

“Maybe.” He looked away, blinking a couple of times, before turning back to her. “You’re the best thing that’s ever come into my life—and I hope you know that I’ll do everything I can to protect you and Pip, and your dad.”

Lilly felt a surge of emotion at Matti’s words, and she smiled at him, her heart suddenly racing as he leaned forward, his hand gently cupping the back of her head, fingers tangled in her hair. For a few seconds she stared into his eyes, seeing the multi-hued blues that sparkled even in the dim light, and as they leaned closer, she inhaled deeply, the scent of him surrounding her.

The kiss was gentle, and Lilly found herself kissing him back with equal tenderness. Lilly had kissed him and been kissed by him before, but this one felt different, and she pulled him closer, wanting to hold him, to reassure herself he was still there, that he'd stay with her, that nothing would ever happen to him.

She held on to him as if he were a lifeline that would keep her tethered to the world and felt a surge of emotion unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. She had never really felt loved or cared for by someone other than Pip or her Dad until she met Matti, and it seemed like the sense of belonging she'd always longed for was finally within her grasp.

They pulled apart, and he brushed her dark hair away from her face, then pressed his forehead against hers. Her fingers gently raked down the side of his face, her fingertips feeling his rough stubble.

"I love you," he whispered, the words coming out ragged and a little breathless.

"I love you, too," she replied. As she looked at Matti, she felt hope surging in her chest, a determination that somehow they'd make this impossible situation work, that they'd reunite with both their families and heal old wounds while keeping their sick safe.

With a feeling of warmth spreading through her, she leaned back and glanced at Pip and Norman, who seemed to have finished trying to catch fish, and then down at the cans filled with water that had come to a boil.

"We better let these cool," she said, smiling at him and kissing his cheek briefly, sweetly, before using two sticks to remove the cans from the fire.

"Are you ready for dinner?" Pip called. She and Norman crouched over the indentation in the rock that held the fish they'd caught, skewering them onto narrow sticks.

"We're starving!" Matti called back, a wider smile flitting over his face.

Norman flashed a thumbs up then wrung out his T-shirt and pulled it back on. He and Pip walked back over to Lilly and Matti, carrying the sticks between them.

“I wonder what they taste like,” Pip said as she settled on the ground beside Lilly. “Norman said we don’t need to clean or debone them. We can just eat the whole thing.”

“I’m hoping when we roast them, the spines will burn off,” Norman said, crouching beside the fire and reaching a tattooed arm out to hold the skewered fish over the flames. “If not, we can just spit them out if they’re inedible. Whitebait and anchovies are a similar size and both eaten whole, so I’m hoping these won’t be too bad.”

Lilly took one of the sticks and held it over the fire, looking at the row of small fish slowly changing color. “Thanks for getting dinner, guys. And I’m glad we found a box of matches at that farmhouse. I didn’t fancy trying to light a fire by rubbing sticks together.”

“Don’t say that, Dad will be disappointed,” replied Pip with a smirk. Their dad’s love of survival shows was a long running joke between them, and Lilly enjoyed the brief wave of nostalgia that washed through her.

“I really can’t wait to see him,” Lilly said.

“Yeah, it’s just a shame Julia will be there,” muttered Pip.

Lilly knew the thought of seeing their stepmom again filled her sister with dread, and Lilly couldn’t blame her. Julia and her barbs and criticisms were not what any of them needed, and Lilly could only imagine her reaction when she realized they didn’t have Lilly’s dad’s meds.

But there was nothing that could be done then and there, so Lilly pushed her worries about Julia and her dad away as best she could. They ate the fish and washed it down with cooled boiled water, and then Norman checked the injury to her calf. There was no sign of infection, but he applied a little more of the antibiotic cream they’d found, and Lilly could tell by the way he frowned that he was thinking of Vanessa.

“You couldn’t have known,” she said, squeezing his arm. “And there are no hospitals we could have taken her to, anyway.”

“Thank you,” he replied, but Lilly could tell he still blamed himself. She wished she could say something to make him feel better, but she knew the horrors they’d seen were too fresh, that there was no way to make that kind of pain go away quickly.

A short time later, Matti and Norman went to scout out the area and make sure they were really as alone as they felt, while Lilly and Pip stayed at the fire to boil more water. As they cleared their campsite and the sun sank lower in the sky, Pip turned to Lilly.

“What do you think happens when you die, Lilly?” she asked, her voice soft and solemn, her hand reaching for the silver cross that Lilly had found back in LA.

Lilly sat down beside her sister and drew her knees up. As she stared into the fire, she was surprised by the sudden jolt of pain she felt, and she sighed as she stroked Pip’s arm. “I don’t know, Pip,” Lilly said quietly. “Whatever happens, though, Vanessa is at peace, so hopefully we’ll see her again.”

“I hope so,” Pip replied. “And I hope we see Mom again one day, too.”

“Me too,” Lilly replied. “And I’m sure we will.”

Pip hugged her, and they sat quietly for a while as the fire crackled and the low hum of insects buzzed, the landscape growing darker as the scent of ash and wildfires lingered all around. A small gray bird alighted on a nearby tree, singing sweetly for a few moments, sounding like hope for a future that might still come. Then it flitted away, and the clearing was silent once again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lilly

Fourteen Years Before

Eight-year-old Lilly popped her head around the side of the crib and made a crazy face at her little sister, Pip, who sat in the middle of the mattress, red-faced and crying. “Boo!” she said with enthusiasm, making her eyes wide and forcing a smile.

For a brief moment, baby Pip stopped screaming and looked at Lilly. But the reprieve was short, and a few seconds later, the wailing started up again louder than before. A fresh set of tears made tracks down Pip’s round cheeks, and her face got redder and redder with each wail.

“Dad!” Lilly stood and crossed the room the two sisters shared, stopping in the doorway. Her parents’ bedroom was opposite, but the door was open and no sign anyone was inside. Worry tickled her tummy, and she wrapped her arms around herself, before calling out again. “Dad, Pip’s crying! Where are you?”

He’d told her he was just popping out for ten minutes after getting a call, but that was ages ago. And her mom had been gone on a business trip or something for a while. Lilly didn’t even know when she’d last seen her mom, now she thought about it.

Behind her, Pip kept screaming, and it looked like they were home alone, so Lilly turned back to the crib and leaned in, picking Pip up under her reaching arms. She was only six months old, but she felt heavy to Lilly, and Lilly struggled to get her up and out of the crib. As she hefted Pip over the bars, she bent her knees to take her sister's weight, dragging Pip's stomach and then her legs across the top rail.

With her sister clutched to her chest, she patted Pip gently on the back and rocked her in her arms, but that just made her scream more. Pip's face was red and her little mouth opened wide like a fish, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. The intensity of her screaming hurt Lilly's ears and she could feel herself starting to panic.

She wished her dad was home, but it was just her and Pip, so she held her sister and walked slowly around the room, talking to her in a low, soothing voice. Pip continued to scream, pausing only to draw a ragged breath, so out of desperation, Lilly started singing a made-up song.

“La la la la, ring a ding ding donging all day. La la la la, ring a ding ding donging all day.”

She knew it wasn't nearly as catchy as the songs her dad made up, but it seemed to do the trick and Pip started to calm down. Lilly sang louder and carried on walking around the room, her little sister's head resting on her shoulder. By the time she'd finished the song, Pip's sobs had turned into gentle hiccups. Lilly looked down at her sister, whose eyelids were half closed. Her face was still red and puffy, but she was starting to look like her old self again.

The room had started to grow dark, and Lilly realized the sun was going down and she was hungry. That's probably why Pip was crying, too. She carried her sister into the kitchen and hit the switch by the door. The fluorescent light blinked a couple of times and then switched on, bathing the room in harsh light.

The kitchen floor felt cold under Lilly's bare feet, and her eyes grazed the peeling paint and cupboard doors hanging at slightly odd angles. A laminated calendar Lilly's preschool

had made four or five years ago hung on the wall above the dining table, showing scribbled pictures she'd done in crayon back when her drawings were so bad she couldn't even tell what they were. She didn't know why her dad had kept it hanging up. Maybe it was because her mom had said once that she loved seeing it.

Lilly's chest always felt a bit funny when she thought of her mom, so she turned away from the calendar and plonked Pip in her highchair, wishing again that her dad was home. The quiet house was making her feel uneasy.

She noticed a clean bottle resting on the side of the sink, and picked it up, then looked for the tin of formula in the cupboard. When she opened it, there was less than a teaspoon of powder in the bottom. With no other choice, she scraped it out and then added some water from the tap before shaking it and giving it to Pip.

“Sorry, it's a bit watery.”

Pip leaned her head back and drank from the bottle, her eyes closing a little as Lilly looked for some more food. She went through the cupboards and the fridge, but there was nothing to snack on except for two bananas with brown spots in the fruit bowl. She took the bottle from Pip and gave her a banana, then took the other for herself, taking a huge bite out of it and then spitting it back out. It was too mushy, but Pip didn't seem to mind.

Lilly chucked her banana in the bin and stood in front of Pip. “We're going to have to go out and get some food.”

Pip smooshed some banana into the highchair with her thumb.

“We'll just go to the diner. I know we're not supposed to go out alone, but dad won't mind. There's obviously been some kind of hold up.”

Pip babbled to herself and Lilly nodded, glad she had a plan. A waitress there was friends with her dad and would feed them and let them wait there until her dad showed up.

After scrawling a hasty note saying where they were going, she picked Pip up again and deposited her in the stroller, before heading out into the cool evening. It was starting to get dark and the wind was picking up, and as they walked, the streetlights came on, shining orange circles on the sidewalk. They passed a couple of familiar neighbors, and Lilly waved but didn't stop.

She continued to walk quickly toward the diner, relieved to see the familiar green neon sign in the window as they drew closer. It was a dingy kind of place, with contrasting bright lights and dark shadows, the windows steamed up, but it was safe and warm, and she'd been there many times before with her dad.

When she pushed the door open, the smell of bacon and melted cheese greeted her and made her mouth water. She saw a couple of old men sitting at the counter hunched over a game of checkers, and a family at a booth by the window, the kids squabbling with each other. The jukebox played softly in the corner, and the clinking of spoons on coffee cups and the distant wailing of a police car completed the scene.

Lilly approached the counter and looked around. Hannah, the waitress who was friends with her dad, saw her and waved her over.

"Hey Lillian, where's your dad?" asked Hannah, picking Pip up out of the stroller and using a napkin to wipe the banana from her face, before cuddling her close.

"He went out a while ago but didn't come home."

"And I guess I don't need to ask about your mom," Hannah muttered in a tone that made Lilly feel a bit funny inside. "Look, you sit down in the booth at the corner and I'll bring you some fries. I'll try your dad's mobile, okay?"

Lilly smiled at Hannah. She felt better already. "Thank you."

She settled into the booth and put Pip in the highchair beside her, then waited for Hannah to come back with some food. As they waited, she couldn't help but worry about her

dad. What if he was hurt? He could be lying in the street somewhere, or in the hospital, and nobody knew where he was. He'd never just leave her and Pip like that, not for hours and hours and not tell them where he was.

The minutes ticked by and Hannah finally came back with the fries, but her eyes were red like she'd been crying. "I got through to your dad," she said. "You just need to stay here for a while. He'll be here soon."

Lilly frowned. "What's happened?"

"It's best your dad tells you, darlin', but he's okay. He's on his way now."

"Is it about my mom?" asked Lilly, her voice getting high-pitched and anxious.

Hannah put her hand on Lilly's shoulder and gave her a look filled with pity. "He'll be here soon. Let me know if you want anything else, okay, hun?"

Lilly nodded and watched Hannah walk away. She ate the fries, sharing some with Pip, and then sat there with her hands clenched into fists, staring at the door, waiting for her dad to come back and tell her what was going on. After what felt like hours, the door finally opened and the wind blew a gust of air into the diner, swirling all the paper placemats on the counter.

Lilly saw her dad step inside a moment later, and her insides turned to ice. His eyes were swollen and red, and he started jogging when he saw her and Pip in the far booth. He covered the distance quickly, and she stood at the same time, both meeting beside Pip's highchair where he pulled her into a tight hug.

Dread made her chest tight, and Lilly pulled back and stared up at his familiar face. "What is it? Dad, tell me what happened."

Her dad bit his bottom lip and shook his head, his dark hair moving around his pale, handsome face. "I'm sorry, Lilly. It's your mom. She was... she was in an accident. She didn't make it."

Lilly felt her knees go weak. She knew what that meant. Her mom wasn't coming home. Her dad helped her back into the booth and picked up Pip, who was too young to understand but started crying, anyway.

The window seemed the only safe place, because looking at her dad hurt too much, so Lilly kept her gaze on the glass, where the sky outside was a deep, inky black, devoid of any stars or moonlight. A storm was coming, Lilly could tell.

Hannah came back, but Lilly didn't turn from the window, her eyes taking in the fingerprints and splatters of grease, counting the smudges while her dad and Hannah spoke in low voices. A loud clap of thunder rang out, and Lilly jumped. She finally turned away from the window and shuffled closer to where her dad perched on the edge of the booth seat.

"Dad," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm scared."

He reached out and took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze that contrasted sharply with his red-rimmed eyes and drawn features. "It's okay, Lilly. I'm here. I won't let anything happen to you. I just need you to be a brave girl for me, okay? Can you do that?"

But even as he said the words, Lilly could sense that he was just as scared as she was, maybe even more so. Her mom was gone, really gone.

The feeling of fear was too much, a solid mass in her chest, making it hard to breathe. But she knew she had to be strong for her dad. A big girl. His helper, just like he always asked her to be when her mom was gone on one of her trips. And this time her mom wasn't coming back.

Lilly sucked in a deep breath, forcing away the fear, and nodded. She'd do whatever he asked. "I'll be brave, Dad. I promise."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Erin

Ten Days After

Light stretched over the eastern field and the entire front of the property as the early morning sun rose in the sky. As the surrounding details were illuminated, Erin's eyes roamed the destruction, taking in the broken parts of her property, while trying to remind herself that their home still stood, that things weren't all dire. But it was hard.

As she scanned the distant fields, Martha beside her, her hand instinctively went to her rifle—the same one she'd used to shoot at Randy Ulrich, and the one she'd kept by her side ever since. She stood there for several moments, rigid, her body tense and ready just in case. But nothing happened. No one appeared over the horizon, guns blazing.

Erin let out a relieved breath and took a few steps forward, brushing her hands over her britches as she walked, calling to Otto. Animals milled around the front field, grazing or resting, and Otto came bounding from the direction of the rabbit coop. Behind her, Martha had crouched down to pick plantain leaves from a patch growing beside the pond.

“Do you need any help?” she asked, turning to face Martha as Otto joined her side.

“I'm all good, thanks.”

Erin spent a few moments petting Otto, scratching him behind the ears and making a fuss of him, then turned back to scanning her surroundings. The sky was a sheet of orange draped over the eastern ridge, and as the minutes passed, it pulled back to reveal a band of pink lined with dusty clouds, while the haze overhead dissolved into a million dull hues of brown and swirling gray.

Erin inhaled, the air carrying the smell of grass warmed by the morning's sun, and as she dropped her gaze to the pond, she tried not to panic. The water levels were low. Too low. There were countless animals now drinking from it, as well as the water they were drawing for themselves, with no sign of any rain imminent whatsoever. And the Vanders were closing rank, setting up camp around the stream that ran through their property.

She turned to look at Martha, who harvested the broad, green plantain leaves with a practiced eye. "Do you think the Vanders are going to want to trade with us for water when we need it?"

"I think it's likely," Martha replied, looking up, her swarthy features creased in concern. "They're not the kind of people to be charitable about anything, really. They're the sort who'll want something in return."

Otto barked once, his head pointed in the direction of the house, and Erin and Martha's gaze moved back to the house where Martha's husband Paul was recuperating and her granddaughter still slept. Tapio stood by the front veranda with his bike, the veranda now partially collapsed on one side, the wooden boards fallen in. He cupped one hand around his mouth and called, "Fiona's on watch. I'm going to head over to help at the Vanders' place. I'll give it one last try to convince them to move themselves over here."

"See you soon," replied Erin. "Please be careful."

"Always," he called back.

"Part of me hopes they say no again," Martha said as she waved to Tapio. "I don't know if I could handle waking up and seeing them every morning, especially after they stole our land

with that stupid boundary dispute. And you know George would come here like he owned the place, issuing orders and telling everyone what to do. He likes to be in control.”

“I know how you feel. But banding together to defend against threats is more important than ever. And you know what they say... keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.”

Martha made a sound that was hard to decipher, and Erin turned from her and watched Tapio cycle up their driveway, gratitude briefly swelling in her chest at his level head and dependability. He’d never let emotion get in the way of what was best for them all.

Things hadn’t been great between them in years, but for the first time in a long time she felt like their marriage was in a good place, like the distance between them had shrunk, and she could reach out and feel him beside her, their feet on solid ground. As he rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, Erin let out a weary sigh, worry for her children never far from her mind, despite the progress she and Tapio had made in their relationship.

Martha looked up at her, squinting against the sun rising behind Erin. “Everything okay?”

“As well as can be.” Erin paused. “How are you dealing with not knowing where your daughter is? I’m finding the not knowing so hard. I can’t get in contact with Johannes anymore. And Matti...”

“I’m not sure how I’m dealing with it all,” Martha replied, her voice tired. “At first, I just felt numb. Like I was dreaming, watching a movie. But now... now I’m just so furious about this entire situation. That’s what gets me going. It’s what keeps me from sinking completely. And we have Daniella to think of now.”

“Of course. That little girl needs you.” Erin nodded in understanding. But angry, sad, or desperate, she just wished her boys would make it home. The world was falling apart around her, and she needed to see her children before it was too late.

Raising her gaze to the horizon again, she scanned the length of the property, thinking about the many access routes from the rear and side of their place. Randy Ulrich could come back at any time looking for his sons, and there was already a target on Erin's back. Plus, with Fiona and the Hills, including their granddaughter, living with her now, she wouldn't let anything happen to any of them.

"I think I've got what I need," Martha said, straightening. She held a basket of plantain leaves in her hands. "I'll get started on the poultice right away and get that on Paul's wounds. Other than that, he just needs to rest."

Martha had long had an interest in herbal medicine, and had even spent a few years selling containers of a homemade balm she made from calendula, plantain, and comfrey on Etsy, until running a small business became too much of a headache.

"I'm glad we have your knowledge of local herbs and plants," Erin remarked as they headed back up to the house, Otto trotting beside them. "Without doctors or hospitals, I don't know what we're going to do when Johannes gets here with Benny. But I guess that's a bridge we'll have to cross when we come to it."

She tried not to look at the barn as they passed, which had finally given out last night in a raucous clash of falling wooden beams. Seeing their place fall apart around them hurt, but she and Tapio had already made plans for the wreckage.

Martha shook her head and clicked her tongue sympathetically. "Ben has leukemia, right?"

"Yes, he's supposed to have a second stem cell transplant soon. It all just feels kind of hopeless when I think too much about it. He's only four. It wasn't fair before, but now what chance does he have to get what he needs?"

"Get angry. It makes it easier, I promise you."

Erin let out a laugh and linked arms with Martha. "I'm so glad to have you in my life, friend. If there was anyone I'd want by my side at a time like this, it's you."

They reached the veranda and Erin let Martha go inside first, calling out to Fiona as she waited outside. Fiona appeared in the doorway a few moments later, her dark blond hair pulled back into a ponytail and an oversized T-shirt tucked into her trousers. Grief had marked her youthful features, dark circles now ringing her eyes, her cheeks drawn. But she still managed a smile.

“Did you need me?”

“Yes, please,” replied Erin. “We need to get started on fortifying this place properly. Randy Ulrich could be back at any time, and he’s going to bring friends with him, no doubt. We’ve still got the trip wires set up around the back of the house, but we need to get the tractor out and start building an outer wall around the house that we can use to defend ourselves if necessary.”

The wall idea had been one she and Tapio had come up with the night before. It would be a lot of work and she hoped it would be worth it if they came under attack. But she and Tapio didn’t have military experience—they were just geologists, and it was hard to know how effective it would be. Randy Ulrich was a completely unknown entity. They had no idea how many people or weapons he’d return with, or when.

Fiona stepped down onto the grass and gave a firm nod. “I’m happy to help. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Together, they set to work, using debris and pieces of wood from the barn. They carried the heavy pieces over to the house using the tractor and placed them into a pile that soon began to resemble a makeshift wall that started twenty yards from the house, and continued around it.

As they worked, the shimmering dust drifted across the sky above, lifted from the remains of homes and buildings and broken lives. They kept the wall thick, although Erin wasn’t entirely sure how far a bullet could travel through wood and metal beams. And they added everything they could find: a stack of old tires and disused farm machinery, a small motorcycle that hadn’t worked in ten years, each piece making the wall wider and taller as they worked without pause.

As time passed and the wall grew, Erin could feel her strength and resolve growing. There was no time to despair or give in to fear—they had each other, and she was determined to protect her people with everything she had.

With every piece of debris they cleared away and carefully stacked up around the house, Erin felt her heart beating a little faster, a sense of purpose and determination welling up within her.

She knew she couldn't let Randy Ulrich or anyone else breach her home. She would do whatever it took to protect Fiona and all the others who had gathered under her roof for shelter. They would weather this storm together, and come out stronger on the other side, her home still standing for when her children finally made it home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Erin

Ten Days After

Martha and little Daniella soon joined Erin and Fiona in building the wall, and the three women and girl had made good progress by the time they decided to break for lunch. One third of the wall they hoped to build now defended the front of the house, and they'd continue construction into the afternoon until the protective wall circled them.

Erin had been careful to keep holes in the wall at strategic points for them to fire through, if necessary. And they'd come up with other ideas to protect themselves, too. Two people keeping watch at all times at the front and rear of the property, ready to sound the alarm, as well as blocking access roads with vehicles or felled trees, and building booby traps.

"None of the bad guys are going to get in," Daniella said, holding Martha's hand as they headed back to the house. Martha had plaited the girl's long dark hair in twin braids that swung around her shoulders as she skipped beside her grandmother.

"We're going to make sure of that," Erin replied, smiling at the little girl. "Don't you worry, darling."

As the others continued on ahead, Erin and Otto paused to search the yard for eggs. She ruffled Otto's ears as she bent down to collect some eggs from hens that had a habit of hiding

their nests in the long grass now that they were no longer confined to the chicken coop. With the eggs in one hand, she picked up her T-shirt hem with the other, and then dropped them inside the little pouch she'd made, the creamy shells gently clacking together as she walked.

When she got back to the front of the house, Martha already had a fire started in a pit lined with broken bricks and was heating up the vegetable stew leftover from yesterday. There had been no fridge to store it in, of course, but Martha would bring it to boiling for a few minutes to make sure any bad bacteria was killed.

Erin stopped beside Martha, palming her hips, the aromas of the stew making her mouth water. She was hungry after a solid morning's work earlier, but she had something to do before she stopped for lunch. "Can you and Fiona keep a good watch while I head over to the Vanders' place and see how they're doing? Tapio still isn't back, and I'd like to offer them some help if they need it, plus a peace offering." Erin passed five eggs over to Martha and showed her the remaining eggs still nestled in her T-shirt pouch.

"Let's hope that does the trick," Martha replied with a smile.

Erin grabbed her red mountain bike, carefully wrapped the eggs and placed them in her backpack, then shouldered her rifle, leaving Fiona with a handgun and Martha with another hunting rifle.

"Be careful," she called over her shoulder as she set off up the driveway. "I won't be long." Erin continued cycling up onto the road, always keeping a watchful eye out for any sign of strangers approaching, as well as hazards left by the earthquakes.

Soon, she was standing in front of Tapio at the ruined remains of the Vanders' home. Sweat beaded on Tapio's hairline and he dragged a sleeve across his forehead before leaning in and kissing her gently on the lips, his touch feather-soft.

“Where are the Vanders?” Erin looked around, not seeing them anywhere.

“George and Piers took a load down to the river, and Louis and Kimmy have been there most of the day setting up their new camp. They’ve put up a couple of tents and have shifted their horses and dogs down there already. I even saw Kimmy digging up their veggie garden. I was left here on salvage duty.”

Erin felt her jaw flex. “I brought them some eggs as a peace offering. But it sounds like they’re pretty set in their decision to stay here.”

“I’d say that’s about right,” Tapio replied. “We can’t say we didn’t try.”

“I just don’t understand it,” Erin said to him, shrugging off her backpack and setting it gently on the ground. “They’re more at risk here by themselves if Randy Ulrich comes back. He’s going to head straight here because this is where he saw the ATV. The stream isn’t too far away, so it’s not like he won’t find them if he looks.”

Tapio reached his hands above his head and stretched, his mouth pulling into a grimace as he lowered them and rubbed his lower back. “I agree with you, but what can we do? If they’re going to be stubborn, we need to focus on our own safety.”

Erin nodded. He was right, of course, and convincing the Vanders to join forces was starting to feel like a completely useless endeavor. George was going to do whatever the heck he wanted, just like he usually did. She blew out a breath and forced a smile. “Well, in better news, we got a good chunk of the wall done while you’ve been here.”

“That’s great. And how’s Paul?”

“He’s doing better. Martha’s put a plantain poultice on his wounds and he seems to have a bit more energy now. He’s been resting all morning.”

“That’s good,” he replied absently as he shielded his eyes and looked into the distance. “I think I can see one of them

coming. You're welcome to make one last attempt to sway them, then we should both get home. I've done enough here."

"Did you manage to locate most of their supplies?"

"We found a ton of canned food and toiletries. Kimmy had enough shampoo to last another decade. And I also found a couple of boxes of old photos." Tapio took a few steps forward and leaned down over a cardboard box, fishing around inside until he extracted some photos. "Here, take a look at this. Looks like old George here had quite the posh upbringing."

Erin took the photos and held them closer to her face. The first image showed a teenage George on the deck of a luxury boat, surrounded by a group of good-looking young men and women. His hair was sun bleached blond, his skin tanned, and he wore a pair of reflective sunglasses. He had an arm draped around another young man's shoulders as they stood on the deck of the boat and gazed out at the ocean.

"Nice boat," Erin commented.

"There are a lot more like that. Ski trips in Europe. A safari trip to Africa. Fast cars, more boats."

Erin nodded, mildly curious about George's upbringing. He certainly acted like a spoiled rich kid who was used to getting whatever he wanted, even though he was now a grown man with a family of his own.

She glanced down at the second picture that showed a woman and two young boys, one of them easily identifiable as George. The woman stood stiffly behind them, her hair pulled up in a severe bun, the expression on her face betraying a deep unhappiness.

"It doesn't look like his mother was a very warm person," Erin commented.

"I've never heard him talk about his family," Tapio replied.

"They're estranged, from what I've gleaned from Kimmy. I think his father was a pretty hard man and severed ties at some point."

Tapio looked up in the direction of the river, then reached out and slipped the photos out of Erin's hands. "George is coming back," he said in a low voice. "I'll put these where I found them."

When Erin turned her head to look in the same direction, she saw the ATV with an empty trailer attached bumping over the uneven road back toward them. The sight sent a stab of regret through her as she remembered the way Randy Ulrich's windshield had exploded yesterday after she'd fired at him. "I wish we'd never agreed to let them use the ATV."

Tapio nodded. "I know, but what's done is done."

They stood in silence as they waited for George to return. He soon pulled up beside them, and Tapio exchanged a significant look with Erin before raising a hand in greeting to George. "I'm just heading around the other side of the house to see if I can find anything over there. Erin's got something for you."

George remained seated on the ATV and cocked his head to the side, watching her as she extracted the eggs from her bag, the sound of Tapio moving through the wreckage fading as he walked away.

Cradling the eggs in her hands, she held them out to George. "Here you go, something for lunch."

"Just put them on the ground for now," he replied, eyeing the eggs with a look that bordered on disgust. "To be honest, we've probably got enough food. We don't really need any handouts."

Erin did as he asked, feeling her cheeks burn. As she straightened, she looked down the sloping land toward where the stream flowed. George's property was surrounded by a wooden fence, the kind that could have been used to pen cattle at one point. Now the fence was falling apart in places, home to small clusters of wild flowers and longer grass. The rolling hills of earth were in varying states of repair, some in the full bloom of summer, others with fissures running through the earth, trees lying flat on the ground like dead sentries.

The silence stretched awkwardly, and Erin cleared her throat. “How’s everything going down there?”

“As well as can be expected. We’ll be pretty comfortable soon.”

She looked at him and held his gaze. “So Tapio mentioned you’re pretty set on your decision to stay here.”

“That’s right.”

“And what if Randy Ulrich comes back? He saw the ATV here. He’s going to come back here looking for his sons, and that man seemed like trouble.”

George’s features darkened. “You and I both know I had nothing to do with that mess over at Fiona’s. If Ian knew how to handle himself, he’d still be alive. And if you and Tapio hadn’t gone storming over there, he might also still be alive.”

Erin felt a surge of anger, but swallowed it down, trying to stay calm. “Which is exactly why we don’t want you here as sitting ducks when Randy and his friends come back, looking to even the score.”

“Don’t worry, Erin,” George replied in a condescending tone. “I can keep my family safe. And if they try anything, I’ll just tell them what really happened, and where you and Tapio live, and then I’ll send them over your way.”

Erin’s mouth dropped open. He couldn’t be serious, surely? “You don’t mean that, right?”

“I make it a habit not to get involved in other people’s business.” George ran a hand over his blonde hair streaked with gray that he’d pulled into a man-bun at the back of his head. He looked less put together than she’d ever seen him, like his carefully cultivated image was slowly unraveling. “So yes, I’m serious.”

For a few moments, all Erin could do was breathe and stare at the eggs on the ground. She finally looked up, a mix of disbelief and anger swirling through her. “George, please don’t do this to Kimmy. Insisting on staying here is dangerous for you all. She’s still suffering after those miscarriages, maybe more than you realize. She doesn’t want to lose her living

children because of your ego. And that's what's on the line here. Your wife's life. Your sons'."

A sharp barking laugh escaped George's lips, and his hands moved to the ATV handlebars as he leaned forward. "Miscarriage? What are you talking about? We never had any miscarriages. And if she said that to you, and you believed her, you're more of a fool than I thought."

Tears stung Erin's eyes, but she willed them back. It was hard to believe Kimmy could be so callous, but then George was rotten to the core and Kimmy was married to him.

"Look, I've got to go, George." She paused, unsure of what to say to the despicable man. "I'll be seeing you then. Good luck."

She turned and called out to Tapio as she picked up her bike, telling him she'd meet him at the house and not to be too long. She couldn't wait at the Vanders' property for even one more minute. Then she climbed on her bike and headed for home, not looking back as she cycled over the uneven ground, anger and betrayal warring inside her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Erin

Four Years Earlier

The house was almost too quiet. Erin stood in the living room listening for Tapio, but all she could hear was the clock ticking on the wall and the faint sound of birdsong coming from the feeder on the front veranda.

She walked into the kitchen and checked her phone to see if there were any messages from Johannes, but the screen held no notifications. Camilla was due to give birth any day now, and with them living all the way over in Qatar, Erin felt totally disconnected from her oldest son's life, and hungry for news.

She glanced around the quiet kitchen with the view out over the pond, the light through the window gray and hazy as dusk approached, lending the scene a dream-like quality. Moving closer to the window, she leaned on the bench and remembered the first time she'd ever slept in the house, the day she moved in with Tapio. She'd stood there in the same spot, smelling fresh paint and sawdust, knowing that this place would be the start of something new and exciting, that they would one day have the children they both longed for and build a family.

But reality had a sick way of laughing at the best laid plans, and she felt a vague sense of longing and sadness at all the ways her life had been derailed from the direction she'd dreamed of all those years ago. As her finger traced the pattern

in the granite bench top, the clock ticked, and she wished she'd spent more time with her grown children. That they were closer, and she wasn't so far away. She wished she'd been able to recognize that Matti needed her before he got into all that trouble. And most of all she wished Kalevi was still alive.

Erin felt the weight of her body pulling her down, and she closed her eyes, her heart feeling heavy, her features wrinkled and tired. She let herself daydream a little as she leaned on the countertop, picturing her kitchen in another, alternate reality. Where things had worked out just like she'd hoped all those years ago.

The room in her mind was flooded with warm morning light. A cup of coffee sat on the bench, half-drunk, and cooling. A boy on the cusp of his teenage years, a child of the outdoors, sported a wiry frame, angular and lean, smiling at her across the kitchen table. Two younger brothers beside him, blond and blue eyed, a trio of young men who gradually faded away from her thoughts until she opened her eyes to see nothing but an empty room.

Erin felt the tingle of goosebumps rise on the back of her neck, her fingers traveling down her arms, making her feel cold and exposed. Her fingers twitched with a craving to touch, to soothe and smooth the ragged edges. She wanted to hug her sons and tell them how proud she was, but there was no one there. Even Tapio had disappeared, probably into his shed or out on a walk around the property with Otto.

Sometimes Erin wondered if other people who'd lost their children or suffered miscarriages felt like she did: all alone with a grief that faded and changed over the years, but never really went away. She was stuck on an island she'd never leave, never able to rejoin those who hadn't suffered such catastrophic loss. It would always be *them*, the normal people with untouched lives, and those on the island, like Erin.

With a sudden huff of breath, Erin forced herself upright. She wasn't one to wallow, she told herself. She was a doer, the kind of person who kept going and moved forward. Grief belonged in the past, and had no place in her head.

As she glanced up, the electronic display on the oven told her that it was time to call Matti, so she poured herself a glass of water from the tap and picked up her mobile, calling the correctional facility's number by heart.

She drummed her fingers on the counter as she waited for Matti, and a moment later, she heard his familiar voice.

"Hey, Matti. It's Mom."

"Hey, Mom. How are you?"

"Good," she said, resting the phone between her hunched shoulder and cheek to free up her hands. She moved to the kitchen table and started to lay out some placemats and cutlery for dinner. "How are things?"

"Okay." His voice sounded flat and distant, and Erin's motherly radar went up a notch.

"Are you okay, Matti? You don't sound so good." She held her breath like she always did when he seemed down. She didn't want any details of his life in prison, didn't want to imagine his day-to-day life in such an awful place, and he seemed to sense that, never giving much away.

"It's no big deal, Mom. I've just had a bit of a headache all day."

"A headache? Do you need to see the doctor?" Erin's voice lilted with concern.

"It's okay. I think it's just stress. I've got some good news, though."

"What's that?" Erin responded, feeling a fleeting moment of relief.

"I've been approved to undertake Forestry Firefighting Training so I can move to the conservation camp." He paused. "Elijah made it in, too."

"That's great," Erin replied, even though she wished Elijah was staying right where he was. It's not that she blamed Elijah exactly, but the two of them weren't good for each other.

"I know what you're thinking. Please don't say it."

“What are you talking about?”

“Elijah has changed a lot, just like me. We both just want to get out of here and get on with our lives.” His voice was controlled and she could picture his face, hard and unemotional.

“I know, Matti. I wasn’t thinking anything about Elijah.”

She looked out the window to see Tapio walking toward the house, his gait slow, his shoulders hunched, Otto by his side. He was probably going to wash up in the bathroom and come right to the kitchen, and she knew she should finish with Matti. Finding out she was on the phone with him could send Tapio into one of his quiet spells for days, where she couldn’t reach him, no matter how hard she tried.

“So listen, I have to go,” she said, as Matti remained silent. “I’ll call you next week at the same time, okay?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and for a moment, she thought he might tell her not to bother, that he would refuse to take her call. Then he said, “Okay, sounds good.”

“Bye, Matti,” she said softly.

“Bye, Mom.” And with that, they both hung up. Erin put her phone down and let out a deep sigh as Tapio entered the kitchen. She made eye contact with him and gave him a small smile, but he only nodded in return before shuffling over to sit down at the table.

“Were you just on the phone? I heard you talking.”

“No,” she replied. “I was just talking to myself.”

Tapio made a non-committal sound and then pulled out a notebook, going over his notations for whatever project he was working on in silence. Erin stared at him for a moment. She wanted nothing more than for Tapio to open up, to tell her what was on his mind, but she knew that would never happen.

As she turned to heat up dinner, she felt the familiar ache of missing the man right in front of her. But she loved him deeply and no matter how bleak things had been over the

years, she knew that they would get through it somehow, that they'd be okay. Outside, the birds at the feeder continued to chirp, the tick-tick of the clock punctuating the air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Noah

Ten Days After

Noah's exhaustion melted away as they continued cycling down Route 101 and approached Soledad on their right, and it was replaced by something that felt a lot like euphoria. They were close to the conservation camp, now, where his dad would be waiting and he could finally rest, finally let someone else take charge.

