

THE UNDEAD AGE BOOK ONE

LOVE IN AN UNDEAD AGE



A.M. GEEVER

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In Memory of Devin Patrick Geever, who loved a good zombie story.

And for Drew. I love you more.

Life is a horror show and baby, it will never stop.

ANTI-FLAG

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PROLOGUE

MONDAY, September 14, 2026 - Santa Clara, California

FATHER WALTER BRENNAN SURVEYED HIS DREARY OFFICE THROUGH NARROWED eyes. No amount of sprucing up could hide the fact that the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at Santa Clara University was in a basement. At least my new office has a window, he thought, even if it was one of those long, narrow, almost near the ceiling kinds of a window. Sunlight still streamed through it, unlike his first office at the university in Galway, Ireland, not far from where he had grown up. That windowless hovel had felt like a dungeon.

Walter checked his watch: seven forty-five a.m. Enough time for a cup of tea, he thought, his mind already jumping ahead to his lecture. He reached for his keys but froze mid-motion—shouting, then a strangled scream from the hallway. What on Earth, he thought, hurrying to the door.

Walter would never forget the sight that awaited him. Allison Landry (Advanced Calculus) and Sebastian Nichols (Automata Theory and Formal Languages) sprawled on the floor at the bottom of the stairs that led down to the basement from the building's south entrance. A slight woman in her early sixties, Allison had knocked the younger and stronger Sebastian to the ground. She was ripping Sebastian's throat out with her teeth. Bright-red blood spurted in high, thin arcs before spattering on the worn linoleum. Sebastian's strangled gurgles,

punctuated by Allison's animal-like grunts, sent cold shivers up Walter's spine. Sebastian flailed without effect against his attacker.

For a moment, shock rooted Walter where he stood.

Holy Mother of God!

Walter dashed toward them and grabbed one of Allison's arms. Allison turned and lunged at him, Sebastian's blood dripping from her chin, then abruptly jerked back. A very tall, slender young man had grabbed Allison's other arm, a visiting assistant professor but from a different department. Walter had met him but couldn't remember his name. He was so slender he looked like he would blow over in a breeze, but he held Allison fast. Allison snapped and snarled between them like a rabid dog.

"What the hell is wrong with her?" the Visiting Assistant Professor asked.

Walter couldn't answer. He didn't know how to process what he was seeing, nor interpret it.

"Get something to tie her up!" Visiting Assistant Professor shouted.

No one heard him above the din of people streaming into the narrow corridor that ran the length of building. Allison thrashed like a wild animal. Despite her wasted appearance, Walter could barely keep hold of her arm. Her strength was simply unbelievable. They had to get her restrained before she hurt anyone else. Walter looked around for something that might work when he spied an extension cord hanging on the corner of an AV cart just a few feet away.

"I'm going to grab that cord from the cart," Walter said. "I'll only be able to keep one hand on her arm. Hold tight!"

Visiting Assistant Professor nodded. His fine sandy-colored hair fell into his eyes before he tossed his head to clear his line of vision. Walter reached for the cord. He almost lost his grip on Allison's arm, but Visiting Assistant Professor proved loads stronger than he looked. Together, they tied Allison to a chair.

Walter turned to see Jan Sieszcchula, the department chair, trying to staunch the wound on Sebastian's neck with a gym towel. Sebastian had become very still. Walter could see he was not breathing.

"I think he's gone. Why don't you let me take over?"

"The ambulance will be here soon, Walter. They can help him!"

“I’ll just say a prayer then.”

Walter knelt beside Sebastian’s body. He felt wetness against his knee. Dear God, he had knelt down into Sebastian’s blood. He didn’t have any oil and could not remember if Sebastian was practicing anything despite having known him for over five years. He decided it didn’t matter. He traced a small cross on Sebastian’s forehead with his thumb.

“Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.”

Hearing Walter say the Last Rites seemed to get through to Jan better than trying to reason with him. He let go of the towel on Sebastian’s neck.

“What the hell is this, Walter?”

Walter shook his head. “I don’t know.”

He was about to ask if anyone had called 9-1-1 when he saw almost every student in the hallway filming the unfolding horror show on their cell phones. Walter covered more ground in three steps than he ever thought possible and snatched the phone out of the nearest boy’s hand.

“Hey!” the kid protested.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Walter snapped at the students, his brogue stronger in his anger. He pointed to the north entrance at the other end of the building. “Get out of here. Now!”

The wail of approaching sirens signaled help was on the way. Walter turned back to his homicidal colleague, who growled and thrashed against the cord that held her fast. The blood on her face had started to dry, flaking away where the smears were thin. Blood still coated her teeth, as if she had no saliva to dilute it.

“Allison,” he said. “Why did you do this?”

No answer, just growls and moans.

“I met her last week. She complained she was coming down with a cold but she looked fine at the New Faculty Reception yesterday. Now she looks like death warmed over,” Visiting Assistant Professor said.

Walter had seen Allison the day before as well. The transformation—sunken eyes with dark circles, shriveled and chapped lips, the reek of decay—was

astonishing.

“She looks like she’s lost twenty pounds overnight,” Walter said. “And her eyes. It’s like she’s not even in there.”

The doors behind them burst open. Campus Security pounded down the stairs, followed by paramedics who knelt by Sebastian’s prone form.

A dark-haired female paramedic checked his pulse, then shook her head. “He’s gone.”

The Campus Security officers gaped at Allison and the bloody body at their feet. One of them shook himself, seeming to remember that he should be taking charge. “Who can tell me what happened here?”

“I suppose I can,” Walter said when no one else answered. “I heard shouting in the hallway—”

“Hey, he’s moving!”

The officer turned back.

Walter stepped forward.

Sebastian twitched.

The female paramedic put her hand to Sebastian’s bloody, ruined neck. “I don’t have a pulse.”

“The guy’s moving,” the other paramedic said, not looking up from the IV he had started prepping. “Get a dressing on his neck.”

“There’s *no pulse*,” the first paramedic insisted.

Her partner reached over to check for himself. Sebastian’s eyes opened. Then he turned his head toward the man’s extended hand and bit him.

“*Aaacckk!* Get him off me!”

The female paramedic scrambled to assist her partner. The Campus Security officer rushed into the fray. Sebastian’s arms and legs were moving. He let go of the screaming paramedic’s hand and the man scurried backward. Then Sebastian grabbed the female paramedic’s arm and bit her, too.

Things seemed to happen in slow motion and fast-forward all at once after that. Walter watched as more Campus Security streamed through the doors behind Sebastian and the paramedics, bottlenecking on the stairs. Sebastian had already attacked the first officer, but not before the man tased him in the chest.

Sebastian never slowed down. He smashed the poor man's head against the wall with a sickening crack before beginning to gnaw on him.

Bodies pressed against Walter as people tried to get away, their screams and shouts echoing off the walls. He was pushed into the AV cart and lost his footing as it rolled from the force of the impact. Walter stumbled, trying to right himself. People were panicked. He would be trampled if he fell. He extended his arm and when his hand hit the floor, he pushed hard. Regaining his footing, he got clear of the AV cart, which bounced like a pinball against the fleeing onlookers. He heard more screams behind him and looked back. Someone had gotten too close to Allison, who was still tied to the chair. The pandemonium intensified as Santa Clara Police entered the building from the other end of the corridor, blocking the only escape route. And still Sebastian lurched down the hall.

Walter felt two strong hands grab his shoulders. He cried out in panic and struggled against them but was pulled backwards into darkness. A heavy door slammed shut with a metallic thud. Walter heard a sliding lock shoved into place.

"Help me push this against the door," Visiting Assistant Professor said, his voice barely a whisper.

Struggling to tamp down his panic, Walter realized he was in the building's tiny maintenance room. Feeble light trickled in from a tiny glass block window near the ceiling. He could barely make out a drum of cleaning solvent against the wall. Walter pulled while Visiting Assistant Professor pushed. As his eyes adjusted to the poor light Walter saw three more people crammed in with them against the back wall.

The chaos on the other side of the door intensified. Gunfire and screams reverberated down the hallway. More sirens wailed, some distant, some near. Walter and the rest of the occupants of the tiny room huddled together as far away from the door as possible.

"Do you think we'll be safe in here?" a young woman asked.

Visiting Assistant Professor said, "It's better than the hallway."

"There's no way out but the door," she said, not quite disagreeing. "We're trapped."

"I think we're safer here," Walter said. Under his breath, he muttered,

“Please, God, let help be here soon.”

As soon as the words left his mouth Walter realized that the police and Campus Security were already here and he felt safer in this closet.

A man’s voice, high with fright. “The guy from Campus Security tasered him and he didn’t even slow down.”

No one had anything to say after that. They fell silent, listening to the screams and shouts and gunfire. Sirens seemed to be coming from every direction. Dark shadows flickered across the cracks of light around the door. The astringent smell of cleaning fluid and furniture polish permeated the stuffy air.

Walter looked up at Visiting Assistant Professor. “You saved my life and I don’t even know your name.”

A ghost of a smile lifted the corners of Visiting Assistant Professor’s mouth. Walter could not tell the color of his eyes, but the tiny expression transformed the young man’s delicate features into movie star handsomeness.

He stuck out his hand. “Doug Michel. Astrophysics, Florida State. I’m here to work with... Shit, I can’t even remember.”

“I’m Walter Brennan,” Walter said, before adding inanely, “I teach Algebra and Statistics.”

“What the hell do you get up to here in Math and CS, Walter?” Doug whispered. “I’m not complaining, but why is there a lock on the inside of this door?”

Walter looked at the lock, then back to Doug. “I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

OCTOBER 2036

“YOU HAVE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME,” MIRANDA SAID, BRINGING THE Range Rover to a halt.

She squinted her eyes against the glare as she watched the stumbling figure near the Secured Expressway’s Tenth Street exit. The clothes of the one-time businessman hung in filthy tatters, fluttering in the breeze. The uneven gait and awkward balance marked it as a shambler, now the most common type of zombie, and its guttural moan carried across the distance.

Miranda twisted around in her seat to look up and down the deserted freeway for more zombies, then inched the Rover closer. A cacophony of snarls and barking erupted behind her, courtesy of Delilah, her caramel-colored pit bull. The fur along Delilah’s spine bristled as she lunged between the front seats. Fifty feet from the shambler, Miranda stopped the Rover. She pulled the handbrake and popped the clutch into neutral but did not turn the engine off.

“Delilah, stay,” she said, then opened the door and stepped out.

The stench of decayed flesh, rank and sweet, wafted toward her. Flies buzzed around the zombie like a dark full-body halo. She ran her hand over her auburn hair to make sure the up-twist was tight. Satisfied that her hair would not give the zombie anything to latch on to, she pulled the .50 caliber Desert Eagle from her shoulder holster and once more looked up and down the Expressway. A lot

of people ended up as zombies because they failed to appreciate that while speed was not a shambler's strong suit, persistence most certainly was.

She walked closer, then spread her feet wide so the kick from the gun did not knock her over. She took her time sighting up, not wanting to waste ammo taking a long shot. Just as she squeezed the trigger, the shambler tripped over its feet and tumbled to the pavement.

"For fuck's sake."

A scowl twisted her lips as Miranda walked closer. The zombie rolled onto its back, writhing on the pavement. The fetid reek of rotting meat burned her nostrils. Gray-filmed eyes turned toward her. The shambler's mouth opened in a lipless grimace, its blackened tongue flicking back and forth. Stiff, bony fingers stretched toward her and still the zombie moaned. Even after all this time, the sound still raised the hairs on the back of Miranda's neck.