He put a bit of distance between himself and Bella and Aaliyah, wanting to lose himself in the memory of the last time he'd seen his dad, without the girls' squabbling interrupting him.

It had been a few months ago, and Noah had been visiting his dad at the camp. It was time to go, time to drive back to LA and Ramona Gardens, and his dad had cupped Noah's face in his hands and held him for a moment, just looking at him. "You be a good boy and do what your momma says, okay?"

Noah had nodded.

"I'm going to be out of here soon and everything's going to change for you and your mom. I promise."

Noah had glanced over his shoulder where his mom stood impatiently by the visitor room door, her eyes on the ceiling and her foot tapping like she had better places to be. Noah knew his mom still loved his dad—she'd even told him so

herself one night, tearfully, when they had barricaded themselves in his bedroom while Joe raged outside—but she was still mad at him for getting locked up, and Joe had been waiting in the car outside.

For a brief time, Noah had wanted to tell his dad how bad things were sometimes with Joe, but he hadn't had the courage. Instead, he'd just enjoyed the fleeting moment of feeling safe, of his dad looking at him like he was the most important thing in the world.

And as he cycled down the road toward where his dad would be waiting for him, he could almost feel his father's tender touch on his cheeks once more. *Soon.*

“Hey, Noah!”

Aaliyah called to him again, and he finally slowed to a stop in front of a felled street lamp that lay splayed across the highway like the broken skeleton of a prehistoric beast, his legs itching to keep pedaling. He looked over his shoulder and watched the girls catch up to him, Bella's face red, and both with the same dry cough from the lingering smoke.

“What is it?” He knew he was being abrupt, but the mid-afternoon sun was only heading in one direction, and he had to see his dad before it got dark.

“Have you looked over there?” Aaliyah pointed toward Soledad. The town had been flattened, almost every building collapsed, and the ruins were blackened and charred. A fire had been through a while ago, the starkness of the burned remains dulled by dust and ash that had settled over the town in the last week or so, the acrid smell of melted plastic and burned buildings fading.

Noah felt his chest thicken as he took it in, his body tensing as he remembered what Soledad had been like the last time he'd been through; the quiet, small-town vibe of the place. He bit his lip and breathed out slowly, but the tightness wouldn't leave his chest.

The afternoon sun created an arch of light that spanned the distance between Soledad and the peaks of Big Sur on the

other side of the road, and Noah's eyes followed it. The light hit the black and burning trees there like an outstretched hand, making them twist and stretch, their limbs clawing at the sky. He could almost feel their pain as the light tore through their withered limbs.

Aaliyah leaned closer to him, her mouth a mean line. "If Soledad is like this, is the conservation camp going to be flattened and burned out, too? It's close, right?" She stared at him with one eyebrow raised and Noah felt a sudden, burning anger catch fire inside him. He felt angry at Aaliyah, angry with his mom, and angry at the stupid, broken world.

"Noah, it might be okay," Bella hurried to say as she looked between the two of them, still perched on her too-big bike like a little bird. "Don't worry too much."

"Oh shut up," Aaliyah said, glaring at Bella. "You don't always have to be little Miss Sunshine. He needs to face the fact that his dad could be dead and gone, and this has all been a huge waste of time."

Noah looked away from her and stared down the road, his hands clenching into fists and his nails digging into his palms. He was so close now, so close to being where his dad was. The fire may have already swept through the camp, but his dad would have stayed behind and waited for him, and his dad had to have survived.

"I have to keep going," Noah said, tightening his grip on his bike handlebars. "He's going to be there."

"You're as deluded as Bella," Aaliyah replied. "After seeing Soledad, the chances of your dad being there are about as good as Bella's mom still being alive."

"She is still alive," Bella shouted, the sudden outburst taking Noah by surprise.

Aaliyah grew calmer the more irritated and upset Bella seemed. She shrugged with a nonchalant air. "How would you know that? Have you spoken to her?"

"She's alive," Bella insisted. "And so is Noah's dad! He's going to be there when we get to the camp. I know it."

Aaliyah let out an irritated groan and turned away from them. “I’ve had enough of this. If you two are going to keep playing in this fantasy world, I’m going to find somewhere else to spend the night and then make a plan to get the heck out of California.”

“Just walk away and keep going,” Bella said, her eyes red. She paused and let out a soft, barking cough, a light billow of ash still swirling in the air, gray and insidious the way it coated their throats. “That’s why Rhys ended up dead. Because you didn’t want to travel with us, and you ran away.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” Aaliyah replied, her eyes narrowing. “Rhys died because you’re a disobedient brat and you went into that half-collapsed building.”

Bella just stared at her, breathing hard for a few seconds.

Noah’s entire body tensed. At any moment, things were going to spiral out of control. “Please...” He wasn’t sure who he was talking to, or what he was asking for. He saw Bella lower her gaze. Aaliyah shake out her hands.

Tears pricked his eyes and he blinked, then settled back in his bike seat and rolled forward a couple of inches, trying to let go of his own anger at Aaliyah and reminding himself that she was having a hard time, too. It was only yesterday she’d submerged herself in that inky lake, going down until Noah thought she’d never return.

“Look,” he said, staring at a crack in the road that widened into a deep fissure. “We can stand here arguing, or we can go and take a look at the camp. We’re close now. We’ll soon see who’s right. But whatever happens, we stick together, okay? Aaliyah, you’re not going anywhere. You asked me once what I’d do if my dad wasn’t there, remember?”

Aaliyah nodded.

“Well, I said I’d be fine. That we’d keep going and we’re a team. And I still mean it.” He’d lied. He wouldn’t be fine. But he wasn’t going to say that. Not now when they were standing on a precipice and the ground was cracking and breaking beneath their feet.

Noah looked between Bella and Aaliyah and his words seemed to reach them, pulling the pulsing tension out of the air and leaving them looking deflated. Both girls nodded and settled back on their bikes.

He swallowed hard, his eyes roaming their familiar faces. They'd become family, and he couldn't bear the thought of either of them leaving. But he knew family wasn't all sweetness and light. He knew the three of them would end up hurting each other, one way or another. But if they could just hold on a little longer, find his dad, things might work out okay. He cleared his throat. Licked his chapped lips. "Let's just go to the camp now, okay? We came this far."

For a moment, the only sounds were those of nature taking back the land. The wind in the trees, the chirps of insects, the whisper of the soot-heavy breeze through the buckling, broken houses, the song of the river.

Then Bella dipped her head and Aaliyah gave a curt nod, so Noah started to push off again, his heart thumping painfully in his chest. As he rode around the felled street lamp, he glanced in the direction of Soledad again. The destroyed town looked completely deserted. Black, empty, and dead. Everyone gone.

He told himself that his dad was different. That he's survived, somehow. But he couldn't help looking over his shoulder at Soledad under its shroud. A citadel of burned wood and steel, a horrible black rust that spread across the horizon in patches, as if it had been poured out like watercolor ink.

With no choice but to just put his head down and hope for the best, Noah and the girls rode their bikes in silence for the next mile or so, the air between them thick with tension. The camp was close now, and Noah's heart was pounding so hard he felt dizzy. His hands were sweating, and he wiped them on his shorts, trying to stay calm.

"It's going to be okay," Bella said quietly, as if she could read his mind. "We're almost there."

Almost there. The words echoed in Noah's head and he pedaled faster, his legs pumping hard as he tried to push away the fear that was threatening to overwhelm him. What if Aaliyah was right?

The thought made Noah feel sick to his stomach, but he pushed it away and focused on pedaling. Finally, Noah spotted the turnoff to the camp, his eyes scanning for the familiar shape of the buildings set back from the road but failing to see them.

As they got closer, Noah held his breath, overwhelmingly terrified of what they might find. But he pushed past the fear and rode toward the camp with determination etched on every line of his face, his hand straying to the empty place below his neck where the silver cross from his mom had once hung. Then, as he passed a thicket of burned out trees, and the camp came into view, he came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the parking lot.

The camp was destroyed; the buildings burned to the ground, the metal frames blackened and twisted. There was no sign of life anywhere. The whole place was a wasteland.

Noah stared at the wreckage for a few moments, his mind struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. He felt his stomach churn, and he fought the urge to vomit as he took it all in.

This couldn't be right. His dad had to be here. He just had to be.

But as Noah looked around at the devastation, he knew that Aaliyah had been right all along. There was no one there. His dad was gone. Noah sucked in a breath and the smell of sweat and fear was suddenly all around him, and he strained to keep himself from gagging on it.

An endless white light seemed to pierce Noah's brain, the world spinning around him, the details of the broken camp fading in and out. Sounds echoed in his ears, but he couldn't make out the words, like he was underwater. Everything looked foggy and out of focus.

“Dad,” Noah whispered, his voice barely audible even to his own ears. “Dad, where are you?”

But there was no reply, only the sound of the wind rustling through the charred remains of the camp.

And then the sound of footfalls approaching, and a harsh, guttural, unfamiliar laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Noah

Ten Days After

Noah and the girls froze at the edge of the parking lot like cornered mice, the sound of footfalls growing louder, echoing around the desolate, smashed remains of the conservation camp. Then Noah and Aaliyah's instincts seemed to kick in at the same time, and they both sidestepped with their bikes to the nearest piece of cover and dropped low.

"Bella," he whispered, and she hurried to join them, the three of them huddled behind a scorched black truck with a blistered and peeling Cal Fire logo on the side.

With his heart galloping in his chest, Noah leaned around the side of the truck to see a group of four walking toward them: three heavysset men, one holding a baseball bat, and a skinny woman walking at the rear. It wasn't just that one man wore a pair of orange inmate trousers that told Noah the men were from the nearby prisons.

The men had all done time, and it was obvious in the way they held themselves, their shambling gait, the sullenness on their faces. They were dangerous-looking, and the young woman behind them had the same dead eyes the prisoners did, but different somehow, and Noah could tell instantly she hadn't chosen to be with them.

Noah stared at her, feeling a lump in his throat. Her gaze was vacant, her jaw clenched tight against her worries. The pale skin on her face was rough and cut in many places, and she looked as though she hadn't had a shower in weeks.

Noah squinted into the fading light, sure he could see a pair of tear tracks running down her cheeks, past the corners of her tight lips, and into the bracelets of grime around her neck. She wiped at her face with a shaking hand, and Noah felt his skin crawl and the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He could sense her desperation, could recognize her pain, the deep and horrible ache of being trapped somewhere with people she hated.

Noah couldn't take his eyes off her, and as the group walked closer, he realized he was clutching Bella's hand so tightly she was squirming. He felt a flicker of fear and scanned their surroundings for somewhere better to hide, but the group was moving closer and there was nothing but scorched earth and blackened, abandoned vehicles close by. He swallowed hard, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, dry with fear, and knew they had to stay put.

"What do we do?" Bella whispered. Her eyes were fringed with red and her lower lip trembled as she pressed one hand over her freckled face, like she was trying to calm herself.

Aaliyah lifted herself a little so her eyes could see over the vehicle, her gaze locked on the group. "We just have to wait here for now. If they get any closer and I say go, get on your bikes and pedal as hard and fast as you can."

Noah nodded his agreement and leaned out again, holding his breath in his chest as he watched the men saunter through the wreckage of the camp and pause outside of one of the partially collapsed buildings. Two of the guys were white, the third, holding the baseball bat, a tall black guy. All three had thick, ropey muscles and hard faces to match.

"I think they're about to go inside," he whispered. The men were about a hundred yards away now, and the two white guys disappeared into the building, the back half of it

completely collapsed. It was hard to tell, but Noah thought it might have been the camp kitchen.

The black guy remained outside, holding the metal baseball bat. As Noah looked closer, he realized someone had wrapped barbed wire around the end of the bat. The man sneered, his dark eyes narrowing beneath a shaved head, and when he looked at the woman, his lips curled into a cruel smile.

The sight of the baseball bat brought back a rush of memories Noah would rather forget, and he blinked away the images of Joe chasing him and Aaliyah through the wreckage of Ramona Gardens with his bat. Noah had taken it after he and Aaliyah had gotten the upper hand, fooling himself into thinking he was strong and powerful and somehow capable of defending himself in this new broken world.

But looking at the man outside the camp kitchen, exuding a barely contained capacity for violence and brutality, he realized how vulnerable he and the others actually were. Noah and the girls were just kids. These were men hardened by a system that would either break inmates or forge them into something even more dangerous than when they went in.

Fear pushed away all thoughts of his dad, and Noah stared at the man. He had shoved Joe's bat inside Aaliyah's trailer, and he briefly contemplated extracting it, but decided he was better off having his hands free in case they needed to get on their bikes and make a run for it. He wasn't going to take on those men. Who was he kidding?

"I don't think that woman wants to be there," Aaliyah said beside him, a strange tone in her voice, stating what was clearly obvious.

Noah leaned out again and watched the woman. She was barefoot, her hair matted and tangled, her arms and legs marked with blue and brown bruises, some fading, others fresh. The man leaned forward, a smirk on his face like he was taunting her, and all she did was stare at him, her eyes blank and glassy.

“It looks like they’re holding her prisoner,” Noah said, feeling sick with the knowledge that he was right.

The words had barely left his lips when the other two men emerged from the building, their arms laden with canned goods and supplies. The man with the bat took a step closer to the woman, and she flinched away from him, but he shoved her forward anyway, the push brutal and jolting; she stumbled toward the two men waiting by the door.

Aaliyah let out a low curse beneath her breath, and the three of them watched in silence as the group moved away, the woman walking along behind them; her gaze still blank and unseeing, like she’d numbed herself in order to survive her ordeal.

Noah waited a few minutes to make sure they were gone before he stood up, his legs trembling slightly. Aaliyah straightened beside him, while Bella remained crouched on the ground, peering under the truck.

“We need to get out of here,” Aaliyah said. “Right now!” Her eyes darted around, like she half expected the men to reappear from behind one of the other wrecked vehicles.

“I need to check the place out before we leave,” Noah replied, biting his lower lip. “Just in case. *Please.*” He knew his dad was already gone, probably evacuated or something, but he needed to look around the camp, just in case, or it would haunt him for the rest of his life.

“And what about that woman?” Bella finally stood, brushing the dust and ash off her knees. “We can’t just leave her here. She looked like she needed help.”

Aaliyah laughed. “We’re just a bunch of kids, Bella. What are you going to do? Ride in there and take them on? Get a grip!” Aaliyah’s last words seemed to edge toward panic and Noah saw her hands had strayed to the circular scars on her forearms, her index finger tracing the faint red spots that looked like burns.

Distant voices reached them, and Noah realized the men were still in the camp somewhere. A fresh wave of panic hit

him. “Look, we can’t do anything now, anyway, unless we want to run right into them. Let’s find a place to camp tonight and then we can decide.”

With a furtive glance toward the camp, Aaliyah nodded and the three of them got on their bikes, pedaling hard until they reached the highway. They left the woman behind, her blank expression fixed in Noah’s mind like a terrible memory he couldn’t shake.

As they cycled away from the camp and into the slowly darkening world, Noah vowed that he would come back one last time and look for his dad. He hoped he wouldn’t find him... because if his dad was there, he wasn’t alive.

And if he could, he’d try to help the woman. But he wasn’t an idiot. He knew Aaliyah was right. How could three kids do anything against a bunch of violent men?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Noah

Ten Days After

Noah had a hollow, empty feeling inside as he and the girls looked for a place to sleep. He'd been sure his father would be there at the camp, just like he'd known his mom would be there every morning to make him breakfast, even if she'd worked late at her cleaning job, like he'd known that Joe would come home drunk and itching for a fight on the day his mom got paid.

But now that he'd seen the camp, knew his dad wasn't waiting there for him like he'd hoped, Noah felt bereft and alone, unmoored and second guessing everything. He really was alone in the world, with no one but Bella and Aaliyah for company, and they had nowhere to sleep and were out of food and water.

The camp was supposed to be the end of it all, but instead it was just the start of a new, more difficult journey with no destination in mind, nothing pulling them through the broken world. With that depressing thought, his stomach growled, and he groaned, a soft sound the others didn't hear. He looked down at his dirty, battered shoes. A thick layer of dust caked his skin, and his many cuts and scrapes had dried and scabbed. He needed water. Food. A change of clothes. A hot bath run by his mom.

Up ahead, Aaliyah turned right at the next intersection, cycling into Soledad, a gloomy light settling over them as dusk rolled in. Noah followed behind her, and Bella behind him, his eyes half on the road and half watching the surrounding buildings. Most were burned out, with a few walls still standing, but now and then he saw a building that was largely intact but cracked and unstable, like any moment it might all come toppling down.

The setting sun cast a purplish hue on everything, the hazy clouds a dark, bruised purple. As the light faded, it seemed to make the destruction look even more surreal, like a dream that had become a nightmare.

Without warning, Aaliyah slammed on her brakes, her bike skidding and sliding on the loose layer of ash on the road. Noah swerved, the squeak of his tires cutting through the quiet street. Bella came to an abrupt stop behind him, and Noah let his bike fall over on its side, then dropped to the ground beside it, scanning the buildings for what had startled Aaliyah.

Aaliyah's bike was still, her legs still straddling the seat. Noah watched her. His breath caught in his throat until she finally took a deep, ragged breath herself and shook her head.

“What is it?” Noah asked, looking around.

“Nothing,” Aaliyah hurried to say. “Those men have me spooked, is all.” She climbed off her bike and took another moment to scan their surroundings, and Bella and Noah did the same.

The three of them stood in what remained of the main street that had run through Soledad, the area lined with fractured, collapsed stores, and abandoned vehicles caught in fissures that had opened up in the road. The black kiss left by the fire covered everything, and the town was silent but for a dog barking in the distance.

Noah sighed and kicked at a chunk of broken asphalt that sat at the edge of the curb. The last time he'd been on this road, it had been full of cars, kids on bikes or eating ice cream, and shoppers navigating the sidewalk.

Now all he could see was the aftermath of the quakes and fire, a nightmarish landscape that felt like a glimpse into the future, an alternate reality where all the people had vanished, leaving only their broken homes, cars, and belongings behind. A world that had moved on without him. Without Bella and Aaliyah.

“We should search the wreckage for any food that might be left,” Bella suggested, a hopeful expression on her face as she looked at the melted fast food sign that lay across the sidewalk a few feet away like a broken promise. She pressed her hand to her stomach and Noah knew she must be as hungry as he was. “Maybe there’s something left behind.”

“If there is, it’s probably spoiled,” Aaliyah replied sullenly, her eyes still watchful and alert.

Noah just shrugged. He was tired of searching, tired of trying to be hopeful, tired of trying to survive.

“Come on,” cajoled Bella. “Rhys always said some food helps a bad mood.”

“This isn’t just a *bad mood*,” Aaliyah replied, but she followed Bella when she walked a little way down a side street to hide her bike, and Noah found himself following, too. Once the bikes were hidden, they crept inside what was left of the fast-food restaurant, stepping over melted plastic and broken booth seats, collapsed sections of wall and cracks in the floor.

The inside was dark, the only light coming in through holes in the roof and the back wall. The smell of garbage and rotting food hung heavy in the air, and Noah’s stomach lurched, his eyes taking in the deep gouges in the linoleum floor and counters caked with dust and rat droppings, scorch marks darkening the entrance where the fire had passed through.

“There’s nothing here,” Aaliyah said before they’d gone more than a few feet through the wreckage. “Let’s go.”

Bella ignored her and kept walking, then dropped down to crawl over a pile of debris to reach the kitchen. Aaliyah hung back to keep watch, arms folded over her chest, while Noah

followed, finding himself inside the gloomy kitchen that somehow still smelled of french fries and old oil. A pale glare seeped through the holes in the roof and back wall, revealing broken fryers and ovens, and walls with snaking cracks.

“Check the cupboards. Look down low in case the grown-ups missed something,” Bella said, and so the two of them began to search the ruined kitchen, Noah feeling a seed of gratitude for Bella. Without her, he’d have just curled up somewhere in the dust and rubble and ash and lost himself in darkness.

They found five cans of soda on a bottom shelf, as well as a carton of sugary syrup labeled *post mix*, and Bella found a huge container of ketchup. It wasn’t much, but it would quench their thirst and get them through the night.

After sharing the soda and having a few big mouthfuls of ketchup each, they decided to sleep outside in case another earthquake hit. The ever present threat of the ground suddenly coming to life and remaking the world around them made the future seem like a large, terrifying question mark. But the soda helped a little. And when Bella curled up next to him, that helped, too.

Slowly, Noah drifted off to sleep, the soft sounds of Bella breathing lulling him into a state of restful peace. But just as his mind slipped into dreamland, that place where nothing was real and everything was possible, a stifled cry suddenly jolted him awake.

His eyes flicked open. Adrenaline surged, and his heart jumped to his throat. A short distance away, Aaliyah thrashed in her sleep, the darkness alive with movement. She opened her mouth like she was trying to scream, and her eyes opened wide, flitting left and then right. Noah could tell her heart was beating a million miles an hour, and she clawed at the air like it was choking her.

“It’s okay,” Noah said softly, reaching out to touch Aaliyah’s trembling shoulder. “You’re safe.”

Tears streamed down her face as she cried out again, begging for mercy from some unseen enemy.

“Shh,” Noah said, gently stroking her arm the way his dad used to when he was a little boy, the half-remembered memory of his dad’s weight sinking down the mattress, the soft touches on his back and arm, making his throat tight. “It’s okay. I’m here. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He wasn’t sure if it was the sound of his voice or his stroking, but eventually, Aaliyah stopped shaking and crying. She hiccupped a few times and then took a deep breath, letting it out with a long sigh.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice small in a way that made Noah uneasy.

“It’s okay,” Noah replied. “I’m just glad you’re alright.”

She breathed in and out a few times. Paused. Then a couple more breaths before turning to face him. “We have to go back and help that woman.”

Aaliyah’s words took him by surprise. “Back at the camp?”

“Yeah.”

The night seemed to inhale around them, pressing in tight and making it hard to think straight. The thought of coming face to face with those men seemed even more foolish in the inky darkness. “I thought you said Bella’s suggestion was stupid. We can’t... how can we?”

“I’ve been where she is. Not exactly the same. But seeing her just brought it all back.” Aaliyah’s hands pressed against her scars, rubbing like she could erase them if she persisted long enough. And Noah burned with a thousand questions. But fear of what Aaliyah might actually say kept his mouth closed.

“You want to know what happened to me, don’t you?” A bit of her familiar defensiveness had crept back into her voice, the old acidic tone he’d come to know and draw comfort from. She sounded more like her old self, and Noah was glad.

“No,” replied Noah, glancing over at Bella, who remained fast asleep. “No. I wasn’t wondering.”

“You’re lying. I’ll tell you what happened.”

Noah pressed his lips together. “Don’t. Please. It doesn’t matter. It’s not important.”

“Why? Are you scared of me? Of what I might tell you?” Aaliyah’s eyes were wide and her voice was harder. For a long moment, Noah said nothing. He just stared into Aaliyah’s face, taking in the shape of her dark eyes, the curve of her jaw, and her nose.

“I’m not scared of you,” he finally said, not meeting her gaze as he spoke. “I just don’t want you to go through it all over again.”

“Well, whether you hear it or not, we have to help that woman,” Aaliyah insisted. “I was wrong when I said we couldn’t try to help her. We have to. I’ll take you back to look for your dad if you agree to come too. And then we get her out of there.”

Noah felt his jaw clench. He did need to look for his dad, and he wanted Aaliyah there with him, just in case he found the one thing he feared the most. If his dad had died, if there really was no hope, Noah didn’t know what he’d do. But the thought of having to confront those men in order to save that lady sent fear slashing through him.

And then—unsure exactly why and with a grim resolve that felt like a band of sharp metal wrapped around his heart—he nodded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lilly

Ten Days After

The trail between two fields looked familiar despite the way the earthquakes had irrevocably changed the landscape, and Lilly felt a quickening in her heart. After everything, they were almost home, almost back to the mud-brick house that she prayed still stood, still protected her father.

As they walked, she couldn't decide if the scales had tipped positive or negative: she had Pip, but they'd failed to find Noah in time and lost the meds for her father. Was it a case of one life for two? Had her mission to LA been a failure? The thought came to her like a physical blow.

Despite her worries about the state her father might be in, she continued to put one foot in front of the other, eyes skimming a flattened farmhouse in the distance. Grief and anger warred inside her for everything they'd been through—the screams from the burning army truck would haunt her until her dying days—but she pushed those feelings down. There would be time for that later. Right now, she needed to focus on getting back to her dad.

She glanced to her left and locked eyes with Matti, his handsome features losing the finer details as the light dimmed. The burnished-orange sun, low on the horizon and hidden behind swirling ash from wildfires close by and dust from the earthquakes, illuminated a wasteland of burned trees and

fields, debris and broken roads behind him. She smiled tentatively; he returned the smile, sad, somehow devoid of joy but filled with a quiet kind of strength.

They had been walking for days, and she knew they were all tired and sore. Her calf still throbbed dully from the wound Norman had treated with antibiotic cream, but luckily it hadn't become infected, and even though it was getting dark, they had to keep going. They were too close to stop now.

Part of her wasn't sure if pushing on was the right decision, but she couldn't bear the thought of spending another night away, the low hum of crickets the only thing she could hear while worry gnawed at her insides. Surrounded by their new, fractured world, it was impossible to ignore the fact that her father was gravely ill and that she might not be able to do anything to help him. That Julia would be furious she'd failed.

But the mud-brick house they were headed for, the modest house that an engineer friend of Sandy's husband had built, felt like a beacon in the darkness, a chance, a place of refuge in an otherwise tempestuous sea.

"I think we're nearly there," Lilly said, glancing over her shoulder, where Pip and Norman walked side by side.

Pip nodded, her face drawn in the orange light of the setting sun, her cheeks streaked with dirt and sweat, eyes red-rimmed but determined. "I can't wait to see Dad." She opened her mouth like she was going to say something else, then closed it again.

Norman, who had been quiet since they buried Vanessa, simply nodded, his almond shaped eyes crinkling the tanned skin at their corners. They continued to walk in silence for a while, the only sound the crunch of loose stones underfoot, the snap of twigs, an occasional animal scurrying in the burned out bushes. The trail led them to a small hill overlooking a valley and what used to be a road. In the distance, a flicker of light caught Lilly's eye and her step faltered.

"Do you see that?" she asked Matti. It looked like a campfire. And a campfire meant other people were around.

He squinted into the distance. "I see it."

"Should we get closer and see who it is?" asked Lilly. It was getting dark, and she didn't want to stumble upon whoever was down there if they were strangers. But at the same time, it could be someone they knew. A familiar face. A friend.

Matti hesitated. "It's up to you. You're the one who knows this area."

Pip and Norman had caught up by then, and they all stood side by side, looking down at the flickering light.

"It could be one of our neighbors, someone we know who needs help." Lilly stared at the distant fire, feeling undecided.

"But it could be someone who's desperate and unpredictable." Norman's eyes narrowed as he continued to look down at the red glow of contained flames. "We should go wide," he said after a moment. "Just in case."

Matti nodded his agreement, and Pip simply shrugged.

"All right," Lilly said. "Let's keep going."

As they walked on, she couldn't help thinking about who might be down there, just trying to survive like her and the others. The prisons behind the conservation camp had collapsed and caught fire, and it seemed likely that some of the thousands of inmates incarcerated there had survived. Although it could also be someone from Soledad. Mr. Jones, who owned the corner store, or Rose, who worked at the bank.

But the others were right. They couldn't afford to take any risks. Not when they were so close to getting back to her dad. So they skirted around the campfire, sticking to the shadows as much as possible, then kept going as the light continued to fade.

Ahead of them, the trail widened, and Lilly could see the familiar slope where the mud-brick house had been built in a clearing. It wasn't far now, and she quickened her pace, her eyes taking in the trees that had been felled in a small landslide, the way the fence along the road on the other side of the field had come down completely.

“Just a bit further,” she said, urging the others to keep going. As they headed up the winding path, she held her breath until the house came into view, then she exhaled all at once. Her wishes and prayers had been answered—somehow, it was still standing.

“Nice house,” Norman said, “hard to believe it’s still upright after everything!”

Lilly took in the details of the simple, modest mud brick home. “Sandy’s husband and his best friend, an engineering professor at one of the universities, built it.” She tried to remember the details that Sandy had told her. “They’d been experimenting with fire and earthquake-proof building materials, and their gamble paid off. Apparently this type of construction has been used for hundreds of years by indigenous groups.”

“Really cool.” Norman nodded in approval.

Lilly bit her lip as another thought entered her mind: the house still stood despite the fact that both men responsible for building it had likely perished.

A familiar figure with a rifle stepped forward in the dusky light, and Lilly raised her hands above her head. “It’s us! We’re back!” She turned to Pip, seeing the tense look on her sister’s face. “That’s my supervisor from work, Sandy. You’re going to love her.”

“It’s not Sandy I’m worried about,” Pip replied in a low whisper. “I’m not giving her any chances this time.”

“I’m not going to let Julia hassle you,” Lilly replied in an equally quiet but firm voice. “It’s going to be okay. We’ve got each other’s backs, remember?”

Pip’s jaw flexed. But she nodded.

Up ahead, Sandy raised a hand above her head and waved it back and forth, then lowered her hand and watched them as they continued walking, a renewed sense of enthusiasm in their steps. A plaintive meow in front of Lilly made her glance down to see Oscar stalking toward them from between the blacked tree trunks. The ginger tabby headed straight for Pip,

who'd always had a special affinity with animals, circling her legs and purring loudly. Pip scooped the cat up and held him close to her chest.

And over by the house, the front door opened. Julia stepped out, her angular cheekbones and blond hair unmistakable, even in the gloom. Julia's eyes fixed on Lilly and Pip with a glare, as if they'd been caught doing something they weren't supposed to. Her lips tightened as she stepped into the yard, her hands clenching into fists and an angry scowl growing on her face.

The skin at the base of Lilly's neck tightened, and she reached up and put a hand on Pip's shoulder, feeling Matti step closer on her other side, drawing nearer to her as though he'd sensed the sudden shift in tension.

"Who's that woman?" asked Norman in a quiet voice, his eyes on Julia, suddenly wary.

"It's our stepmom," Lilly replied.

"And she's a piece of work," added Matti.

Lilly swallowed hard a couple of times, wishing her heart would stop pounding like a drum. But that was impossible. Julia was angry, and as she walked toward them, her pale blue eyes narrowed, her expression hardening, Lilly felt like she was staring down the barrel of a gun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lilly

Ten Days After

Lilly and the others stopped twenty yards from the mud-brick house in a tight knot, staring at Sandy and Julia just a few feet away. A small clearing and then a patch of blackened forest surrounded the house, with fields and fractured roads, collapsed farmhouses and broken homes, beyond that.

Julia was the first to speak. “You’re back.” She drew a half-step closer, arms crossed, blond hair framing symmetrical features that appeared to study Lilly’s ragged appearance. Apparently finding Lilly lacking, she turned to look at the others, nodding toward Pip. “You found her. What about your Dad’s meds?”

Lilly shook her head, and the tension became almost unbearable as Julia’s features hardened. Her face was pale like a ghost, but her eyes were fierce, snapping with a blue fire, her expression unsettling.

“I’m sorry,” Lilly said, finding it hard to get the words out, “but we’ve had a really hard time. We lost them on the way home.” She wanted to tell Julia about everything they’d been through. The landslide and the army truck catching on fire, the shoot-out at the pharmacy and the terrible devastation at LA, but her mouth felt like it was filled with clay.

A vein pulsed in Julia's forehead, and Lilly glanced at her sister, who held Julia's gaze with an intensity that Lilly had never seen before. The seconds seemed to draw out, to become a dark, sticky, tangled thread that flowed between Julia and Pip, only broken when Sandy stepped forward with a frown aimed at Julia and her arms open.

"We are so glad to see you," Sandy said, a huge smile lighting up her face. "You've been gone for so long."

Lilly walked into Sandy's arms, the hug warm and steady, Sandy's coarse hair brushing up against Lilly's cheek, her frame slim but strong, the strap of her rifle between them. "How's my dad," Lilly whispered, still holding onto Sandy.

"He's been better," Sandy replied softly, before releasing Lilly. "We're so happy you and Matti made it home in one piece. I was starting to think the worst. Did you lose the motorcycle?" She arched an eyebrow.

Lilly pulled away, nodding, dread settling at the base of her chest. "It's just another thing we lost. The motorcycle, the gun, the meds. It's been an ordeal and a half getting back. You probably wouldn't believe the stories we have."

"You'll have to tell me over a hot meal. And you're alive. That's the most important thing. We don't need to worry about any of that stuff now." Sandy patted her reassuringly on the back.

Lilly shot Sandy a grateful smile and turned to introduce the others. "This is my sister Pip, and our friend, Norman."

"Pleasure," Sandy replied in a cordial tone, extending a hand. "I'm Sandy Connor. Lilly and I used to work together."

Julia remained standing a couple of feet away, making no move to come closer, arms crossed over her chest, her long dark shadow cutting across the clearing. With a tip of her head, Lilly indicated Julia, quickly introducing her to Norman. The others shook hands, but Julia stayed silent, hands locked by her sides, staring at Lilly and then Pip, who met her gaze without flinching.

Ignoring Julia, Sandy focused her attention on Lilly. “You did well to make it to LA and find your sister given everything that’s going on right now. Come on, let’s go inside and have a meal, see your dad.” Her tone was softer than Julia’s, but firm, still carrying a note of authority.

Lilly nodded and glanced at her sister, who hesitated for a fraction of a second—eyes flicking to Julia—before following.

The basic, off-grid home looked sturdy and safe, and Lilly wasn’t sure she’d ever seen a more welcoming sight. As they walked across the clearing, Sandy explained that they’d hunkered down for the last week or so. She’d only ventured out a few times to look for supplies and meds for Rick, but she hadn’t found what she needed for him.

They reached the house and Sandy held the door open for them. Stepping inside, it took a moment for Lilly’s eyes to adjust, the light dim with only a camping lantern glowing in one corner. As she looked around, it was almost exactly as she remembered: small and sparsely furnished, with a couch and a few chairs, a table with some books and board games on a shelf behind it, and a modest kitchen. A hallway led off to the left, and Lilly could see a bedroom door at the end of it.

Pip let Oscar onto the floor and the cat stalked off. The sudden influx of people left the small space feeling cramped, and Norman and Matti hung back.

“Matti, can you keep watch?” Sandy asked, passing him the rifle. “There’s a good view out the front window. I’ll just be a minute.”

As Matti moved to the front of the house, Lilly took Pip’s hand and followed Julia and Sandy toward the bedroom. They paused at the door briefly, and Lilly tightened her hold on her sister’s hand, feeling a stab of anxiety.

With her back ramrod straight, Julia pushed the door open, the movement sending the dust motes swirling in the gloom, a twisting hurricane of insignificance. As the particulates slowed, Lilly caught sight of the outline of her dad lying on the bed, behind him the curtains drawn, a strip of dusk light invading between the two halves of the gray material.

The two sisters stood at the foot of the bed and Pip squeezed Lilly's hand as Sandy flicked on a camping lantern, the yellow light spilling over the familiar contours of their father's face. He lay under a pink and blue floral sheet that smelled of mothballs. Dark hair framed his pale, handsome features, and he looked thinner than when she'd seen him last, less substantial, like he was there and somehow not there.

Lilly leaned closer, taking in the way his skin was sallow and slick, speckled with the dull sheen of sweat, and his closed eyes. As he breathed, a wheeze in his chest, the muscles in his throat tightened and relaxed, giving off a soft noise like a kid pumping air into a balloon.

After releasing her grip on Pip, Lilly moved around the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. Pip followed a moment later, and watched as Lilly took their dad's hand, stroking it gently. "Hey, Dad," she whispered, but he didn't open his eyes, and she wasn't sure if he was asleep or not.

Sandy came to stand on the other side of the bed, while Julia remained near the doorway, shaking her head, thin lips pursed.

"He's been resting a lot lately," Sandy said quietly. "The Parkinson's symptoms are getting worse because he decided to reduce the dose of his meds to make them last longer. But we're almost out now."

A lump formed in Lilly's throat and she nodded, still stroking her dad's hand, Pip standing rigid behind her. She glanced up at Sandy. "How many more days does he have left of his meds?"

"Three days at the reduced dose," Sandy replied. "I headed out a couple of times but couldn't find anything. I'm sorry."

Lilly swallowed hard and nodded again. "You don't need to say sorry. This was my responsibility." She leaned over and kissed her dad's forehead before standing. "I'll go now and start looking."

"It's too late," Sandy hurried to say, shaking her head, the lines around her eyes and mouth deepening. "Tomorrow is

another day. I'll come with you first thing in the morning."

An annoyed noise came from Julia's direction. "She should go now. Who knows what's going to happen to Rick when his meds run out."

Lilly looked at the floor. She knew what would happen. Norman had told her in painstaking detail how the sudden cessation of her dad's Parkinson's meds could cause an array of life-threatening symptoms, could lead to her father's death.

"Lilly is staying here tonight," Pip said in a firm voice, her hand finding Lilly's shoulder and squeezing. "When it's light, we'll get Dad what he needs."

Lilly glanced at her, surprised by the strength in her sister's words. Her emotions were pushing her to head out then and there to search for what her father needed, but she knew Pip was right. It would be foolish to set off in the dark where only bad things lurked, no matter how worried she was about what lay ahead for her dad.

"If you'd done what you were supposed to do in the first place, this wouldn't even be an issue." Julia's voice rose in volume, her words cutting through the air. Lilly couldn't even look at her.

"That's enough," replied Sandy with an edge of warning in her voice. "All of you out before you wake Rick. Let's get these travelers some food. Okay?" It was phrased as a question but it was clear to Lilly that Sandy had Julia's measure and wasn't looking for a debate.

As Julia pivoted and left the room, Lilly stood, letting go of her dad's hand, seeing it settle on the pink and blue floral sheet, fingers twitching, dust motes slowly settling back into place. Sandy moved beside her and laid a hand on Lilly's arm and the other around Pip's shoulder, then guided them out of the room and into the living room, where Norman sat at the table, and Julia took a seat on the sofa with a stormy expression.

"Sit down," Sandy said, gesturing at the table. "I'll get you something to eat."

“Thanks,” Lilly replied, taking a seat, Pip beside her. She could see Matti’s curious expression, knew he wanted to ask about Lilly’s dad but was holding back until they were alone, while Norman just stared at the table, a finger tracing the circular grain.

Norman would want to look at Rick soon enough, examine him and give his professional medical opinion, but Lilly was glad for a few moments reprieve as she tried to process her dad’s state.

A few minutes later, Sandy set a bowl of soup in front of her and the others, heated from a can and smelling delicious. They all ate in silence, wolfing down the soup in front of them, spoons clinking on the worn metal bowls.

Once they were done, Norman stood to clear the dishes. “Thank you so much for welcoming me into your home,” he said to Sandy as he wiped the dishes clean with a small amount of water he’d poured into the sink. Lilly stood to help him, taking a soft yellow kitchen towel and drying the dishes as he washed. The simplicity of the domestic task soothed her frayed nerves.

“Well, this isn’t a free ride,” Julia said from the sofa before Sandy could reply. “I’m sure you have other places to be. We don’t need strangers and shady folk eating through our resources.”

Lilly stared at her stepmom, fingers seeming to thrum with the rush of words in her mind, but the effect was erratic, like waves crashing against the shore, and she couldn’t decide what to say.

Sandy didn’t have that problem. “That’s enough!” She stood by the front window and her words silenced Julia instantly. “I know you’re worried about Rick, but don’t forget that this is my place, Julia. I decide who is welcome and for how long.”

Julia stood, and Lilly took a half step back without even realizing it. Rage rippled across the woman’s face. “Fine!” She stormed across the room and yanked open the front door, then turned back to face them all, defiant, arms rigid by her side.

Her gaze settled on Lilly. “But I actually care about Rick, and if any of you did too, you’d be heading off right now to find what he needs.” She paused, looking between the others. “Just like I thought. It looks like you’re all going to sit here and do nothing instead!”

And with that, she was gone, slamming the door behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lilly

Ten Days After

For a long moment no one said anything, the sound of the door slamming behind Julia remaining like a silent echo inside the mud-brick house. Lilly could feel her muscles tensing, her fists clenching as a familiar anger surged through her. She took a breath and focused on the kitchen wall, letting the tension slowly recede.

As she shook out her hands, knowing the others were watching, she forced a grim smile, catching Pip's eye and then looking away. "I'll go after her. I think she's just stressed about Dad and everything else going on. We all are."

"Don't go too far from the house," Sandy said from where she'd taken over the watch. "It's dark now. Here, take this." She retrieved a handgun from a scuffed cupboard beside the window, handing it to Lilly. "We don't have a lot of ammo left, but enough to scare off any troublemakers."

The gun felt cold in Lilly's hands and she checked it over before tucking it into her waistband. She glanced outside at the darkened landscape; the shadows lengthening and coalescing into each other as the sun fell toward the horizon. "Has there been any trouble?"

"Not up here at the house. But I had a couple of sticky situations when I went looking for supplies. Nothing I couldn't

handle.”

Sandy straightened and Lilly was reminded of the respect she commanded back at the conservation camp. Small, wiry and well into her forties, she had the lean, muscular body of a fighter, and her eyes set a hard edge to her otherwise pretty face. With her hair pulled back in a no-nonsense bun, a hunting rifle hung over her shoulder, Lilly had no doubt there was very little that Sandy couldn't handle.

Lilly reached out and took Sandy's hand for a minute. “Thank you for looking after the two of them while we were gone. Especially after you lost your husband and your dogs. You didn't hesitate to step up and help us, and I'll never forget that.”

Sandy squeezed her hand. “It's easy to help good people.” She turned back to the front window for a moment, eyes scanning the gloom, watchful and alert.

Lilly was about to reply when Norman cleared his throat. “Do you mind if I take a look at your dad, now?”

“Go ahead,” Lilly replied, shooting Norman a grateful look. He raised his tattooed arm and gave her a thumbs up, before heading to the bedroom. When she glanced back at Sandy, she saw her questioning expression, one eyebrow raised and her head cocked to the side.

“Norman's a doctor,” Lilly said, “a cancer specialist, actually. But he might still be able to help my dad.”

Sandy gave a nod. “Don't judge a book by its cover, right? I assumed he was one of Matti's friends.”

Lilly let out a bitter laugh. “Probably explains why Julia was so rude to him. I wonder if she'll change her tune when she learns he's a doctor.”

“Whatever happens, don't be too long, okay?”

Lilly gave a half nod, then turned to leave. She passed Matti and Pip, who still sat at the table. Pip had her arms wrapped around herself, shaking her head. “I don't know why you're bothering. Just leave her out there until she's cooled off. You don't always need to be the peacemaker.”

“It’s fine. I’ll be back soon,” Lilly replied. Pip didn’t realize that petty squabbles could pull them apart before they even had a chance to try to survive this mess or get the meds their dad needed. And Julia may have been a difficult woman, but she was still her father’s wife. Rick loved Julia, and Lilly owed it to him to be civil to her.

Outside, the sun had gone down and darkness had settled over the landscape with a heaviness that seemed ripe for trouble. A half moon hung low, with only the barest hint of light filtering through the haze. “Julia,” Lilly called, her voice loud and echoing in the darkness. “Wait.”

As her words faded, she heard Julia stomping away, and she followed at a faster pace, slipping into the woods behind the house, pushing through the blackened underbrush. The loose dirt crackled and skittered away under her boots, and she kept going until she found her stepmom sitting on the trunk of a felled tree.

For a moment Lilly just looked at Julia, drawing on her reserves of pity for her stepmom to calm and center herself. Julia was closed off, unreachable and cold as she’d ever been, and a tangent crossed Lilly’s mind of one of the first periods when she’d really spent time with Julia.

The woman had breezed into their home like she already owned it, long blond hair making her look like the snow queen from one of Lilly’s childhood fairytales. She’d been so different from Julia’s faint memories of her real mother. Even as a child, in those early days, Lilly had known Julia was a new mother, coming to step into the shoes of the one now gone.

Lilly had felt like she was at a crossroad, the influence of the two mothers meeting, one coming from the past and one from the future, with no space for them both. The thought brought pain to Lilly’s heart, and she longed for some way to forget the way Julia had taken her mother’s place. As she stared at her stepmom, Lilly’s stomach tightened with an all-too-familiar sense of betrayal or perhaps loss.

But she had to find a way to reach Julia now. She'd promised Pip she'd have her back, and that meant finding peace where she could. So she forced a smile to her face: "Hey, Julia."

"Leave me alone," Julia muttered, her arms folded across her chest, posture closed off like an old book with water damage, layers of anger and resentment crusted together. "I don't want to talk to you."

Lilly came to stand in front of her, anyway, hands on her hips, her face as neutral as she could get it. "Fine. But I'm going to talk, anyway. So you need to listen."

Julia rolled her eyes and looked away, but Lilly continued regardless. "Norman is a doctor," she said firmly. "A cancer specialist. So he might be able to help dad. And he is welcome in the house as long as he wants to stay."

"What difference does it make? We're all going to die, anyway. Not that you care now you're shackled up with that low-life criminal. I bet you were too busy screwing him to bother looking for your father's meds. After everything he's done for you, and you repay him by letting him die."

The words were like a slap in the face and Lilly took a step back, trying not to react, trying to see the pain and worry under Julia's words.

"You don't get to say that," she said, her voice trembling a little. "I may be with Matti now, but that doesn't mean I won't risk my life for my dad. I did everything I could to get the meds he needed. It's not like you can just walk into a pharmacy now. Call up a doctor and get a script. Our old lives are gone. Over."

Julia fixed her icy stare on Lilly. "I took you on as my own. Did everything I could to support you and your sister. And you've always just been ungrateful little brats. But I guess it's all okay, right? Even if your dad dies. Because you have a new project to fix now."

"Matti isn't a project." Lilly paused, sucking in a breath, grounding her feet in the loose earth stained with ash. "I know

you've done a lot for Pip and me. And I know it hasn't been easy living in my mother's shadow."

Julia snorted and stood up suddenly, her eyes blazing with fury. "Your mother's shadow? You have no idea, Lilly. No idea."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Julia opened her mouth like she was going to say something, but then she shook her head. "Never mind. I'm sure you'll figure it out for yourself."

"We need to put these differences aside," Lilly said, knowing that Julia was just playing with her, trying to get under her skin. "For the sake of my dad and the rest of the group, we need to just get on, Julia."

"You don't give a damn about your father."

Lilly felt her anger settling like a hard rock in her stomach. She'd been working so hard to stay calm, but she'd been pushed too far by Julia for too long. For years she'd sacrificed so much to be there for her dad, to care for him and look after him, and Julia had never once shown she cared about Lilly, valued the things she did for the family.

But Julia wasn't done: "Why don't you go back to Matti. The two of you can run off into the sunset together while I stay here to bury your father in the ground."

The rock of anger seemed to split open, releasing a pulsing wave of magma. Lilly pictured Pip, how her little sister was finally ready to stand up to Julia, and there she was, doing everything she could to appease the woman, fighting to suppress her own rage.

As she stared at Julia, Lilly realized her whole body was tight as a coiled spring. Her eyes were wide, her fists clenched, and her teeth ground together. Despite the darkness, she saw the world in blazing reds and oranges, her own pulse pounding beneath her skin.

"You think I'm just going to abandon my father now, when he needs help? You're wrong. I'll always be there for him, no

matter what. You need to accept that and just be part of the team.”

Julia glared at her, but Lilly was done backing down. She turned and walked away into the darkness, leaving Julia behind in a storm of her own making.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lilly

Eleven Years Before

Eleven-year-old Lilly sat opposite her father at the dining table in the kitchen nook, three-year-old Pip on the third chair eating from a chipped yellow bowl filled with dry cereal, the fourth chair sitting empty. The house was tidier than it had ever been, and Lilly knew her dad was apprehensive about his special friend Julia coming over today, about whether Lilly and Pip would like her. He hadn't said it directly, but Lilly could tell. She knew her dad better than anyone.

He leaned on the table, elbows resting on the wood, hands propping his chin. "Julia is nervous about meeting you both, so I want you to make her feel welcome, okay?"

Lilly nodded, trying not to let the knots of uncertainty in her stomach show on her face. She still missed her real mom. But she knew that Julia made her dad happy, happier than he'd been in a long time. Since Julia had appeared in her dad's life, there were small differences about him that Lilly had noticed: he'd dug out his good T-shirts and shirts from the back of the closet, he'd started cutting his hair at the barber instead of letting it grow into a wild dark mop and then clipping it at home every six months. And his eyes had a sparkle in them, like he was happy and excited, and that was great.

As much as she had mourned the loss of her mom, watching her dad's heart breaking had been just as hard. She

couldn't bear to see him looking so sad all the time. And then one day after school, he'd taken her to the park, and they'd sat on a bench in the dying light listening to the water fountain and the birds, breathing in the scent of fresh air and budding trees.

That day he'd told her about Julia, which had felt strange, like it was someone else's life she was hearing about. He'd been in love with her mom since they'd been in high school. He'd never had another girlfriend before, and it was hard to reconcile her dad with the idea of loving someone who wasn't her mom. But he seemed so much lighter now, so Lilly figured it had to be a good thing. Right?

The doorbell rang as Lilly was nodding, and she jumped up from the table, trotting after her dad to let Julia in, Pip climbing down off the bench more slowly and toddling after them both. He stepped aside when they got to the door and squeezed Lilly's shoulder. "You can let her in if you like."

Lilly smiled at him, then turned to the doorway, feeling grown up and mature as she opened the door to reveal an elegant woman with light blond hair and bright blue eyes.

"Welcome to our home," Lilly said, trying to stand a little taller. "I'm Lilly."

"Hi, I'm Julia," the pretty lady said with a tight smile, and the way she touched her hand to her chest, her fingers making a small flourish, made Lilly feel like she was meeting royalty. She smiled back awkwardly, suddenly feeling shy in Julia's presence. But as her father nudged her shoulder, she took a deep breath and stepped forward to give Julia a hug.

Julia's stiff body bent at an awkward angle, her arms not quite knowing what to do. A sweet, almost sickly smell from Julia's perfume invaded Lilly's senses, and she tried to breathe through her mouth. It was clear that this was an uncomfortable kind of hug, that Julia hadn't spent much time around children, but as they pulled apart, Lilly just smiled and said, "It's nice to meet you, Julia."

Julia smiled back, relief etched on her face—maybe glad that the hug was over, or that Lilly was still smiling. "I'm

pleased to finally meet you, Lilly. I've heard a lot about you." She waved a hand at her chest, a brief flutter, an uneasy gesture, before focusing on Pip. "And this must be Pip. What a pretty girl you are."

"She looks just like our mom," Lilly said, looking at her little sister with a touch of pride, admiring her fair, wavy hair that her dad had pulled into twin pigtails on either side of her face.

Rick picked Pip up, planting a kiss on her round cheek. At the same time, Lilly glanced at Julia and caught the briefest look in her eyes: a transient hint of jealousy and unkindness, and she felt a wave of derision washing over her, rolling like a cold, dark tide from Julia.

The look on Julia's face was there only for a moment, half a moment, even. Not enough time for the second hand on the clock to make its next faint tick, and then it vanished as quickly as it came. Julia smiled at Lilly, her blue eyes like frozen sapphires, translucent and frigid, like taking a deep breath in winter.

Lilly sensed in that briefest of moments, in the way only a child on the cusp of stepping toward adulthood could know, that Julia despised her and her sister's very existence. The thought chilled her, and she looked at the ground with the sudden realization that things weren't always what they seemed, and that her dad hadn't even begun to glimpse Julia's true nature.

"I'm looking forward to getting to know you kids better," Julia said, as though the look had never happened, and Lilly moved aside to let her in.

While Rick carried Pip on his hip to show Julia around, Lilly stayed in the hallway, her senses heightened, the hair prickling on the back of her neck and sending warning signals that something wasn't quite right. But when her dad called her name in a singsong voice just like he used to, she pushed the disquiet aside and headed down the hallway to be with them.

Pausing a few feet from the door, she glanced at her mother's photo in a frame on the table in the entryway,

touching her finger to the face.

The photograph was black and white and showed a woman who loved painting. She was focusing on a canvas not captured in the photo, paint brush in hand, her head cocked to one side and her eyes half closed with a look of intense concentration, somewhere between intentness and the verge of laughter. It was the eyes that were the most honest, direct, and compelling. The rest of her seemed half-erased, a fading line sketch in pencil with a gradient of gray at the edges.

She wished she had better memories of her mom, that things weren't so hazy. For the last few years before she died, her mom had been traveling a lot, and the memories she had felt like something out of a dream, almost unreal, like a recollection or a story told to her by someone else, rather than a real memory; more her own voice than her mother's, calling her name from across the house.

But when Lilly concentrated, she could smell her warmth and the sun-kissed bronze of her skin, see the soft blush of her lips, hear the gentle clink of her bracelets as she brushed hair from her eyes. When her mom was home, the candles were lit, and the air was fragrant with the scent of lilies, magnolias, and carnations.

Lilly closed her eyes, hearing the flowing ring of her mother's laugh, the sound of a buoy in a heavy sea, where the waves never break, just idle in the distance, waiting to crush you. She felt a mixture of longing, a desire to have her there, and an acrid bitterness that she was gone.

Dropping her hand to her side, eyes flicking open, she followed the warbling sound of Pip's giggles through to the kitchen, where the three of them sat around the table. The adults nursed mugs of coffee, the smell wafting toward Lilly, a rich and dark mix.

Lilly took her seat, glancing at the chair her mom used to sit in, now occupied by Julia. She took a deep breath and willed herself to be brave. Julia was her dad's special friend, someone he loved and cared for. Even if Julia set her internal

alarm bells ringing, Lilly would be nice to her, be welcoming and warm. Because that's what would make her dad happy.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Johannes

Ten Days After

Johannes stood on the cracked and fissured shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, looking up at the sky as the sun skimmed the horizon, the fierce, fiery colors of the sunset reflecting in the shallow water spread out in front of him, the wind whipping the surface into a fury, the lake a boiling pot of red. Camilla stood beside him, while the kids and Storm played on the crusted banks close by.

The lake was a gnarled, shallow thing, and instead of trees, clumps of grass rose out of the flat, dry ground, mountain peaks rising in the distance. The birds that had gathered and circled above, dipping down into the water, looked like haunting ghosts of an era long past.

“I think that Yellowstone eruption yesterday was just a warmup,” Johannes said to Camilla, inhaling the acidic air coming off the lake. “See how the ash cloud seems to be dissipating?”

Camilla nodded. “So, you think we can fly tomorrow?”

“I do,” replied Johannes, his hand reaching for Camilla’s. He’d been watching the sky ever since they’d been forced to make a rushed landing as volcanic ash billowed into the air in the distance en route to California. But it hadn’t spread anywhere near as far as it should have, which was very

fortunate. The last thing they needed was to be stranded in Utah in the middle of nowhere.

He glanced back to check on the kids and then scanned their surroundings. The area was a desolate wasteland, with no signs that anyone had ever inhabited the hostile land, and they were still alone.

As their shadows continued to lengthen and silence settled around them, he turned back to Camilla. “We’re going to have to be quick, whatever we do. We’ll fly past your mother’s place, then get Matti, before flying to Texas. I don’t know when Yellowstone is going to blow for real, but when it does, it will ground us for weeks.”

“But if it erupts, it’s going to darken the skies for years, right?” She kicked at a deep crack in the lake’s shore that had no doubt formed in a previous earthquake.

“That’s right. I remember my parents sent me a scientific paper a few years back. It was by some of their colleagues who’d done modeling on what a Yellowstone super eruption might actually look like. And it would bury the surrounding states in three feet of harmful volcanic ash and blanket the Midwest. This eruption was much smaller, but probably a sign that all this seismic activity has gotten things started. When the big one happens, ash would go miles high and after the initial fall, some would continue to circulate in the atmosphere for years.”

“Does that mean we’ll be stuck in Texas when it blows?”

“I think within a few weeks, the worst of the ash would have fallen, and the prevailing winds tend to be westerly, so a lot of the ash would blow east. Given enough time, we should be able to fly if we have to.”

“Okay.” Camilla glanced at their plane resting on the salt banks a short distance away. “I feel safer knowing we have that option. The air seems to be the only safe place right now.”

“I know what you mean.” He squeezed her hand, felt her soft skin and finger bones, fine yet also deft and strong, just like Camilla herself.

She glanced back at the lake and shook her head, dark hair in loose waves dancing around her pretty face. “I read an article once about how the Great Salt Lake could evaporate completely in coming years, and how the dry lake bed would be full of toxic dust that could harm people living in Salt Lake City. All these things we were worried about, and then we went and broke the world so completely that those other things all seem totally irrelevant.”

Before Johannes could reply, Storm’s urgent barking pulled his attention, and a flock of birds took off from the lake with a loud squawking. His chest suddenly tight, he turned, eyes seeking out Storm’s dappled white form against the pale banks of salty sand in the dwindling light. The dog stood protectively over Noelle and Benny thirty yards away, and Johannes was already sprinting toward them as the ground began to tremble beneath his feet.

Camilla fell in behind him, but Johannes didn’t look back, his mind a swirl of fear and lightning-fast calculations as the world lurched left and then right beneath his feet. The earth groaned, the ground trembling more violently now, and he could feel the force of the earthquake growing with each second that passed, each step toward his children.

Johannes reached them a few seconds later and scooped up Noelle and Benny into his arms and then dropped to the ground to steady himself. Camilla crouched down beside him, her arms around Storm’s neck.

Johannes caught Camilla’s eye, and then the force of the earthquake shook and rolled the ground, throwing them all off balance. Storm yelped and Noelle and Benny cried out in fear, clinging to Johannes, tiny hands clutching at his clothes, his hair. The salt banks crumbled around them, huge cracks forming in the earth, chaotic waves rolling over the shallow lake.

For a moment, Johannes felt pure fear. Tangential images cut through his brain: holding Kalevi as he bled out in the ditch, the green Mustang’s engine still echoing in the distance; molten rock falling from the sky after the nuke was detonated, the smell of scorched flesh and the sound of dying screams all

around; the spray of red blood as the bullet struck Harriet, the droplets frozen in space and time.

“What do we do?” Camilla yelled over the rising din of the earthquake.

“Let’s take shelter in the plane!” he shouted back, already scrambling to his feet, pushing down his fear. Holding one of the children in each arm, he started to run toward the plane, stumbling every second or third step, heart in his throat.

He could hear Camilla behind him, her breathing ragged as she ran with Storm close at her heels. The ground was shaking so hard now that it was difficult to keep his footing, and more than once, he nearly fell. But he managed to stay on his feet long enough to reach the plane and throw open the door.

“Get in!” he yelled at Camilla as he put Benny inside, then followed after. Noelle was already crying, her little face pale and frightened, and Johannes’ heart ached at the sight of her terror.

“Take Storm!” Camilla called back, handing Storm up to him before scrambling inside.

After setting Storm down, he fastened a seat belt around Benny while Camilla strapped herself in with Noelle. Then he stumbled toward one of the other recliners, calling Storm to him before strapping himself in and hugging his arms around Storm.

He glanced at Camilla, making sure she and Noelle were strapped into their seat, then closed his eyes as the plane began to shudder and groan under the force of the earthquake, small items rattling and bouncing around them.

The earth continued to rumble and quake, but through it all, Johannes clung to Storm and prayed for safety as they rode out the worst of the terrifying earthquake. Storm whined softly, burying his head in the crook of Johannes’ arm.

Finally, with a convulsive shudder, the world stilled once more. Johannes opened his eyes and breathed out a heavy breath as he gazed at the devastation surrounding them. Just as the sun slipped below the horizon, he took in the new cracks

that stretched across the landscape and the salt banks that had crumbled completely into giant chunks of broken earth and jagged rocks.

He looked over at his family. “Is everyone okay?”

“We’re fine,” replied Camilla. “We’re alive.” She pressed her face to the window, gazing out at the dark, broken landscape with wide eyes. “I think we should just stay on the plane now. Try to get some sleep. I don’t know if I can handle going out there in the dark.”

“I agree.” Johannes leaned back in his seat, holding Storm to him, his mind reeling and his emotions a churning, chaotic mess. Yellowstone was a ticking time bomb hanging over their heads, and the earthquakes were a constant threat from below. It felt like they were under attack from all sides.

He glanced over at Benny and Noelle—Noelle’s face streaked with tears, and Benny wide-eyed with fear. As Storm climbed off his lap, he turned his gaze back to the window and realized he was still breathing hard, his heart pounding like he’d just ran a marathon, and he didn’t think he could even sleep knowing what the night might bring. Then he heard a soft, hiccupping sound come from Noelle’s direction, and when he looked at her, she was still crying.

Reaching down, he unbuckled his seatbelt, stood, and then picked up Noelle from where she sat with Camilla before returning to his seat and easing her onto his lap. Camilla moved to comfort Ben, and he looked into Noelle’s tear-stained face and pushed down his own worries, opening his arms to her. “You’re safe now,” he murmured, trying to soothe her. “You’re safe.”

Noelle hiccupped and buried her face in his neck, and he could feel her shivering body pressed against his. He held her close, his arms wrapped around her as her tears soaked through his shirt, her breath hot on his neck.

For a while, they sat like that, Noelle hiccupping with tears and Johannes soothing her with his gentle voice as he held her close, rocking them both as if they were all that was left of the world.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Johannes

Eleven Days After

Johannes and his family woke with the new sun, eating quickly, the broken landscape around them remade into something even more desolate after the earthquake the night before. He paused to hug Ben, to check his little boy over, taking in the paleness of his skin, the worried circles under his eyes.

Getting Ben the treatment he needed was something Johannes couldn't think about yet, but it hung over him like a noose: once they got to Texas, it would be the next hurdle in front of him. And Johannes would be running at it head on—he'd risk his own life before he let anything happen to his kids.

A nervous kind of anticipation filled him as they loaded themselves back onto the plane, ready to finish the journey to find his brother. They'd stop at Camilla's mom's place on the way, then get Matti, and finally fly home to Texas. He could picture his mom's face as he walked down the driveway with his family and Matti, the way all the bad years would just melt away, maybe even thawing the self-imposed prison that his dad had frozen himself inside.

And then there was Matti himself. For so many years Johannes had all but pretended he had no brother, not speaking about him to anyone, and deflecting whenever Camilla or his mom brought Matti up in conversation. But beneath his anger

at what Matti had done lay regret over the fact Matti had taken a hit for him at all, and even deeper: a kernel of guilt over not knowing Matti was in so much trouble, that he hadn't stepped in before it was too late. What kind of brother was he, really?

All the messy emotions lay tangled up with his grief and anger over losing Kalevi, and Johannes knew coming face to face with Matti again wasn't going to be easy. But he had to. He couldn't live with himself otherwise. Couldn't face his mom if he didn't at least try to save Matti.

As he settled into the pilot's seat, Camilla beside him, he was struck with a sudden need to see the sunrise—a new day, a second chance—so he turned his face to the rising sun, and then took one last look at the broken world behind him, before starting the plane.

He soon had them in the air, where the sight of the ground below had him shaking his head, eyes taking in the desert of death and destruction, a wasteland devoid of life, of color.

“Oh my gosh,” Camilla breathed from the other seat.

Johannes nodded as he glanced out the window. “It really is...” he trailed off, using his hands to indicate the wide expanse of cracked ground, crumbled cliffs, and broken, salty banks. “It's just shocking to see so much damage, and the scale of it from up here.”

“I just don't even have the words.”

Camilla stood to check on the kids, but she paused beside Johannes before heading to the main cabin. He heard her shallow breathing, inhaled her uniquely sweet scent as he waited for her to speak. “I'm nervous about my mom,” she finally said. “I really hope she's okay.”

“We'll find her,” he said, glancing up at Camilla. “She's strong. She raised you and your sisters single handedly, right? I'm sure she'll be fine.”

Camilla continued to stare at him, and he reached out to cup her face, holding her gaze as he leaned toward her, giving her a soft, lingering kiss. “I love you,” he murmured as they

broke apart. “This is almost over. Once we get to Texas, everything is going to be fine.”

The tears in her eyes glimmered, reflecting the light of the rising sun against the hazy sky. “I love you, too. And I hope you’re right.”

He watched her go, then turned to look out the window again, focusing on the plane’s controls. They were gaining altitude, and as they hurtled through the sky, he took in mile upon mile of the Great Basin, which seemed to stretch on forever.

“I really hope they’re waiting for us in California,” he said softly, his voice heavy. The rugged mountains and flat valleys below had always felt so lonely and desolate to him, but now it was like their insides had been broken apart and exposed to the sky, just like him.

They hit cruising speed and time seemed to warp and bend, his thoughts alternating between boredom and anxiety until they neared Stockton. Camilla’s mother and her youngest sister lived on the outskirts of the city, and Johannes brought the plane down, and then lower still, until the full extent of the earthquake damage became clear.

The ground was covered in so many cracks, craters and fissures that the buildings it once supported were like broken teeth in a shattered jaw. From above, the city resembled a giant jigsaw puzzle tossed aside. The center of the city, which was once its main street and business district, lay as a twisted, broken mess of rubble and dust, like someone had taken a bulldozer and dug up the city, then dropped it from the sky.

A feeling of dread settled inside Johannes. He knew Camilla would be looking out the window from the rear of the plane, and he knew even if it hurt, he needed to go past her mother’s house. He banked the plane left and swooped lower, his eyes roaming the place where thousands of houses and buildings, both new and old, were simply not there. And the echo of death, of people who’d flooded the street, fleeing the city, and who didn’t make it, made the streets look like rivers of flesh and jagged bones that seemed to flow toward him.

Tears stung his eyes, and he blinked them back, refusing to let despair wash over him and take him completely. With no other choice, he kept going until he reached his mother-in-law's home.

But just like the rest of the city, there was no sign of life. Even the house was unrecognizable. There was only the building, turned to dust and rubble, and the gaping pits where its people once stood.

He heard Camilla's footfalls before he saw her, and a moment later, he turned to face her, sensing her behind him. He kept the plane in a low arc around the place where she'd grown up, the engine rumbling the plane, vibrations filling the air. "Do you want me to land?"

Camilla shook her head, eyes rimmed in red, cheeks flushed. "There's no point. I don't want to remember her like this, or our home like that. Let's keep going to the conservation camp and look for Matti."

"Are you sure? I'm happy to bring her down."

"Please, just keep flying."

"Okay. Hey, hon? I'm so sorry." As Johannes said the words, they felt woefully inadequate.

"Thank you," she replied, slipping into the co-pilot's seat. "The kids are napping. I'm just going to sit here and..." Her voice trailed off and she swallowed, silent tears making their way down her cheeks.

Johannes nodded. Slowly, he adjusted their course and increased their altitude, all the while his heart aching for Camilla's mother who had surely survived every other disaster thrown her way in her long and blessed life. Until now.

As he headed away from Stockton, perverse curiosity kept him going toward San Francisco. Even though the possibility of Yellowstone erupting hung over his head, the short detour would add barely any time to their flight... and he needed to see for himself if the city had truly fallen.

It didn't take long to get near San Francisco, and the view below was even more devastating than Johannes could have

imagined. The city was in ruins, with fires still burning in some places and clouds of smoke rising, making the scene look like a war zone, or like something out of a nightmare.

The Golden Gate Bridge was still standing, but barely. One of the towers had been toppled, and part of the roadway had collapsed into the bay below. As they flew over the city, Johannes could see that most of the buildings were damaged or destroyed, flattened into nothing, and they only saw a few groups picking through the debris, tiny ants crawling through their demolished homes, and a handful of makeshift shelters.

It was a ghost town, a place that had once been full of life and vibrancy, now reduced to rubble and death. Johannes shook his head, starting to doubt whether they had any chance at all of finding Matti alive at the conservation camp.

As they flew away from the destruction, toward his brother, he glanced over at Camilla, who sat with her back ramrod straight, like she was holding herself together with pure will alone.

She must have sensed his gaze, because she turned to look at him, eyes glassy. "I'm okay," she assured him. "I just didn't want to know for sure what really happened. This way I can hold on to hope that she escaped, and she's somewhere with a group of good people, maybe with my sisters."

"It's important not to lose hope," he replied, trying to remind himself that it wasn't over yet. Against all odds, Matti might still be at the camp.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Noah

Eleven Days After

Noah hid his bike beneath what was left of a burned, scrubby bush, the branches split and broken, as the heat of the morning sun behind the hazy, smoke-filled sky started to gather strength. He picked up his baseball bat and then glanced at Bella and Aaliyah to make sure they were ready. Both girls gave a nod, already holding the sharpened sticks they'd made earlier that morning.

He looked toward the ruins of the conservation camp, where they were going to hide and make sure the inmates weren't around before looking for his dad and hopefully helping that lady escape. Both of the goals filled him with a mix of dread and nervousness, and he felt himself going quiet, withdrawing into himself.

"Let's go," Aaliyah said, a fierce look on her face. Noah knew she was thinking about the woman being held as some kind of prisoner by the inmates they'd seen, and he also knew she was torn between her fear and her realization that they had to help that lady.

He held back for a few seconds as Aaliyah and Bella climbed over a collapsed barbed-wire fence, before following them as they darted across a clearing filled with scrubby grass barely holding on, each strand bleached yellow in the heat. As

he ran, he inhaled, and the air smelled of death; his skin prickled with gooseflesh.

They continued running, eyes scanning for trouble, the collapsed remains of the camp silent and dark up ahead. There was no sound of voices or any other sign of the three men they'd seen yesterday, but that didn't mean Noah and the others were safe. The men could be sleeping or gone to get supplies, about to be back at any moment with their barbed wire bat.

"We have to be careful," Aaliyah whispered as they reached one of the buildings that had once been a dormitory on the outer edge of the camp, her voice barely audible. "They might have left someone on guard."

Noah swallowed and nodded, his throat dry. His hand touched a section of wall that still stood, and he raised himself to look over, catching a glimpse of a crushed bunk bed, splintered, charred wood shearing into the air. He could see movement out of the corner of his eye and he tensed up, but it was just Bella moving closer to him, who had been quiet up until now.

She scrunched her nose, freckles dancing across her cheeks. "What if those men are still here and we run right into them?"

"We've been over this." Aaliyah's voice held a warning tone and she planted the base of her stick in the dirt. It came up to her waist, the thickness of a broom handle, the point sharp and deadly. "Concentrate Bella. Be helpful and not a liability. If there's any trouble, we run."

"And what if they catch one of us?" Bella bit her lower lip, her stick sagging in her hands.

"Same answer. *Run*. We'll deal with that if and when it happens, but if we all get caught, we're screwed. So just run if you see anyone. Is that so hard to understand?"

Bella looked like she wanted to say something else, but took hold of the locket with the photograph of her mom

instead, holding it tight inside her fist. Noah felt glad to see her lift up the stick, her jaw flexing.

“Are we ready?” Aaliyah’s face glared at the two of them.

“I’m ready,” replied Noah, while Bella nodded.

They crept to another pile of debris and hid for a short time to make sure the inmates weren’t there. Noah’s chest tightened as he peeked out from their hiding spot, trying to scan the area for any signs of them. But everything was still and silent, the only sound the faint rustle of the wind through the grass, carrying gray ash from the wildfires, and the chorus of their breathing.

Leapfrogging from cover to cover until they were standing in the center of the burned out, collapsed camp, Noah had never felt more vulnerable, his heart more exposed. If he found his dad, it would destroy him. And if they came across those men, they’d have literally no chance against them. They were a group of kids!

Sure, Aaliyah had good street-smarts, but whatever had happened to her in the past was clouding her judgment. Noah knew they’d never really have a chance if they had to go toe-to-toe with those men, but he’d promised her they’d try to help the woman they’d seen, and he wasn’t one to break his word. And Bella was going along with it, of course. She always saw everything so clearly, and knew helping the woman was the right thing.

“I think we should split up,” Aaliyah said. “I’ll look for any sign of where they’re keeping that woman, and you look for your dad.”

“Rhys always said we should stay—”

“Shut up,” Aaliyah said, her voice tense. “I know you think you know everything, but you’re wrong if you think splitting up is a bad idea.” She paused, eyes narrowing. “We can cover more ground this way, be in and out quicker, and it’s less likely they’ll catch all three of us.”

“But we’ll be more exposed,” Noah tried to counter. “What if they see us?”

“We can’t play it safe,” Aaliyah hissed. “Not if we want to get that lady and make sure your dad isn’t here. Agreed?”

Noah said nothing. Aaliyah glowered at him, her lips pressed together. Dots of gray ash speckled her tight black curls like she’d been caught in a light snowstorm.

When it was clear he wouldn’t object further, Aaliyah gave a satisfied nod. “Go on,” she said. “Do what you have to do and meet back here in fifteen minutes.”

Aaliyah darted off, while Noah and Bella went the other way, Bella looking as uneasy as Noah felt. He moved as quietly as he could, which was hard because every step they took seemed to echo loudly in the silent camp. He tried to ignore it, though, and focus on what he was doing.