She raised the Desert Eagle again and squeezed the trigger, but the shambler twitched its head at the last moment, like it knew she was trying to kill it. The bullet nicked its jaw but did not hit the zombie's brain.

"You fucking piece of shit, that's two bullets!"

She reholstered her gun and unsheathed her machete as she closed the remaining distance between herself and the zombie. Stomping on the zombie's arm, Miranda swung the machete down like a guillotine. The crunch of bones reverberated up her arm as the head came free of the neck. The head rolled away, the zombie still hissing. When it stopped, Miranda raised her booted foot.

"Fucking." Her foot descended, smashing into the zombie's temple.

"Piece of." Sticky slop splashed on her leg as she pulled her foot free.

"Shit," she snarled, her foot pounding through the shambler's skull.

She glared at the gummy pile of bone and brain that stained the pavement black, chest heaving from exertion.

"Unfuckingbelievable," she muttered.

She walked back to the Rover, stopping to wipe the machete and her boot on a rag tucked into a pocket in the driver's side door. She retrieved a pair of binoculars from the glove compartment and looked up and down the freeway again. Her mind raced as she searched the walls and fences that lined the road.

How had it gotten in?

“Settle down, Delilah. It’s okay now,” she said. She patted the dog’s head and rubbed her batwing ears through the back window. Delilah ceased barking but persisted in growling, only partially appeased that the zombie no longer moved toward them.

Maybe the power around a maintenance entrance gate shorted out, Miranda speculated, a frown twisting her mouth downward. Electrified fences were the weakest link in the Expressway’s security system, but the second set of gates behind them were manned and overengineered. It had never been a problem.

Until now maybe... But this shambler wasn’t coordinated enough to be a good climber, she thought, lowering the binoculars.

Most zombies couldn’t climb. They could stumble over low obstacles, but climbing stairs, fences, or ladders required coordination beyond a typical zombie’s abilities. Even if this one were coordinated enough to climb the Expressway walls, there would need to be an electrical failure at the fence and a failure at the secondary gate including the guard.

“How the hell does that happen and no one notices?”

A zombie on the Expressway in the heart of Zone 1, the safest area in San Jose. Hell, in all of Silicon Valley. The evidence lay crumpled a few feet away, but she could not believe it. There had never been a zombie on the Expressway. Never.

What if it’s an outbreak?

The idea sent an unpleasant shiver skittering down her spine. Miranda climbed into the Rover and turned around to drive back to the Bird Street exit. She looked in the rearview mirror at the slumped form, growing smaller by the second. It’s not an outbreak, she decided, remembering the condition of its clothes. This was an old zombie, not someone who had missed a dose.

Delilah’s snout nuzzled Miranda’s ear. She nudged the dog away before Delilah could give her a wet willy.

“This is definitely going to liven up some gate operator’s morning, Liley; that’s for sure.”

“AND THEN HE said he ‘didn’t have time for crazy chicks.’”

Miranda and her best girlfriend Karen were having lunch at the Ethiopian Place. That wasn’t the restaurant’s name, just what everyone called it. If pressed, most Valley residents could not have supplied *Star of Ethiopia*’s actual name if it would save them from a pack of snarling zombies, but everyone knew *The Ethiopian Place at San Pedro Square*.

They were seated outdoors at a café table on a gorgeous October day, marred only by the abject misery of Miranda’s lunch companion. Karen sat sniffing, salty tear tracks crusting her copper skin as she poked aimlessly at the Doro Tibs and Azifa with her injera. When they’d made their lunch date, Miranda had not considered that injera—the soft, porous bread that served as an edible fork—might also be used as a tissue as Karen went through the motions of eating. She had not actually dabbed her eyes or blown her nose on her injera—yet—but the sight of it passing so close to Karen’s sniffly nose only to be poked back into the food they were ostensibly sharing was starting to put Miranda off her lunch.

“Why the hell did he lead me on for two months and make me think this was going somewhere if he wasn’t really interested?”

Karen’s righteous indignation was followed by a fresh burst of tears. Miranda passed her a napkin. If she could get Karen to use the napkin, maybe she’d quit almost using her injera.

Miranda could think of several reasons why this latest creep was not interested in anything more than fucking around, but the short answer was Karen

dated jerks. For as long as Miranda had known her, there was something about handsome, cocky, macho jocks who thought the world revolved around them that attracted Karen like a magnet.

“I’m just so tired of dating,” Karen whimpered. She wiped her puffy eyes on her sleeve. Her corkscrew curls stuck forlornly to her head. Her mouth compressed into a scowl. With her coppery skin, she looked like a too-old buckeye robbed of its satiny shine.

“How is it that you always date such nice guys, Miri?”

Miranda choked on her drink. The absurdity of Karen’s statement caused her to suck water down her windpipe.

“You’re kidding me, right?” she sputtered between coughing fits. “The most action I’ve gotten lately was when you couldn’t find your seat belt in What’s-His-Face’s car and were fumbling under my ass for it.”

“You know what I mean,” Karen replied. “Maybe it’s been a while, but Sam was—oh shit, Miri, I’m sorry.”

Miranda waved her friend’s unease away. Talking about Sam didn’t sting like it used to. It wasn’t Karen who had gotten him killed.

“And so was—” Karen stopped again, wincing before continuing gamely. “Well, and Connor, of course.”

“You’re going back to college, Karen, eleven years easy. That’s a bit of a stretch,” Miranda replied, digging into the food. Karen’s embarrassment had distracted her so much that she had finally quit waving her contaminated injera everywhere.

“Well, I don’t know what to do,” Karen sighed. “I’m thirty, single, and date assholes. I feel doomed.”

Miranda was about to say something encouraging when a woman walked past their table, distracting her.

“What is it?” Karen asked as she watched Miranda’s attention drift.

“It’s that woman. Do I know her?”

Karen turned in her seat to look. “The one in blue?” she asked. “She doesn’t look familiar to me.”

Miranda’s brow furrowed. “Something’s not right about her, but I can’t put

my finger on it.”

The woman had stopped to look in a shop window. On further inspection, Miranda decided that she didn’t know her and she looked normal enough: a tall woman in a nice dress and expensive sunglasses. Her dog stood beside her.

“I don’t know what it is you’re seeing, Miri. She looks like a regular person to me.”

“I dunno, maybe my imagination is getting the better of me,” Miranda said, setting the matter aside. “That zombie on the Expressway got my day off to a strange start.”

Miranda turned her attention back to her lunch when it hit her: the woman was wearing heels. Very *high* heels. She had not seen anyone in a pair in years.

“It’s her shoes!” she hissed. “She’s wearing heels!”

Karen regarded Miranda with a puzzled expression. “Why is that weird? Lots of women have started wearing them again. I just got a pair myself. I forgot how much they pinch your toes.”

“Lots of women are wearing them?” Miranda squeaked, her voice getting higher with each word. “Since when?”

“Not everyone plays in the dirt for a living and considers sneakers snazzy footwear, Miri.”

“How do you outrun a zombie in high heels?”

“Oh, Miri, honestly! You make it sound like there are zombies around every corner,” Karen said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Things are so much better now. Why not live a little?” Karen mustered a faint grin, no doubt at the prospect of having footwear fashion trends to follow.

“Well, of course things are better,” Miranda replied. “But with all the people coming to San Jose for the vaccine and then finding out they can’t afford it, we have a pretty bad zombie problem just outside the walls. There’s still the occasional dasher. Zombie on the Expressway this morning.”

Karen rolled her eyes in an aggrieved manner that always got under Miranda’s skin.

“Dashers? Really? When’s the last time you saw someone fat enough to turn into a dasher?”

“That’s not the point.”

“I can’t remember the last time I saw a dasher. And they end up slowing down and becoming shamblers once the fat is gone.” Karen paused. “Have they ever figured out how that works?”

“If they figured out how something dead can metabolize anything, let alone how fat, fast zombies turn into gaunt, slow ones, I think we’d have heard about it. I know what you’re doing, Karen. You’re trying to change the subject.”

“I’m not saying that people don’t have to be cautious,” Karen allowed. “But there are places where there haven’t been zombies in what...seven, eight years? Like right *here*. What’s wrong with wanting to try and be a little normal?”

Miranda felt her brain begin to swell. One more ridiculous word out of Karen’s mouth and it would explode.

“Anything that doesn’t take what I affectionately refer to as *reality* into account isn’t just stupid, it’s dangerous. Next, you’re going to tell me you’re moving to one of the gated La-La Lands.”

“Sweetie, if I had the money I’d have moved there yesterday. And so would you, if you were honest with yourself.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Miranda snapped.

“Yes you would, Miranda Tucci, and you know it! Why are we even arguing about this? You’re supposed to be cheering me up, not biting my head off.”

Miranda wanted to tell Karen how wrong she was but swallowed her retort. “Maybe we should get some dessert?” Dessert was always a good olive branch. Karen had a sweet tooth.

“Are you kidding? I have to get back to my dating weight, and I have to get back to work. I’ll take care of the check.”

Karen was out of her seat and through the restaurant door before Miranda could say anything more. Miranda couldn’t believe Karen did not see the sheer insanity of wearing shoes that were not made for walking, let alone running or fighting. Was she being more irrational than usual because of the breakup, or were people really getting back to “normal” and she had somehow missed it?

The waiter came up to the table. “Would you like your check, Miss, or will you be getting a coffee?”

“Uh, no, thanks,” Miranda said. “My friend went in to pay. She’s in a hurry to get back to work.”

The waiter paled. “I— She shouldn’t need to do that,” he stammered. “I’ll pay your bill myself, I, let me get these dishes out of your way.”

The waiter continued to apologize. His hands shook so much that the dishes he picked up rattled. Miranda opened her mouth to assure him it was no big deal when she saw the tattoo on his neck: an orange triangle overlapped by a thin black circle with three black pointy-ended semi-circles intersecting it—the universal symbol for a biohazard. Her hand touched the green triangle tattoo on her own neck, just under her right jaw, before reaching for his arm.

She only succeeded in startling the poor man. He jerked his arm away so abruptly that a glass tumbled off his tray. Heads turned at the hollow crash of the breaking glass. As he stooped to pick up the pieces, the waiter began to weep.

Miranda crouched beside the distraught man. She picked up a piece of the shattered glass and set it on his tray.

“It’s okay. Please don’t worry. We would never complain.”

Pathetic, gratuitous apologies or wretched, abject gratitude—she wasn’t sure which was worse.

MIRANDA DOUBLED OVER, breathing heavily as she recovered from a sprint up the six flights of stairs to the top story of Farm #1. After her weird morning and then lunch with Karen, she needed to dispel the funky energy she seemed to be attracting. Running stairs was as good a way as any and it kept her in shape in case she was attacked by all those zombies Karen thought she was being over the top about.

She opened the door, breathing deep. The tomatoes were her favorite part of the farm. There had been a Sun Gold that had topped fifteen feet during the last growing cycle. Nothing was going quite that crazy just now, but the plants were doing well.

The same could not be said for the irrigation system on this floor, however, and the tech was not in yet, so she would look at it herself. The place buzzed with activity as people tried to catch up on the morning's work. Miranda liked when it was busy like this. It reminded her of when they were first trying to get the farms off the ground.

Some had scoffed when she first suggested the idea of a vertical farm. Who was she, a snot-nosed college kid who'd never even graduated, to think she should be in charge of growing enough food for everyone? Holders of that opinion were not impressed by Miranda's internship at the Chez Panisse Foundation's Edible Schoolyard Program. Others were daunted at the thought of building anything so ambitious. Miranda had come across vertical farms her freshman year and fallen in love with the concept immediately. The idea was so

elegant and made so much sense that Miranda was sure it would never become a reality on the scale that it should. Not in America, anyway.

The idea was to have multi-story buildings in cities that were essentially huge greenhouses to grow food. The controlled environment would mitigate crop failure, making organic farming easier. Farmland could be allowed to return to its natural state, restoring ecological systems. Burning fossil fuels to transport food would be reduced because it would not have to be shipped all over the world. And if there was ever a disruption in supply lines because of a disaster, cities wouldn't run out of food within days.

Miranda spent hours poring over schematics for glass and steel buildings with thermodynamic heating and cooling systems, solar-powered irrigation systems, and wind-powered electrical systems. She thought the designs were inspired, never thinking she'd get the chance to manage one, never mind build one. Farm #1 was in the converted North Parking Garage on the San Jose State University campus. When the first harvest from the pilot was compared to those that were grown traditionally, the project picked up steam. The vertical out-produced the regular farm by thirty percent, better than they'd projected. Even without the use of heavy machinery, building from scratch proved more efficient than conversions. Once they started using purpose-built buildings, the percentage jumped to forty-five.

There were still traditional farms. Replacing them had never been the idea; having a more secure food source was. There were five verticals between the San Jose State and Santa Clara University campuses so far, as well as the farm at UC Berkeley. Just thinking about the success of the project made Miranda so happy she thought she would burst.

She squatted next to the pump for the sixth floor and took off the casing. No blockages on the intake and outtake tubes she discovered after a quick visual inspection. The pump had power and the water pressure was good, so it was not a leak. It had to be mechanical. Miranda pried off the motor cover to take a look. *Worst case scenario we swap the whole thing out and have maintenance do the repairs.*

She had the motor almost half taken apart when she heard footsteps and

voices coming her way. One voice belonged to Alan Reynolds, the City Council Administrative Liaison.

Privately, Miranda referred to Alan as ‘The Troll.’ His predecessors had understood that the job was a bone the Jesuits of Santa Clara University—who ran the farms—threw to placate the City. The City, in turn, used the liaison to spy on the Jesuits. There had not been much to report of late since the rocky relationship between the Council and the Jesuits was calm just now, but that could change in a heartbeat. Everyone knew how it worked except Alan. He had ideas about how to run the Farm and thought his position gave him a say about Ops. Miranda had decided that Alan was not that smart. Self-important and well-connected? Absolutely. But smart? Not in this lifetime.

“It is hard to find a good gardener!” Alan’s droning voice floated down the aisle. “Every time I find an adequate one, it takes a month to get them to do things the way I want. I get maybe six months, and then one day some random person shows up saying my gardener turned, but he’ll be happy to take over.”

Alan sounded aggrieved, as if his gardener woes would be the death of him. Miranda had abandoned all pretense of trying to work with Alan months ago and instead concentrated her efforts on finding some pretext to get rid of him. If he’d just get caught out in something even the City can’t defend, like kiddie porn, she thought.

A deep pang of longing blossomed in her chest. Lately she’d begun fantasizing about arranging an accident to take care of the Alan problem but when she made a wisecrack to that effect, Father Walter had not been amused. She grinned, remembering the look of horror on his face, as well as his sharp admonishment that she would do no such thing.

As if I’d ever stoop as low as murder for that waste of space.

The footsteps drew closer. Even though she knew it was coming, it still put every nerve on edge.

“Knock knock!”

She didn’t know where Alan had picked up the habit of slinking up behind people and treating the beginning of a knock-knock joke as a legitimate greeting. Business school, most likely.

“What do you want?” she asked, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

“I want to introduce you to Mary, our new irrigation tech.”

A new irrigation tech? Alan had Miranda’s attention now.

“What are you talking about?” she said as she stood up. “You don’t hire for Ops and we don’t need an irrigation tech, especially now.”

“Ah, yes, about that... I’m afraid I had to let Timmy go.”

Alan looked down at his shoes, then up at the ceiling. He was so tall that his raised head left her looking at the bottom of his bobbing Adam’s apple. His habit of not looking her in the eye was almost as annoying as the knock knock crap.

“*You* had to let Timmy go? I’m gonna use short sentences so you understand me. You don’t hire for the Farm. *I* do.”

“You know that Timmy was bitten—”

“And he got to the hospital in time so they could dose him.”

Alan lowered his beady blue eyes to hers, his lips pursed like he’d been sucking a lemon.

“We’ve never had a doser working at the Farm and I don’t think it’s a good idea to set a precedent. I don’t have to remind you that his Level 1 skill rating is the only reason he was eligible for post-bite sponsorship in the first place, and that comes out of the general fund, not the Ops budget.” Seeing Miranda’s stunned expression, Alan’s voice became bold. “You should have consulted me before you signed off on treatment.”

For a moment, Miranda was too stunned to speak. “You want to get rid of him because it costs us money?” she demanded. “If we don’t sponsor him, he’ll be a slave or turn into a zombie! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Heads popped out from the tomato plants, seeking the source of the raised voices. The would-be irrigation tech backed away from Alan.

“You can’t talk that way to me!” Alan snapped. “The last thing we need is to have someone working here who’s going to turn into a zombie if he misses a dose! I won’t have it!”

“There is zero chance of him turning if he gets his dose every day. I’ve talked to Timmy, and despite the fact that he’ll now be treated like shit by most everyone and has to go live in that goddamn camp, his motivation to avoid

becoming a zombie is very high. You don't have authority over Ops staffing, which includes vaccine sponsorship, so I don't give a shit what you'll have."

"I don't appreciate your attempts to undermine my authority, Miranda," Alan countered, looming over her. "It's unfortunate that he was infected but—"

"No, Alan, you listen to me." Miranda moved into his space so that he had to take a step back. Her voice dripped menace, and her right index finger jabbed into his chest for emphasis. "I don't give a fuck what you want, what you like, or how you want things done. I don't care if they put a biohazard tattoo in the middle of his fucking forehead! Nobody is going to turn on my watch to save a few a bucks. Now take your flunky and fuck off before I throw you out the goddamn window."

Alan vibrated with fury and embarrassment, his face as purple as the eggplants that grew on the other side of the building. "You haven't heard the last of this, Miranda! You can't treat me like this and get away with it!" he snarled.

He turned on his heel and scuttled toward the door, very much like an oversized beetle, taking note of the sizable audience their shouting match had drawn. Miranda shouted after him.

"Yeah, Alan, I have heard the last of it! The City doesn't control the Farms and I don't care what Councilman you're blowing, you fucking troll!"

"Goddamn him," she hissed as the door slammed shut. She kicked a wrench that lay on the floor, sending it skittering across the deck grating that let water drip through to the level below. Blood pounded in Miranda's ears, her body brimming with adrenaline. She looked up and for the first time noticed the staff standing there.

"What?" she blurted. At the back of the group came a clap, followed by another. Within seconds she was receiving an enthusiastic standing ovation. Miranda felt a grin tug at one corner of her mouth. "That was pretty bad, wasn't it?"

The young woman nearest to her grinned. "That was epic, boss! That was like, folk hero stuff."

"I don't know about that," Miranda laughed. She looked at her staff, their faces alight with laughter and adoration. "Okay, you guys. I blew my stack and

there's still work to do. Nothing to see here anymore."

The clapping, though not the laughter and excited chatter, subsided as people drifted back to their work.

"Hey," Miranda said to the young woman. "Will you call maintenance for me, have them come swap out this pump?"

"Sure thing, boss."

Miranda smiled her thanks, then headed for the door. She had to track down Timmy, the irrigation tech caught up in Alan's power grab, to let him know that she had not gone back on her word.

Fucking Alan, she thought, another fucking day in paradise.

“YOUR CAR IS READY, sir. It’s waiting outside the main entrance.”

San Jose City Councilman Mario Santorello looked up from the contract he had been reviewing. The Council secretary hovered in the doorway.

“That’s great, thank you,” he said, offering a tight smile. Almost eight months into his term, Mario could not remember the woman’s name. After years of not bothering with the names of underlings, he had trouble remembering even the names of those it would be helpful to know.

Mario straightened the papers before setting the contract aside. He pushed his chair in with a precision the task did not require, then checked his watch. Might as well go straight home after and spend an hour with the kids, he thought as he buttoned his suit jacket.

Outside, the sun’s rays were blinding as they reflected off the squat glass and silver dome beside the San Jose City Hall tower. Mario squinted against the glare, the pupils of his light-brown eyes contracting to pinpoints. He slipped on his sunglasses and headed for the open rear door of the black SUV parked at the curb.

“Mario!”

He stopped and turned. His younger brother Dominic waved his arm above his head from halfway down the block.

“Glad I caught you,” he said when he reached Mario.

“I’m on my way to the Julian Gate. I can’t stick around,” Mario said.

“I’ll tag along. You can give me a ride home,” his brother answered, then

ducked into the SUV ahead of Mario. Dominic grinned as he settled himself on the cool leather of the back seat. “Julian Gate means a riot and you’re still the new kid on the block. The first year sucks, but someone else will be getting the glamour jobs before you know it.”

Mario sighed, then looked out the window. Falling into the pecking order of siblings, Dominic did not try to engage in conversation during the three-minute drive.

The Julian Street Gate towered ominously at the intersection ahead. The fortified concrete wall that demarcated San Jose’s border could have given the Berlin Wall a run for its money with its drab grayness and oppressive aspect. The walls and gates that surrounded San Jose always reminded Mario of the ugliest examples of Soviet architecture, but they got the job done. He supposed that was all the Soviets had cared about, too.

Mario opened the SUV door. The roar from the other side of the wall always surprised him. He knew it was a riot, and by definition riots were loud, but he could not shake the years of conditioning for quiet and stealth.

He nodded to the Watch Commander who waited at the bottom of the tower stairs. “What have we got?” he asked as they started up the metal stairs two abreast, his brother following after.

“Approximately five hundred subjects gathered over the last hour. Twelve minutes ago, they demanded entrance to the city. They were given two minutes to disperse, then tear gas canisters were fired. They fell back for a short time but regrouped.”

Mario walked to the railing of the observation deck at the top of the stairs. The ashy smell of tear gas still hung in the air despite the stiff breeze against Mario’s back. A wave of raggedly dressed people rushed toward the wall, then stopped short as if on cue. Arms flipped up like the levers of a line of catapults and rocks filled the air, smacking feebly against the fortified concrete. Flames burst to life at the edge of Mario’s peripheral vision as a Molotov cocktail ignited.

Beside him, Dominic said, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning.”

Mario shot his brother an annoyed sideways glance.

“Lighten up,” Dominic laughed. “And don’t pull that fox face with me. I pulled more of these the first month of my first term than you’ll ever get now. Order the live ammunition.”

Mario turned to the Watch Commander. “Why haven’t you used the water cannon?”

“We’re still on water restriction until the rains start, sir. We can let it run its course if you’d like.”

“Tick tock, tick tock,” Dominic muttered.

Mario shook his head. “We don’t need five hundred more zombies along our walls. Give another order to disperse, then use live ammunition.”

The Watch Commander nodded. He turned away and started barking orders.

“Now the fun begins,” Dominic said as the dispersal order blared over the loudspeaker.

Mario waited. The mob offered rude gestures and cat-called insults. When the crack of the rifles began, the taunts turned to screams and panic.

“And they’re off!” Dominic said, his voice like a child’s with a new toy. “Look at them run.”