As they moved between piles of debris and partially collapsed buildings, the first thing he noticed was the smell. It was overwhelming, a mixture of burned flesh and something metallic. He gagged and had to fight the urge to vomit while he forced himself to keep going. The next thing he noticed, after Bella elbowed him in the side and made a strange noise in the back of her throat, were the bodies.

Once he started looking inside the collapsed buildings, they were everywhere, twisted and blackened beyond recognition, but clearly once people. They all seemed to be staring at him with sightless eyes, and he had to resist covering his own eyes and blocking out the horrific scene.

Because he couldn’t do that. He had to look at every body, every face, assessing whatever clothes or features were left, looking at the size of their blackened hands, or the width of their shoulders, measuring them against the memories of his dad. But none were him, and Noah’s hope grew with every charred corpse.

They continued through the camp, listening for the men while searching as fast as they could, until he caught sight of the main building just up ahead. He hurried toward it, pausing at the front doors. It had collapsed completely at the rear where the offices, rec room and visitors’ room had been. The front reception room still stood, the outside walls licked black

by the fire, and the awful smell of decomposition coming from inside.

It was the place where he'd last seen his dad, and he felt his breath catch as he motioned to Bella: "Let's look in here."

He didn't want to, but he had to. Steeling his resolve, he pushed open the door and stepped in, Bella close behind him. Inside, it was dark, the air hot and heavy. He could see the familiar shapes of desks and chairs strewn about, the floor littered with debris and remnants of broken plasterboard.

The smell of something dead had grown stronger, vague and enormous, a plume of malevolence hanging heavy in the air; the scent of sorrow and grief, and not of a single victim.

Noah looked around the gloom as Bella slipped her hand into his, her T-shirt pulled up over her mouth. She raised her hand and pointed. Against the far wall lay what could only be bodies covered in blue tarps.

Noah's heart pounded in his ears as he moved closer, carefully ducking under a fallen beam and stepping over shattered glass sprinkled over the floor. Bile rose in his throat as the smell grew overwhelming, a strange buzz coming from the wrapped bodies.

Reaching out tentatively, he grabbed hold of the corner of the closest tarp and lifted it up. A swarm of black rose in a horrifying cloud and Bella screamed. Noah swatted the flies away and looked at the body lying below. What he saw beneath him knocked the breath right out of his lungs—his father's face, skin marbled and sloughing off, a foul liquid leaking from his nose and mouth, flies crawling over every inch of him.

Noah felt his world shatter around him as he stared at his cold, lifeless father lying in front of him like some kind of twisted sacrifice, the putrid smell of death stinging his nostrils. He sank to his knees, numb with disbelief and grief, as tears cascaded down his cheeks.

As soon as he'd seen the destroyed camp, a part of him had known this was what he'd find. But that hadn't stopped him

from hoping for something different. The seconds squeezed together, and he knew Bella was there with him, but he wasn't sure if he could hear anything or not, and his ears were ringing as if he'd been shouting for a long time and he couldn't hear himself think.

He didn't care. He didn't want to think. He'd seen enough to know it was over, and the last thing he wanted to feel was the overwhelming sense of despair that gripped him. His father was gone. His dad was gone, and now Noah would never have a chance to say goodbye. He'd never have a chance to look into his eyes and tell him how much he loved him and how much he'd always wanted to be with him.

His dad was supposed to save him from Joe, from Ramona Gardens, and from the rest of the horrible things in his life. And now he faced an uncertain future without any chance his dad would be there at all.

He lowered his head to the dusty floor, not bothering to swat away the flies that crawled over his arms, his face, his skin itching from the constant movement, the tiny crawling legs that smelled of death and the loss of all hope.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Noah

Eleven Days After

A long time passed, or maybe no time passed at all. He couldn't tell, but he was aware of Bella crouching down beside him, holding the back of his head close to her chest, stroking his hair. He didn't want to move, but he knew he had to, that at some point he had to stand up and stop crying and get to Aaliyah.

Noah looked up and gasped, grabbing desperately for something to hold on to, anything that could stop him from falling and taking the rest of the world down with him. He found Bella's hand, wrapped his fingers around it, and felt some of his strength return.

"I... I can't breathe," he rasped.

"Don't try to talk," Bella said, squeezing his hand, her own tears tracking down her cheeks.

"I... " Noah said, the pain of his father's death still burning in his chest.

"It's okay," she replied. "Come on, Noah. Let's get out of here. We should find Aaliyah. We've been longer than we were supposed to be."

"You're right," he said, and he wondered why his voice sounded so small, like he was talking in a faraway echo. He

felt like he was going to cry again, but he swallowed the tears and stood up, dragging a sleeve roughly across his face.

He stopped to pull the tarp back across his father's face, then his hand went for the silver cross that no longer hung around his neck. "Bye, Dad," he whispered, "I'll miss you always."

Then he pivoted to follow Bella out of the partially collapsed building, stepping outside into the hazy, smokey air a moment later, well and truly alone. There would be no big reunion he'd been yearning for. No boat to sail away into the sunset. That dream was gone.

"Do you remember how to get back to where we need to meet Aaliyah?" Bella looked around the piles of debris and half-collapsed buildings of what had once been a busy conservation camp.

"Yeah," he said, blinking, trying not to think about anything at all. "No problem. I can get us back."

Bella brushed a fly away from her face, then moved over to Noah, putting her arm around him. "We're gonna get through this, Noah. We're going to get out of here and take care of each other. I promise."

"Thanks—"

A sharp cry cut him off, and Noah dropped to the ground, dragging Bella with him.

"What was that?" Bella asked as they both crouched behind the brick wall of the main building, trying to make themselves as small as possible to avoid being seen.

"Shh. There's someone here. Those men might be back." He pictured the three muscle-bound inmates he'd seen yesterday, the barbed-wire wrapped bat the tall black guy had held. If Aaliyah had been seen, or worse, there was no telling what they'd do to her. He felt a cold chill pass over him.

Bella raised her head a fraction, then ducked down again when the sound of voices reached them. "We have to make sure Aaliyah's safe."

“Of course,” replied Noah, remembering how Aaliyah had told them to run. He couldn’t deny that a part of him thought about it, the same part that kept thinking about his father’s marbled face, the cloud of black, buzzing flies. But he couldn’t just run without making sure she was okay. He couldn’t abandon Aaliyah. They were family. She and Bella were all he had left in the world.

He looked up, scanning the far side of the site for any sign of movement—and he saw her, just a flash of color as she darted from one pile of rubble to the next, like she was trying to avoid the people who pursued her.

“She’s over there,” he said, body tensing as he tightened his grip on his own bat, and Bella picked up her sharpened stick.

“Okay,” Bella said. “On the count of three, we make a run for it. One... two...”

Noah held his breath and on three, they both bolted from their hiding place, running as fast as they could toward where he’d seen Aaliyah, sidestepping piles of debris and broken furniture. She saw them coming and redoubled her efforts, changing direction and running toward them, arms pumping by her sides, eyes wide, mouth open like she wanted to say something.

“Hurry!” she said in a low voice as they stopped together, all breathing hard, heads on swivels as they searched for the men. “We have to hide. They’re coming.”

Noah heard distant voices, deep and threatening, but jagged sections of building protruded through the ruins, making it hard to get a good line of sight, to figure out where the pursuers were coming from. He let out a frustrated breath.

Aaliyah didn’t have to say who *they* were, and even if they didn’t know where the men were, they had to run. “Come on!” He grabbed Bella’s hand and the three of them pivoted and kept going, dodging piles of debris, leaping over cracks in the ground. Once, Aaliyah stumbled, but Bella and Noah both caught her and pulled her up, never slowing their pace.

“Get in there,” panted Aaliyah, as they passed a small doorway that led into what had been one of several dormitories. She darted inside before Noah could say anything, then stopped and turned to face them as they followed her in. The darkness was absolute, like staring into the depths of space; a blackness so intense it could swallow you up. Noah blinked a couple of times before his eyes adjusted, and he stepped closer to Aaliyah and Bella, the three of them drawing together as they listened for any sign the men were following them.

The air in the dormitory was thick with dust and the stench of rot. Every breath pulled the smell of decay deeper into his chest. After a few seconds, Noah shook his head, his breathing still ragged in his ears. “I can’t hear them. Why did you stop? We should have kept running.”

“Did you find your dad?” Aaliyah stared at him, brown eyes liquid pools in the darkness.

Noah gave a nod, his throat tight.

A brief flicker of sadness moved over Aaliyah’s face. “I’m sorry.” She swallowed and looked toward the open door, a bright rectangle against the darkness. “The men came back, and that lady is still with them. She looked right at me, and I know she wants us to help her. We have to go back.”

Noah shook his head. “We can’t, Aaliyah. How can the three of us take on three grown men? They’ll kill us.”

Aaliyah took a deep breath and stared at him, determination written all over her face. “I’m not giving up on her. We have to try.”

Noah could see the resolve in her eyes and he knew there was no stopping her once she got an idea like this. He glanced back at Bella, who shook her head. “Aaliyah,” he said, his voice hoarse from running and fear. “We can’t go back. They know we’re here. We’ve lost all elements of surprise. They’re searching for us *right now*.”

“No,” Aaliyah said stubbornly. “I have to go back. I can’t just leave her there. You and Bella can go. But I’m staying.”

“Aaliyah’s right,” Bella said. “We have to try to save her. It’s the right thing to do.”

Aaliyah looked like she was about to argue, until she realized Bella had agreed with her, but Noah spoke first. “Listen to me, both of you. We’re going to get killed if we head out there.”

Before either of them could reply, a harsh voice reached them from outside the dormitory. “Keep looking. She can’t have gotten too far.”

Noah grabbed Aaliyah’s arm and pulled her further into the darkness of the collapsed dormitory, Bella close on their heels. “We have to hide,” he whispered frantically. “They’re coming.”

They crawled behind a bunk bed covered in a thick layer of dust and palm-sized pieces of plasterboard, and the three of them huddled together, silent and waiting as the men’s voices grew closer and closer. Finally, a figure appeared in the doorway, broad shoulders almost touching the sides.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” the silhouette called in a sing-song voice that sent pure fear tracing down Noah’s spine. “We just want to talk to you, girly.”

A man out of sight laughed and then appeared in the doorway, too. Noah stiffened as they both peered into the dark building, the smell no doubt making them hesitate.

“Come on, let’s keep looking,” said the first man. “She’s not here.”

A moment later, the men stepped back and moved on, their voices growing fainter and fainter until Noah couldn’t hear them anymore.

He let out a breath and sagged against the wall. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We can talk about going back for that lady later.”

Aaliyah nodded, but Noah knew it wasn’t over yet. Aaliyah wasn’t the kind of person to just let something go.

He moved to the door and peered outside. He couldn't see anyone, but the faint sounds of the men moving around told Noah they hadn't given up on finding Aaliyah. The sun had moved higher in the sky, and heat and ash pulsed through the surrounding air, making him feel like he was in an oven. He turned to look at Aaliyah and Bella. "Come on," he said softly. "Let's get out of here."

Noah stepped onto the soot-stained earth, hearing the others emerge behind him. They hurried in the direction they'd left their bikes, darting from cover to cover, Aaliyah looking like she might change her mind at any moment and head back into the camp to help the lady they'd seen.

Just as Noah looked over his shoulder to check Aaliyah was still following, he heard a shout. He shifted his gaze and caught blue eyes staring at him from thirty yards away.

The woman's eyes were the color of the sea and as deep as eternity. Their luminescent intensity seemed to fill her face, her head, her entire body with ice, like she was already dead and looking at him from the other side.

It was the woman the men had taken as their own, and Noah blinked, a man with a shaved head and narrowed eyes coming into focus. The man stood behind the blue-eyed woman, staring at Noah. He'd been seen!

"Run!" he shouted to Aaliyah and Bella.

The three of them darted away from the camp, their footsteps echoing loudly in the stillness of the morning. They ran as fast as they could, with Noah leading the way back to the bikes. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, fear and adrenaline coursing through his veins as he pushed himself to go faster and escape.

Finally, they reached their bikes and jumped on, pedaling at full speed down the dirt road, away from danger. Noah felt a little bit of relief wash over him, knowing that they had survived another day in this harsh and unforgiving world, but it was quickly replaced with something dark and gray that settled over his brain like a shroud.

He knew it was only a matter of time until something else would threaten them again, and this time, his dad was really gone. And then there was the lady. It felt like he was grasped in a vice, soft skin on the outside but hard bone underneath, making it almost impossible to pry her fingers off his thoughts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Erin

Eleven Days After

Erin wiped the sweat from her brow and then pressed her foot on the shovel, the metal biting into the earth with a satisfying sound. She carefully scooped out another shovelful of the soil and then dumped it into the long pile that was to become their newest garden bed, a fence erected yesterday already protecting the area from hungry grazing animals.

She'd been working for the past hour, and her arms were aching from the exertion. It wasn't the first time she'd had to turn over the hard ground, but it was the biggest garden bed she'd ever had to make.

With so many mouths to feed, they wanted to get a jumpstart on growing, and they'd spent the morning prepping the beds and planting tomatoes, squash, and zucchini. They'd made the new vegetable garden as big as possible to hedge their bets against the damage that was no doubt going to be inflicted at some point by the earthquakes.

"Hey, Martha!" She raised her head as she called out to her friend who moved behind her along the row, planting seeds and using more of their precious water as she did so, along with a generous splash of vermiwash from the vermiwash unit Tapio had salvaged from the Hill's place yesterday afternoon. The barrel had been filled with layers of pebbles, sand, dung,

compost and earthworms, with the nutrient rich liquid collected from the bottom of the unit a potent fertilizer.

Martha smiled at Erin, her weathered face creased, cheeks and forehead kissed golden by the sun. “Everything okay?”

“I was just wondering if Tapio is back from harvesting the last of the vegetables from Fiona’s place. Have you seen him?”

Martha stopped and took off her wide-brimmed straw hat, letting her gray-streaked brown hair spill to her shoulders and then wiping her forehead with the back of her arm. “No, I haven’t.” She glanced at her watch. “He should be back soon.”

Erin heard a shout from Paul and Fiona from the veranda and let out a soft groan. They were canning the surplus vegetables with Daniella and trying to keep watch, but they’d had quite a few issues with the process. Martha rolled her eyes. “I’ll go see what that’s about.”

Laughing to herself, Erin nodded, and Martha headed off, pulling her hat back on as she walked through the gap in the protective wall they’d built and which now circled the house. Erin turned back to the soil and resumed her work, feeling the familiar wave of nostalgia roll over her as she worked the land she and Tapio had invested so much of their time, money, and energy into.

Muscles working, mind ticking over her to do list, she was back in her element, doing exactly what she’d been born to do. But at the same time, there was an undercurrent of sadness and worry. It wasn’t the same with her kids still missing, out there somewhere in the broken world. She reminded herself it hadn’t yet been two weeks. It would take time for them to come home, and she had to be patient and protect the house and their land as best she could while she waited for them.

The sound of dogs barking an alert reached her, and she turned to look to the front of the property, hoping to see Tapio and Otto coming down the driveway that led to their house. But instead she heard the low growl of an engine and felt a slice of fear: Randy Ulrich was finally back. Then a moment later, she saw the Vanders’ truck, George driving, and Piers in

the passenger seat. Her breath caught and relief settled in, only to be replaced by a flame of anger.

After kicking the shovel deep into the soil so it remained upright when she released it, she shouldered her rifle and marched through the rows of garden beds toward her neighbors' vehicle, thinking all the time about how Kimmy had lied about having miscarriages in order to manipulate Erin to some end she still hadn't discerned, and George's constant, unrelenting rudeness.

She kept walking until she reached their vehicle parked at the bottom of the driveway, not looking back at the others who she knew would see her walk past through the holes in the wall. Hands palming hips, she waited until George rolled the window down before asking, "What do you want?"

George seemed to have recovered some of his composure. The wrinkles around his pale blue eyes seemed to have lessened, like he'd slept well the night before, and he'd bathed and changed out of his dusty clothes. As she held his gaze, Erin got the sudden sense that he and his son were ill-intentioned. She could see it written in the tension around their mouths and the coldness of their eyes. Both wore holsters at their waists, and there were two rifles in the gun rack attached to the rear window.

George noticed Erin looking at his guns, and a satisfied expression formed on his face, his red-haired son gloating beside him. "You ask what I want? Well, I'm just trying to be neighborly, Erin. You should give it a try sometime."

I'd rather have a root canal, Erin thought. But she kept her mouth shut and waited for him to continue.

"Nice wall." He nodded his head toward the barricade made of debris and spare parts, tires, and defunct machinery. "What the heck is that for?"

"Protection," Erin replied, eyes narrowing. "What brings you here?"

"I just wanted to check on you and your little group." He nodded toward the house again, and Erin felt a brief sense of

satisfaction that he couldn't see what they were doing on the veranda, or who was there. Beside him, Piers managed to make his smile look like a leer as he stared at Erin's home.

"What do you actually want?" Erin wasn't going to suffer anymore of the men's bullish behavior. She'd had enough.

George opened his mouth, then closed it and cocked his head to the other side. "We also wanted to check how your water situation is going? We're neighbors and friends, remember. We're always happy to help out in times of need."

Pierce motioned with his head toward several barrels in the back of the truck. "We've got plenty to trade if you're interested."

"Really?" Erin heard the sarcasm drip from her voice and gave a mental shrug, forcing the tension out of hands as she flexed her fingers. It didn't matter what she said: the Vanders were a lost cause, slimy Piers a carbon copy of his dad, except with bright red hair. "I'm not sure why you think we'd be interested in any of your water. We're doing just fine. Thank you."

George scoffed.

"You should be on your way now," Erin said before he could say something obnoxious. "Make sure you're keeping your property and new camp safe. As you both know, threats are everywhere. Another earthquake could be just around the corner. And then there's Randy Ulrich."

George raised an eyebrow and looked toward the pond. "I'd be worried about more immediate concerns. The levels don't look so good to me."

"The levels are fine," replied Erin in a firm voice. "I would invite you both inside, but we're busy right now and I'd better be going." She turned her back on them and strode toward the wall. A moment later, George's engine gunned, and she turned back briefly as the vehicle pulled away, dust rising in its wake.

Erin wiped the dirt from her hands onto her jeans and then continued up the path toward the house. She slipped through the gap in the wall, ignoring the ache in her arms as she

climbed the veranda steps. Martha sat with Fiona, Paul and Daniella, the four of them watching the Vanders' truck turn off at the top of the driveway, while Erin walked across the worn wooden boards toward them.

“What was that about?” Martha sat on Tapio's chair, Fiona's dogs laying in a pile of black and tan at her feet. A camping table had been set up on the veranda, where Paul—newly back on his feet—and Fiona were slicing vegetables and preparing them for canning. Daniella hovered close by, helping where she could, the little girl's eyes big as she listened to the grownups talking.

“They wanted to know if we wanted to trade for water.” Erin took a seat beside Martha and shook her head, placing the rifle across her lap.

“And what did you say?” Fiona paused with a knife midway in the air.

“I said we were fine, and we didn't want to trade.”

Fiona nodded her approval and then resumed her work. Around them the house echoed with the sounds of life: the barking of the dogs, the idle talking, the sound of Daniella's questioning voice, wanting to know every detail of the canning process. Small birds darted to the bird feeder, pausing briefly to eat before fluttering away.

Erin massaged her hand absentmindedly, feeling the painful blisters that had formed, and Martha leaned closer, taking Erin's hand and examining the reddened skin. “I'll get you some aloe vera and coconut oil to rub into that.”

“Thanks, Martha.”

Fiona's dogs started barking again, and Erin looked up to see Tapio at the top of the driveway on his bike, a wagon full of vegetables behind him, and Otto at his side. For the second time, Erin got to her feet and walked through the wall to the bottom of the driveway. She watched Tapio cruise down the hill and kissed him after he climbed off his bike.

“You just missed our favorite neighbor, George.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“He was here with his slimy son, and they were asking how things were going, offering to barter with water if we needed it. I know it was an ambush, like they wanted to trick me into saying something, but they left without any trouble.”

Erin watched Tapio’s expression and saw the way his eyes narrowed and the thick muscle in his jaw that flexed. She knew she didn’t have to say anything else.

Tapio pointed toward the wagon. “I’ve got most of the veggies from Fiona’s garden.” He paused, and Erin could see instantly that he was holding something back.

“What?” Erin leaned forward, curious, searching his face.

“I found something at the Vanders’ house yesterday. I’ve been thinking about it all day, and at first I tried to convince myself it was nothing, but now I know showing you is the right thing. Especially if they’re already coming over here pretending they want to trade water, when we all know they just want our house.”

“You’ve got me worried.”

But instead of reassuring her, Tapio’s mouth just tightened, and Erin felt a surge of anxiety as she held her husband’s gaze. “It’s not something I can tell you,” he said. “I have to show you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Erin

Eleven Days After

Standing at the bottom of their driveway, Erin stared at Tapio for a moment longer, thoughts racing about what he might be about to show her. She knew every inch of his face, the way his gray-blond hair refused to stay flat at his crown no matter how much he wet it and brushed it down, the hue of his blue eyes when he was mad, or excited, or tired. And she knew every groove of his body and every inch of skin, his smell and the way he always looked when he walked into a room.

When he got angry, the planes of his face hardened, his eyes turned to ice and mouth pinched, bottom lip with a slight quiver, giving him an expression that never failed to send a jolt of adrenaline through her. Right now, with his eyes hard and a solid line to his mouth, he looked exactly like that: a man who had seen something that had rocked him to his core and filled him with fury.

“Tapio?” Erin let his name hang in the air between them and then took a step toward him, leaving just a few inches of supercharged space.

“I’ll show you,” he replied. “It’s the only way.” He took a step back and then started walking up the path with Erin following, leaving his bike and the trailer full of vegetables behind.

They walked through the gap in the barricade, the house and the veranda coming into full view. Otto ran ahead to greet Fiona's dogs, tail held high, while Paul called out in a cheerful voice, "Hey, Tapio! We should find something we can roll across that gap in the wall..." His voice trailed off as he no doubt took in the expressions on Tapio and Erin's faces.

Tapio raised his hand briefly, head slightly lowered to avoid eye contact as he stepped onto the veranda. He walked straight into the house, front door creaking like a faint whisper, and Erin paused, catching Martha's eye, her mind focusing on the sweet trilling of birds at the bird feeder as she tried to order her chaotic, worried thoughts.

"Everything okay?" Martha raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not sure," replied Erin. "But can you guys keep watch? Someone should head around to the rear of the property. We don't want to be taken by surprise." She passed Martha her rifle, both women holding the weapon for a few seconds, Martha nodding, a surge of support rolling off her in a wave that Erin received gratefully.

"Whatever it is, it'll be fine," Martha whispered, and Erin watched her friend head out beyond the barricade, the rifle gripped tight in her hands.

Avoiding looking at the others, Erin walked across the veranda toward the open door, floorboards creaking into the silence. She looked through the opening to see Tapio standing with his back to her in front of the cold fireplace. His finger tapped out a pattern against the mantelpiece, and he turned around to face Erin as she stepped through the doorway.

Coming from the kitchen came the sound of Smooth Phil on the hand crank radio. Erin kept the radio permanently tuned to his station, hoping to catch his broadcasts. He'd promised to stay on the air as long as he was able, and hearing his voice felt like a promise that everything would eventually turn out okay.

"...I haven't been on air for a couple of days. We ran out of gas for the generator and had to head out to find some. Let me tell you, folks, it's like the Wild West out there. If you're

listening to this, you're either a stubborn ass, or one of the very lucky few. Either way, I'm going to do my best to bring you up to speed. We're still getting reports of earthquakes all over the country, with no sign of things slowing down."

"I'm just going to switch that off," Erin said, pivoting to walk into the kitchen as Tapio nodded. The air felt thick with tension, like a kettle on the boil. She could feel it, but neither see nor hear it and so could only imagine the pressure building, tight and impenetrable, within the walls of the house.

The small hand crank radio sat on the kitchen table and she picked it up. Smooth Phil's voice continued to pop and crackle from the speakers: "If you still have a home, defend it with your life. Survivors are getting desperate. Expect to see more violence as those remaining fight over what's left—"

Erin switched the radio off, holding it a moment longer and making a mental note to speak to Paul about his idea to get something to roll across the gap in the barricade, before turning back to the front room. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was about to face the gallows, lower her neck for the executioner's axe, and by the hard, almost desperate look on Tapio's face, she sensed he felt the same way, too.

Tapio stood with his back to the fireplace, now, and she closed the gap between them, the familiar scent of his skin filling her head and calming her a little as she looked up into his eyes. "Tell me what you found. Please?"

He gave a brief nod. Pulled something out of his pocket: a photograph. His hands trembled slightly as he held it turned toward himself.

"Well?" Erin's heart beat loudly in her ears.

Tapio opened his mouth to speak, and then shook his head, his eyes unexpectedly swimming with tears as they filled with a glassy film that made them seem as gray as the hazy Texan sky outside.

He handed her the photograph.

Erin brought the grainy image closer to her face, her heart skipping a beat as she took in a younger George Vander

leaning up against a green Mustang.

She stood still as a stone as time lost all sense of meaning, her mouth agape and the photograph hanging limply in her hand. The wind outside snatched the door closed with a loud bang, and Otto started barking from outside.

George's cologne. She could suddenly smell it coming from the picture, and it made her want to throw up. Erin's tongue was a dead fish, her mouth dry and cottony. She felt like she'd been punched in the gut.

She traced a finger over the car. The Mustang's green paint looked smooth and slick, like a freshly licked ice cream cone.

"This can't be... It's not..." She swallowed. Looked up at Tapio. "What is this? Why are you showing this to me?"

As Erin fell apart, Tapio seemed to have pulled himself together, a counterpoint to Erin's emotional state. His features were impassive, no sign of the tears he'd just been crying, and his voice was gruff, jaw clenched as he spoke. "I found it at the Vanders' house. In that box of photographs. I didn't want to believe it, either. Sure, it could be a coincidence. That's why I didn't tell you straight away. But I checked with Martha to refresh my memory. The Vanders were buying their property around the time Kalevi was hit, and the date on the photograph is just over a year before Kalevi died, so he had the car around the same time."

Erin lifted the photograph and examined it again, taking in the details: George's familiar, smug smile, the wild horse on the badge set in the grill. One hand moved beside her face as she gasped for air, clawing at something invisible. Was it true? Had George Vander killed Kalevi all those years ago? Got rid of his car and moved in like nothing had happened? It was almost awful enough that it had to be true.

Her hand shook as she passed the photograph back to Tapio. Something cold slid through her veins, the movement of a huge river of ice, and she felt sick, bile rising up her throat. Her breath caught in her chest, but she swallowed hard, steadying herself for a couple of moments before she walked

over to the couch and sat down, then let herself collapse, curling her body into itself, like a turtle.

Tapio placed the photograph on the mantelpiece and then sat on the arm of the couch, his eyes closed and a disgusted look on his face. "I know how you're feeling. I had to restrain myself from confronting him yesterday as soon as I found it. But we can't do anything rash. We don't know for sure, and an accusation like that isn't something any of us can come back from."

A million thoughts flashed through Erin's mind, but nothing came to the surface. She was suddenly tired. Bone-weary. Grief that she'd worked so hard for so long to push down below the surface was bubbling up again, at a time she could least afford to let it. They were under attack from all sides. And it couldn't have been George, could it?

Her thoughts seemed to narrow and widen. Narrow and widen. Had George killed Kalevi? Had her neighbor run over her son? How many green Mustangs existed in the world? This was just one photograph: it didn't prove anything.

Then narrower: Kalevi was dead. He wasn't coming back. Maybe George did it.

She finally looked up at Tapio. "What do we do?"

Tapio shook his head and let out a long breath. He looked down at the floor and then back up. "We keep a low profile while we figure things out. We have to be sure before we confront George, and we have to be ready because the man will retaliate with everything he's got. Maybe we give Johannes a bit more time to get home. He's the only one who'd know if this is the same car, but even his memory will be hazy."

The word *we* was a heavy one. For so long, Erin had been left to drown in her own grief. Tapio had disappeared into his shed, into his own head, into the long silences that reached into the ground like unmarked graves. Now he wanted her to wait, when all she really wanted was revenge. An eye for an eye. A life for a life.

“You really want to just sit on this? Because I want to go over there right now.”

“We can’t do that, Erin. Not yet.”

“I’m just going to confront him with it. Wave the photo in his face and say that I know what he did. I want to look that man in the eye and I’ll know if it was him. And then...” Her voice had grown stronger and her words were quivering with the desperation with which she spoke, but even she didn’t have an answer as to how they’d deal with George, what they’d do to him.

Maybe Tapio was right. They needed to wait, at least for a little while, and once they were sure, they had to be ready to hit George Vander where it hurt the most. Because if he did this, if he killed Kalevi, there would be no holding Erin back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Erin

Eighteen Months Earlier

The smell of Christmas always made Erin's heart swell a little, the feeling bittersweet as she remembered Christmases of long ago with her children when they were small. But this was going to be the best one for a long time: Johannes was back with his family, and she and Tapio had met little Noelle for the first time since she was born, when Johannes and Camilla had moved to Russia to take that job at the Kola Superdeep Borehole.

Erin had woken a short while ago and now bustled about the kitchen, everyone else asleep as she prepped breakfast and made a pot of coffee to take out to the front veranda. Sunlight flooded the room as the winter sun rose above the horizon, and a gentle orange glow, luminous through frosted window panes, spilled over the benches.

Nutmeg and cinnamon muffins already baked in the oven, while the citrus and forest aromas of the decorated tree sitting in the room's corner filled the air. Erin fed Otto and then stood still for a moment, looking around her home, feeling grateful for a full house and the sweet celebration to follow. The air was warm and cozy, and lights twinkled from the eaves of the house. A few sugary snowflakes drifted lazily from the sky, melting as soon as they hit the ground.

A short time later, coffee in her thermos, Erin stepped outside with Otto and breathed in the crisp air, content in the knowledge that for a few days at least, she could be at peace, her family together and happy. Johannes and Camilla were back, Benny seemed to be doing well, and Noelle was growing more beautiful every day. She'd just started to crawl and had the most expressive eyes Erin had ever seen.

But still, Erin couldn't help but think about those who were missing. Matti and Kalevi's absence felt like iced blood flowing through her veins, despite the fire in the hearth.

She shivered and shook her head, banishing her thoughts of Matti in prison, of Kalevi long gone but never forgotten. It was Christmas, and she'd been so looking forward to it, she thought, pouring herself a cup of coffee from the thermos as she took a seat, watching Otto race around the pond.

Behind her, the front door creaked open. "Morning, Mom," said Johannes, his eyes bleary as he stepped outside with his own mug of steaming coffee. He set it down on the small wooden table beside Erin and pulled on his sweater before sitting in Tapio's chair. She admired him for a few moments, smiling to herself as she took in his handsome profile. But his eyes were edged with worry, and her smile soon faded.

"Morning," Erin replied, wondering if he'd slept at all. "Everything okay?"

Johannes shrugged, remaining quiet for a few seconds as he seemed to gather his thoughts. "It looks like Benny is going to need another stem cell transplant. Not immediately, but in the next year or so."

Erin felt worry settling in the pit of her stomach at Johannes' words. Six months ago, Johannes had donated his own bone marrow, but he wasn't a perfect match, and there had been a suggestion from the doctor that they might need to search for another donor. The main reason he'd taken the job at the borehole in the first place was the generous completion bonus, which would cover Benny's future medical expenses and more.

“Why don’t you just move back home?” Erin said. “You know Dad and I will sell the house. We’d do anything for you and your family.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Johannes replied, looking around the property with a sweeping gaze. “You worked your entire lives for this place.”

Erin nodded, her eyes straying to the horizon and her mouth tightening. What she didn’t say was that she and Tapio had already moved to list their property when the doctor first raised the possibility of Benny needing more procedures. The only problem was the market was saturated, and their modest house needed a facelift if it was going to attract a buyer. And they didn’t have the funds for that.

“Mom. Can I ask you something?” The hoarseness of Johannes’ voice pulled Erin’s attention.

“Of course. Anything.”

Johannes sat rigid in his father’s chair, staring into the distance, eyes unfocused. “Do you think what’s happening to Benny has anything to do with what I let happen to Kalevi?”

Erin sucked in a sharp breath, the cold air harsh in her mouth, the back of her throat, and she turned to look at her oldest son. For so long she’d seen Johannes as the successful one, with his beautiful family and fast-tracked career. He’d always been good-looking and clever, and while not the most popular kid, he’d had a lot of friends over the years. He’d never been one to cross the line and get into trouble, and she’d never once worried about him, even after what happened to Kalevi. He’d always seemed so... resilient. Strong.

But somewhere along the way, things had changed. Or maybe it had never been true in the first place. As her eyes roamed the familiar contours of his face, the face she birthed and fed and loved, she could see for the first time that there were broken parts inside him, too.

“Please,” she said, wanting to reach out and take him in her arms, “Johannes. What happened to Kalevi wasn’t your fault. Benny’s illness isn’t your fault.”

The look on Johannes' face was pained as if he was struggling with something, and finally he said in a low voice, "I was the one cycling on the road when that car hit us. What if I'd moved to the shoulder sooner? What if—"

"No," Erin cut him off, desperation making her voice ragged. "Please don't."

Johannes nodded and looked at the ground for a few seconds before focusing on her again. "I don't know if I can ever forgive myself—"

"Johannes," she interrupted. "Stop right there. If you are asking me if what happened to Kalevi was your fault, the answer is no." She took a deep breath. "But I want you to say it. Say the words out loud."

"I didn't... I didn't kill Kalevi."

"That's right," she said, her voice softening. "You didn't. Kalevi's death wasn't your fault. And Benny's illness isn't your fault, either." Erin's heart was racing, blood pumping too quickly as she tried not to show her upset. Johannes needed to know everything was okay. "It doesn't help to dwell on *what ifs*. Because you're going to live a long and full life. And so is Benny."

Johannes didn't reply, his eyes unfocused, his gaze on something in the distance again, no doubt seeing things he'd rather forget. Erin reached out and took his hand, holding it for the first time in decades. When did it happen? When did she stop holding her oldest son? Comforting him?

He finally turned to look at her, eyes rimmed in red. "If there is one thing I wish I could do in this life, it's to kill the driver of the green Mustang for everything they did to us."

"Johannes!"

"It's true. I'd kill them with my bare hands."

Erin felt her heart contract, and she squeezed his hand, pulling him closer to her, leaning in and smelling the warmth of his skin and the wool of his sweater.

She didn't want to hear any more about his grudges, about his regrets. And she didn't want to tell him that she felt the same way. How she'd fantasized about it, about how it would feel to end the life of the person who had set a seed of rot in her family, had destroyed it from the inside out, had stolen the life of her beautiful, perfect four-year-old son and not even bothered to stop.

Instead, she said: "Let it go, Johannes. It's done. It's in the past."

Johannes was quiet, his breath short and fast, and he nodded, eyes briefly closing.

"It wasn't your fault, Johannes. It just wasn't. And I'll never let you think otherwise for another second. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," he said finally, his voice raspy and broken.

Erin knew he still hurt, and that he might not even believe her, but dwelling on the past wasn't good for anyone. They had to keep going, keep moving forward. Before the rot caught up to them, too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Lilly

Eleven Days After

Lilly and Sandy crouched low behind a collapsed building on the outskirts of Santa Cruz, the motorcycle already hidden and their eyes scanning the ruins up ahead for any sign of life. “I really hope we find what we need for your dad,” Sandy said, her voice low, heavy with the pressures of several failed trips already behind her. She wore her rifle over her shoulder and her hair pulled back off her face.

A surge of gratitude passed through Lilly as she glanced at her supervisor turned friend. If anyone could help her get what her dad needed, it was Sandy. At work, she’d always been the doer, the fixer, the one who could move mountains, and Lilly knew now would be no exception.

“I hope we find those meds, too,” she said. “He’s going to get very sick very quickly if we don’t get more of what he needs.” A solid pit of despair had settled inside her ever since she’d returned home and seen the state of her father. He was deteriorating fast, and they only had another two days before his meds were out completely.

Added to that, Julia seemed determined to make everything as difficult as possible for everyone involved. Given how unpredictable she could be, Lilly had left Pip and Matti at the mud-brick house so they could have Norman’s back while he tended to Rick, to make sure they clearly

outnumbered her stepmom. Because if Lilly knew one thing, she knew Julia was capable of just about anything. But it was a balancing act: she needed to be careful not to antagonize Julia. The last thing her dad needed was more stress.