Mario felt his face tighten into a hard mask. It started at his eyes, then his nose, followed by his mouth and square chin. Mario looked at his brother again and headed for the stairs. He was almost at the landing before Dominic called after him. Mario waited while Dominic caught up.

“Don’t be such a crab ass, I’m just having a little fun. Migrants can’t turn up on our doorstep expecting to be handed the vaccine as some sort of entitlement, Mario. They have to pay for it or earn it like everyone else. It’s not like they matter.”

Dominic had been on the City Council for almost six years and enjoyed the idea of being senior to his older brother entirely too much for a thirty-four-year-old man. Mario’s motives for wanting to be on the Council could not have been more different than his brother’s, and he’d fought like hell to prove his loyalty before he was finally awarded a seat. The sibling rivalry, and, if he was honest with himself, his brother’s lack of recognition of how hard he had to work to get where he was now, got on his nerves.

“Of course they don’t matter. I just have better things to do than watch fish being shot in a barrel.” Above them, the gunfire ceased. “You still want that lift home?”

“Yeah, though I’m not in a rush,” Dominic answered, opening the SUV’s door.

“Alan still trying to run the Farm?” Mario asked, not trying to hide his amusement. He directed the driver to the Axis building, then turned his attention back to Dominic.

“If I’ve told him once I’ve told him a million times: all he’s supposed to do at the Farm is keep an eye on things and report back, but does he listen?” Dominic asked, his voice filled with long-suffering. “He and Miranda got into it again, but this one was bad. She threatened to throw him out the window.”

“You still have your looks,” Mario said. “It’s not like you’ll be a widower for long.”

“You suck.”

Mario laughed. “That may be, but he needs to cool it. We cannot touch Miranda without pissing off the Jesuits, and you know what her temper is like. If she gets angry enough—”

Dominic groaned. “I spent lunch trying to explain political realities to him. He refuses to believe the Jesuits have the support they do with the unwashed masses. Or that they’re stronger now than when we tried to get rid of them before. ‘We have the vaccine’ is his answer to everything, as if having the vaccine is all that matters when we need their import network from the missions. He has this ridiculous notion that we can just step in and take them over, too. And he cannot comprehend that they started the Farms to feed people, not to make a buck.”

“That’s what happens when you let a bunch of academics run things.”

“Talking to Alan about any of it is like talking to a stone.”

“You should have married a Catholic, Dom,” Mario teased. “If you hadn’t strayed from the One True Church, your husband would understand that priests live for that social justice crap.”

“If I hadn’t strayed, I wouldn’t be married at all, you dick,” Dominic

retorted, but he smiled. The SUV slowed as they approached his building.

“You picked him.”

“It’s self-inflicted, I know.” Dominic opened his door. “Give Emily and the kids my love.”

“You bet. I’ll see you later.”

The SUV door slammed shut.

“Home next, Councilman?” the driver asked, making eye contact via the rearview mirror.

Mario nodded, then looked out the window without seeing anything. Fucking Miranda, he thought. A ghost of a smile played around the corners of his mouth as he pictured her: a five-foot-seven fire-breathing dragon squaring off against his idiot brother-in-law. She had probably been sticking up for someone who could not stick up for themselves, like she always did.

A wave of loneliness caught Mario in its undertow, tightening his throat and hollowing his chest. He tried to shove the feelings aside. He could not afford to dwell on Miranda, but that left him thinking about Dominic. His brother regarded shooting unarmed people as entertainment, even people as dispensable as migrants. It shouldn’t have surprised Mario, yet somehow it did. What was it that Miranda had read to him once?

A riot is the language of the unheard.

“What’s that, sir?” the driver asked.

Mario looked up, surprised to realize he had spoken out loud.

“It’s nothing.”

CONNOR'S BREATH came in scraping gasps as he sprinted across Monterey Avenue.

"The bank!" Seffie shouted.

Connor saw it on the corner: a squat Bank of America building. Low enough that they could get to the roof, but high enough that they could escape the horde. He glanced over at Mike.

Mike wasn't there.

Connor skidded to a halt and turned back. Mike was down on one knee, still by the motel down the road, trying to shake off two zombies. If they got him down, he was done for.

Without thinking, Connor ran back. From his peripheral vision he could see zombies—tens of them, soon maybe hundreds—spilling out from the parking lots and abandoned buildings of this semi-industrial strip of old San Jose. They were closing in from all sides, stalking their prey with an inexorable herky-jerky momentum.

He swung the crowbar against the skull of the zombie on Mike's back. Both Mike and the zombie sprawled forward, knocked down to the pavement from the force of the blow. Connor took aim at the other zombie—the one holding fast to Mike's arm as it gnawed on his elbow. When the crowbar connected, Mike yanked his arm away, shrugging off the zombie on his back as he rose. His jacket, still tangled in the fists of the dead zombies, began to tear.

"Behind you!"

Connor didn't look, just swung as he turned. He hit the first zombie in the chest. As it staggered back, he shoved the sharp end of the bar into another's face.

Mike fell in beside Connor, the early evening sun glinting off the stainless steel chain mail exposed by the rips in his jacket. Seffie was gone, turned the corner already. They ran flat out, dodging and swatting away the grasping, twisted hands, not trying to kill because that would slow them down.

"Over here!" Seffie shouted, waving her arms above her head, her voice almost panicked. Connor saw her eyes get wider. He did not need to look back. The growing volume of moans at his back told him everything.

Seffie looked tiny next to the three square brick columns supporting the low roof over a row of defunct ATMs. Mike leaned down when they reached her, weaving his hands together to create a step. Almost as soon as Seffie's foot hit his hands, she was airborne, tossed up on the roof like a doll. Connor performed the same service for Mike with a groan and none of Mike's grace, providing just enough lift so that Mike could catch the roof's lip. Connor stepped under his kicking feet, guiding them to his shoulders, his spine compressing under Mike's weight.

The sight that had widened Seffie's eyes now widened Connor's own. There were hundreds of zombies shuffling into the intersection, curling around the corner from Monterey Avenue like water around a stone.

"Come on, man, let's go."

Connor looked up. Mike's perfect white teeth glinted against his blue-black skin. His muscled arms extended down. Connor crouched, then jumped, stretching his arms high. Mike snagged him just past the elbows, his huge hands dwarfing Connor's biceps. Connor scrabbled his feet against the column, seeking whatever tiny purchase the mortar between the bricks offered. He felt a sliding weight against his boot heel, a hand not quite able to catch hold and hang on, as Mike pulled him up to safety.

Connor collapsed onto the hot blacktop and gravel roof. Heat radiated through his battered canvas backpack, clothing and chain mail, broiling his already roasting skin. He felt itchy, exhausted, and grateful to be alive.

“And I thought we were screwed in Salinas,” he gasped.

“Tell me about it,” Mike answered.

Seffie’s voice was filled with irritation. “You two need to come over here, away from the edge.”

Connor lifted his head. Seffie had retreated to the main building roof. He followed Mike over to where she sat.

“Don’t tell me you’d miss me,” Connor said to her.

“Hardly,” she snorted. She swiped at the sweat on her flat, Pekinese-like face with the blue bandana that was usually wrapped around her head. “We’re what, half a mile short?”

Connor stood up and squinted through the shimmering waves of heat rippling up from road and rooftops, barely visible as dusk approached. It couldn’t be more than half a mile to the huge concrete wall that demarcated the boundary of modern San Jose. The road itself was clear of vehicles beyond the intersection where they were stranded. Every car, truck, and SUV had been moved off to the side and stacked two or three high, almost all the way to the gate. The road lay open like an invitation, but a smattering of zombies wandered on both sides of the vehicle barrier. For every one you could see, there was sure to be at least five more you could not.

“I can see the gate and a whole lot of zombies.” Connor sighed.

“How do they keep the city secure with this many so close?” said Mike.

Connor shrugged as he sat down again. Seffie’s face twisted into its habitual scowl.

“It’ll be dark soon, and we still have one flare. We could shoot it and see if they’ll come get us,” Connor suggested.

“Would you come out to get people you don’t know?” Seffie asked. Almost immediately, both she and Mike added, “Don’t answer that.”

Connor didn’t need the reminder. He knew he was the Boy Scout of the group. Seffie and Mike were far too pragmatic to risk their necks for people they did not know without a damn good reason. Whoever was manning that wall was probably the same.

“I have a few grenades left,” Mike said. “Let’s lay low for an hour or two, let

the horde settle. If it clears up at all, we make a break for it. Shoot the flare so they know we're coming, and it'll give us some light. Use the grenades if it gets crowded. If we're lucky, we'll make it. It's only half a mile."

It was risky, but Mike was right. They did not have a radio or a vehicle or even bicycles. They'd run out of water over a day ago. It was now or never. Connor stuffed his battered canvas backpack under his head before shading his eyes with the crook of his arm.

"You weigh a fucking ton, dude," he said to Mike.

"I played linebacker for NAVY. I'm supposed to weigh a ton."

"Twenty years ago, maybe," said Seffie.

"Now don't be like that, little girl," Mike said, gently teasing.

Seffie flashed a rare smile. "I'll be any way I want, you old geezer."

ZOMBIES STILL MILLED AROUND THE BANK SEVERAL HOURS LATER, BUT FAR fewer than before. Connor wasn't worried about getting through the close ones. It was what they might encounter farther down the road that concerned him. Making a break for it in unfamiliar territory was always dangerous. Trying it in the dark... He didn't let himself think about the odds. The glow of electric lights shimmering against the night sky, safely ensconced behind San Jose's walls, felt like a dare. Were they brave enough—desperate enough—to take it?

Connor pinched the bridge of his nose to ease the throbbing headache behind his eyes. The pain flared whenever he turned his head, a sure sign of dehydration. He eased himself over the lip of the roof, hung for a moment, then let go. At six feet plus the length of his arms, the ten-foot drop was easy. Seffie shimmied over feet first. Connor caught her legs and let her slide down against him. Mike got down on his own, just as Connor had.

The closest zombies began to stir as they moved away. Connor adjusted his grip on the crowbar and glanced back the way they had come. Most of the zombies that had surrounded them earlier were back around the corner, milling in place. At least, that's what it looked like. It was hard to tell in the dark.

They trotted through the intersection and passed the first set of shops before the moans began. A low, thin sound that began near the bank. Then it spread, hopped, amplified.

“Let’s pick it up,” Mike said.

As Seffie started to jog, Connor saw the first shapes moving in the dark beyond the stacked cars, far more than he had feared. More adrenaline flooded his system, tightening his chest and making his heart race.

“Shoot the flare,” he said to Mike.

“Not yet,” Mike answered.

They ran faster as they skirted a three-car-length gap in the barrier where zombies spilled into the road. From side streets and alleys, from the vast vacant tracts of land behind tumbledown chain-link fences, came stumbling, moaning figures.

“Shoot the fucking flare, Mike,” Seffie hissed.

Mike lifted his arm. Connor heard a soft pop. A moment later, soft pink light illuminated the sky and Connor’s heart sank.

There were more gaps in the stacked car barrier. Zombies were spilling into the roadway. There were even two climbers, something Connor had rarely seen, tumbling off the barrier before staggering to their feet.

They had covered half the distance, but Connor didn’t see how they were going to make it.

“When I say duck, you stop and do it!” Mike said, not bothering to be quiet any longer. Connor saw him pull the pin from a grenade.

“Duck!”

Connor stopped and ducked low. He could see the dirty gray laces of a battered pair of Converse tennis shoes that shuffled closer. Black ballet flats. Work boots. A broken high heel.

The grenade detonated.

Connor and the others leaped to their feet, toward the thinning of the almost-horde ahead of them. Mike lobbed the next grenade without telling them to stop. Connor shielded his face when it detonated, saw its lack of effect.

“Climb!” Seffie shouted, grabbing his hand.

They climbed the vehicle barrier, hands slick with sweat, fear sharp in the air. Connor crouched on the roof of the minivan on top of a car. Mike scrambled up, then leaped to the next vehicle. When Connor pushed off to follow, he felt the minivan roof beneath him shift. He looked down to see zombies pressing against the barrier from both sides.

Seffie and Mike stumbled ahead of him, swaying like drunkards as they struggled to keep their balance on the shifting car roofs. They both stopped short, and when he reached them, Connor saw that the barrier ended. The flare still burned bright, bathing the wrought iron enclosure around the wall's outer gate in a rosy glow. They were two hundred feet short. No way they could make it. All the way from Mexico and they were going to die, here, two hundred feet short of salvation.

The barrier beneath them shifted first one way, then the other. They huddled close together on the dented roof of the finest German engineering money used to be able to buy.

"Goddammit!" Seffie yelled. "God motherfucking dammit!"

Mike put his hand on her shoulder and pulled a grenade from his pocket.

"I've got one more."

The car shifted a few inches. Mike looked nervous but confident. Seffie looked as pissed as Connor had ever seen her. Connor just felt defeated. He'd never see any of them: Miri, Walter, Emily. They'd never know what happened to him.

Connor looked at Seffie and Mike. They were more than his friends; they were comrades-in-arms. A sudden rush of affection swelled in his chest.

"You're the best people to die with."

The car shifted again, more forcefully this time.

Mike pulled the pin.

A siren split the night, drowning out the noise of the horde. They all looked to the wall. Industrial yellow lights twirled bright, making the pink light at the gate a hazy orange. The interior gate built into the wall opened slowly, far too slowly when the perch between safety and death rocked beneath their feet. An armored delivery truck rumbled through the wall into the wrought iron

enclosure. When the inner gate shut behind it, the outer gate opened.

“Holy shit,” Seffie whispered.

Suppressing gunfire mowed down zombies in the truck’s path. As it closed the distance, the rocking of the car they huddled on lessened. The over-tall truck pulled alongside as a round top hatch opened.

“Come on, get a move on!” shouted the man who popped up through the hatch.

They all leaped at once, landing on the truck with a hollow thud. First Seffie, then Mike climbed in. Connor fell down the ladder with trembling legs and clumsy feet, shaking from head to toe, and collapsed on the floor.

Their amused-looking rescuer scurried back up the ladder, secured the hatch, then slid down firefighter-style with his feet pressed against the outer rails.

“Okay, Jimmy, let’s go!” he shouted toward the front.

The truck jolted forward and began a wide U-turn. Connor crawled out of the way and leaned against a row of lockers built into the truck’s wall.

“Thanks,” he said, extending his hand to the stranger, who took it in his own, giving a firm business-like shake. “We were just about to blow ourselves up.”

“Is that right?”

“Why’d you do it?” Seffie asked, a rescue from certain death not enough to overcome her suspicious nature.

The man began to laugh.

“I made a bet with Jimmy up there,” he said, gesturing toward the driver. “He said you weren’t gonna last one minute once the flare went up. I said you’d climb and make it to the end of the cars. He said he’d drive out himself to get you if I was right.”

Seffie’s posture relaxed. Connor did not know what had happened to her, but she was suspicious of altruism. Bets, on the other hand, even those made at her expense, she understood.

“You’ll need some skills, something to offer if you want to live here,” the man continued. “They don’t let you stay just because you made it.”

“We’re not going to San Jose,” Mike said.

For the first time, their rescuer looked surprised. “Where do you think you’re

going?”

“SCU,” Connor said. “We’re here to see Father Walter Brennan.”

The man looked, if anything, even more surprised than before.

“You better be ready to pull the tiger’s tail if you’re going to see the Jesuits,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong, they run a tight ship, but they piss the City Council off on a regular basis.”

“That sounds about right. Jesuits have always been troublesome priests,” Connor said, feeling suddenly exhausted. Dying would have been clear-cut. Surviving in an unfamiliar landscape was always a murky, dangerous business.

EVEN TUCKED AWAY in the chapel of the Jesuit Residence, Connor could feel the energy that seemed to make the building hum. He, Seffie, and Mike had been parked in the chapel with the promise of a meal and an assurance that Father Walter would arrive soon. When the chapel doors whooshed open a few minutes later, Connor turned in his seat.

“Connor,” said Father Walter, the relief in his voice making the lilt of his Irish brogue more pronounced. “You are a sight for sore eyes.”

Connor found himself wrapped in an embrace before it seemed that anyone had moved. “Not as much as you are, Father Walter.”

The middle-aged priest stepped back, his hand on Connor’s shoulder. He was a small man, slight of build. His brown hair was shot through with gray, but not in a manner that looked particularly distinguished. His nose was too big and his chin weak, but his hazel eyes were startling in their beauty. Despite a ready smile and genuine desire to connect with others, Connor knew that Walter sometimes came off as aloof. In reality, he was quite shy.

“You look like a Santa Cruz panhandler!” Walter said, seeming to recover a little from the emotional wallop of seeing his former student.

Connor burst into laughter. “You just couldn’t resist, could you, Old Man? Even now.”

“And you smell like one, too!”

They laughed, wiping tears from their eyes. Walter ushered Connor back toward his companions. At the back of the room, the chapel doors opened again,

this time revealing a young man carrying a tray of sandwiches, a bottle of milk, and three glasses. He beat a hasty retreat as the hungry arrivals swarmed him.

“So, what’s the craic and scandal? When did you get here?” Walter asked.

“Half an hour ago. I’ve never been so happy to get through a fortified gate in my life,” Connor replied around a mouthful of his sandwich. He swallowed and proceeded with introductions.

“This is Mike Sealy,” he said, motioning to the burly man on his right. “And this”—he hooked his thumb to the left—“is Seffie Johnson. Mike, Seffie, this is Father Walter Brennan. He leads the Jesuit Community here at SCU.”

The pew creaked as Mike Sealy shifted his barrel-chested frame. He took a moment to finish chewing his food before he stood to greet Walter.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Mike said, looking Walter in the eye, every movement performed with an economy of motion that betrayed his military background.

“I’ve heard good things about you from my brothers in Mazatlán,” Walter replied.

Seffie swiped at a dribble of milk on her chin. She wiped her hand on her blue bandana as she looked Walter up and down. She gestured at the crucifix on the wall.

“I don’t have much use for this crap. Or priests. Especially after this clusterfuck of a trip.”

Connor watched Walter freeze for a moment at Seffie’s acerbic sally.

“Yes, well,” Walter said, “we’ll find you a comfortable bed for the duration.”

“Don’t pay too much attention, sir,” offered Mike. “She’s naturally crabby.”

“Fuck you, Mike,” Seffie said, but with fondness.

“Now, now, little girl,” Mike chided, grinning at her.

“What happened?” asked Walter. “We expected you six weeks ago. Fourteen of you, not including this one,” he said, tilting his head at Connor.

“What didn’t happen, is more like it,” Connor answered. “We ran into some weather just north of Santa Barbara and lost the sailboat. We couldn’t get another, so we walked.”

“What?” Walter said, a horrified expression on his face. “But that’s three

hundred miles!”

“Three people didn’t even make it to shore,” Connor continued. “It’s bad around Santa Maria. We lost Juan, Peter, and Mary. We got a break, sort of, at a settlement in Pismo Beach but they wouldn’t give us a boat.”

“Eight of us looking at two hundred miles and they would not give us a boat,” Seffie spat.

Mike picked up the narrative. “Pismo’s your typical strong man setup: toe the line to stay on the right side of the wall. They arrested two of our people as ‘subversive influences.’” He snorted, his face wrinkling with disgust. “It was just an excuse to keep the locals in line. They wouldn’t release them, and it wasn’t safe to stay after that.”

“We made good time at first, all things considered,” said Connor. “Slept in whatever high place we could find, even found a gun store that still had ammunition. Not that we could use it.”

Walter nodded. Guns made noise. Noise attracted zombies.

A new voice said, “And you had trouble at Salinas.”

Connor turned to see a tall willowy man about his own age walking toward them. “Father Doug Michel, pleased to meet you.”

“You’ve been there recently?” Mike asked.

“No.” Doug twitched his hair out of his eyes. “It’s been at least five years since anyone went to Salinas. I was the only one to make it back. We’ve steered clear ever since.”

“We were almost through; that’s the goddamned kicker,” Connor said, anger building at the unfairness of it. As quickly as it flared, it subsided. He was tired of losing people, but it was not something he could dwell on, not if he wanted to stay sane.

Mike said, “The three of us and another guy, Rick, got stuck up on a water tower after losing two more people. I got head shots on them... It was better than nothing.” He sighed. “Rick, well, his girlfriend didn’t make it to the tower. He took the second watch and shot himself in the head.”

No one said anything for a while. Finally, Doug broke the silence.

“How long were you stranded?”

“Three days,” Connor replied. “Seemed like every zombie within a hundred miles was there. I don’t know what caught their attention, but something did because they moved off on their own. We barely made it to the city gate.”

Mike snorted, then giggled. Soon he howled with laughter, one hand over his belly while the other wiped tears from his eyes. His merriment would have been infectious under other circumstances. As it was, everyone looked at him in confusion.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean any disrespect,” he gasped, holding up his hand as if to physically fend off the laughing fit. “Rick always managed to make things complicated. The son of a bitch kept on doing it even after he was dead!”

Connor and Seffie looked at Mike, then one another. A moment later, all three were in an uproar.

“Zombies have really warped peoples’ sense of humor,” Connor heard Walter murmur to Doug.

“I’m sorry, it’s not funny, I know—” Connor gasped, before dissolving into giggles again.

Doug shrugged, an indulgent ‘What can you do?’ look on his face.

When the laughter subsided to occasional snorts and giggles, Walter seized the opportunity.

“Why don’t we get you settled in,” he said. “The Rector is here and I’m sure a shower and a big sleep are in order.”

The Rector swooped in to gather his charges, but Connor demurred, hanging back with Walter and Doug.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” Walter said as soon as the doors swung shut. “You were told to stay where you were.”

“I told you I couldn’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Connor!” Walter said. “Of course I’m happy you’re alive, but we’ve less than two months. We need you in Mazatlán to prepare the labs in South America, not up here mooning after Miranda!”

“You know Miranda’s not the only—” Connor stopped mid-sentence, tired of trying to justify himself. “If you don’t understand why I need to be here, I’m not wasting my time explaining.”

Walter opened his mouth to speak.

“Let’s take this down a notch,” Doug said. “Walter’s right, you should have stayed put and done what you were told.” Connor started to defend himself, but Doug kept talking. “That said, he’s here, so you need to let it go, Walter. He can go back to Mazatlán when the rest of us ship out.”

“And get killed on the way back, if he bothers to go,” Walter retorted.

“Really, Walter? You’re gonna pout?” Doug asked.

“Fine, I’ll let it go,” he said, sounding tetchy, “but I don’t have to be happy about it.”

“There is an upside to me being here, which you might not know if I’d stayed in Mexico,” Connor said, leaning forward. “We didn’t lose the sailboat because of the weather. Someone sabotaged the rigging. When the storm hit, we couldn’t drop the mainsail, and then the mast snapped. The boat listed and we took on water too fast to be an accident. The mast was tampered with, too. The Mazatlán community is compromised.”