Lilly blew out a breath, trying to release some of the tension wrapped around her chest, and scanned their surroundings one last time, Sandy doing the same. Up ahead, the pretty seaside city was barely recognizable. Most of the buildings were burned out, heavily damaged, or reduced to rubble. Santa Cruz was a blackened version of itself, its body punctured and infected, while the empty, cracked shells of broken homes stood at attention, rank upon rank, like the silent, broken soldiers of a defeated army.

“It looks clear. Come on, let’s go.” Sandy readied her rifle and they continued on foot down the road toward the nearest drugstore.

Lilly walked beside Sandy, her steps driven by a sense of purpose, handgun in one hand, backpack on her shoulders, on the lookout for strangers but also any homes still partially standing, which she intended to search. The chances were slim of finding her dad’s meds *anywhere*, but she’d go to the ends of the earth if she had to. Inhaling through her nose, she caught the distant aroma of the burning wildfires, and beneath that, the smell of death, pungent and pulsing in waves in the salty air.

They reached the first pharmacy without incident, but it lay in a heap, a crushed toy discarded by a petulant child, stomped on until it collapsed. Its walls were smashed and ruined, the streets ahead impassable, the road in front of it littered with rubble, crushed packaging and signage, and grit that crunched underfoot. A twisted, charred road sign lay rocking in the breeze, precariously balanced over a deep fissure in the road.

Lilly shook her head as they kept walking, soon finding two other drugstores in the same condition. Fear and anxiety for her father snapped at her heels like unmuzzled, feral beasts while she stared at the destroyed buildings. “What now?”

Sandy let out a sigh. “I guess we head on to San Jose and search there.”

“Do you think it’s worth looking through any of the houses?”

Sandy shook her head. “What’s the likelihood of finding a house still standing owned by another Parkinson’s sufferer, who left their meds behind?”

“What are the chances of finding a pharmacy that’s still standing which hasn’t been scavenged already?”

A hopeless kind of silence settled over them. All around, any buildings that hadn’t completely collapsed had been looted of anything useful, windows and doors smashed in, contents stripped bare. The wind, full of salt and the scent of the sea, howled through the streets and over what was left of the once vibrant city.

Lilly glanced at Sandy: “Just give me a minute.” She walked a hundred yards down the road to a semi-collapsed corner store, touching her palm to the wall as she reached it, which crumbled in chunks to the ground. Her fingers came away gray with soot and ash.

With a backward glance at Sandy, she ducked into the gloomy space, quickly seeing that every shelf had been emptied, the ground covered in garbage and dust. A faint smell of rotting food lingered in the air, and insects flew around the now powerless refrigerators at the rear of the store, the low buzz of wings and movement reverberating in her chest and inner ear.

She closed her eyes, an image of her father’s death hitting her like a premonition. There was only dark. There was only cold. No light shone through the heavy curtains in his room. She watched, horrified but unable to look away, as her father’s corpse, decayed beyond recognition, rose from the bed. His eyes were blistered shut and red, peeling lips, pushed back from brown teeth, smiled a silent scream, before whispering her name.

Her eyes flicked open, and she leaned against the wall, her pain and loss so palpable she could hardly breathe. She felt the anguish of it all the more because she was helpless to stop it unless she found the medication he needed. With no option but to ignore the insidious worry creeping in, she headed outside and walked back to Sandy. “I think you’re right. Santa Cruz is dead and gone. We should try San Jose.”

“I don’t like it either, but we don’t have a choice,” Sandy replied. “It’s a much bigger city, so we stick together, no matter what. I need you to be thinking about your safety first and foremost, not your dad and what he needs. Okay?”

Lilly nodded, still trying to get the image of her father’s corpse out of her mind. “Got it.”

A thick silence settled over them as they walked side-by-side back to the motorcycle, eyeing the road ahead. Finally, Sandy spoke, her words taking Lilly by surprise. “I know it’s tough to be back, Lilly. I had to live with your stepmom for more than a week while you were gone, and I know she’s a difficult woman. I can see the strain it’s putting on you and Pip. But you have to have faith in yourself, you have to believe in yourself. You have nothing to prove to her.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just that your dad loves you so much, regardless of your relationship with Julia.”

“I can’t make him choose between us.”

“You don’t have to. He loves you no matter what. There is no choice, and I wish you could see that. You should have heard the way he talked about you while you were gone. Did you know he still wants to take you and Pip camping, despite everything going on?”

Lilly worked to hold back the ache in her chest, finally giving in to the rawness of her emotions. She knew her dad would never take her and Pip camping again. That dream was done. She blinked, her eyes stinging from the smoke and tears. The light ash from distant fires that lingered in the air felt stale, thick, and cloying.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice cracking a little. “To be honest, I’ve been in denial about Julia for a long time. I thought it was my duty to be a good stepdaughter, to do what it took to make her happy, so there was less strain on my dad. But now everything’s changed. There’s no time to pander around her, let her tear us down when what we really need is to be building each other up so we can survive this.”

“You’re right,” replied Sandy, stopping beside the pile of debris where they’d hidden the motorcycle. “We’re a team now. We can’t do this alone. And I know you feel like you owe me for inviting you all to shelter at the house—”

“We do owe you. You’ve given so much to us already.”

“Well, I feel like I’m the one who owes you.” Sandy ran a hand over the top of her head, smoothing down the frizzled strands, eyes filling with the pain of her loss. “After I found out that Arnold and the dogs died in that first earthquake, I had a moment of feeling completely alone. Our daughter lives on the other side of the country, and we’ve had separate lives for a long time.”

“I’m sorry,” replied Lilly. She’d known Sandy had a daughter, and they weren’t particularly close. “I really hope she’s okay wherever she is now.”

“Me too. As a realist, I know my chances of finding her in the short term are small. I’ll search for her when the worst of this blows over, even if it takes a few years or more before that can happen. Anyway, all that to say—thank you, Lilly. I’m so glad to have you and your dysfunctional family by my side. Otherwise I’d be trying to survive this all by myself. You’ve given me a purpose, a reason to keep going.”

Lilly laughed, her arms opening wide as she pulled Sandy into a hug. “You’re welcome, I think. And you’re part of that dysfunctional family now, too.”

They released each other a few moments later, and Sandy lifted the plasterboard they’d used to cover the motorcycle, then climbed on. Lilly drew in a breath, feeling a renewed pressure in her chest. She could feel it, hear it. A new urgency beating like a drum in her mind. It was time to go, time to

search San Jose for what they needed for her dad. And she wasn't going to give up until they found it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lilly

Eleven Days After

Lilly tightened her arms around Sandy as the totaled remains of San Jose came into view, the low rumble of the motorcycle helping to quell her nervous thoughts while they navigated the shattered road. If the meds her father needed weren't there, she wasn't sure what they'd do. It was almost midday, and it wouldn't be safe to keep driving, to keep searching; in this new world of theirs only bad things happened at night, and they wanted to be home well before sundown.

"It's okay," Sandy called over her shoulder, her voice gentle, no doubt feeling Lilly's grip tightening, sensing her tortured thoughts. "We're almost there."

Lilly nodded, swallowing at the lump in her throat as she looked at the decimated cityscape rising up in a smoking pile ahead of them. It never got easier to see the earthquake-destroyed cities, and San Jose was no exception. The city was in shambles: spot fires still raged here and there, adding an eerie glow to the ruins, but the wildfires hadn't yet passed over the city, giving Lilly just a little bit of hope they might find what they needed.

Soon they were driving through collapsed homes and buildings in the heart of the city, and there were signs of life that made Lilly loosen her hold on Sandy and reach for the handgun tucked in her waistband. A few tents and other

makeshift shelters could be seen spotted around the debris, with several groups moving around on foot. They stopped and stared at the motorcycle passing through, but nobody made any threatening movements. At least, not yet.

“I don’t like this,” Lilly said as Sandy slowed. “We need to get the meds for my dad and get out of here before we run into trouble.”

“I know,” Sandy said, bringing the motorcycle to a stop on what had once been a bustling street filled with cafes and student bars close to the university, but now seemed deserted, the buildings reduced to mostly rubble. A pack of three mid-sized dogs looked up from something they were eating a hundred yards away, before returning to their meal.

Farther along the street, a handful of jagged walls rose up between the piles of brick and chunks of concrete, and Lilly made out a bent sign for *Fresh Juice* still attached to one, a bright painting of a pineapple catching her eye, and another sign advertising a student discount for dim sum on a Chinese bistro that hadn’t yet fallen completely.

The faint echo of the young people who used to frequent the street seemed to whisper between the wreckage, and the thought of what had once been made gooseflesh break out over Lilly’s arms despite the heat.

Rubbing her forearms, she climbed off the bike, Sandy following a moment later. They quickly hid the motorcycle and waited a few minutes to make sure there was no one around. As they crouched side by side, all Lilly saw was a group of crows picking through the collapsed buildings, and the subtle shifting of small pieces of detritus as a warm breeze gusted through. A moment later, one of the dogs barked and they took off running down the street, tails held high.

“I remember there being quite a few drugstores around the university last time I did a guest lecture here,” Sandy said, rifle readied as she stood and walked into the street to get her bearings.

“That’s great. And I don’t see anyone around,” Lilly said, scanning the area. “Do you?”

Sandy shook her head and motioned for Lilly to follow her as she started walking down the fissured street. After a few minutes of careful exploration they found what they were looking for: a small drugstore, the front collapsed but with a ragged gash in the side wall, like the artist rendering the scene had slipped. They entered cautiously, weapons at the ready, but found only looted shelves and overturned displays.

Lilly tried to push down her disappointment. "Let's keep looking."

Sandy's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Of course. We're not going to give up."

By the time they reached the fourth store, which was nothing but a layer-cake of plasterboard and broken bricks, Lilly couldn't stop her disappointment bursting to the surface, spreading through her mind, a dark oil spill on water. "This is hopeless," she muttered, standing with Sandy beside a felled electrical pole, staring at the store.

Into the silence that followed, a female voice called from between the rubble: "Hey, there. Are you okay?"

Despite the innocent words, the effect on Lilly and Sandy was instant. Sandy swung around, rifle raised in the direction of the voice, and Lilly hurried to follow. "We're fine," Sandy called back, words tight and pinched together. A vein pulsed in her forehead, tongue darting out to wet chapped lips. "We don't want any trouble."

"Neither do we," came a man's voice. "We saw you searching the pharmacies. We might be able to help you if you want to trade."

"Have you been following us?"

"Only for a little while," the woman hurried to say. "But we don't want to hurt you."

Sandy cast a sideways look at Lilly, voice dropped low. "What do you think?"

Shrugging, Lilly kept her gaze focused on the five-foot section of brick wall she thought the man and woman were

hiding behind. “We’ve got nothing to lose. If they were going to shoot us they would have done so already.”

They both kept their weapons raised, and Sandy called toward the debris. “We’re listening. But don’t try anything stupid.”

A man and woman in their mid-forties emerged from between the piles of wreckage, their clothes dusty, the man’s face stubbled in weeks’ worth of growth. He carried a black handgun, but kept it down low by his side. “Hey, take it easy,” he said, eyes moving between the weapons pointed at him. “I’m Jim Bugdeon. This is my wife, Sue. We owned that there drugstore. I’m a pharmacist; been working here for twenty years. We’ve managed to sift through the wreckage and find some meds, and we’re willing to trade if we have what you need.”

Jim Bugdeon’s clothes were ill-fitting, like he’d scavenged them from someone taller and broader than himself. His button-up shirt was stained with sweat, the collar frayed and molded to his skin. Sue’s clothes fit a little better, but she looked to have cut the sleeves from her own shirt with a pair of blunt scissors.

“Thank you for the kind offer,” Sandy replied, not lowering her rifle. “Have you been in San Jose since the quakes started? Are there many people left here?”

Jim nodded. “Yes, we’ve been here since this all began. There are a couple of small settlements around the city, survivors who have banded together with no intention to leave, and we’re part of one of them. We’re short of a lot of things, though, including liquid bleach to sanitize water and ammo. Do you think we can come to some kind of an arrangement, ladies?”

“Heck, I’ll give you one of our guns and all the ammo we have on us if you have the meds we need,” Sandy replied, finally lowering her weapon as the two groups stepped closer to one another. A small flare of hope flickered to life inside Lilly.

“Why don’t you tell us what you need?” Jim asked, hands moving to his hips, a touch of kindness entering his eyes. Lilly could imagine him in his dispensary, greeting customers by name and helping them however he could. Beside him, his wife Sue had taken the hand gun and turned to one side, scanning the wreckage.

Sandy gave a deferential nod to Lilly and turned in the other direction, rifle in the low ready position, head pivoting as she kept watch. “Thanks,” Lilly said, hardly daring to hope that Jim Bugdeon might be the answer to their problems. “We really need these meds. It’s for my dad and he’s quite unwell.” After sucking in a breath and crossing her fingers on both hands, Lilly rattled off the meds her father needed.

Jim pressed his lips together briefly, and Lilly could tell before he spoke that the man wasn’t going to be able to help her. The weight of all her worries and fears for her dad seemed to come down on her like a suffocating blanket, and she felt her shoulders rounding, lungs straining to draw a deep breath while Jim shook his head, genuine sorrow flitting over his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “We don’t have any of those medications.” He glanced toward the ruined remains of his store. “You’re welcome to spend some time sifting through, but we’ve been going through it since the building first came down and I think we’ve recovered as much as we can.”

“Are there any other pharmacies nearby that might have what we need?” Lilly felt increasingly desperate as she looked around the broken city.

“I’m sorry, everything’s been cleared out as far as we know.”

She shook her head. “That can’t be right. Please, you have to help us.”

“I’m really sorry. I wish we could do something, but we just can’t. If I had what your father needs, I’d trade with you no question. I know things are going to be extra tough for someone like him right now. And I honestly have no clue where you’re going to get his meds.”

Lilly dropped her head, vaguely aware of Sandy thanking Jim and Sue, before she felt Sandy's arm around her shoulders, gently guiding her back toward the motorcycle. As she fumbled one step in front of the other, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd just heard her father's death sentence.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Lilly

Eleven Days After

Lilly and Sandy stood outside the mud-brick house as Sandy secured the motorcycle, the trees overhead casting serene shadows, the air as hazy as ever, fine ash particles coating the back of Lilly's throat and making her feel perpetually thirsty. "It's not over," Sandy said, straightening and palming her hips as she took a moment to scan the distant sloping hills. "We can go and look at the hospitals tomorrow. We're not giving up just because we hit a roadblock."

Sandy's words were meant to soothe the storm raging inside of Lilly, but they did little to calm her fury at the injustice of their situation. "Then what? We find the meds he needs, and he runs out in a week or a month, and we're back to where we started? It's not like there's anyone still manufacturing these meds, shipping them to pharmacies and restocking shelves."

Sandy took Lilly by the shoulders, her grip gentle but firm. "One thing I've learned in life is that the unexpected can happen at any time and totally change everything. We get him through the next short period and then we deal with whatever comes after that. And then again and again for as long as we need to. But worrying about the future does absolutely nothing."

The sound of a stick cracking underfoot made Sandy drop her hands as they both turned. Julia's familiar form appeared between the trees, the afternoon light filtering through the trees and setting her hair alight in a golden flame. She stepped closer until only a few feet separated her from Lilly and Sandy. Her face was grim, displeased. "Did you find what he needs?"

Lilly swallowed. "No. We searched all the way to San Jose. But we're going to try the hospitals tomorrow."

For a moment, everything went still. Lilly noticed the minute tightening of Julia's muscles, her jaw clenching, fingers curling into fists. Then Julia's face contorted and she took a step closer. "Tell me you're kidding. You were asked to do one thing, Lilly. Your father's life is slipping away, and you can't handle this one thing."

Lilly felt the familiar hardening of her skin, the shrinking into herself like a sea snail pried from a rock, exposed to the sunlight and harsh salt wind. For years, now, she'd tried to keep the peace, appease Julia when she criticized or ranted, and all to protect her dad from the stress, or Pip from becoming a target. It had become second nature. She felt her eyes dropping to the ground, stance softening.

Then a hand moved to her back. Sandy, urging her forward, warm and supportive, but somehow unyielding. Her touch galvanized Lilly, and she shifted her gaze, eyes landing on Julia's face. Ice-cold eyes stared back, capable of freezing Lilly in place. But Lilly wasn't willing to acquiesce anymore. She stood a little straighter: "We did our best, and it's not over yet, Julia."

Julia scoffed. "Have you seen your father? Have you seen how close he is to letting go completely? It is over, Lilly. You failed him, just like you always do." Her voice has risen higher, the words bouncing off the charred trees, the walls of the mud-brick house. Lilly felt a moment of panic. What if her dad could hear?

As her thoughts whirred and leaped inside her head, distracting her, yanking her backward, Sandy leaned closer to

Julia, brows lowered. “Are you kidding me? I don’t see you volunteering to get what Rick needs. How dare you speak to her like that when you’re not willing to do it yourself!”

Julia’s eyes went wide. “How can I head out there? I don’t have the firearm skills to protect myself. How dare *you!* My job is to be here and make sure that fraud Norman doesn’t do something to kill Rick before you get back!”

“Norman isn’t a fraud,” Lilly said, shaking her head. She paused and shook out her hands, feeling emboldened but wanting to diffuse the tension. Her dad and everyone else were just inside, so close, listening to everything. “I know you’re scared about Dad. But you don’t have to take it out on us. We’re a team, Julia, and Dad needs Norman’s help.”

“Actually, Rick needs his meds,” Julia said through clenched teeth. “Stop making excuses all the time. You’ve been like this your entire life. You’re pathetic, Lilly, a sad sorry excuse for a woman and a daughter.”

Sandy bristled, but Lilly grabbed her by the arm. “It’s okay,” she said in a low voice, giving a subtle shake of her head. *I got this.* She looked at Julia and pulled back her shoulders, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. “You’ve had it out for me since day one. Me *and* Pip. We remind you too much of our mother, and I do feel bad for you. Living under her shadow for all these years can’t have been easy. But enough is enough, Julia. I’m doing everything in my power to save Dad. My family is my life, and I’ve already lost one parent. I’ll do everything I can to make sure I don’t lose another.”

Now it was Julia’s turn to laugh, the sound infuriating. Every time Lilly thought she was ready to stand up to Julia, to assert herself, the woman skittered another step ahead. It was like trying to climb a set of stairs with someone pushing her back down, hands on her chest, shoving just a little harder than she was capable of pushing herself up.

Julia fell quiet for a few seconds, looking up at the sky like she’d find all the answers up there, hands out by her sides as she turned in a slow half-circle. “This façade has gone on too long.” Bitterness made her face drawn and haggard, twisting

her pretty features into something ugly. “I told Rick just to be honest with you. But he wouldn’t. And I’ve had enough.”

“Honest about what?”

“Ignore her,” muttered Sandy.

“No, I want to know,” Lilly said. “Honest about what?”

For a brief moment, Julia’s face softened just a fraction, a hint of something like regret entering her eyes. Then everything hardened again, and she shook her head. “It’s not my place to say. And I don’t want you bothering your father with this. In fact, I forbid you to speak to your father about this!”

Already walking toward the house, Lilly shook her head, brittle, charred undergrowth crushing beneath the soles of her shoes with every step. She wasn’t going to stop, not this time.

“Lilly! Come back,” Julia called out in a low voice. “Don’t you go in there. He’s just fallen asleep!”

Lilly hesitated for just a moment as she reached the front door, hearing the sound of Julia and Sandy arguing in whispered tones where she’d left them, then she pushed the door open, stepping into the darkened house, mind focused on one thing. Pip and Matti sat at the table, both staring at her, while Norman kept watch from the front window, the light casting half his face in shadow.

“We didn’t get the meds,” Lilly hurried to say, feeling their gazes burning into her.

“We heard,” Matti said quietly, getting to his feet. He walked toward her and embraced her, his arms going around her, lips finding her cheek, blond stubble tickling her skin. His aroma of lemon and musk soothed her frayed nerves, and she allowed herself a brief moment of comfort before pulling away.

“Julia’s been her usual awful self while you were gone,” Pip said from the table. A half-drunk mug of tea sat in front of her and she’d braided her fair hair. She lifted her chin with a defiant tilt, somehow both child and woman. “She thinks

Norman is pretending to be a doctor so he can freeload or something.”

Norman let out a low laugh. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle Julia.”

“What was she talking about outside?” Pip stared at Lilly in a way that let her know she’d heard snippets of what Julia had said. Pip knew even less about their mother than Lilly, her memories all but non-existent, but she held their mom on a pedestal, just like Lilly.

Lilly wanted to believe that Julia was just being unkind, stirring the pot, although a part of her knew there was more to the stories her father had told her. There were too many holes. Too many hazy memories. But the narrative had woven together over the years into something comforting and familiar, something she’d never wanted to shrug off, to peer underneath. And after their dad had gotten sick, the idea of challenging him had seemed wrong, the thought of unpicking the tales about their mother unthinkable.

But now? Now she needed to know, if only to shut Julia up and let them all have some peace.

Lilly pursed her lips, eyes flicking to her father’s door. “I’m not entirely sure. But I’m going to find out.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Lilly

Eleven Days After

Lilly opened the door to the room where her father lay still as the sheets, face pale, lips a faint peach smudge. The gentle ticking of an old-fashioned windup alarm clock placed on the bedside table at her father's insistence was the only sound, and the moment filled her with a surreal sense of dread, like she was facing a firing squad without any idea who'd made the hit list.

And then her father's eyes fluttered, and she exhaled, the tension bolting out of her, a released spring. He moved his head to look at her, the gaze only half focused. "Lilly," he croaked.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and grabbed his trembling hand in both of hers. "I'm here, Dad." She swallowed, a bead of sweat forming at the base of her neck and then slowly tracing its way down her spine while she tried to bring herself to ask the question burning on her lips.

The need to know the truth about her mother had snuck up on her, taking her by surprise. But now she had finally acknowledged the desire, she also knew she stood on a precipice. Once she asked, once her dad told her the truth, there would be no going back.

The cool air inside the room felt strange after the heat of the afternoon sun beating down outside, while the smell of death was sharp, lingering around her father like the grim reaper himself loitered in the shadows, waiting to snatch her father away the minute her back was turned. Not letting go of his hand, she took a moment to look at her father's face. He'd been the one constant in her life since her mother died, and the thought that he might not make it tore the very fibers of her soul apart.

Maybe it was unfair to ask him about her mother when he was in such a state... But if she waited too long, the cold, hard, mind-bending truth was that she might never know.

"Lilly, is everything okay?" He lay on the bed with his head propped up on pillows, the sheets pulled to his waist, somehow looking ten years older than before the earthquakes. Cutting the dose of his Parkinson's meds had obviously bought him more time, but she could see the difference in him physically and mentally. His tremors were worse, and he was forgetful, confused, and sometimes deluded, clinging to a past that no longer existed.

She smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. "Yeah, everything's fine. How are you feeling?"

"I'd feel better if you'd take me for a walk in the woods," he said in a halting voice, pausing to lick his chapped lips, arms jerking in stiff movements. "That's where I used to go walking when..." He looked off over her shoulder.

Lilly swallowed. She leaned over to the bedside table, eyes skimming the clock he'd asked for last night, hands reaching for the cup of water. "I'd like that." She helped him sit up and take a drink, then placed the cup back down.

He stared at her as he sank back into the pillows, his voice a whisper, filled with longing. "All she ever wanted was a happy family."

Lilly bit back the urge to ask her father who he was talking about. His skin was sallow and covered in a light sheen of sweat, while his arms and legs twitched, his neck stiff. As she pulled the pink and blue floral sheet up around his chest, a

panic that she'd lose him at any moment tightened the muscles in her neck, and she knew she had to ask him about her mom right then, or she'd never do it.

Leaning over him, she kissed him on the forehead. "Hey, Dad. There's something I need to ask you about Mom."

He frowned. "She's gone on one of her trips again. I don't know when she'll be back. I'm sorry."

She nodded, not wanting to make him agitated and upset by reminding him she'd been gone for more than ten years. Norman had told her it was best to keep her dad calm. "I know that she's not on her trip, Dad." Her heart had suddenly started beating faster, her fingers squeezing the sheet, pinching the blue and pink floral material. "I'm not a little girl anymore. Can you tell me where Mom is, please?"

He looked sideways at the bare wall, his mouth drawing down, and Lilly's throat tightened. Her dad was one of the kindest people she'd ever met, and she could see in his eyes that he knew exactly what she was talking about. For a few seconds he seemed to struggle for words, and she could tell he was about to come up with a lie, a convenient untruth.

She raised her voice just a little, her body tense. "Just tell me, Dad. You don't need to protect me anymore. I just want to know what happened to her."

He licked his lips. Then gave a brief nod, eyes on the wall, voice low and suddenly lucid. "I should have told you earlier. I'm sorry." He stared at the empty space on the wall as if he was looking right through it, seeing something no one else could: memories he'd kept locked up for too long.

The air pulled taut between them, filled with the tension of countless years of unspoken truths, doubling in weight and substance, dividing against their own center. Lilly let out a breath. "It's okay. Just tell me now."

He frowned, then his lips pulled into a thin line. The expanse between them drew out, frayed, and became translucent. He cleared his throat, locked eyes with her; she could see her father's face as a reflection, his eyes a mirroring

of her own. “She kept trying to beat it, Lilly. But it went hand in hand with her creative artist’s soul. You have to understand that.”

Lilly nodded, willing him to go on as the silence stretched.

“Everything she did was so big. So extreme. And her addiction just got the better of her.” He continued, pausing frequently. “She’d go on a bender and we wouldn’t see her for weeks. You used to miss her so much. And the only thing I could think of was to tell you she was on a business trip.”

Lilly’s heart hammered in her ears, the truth of his words fitting together like she’d just been given the other half of a jigsaw puzzle, the key pieces missing for more than a decade. The sheet on the bed seemed to crinkle and shrink under her hands. Her skin prickled with gooseflesh, and Lilly felt small and cold in the shadow of her father’s words. “How did she die, Dad?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s not safe there either. Both of you should stay away from the woods.” He began to shake his head, eyes back on the wall, his mouth pulled into a frown. “It’s not safe.”

Lilly nodded, patting his hand, blinking back tears that stung her eyes and blurred her vision. “It’s okay, Dad. We don’t need to talk anymore.” She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the diner where she’d sat waiting for her dad the day her mother had died. Had it been an overdose? Or had she really died in an accident? Did it even matter?

She turned back to him, watching her father’s face settle into a mask of calm, a strange feeling of peace moving through her mind, a cool mist of acceptance. The news seemed more shocking than she’d imagined, but also, somehow, inevitable.

“You should rest now, Dad. I’ll be back soon. Just call out if you need anything, okay?”

He was already half-asleep, his face smooth, expression slack. “Okay, Lilly,” he said with a smile. He gave a slight nod, eyes sliding closed.

Lilly gave his hand a final squeeze and stood up, heading for the door. She needed to talk to Pip alone, tell her what she'd just learned, even though she needed a chance to process it herself. But she wouldn't keep the truth a secret any longer.

In the kitchen, Sandy and Julia worked side by side, both turning as Lilly re-entered the living room. She ignored their curious stares, Sandy's filled with empathy and Julia's narrow and spiteful, instead beckoning to Pip before briefly catching Matti's eye. She walked outside, the heat wrapping around her as she made her way a short distance into the woods to wait for her sister. Even though she'd just learned her beloved mother was actually an addict, Lilly felt a sense of calm, the kind of serenity that came from finally knowing the truth.

She sat down on a felled log and watched Pip walk toward her, her face a striking resemblance to the photographs of their mother, now all lost in the ruins of their home. Pip took a seat beside her, and Lilly reached for her hand, wondering briefly at the supercharged passage of time that seemed to make the last decade feel like a blink of an eye, a strange and unreal anomaly that had turned her baby sister into a young woman.

"What did Dad tell you?" Pip asked, looking at Lilly with a steady gaze.

Lilly turned to face her sister. "Are you ready to hear the truth?"

Pip didn't look away, but her hand grew restless in Lilly's. "Yes. Tell me everything."

Lilly took a deep breath and repeated the conversation she'd just had with her father. Pip nodded as she finished, eyes filled with both understanding and sorrow, and they sat in silence for a while.

Finally, Pip spoke. "We saw a plane today. A few hours ago now. It looked like it was going to land near Soledad. But none of us were sure, and we didn't know if it was friendly, so we didn't want to risk heading out there."

"What sort of plane?"

“Not a military one. It looked small, like a private jet type thing.”

Lilly studied her sister. “You don’t want to talk about Mom yet, do you?”

Pip shook her head.

“That’s okay. Let’s sit here a while longer.”

She didn’t let go of Pip’s hand as they sat together, the quiet world full of broken light that moved through the canopy above. Glinting fragments lay on the ground like pieces of glass and metal that swam and twirled in a sea of dust, catching the pale rays from above.

Everything had changed, but even in its broken state, the world still seemed to sing—a distant hush, like the placid afterglow of a great beach party on a summer evening, the last sigh of voices and the roll of distant drums, and the final call of the sea while the birds played hide-and-seek with the slowly sinking sun.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Johannes

Eleven Days After

Johannes slowed the plane and looked down at the blackened landscape as they approached the conservation camp, taking in the details of the earthquake-ruined landscape and the way the fire had taken what was left. He felt anxiety for Matti twisting through him, the emotions hot and long, like tongues of flame reaching from his belly and licking at his lips.

“Do you see that, Stormy Boy? It’s not looking good.” He spoke in a low voice, not looking at Storm curled up in the co-pilot’s seat, his gaze moving quickly and distractedly, occupied with his mad, flickering thoughts and the urgent question of whether he’d find his brother alive.

He could hear Camilla and the kids from the main cabin, but couldn’t focus on their words. Up ahead, at the Big Sur National Park, he could see where wildfires still burned, wide columns of smoke rising up from the old-growth forest of redwood, oaks and sycamores, ash and soot rushing into the atmosphere in a dirty plume.

The sight of the massive fires evoked something primitive, a hard kernel in his chest. He felt drawn out of himself, into a place much larger than the human world, not quite on Earth at all but on the other side of something, a blur, but only for a moment. Then he was back in the pilot’s seat, the plane rushing through the air, the engines rumbling below him.

Johannes watched the fissured, devastated land turn from black to gray and back to black. The trees had been bent to the ground, their tops the last thing to burn before the vegetation had been reduced to ash, while the toppled buildings were a husk, blackened and crumbling, and it was hard to tell what had been where.

But as they drew nearer to the town of Soledad, the two massive prison sites were unmissable, and Johannes brought the plane lower, searching the ground for where the conservation camp should have been. He soon spotted a parking lot beside a cluster of collapsed buildings surrounded by fields on one side and the broken pieces of Route 101 on the other, and he knew he'd found it.

His eyes roamed the wreckage, and he saw no sign of anyone left alive. The camp's buildings had mostly collapsed, and fire had passed over the site, blackening the layers of debris crushed on top of one another. His eyes strained for any sign of Matti, but there was none.

In an instant, he was transported back to that day he'd stumbled down the driveway at home, snot and tears rolling down his face. His chest tightened at the memory, and he relived the painful, awful moment he'd had to tell his mom that Kalevi had been hit, that he was gone, really gone. Was he going to have to do the same thing again, twenty years later? A different tragedy, a different son, yet somehow the same.

But he couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't. Matti could still be down there, sheltering or hurt. He was a trained firefighter! He'd know how to protect himself in a disaster. Johannes clenched his jaw, molars working against each other. He leaned forward and adjusted the controls. "Buckle up! I'm bringing the plane down."

"We're ready," Camilla called back, her voice somber.

He leaned over and strapped Storm in, then brought the plane lower, aiming for a nearby field. Kalevi's blond hair and cherubic face appeared to him as the wheels hit the uneven ground, the stomp of his small feet on the wooden floorboards of their Texan home echoing as the plane bumped and rattled,

the air dragging against them in a loud rush until the plane slowed and then stopped.

For a moment he sat still, breathing hard as he checked over the controls, noting the fuel level and other gauges. They'd have to fill up on the way to Texas, and he could only hope one more seat in the plane was filled, too.

Johannes unbuckled Storm and paused to stroke him between the ears, rubbing his favorite spot, grateful for the dog's unyielding loyalty and love at a time when nothing was certain except for the constant risk they faced. "Come on, boy. Let's go find my brother."

The two of them headed down into the main cabin, where Camilla had already slipped Noelle into the backpack they'd modified into a baby carrier. She held out a thin blanket to him, and he knew she wanted him to tie it around his chest to secure Benny to his back.

"You and the kids need to stay here," he said, shaking his head, hands remaining by his side.

"No," she replied firmly. "Bad things happen when we split up. And if something were to happen to you, it's not like I can fly the plane out of here, anyway. We're a team. We can cover each other and look out for one another."

As she stared at him, her brown eyes filled with the kind of steady love that only comes from two people who've been through hell already and made it out the other side, he could hear all her unspoken words. *I'm not letting you do this alone.*

And worse: *We both know there's no one there alive. No one is going to attack us.*

"Okay," he said, blowing out a breath. "Thank you."

They climbed down onto the field, the ruins of the conservation camp less than half a mile away. He locked the plane and then set down his rifle, taking the blanket, folding it, and tying it around his chest, before tucking Benny into the pouch in a supported piggy back. Camilla offered him a sad smile as he picked up his rifle again, and they headed toward the conservation camp, walking slowly across a blackened

field toward the place where his brother was supposed to be released from.

They reached the camp, and he paused and took stock of the destroyed dormitories and administrative buildings. The devastation was so complete that nothing looked like he expected it, and at that moment, it seemed impossible that anyone had survived in there. He glanced at Storm, who seemed reluctant to step forward into the camp itself, like he could smell the death and loss the place reeked of.

But Johannes couldn't just turn away now. He'd never forgive himself. He held his rifle up and scanned the still, eerily silent wreckage, seeing no movement, then slowly lowered his weapon. "Do you mind if we walk through? Mom would want me to check, just in case. He could be hurt somewhere in there."

Camilla nodded, even though they both knew Matti wasn't there. At least not alive.

They set off through the camp, climbing over charred ruins and skirting around the piles of brick and concrete, peering into the partially collapsed buildings and calling Matti's name. It was hard to believe that there had been a working conservation camp just a couple of weeks ago, when now there were only blackened corpses staring at them from between the detritus in the dark and gloomy spaces.

Johannes paused, feeling overwhelmed, and dragged a hand through his hair.

"It's okay," Camilla said, squeezing his arm, and they kept walking. Overhead, the sky was pale, full of clouds and ash. The air tasted like soot and sweat as they made their way to the parking lot, several burned-out vehicles still sitting there.

They stopped beside a blackened truck with a Cal Fire logo and Camilla leaned down, examining the ground. "Hey, do you see this?"

Johannes moved closer. "What is it?"

"Looks like footprints in the ash." She pointed to several sets of prints and some lines where it looked as though

someone had lowered themselves onto the ground to look under the vehicle.

“I don’t think it’s Matti,” he replied, putting his own foot beside the much smaller prints. “It’s either young people or a woman, I think.”

Camilla nodded. “I think you’re right.”

“Alright,” he said, straightening and wanting to get out of there, yet at the same time unable to leave. The wind ruffled his hair and clothes and the ashes shifted across the ground, clinging to his boots with an eerie caress as he looked at Camilla. “Let’s walk through the eastern edge of the camp and then go back to the plane.” His voice sounded hoarser than usual, and he tried not to think about what they’d do once they finished walking through the camp.

With sadness in her eyes, Camilla nodded, and they set off once again, their boots crunching through the rubble as they moved slowly and methodically through the camp. Even though he knew it was impossible, Johannes couldn’t help but imagine that Matti might be out there somewhere, just on the other side of one of the charred walls or beneath a heap of twisted rubble.

They soon reached what looked like the main administrative building, and Camilla pointed to the ground. “Look, more of those smaller footprints.” Storm had his nose down, and Johannes followed him toward the door into the partially-collapsed building, peering inside the darkened reception area and sensing the unmistakable scent of death. Overhead several crows cawed, circling before wheeling toward the ground.

Johannes’ stomach lurched as he took in footprints in the dusty floor leading toward what looked like bodies wrapped in tarpaulin sitting against the far wall. He swallowed, knowing he had to look, and helped Benny off his back before stepping inside the gloomy space.

“Just wait here,” he said to Storm, pointing to the ground beside Benny. He couldn’t meet Camilla’s eye as worry about what he was going to find made him want to throw up.

The smell of death poured from the dark room, and he lifted his rifle, holding it before him as he stepped forward, not wanting to get too close to the bodies but pushing himself on, anyway. His mind went numb as he lifted the edges of the tarpaulins, swatting away clouds of flies, taking in the decomposing faces of those left behind.