Doug shook his head as Connor spoke, a frown marring his delicately handsome face. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Do the others know?”

Connor shook his head.

“If what Connor suspects is true, we have a problem somewhere, but we cannot jump to conclusions,” Walter said. “Without more information, we have no idea what we’re dealing with, or what it means about Mazatlán.”

“I’ll start some inquiries,” Doug said, “but right now, I’m going to find out where they’re bunking Connor. He looks ready to lapse into a coma.”

Connor did feel like passing out. After their grueling trek, all he wanted was to scrub away the dirt that had seeped into his pores and sleep for a week.

“I can’t wait to tell Miri you’re here,” Doug continued. “She’s gonna lose her mind when she sees you.” He flashed a million-watt smile and headed for the door.

“She’s still here?” Connor asked as soon as he and Walter were alone.

“Of course. Where else would she be?”

“Do you think she’ll want to see me?”

“She’ll see you one way or the other. The world’s a lot smaller than it used to be.” Walter studied Connor’s face, his expression suggesting that he did not like what he saw. “She’s not the same, Connor. She’s more—” He sighed, and then shook his head. “I almost said she’s more brittle, shut down and dangerous, but who do I know who isn’t?”

“I get it. I do. What about my cousin?”

“Emily’s well.”

Walter put his hand between Connor’s shoulder blades and gave him a good-natured shove. “*That’s* for calling me Old Man,” he said, opening the chapel door. “Get a shower and a sleep, Connor. There’s time enough to bid the Devil good morrow when you meet him.”

“HOLD UP!” a voice called up the stairwell.

Miranda stopped and looked back. Harold Peterson, Director of Procurement for The Farm, took the stairs two at a time to catch up with her.

“I was worried when I heard it was you on the Expressway yesterday,” Harold said, a little breathless from his sprint. “A zombie? What the hell?”

Even when etched with concern, Harold’s face, like everything else about him, managed to be unmemorable. Hidden behind the facade of his average build, knobby chin, and receding hairline, Harold was the canniest strategist Miranda had ever met. He used his unimpressive facade to such advantage that Miranda almost felt sorry for anyone who tried to get the best of him.

“You know me, always in the thick of it.”

Miranda pushed on the door but Harold caught her hand.

“The important thing is that you’re okay and you took care of the zombie.”

As his thumb stroked the back of her hand, Miranda suppressed her lips’ strong desire to form a moue of distaste.

“Nothing a machete couldn’t handle,” she averred, withdrawing her hand from Harold’s overly familiar paw.

Harold narrowed his washed-out blue eyes. “I wish you wouldn’t drive around by yourself all the time. You should think about getting a roommate, or at least carpool with someone.”

He is so transparent, she thought. Miranda had never been able to figure out how Harold could be so subtle at office politics but so clumsy at romance. He

had doggedly refused to take the hint that she was not interested in anything more than friendship for years.

“I can take care of myself, Harold.”

“It was a worn-out shambler this time, but what if there’d been a swarm?”

“If there’d been a swarm, I’d have stayed in the Rover and turned on the flamethrowers.”

I wouldn’t be asking the most average man on the Earth for help, she thought irritably, then felt like a jerk. Sure, Harold refused to take the hint, but he was an ally and friend whose only crime was being lonely and annoyingly persistent.

“I get it, Harold,” she said, softening her tone, “but I’m fine.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Just stop.”

“Have it your way,” he said, relenting, if only for the time being. He turned to go, then turned back. “Did you get the package?”

Miranda’s cheeks blazed scarlet. Damn him, he did that on purpose, she fumed, re-evaluating her opinion of his romantic obtuseness.

The package Harold referred to was the black silk and lace bra, along with a scrap of matching panties, that she wore at this very moment. As head of procurement for The Farm, Harold had an unparalleled knack for finding things that were hard to come by. If Harold couldn’t find it, then it didn’t exist. She had no idea how he had discovered her taste in lingerie, never mind her bra size. Every time a package with an irresistible bra and panty set appeared on her desk, Miranda told herself if she had a shred of integrity, she’d give them back, but somehow she never did.

“I did,” she managed through a tight smile.

“You liked it?” he asked, all innocence.

“Yes.”

She squirmed, the bra not feeling quite as comfortable as before.

“Oh, you’re wearing them now, aren’t you?” he cried, delighted. “Is the demi-cup a good fit?”

She wanted to smack him. The twinkle in his eye and the smirk on his lips made her feel as if he was undressing her. She might not be sleeping with

Harold, but the gifts definitely were not free. She forced herself to look him in the eye.

“The fit is just fine, thank you. Now, if you don’t mind.”

Harold opened the door and held it for her.

“Of course,” he said as she stalked past him.

HOURS LATER, MIRANDA STEPPED BACK TO SURVEY HER HANDIWORK. SHE stretched her arms over her head, several vertebrae in her back popping. All the bean teepees were tied and placed, all one hundred and thirteen of them.

Her fingers felt thick and clumsy after tying all day long, but there was no denying the feeling of accomplishment. As Ops Director, she didn’t have to do fieldwork, but she liked it. It was good for morale, not that it needed a boost after her fight with Alan. If the staff wasn’t gossiping about the fight, they were buzzing about how she brought Timmy back into work yesterday.

She checked her watch. Almost six, well past time to go home. She whistled for Delilah and was rewarded a moment later with the scuffle of paws on metal. She turned at the end of the row and saw the pit bull waiting for her by the fire doors, tail wagging, when she felt a buzz in her pocket—her phone, vibrating for attention. She fished it out and answered.

“Hello?”

“Ah, Miranda, how are you?” a voice with a thick Irish brogue asked.

“Father Walter! I’m fine, but I’m falling on my face. I’m just about to head home.”

A pause, then, “Could you swing by here, if it’s not too much trouble? I need to talk to you.”

“Can it wait? I barely got any sleep last night and my day has been insane.”

“I can hear that you’re tired, Miri, but this is important.”

“And you can’t talk to me on the phone?”

“Not really.”

Fuck.

“Okay, I’ll come by. Do you happen to know what the traffic report is for Guadalupe River Park?”

“I checked since I knew you’d ask. Very little zombie activity. There was a riot outside the gate yesterday, but you should be fine. You can always backtrack on the Expressway.”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head even though he could not see her. “I’ll see you in ten minutes.”

“Okay, Miri,” Walter answered. “We can feed you dinner if you’re hungry.”

Saliva flooded her mouth. The cook at the Jesuit Residence knew how to put a meal together. “I will definitely take you up on that.”

She hung up and groaned. Even with a meal thrown in, Father Walter’s timing sucked.

“Looks like we’re going to see the Holy Fathers, Delilah. Maybe there’s a bone in it for you.”

Five minutes later, she paused at the Julian Street Gate and waited while the massive structure opened like the maw of a monster. Similar to the Expressway entrances and exits, an exterior electrified fence and double gate awaited her. She pulled forward and waited while the gate closed behind her with a deep, shuddering thud.

Beyond the gates, signs of yesterday’s riot: shell casings, rocks, scorch marks on the wall, a shoe next to a trampled bandana. Bodies below the overpass and blood, lots of blood. More than two people had died if the amount of blood on the concrete was any indication. Miranda realized that her jaw was clenched. A sense of building energy swelled beneath her skin.

“Do not get angry,” she said to herself. “You make mistakes when you’re angry. Let it go.”

She took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down, and followed the curve of the road for half a mile toward Guadalupe River Park. The trickle of water within its boundaries barely constituted a stream, let alone a river. Twilight began to fall, soft and silent. She turned on the Rover’s headlights.

This is inconvenient, but if I get a good dinner out of it, it won’t be so bad. Maybe we’ll just stay the night.

She turned left at Hedding and looked ahead—all clear. She started to relax as the Rover crested the overpass when she saw it. Seventy yards ahead of her, a very old two-door Honda Civic hatchback approached a clutch of twenty shamblers. The driver seemed unsure of what to do. Miranda laid on the horn.

“Speed up! Keep going!” she said as if the driver of the Honda could hear. The worst thing they could do was stop. Either turn around or barrel through, but don’t stop.

“What the fuck are you doing, you idiot? You have four fucking lanes! Go around!”

Picking up on Miranda’s agitation, Delilah began to growl. Then the car stopped. Heads and torsos twisted out of the windows.

They were going to try picking them off.

Such a reckless course of action took a moment to register. Miranda watched for a moment, aghast, then checked her rearview mirror. She was all for killing zombies, but this was the kind of stupid that got you killed.

She had the Rover half turned around when she saw the shapes spilling out from the shadows on the far side of the underpass. Large and fast, moving with a contradictory mix of awkwardness and grace. And speed. Whatever they were, they were fast.

“Holy shit,” she said, her brain catching up with her eyes.

It had been ages since she’d seen one, but there was no mistake. Dashers, a lot of them, four or five, maybe more. Their fat, bloated bodies belied their unnatural speed as they hurtled up the roadway. They looked like a pack of stampeding rhinos, mindlessly intent upon their target.

Panicked shouts carried on the breeze. The people in the Civic started firing at the dashers. I am out of here, Miranda thought, but she made a mistake; she hesitated. Leaving them to deal with a mess of their own making was the smart thing to do. She didn’t know these people. They were nothing to her. But she couldn’t leave them so outnumbered by Dashers. She wouldn’t sleep at night if she did.

She flipped the flamethrower “ON” switch before she knew she had made a decision. Small blue pilot lights popped brightly along the Rover’s

undercarriage.

“Delilah, down!” she shouted, jamming the clutch into first.

The Rover roared toward the Honda. A dasher had already dragged the driver out through the Honda’s window. She barreled into the mass of fat, inhumanly fast creatures and flipped the “FUEL” switch. Pillars of fire billowed up the sides of the Rover. Three dashers caught fire as she sideswiped the dasher attacking the driver. She felt the satisfying thuds as she ran over two more. She braked hard and turned the steering wheel sharply to the right, skidding the back end of the Rover around a hundred-eighty degrees.

The driver of the car slumped on the ground, bleeding from wounds on his neck and arm. The girl in the front passenger seat slid behind the wheel of the car and kept shooting at the remaining dashers. The other passenger had scrambled into the front seat and rolled up the window, which would hold off the shamblers approaching from the other side for a few moments. The girl handed off her weapon and opened the driver’s side door, reaching for her fallen friend.

Miranda sprang from the Rover. She stood behind the open door.

“Hey, over here,” she shouted, catching the attention of the last dasher. In a detached part of her brain, she realized the people in the Honda were teenagers, just a bunch of stupid kids.

Miranda aimed for the last Dasher and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. She squeezed again, but the firing mechanism had jammed. Lightning quick, she ducked behind the lower section of the door. She tossed the gun inside and reached for the crowbar next to the seat. She braced herself as the dasher slammed into the door. She fell to the ground. Knocked from her hand, the crowbar clattered on the concrete and skittered under the Rover.

She rolled onto her back and kicked at the door with both feet. The dasher staggered back as the door smacked against it. Miranda flipped onto her stomach and stretched under the Rover for the crowbar. She gritted her teeth against the searing pain of her shoulder, bumping the blistering pipes of the flamethrower apparatus.

The dasher was upon her as she twisted onto her knees. Miranda swung the crowbar hard. It connected with the dasher’s ankles, knocking its feet out from

under it. Miranda scrambled up, but the dasher rolled toward her and grabbed her ankle. She began to lose her footing as the crowbar arced down. She smacked against the ground as the crowbar crushed the zombie's skull. Yanking her ankle free, she scooted away from the pool of gooey black blood that had splattered her. The girl from the downed car was dragging her injured friend to the Rover.

"Put him in the front!" she shouted. She looked past the girl, expecting to see the third passenger, but he wasn't there. She snapped her head back to the Honda. Through the deepening twilight, she saw the boy crouched down in the passenger seat. The shamblers were making their way to the driver's side. The kid did not even have the presence of mind to pull the door shut.

Miranda bolted toward the car, wielding the crowbar like a bat. She hit the closest shambler on the side of the head. It dropped like a sack of stones. She reached in the car and grabbed the glassy-eyed passenger by the collar. She thought it was a trick of the fading light, but no. He couldn't be more than ten. She shoved the boy toward the Rover. He stumbled, but once in motion did not stop. Another shambler rounded the back of the car, lurching toward her as she sprinted to the Rover. The injured passenger slumped in the front seat, bleeding from what Miranda could now see was definitely a bite. Sensing undead infection, Delilah snarled and snapped at him from the back seat.

Miranda grabbed the dog's collar and pushed her over the back seat into the cargo area so the children could scramble inside. She slammed her door shut and flipped the flamethrower "FUEL" switch. Bright yellow-white flames licked up the doors as they raced down the overpass. Miranda wrenched the wheel so abruptly at the intersection that the Rover went up on two wheels for an endless, harrowing moment before slamming back down to the pavement.

Buildings on both sides of the road streaked by in a fiery blur. The girl leaned forward, toward the moaning, semiconscious boy. The kid wasn't more than fifteen, tops. The girl reached out to inspect his wound and Miranda backhanded her, connecting with her nose. A startled yelp escaped the girl's lips

"What the fuck were you thinking? Don't touch him unless you want to get infected!"

“We have to get him to a hospital,” the girl wailed. Blood from her nose dripped onto her ragged t-shirt. “They have the vaccine here. We have to get him to a hospital!”

“You can’t afford it and you don’t want one.”

Miranda fumbled for her phone and punched a speed-dial number. “This is Miranda Tucci! I’m coming in hot at the Accolti Gate with three civilians. One is injured.”

“But he’ll turn, he’ll turn! We have to go to a hospital,” the girl cried, hysterical.

The Rover’s tires screeched as Miranda turned onto Accolti Way. She saw movement in the elevated watchtower, then the gate opened. She finally flipped off the flamethrower switches, belatedly realizing that she was literally coming in hot. They streaked through the gate and into the nearest parking lot. Miranda slammed the brakes so hard she felt the children in the back seat thump against her own. Medical personnel streamed from the brightly lit Cowell Health Center. She breathed a sigh of relief and sat, unmoving, still clutching the steering wheel. Delilah barked and growled from the cargo area of the Rover, making an enthusiastic contribution to the chaos.

Miranda heard a voice, as if from a very far distance. She turned her head to see Doc Owen next to the injured boy. She roused herself with an effort.

“Took a bite on the neck. He might have some burns. I didn’t get a look at the others.”

Doc nodded, barking orders as he eased the boy from the front seat onto a waiting stretcher. His gloved hand applied pressure to the boy’s bleeding wound while the other children were coaxed from the back seat. Delilah hopped to the back seat and stuck her snout in Miranda’s ear, whimpering and licking.

“Are you getting out, Miranda? We need to check you out.”

Ellen, a nurse practitioner at the health center, peered into the Rover as Miranda began to shake from head to toe. She looked at her hands, clutching the steering wheel.

“I can’t let go,” she whispered.

Ellen walked around to Miranda’s side of the Rover. She reached through the

open window, avoiding the still hot exterior handle, and opened the door. She cooed nothing in particular as she tucked some stray strands of hair behind Miranda's ear and stroked her head, ignoring the gore stuck in it. Miranda began to relax. Ellen leaned in and unlaced her fingers.

"Look at me," she murmured, coaxing Miranda to turn in her seat and put her feet on the ground. Her calm brown eyes regarded Miranda's wild blue eyes. "That wasn't so hard, was it? Take a few deep breaths."

Miranda obeyed, halting at first, but soon breathing deep and smooth. She felt grateful, embarrassed, relieved that no one else had witnessed her meltdown. She looked down at her spattered clothes and her gore-specked hands.

"I'm okay now. Thanks."

"Ready to go in?"

"As long as there's a Valium with my name on it."

MIRANDA STRUGGLED to open her eyes. She lay on her stomach, on a mat on the floor. She tried to sit up but quickly realized that was a mistake, so she lay back down. Her shoulder throbbed. Delilah, snuggled up along her other side, raised her head and began licking Miranda's face. Miranda could not have said where she was if her life depended on it.

Ellen popped her head into the room. "I thought I heard you, Miri. How are you feeling?"

"Like a truck hit me."

It all came rushing back: the kids, the zombies, spending the night at Ellen's apartment in Swig Hall. She rolled onto her uninjured side, crowding her trusty pit bull, and pushed herself up. When the room stopped spinning, she asked, "How badly did I burn my shoulder?"

"Bad, but not third degree. You were lucky, but it's going to hurt." Ellen disappeared, then returned with two small pill bottles and a glass of water. "This is Percocet," she said, handing Miranda a pill from one bottle. "Take one every four to six hours, two if you're really hurting."

Miranda took the proffered water glass and pill. Her mouth felt like a desert.

"This is an antibiotic," Ellen continued. "One pill three times a day. Take it all and with food since you're a puker."

Ellen set both bottles on the coffee table and headed to the small kitchenette. Sensing action in the kitchen, Delilah trotted after her. Ellen's kitchen reminded Miranda of the kind she had used in rented apartments in Europe: half-sized

fridge, undersized stove, and a small sink with an even smaller counter. Ellen peered into the fridge.

“I’ve got some eggs and tomatoes. Are you up to eating something?”

Miranda nodded, which made her dizzy. When she stood up to go to the dining table, the dizziness got worse. She stopped and took a moment to look out the window.

Swig Hall had been the freshman dorm once upon a time and as such had no character whatsoever. Its eleven stories of ugly rectangle were a sizable exception to the elegant tan stucco and terra cotta tile roofs that characterized the rest of SCU’s campus. Swig did have one thing going for it in the aesthetics department, however: its view. The north side view was of campus, which was pretty even now. The southern side of the building looked out over the residential neighborhoods that were now part of SCU’s settlements.

The dorm had been remodeled from one-room dorms into one- and two-bedroom apartments. The apartments were small and the bathrooms communal. Swig was considered a nice, very safe place to live and as a consequence, getting an apartment in the building was difficult. Miranda had lived here once, even after the terrible experience of being trapped inside with Sam. She shuffled over to the small table and sat down.

“How long was I out?”

“We gave you something to help you sleep last night. It’s almost noon.”

“How are the kids?”

“The girl and younger boy are fine.” Ellen tumbled the eggs one final time around the frying pan while reaching for two plates from the dish rack. “The boy with the bite didn’t make it. Lost too much blood. We didn’t have time to get him to the city hospital.”

Miranda felt her spirits sag. “Dammit. I thought it would be better for him to get treated here.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. He would have been better off getting post-bite from us, but we don’t have enough to start anyone new.”

She turned from the stove, steaming plates in hand, and set one in front of Miranda as she sat down. Miranda looked at the food. Her appetite had vanished.

“Eat,” Ellen ordered.

Miranda took a bite of egg and tomato. Her appetite came roaring back.

“So the other two are staying here?”

“Yeah,” Ellen said with a nod. “You should have seen their faces when we explained how things work. Even with losing their friend, they think they’ve landed in Wonderland.”

The “wonderland” aspect of SCU for its newest residents was its vaccination program. SCU received preventative and post-bite vaccines under the terms of the Agreement with the City Council and GeneSys. They did not get enough to vaccinate everyone, not by a long shot, but dosers treated post-bite at SCU weren’t registered with the City. All Valley residents qualified for post-bite treatment but since City-run hospitals were the only places to receive sanctioned treatment, avoiding registration and a biohazard tattoo—and everything that came with it—was virtually impossible.

For those who lacked vaccine sponsorship, becoming a doser was their entry into highly regulated servitude. They were required to live in city-sponsored projects, submit to any testing the City deemed customary and necessary, and abide by curfews and strict schedules that curtailed all freedom of movement. The City could—and sometimes did—decide to deny treatment at any time, even for someone who had followed all the rules and received treatment for years. The restrictions on those with vaccine sponsorship were a little looser but a sponsor could withdraw their support for a long list of infractions, most of which were minor. Unless a person was well-connected or became infected when SCU could guarantee treatment, the zombie-bitten had no options. As a consequence, the City Council ruled the Valley and its frightened, dependent populace with an iron fist.

Circumventing post-bite registration by offering treatment off the books made SCU’s activities off-the-charts illegal. As far as the Jesuits were concerned, they answered to a higher authority. Officially the program didn’t exist. In reality, it was an open secret that the City Council chose, for the most part, to ignore. In addition to controlling the farms, the Jesuits’ network of missions imported vital raw materials essential to maintaining the Valley’s high

standard of living. Occasionally a council member tried to make an issue of it, but when the supply of lithium from Nevada for solar panel batteries suddenly dried up, the matter was always dropped. A few dosers restricted to SCU-controlled areas escaping the clutches of City's registry system were not worth the price the Jesuits could make the entire region pay.

"So," Miranda said, "are you planning to talk to Doc about a psych consult for me?"

"The thought did cross my mind. Saving those kids is all well and good but taking on a bunch of Dashers in addition to a clutch of shamblers? If it was anyone else, I'd say they were stupid or suicidal. Or both."

"I'm neither, so you don't have to worry."

"What's that about, then?"

Ellen pointed to Miranda's forearm, where a pink, newly-healed cut nestled among the cross-hatch of fine white scars along the inside of her arms. That cut had been an accident while working on the Range Rover. If Ellen bothered to look closely, she'd realize it wasn't like the others because it was going the wrong direction. She also knew Ellen would never believe her.

"It's nothing. Has Delilah been out yet?"

Ellen sighed. How she managed to pack so much frustration into an exhale Miranda didn't know.

"I took her out earlier," Ellen said, collecting the dishes and putting them in the sink. "I have to go to work now but stay as long as you want."

"I'm gonna head over to the Jesuit Residence. I was on my way here yesterday to see Father Walter."

"I'd tell you to go back to bed, but I know all you'll hear is 'Bwah bwah bwah.'"

Miranda laughed and regretted it. Anything that shook or jostled her rib cage or shoulder hurt, even with the painkillers. She reached for the Percocet bottle and took another.

"Don't visit too long. Get yourself home and rest."

Miranda nodded. Ellen made a skeptical face before departing.

Miranda shuffled to Ellen's bedroom. She pulled up the oversized t-shirt that

just covered her bum and looked at her shoulder in the mirror. A crescent of bright-white bandages covered her right shoulder blade. The rest of her right side was the shade of a very bad sunburn. She thought about finding a long-sleeved shirt, then rejected the idea. Changing shirts would hurt too much. She found a pair of jeans and socks on the bed, presumably for her, and went about struggling into them. Getting into her combat boots was worse.

Delilah waited by the door, tail thumping against the jamb. Miranda rummaged in the tiny bathroom for a spare toothbrush. Ellen's apartment was one of the few that had its own bathroom since it had housed a Resident Minister back in the day. She gave up and used a washcloth. She spied her expensive bra and panties washed and hung up to dry in the shower and sent a silent blessing in Ellen's direction. She splashed some water on her face and smoothed her hair back.