Matti wasn't there, but under the tarp on the edge, where the small footprints had stopped, was the face of someone else he knew. For a moment, Johannes could only stare, unable to think or move as he took in Elijah's familiar features.

He cleared his throat and crouched down, the air growing thick and heavy as his heart sped up, unable to process this sudden reality. The last time he'd seen Elijah had been at the sentencing hearing, when he'd watched his brother and Elijah be led away in handcuffs. He'd hurried to leave so he wouldn't have to see Elijah's girlfriend Remy and his son Noah again, not even lifting a hand to wave to the two men.

He glanced at the small footprints as he covered Elijah again and straightened, not willing to believe that Elijah's small son had been the one traipsing through the ruined conservation camp, coming face to face with his dead father. Surely the boy was somewhere safe with his mother. Any other alternative was too horrible to contemplate.

Saying a prayer under his breath for Noah's safety and that Elijah was in a better place, he backed up and headed outside. Camilla raised one eyebrow and Johannes shook his head. "No Matti. But Elijah was in there."

"I'm so sorry," Camilla said as she helped Benny onto his back. "I hope he didn't suffer."

"I hope so, too," replied Johannes as they started walking again.

As they neared the edge of the camp, he couldn't shake the haunting feeling that he was leaving his brother behind, that Matti had been left to die alone in this desolate place. And even though the rational part of his brain knew it wasn't true, he couldn't help but feel a deep sense of pain and loss, like

somehow it was all his fault. Like he was responsible for the death of another brother.

“I wish we’d been closer,” he said to Camilla as they walked. “I had so many chances to be a good brother and I never took one of them.”

“I’m sure you were a much better brother than you remember,” Camilla replied. “Despite your differences, Matti loved you. He wouldn’t have done what he did, otherwise.”

“He never quite fit in, you know, no matter how hard he tried. He even got into nature journaling and bird watching, so he had something to bond with our father, not that Dad ever noticed.” He shook his head, a complicated mix of feelings twisting through his tortured heart.

Camilla took his hand. “I’m really sorry—”

Storm let out a low, warning growl, freezing the words in Camilla’s mouth. A moment later, Johannes sensed someone behind him.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Johannes

Eleven Days After

For a brief moment, Johannes tried to make sense of what was happening. The first thought to flash through his mind was that he was hallucinating, that the smoke and the dust still clouded his vision, bringing to life his hope that Matti was still alive. But he blinked and heard a grunted breath, heard Storm's growl ratchet up a notch.

The ground was littered with burned and twisted pieces of debris, and there was a feeling of dampness and heat in the air, a hazy pall that hung over the landscape. He let go of Camilla's hand and turned with a smile on his face, hoping, believing, that Matti would be there behind him, or someone who knew where Matti was, and they'd get their second chance after all.

But it wasn't Matti staring at him. Camilla screamed, raising her gun, as Johannes took in the tall, broad man with thick, muscular arms brandishing a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire just a couple of inches from his face.

Johannes fumbled with his gun, but Camilla's cry turned into something more primal, and he turned back to see a black man—materialized from between the rubble—now yanking the rifle from her arms, the two of them tussling over the weapon while Storm darted in, snapping and snarling at the man. His biceps were as big as Camilla's head, and Noelle's

mouth opened in a wide circle as her cheeks turned red, her cry shrill. Johannes took in those details, shock narrowing his mind in all the wrong ways.

His hands tightened around his gun, but it was too late. The man behind him had the baseball bat raised, metal spikes hovering near his right eye, sharp as needles. He felt Benny's weight on his back, Camilla's desperation. He'd let down his guard, let his emotions get the better of him when they could least afford it.

With a sudden surge of strength, he pushed himself forward and managed to slip out from under the bat's arc as it whipped over his head. He turned, his gun raised, adrenaline coursing through him. Time slowed, and Johannes felt like he saw everything it contained, every second and possible choice, seconds leading to larger moments, all of it like grains of sand in a far larger hourglass, the sand moving through it, each grain carving its own path, carving out its own story, breathing out its own breath.

The air suddenly darkened, like someone had placed an opaque sheet of plastic over the sky. The haze grew thicker, and the clouds gathered and swirled. Johannes inhaled, the man in front of him smelling like mud and copper coins, like someone who hadn't taken a shower in weeks, while his breath contained hints of tobacco, cheap beer, and something sour.

"Don't move," Johannes growled, staring down the man with the baseball bat. The man's dark hair curled a little around his ears, nose thick with a large bump on the bridge like it had been broken years ago and never set properly. Johannes' eyes narrowed. "I'm warning you."

The man laughed, a deep and menacing sound that tightened the muscles at the base of Johannes' neck. With a malicious glint in his eyes, he swung the bat toward Johannes' head in a deadly swing.

Johannes didn't flinch, instead shifting at just the right moment, pulling the trigger as he leaned away, feeling the jolt of the weapon against his body. The gunshot ripped through the air, echoing through the desolate camp as blood sprayed

across the ground. The man howled in pain, dropping the bat and clutching his shoulder, letting out a string of swear words and promises of all the things he'd do to Johannes.

But there was no time to linger on that feeling of triumph. There was another threat looming nearby, and Johannes had already pivoted to face Camilla, his gun raised at the man standing behind her holding her rifle.

The man was dressed in worn prison pants and a black tank top, his hair cut short and eyes a deep brown framed by thick dark brows, the whites a yellow-gray and the pupils screaming the vicious violence he was capable of. Johannes stared at Camilla's gun in the black man's powerful hands, his grip around the weapon like he knew what he was doing, the muzzle pointed at his wife's head.

Camilla stood quietly, anger burning in her eyes and one hand on Storm's collar, holding him to her side as he growled at the man beside them, her body bouncing on the balls of her feet as she tried to soothe Noelle. And he knew, with a sinking feeling in his chest, that this time he wouldn't just be able to get his family out of it with a careful aim of his gun, a quick step to the left. Because Camilla would be dead before he pulled the trigger.

The sensation in his chest squeezed tighter. He had no choice but to surrender himself to these men. He and his family would need to give in to them if they wanted to live through the next few minutes and make it out of this hellscape alive. With fear and determination warring inside him, he raised his hands in defeat, knowing that sometimes giving in was the only way to stay alive.

"Drop the weapon," called out the black guy.

Johannes bent down slowly, his eyes on Camilla and Noelle and one hand reaching around to reassure Benny, and placed the gun on the ground. The man with the broken nose, the one he'd just shot, yanked it away with his good arm, turning it on Johannes with a sinister expression, a growing patch of red seeping through the bullet wound in his shoulder.

For a moment, Johannes thought he was about to be shot and killed, gunned down in front of his wife and kids.

“Please,” he said, raising his hands palm out, heart beating loudly in his ears. “I’m just here looking for my brother. He used to work here. Matti Virtanen. Do you know him?”

“We ain’t firefighters,” Broken Nose said. “We’re just here for the food.”

Johannes’s eyes narrowed, trying to figure out a way out of this, but seeing none. “Let my wife and children go. Please, do the right thing. They’re just innocent children.”

“Not likely,” said the black guy, scoffing as he nudged Camilla with her weapon. “Come on. That way.”

Johannes glanced at Camilla, feeling sick with worry. They had no choice but to trust they’d get away at some point, even if it meant putting their lives in the hands of these dangerous strangers. He moved beside her and they walked with Storm between them, the kids on their backs, and Broken Nose leading them through the wreckage, the other guy taking up the rear.

“I’m so sorry,” he said in a barely there whisper. “This is all my fault.”

Camilla shook her head, frightened but resolute. “It’ll be okay.”

They followed Broken Nose to the far edge of the camp where a dormitory sat, one collapsed wall and a partially collapsed roof. A third man stepped out of the doorway who was big, burly, and bald. He wore no shirt, only ripped blue jeans and a wicked grin. And then a young woman walked out behind him, the sight of her making Camilla gasp and Johannes want to smash every one of the men into smithereens.

The young woman was no older than twenty, thin and pale, with dark hair, and bright blue eyes glazed with pain and fear. Her face and body were covered with bruises, her hair matted and oily, clothes filthy, stained with blood and dirt. Whatever the men had done to her, they’d ruined her, her body and soul

now so broken that she was nothing but a dead woman walking.

Johannes swallowed hard, his face paling as he examined the young woman, whose eyes glimmered with a sheen of tears. He couldn't tell what was more disturbing: the bruises, the hollow circles under her eyes, or the vacant expression on her face, and his stomach churned as his eyes met hers. He knew he had to do whatever it took to get his family away from these men, and to help the girl, too.

As the men moved closer together, she continued to stare at him with eyes that held more emotion than he'd expected to find in this place of hopelessness. It tore at him, dragging him down from the hope he'd been clinging to, sinking him deeper and deeper into the nightmare that surrounded him.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Johannes

Eleven Days After

The men sat ten feet away from Johannes and his family, heating a can of beans recovered from the conservation camp kitchen over a small fire. They passed a bottle of bourbon between them as the sun skimmed the horizon, sending long shadows cutting through the rubble.

The young woman had retreated into the partially collapsed dormitory, slipping away as the men got louder and more drunk, and Johannes hadn't seen her in an hour or so. He'd spent the time watching the men as he thought about the key for the plane they'd taken, about how he could get it back, while also trying to figure a way out for them all.

The guy with the broken nose, a vicious guy called Chip from LA, didn't seem too affected by the gunshot wound Johannes had inflicted, although he clearly favored his right arm, keeping the left down by his side, a bandage tied haphazardly around the wound which was probably more like a graze. He had pocketed the key to the plane, and seemed to be the leader of the trio, clearly stating his preference for Johannes to fly them to Mexico in the morning. The men had a heated debate until Colton, the black guy, produced a bottle of liquor and they'd decided to talk again in the morning.

That meant Johannes had both time and a little leverage; it seemed unlikely the men were going to kill him that night—

they needed him to fly the plane—and if they got drunk enough, there might even be a chance to escape when the men let their guard down. He glanced at Camilla, who sat with both children’s heads in her lap. Benny and Noelle seemed to sleep peacefully, while Storm sat beside them with his eyes locked on the men, body tense.

Johannes and his family were completely unarmed, but he reminded himself that they had the motivation to get away and a strong will to survive. And as Johannes stared at his wife, thinking about how he’d do anything to protect her and the children, he knew he couldn’t fail them like he’d failed Matti.

Matti. He pushed the thought down, fingers trailing through the ash-covered ground, raking small stones into a pile. He couldn’t deal with the loss of his brother, not yet. But the time would come when the little seed of rot that had settled in his chest would take root, and he’d have no choice but to confront it. But now... now he had to focus on getting his family the heck out of the camp and back to the plane in one piece.

“I’m thirsty, mummy,” Benny said, eyes blinking open as he sat up and looked around. He looked so small and vulnerable in the dwindling light, and Johannes hated his own feelings of inadequacy at not being able to properly protect his son.

Johannes glanced over his shoulder, the fire casting a glow across the wreckage as dusk settled over them. The dormitory door sat just to Johannes’ right, the cracked wall rising up behind him, while the men sat to his left.

He coughed to get the men’s attention. Chip passed the bourbon to Colton, who took a swig, then glanced over at Johannes with his dark eyes narrowed. The smell of bourbon hung in the air, smokey and sweet. “What do you want?”

“Can we have a little water, please? For my kids.”

Colton laughed and offered the bottle of bourbon, holding his arm out extended and shaking the contents. “We don’t drink water, but the kid is welcome to join us. Toughen him up

a bit, eh?” The other two laughed, and then the three men turned back to the fire, returning to their conversation.

“It’s okay,” Camilla said in a low voice, stroking Benny’s head. “Just close your eyes, baby.”

“But I’m so thirsty. Please, Mommy.”

Just as his chest tightened uncomfortably, Johannes sensed movement and glanced toward the dormitory door, seeing the young woman standing in the shadows, her gaze so intense he could feel the weight of her stare on his skin. She held a bottle in her hands and crouched down before leaning out and setting it on the ground close to Johannes.

“Thank you,” he mouthed, taking the bottle with a quick dart of his hand. He unscrewed the lid and shifted his body to block the men’s view, then helped Benny take a drink, the small boy somehow knowing he had to be careful and quiet.

Once Ben had taken a drink, Johannes offered the rest to Camilla, before taking a small sip himself and passing it back to the girl. She gave a brief nod of acknowledgment before melting into the shadows.

He shifted to sit next to Camilla and half-closed his eyes, watching the men while pretending to sleep. The trio continued to drink, growing more belligerent with one another as darkness dropped over the camp. After some time, he felt Camilla’s hand on his own and he turned to face her. She leaned in closer until he could feel her breath on his cheek, and whispered, “What are we going to do?”

“When they fall asleep, we’ll get away, somehow.”

“We shouldn’t underestimate them.”

Johannes glanced at the men, at their prison-hardened bodies. Colton took several big gulps of bourbon, and then belched, his neck thick, biceps bulging. “Don’t worry, I’m not.”

“And the girl? We can’t leave here without her.”

“I’m not leaving her. Don’t worry. We’ll get her out of here. We just need to wait a little longer. Okay?”

Camilla nodded and wrapped her arms around the children, as if her skin and bone alone could protect them from the danger and risk that was growing around them. And as hard as it was, for now, Johannes knew they would have to wait, biding their time until their moment to escape came.

Turning his gaze back to the men, Johannes gritted his teeth, feeling the tension in his jaw and neck, the seconds dripping like cold treacle as he waited for them to finish drinking, to lay down and give in to sleep and the heavy effects of the alcohol.

“I’m telling you, I saw it! It was as big as a house!” one of the men, Chip, was saying, his eyes wide and wild in the firelight.

“You’re full of crap,” Colton spat back, taking another swig from the bottle. “There’s no such thing.”

“I’m telling you, I saw it! It was right outside my window.”

“What the hell were you doing looking out your window in the middle of the night?”

“I don’t know, I just woke up and there it was! This huge... thing. Just standing there staring at me.”

“And what did you do?”

“I got the hell out of there!”

The three men erupted into laughter and Johannes glanced at Camilla, who stared back at him with wide eyes. He shook his head slightly, trying to reassure her that everything would be alright, that the men would eventually succumb, and she nodded.

It took another hour before the men started yawning and settled down around the fire. “One of you keep watch on that lot,” Chip said as he lay back, staring at the hazy sky, every star obscured and the moon nothing but a blurred patch of yellow.

A short time later, Johannes heard the first snore. He waited until it seemed like all the men were breathing heavily

before he placed a hand on Camilla's arm.

Her eyes flicked open, and he gave a nod before turning to the dormitory door. "Hey," he called in a low voice. "Come out here. Quietly."

The young woman appeared in the doorway, eyes wide as she stared at Johannes, and then at the men. He could understand her reluctance, recognizing that fear of what might happen to her if she was caught had kept her from trying to escape up until now. But if they didn't leave soon, they might not get another chance. From behind him, the acrid smell of smoke wafted over them, and Johannes knew the fire had burned down to red-hot coals.

"Hurry," he mouthed, glancing back at the men and then toward her again. The woman crept forward until she was half in, half out of the doorway.

Gathering Benny in his arms, he slowly stood up. "Now!" He whispered the word urgently to the young woman and Camilla, who had Noelle cradled in her arms. "Come on."

The young woman looked torn, but then stepped completely out of the dormitory, blue eyes wary as she took her first steps toward freedom.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Johannes

Eleven Days After

Johannes continued around the snoring men, each footstep sounding like thunder, his own heart galloping in his ears. He did not know if they would make it out of the camp, but he knew it was better than waiting until morning, waiting for the men to wake up and trying to get away then.

They crept as a group toward the next building, moving as quietly as they could. Johannes kept a tight grip on Benny, who seemed to understand the importance of silence, while Noelle was asleep in Camilla's arms, her face peaceful. The young woman moved like an orphaned gazelle, eyes wide and frightened, as she continued to glance back at the sleeping men.

The only sound that broke the thick silence was their breathing and the crunch of debris beneath their feet; even the night birds seemed to be holding their song, the insects still as they watched Johannes and the others trying to escape.

As they stepped out of the circle of orange light cast by the fire, Johannes glanced back at the glowing coals in front of the dormitory, half expecting one of the men to be staring at them, but all was quiet. Turning his attention to the collapsed building ahead, he quickened his pace, eager to put as much distance between them and their captors as possible.

They reached the building a moment later, and he set Benny down, while Storm immediately moved to the little boy's side. Johannes straightened and put his hands on Camilla's shoulder, and a surge of emotion passed between them. "I need to go back for the plane's key. I could wake them, in which case I just want you to run. Don't worry about me. Just go."

"Johannes—"

"No. I'm not arguing about this. We need that plane to get home. But I can't let anything happen to you and the kids. Promise me you'll go and won't look back if there's trouble."

She hesitated for a moment before she nodded. "I promise."

He dropped his hand and turned to the dormitory, but not before he saw the tears in her eyes. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself for what he had to do, then kept walking until he moved back into the circle of light.

He crept toward the men, heart in his throat, and stopped at Chip's side. The man snored gently, right arm thrown over his head, the stain from the gunshot turned rust brown on his other shoulder, flaps of bandage visible over his T-shirt. He stared at Chip's motionless body, and then snuck a glance at the other men, who all looked to be asleep.

After crouching beside Chip, Johannes' fingers shakily slid into the man's pocket. He watched Chip's eyes and listened for any sign the man was waking. Sweat beaded in the small of Johannes's back as he mentally willed Chip to stay asleep, and his heart pounded against his ribcage as he continued to work the key out.

Chip's breath came out stinking of liquor, and Johannes could taste the dry, stale air and with it the fear of being caught before he could escape with the key. But then it finally slipped under the ridge of Chip's pocket hem. It felt like it had taken a lifetime, but he had it in his hand.

Johannes straightened and started to turn away when a loud grunt reached him, then the sound of one of the men

rolling over, stirring. There was no time to think. Johannes pivoted and started running toward the others.

“Hey!” came the voice he’d been dreading, been expecting. “Hey! Stop!” One of the men continued to shout the alarm, and a moment later, a rifle shot barked through the night, cutting through the air and slamming into the pile of debris up ahead with a loud thwack, a cough of dust rising into the darkness.

Johannes shoved the key in his pocket as he sprinted toward Ben and then scooped him up. His boy in his arms, he turned toward the firelight for half a second, taking in the men getting to their feet, rifles raised in their direction, voices filled with anger. Beside him, Storm lowered his head, teeth bared and growling.

Despite the danger, Johannes lifted his chin, locking eyes with Chip for the briefest of moments. Then he turned to the young woman and Camilla. “Go!” he shouted, and they took off at a run, ducking around the building and into the collapsed and broken camp beyond. He felt Camilla’s hand slip into his own as she stumbled, but they didn’t slow down for a moment. They had to keep moving. They had to keep the kids safe.

Gunfire cracked the air behind them, but they kept going, weaving between the wreckage and piles of debris. With Benny clutched tightly against his chest and Noelle in Camilla’s arms, Johannes fell back, running with Storm behind his wife and the young woman, urging them to go faster, determined to outrun the men and find safety for them all.

As they ran blindly through the dark labyrinth of fallen buildings, the only thought in his mind was that they had to make it. They had to survive this night and live to see another day.

But then a dark figure stepped out directly ahead.

The young woman screamed, stopping mid-step and pivoting to escape the new threat.

“Come on!” shouted Johannes, quickly shifting directions, his bearings lost in the dark maze.

He could hear the men's shouts as he struggled to put more space between them. But even as he ran, ducking and weaving to avoid the worst of the debris and making enough noise to keep the men alerted to their position no matter how quiet he tried to be, Johannes knew the men were gaining on them. It felt like they were closing in on all sides, their gunfire ringing out sharply through the night.

Finally, he saw a break in the dark, broken buildings ahead. A gap leading out into an open field where they might have a chance. With a final burst of energy, Johannes urged his family forward, urged the young woman who wore her terror like a cloak, all of them running as fast as they could toward that glimmer of freedom.

But it was too late. Chip moved into the gap, rifle raised.

Johannes skidded to a stop, heart pounding as he saw the men coming at them from all angles. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. He could hear Noelle crying, Camilla's soft sobs, and Benny's terrified whimper, but his mind was focused on the young woman, who looked like she was about to break. He moved closer to her, positioning himself between her and the closest man.

Chip stepped forward, right fist raised, and before Johannes knew what was happening, he punched Johannes in the face. The world reeled and spun around him, a million stars and fireworks exploding behind Johannes' eyes. It was as if the world had been replaced by a pyrotechnic display.

A second fist, blurry, like a phantom as it approached him, caught him in the jaw, then Johannes felt a sharp pain in his side as someone tackled him violently to the ground. He curled around Benny protectively, hearing his wife's screams.

Using the last of his strength, he struggled against his attackers as they pinned him to the ground, swearing and shouting at him, sour and sweet notes of bourbon blasting him in the face. Through the haze of pain, he saw Storm barking furiously, lunging at one of the men who held him down. But it was no use. They were outnumbered and outmatched, and soon Johannes found himself staring up into the darkness as he

felt a heavy weight settle over his chest, Benny wrestled from his arms.

As he struggled for breath, Johannes looked around desperately, a small bit of relief surging through him to see the young woman holding Benny as she stood beside Camilla. Then it hit him. He had failed to protect his family from these cruel men who would stop at nothing to get what they wanted, who would hurt whoever they wanted in any way they pleased.

But even as despair flooded through him, he knew he wasn't dead yet. He could imagine the warmth of Camilla's hand in his own, and he knew that as long as he was still breathing, he'd fight for her and the kids.

The men continued to shout and scream at them, but Johannes tuned them out, his focus solely on his family. Resolve hardened him. He would do whatever it took to keep them safe. Even if it cost him his life.

And this time maybe that's exactly what it would cost. Because he couldn't see any way out of this alive.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Noah

Eleven Days After

Darkness had fallen, and Noah and the girls walked around the plane parked in a field close to the conservation camp, nerves tightening Noah's stomach. He heard the wind and the rustle of tall grass and trees, the soft scrape of feet on loose stones, the hoot of an owl.

"This looks like a celebrity's private jet," he whispered to Bella, who walked beside him as they did another lap over the stubbly grass and cracked earth, heads craning at the plane in the dark.

Bella rubbed her freckled nose with the back of her hand. "Who do you think it belongs to? The president?"

Aaliyah stopped walking a few feet ahead and spun around to face them, her mouth making the shape of scorn as she glared at Bella. "Are you kidding me? Why would the president be here?" She shook her head and moved toward the plane's door, her fingers probing the seam and lock. "I don't think we'll get in there, and we're wasting time here, anyway. We need to check out the camp, see if we can help that lady."

Noah felt his insides contract in on themselves at her words. Aaliyah had spent the day convincing him to go back and help the woman that the men had taken, and Noah had agreed... but that didn't mean Noah thought they actually had

a chance of saving her. How could three kids go up against those men? Noah had tried to tell Aaliyah that they couldn't do it, but she had just kept arguing.

Even Bella had her doubts, standing with her arms crossed, eyebrows scrunched together. "We don't know for sure that she's even there anymore. Maybe they killed her already."

But Bella had quickly agreed with Aaliyah, who had been unrelenting until eventually he'd agreed to go back, too. It was an easy decision when he realized the girls would just go off by themselves if he didn't go too.

So there they were, heading toward the conservation camp when they'd stumbled over the plane. They'd seen it flying low earlier that day, and finding it in the field unattended had rattled him. Who would just leave a plane like that by itself, without even a guard stationed? Whoever it was either figured they were so big and tough they weren't at any risk, or they'd thought the place was deserted.

And both options were bad news for Noah and the girls. Not only would those guys at the camp kill them without a second thought, there was someone else around, too, an unknown person with an unknown purpose, and that made him extremely nervous.

As Noah stared at the plane, lost in thought, a gunshot made him and the others turn. The noise was at once sharp and flat and came from the direction of the conservation camp, which was about half a mile away. His ears strained for any more shots, but there were none. He wiped his palms on his shorts and glanced around, catching the worried look on Bella's face, the way Aaliyah's jaw tightened, arms crossed over her chest.

The moon behind the haze was low on the horizon, a thin, blurry slice of light. Shadows slanted and turned from gray to black and back again to gray, full of dangers and potential hazards, the sky overhead a heavy, dark canvas of brown dust and gray ash.

In a way it wasn't so unlike nighttime at Ramona Gardens. There were differences, of course. Instead of the growl of

engines and raised voices, there was the crackle of insects and calls of birds. And instead of streetlamps and neon signs, the hazy sky cast a dimmer light. But the sense of palpable danger was the same, the lingering thought that he was only a step or two away from harm. They were far from home, but somehow still in the same neighborhood.

More gunshots rang out, then fell silent. The three of them stepped closer together, all staring in the direction of the conservation camp. Crickets chirped, wind blowing through dead trees like a person gasping for water. Another round of shots, and then silence.

With each breath, he could feel the warm nighttime breeze on his face, his clothes, his hair. His skin was sticky with sweat and his body was sore from all the cycling. He felt his stomach twist with anxiety, hunger gnawing at him.

All he wanted to do was run far away, get somewhere safe where the fact he was so alone wasn't staring him in the face. But instead, he glanced at Aaliyah, taking in her determined expression, and pulled out the bat from his T-shirt. Adrenaline and anxiety made him feel shaky, but she gave him an approving nod, which helped a little. Then the girls picked up their sharpened sticks and they were ready.

"They didn't have guns before," Bella said as the three of them started walking toward the camp. Small sticks and debris crunched underfoot as they continued over the burned and wrecked landscape, keeping to the shadows and moving from cover to cover as they got nearer.

"Maybe it's whoever was on that plane. Maybe they just got rid of those bad guys for us." Bella looked so hopeful, for a minute Noah almost allowed himself to believe it might be true. But then he reminded himself that there was no way he'd be that lucky. His hand moved to his neck, feeling his mother's absence as keenly as the missing cross that should have rested just below his collar bones.

They reached the edge of the conservation camp and Noah could hear raised voices and smell a fire burning close by. Fear caught him around the neck and wouldn't let go, icy fingers

digging into his skin, nails clawing at his neck. The men were still there, and they needed to get closer to figure out what was actually going on. But he didn't want to.

As he took a step forward, he felt his father's presence so keenly it took the breath from his lungs, an almost tangible force that was pushing him backward, telling him to save himself, to listen to his gut instincts.

He took another step and heard someone whispering his name, then froze, hand on the bat, sweat making his palms slick. His eyes darted around, mouth open, wondering if there was someone else there with him, if it was Bella or Aaliyah saying his name. But neither of them said a word, and the sound of his own breathing was too loud.

"Are you okay?" Bella said under her breath as she joined him beside a stack of plaster and bricks. Aaliyah kept creeping forward, stopping a few yards ahead and shooting them an impatient glare.

Noah slowly turned to face Bella, feeling like he'd seen a ghost. The air was still and silent, thick with dust and ash, the sounds of the desolate landscape quiet and haunting. After a long moment, he shook his head. "We can't do this. We're going to end up dead."

Suddenly everything smelled bad. The air was stale and rotten, with just a hint of burned flesh, of sulfur, like garbage rotting in the sun. Bella swapped her sharpened stick into her other hand and reached for his. "We can do this, Noah. And you can't turn back now. Aaliyah is going to charge right in there and get herself killed or something dumb. She needs your help."

Noah closed his eyes, feeling torn between his loyalty to Aaliyah and his memory of the young woman who so clearly needed someone's help... and then his ingrained sense of self preservation on the other.

He saw his dad in his mind's eye, sitting in his favorite chair in the living room in the house they'd lived in before he got locked up, with a serious, far-away look on his face as he stared at the gray walls and dreamed of providing his family

with a better life. His dad hadn't listened to his instincts when he got in trouble, he'd put himself at risk and ended up in jail. And then Noah had ended up at Ramona Gardens with Joe and he didn't know who got the worst punishment.

He squeezed his eyes and felt like he could cry. He wanted his mom so badly, but all he had was Aaliyah and Bella and they were his family now. So he had to go with them. He had to help that lady. Even if he didn't want to.

He had to go even if coming up against the men—faceless, nameless, violent men—would feel like going into battle all over again against Joe. How many times would he need to stand up and fight? How many times until he was safe? That's all he wanted. Safety. Food and shelter. A hug from his mom.

He choked back a cry and flicked open his eyes, locking his gaze on Bella. He swallowed, torn in two but knowing there was only one direction he could go. "You're right. Let's do this."

Bella gave him a nod like she understood, and they started following Aaliyah. The three of them moved silently, alternating between walking and crawling on their hands and knees, trying to get as close as they could to figure out what was going on, who was there at the fire with the men.

All the while, Noah was dreading the moment when they'd have to confront the men and everything they symbolized. He wasn't sure how they were going to get through this, but he had to figure out something, because none of them would leave this place alive if they were captured.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Noah

Eleven Days After

Noah and the girls crouched thirty yards from the campfire, hidden behind a pile of debris. He leaned around a shard of plasterboard and stared at the man sitting on the ground beside the blue-eyed lady, blinking, sure he was hallucinating. The man looked like Johannes Virtanen, the brother of his dad's friend, Matti, and the man her mother had hated for years, even though Noah had never really been sure why. He still remembered the day his mom had slapped Johannes at the courthouse, how she'd stalked off, calling for Noah to follow.

At first it made no sense to him that Johannes was there, but then it hit him—he hadn't been the only one searching for someone he loved. And if Noah's dad was dead, Matti was dead, too. Because they were always together; the best of friends. Noah had seen so much death, now, that the thought of someone else he knew being gone left him kind of numb.

He glanced at the others sitting with Johannes: a pretty Hispanic woman and two little kids—he could tell by the way she held them that she was their mom—and a dappled white dog with fluffy ears and tail. The three men stood arguing on the other side of the fire about whether or not they should just shoot Johannes and his family, and Noah noticed that the black guy and the guy with the crooked, lumpy nose held rifles now, instead of the barbed-wire bat.

Aaliyah's elbow in his ribs made him turn, and he frowned at her. "What?"

"We're going to need a distraction. Something to get their attention so we can attack from behind and surprise them."

"They've got guns, Aaliyah. You've got a sharpened stick."

She blew out an annoyed breath. "That's why we need a distraction."

Noah's thoughts raced as he looked at her, taking her all in, her dirty face, her grubby clothes. There were huge circles under her brown eyes, and she looked more stressed than he'd ever seen her, fingernails scratching at the scars on her arms. He'd already decided he had to do this for her, and nodded. "Okay, give me a minute." He glanced back at the fire, thoughts racing and bumping into one another. "Could we set off an explosion or something?"

"I know," Bella whispered, producing their box of matches from her pocket. "We drop one of these in the gas tank of one of the cars in the parking lot. It'll cause a gigantic explosion."

"It won't work," Noah replied. "I saw a TV show on that once."

A sudden ruckus broke out at the fire, a young child's screams cutting through the air, accompanied by a dog's frantic barking. Noah's head snapped up to see the guy with the broken nose dragging the Hispanic woman toward the partially collapsed dormitory behind him.

Johannes held the screaming toddler and the little boy, one in each arm, shouting over the top of the children's cries, frantic to get to the woman, while the blue-eyed lady seemed to shrink backward into the shadows, like she was trying to make herself invisible. The dog growled at the black guy, snapping and snarling, but the black guy ignored him, keeping the rifle trained on Johannes, a smirk on his face like he was enjoying himself.

Johannes grew more and more upset, while the third man now held the other rifle down by his side, and seemed to egg

Johannes on, taunting him. The Hispanic woman disappeared into the darkness of the dormitory, dragged by one arm, and Noah felt like the gaping black hole beyond the door had swallowed him up, too.

For a moment he just stared at the doorway, bile and anger mixing in his throat, burning his esophagus, the air tight like it had been slapped, the children still crying and the dog still barking.

“Come on... we have to do something and we have to do it now!” Aaliyah shook her head from where she crouched in the ash-stained dirt, bitter tears staining her cheeks. “We have to stop him before he hurts her and it’s too late.”

“What do we do?” Bella’s eyes had gone wide, and she tugged at one of the plaits hanging over her shoulder. The air seemed supercharged, the way it had in that moment just before Joe would strike Noah, the atoms themselves slamming into one another.

“I’m going to be the distraction,” Aaliyah said, already standing. “I’ll get their eyes on me, keep them watching me. You two circle around and go for the rifles. I don’t care what happens. Just get those guns from them.”

“How?” Noah glanced at Bella, at her stick thin arms. “This isn’t going to work. Please, Aaliyah. Look at those guys and look at Bella!”

“Then Bella is the distraction. Come on. Get out there!” Aaliyah dragged Bella to her feet and gave her a rough shove, and then looked at Noah with a wild, almost deranged look on her face. “You go for the black guy. I’m going for the other guy.”

Before Noah could respond, she sprinted into the darkness and disappeared.

“What am I supposed to do?” To Noah’s surprise, Bella hadn’t started crying. Instead, she stood a little taller.

Noah didn’t have time to think about the lunacy of what they were about to do. They’d already reached the peak of the rollercoaster and were rushing down the other side. He got to

his feet, holding the bat in one hand, and rested the other on Bella's shoulder. "Just give me some time to get into place. Count to like, thirty. Then head out there toward the fire and make a lot of noise. Can you do that?"

"I can."

"Be careful, Bella."

As she threw her arms around his neck, he felt a strange sense of peace coming over him. Maybe he wasn't listening to his instincts, but he was doing the right thing, which somehow made his fears curl in on themselves a little, tamed the anxious snakes coiling in his gut.

Stepping into the darkness with his hands wrapped around the bat, Noah felt his dad's presence again. But this time, it wasn't pushing him back. This time it felt like a gentle hand on his shoulder, guiding him, supporting him on his impossible task.

He crept through the shadows until he reached the side of the collapsed dormitory, where he pressed himself up against the brick wall. He could smell fear and desperation all wrapped up in layers of dust and soot and decomposing bodies. The dog pricked its ears and turned to him, no longer growling, but no one noticed as the little girl continued to scream for her mommy and Johannes alternatively shouted and pleaded with the men to let his wife go.

Noah narrowed his focus, staring at the black guy just a few yards away, the rifle still trained on Johannes. The man was no longer just a nameless stranger. He was Joe. He was the men who'd hurt Aaliyah. He was every monster from every nightmare Noah had ever had. He tightened his grip around his bat and readied himself. A couple of seconds later, he heard Bella's small voice.

"Hey! Yoo hoo! Sorry to interrupt, but I was just wondering if you guys had space for one more? I'm traveling alone."

The sound of her sweet, friendly voice silenced the group, and Noah felt his body tense as they turned to look at her

strolling into the clear area around the fire. She held the stick point-side down, like it was nothing but a walking-aid, and wore her most guileless expression, twin blond plaits hanging over her shoulders and eyes wide.

This was it. Noah ran for the man, the bat cocked high over his head, his feet flying over the rough ground, making him feel alive for the first time since he'd found his dad. Heat prickled his skin, his chest swelling with every step.

As he rushed at the man, he could taste the bitterness of all the beatings he'd taken, remember all the times he'd suffered at the hands of Joe, all the times he'd heard the neighbor's kids crying in pain through the thin walls at the hands of their own aggressors. With the memories galvanizing him, he charged forward and swung the bat.

The man shouted in pain and surprise as the bat smashed into his shoulder with a satisfying whack, and before he could spin around and raise the rifle, fury coursed through Noah, filling him with an almost superhuman-strength.

He pulled the bat back with a swift movement and this time he aimed for the man's head, swinging the bat around with all his pent up anger and rage. There was a sickening crunch as it made contact with the side of the man's head, and—almost as if the gates of hell had been forced open by the impact—chaos erupted.

The white dog darted forward, jaws clamping on the man's calf, while Johannes ran to join them, wrestling the rifle from the man's arms. Behind them, a shot was discharged, and Noah looked over his shoulder to see Bella and Aaliyah fighting the third man, who tossed them away like rag dolls. But they kept rushing at him, kept going for the rifle.

Noah pivoted and ran to help them as the man with the broken nose emerged from the partially collapsed dormitory, shouting threats, obscenities. But Noah didn't stop, running at the third man with his bat raised and bringing it down on the arm carrying the rifle just a moment after he pulled the trigger, the sound deafening.

The man dropped the rifle, howling with pain and anger, while Aaliyah scooped it up in triumph. She turned it on the man, holding it in shaking arms. “Get your hands in the air!” she shouted.

The man laughed, although his eyes darted around, worried, as he nursed his right hand. “You’ve got no idea how to shoot that thing.”

“But I do,” Johannes said, stepping forward, a red glow from the fire lighting his features from below as he swept the other rifle between the three men. “Camilla, take the gun from that girl. Let’s get these men tied up.”

“Johannes,” Camilla said, her voice thick with emotion. Noah realized the children had stopped crying and looked over to where the woman’s voice was coming from.

The blue-eyed lady, the broken, defeated soul they’d hoped to save, lay on the ground beside Camilla, a terrible bloom of red bursting forth on her chest. Noah remembered the shots that had been fired and realized she’d been caught by a stray bullet. Her gurgled breath broke through the stunned silence, wet and terrifying. She coughed twice, twin sprays of red arcing into the air, then went still.

“No!” Aaliyah’s voice filled with despair. “Someone help her. Help her!”

“It’s too late,” Camilla replied, her voice hoarse as she ran a tender hand over the young woman’s bruised face.

Noah felt the proximity of death all around him, like a heavy fog inching closer and closer, threatening to consume them all. He could do nothing but stand in place, frozen, as Camilla searched the campsite and found materials to bind the men, before she took the rifle from Aaliyah’s trembling hands.

“It’s okay,” she said to Noah as she moved closer to him. A hand on his arm, a gentle, grateful squeeze. “You kids saved us. You and your friends did an amazing thing.”

“Noah? Is that you?”

Noah turned and saw the wave of recognition wash over Johannes’ face as he stared at Noah like he couldn’t believe it.

But all Noah could do was nod as he looked with concern at Aaliyah, who now crouched beside the young woman they'd come back to save. Aaliyah looked like a wounded animal as her hands hovered over the woman's body, not touching her.

They'd come together and risen up against three monsters, defeating them, yet somehow they'd still failed.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Erin

Twelve Days After

Erin tossed and turned, feeling something pulling her from the fog of sleep. It sounded like Kalevi and he needed her. But the more she struggled to get to him, the thicker the fog grew until she was encased in concrete. She saw George Vander's face, appearing like it was carved out of stone, and felt an overwhelming rage to wrap her fingers around his neck.

Then a hand tightened on her shoulder, shaking her, and the concrete dissolved. She sat up gasping for breath, eyes adjusting to the darkness, slowly making out Fiona's frightened face. In the distance, she heard the dogs barking, Tapio's voice sounding the alarm.

Erin's thoughts sharpened as she grounded herself back in reality, feeling the swathes of sheets around her legs, the cushion of the mattress, her skin sticky from the heat of the night. "What is it? What's happening?"

"There's a group of vehicles approaching. Quick, get up. You have to get ready."

Erin pressed her lips closed against the other questions that fought to get out, standing up and grabbing her rifle. She exchanged a glance with Fiona and saw the young woman's terror, and forced herself to pause, one hand skimming Fiona's

cheek. “It’s going to be okay, Fiona. We’re prepared and we are ready.”

Fiona bit her lips, hands in tight fists by her side, deep shadows hiding the details of her features. “All I can think about is what happened to Ian. I can’t watch someone else I love die.”

“None of us are going to die,” Erin said in a firm voice. “Where’s Daniella?”

“She’s in the bedroom with one of my dogs.”

“Go be with her. I’m going to defend our home like our lives depend on it. You have nothing to worry about, I promise. Just take care of that sweet girl, okay?”

Fiona nodded and Erin turned away from her, hurrying through the darkened house, her footfalls empty echoes as urgent shouts reached her from outside. She glanced at the clock on the wall as she passed it, noting the time. Randy Ulrich had chosen the darkest hours of the night, the time when nightmarish monsters liked to play, to make his move.

She stepped outside onto the veranda, hearing Tapio’s voice calling to the others. As her brain hurried to play catch up, she paused and took a moment to scan the makeshift wall, her eyes picking out the holes they’d left so that they could fire at any attackers, as well as the natural gaps in the materials that left them vulnerable. They had made the wall as sturdy as they could, but it was by no means impenetrable. All that really stood between her, her home, and whatever was coming was a pile of debris and old farm equipment.

In the distance, cutting across the field to her right, she saw a set of headlights that slashed and shifted over the uneven ground, the lights filled with the promise of something awful to come. It didn’t escape her they were coming from the direction of the Vanders’ property, and she couldn’t help but wonder if George had made good on his promise to send Randy Ulrich directly to her house.

The thought of George Vander brought a fresh surge of emotion. The photograph from yesterday was seared into her

memory, and she had to pause mid-step and force herself to focus. There was no time for distractions.

With her pulse racing, she stepped down and checked over her rifle, grabbing extra ammunition from the pile they'd left at the top stairs. Once she was loaded up, she took a few frantic steps away from the house and looked back around the building, raising herself onto her toes to see over the wall. What she saw sent a slice of fear stabbing through her chest, and she swallowed and braced herself: several lights from other vehicles were just behind the first.

“Tapio! They're coming! There are four vehicles headed right for us.”

He paused and stared at her, decades of marriage like a bridge between them, and as she held his gaze, she'd never felt more connected to him. He gave a brief nod before shouting, “Let's go!”

At the sound of Tapio's voice, Otto came barreling around the corner, ears streaming behind him, and man and dog sprinted for the rear section of the wall. Erin and Martha went running after Tapio and Otto, while Paul stayed to defend the front of the house, just in case.

As they ran across the yard in the darkness, Erin's heart pounded, her eyes locked on Randy Ulrich's car and the three other vehicles approaching. She smelled exhaust fumes in the air and for a moment she wondered if this was all a trap or a trick of some kind, a diversion before the main attack, but in her gut, she knew that Randy was desperate enough to do whatever it took, and he'd drive right at them if he thought he could find out what happened to his sons.

They took up positions behind the wall, and Erin fought against her fear and did her best not to let it overwhelm her. When she looked at Tapio's clenched jaw and Martha's calm determination, she felt a surge of strength coursing through her veins. With them by her side, nothing and no one would be able to take what mattered most away from them.

She turned her gaze through the face-sized hole they'd left for exactly this purpose and propped her rifle up in the gap,

heart pounding in her chest as she watched the cars coming closer. She fixed her gaze on one of the headlights and aimed her rifle at it, waiting until they were close enough that she could see shadowed faces and the shape of their weapons, then fired, feeling her focus narrow, her mind going numb to the reality of what she was doing. One thought ran on repeat: *defend her home.*

The vehicles seemed to roar as they swarmed forward like a wave crashing down on them, and Erin braced herself for the fight ahead. She gritted her teeth as bullets flew through the surrounding air, feeling a sense of grim determination settle over her like armor.

As Erin squeezed off return fire at the oncoming attack, the bullets kept coming right back. Each second felt violent and cruel, and her senses, overloaded and desperate, ceased to discriminate about what mattered and what didn't. Every time she popped up, she knew a bullet was flying directly at her, but it was the ones that came a fraction of a second after, when she heard the crack of them passing close enough to make the air vibrate with the force of their passing, that made her heart seize up.

The indiscriminate firing continued for a few more moments, until, with a suddenness that was shocking, the drivers hit the brakes, turning the cars side on to the barricade thirty feet out. She could imagine Randy Ulrich and his family pouring out the doors on the other side, hitting the ground and readying themselves to continue the barrage.

Erin sucked in a ragged breath and the deep silence lengthened. She took another breath, trying to steady her racing pulse as her eyes probed the darkness, feeling the dusty debris of the wall pressed up against her chest, her arms. She could sense Tapio and Martha's gaze on her as they waited for Randy Ulrich to make his move, but she didn't look away from the line of vehicles.

A moment later, his voice sounded through the night, deep and resonating with a pain Erin recognized. "I'm here about my sons. I have on good authority that you know what happened to them."

Erin closed her eyes, remembering the image of Fiona shooting Randy's sons after they'd killed Ian. Tapio had burned their bodies, and they'd hidden all traces of the men until Randy had seen George using the electric ATV they'd left behind.

"We don't know what you're talking about," Tapio called back. "And if you heard that from George Vander, he's a liar! Take your people and get out of here, or you're going to regret it! You're trespassing on private property."

There was a moment of silence. "That might be true," said Randy, and his voice sounded oddly detached. "But his version of events sounded like it could have really happened. And if my boys are dead, I want to know. Besides, who are you going to call to stop us *trespassing*?" He spat out the word like he had a bad taste in his mouth. "The police? 911? Go on, be my guest. Otherwise, tell me what the heck happened to my sons and why you killed them."

Erin's body tensed as she realized that George had not only pointed the finger at them, but he'd told Randy that they'd killed the two young men. Tapio was the first to speak, and his voice sounded odd even to Erin. "We have no idea what you're talking about."

The quiet thickened, and Erin could feel their guilt rolling off them like waves.

Then Randy's next words confirmed her fears: "I'm not asking for details about what went down. I know my sons are dead and now I know you killed them. Do you know what that means? Well, it's time to pay the price for what you did."

With that, one of the vehicles' engines roared to life, and the next moment a beaten-up truck surged forward toward them, bearing down on the wall they were hiding behind.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Erin

Twelve Days After

Erin stared at the vehicle barreling toward her in the dark, her feet taking root in the earth she'd lovingly tended to for decades. And slowly, a strange stillness settled over her. It wasn't quite peace—but perhaps acceptance that this could well be the last stand of her life.

She held steadfastly to her position at the gap in the barricade, knowing that it would be up to her and the others to hold back Randy before he took everything, including the home she was determined to protect until her sons returned.

At the same time, she heard a roar, calling the waiting group to action: “Attack!”

As the group behind the cars started to shoot at them again, she gritted her teeth against fear and doubt and continued to fire round after round at their enemies, determined not to give in as the vehicle kept coming. In that moment, it felt like time had slowed down and she was filled with a sense of clarity and purpose. She fired at the driver's side, while the others continued to trade fire with the attackers, one eye on the vehicle, bracing herself for its impact.

She felt the moment when the truck hit the wall, felt the long pile of debris and unused parts shudder, dust flying up like the earth was quaking all over again. The section that took

a direct hit crumbled inward, leaving the front of the truck visible, stuck between sections of the barricade, the headlights shining on the back wall of the house while clouds of particulate rose into the night like steam. The engine hissed and clicked and then went silent.

Gunfire continued beside her, Tapio and Martha shooting at the group gathered behind the vehicles. There were cries of pain, of anger, but the feeling that they'd caught their enemies unprepared was short-lived, as the bullets coming back toward them were more coordinated, more purposeful.

Erin's heart raced, adrenaline surging through her veins like a life-giving current. "Keep going," she shouted to Tapio. "Don't let them get near. I'll take the truck!"

"Got it," Tapio shouted back, ducking and then popping up again, squeezing off two shots.

Erin glanced at Martha, seeing the fierce determination on her old friend's face. Daniella was inside the house, and Erin knew that Martha and Paul would do whatever it took to keep their granddaughter safe.

Shifting her gaze, she readied her rifle and focused on the vehicle, stepping closer and keeping one shoulder against the barricade, waiting to see who would get out of it. She saw movement in the dark, a door opened, then she heard a groan. Otto moved beside her, and she felt the brush of his body against her leg, his presence fortifying her.

The headlights shimmered, the beams rising and falling, cutting through the darkness and dissipating into nothingness as they hit the brick of her home. The area beyond the light was gone, covered by a veil of darkness, the world behind it vanished, the fields and trees nothing but a dark, hollow void.

The air was warm and still, and the shots and screams behind Erin harsh and full of pain. She could sense the acrid smell of gunpowder and anger, the smokiness in the air and the metallic scent of blood.

And then a weak female voice coming from the truck: "Help me, please."

Erin felt her gut clench as the fog of war cleared from her brain, and she realized that something was wrong. Whoever was still in the truck was one of the bad guys, but the sound of the cry—the despair, the pleading, the sheer humanity in it—made her blood run cold.

As Erin's mind rippled with confusion and doubt, she aimed her rifle at the vehicle and continued to move closer, fighting against her own instincts. Gunfire and sweat, fear and desperation filled the air. A woman's distant scream to the left, a man's enraged cry to the right.

"Randy?" she called out, but she knew the voice calling for help wasn't his. She stepped over pieces of debris knocked loose from the barricade, Otto close by her side, until she stood right next to the vehicle, aiming at the front seat, keeping her finger hovering just above the trigger. The hood of the truck was only a foot away from her, and after the dazzle of the headlights, it took her eyes a moment to adjust to the dark, for her mind to make sense of what she was seeing.

A woman her age sat in the truck's front passenger seat, her head bleeding profusely from a wound above her right ear, looking dazed and letting out groans of pain. She no doubt had other wounds Erin couldn't see—the woman's eyes were glassy, her breath labored like she didn't have long.

As Erin debated what to do, her thoughts were disrupted by a familiar voice shouting, "Don't move!"

Her head snapped up, and she shifted the rifle toward the voice to see Randy Ulrich on the other side of the truck, near enough to the front that the glow of the headlights illuminated his sneer and the cowboy hat perched on his head. He stood with his pistol raised and pointed directly at her chest.

"Drop the gun," he ordered. "Now."

The guttural moans of the wounded reached her, the staccato gunfire, shouts of anger and triumph. The ping of bullets against metal. A scream.

Blood roared in Erin's ears and she felt light-headed, her grip on the rifle wavering. She knew that if she lowered her

weapon, she was as good as dead—but if she didn't, he might shoot her anyway. She saw the cold determination in Randy's eyes and knew that he would kill her without hesitation.

Erin tried to think of anything that could get her out of this situation alive, but her mind was blank. All she could focus on was the gun in Randy's hand and the woman bleeding to death in front of her, the roar of the guns and the anguished cries as the battle raged behind her.

As she stared at Randy, she could sense his desperation, his worry for his sons, and his unrelenting hunger for revenge if his worst fears were confirmed. She held his gaze, seeing so much of herself in him that it stole the air from her chest.

She sucked in a breath, feeling the hot, angry vibrations in the air, the jittery, edgy energy of battle. Erin knew that she was in a bad position, but she also knew that she couldn't just give up. If she did, everyone in the house would be at Randy's mercy. She had to find a way to talk him down, to get him to see reason.

"Randy, listen to me," she said, projecting her voice over the other terrible sounds. "You don't have to do this. We can work something out. There's some other way."

"There is no other way," Randy shouted. "You're all going to die tonight unless you tell me what happened to our sons."

"Our sons?"

His gaze flicked to the woman in the front seat, and Erin's followed. The woman looked back at them with dull, listless eyes, the lids heavy in the gloom. It was the mother of the men that had died in Fiona's house. In that moment, pain and grief and loss wrapped around Erin like a red and endless chain, like a forest that is never silent, filled with ever-changing whispers and hoots and languorous scraping, like the desperate breathing of a beast that refused to die.

Erin dragged her eyes back to Randy, tangential thoughts about Kalevi slicing through her brain. "Your wife is going to die if we can't work something out. She needs help."

“What she needs is to know the truth about our sons,” Randy screamed, spittle flying through the air, each droplet illuminated by the headlights.

Between the gunshots that continued to tear through the air, Erin heard a low growl, and she knew Otto was moving around the truck. She didn’t dare look at the dog, not willing to take her eyes off Randy. He looked like a man on the edge, like he had nothing else to lose and would do anything to get what he wanted. And that made him more dangerous than ever.

“We can talk, but you need to tell your friends to stop attacking my home,” Erin replied, knowing that she had to keep him talking. Her words were a mixture of truth and lies, a desperate attempt to buy time until she could figure a way out of this. “Randy, please. I know you’re hurting right now, but we can help each other. I’ll do whatever it takes to make this right.”

“Enough!” he shouted, suddenly shifting his gun and aiming it straight at her heart, and she knew he was about to fire.

In a desperate move, Erin let out a scream and dived to the side, frantically scrambling for cover as his bullets struck the barricade and debris rained down around her.

Otto’s growl intensified, then Randy let out a cry of pain, sharp with shock. Without hesitating, she shot to her feet, got her eyes on Randy, and pulled the trigger, the sound deafening, a thunderclap echoing through the forest of grief crowding her mind.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Erin

Twelve Days After

Erin watched as her bullet struck Randy Ulrich in the center of his chest. The shock and force of it threw him backward half a step. Blood, dark and coppery in the night air, erupted from the wound. His chest rose and fell with heavy puffs as he tried to draw air into his body, and then again as he breathed out. His eyes were squeezed shut, lips wide in a silent cry.

At the same moment, a gust of wind thrashed the grass and trees back and forth, their branches and limbs blown about with reckless abandon.

The sound of the gunshot seemed to hang in the air, the echo amplifying on itself until it finally faded away leaving nothing but Randy standing beside the truck, his mouth open and hands clutched to the ragged hole in his chest, pistol dropped somewhere at his feet.

The wind dropped. Silence followed. Even the battle raging behind Erin seemed to have paused. Her attention focused on Randy's wheezing breath, then another, every second a struggle. The smell of his pain and grief intensified by the heat of the night had become so powerful, so concentrated, that the whole world seemed to have been dipped in it.

Erin shared his loss, his sorrowfulness, their self-pity as palpable as the bleary light that had forged a tinted layer of gray ash and dust over everything and everyone for a thousand miles in every direction.

Randy took a single, shaky breath before dropping to his knees and then falling forward, disappearing behind the truck. Erin took a moment to glance back over her shoulder and saw Martha and Tapio still stationed by the wall, staring through the gaps in the barricade, rifles trained on the eerily quiet scene on the other side.

“What’s happening?” she called to them, her words restoring meaning to the strange, dark world she’d suddenly found herself in, where her enemy looked more like her own reflection than the monsters in her mind. “They’re both down over here.”

“I think it’s over,” Tapio called back, body rigid as he continued to stare at the vehicles, a touch of sadness in his voice and very little triumph. “I’m going to head out there and see if anyone is still alive.”

“I’ll cover you.” Martha glanced at Tapio as she reloaded her rifle.

Tapio nodded his thanks and then strode toward Erin until they passed at the truck. He paused only briefly to take in the dying woman in the front seat before his gaze turned to Erin. He raised his hand, the movement a blur until it neared Erin’s face. Only then did she notice the sweat and grime staining his skin, the dirt ground into the grooves and folds of his knuckles.

He’d always been handsome and rugged, even as age and sorrow had stooped his shoulders and weathered his face, but now they were emotionally more connected than they had been in decades, and Erin could see his eyes held a distant sadness, like he was contemplating the meaning of it all, like what he’d just had to do in order to defend their home was weighing on him. As their eyes locked, the blue of his had turned gray, both sad and intense.

He stepped closer and his hand wrapped gently around the side of her neck. His thumb traced the shell of her ear in a circle, then his fingertips brushed the line of her jaw. His touch and the look in his eyes said so much. He hesitated before pressing his lips against hers, and Erin's hand moved up to his face, fingers threading through his hair as she pulled him in close for a brief, tender kiss.

They pulled apart, and he turned and walked into the dark field, moving cautiously at first and then more quickly as it became clear there were no signs of life at the three remaining vehicles.

As he moved away, Erin took a breath to steady herself and then stepped around the truck, cutting through the twin brilliant headlights until she saw Otto standing guard over Randy's body. She took a moment to crouch beside Otto and wrapped her arms around his neck, burrowing her face in his hair and welcoming his familiar doggy smell.

"You're a good boy," she whispered to him before standing up and taking a step closer to where Randy lay face down, body folded over the crumbled remains of the barricade. She kicked his pistol away and then kneeled down beside him and pressed two fingers against his neck, feeling nothing but the warmth of his slowly cooling skin. Crimson continued to leak from the exit wound at his back. His cowboy hat lay upside down on the ground beside him.

A soft groan reached her at the same time that a single gunshot rang out from the direction of the three vehicles. Erin shot to her feet, rifle raised, a fresh surge of adrenaline pulsing through her.

"Tapio!" She looked into the darkness, her breath tight in her chest until she heard Tapio's return answer.

"I'm fine. They're all gone... now."

Erin released the breath caught in her chest and turned to the truck, surprised to see the woman with her eyes open staring at her. At first Erin thought the woman might be dead, but she blinked several times and let out another groan.

Like a migratory bird pulled by forces it didn't understand, Erin felt drawn to the dying woman who had come to find out the fate of her sons. Erin knew in her heart that she would do the same for either of her boys if the situation was reversed. And while the woman's sons had committed a terrible crime and deserved what Fiona had done, Erin couldn't separate herself from the woman, no matter how hard she tried.

She crawled into the driver's seat and sat opposite the woman, taking the pistol from her weak grip and staring at her for a few moments. The woman was in her fifties and had tattoos on her arms that reached down to her wrists and up to her elbows. Her face was lined with stress, her mouth dry and cracked, eyes vacant from the pain.

As the moment stretched, the woman took shallow breaths through her mouth, a rasping wheeze that carried the scent of dust and death. Erin licked her lips, suddenly nervous. "You came here to find out about your sons?"

The woman gave a barely there nod. "Please... Please tell me what you know."

Erin knew from experience there was no kind way to say the words she was about to utter. Better to just get them out there before they fermented in her mouth. She held the woman's gaze, even though it made all the spaces between her ribs ache. "I'm sorry. They're dead."

The woman let out a cry that sounded more animal than human, like that of a beast being led to the abattoir, a moment of pained noise before someone ripped open their chest to expose the beating heart inside, filled with the knowledge that they may be breathing but were already gone. She closed her eyes, her hands shaking in her lap. Her voice, barely a whisper, "Where are they?"

At first the question surprised Erin, but then she realized the woman was asking about her son's bodies. In that moment, she was transported to the cold sterile graveyard where they'd buried Kalevi. The place that had never felt like him, a place she could never reconcile with her vibrant, cheeky, wonderful son. She knew his physical body lay there, but his spirit was

here in the house, in the land, by the road where he died that was filled with wildflowers when winter melted into spring.

It had been two decades since he died and she knew his body would have been stripped down to nothing but white bones by now, but at least she knew where those bones lay. The least she could do was give the woman the same knowledge, the same small amount of peace.

Erin stared at the mother of the two slain men. She was so close to death now, she only had moments left, and Erin let the words spill over her lips, even though each one sliced like a knife through her heart. “My husband burned their bodies. The ashes were buried in the land around here.”

The woman’s labored breathing was shallow, ragged, and filled the cab of the truck. But it wasn’t full of pain or suffering anymore, but of exhaustion and acceptance. A single tear tracked down the woman’s cheek and she nodded one last time before giving in to the darkness, forever.

Erin stayed with the woman until the moment she took her last breath. Then she climbed out of the truck, stepped around Randy Ulrich’s body, and stood with her back against the front grille, staring at the back of her house lit up by the truck’s headlights, at the collapsed barn and the land she’d worked, and at the trees that Johannes, Kalevi, and Matti had climbed all those years ago. This was her place, her home, and she’d come close to losing it all tonight.

But somehow, even worse, she’d been forced to come face to face with her own anguish over the brutal question of what had happened to Kalevi, which caught her off guard and left her feeling dizzy and off-kilter. Turning slowly, she kept her eyes on the dark expanse of field, holding her breath until she saw Tapio’s silhouette coming closer.

They may have won this battle, but she could almost see the challenges ahead, rising in insurmountable peaks. George Vander had declared war: not only had he sent a murderous group to their doorstep, there was still the question of the photograph Tapio had found. And it would take everything they had to meet him head on and win.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Lilly

Twelve Days After

Lilly felt grateful for the small moment of quietude as she walked through the patch of forest beside the mud-brick house with Matti. It was peaceful and serene in the dawn light, despite the damage inflicted by the fires and the earthquakes.

Even though the tree trunks were blackened and small landslides were visible, the birds had returned and green shoots could be seen pushing their way through the ash-stained earth. And Lilly needed a moment of serenity before she started her search for her father's meds again, needed it to reconnect with herself after learning the truth about her mother.

She looked sideways at Matti as they walked, hand-in-hand, toward where he'd set snares close to several rabbit burrows yesterday. Matti's face caught the hazy morning light coming through the trees, his features angular and attractive, his mouth relaxed, blue eyes turned the color of a bright, clear sky.

Lilly smiled at him. "Did you ever see that plane you and Pip saw yesterday take off again?"

"No. I've been thinking about it, though. Wondering who it might be."

"What's your idea?"

“I think it’s someone searching for a lost family member. I can’t see any other reason someone would head out here in a fancy plane like that. Between the earthquakes and the fires, there’s nothing here for anyone anymore.”

“I doubt there’s much left for anyone *anywhere*, anymore. The only people who are going to survive this are those with a lot of resourcefulness and cunning. Do you think it’s worth checking it out?”

Matti looked into the distance, then gave a slight shake of his head. “No. I don’t think it’s worth investigating. It’s definitely not anyone from my family, and everyone you care about is here, now. We could just be asking for trouble if we head over there, and I think we’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime.”

Lilly squeezed his hand and nodded. “We don’t have to check it out. But you have to know they’d come for you if they could. And once we get my dad’s meds, we’re going to figure out a way to get us all to Texas.”

Matti looked at the ground and let out a low chuckle. “You’re really something, Lilly.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Her smile widened, and she realized she felt safe in his presence, as if his physical closeness alone was enough to give her a sense of security and belonging. He smelled of the forest and the outdoors. He smelled of summer. Her father always said that the forest was the best place to escape the madness of the world, and that’s exactly what Matti was to her.

“It’s so strange to finally know the truth about my mother,” Lily said, eyes still on him, feeling free to unburden herself now that they were away from everyone else, including Julia’s prying eyes. “At first I felt confused and a little angry, but the more I process it, the more I feel free, like I was playing a part in this elaborate charade for most of my life. All this time I thought Julia was jealous of how much my father loved my mother, but it turns out it was all just a lie.”

Matti squeezed her hand. “That’s probably the only thing that wasn’t a lie. I’m sure he loved her more than anyone he’s

ever loved, whether before or after she died. He wouldn't have kept up this pretense if he didn't cherish her memory."

Lily found herself nodding. "It's a weird feeling, though. It's like if I was wrong about her, what else am I wrong about? The foundation on which I built myself was just an illusion. And I never really knew her at all, you know? I thought I did based on the few hazy memories I had and the stories my dad told me. But I have no idea who she really was."

"I guess we have a lot more in common than we thought," Matti replied. "I don't know much about my birth mother, either."

They continued walking, approaching the edge of the forested area, a field up ahead stretching out beyond the tree line, collapsed houses in the distance and a twisted length of fencing lying on its side.

Lilly knew Matti had been adopted, and that his family life had been tense and often difficult growing up in the shadow of a dead boy, but he'd been reluctant to tell her too much in their sessions back at the conservation camp. She chose her words carefully, not wanting him to shut down. "Have you seen your birth mother since you were adopted?"

Matti raked his free hand through his chin-length blond hair and shook his head. "No, she disappeared somewhere. She was so young when she had me. Sixteen. Just a kid herself. She was a distant cousin of my mom."

"It must be hard knowing she's out there somewhere."

"I try not to think about it. That's the Virtanen way. Put on a brave face and pretend everything is just fine." Matti's lips thinned, and Lilly could see a flash of pain pass over his eyes. "But I never really felt like I belonged, no matter how much my mom tried to make me feel like I was a real Virtanen. Johannes was the golden boy, of course. He could do no wrong. And I don't think my father ever really saw me at all..."

Matti's voice trailed off and Lilly waited, not saying anything, hoping he would continue to open up to her. Sticks

cracked underfoot as they walked, and a mourning dove alighted on the ground a few yards away before taking flight again, a flash of gray feathers against the blackened landscape.

Matti swallowed, glanced sideways at Lilly. “He knew I was in the house, of course. Knew I was there as a physical presence, but he’s never *known* me.” Matti let out a bitter laugh. “I tried so damn hard to get him to notice me when I was a kid. But it never did any good.”

They paused under the last tree before the ground gave way to charred, yellowing grass and a wide, open expanse of field, and turned to face one another. Matti’s hand was warm around hers, and despite his skin being rough, his touch was gentle. She felt a tingle pass from her fingers up to her head. It was like she could feel his touch through every fiber of her body, all the way through to her heart.

The coo of the dove reached them as his hand moved slowly around the back of her neck, his thumb tracing her hairline, his fingers grasping gently at her skin. He watched her, gauging her reaction, and then he leaned forward, his lips skimming hers.

Lilly reached up to touch the side of Matti’s face, carefully tracing his jawline, feeling the roughness of his beard with her fingertips. Then she was lost in the sensation of his lips on hers, the warmth of his body as he leaned in closer, his hand making its way up to cup the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair.

She’d been lonely for so long. And while she’d do anything for her father and Pip, his illness had taken a toll on her, no matter how much she tried to deny it. But now she’d finally found someone who saw her for who she really was, in all her brokenness and regardless of what secrets lay in her past, and that left her feeling more alive, more connected than ever before.

In the distance, the dove let out another coo, echoing the sound of their growing desire, but at that moment they were miles away from the rest of the world. All alone in a brief moment of bliss.

He tasted like pine needles and wood smoke, and she couldn't get enough of him as their kiss deepened. His hand slid down to her waist, pulling her closer. She ran her fingers through his hair, gripping tight as she felt herself being overwhelmed by the sensations coursing through her body. At that moment, she forgot everything but him. His smell, the feel of his body pressed against hers. The way he made her feel alive. Wanted. Needed.

They pulled away from each other reluctantly, both of them breathless, and Matti rested his forehead against hers. "That was..."

"Great," Lilly finished for him, unable to find the words to describe what she was feeling.

"I was going to say wonderful." He brushed his lips against hers again, gently. "But great works, too. I love you, Lilly."

She smiled. "I love you, too. I feel like we can get through anything together."

"It's true. We can."

"I thought the truth about my mom might destroy me, but I feel free for the first time in a long time, and it's like I don't owe Julia anything anymore, because I no longer feel bad for her. She's not living in anyone's shadow, she has no reason to resent me and Pip." She paused, her mouth forming words she hadn't fully processed in her head. "My mother wasn't a saint, which maybe means I don't have to try to be one, too." She took a step away from him, turning her face to the hazy light, closing her eyes for a moment.

When she opened them, the sun was rising behind the ash and soot in the sky, and the light had taken on a pearly glow that Lilly wished she could bottle and take with her, wished she could run and catch before the sun rose above the distant horizon and it was lost forever.

Her heart raced as she watched the ball of yellow rise higher, illuminating the shadowy creases and folds of the landscape and bringing it to life. She felt like she was

watching something rare and special. Something she might never see again.

The scent of pine and charcoal clung to the air, a lemony musk that reminded Lilly of everything and nothing all at the same time. She heard the rustle of leaves in the wind and the whistle of birds in flight and the buzz of insects off in the distance, and felt grounded and content.

For a short time she was able to forget about the journey she and Sandy were about to undertake to the nearby hospitals to find her father's meds, about the fact her father only had a couple of days' worth of medication left before he was completely out. She could just be herself, unburdened and reborn, the moment restorative before the fight to survive and save her loved ones started all over again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Johannes

Twelve Days After

Johannes stood over the freshly dug graves of Elijah Jackson and the nameless woman who'd lived a short but terrible life, thinking about the utter random cruelty of her death. To be taken by the three inmates as some kind of possession, and then to be killed in crossfire, felt like a bitter end to what had probably been a sad life.

“She might have had a family out there, somewhere,” Camilla said, stepping closer to him, somehow knowing exactly what he was thinking. “Let's hope she had some happy times before all this started.”

Johannes dipped his head, not meeting her eyes, thinking about how the young woman had looked like she'd grown up on the streets. “I hope so. Otherwise, it's hard to understand how the world could be so cruel, how one person could have such bad luck.” He glanced at the three inmates tied up and sitting against the dormitory wall twenty yards away, his rifle following his gaze, then at his own children, who sat as far away from the men as possible, Storm standing watch over them.

Finally, his eyes moved to Noah Jackson, the twelve-year-old son of his brother's best friend, the boy who'd just had to bury his father. Beside Noah sat his two companions, and Johannes couldn't have found two more opposite girls if he'd

tried; Aaliyah was wary, street-wearied, wearing a brittle mask designed to keep anyone from getting too close.

Bella, on the other hand, smiled easily, despite what she'd been through, her years before the disaster no doubt giving her the resilience to believe that one day things would get better. For people like Aaliyah, who'd never experienced *better*, it was probably hard to believe that such a thing existed.

"I'm going to ask them to come with us back home," he said to Camilla, his gaze still on Noah. "Those three kids saved our lives. It's the least we can do."

"I was going to suggest the same thing," she replied, taking his hand. "And I'm sorry we didn't find Matti."

Johannes felt a sudden lump forming in his throat. "He and Elijah were never far apart. If Elijah didn't make it, then chances are neither did Matti. He's in here somewhere and it kills me that we didn't find his body and can't give him a proper burial. I can't even imagine how Mom is going to take this."

Memories of stumbling down the driveway to his Texan ranch home as a kid, overcome with grief and shock, slammed into him, and not for the first time. He'd been the one to tell his mom about Kalevi, and now his worst nightmare had come true: he was about to do it all over again.

"Your mom is one of the strongest women I know. It's going to be okay, Johannes. We'll get through this like we always do. Together." She squeezed his hand, her love and support flowing through her gentle touch.

Johannes just nodded, words beyond him. For days, he'd been dreading seeing Matti. But now Matti was gone, and the knowledge he'd never see his brother again was like a blade to his heart. The dark despair of his brother's death hung over every thought, his heart broken and heavy.

"I know you're going to be okay, Johannes," Camilla said softly, moving close to him, laying a hand on his arm. "You *will* get through this because you have me. We'll get through this together because I won't give up, and you don't have it in

you to quit.” She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. “Let’s get out of here. Go and speak to Noah and the other kids and we can leave this place for good. Leave those awful men to their fate.”

She led him away from the unmarked graves, and the dead man and woman who lay beneath them, and as he followed her, Johannes felt the darkness inside him only intensify. She was right, of course. They’d get through this, just like they’d gotten through Benny’s sickness, just like they’d gotten through this disaster and all the awful things that had happened so far. They had each other. That was all they needed to keep going.

But that didn’t mean his guilt didn’t almost bring him to his knees. Two brothers dead. Two brothers he could have saved but didn’t. What if Matti had been released already? If he wasn’t serving the extra time on his sentence in order to save Johannes when the earthquakes started? If only he’d tried to make things right with Matti sooner.

Regret crawled over his skin like a bruise, and he realized it had been there for years. It had changed colors from blue to green to faint red, from a raised bump to a flat welt. It had changed over the months, over the years, transformative and slippery, until there had been no external sign at all. But he’d always known something wasn’t right.

Now, the pain of losing Matti when there were so many unresolved issues between them existed as a phantom limb, a potent and inescapable presence that extended beyond physical boundaries and could be felt in the air, the ground, the broken buildings around him. It was a corrosive feeling that spread through his heart, his arteries. A loss so deep and far-reaching that Johannes knew his grief would only deepen, becoming more painful with time.

“Johannes?”

He looked up and realized Camilla was staring at him. He shut the thoughts down before they overwhelmed him, jaw clenching, molars grinding. The bile of regret and sorrow burned in the back of the throat, but he quirked an eyebrow up

in question as he realized she'd been talking to him and he'd missed it all.

“Would you like me to speak to Noah and his friends?” She repeated her question without a hint of annoyance, eyes straying to the three inmates, her rifle still raised in their direction.

“No, I can do it,” Johannes replied. “Can you get the kids ready?”

They'd already taken the rest of the supplies from the camp kitchen and boiled more water they'd collected from a nearby pond. All that remained was to load themselves up and to bid farewell to Matti once and for all.

And they'd leave the men tied up, given neither Johannes nor Camilla had any appetite to deal with them any other way. But Johannes couldn't deny that he hoped they wouldn't be able to free themselves from their bonds, that the men would die sooner rather than later from exposure or hunger. Anything else was far more than they deserved.

“I can get the kids ready. They'll be just as happy as us to get out of here.” Camilla stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth.

Then Johannes watched her walk away, before pivoting to face Noah and the girls. They saw him coming, and he felt self-conscious as he crossed the distance under their watchful eyes. They sat perched on the edge of a long metal support beam, a jagged pile of debris behind them, and he stopped in front of them, unsure whether he should join them on the beam. In the end, he sat down on the ground, knees bent and rising at a peak in front of him, arms awkwardly folded around himself.

Aaliyah eyed him warily, while Bella smiled, and Noah seemed curious. Johannes had to wonder how much the boy remembered, how much he knew about the circumstances of his father's imprisonment. He cleared his throat. “I know I've said this already, but thank you for everything you did for us.” He looked between the three of them. “I don't know what

would have happened if you hadn't gotten those weapons off the men like you did."

"We didn't do it for you," Aaliyah said, eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms. "We did it for your wife and that lady who died. So we don't need your gratitude, okay?"

"Sure," Johannes replied, working hard to keep his voice neutral despite the tidal surge of emotions churning inside him. "I won't say anything else. I would like you to come with us when we fly to Texas, though. My parents have a place there, and there are likely to be fewer earthquakes because there are fewer fault lines, and hopefully less threatening people because their place is quite rural. You'll be safe—I'll make sure of that."

Aaliyah scoffed, and he heard her mutter, "Like we can trust you."

Noah's gaze bored into him, and in that moment, Johannes felt the universe balanced on a set of scales. Because of Johannes, Noah had been without his father for even more years than necessary. Now was a chance to redress that wrong, to make up for the mistake he'd made in the only way he had left, but only if Noah agreed to it.

"Thanks for asking us to come with you," Noah said, the boy's face not giving anything away. "Can you give us a minute to talk about it?"

"Sure, take your time," Johannes said, grabbing his rifle in one hand and pushing himself to standing with the other, before quickly adding, "but don't take too long, because we want to leave soon. Yellowstone could blow any day now, and that will ground us for a while. We need to get to Texas before that happens. Plus another earthquake could happen at any time." He forced a smile, but they were already turning inward, closing rank, considering his proposal and no doubt preparing to debate it once he was out of earshot.

With a shrug, he turned and headed toward Camilla, trying not to look at the three men. But Chip made that all but impossible. "Hey, jerk!" the burly man called. "Untie us and we won't have to kill you and your family."

Johannes froze, a sudden rush of rage taking him by surprise. He changed direction and headed right for the men, a growl buried deep in his throat as he stood over Chip, who leaned with his back against the collapsed dormitory, hands tied behind his back, rust-stained bandages around the gunshot wound in his shoulder from yesterday, and a nonchalant expression on his face.

Johannes leaned down until only a few inches separated him from Chip. “You shut the hell up. I don’t want to hear a single word from you.”

“Are you going to make me?”

Johannes’s arm went helplessly taut as he pulled it back, his muscles feeling as if they were going to tear in two. He could see the man’s face stretching and darkening into a grotesque gargoyle mask as he readied his fist. Then he moved toward Chip, his hand swinging forward in a brutal roundhouse punch.

The smack of his knuckles against Chip’s skin sent a blast of pain through his hand as Chip’s head cracked sideways from the impact. Johannes felt the man’s nose give way beneath his fist, feeling the cartilage break loose. Chip’s mouth fell open dumbly, and a stream of blood ran from his already lumpy nose. Shock distorted his features before his mouth erupted in a long string of obscenities, like a rising tide, as he howled through the re-broken nose.

Johannes took a step back and shook out his hand, before pivoting and walking away, the satisfaction delicious but short-lived as he headed toward his family. There was still a huge jagged canyon carved across the surface of his heart, a canyon which had yawned with emptiness from the moment he’d found out about Matti’s death, and which would only grow wider and more invasive until he finally told his mom that Matti was gone.

As Johannes reached his family, he lifted Benny up into the air, holding his small son close before vowing that he would never give up hope for a better future for his family and for those left behind in this broken world. He’d never give up

on any of them ever again. Not after losing Matti with so much left unsaid between them. He kissed the top of Benny's head, his son's sickness never far from his mind, knowing he'd fight until the very end to protect them all.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Noah

Twelve Days After

Noah watched Johannes Virtanen walk away, a thought itching in his mind. Why had his mom hated that man so much? The question nagged at him, trying to demand his attention, but he felt Bella and Aaliyah staring at him, and knew he had to put it out of his mind, at least for now.

“What are we going to do?” Bella looked between the two of them, her fingers curling around the metal beam they sat on, a partial wall from a collapsed building rising behind them while dust and ash swirled around their feet as a soft wind blew.

Before Noah could reply, the inmate with the lumpy nose called out to Johannes, and the air shifted, pulling tight with tension as Johannes suddenly turned and walked toward him, his body coiled like a spring. All three of them watched as the two men exchanged a few words, before Johannes drew his fist back and smashed it into the man’s face. Bella gasped and Aaliyah gave a satisfied nod, while Noah watched the fine spray of blood hit the ground.

Johannes headed back to his family as the man—now bleeding from the face and unable to wipe it away because his hands were tied behind his back—shouted obscenities after him.

Noah shifted his gaze to Bella and Aaliyah and swallowed. “You asked what we’re going to do about Johannes’ offer to go with him to Texas?”

Bella nodded and Aaliyah just made a strange noise in the back of her throat.

With his hands clutched in his lap and anxious snakes twisting through his chest, he looked around at the collapsed, burned conservation camp, the remains of the place that was supposed to be his salvation.

He hadn’t slept all night, thinking instead about his father lying dead, slowly decomposing, just a short distance away. He’d imagined finding his father alive at the camp and then taking a boat and sailing into the sunset toward safety. The scene he’d imagined belonged in a Hallmark movie, complete with a soft, pink-hued sky and wide smiles.

Instead, he’d helped to dig his father’s grave as the sun came up, and buried him beside a stranger, still wrapped in the blue tarp, swarms of insects crawling into his mouth, his nose. And now Noah was tired. He wanted an adult to take charge for a little while so he could grieve for his parents and try to make sense of this new, broken world that wasn’t changing anytime soon... but he knew Aaliyah wouldn’t be happy about it, and he struggled with the right words to tell her how he felt.

Shaking his head, he looked into Aaliyah’s eyes, then Bella’s, forcing the words out like he was ripping off a bandaid, not pausing to take a breath. “I think we need to go with them to Texas. There’s nothing else left for us here, and if we don’t go, we’ll just end up dead. At least this gives us a chance. My dad knew Johannes, and his wife has been pretty nice to us—if we go with them, we could start over somewhere safe.”

Aaliyah gave the disgusted snort he’d been expecting. “Are you serious? After everything we’ve been through, you still trust the first idiot who comes along?” Her words were laced with the kind of scorn Noah had gotten used to hearing from Joe, and his heart constricted while his anger rose.

“Can you think of a better option?” Bella asked, standing up from the beam and drawing Aaliyah’s attention away from Noah.

“You go with them. Me and Noah can keep heading along the coast. We stick together and look out for one another. That’s how Noah and I survived so far, *Bella*.” Aaliyah was practically spitting, her eyes full of venom, while her arms were crossed, muscles tensed and ready for a fight.

“Aaliyah...” Noah rubbed an exhausted hand over his eyes. “We’ve been going non-stop for days. How much longer do you think we’ll be able to survive all this?” He waved a hand toward the shattered landscape.

“Well, it’s better than running off with people we don’t even know! And what are they going to do about those men? Just leave them here so they can hurt someone else once they get free?”

“I don’t know, but I’m still going to trust Johannes and his family over everyone else out there,” Noah replied, managing to keep his voice steady. “He offered to help us, and I think we should take him up on it. Otherwise we’re all alone, Aaliyah. Like, completely alone.”

“I’ve been alone plenty of times. Enough to know it’s the safest way to be.” Aaliyah’s face hardened as she glanced at the men, then she stood abruptly and started walking toward Johannes.

“What do we do?” Bella’s eyes had gone wide, her usual quips silenced.

“We follow her,” Noah replied, a pit of unease opening inside him. Aaliyah was mad, and when she was mad, she could be unpredictable.

He and Bella started walking after Aaliyah, hanging back when she stopped beside Johannes and Camilla, her body practically vibrating with pent up anger. The two young kids were on the ground with the dog, crawling on him and tugging his ears, but they both stopped and stared at Aaliyah, too.

Aaliyah propped her hands on her hips, tight black curls in a messy ring around her head. “You want us to go with you to Texas?”

“That’s right,” answered Camilla in a soft, placating voice, eyes wary as she took a small step closer to Aaliyah. “We want you and your friends to come with us. We’ll make sure you have somewhere safe to sleep, and enough food. We’re safer in a group, and this is no place for kids to be all alone.”

“We managed plenty well without you so far,” Aaliyah replied, “so don’t go thinking we need you to save us. Actually, if I remember right, it was *us* who saved *you*.”

“That’s true,” Johannes said, “and we’re grateful for that.”

“And what about those men? You’re going to leave them tied up like that and fly away in your fancy plane? What if they get free?” Aaliyah spun around to stare at the men and then pointed to the freshly dug graves, her voice rising until she was practically shouting. “Do you want another death on your hands? Is that what you want?”

Noah felt his mouth drop open as Aaliyah suddenly pivoted and lunged forward, hands going for the rifle hanging from a strap around Johannes’ shoulder.

He was too fast for her, though, and before she could even touch it, he had pushed her back, his jaw set and eyes blazing. “No, Aaliyah, calm down. We’re going to leave these men here and they’ll rot in the dirt like they deserve. But I’m not giving you this gun. You need to just calm yourself.”

But Aaliyah struggled against him, panting with rage. “Give me the gun,” she shouted desperately. “I’m not letting you leave those men here alive while you fly off to Texas!”

Noah watched, feeling helpless, as Aaliyah fought with Johannes, tears streaming down her face. The kids had started crying now, too, and Camilla hurried to comfort them, drawing them into her embrace and speaking in low tones to them while keeping her eyes on Aaliyah.

After a few long seconds, Aaliyah stepped back, putting distance between herself and Johannes, still breathing hard.

Her eyes were wild as she stood in the midst of the piles of debris and collapsed buildings. The landscape was desolate and destroyed, the ground cracked, with pieces of brick, concrete and other debris scattered everywhere, while the gloomy yellow-gray sky made everything look lifeless and dead. Aaliyah's gaze shifted around and settled on Noah. "You're pathetic, all of you!"

Bella was the first to move, and she took a tentative step toward Aaliyah, hands held out and low like she was approaching a frightened animal. "It's okay, Aaliyah. Those men won't hurt anyone else."

Aaliyah shook her head, like she couldn't believe Bella would have the audacity to approach her, and then charged forward, barging her shoulder into Bella as she started walking away. "You're a bunch of dumb fools who are going to end up dead," she muttered. "I don't need any of you."

"Where are you going?" Noah shouted after her. "Come back!"

But Aaliyah didn't stop. She kept walking, pausing only to pick up Noah's baseball bat, her feet pounding against the rocky, debris-strewn ground as she disappeared behind what was left of one of the dormitories.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Noah

Twelve Days After

Noah and Bella exchanged a helpless look before following after Aaliyah to the sound of Camilla calling after them, *Don't go too far*. Noah's heart felt heavy with worry, every step over the ruined ground compounding his sense of foreboding. Without discussing it, they broke into a jog, circling around broken buildings and catching up with Aaliyah at the edge of the field beside the camp.

The fire had left charred remains of trees and buildings everywhere, the blackened countryside giving off a pungent smell of charcoal and burned wood, while the dry air swirled in heated currents. As he stared at Aaliyah, it was suddenly difficult to breathe. He could taste the ash and smoke from distant fires on his tongue, and in the background, Johannes' shiny plane stood silently, waiting to take them to Texas.

Noah's gaze roamed the plane and then the destroyed landscape around it. There was something about the wasteland of empty fields and broken buildings reduced to rubble that chilled Noah's heart. Seeing the flattened homes along the ridgeline of gently sloping land, the burned clusters of trees, he couldn't help but feel a sudden, painful pang of longing for what had been lost.

Aaliyah was just a few feet away, and he shifted his gaze to her. She stood with her shoulders hunched and her fists

clenched by her sides, baseball bat dragging on the ground as she turned her body away from them. She looked more closed off than Noah had ever seen her, and it struck him for the first time that he might not actually be able to get through to her.

“Aaliyah,” Noah said, his voice gentle but firm, knowing he had to do whatever it took because there was no way he could lose her, and no way he could stay here in California with the ghosts of his parents chasing his every thought. “We don’t want to leave you here. We want you to come with us. You’re like family to me. You know that. Think about everything we’ve been through.”

Aaliyah’s eyes blazed as she finally turned her head to look at him. “Family?” She scoffed. “You think a couple of weeks together makes us family? That doesn’t mean anything. Why don’t you and your new best friend get out of here?”

But Noah was undeterred, stepping away from Bella and moving closer to Aaliyah until he stood just a few fistful’s of air away from her. He could feel the anger and hurt emanating from her body and saw the pain in her eyes, and he guessed she was still struggling with what had happened to that young woman, and to herself. And she was mad that Noah wanted to go with Johannes, of course, although he didn’t fully understand why.

“Everything we’ve been through means something,” he said firmly. “You’re like my sister, and I want you to come with us to Texas.”

Aaliyah stared at Noah, her expression fierce and determined. “Why do you want to run away from here so badly? I’ve never known you to be a coward. And who is *us*?”

She rose up on her toes and for a brief moment looked like she might be preparing to take a swing at him with the bat, but Noah could see the sorrow hidden behind her eyes, like she was still grieving for her family and everything she had lost well before the disaster started.

He hesitated for a moment, knowing his next words would just make her more mad. “*Us* is me and Bella. We both care about you.”

Aaliyah rolled her eyes. “Bella is just as useless as Johannes and his family. You’d be doing me a favor if you took her with you.”

“I’m not useless,” Bella said, her brows furrowing. “Everything you’ve ever asked me to do, I’ve done.”

“Because you’re a sheep. You both are. I need leaders to join me, not a bunch of hopeless followers.”

Noah held out his hand to her once more, speaking with all the kindness he could muster, even though he was starting to feel his own defenses rising. “We can do this, Aaliyah. Texas could be the new start we need.”

Aaliyah ignored him and stared at Bella, hands on her hips, head cocked to one side. “What are you doing, Bella? Texas with those idiots?” She nodded her head back toward the camp.

“Texas,” Bella replied firmly. “And I like Camilla.”

Aaliyah spun to face Noah. “So choose. You come with me or you go with her.”

The ultimatum hung in the air between them. He knew that Aaliyah was just as scared as he was, maybe even more so. But he also knew deep inside that there was nothing for them in California, that they could end up hurt or worse if they kept trying to survive there, and he didn’t want to think about his mom or dad for a while—staying in California would mean that was all he could do.

“I’m sorry, Aaliyah,” he said, pausing and biting his bottom lip. “But I’m going to Texas and I want you to come, too.”

Aaliyah’s eyes narrowed, and she turned away from him, her shoulders shaking a little. “Fine,” she spat. “Go to Texas. But don’t expect to ever see me again.”

And with that, she turned and walked away, leaving Noah and Bella standing alone in the field beside the camp.

“Wait!” Noah shouted, running after and trying to grab her hand, but she shook him off.

Tears were streaming down Aaliyah's face as she glared at him, her voice trembling with rage and hurt. "Leave me alone," she said bitterly.

"I'm not going anywhere," Noah replied, desperation making him reach for her again. "We're a team. Please, Aaliyah."

She pushed his hand away, dropped the bat, and then raised both of her own, shoving him hard on the chest. He stumbled back, shocked and hurt by her sudden burst of physicality.

"Leave me alone." She spoke through gritted teeth. "I don't need anyone."

"Please," he said, feeling like a helpless little boy, more vulnerable than he'd let himself feel in years.

"I hate you." Her tears had gone, her eyes cold and hard. "Just stay away from me and don't follow me."

With that, Aaliyah picked up the bat—the same bat he'd used to finally beat Joe—then started running across the field, leaving Noah standing alone on the dry, cracked earth as his heart shattered into a million pieces, wondering if he had just lost the one person he cared about most in the world.

"Aaliyah!" he cried out desperately. "Please, don't go!" *I need you.*

His eyes burned as he watched Aaliyah head toward the collapsed barn, not looking back or even acknowledging his words. He knew that it would be impossible to stop her now, and he couldn't help feeling desperate and afraid that this was really it.

He looked down, her footprints in the dirt quickly fading as she disappeared behind the barn. For a moment he just stared at the empty space where she'd been. Then he turned to where Bella stood alone, the ruins of the conservation camp behind her. He felt torn in two, but forced himself to walk toward Bella, trying to convince himself that Aaliyah would be back.

But she didn't return, and when Noah begged Johannes to wait another couple of hours so he could cycle into Soledad and search for her, he found the place where they'd camped deserted. He rode through the streets calling her name, not caring if he caught the attention of any other survivors who might be lurking, but she was nowhere to be found.

Eventually, he gave up and rode back to the conservation camp, his heart feeling like it had been ripped out of his chest. Aaliyah was gone, and he knew that she wasn't coming back. And as the others prepared to leave, all he could do was stare at the deep crevices all around, dust suspended in their depths, where the memories of everything he had lost seemed to torment him.

Crumbling buildings, some partially burned by fire, lay in ashen piles of charred wood and brick, and he could see himself in the ruins: irreparably damaged, everything important left cracked and broken.

And when he looked in the direction of Big Sur, there were massive plumes of smoke rising into the air above the earth, clouds of vaporized trees belching from the earth to fill the atmosphere like black milk. The smoke cloaked everything in a darkness he wasn't sure would ever clear again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Johannes

Twenty-Two Years Before

Johannes floated on his back, staring up at the blue sky and fluffy white clouds that drifted by in slow-moving rows, the muffled sounds of Kalevi and Johannes' friend Ritchie reaching him through the water. Their words were dull but somehow Johannes was still able to understand them, the water acting like a filter, absorbing the louder sounds and leaving just enough to let him hear what was going on.

But Johannes wasn't concentrating on what they were saying. He was thinking about the tree house he would ask his dad to build when he got home, picturing all the features he'd ask for. He wanted a rope ladder and a hatch in the floor, and a wide lookout facing the pond.

Ritchie's dad had built him one in the big oak tree in their front yard, and the boys had spent the last few hours swimming in the pool and climbing into the treehouse, playing soldiers and pretending it was their base. They'd had a ton of fun, but it was probably time to go home now.

Johannes stood up, feet touching the bottom of the pool, cool water lapping at his chest, his eyes drawn to Kalevi's shriek and fast moving form as he ran the length of the swimming pool while Ritchie tried to shoot him with a water pistol. Ritchie had been one of Johannes best friends for years,

simply by virtue of the fact they lived so close to one another and were in the same year at school.

Overhead, the sun's light shined bright, its warm rays tickling his skin as the smells of a carefree summer reached him: chlorine, homemade lemonade, freshly mown grass. Johannes checked his watch and then stared at his brother, wishing they could stay longer but knowing they needed to go home. "Kalevi! We've got to head back soon."

His little brother paused mid-step and spun to face him, blonde hair almost white. Ritchie took the opportunity to shoot Kalevi square in the face with a stream of water, and Kalevi shrieked again, then ran for the pool, cannon balling himself through the air and sending a spray of water into Johannes' and Ritchie's faces as he landed.

For a moment, Kalevi completely disappeared under a flurry of bubbles and water, just the shimmering illusion of blond hair and tanned skin visible. Johannes wiped the water from his eyes, watching his little brother until he popped up and paddled to the side of the pool. Kalevi looked at him over his shoulder, and Johannes pointed to the side of the pool. "Come on. Out you get. Let's get dried off."

"Can't we stay a little bit longer? Please?"

Later, those words would come to haunt him, and a strange sense of foreboding passed over Johannes as he stared at Kalevi. But he knew Ritchie was watching, and he hated to disappoint his little brother, even though he knew they should get back, so he nodded. "Just a bit longer. Then we have to cycle home. When we get back, I'm gonna ask Dad to make a treehouse for us."

Ritchie grinned. "That'll be awesome!"

Kalevi hauled himself out of the pool and looked around until his gaze landed on Ritchie's new puppy asleep under the outdoor table where Ritchie's mom, Jeanette, sat reading a book. He made a beeline for the dog, and Johannes couldn't help but smile as he watched Kalevi try to sneak up on the sleeping dog. He was going to be in trouble if Jeanette caught

him doing that. She'd already asked the boys to leave the puppy alone if he was resting.

Kalevi didn't seem to notice Jeanette sitting there, engrossed in her book, and he tripped just as he got to the dog, falling to his knees and catching himself with both hands before landing on the ball of fluff. The dog woke up with a yip and scampered away, making Ritchie and Johannes laugh, the sound drawing Jeanette's attention. She looked at Kalevi with a stern expression, but Johannes could tell she was trying not to smile. Everyone loved Kalevi.

Before Jeanette could say anything, Kalevi took off running, Ritchie jumping out of the pool and chasing after him, both boys sprinting around the pool to the sound of Ritchie's mom calling to *Be careful*, slipping and sliding through dirt, grass and mud. Ritchie caught up to Kalevi and tackled him into the pool, both boys disappearing under the water. They came up spluttering and laughing, and Ritchie dragged Kalevi to the edge, where they both hung on, catching their breath.

Jeanette stood and put down her book, glancing at her watch. "Boys, as much as I'd love you to stay all day, you should probably head home now. Your mom will be expecting you."

The itch of worry was back, and Johannes couldn't shake the feeling like he'd forgotten something as he nodded and herded Kalevi toward the front of the house where he'd left his bike and the trailer. It was a hot day, and they'd be dry by the time they got home, so they didn't bother with towels or getting changed.

He buckled Kalevi into the trailer and Jeanette checked it after him, handing Kalevi an apple and tucking another one in for Johannes when they got home. Then Johannes started to cycle back, leaving Ritchie's place behind them.

Tall grasses and wildflowers made up a gold and rainbow carpet on either side of the road, the grass swaying with the breeze that carried the smell of the land and growing plants, and things that had just bloomed and were still fragrant. The

sun beat down making the world glow under a shimmering blanket of light, the heat haze making everything seem like a dream.

They reached a section of road where the trees formed a tunnel of green, blocking out direct sunlight so the world seemed full of shadows and shade and specks of golden light. As he continued cycling, Johannes heard the distant growl of an engine and moved to the side of the road, keeping the bike on the shoulder.

Overhead, birds sang in the trees and a dog barked in the distance, while the engine grew louder, the revs reverberating through Johannes' chest. "What is that?" Kalevi called through the trailer's thin plastic covering.

"It's a car coming up, hold on, I'm going to ride on the gravel. It'll be a bit bumpy."

Johannes steered his bike onto the gravel beside the road, slowing down as the trailer bumped behind him. His eyes glanced at the ditch that ran parallel to the road. He could hear the car so close now, the engine's roar like a continual boom of thunder. With his heart starting to race, he glanced over his shoulder to see the sun gleaming off the hood of a bright green Mustang, just before it entered the section of road covered by trees.

Something about the vehicle sent a wedge of fear through Johannes. It was traveling too fast, one wheel crossing the line between the road and the shoulder, like the driver was looking at a map or changing the radio and not looking where they were going. Not looking at Johannes and Kalevi on the side of the road.

Gleaming with chrome and mirrors, the paint job shimmered through the dappled light, the distinctive running horse emblem staring at Johannes. He started to speed up, moving farther from the road as his eyes flicked to the windscreen, the tinted windows dark in the shade, the driver hidden. Everything seemed to slow except the Mustang as its engine screamed a song of power, its wheels whipping over the ground, getting closer.

Johannes shouted at the driver: “Stop! Slow down!”

But whoever was behind the wheel didn't listen, couldn't hear, the metal grill plowing into the back of the trailer with a sickening crunch. For a moment, Johannes was airborne, the scream stolen from his lips, before he slammed shoulder first into the hard ground, pain shooting through his body as he bounced and landed on his back.

Kalevi moaned, or at least Johannes thought he heard him moaning, but he couldn't catch his breath, or move. Instead, he just lay there, blinking at the sun and the waving tree branches in a haze of pain. He tried to get up, to tell his little brother everything was going to be okay, that they were going to make it home, but he couldn't speak, couldn't yell, all the wind knocked out of him.

He heard the screech of brakes, a lull in the rumble of the engine, before the Mustang sped up again and kept going, its engine roaring as it careened down the road, leaving nothing behind but a trail of dust and exhaust fumes.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Johannes

Twelve Days After

Johannes stared at Noah as the two of them stood beside Elijah's grave, the boy sniffing and wiping his eyes with his sleeve. The earth over the twin mounds had dried and crumbled, the bodies below finally lying at peace, while behind them, the three inmates sat silently, watching. Johannes tried not to think about or look at the men: in his mind, they were already dead.

"Can't we stay a little bit longer? Please?" Noah scanned the ruined landscape and Johannes knew he was desperately hoping that Aaliyah would come back. But it looked like the girl was gone.

Noah's words—the same spoken to Johannes two decades ago on the day that forever splintered his life into *before* and *after*—tightened his chest and he found himself staring into the distance as he tried to slow his breathing and his racing heart. If he'd left when they were supposed to, if he and Kalevi had gotten on that bike ten or fifteen minutes earlier... how many things would have worked out differently?

He wanted to wait for Aaliyah. He felt sick with worry about the girl. But he couldn't put his family at risk when she might never come back. Yellowstone could blow for real at any time, another earthquake could hit. Heck, they could even be attacked by other desperate survivors. He couldn't just *stay*

a little bit longer, not when the lives of the people he loved were on the line.

A stand of trees just beyond the camp caught his eye, stripped of bark and branches, their skeletons like rotting bones. Decaying fallen trunks lay on the fissured earth, like shriveled black bodies. Here and there, a patch of grass was leftover, green in a sea of gray and brown.

“I’m sorry, Noah.” Johannes swallowed, his throat aching. “We need to say goodbye to your dad and my brother, and then it’s time for us to leave. We can’t stay any longer.”

Noah nodded and Johannes had never seen a more miserable sight, but he had to keep things moving in the right direction, so he put his arm around the boy, before feeling him tense under the weight of Johannes’ arm.

Johannes glanced down at Noah, seeing the way the boy averted his eyes and held his arms rigid by his sides, and he knew Noah had already suffered too much, that people had hurt him and put fear into him in ways children should never have to experience.

Equal parts guilt for the part he had played in the boy’s life unraveling and a fierce desire to protect Noah churned inside Johannes. He’d do whatever he could to look after Elijah’s son, to make it up to him. But right now, the boy needed to feel safe, and that meant giving him space. Johannes lifted his arm off Noah’s shoulder and let it hang by his side. He knew how trauma and stress could ride with someone their entire life, could make innocent gestures seem threatening, twisting perceptions and fraying all sense of security.

They stood that way for a moment, silently mourning their losses side by side, the smell of sulfur hanging over them, pungent and sharp, as if the ground itself had rotted. Johannes turned to Noah, holding the boy’s gaze. “We’ll say goodbye, and then it’s time we go. Okay?”

Noah glanced up and his eyes were red rimmed and tired, “Okay.”

“Your dad was a good friend to my brother,” Johannes said, “loyal to the end. And I know he and Matti wanted to turn their lives around. They did so much good working at the conservation camp before all of this.” He paused, his own unbearable grief pressing down on him. “I’ll miss them both so much. I wish I’d had a chance to speak to them one more time. I let too much come between us for far too long.”

Noah nodded, his chin trembling as he fought back tears, fought against showing his vulnerabilities. In that moment, standing beside the broken boy, not touching him and with his arms by his side, Johannes had never felt weaker. His heart cracked open, and he drew a ragged breath, fighting not to reach for Noah, fighting not to comfort this boy who’d lost everything, including his own father.

But then Noah reached up and took Johannes’ hand, squeezed it, turning his body slightly and pressing his face against Johannes’ chest. The touch felt like forgiveness, a second chance at redemption. A low wind whistled through the flat land, singing around the edges of jagged ruins like the panicked wail of a ghost.

Johannes exhaled, gently touching Noah’s shoulder, knowing he would protect this boy with every last ounce of strength in his body. Together, they would face whatever lay ahead, because Noah deserved nothing less than all of Johannes’ love and protection.

“Come on,” Johannes said, guiding Noah away from the graves.

“You’re not actually leaving us here,” Chip called out after them as they headed through the collapsed buildings, his voice hoarse and weak. “It’s murder!”

But Noah and Johannes didn’t look back, continuing through the collapsed and charred remains of the conservation camp, moving around piles of debris and stepping over the detritus littering the ground. Johannes felt like a chapter was closing, and while he couldn’t shake the sadness that had curled up inside him, Noah and the other kids made him feel like they still had a bit of hope.

They reached the field and continued across the stubbly, blackened grass, the plane shining like a beacon up ahead. The air was still, silent, the only sound the beating of his heart, his own breath, and the scuff of their shoes against the ground. Camilla and the kids, including Bella, were already on board the plane, while Storm stood at the bottom of the stairs, letting out a sharp bark when he saw Johannes approaching.

“I know everything feels awful and hopeless now,” he said to Noah in a low voice as they walked side by side, the plane getting closer, the hazy light illuminating the swells of ash and dust in the air. “I’ve been through some bad things in my own life and the pain fades eventually.”

What he didn’t say was how part of him wished someone had told him that shoving the pain down deep inside wouldn’t help. That it would grow and fester like a rotten apple left in the bottom of a barrel. But he hadn’t dealt with his own issues yet, so who was he to give out advice like that?

They reached the plane and Noah bent down to ruffle Storm’s ears, looking back at the conservation camp before straightening and walking up the stairs onto the plane. Johannes couldn’t help but think that the boy had plenty of steel, and a heck of a lot more strength than plenty of the adults he knew.

Just as he raised his leg to step up onto the plane, too, he heard a faint shout for help coming from the direction of the conservation camp. It was a man’s voice, and if Johannes wasn’t mistaken, it sounded like Chip.

He raised his rifle, instantly alert, and looked quickly at the plane. “Camilla! Stay here and keep watch. Give me five minutes.” He looked at Storm and could see the dog wanted to come with him, but Johannes needed Storm to keep his family and the kids safe. “Stay boy!”

Storm whined but dropped to the ground. Before Camilla could ask him what was going on, Johannes started running back toward the conservation camp, toward the men’s pained cries, a suspicion about who might be there taking hold in his mind. He reached the outskirts of the camp breathing hard, and

slowed, proceeding more cautiously toward where they had left the three men tied up.

He was twenty feet away, coming around the corner of one of the collapsed buildings, when he saw the first splatter of red across the dusty ground. His grip on his rifle tightened, and he pressed his back against the wall behind him, knowing who was responsible but commonsense forcing him to be cautious.

“Aaliyah!” He called out. “I know you’re here. It’s not too late to come with us. Please.”

The echo of his words quieted, and there was nothing but empty silence and the rustling of dry grass. After a few moments, Johannes continued toward the men, wincing at the sight of their battered bodies lying strewn across the ground. They were monsters who deserved whatever had happened to them, but the sight of viciously beaten humans was still shocking.

Johannes let his gaze linger for a moment. The men lay askew, limbs twisted in awkward positions and still bound, as blood seeped into the ground like a dark stream into parched desert sand. Their bodies were mangled and broken, skin ripped open, cracked and battered. A leg bent the wrong way. Bones of an arm exposed, the jagged edges of broken wrists.

Lying between Colton and Chip was Noah’s baseball bat, stained with a fresh coat of red, dark and slick with blood. A message from the girl who had taken justice into her own hands.

“Aaliyah!” Johannes cupped his hands around his mouth as he shouted the girl’s name. “Noah needs you. Please come back. Please!”

He stood there for as long as he could bear it, the coppery scent of blood invading his nose, bile rising up his throat, waiting for the girl to step out from where she hid. But there was nothing, no sign of anyone at all, only small pieces of debris shifting in the wind and the cawing of a crow.

Johannes’ gaze zeroed in on the black bird pecking through the debris and he felt a shiver pass over him. Matti

had always said he felt like crows were a good omen, but to Johannes, they were the complete opposite. A sign of death, of waning spirits, of emptiness, despair, lost souls. He shuddered, staring at the bird for a moment before forcing his eyes away, trying not to think about what else might lie ahead.

He knew Camilla would be getting worried, that he'd spent too long already waiting for Aaliyah to appear, but his heart pulled him to give her one more chance. "Aaliyah!" He screamed her name, raising his face to the smokey sky, eyes closed.

As his words faded away, the crow moved closer to Chip's broken body, and Johannes knew it was time. He picked up the bat and wiped it on the ground, then headed back toward the field, his heart and mind heavy.

He reached the plane and climbed the stairs with Storm, before tucking the bat quietly behind one of the seats, Camilla giving him a knowing look. But he didn't mention anything about what he'd just seen when Noah and Bella asked what was wrong. He'd tell them later, but at that moment, he couldn't shake the feeling that time had run out, that they couldn't afford any more distractions. They had to leave before it was too late.

Soon they were all strapped in, and Johannes got the plane rolling forward. As they started to pick up speed, he gave a futile scan of the surroundings for Aaliyah, again seeing no sign of her, the landscape nothing but a desolate wasteland. He pictured Matti's face as the details outside started to blur, and whispered, "I'm sorry I was too late."

And then, softer, "Good bye."

He was adjusting the plane's controls when he heard Bella talking to Noah from the main cabin, and he focused on her voice.

"I know this isn't quite the same as the boat you were dreaming of, but it's pretty close, don't you think? I reckon everything is going to be okay once we get to Texas."

And as the plane lifted into the air, all he could do was hope that the girl was right.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Erin

Twelve Days After

Erin stared at the fire, watching the inferno go higher and higher into the midday air. Flames licked the edges of the bodies laying in a neat row in the center of the pyre, illuminating the ghoulish cremation, while the stench of burning flesh and hair filled the air, a column of smoke rising and carrying with it the ashen remains of those who had attacked them in the wee hours of the morning.

As the flames and smoke raced toward the sky, the fire's eerie glow reflected off the faces of Paul and Martha, who'd helped Erin drive Randy Ulrich and the others who'd died to Fiona's property. Erin had wanted to lay the parents to rest as close to the men as possible, hating the awful, grisly task but knowing it was the right thing to do. And once they were done, they'd dispose of the group's vehicles after stripping them of anything useful.

As the minutes wore on, the crackling, popping sound of the fire unrelenting, Erin moved closer to Martha, trying to numb her brain to the grim reality of their task. The two women leaned into one another, the hot and dry air swirling around them, charged with the terrible smells of the burning bodies.

"I'm so sorry we had to go through this," Erin murmured softly. "First defending our home, and then having to deal with

the aftermath. It's been a lot.”

Martha nodded, her tanned face etched lightly with sadness that soon gave way to a look of determination. The skin around her eyes was lined and weathered, and she radiated the same solid, sturdy strength she always had, her gaze holding wisdom and pain like a bitter handshake.

“You and I have never been the type to back away from something hard,” Martha said, her eyes on Paul as he fed more pieces of wood into the pyre. “There’s nothing to apologize for, Erin. And I can guarantee this won’t be the last issue we have to face together.”

Erin pursed her lips, thinking of the photograph of George Vander and the Mustang she’d shown the others back at the house. Holding that photograph, being surrounded by her friends... It had been a moment of pain contrasted with pure being and understanding. Their support and love had stretched out and pulled her mind apart, picking through the anger and horror, before putting it back together again stronger than ever.

Martha was right. There were more tough times ahead. But none of them would be facing it alone.

Together with Martha, Erin watched as the fire devoured the last of the bodies, feeling a sense of unreality but also relief at having finally put an end to the threat posed by Randy Ulrich. There was a chance someone else would come looking for Randy and the others, but Erin felt confident the threat was over, and if she was wrong? They’d deal with that when they had to.

As the last of the flames died down, the bodies reduced to bone and ash, Paul moved closer to the two women. The three of them formed a half-circle as they scanned the landscape for threats, and he palmed his hips, not beating around the bush as his gaze fixed on Erin. “What are we going to do about George?”

Looking at her two old friends, Erin took a fortifying breath and replied, “I’m not sure yet. But one thing I do know is we need to take stock and prepare to defend the house before we make any kind of move. The barricade needs to be

repaired. We need to work on booby traps and an alarm system. There's lots of work to be done."

Paul nodded his approval. "Your boys and my daughter are still out there, and if we want anything for them to come back to, we need to make that our priority."

As Martha murmured her agreement, Erin looked out at the fields and forests around them, the wildflowers blooming bright in the sunshine. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine what life could look like moving forward—a future where they came together against their enemies, defending their homes and families from any threats, keeping each other safe.

But she knew not all threats were defensible, and one day there'd come an earthquake that even their home wouldn't be able to withstand. And then? There would be nothing left to defend but each other.

An old birch grove stood sentinel a short distance away, marking the boundary between her land and Fiona's. The trees still stood despite Fiona's home lying in ruins, and Erin couldn't help but stare at them. Maybe the grove would survive for decades, shading them all when they sat outside and watched their grandchildren and great grandchildren playing or working the fields. And maybe they would stand tall and proud long after Erin and the others had breathed their last breath.

She glanced up, feeling a sudden pull toward the horizon. A flock of small birds settled on a collapsed and twisted fence in the distance. The birds bounced back and forth and chirped conversationally, their song sweet and simple, before they flew off in a sudden, unexpected flurry. Erin watched them, uneasy. It felt like they were on the brink of something big, like things would be changing one way or the other, and it would be happening soon. They just had to be ready for it.

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