"Okay, Ruff Ruff, let's go."

She exited the apartment and descended to the lobby in the empty elevator. Empty was perfect. SCU was a small place, and since gossip was still the universal human pastime, everyone would know of her adventure by now. She didn't make it out of the lobby without having to recount the tale but managed to keep it brief and fend off well-intentioned hugs.

Once outside Delilah raced ahead, her joy at running fast just because she could evident, before looping back to fall in step beside Miranda. The bright sunshine set Miranda's head pounding, matched only by her determination not to admit that maybe she was not up to this and should have listened to Ellen.

Between her slow pace and the near constant stops to answer inquiries about her well-being, what should have been a three-minute stroll took fifteen minutes. Mercifully, the Jesuit Residence was in sight. The Mediterranean-style building was the same cream and terra cotta tiles as the rest of campus, with two stories in certain sections that created a tiered effect pleasing to the eye.

Miranda felt woozy as she slid her Access Card through the reader to enter the building. She had not expected the walk to wear her out, nor the dizziness that accentuated the throbbing in her temples.

On the far side of the airy foyer, where floor-to-ceiling glass showcasing an

interior courtyard met the hallway, she saw a ladder leaning against the wall. An old man had a light bulb in one hand and his foot on the ladder's first rung. The shock of curly white hair could only mean Father Al. Apart from shrinking, the only concessions the elderly priest made to old age were hunched shoulders and a slight wobble in his hands. But at eighty-nine years old, no matter how spry, he had no business climbing a ladder.

"Hey, Father Al," Miranda called out.

Father Al's face lit up upon seeing her. His foot came off the ladder, too.

"Miranda!" The old man shooed Delilah out of the way as Miranda approached. He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'd give you a hug, but I heard you hurt your shoulder."

"Nothing that won't heal. See?" She moved her arm a little in demonstration and was surprised to find her shoulder did not hurt as much.

Father Al's brow furrowed. "You don't look well, Miranda."

"I've got a headache, but I'll live," she said, waving off his concern. "Are you really planning to climb that ladder?"

"I'm old, not an invalid! I can manage, young lady."

"Will you humor me? If you fall and break a hip when I could have helped, Father Walter will kill me."

"Should you even be on a ladder at the moment?"

Miranda held out her hand. "Light bulb?"

"Oh, all right," Father Al muttered, handing it over. He gripped the ladder with both hands. "You start with one foot, then use the other."

"You're a worse backseat climber than you are a backseat driver," she teased but was pulled up short by another wave of dizziness. She leaned over, hands on her knees. "You're right, Father Al. I'm not up to this."

Even with her head down, the room still had a spinny feeling. Her body felt like it was disconnecting into constituent parts: joints detaching from the long bones of her legs, shoulder sockets loosening for arms to slip out, widening vertebral spaces making her spine feel malleable.

"You better sit down," Father Al said, concerned.

Before she could acquiesce, voices echoed from the hallway, muddled with

quick footsteps. Father Walter, his words indistinct but tone commanding. And another voice, almost forgotten.

Recognition hit Miranda like a gunshot. She straightened up too fast and the room lurched forward. Father Walter came into view, a dark silhouette against the sunshine from the courtyard. He stopped short and another person ran right into him. Disentangling himself, the second man stepped out from the courtyard's bright glare.

The world tilted on its axis. Miranda gaped at the other man, her stomach sliding to her knees. His eyes were brown and wide. She could feel the suggestion of dark stubble that covered his jaw against her fingers, as if he'd shaved last night but not this morning. He almost smiled, and familiar dimples appeared.

Her brain could not compute what her eyes were seeing.

Weren't seeing.

Were making up.

"Miranda," he whispered hoarsely, as if all the air had been sucked from the room.

The foyer had become miserably hot. She struggled to interpret this apparition through the haze of vertiginous, sweat-slicked confusion, because that was what it had to be. He could not be real.

"This isn't possible," she whispered.

Miranda clung to Father Al's arm as the spin of the room accelerated. Acrid vomit burned her throat and a low roar filled her ears. Her vision narrowed as if the visor of a knight's helmet had snapped over her eyes.

I'm gonna pass out, she thought, and slipped into the black.

SHE WOKE to anxious faces and silence. Miranda could see the mouths of the people around her, but voices did not accompany the moving lips and worried expressions. An orange haze obscured her vision, as if translucent-colored tissue paper covered her eyes. Her skin felt clammy, hot and cold at once. Father Walter held her left hand and Connor—if that really was Connor—held her right. Someone thrust an ice pack in front of Connor, who started to put it against her head.

“Don’t,” she said as her hearing returned and her vision cleared. The babble of agitated, apprehensive voices was not soothing. She snatched her hand and then the ice pack away from Connor and gingerly explored her skull. She found a tender spot that would be a beauty of a lump in a few hours and eased the ice pack against it.

“Jesus, Miri, you scared me half to death!”

Miranda tried to focus her bleary eyes. “Nice to see you too, Connor. I’m glad you’re not dead.”

Connor opened his mouth, but Father Walter cut him off. “Just be quiet, the pair of you. Everyone back up and give her some room.”

Miranda closed her eyes but sensed people withdrawing. She peeked to find only Father Walter beside her, which felt a lot more manageable.

“Do you know what day it is, Miranda? Do you know where you are?”

Miranda knew what Walter was doing. He would be the first of many who would ask her the same two questions for the rest of the day.

“A shitty-passing-out day after yesterday’s shitty-almost-get-killed-by-zombies day, with a bunch of priests thrown in for shits and giggles,” she muttered. “How bad does that make the brain damage?”

Walter rolled his eyes and snorted. “Not any worse than it was already,” he replied. “Just stay still until Doc comes. I’m sure he’ll be along any minute.”

She turned her head toward Connor. “It’s really you.”

Taking her statement as permission to come closer, he knelt down beside her, a hesitant smile on his lips. His eyes were full of worry and something else. Something that looked very much like hunger.

“Yeah. It’s really me.”

She smiled and let go of a breath she had not known she was holding. She switched hands with the ice pack so she could reach out to touch him, even though lifting her arm made her wince. She traced her chilled fingers along the side of his warm face. He turned into her hand like a cat.

“I figured you were dead after so long,” she half whispered.

“Almost, a few times.”

“Me too.”

Miranda kept her hand on Connor’s jaw, thumb stroking his cheek. He was older, of course. His thick, dark hair was just long enough that it didn’t stick up too much. She remembered how he kept it longer in front when they were younger. It always looked as if an avalanche of hair was cascading across his face. His dark-brown eyes were full of warmth, his smile perfectly symmetrical.

And then she remembered. She blinked a few times, trying to reconcile the newly remembered knowledge with the jumble of feelings the sight of him stirred. She had been so angry with him the last time they spoke. Now here he was, risen like Lazarus, and she’d almost forgotten—had forgotten—if only for a moment. She pulled her hand away.

“I guess it’s Father Connor these days.”

He stiffened. For a split second his expression contracted and his smile became strained. If she hadn’t been looking directly at him, she would have missed it.

“It’s just Connor.”

“Oh.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. She tried again, but Doc Owen bustled through the door, shooing everyone but Father Walter out of the way.

Her mind felt like it was spinning away from her body. First from seeing Connor, then from the meds and whacking her head. He wasn't a priest? When had *that* happened? Thrown by Connor's revelation, her usual smart-ass answers abandoned her and at first Doc thought she was seriously injured. He eventually settled on a mild concussion—and stoned—while muttering about having a death wish. He let her sit up and move to one of the foyer chairs, leaving only after issuing dire warnings of exactly what he'd do if she did not rest and avoid injury for at least twenty-four hours... Something about restraints and the psych ward.

“All right then, Miranda,” Father Walter said, “we'll get you to one of the guest rooms.”

Movement made her head throb again. The weird, disconnected feeling between her body and brain intensified. Connor moved as if to help her up but stepped back after a preemptory glare from Walter. Miranda leaned on Father Walter's arm and they set off down the hallway. She looked back to see Connor watching them. He looked as if he had just realized that nothing would play out as he had imagined.

THE FILMY LIGHT OF TWILIGHT SEEPED IN AROUND THE EDGES OF THE WINDOW when Miranda woke from her short, fitful nap. The blind blocked the afternoon sun, leaving the room deep in shadow. The guest room Miranda occupied was small but comfortable. The single bed pushed into the corner by the window accentuated the narrowness of the room. A crocheted afghan, the kind made from granny squares that old ladies produce in abundance, lay over her, and her head rested on a positively decadent pillow. A plain wool rug offered warm feet a respite from the chilly tile floor.

Her shoulder and back hurt again. So did her head. She ran her hand up her

skull. The lump, while sizable, was not nearly as bad as she'd expected. She concentrated on the pain, breathing it in and out, so she would not have to think about Connor. She wasn't ready for that. She couldn't say how long she lay there, alone with her breath and discomfort. It might have been minutes or hours. A gentle knock on the door broke her reverie.

"Come in," she croaked, her mouth feeling dry and sticky all at once.

The door opened, filling the room with the smell of melted butter. Father Walter held a plate of buttered toast in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. He pushed the door shut with his elbow—how he had opened it with full hands a mystery. No matter what the situation, no matter how desperate the crisis, Walter Brennan believed a cup of tea would make things seem a little better. The funny thing was that it usually did.

"How are you feeling?" Walter asked as he set down the plate.

He handed Miranda the teacup, which forced her to sit up so she could hold it properly. He raised the blind halfway and opened the window a few inches to let in the fresh air. It smelled of jasmine, heavy and cloying. He reached behind her to rearrange the pillow so she could lean against it. Then he pulled out the desk chair, turned it around so it faced her, and sat, waiting.

She looked at Walter for a moment. She knew he was here to talk about Connor, but she did not want to. Thinking about him would make her head hurt worse. "Do we have to talk about this now? I don't think I'm up for it."

"I only asked how you're feeling, Miranda," Walter chided gently.

"You never just ask how I'm feeling."

She thought he would try again, but instead, he reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out two small brown bottles and set them on the nightstand.

"Ellen brought over your prescriptions. She said to take the antibiotic with food and to be careful with the painkillers since you have a concussion. You're only to take them if you absolutely need to."

Miranda reached for the bottles and took her pills. Now that she was out of her Zen trance, a painkiller fit the bill. She didn't spare its effects on her concussed brain a thought. They sat in silence as she drank her tea and ate her toast. Walter had gone heavy on the butter, just how she liked it. She kept her

eyes on her teacup, blowing on the hot beverage and watching the ripples play across the surface. She breathed in the steam with its scent of cream and honey.

“How long have you known he was alive?” she eventually asked, never taking her eyes from her cup.

“A few years,” Walter replied.

“And it never occurred to you that I’d want to know?”

“Of course I knew you’d want to know, but what purpose would it have served?” Walter asked, not unkindly.

She opened her mouth to protest, but he continued.

“He was thousands of miles away, Miranda, and could have been killed at any time. He shouldn’t be here; he was supposed to stay where he was. But even if I had known he was coming, I wouldn’t have told you in case he didn’t make it.”

“It’s not your job to protect me!”

She spat the words like they burned her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears and her mouth started to pucker. She looked away, trying not to cry. She hated crying in front of people, but sometimes that didn’t seem to make a difference.

Walter leaned forward and caught her chin with his hand, turning her face toward him. His calm hazel eyes looked into her angry blue ones.

“It is my job to protect you, Miranda, and I won’t apologize for that.” Walter released her chin and sat back in his chair. A steely silence filled the room. After several minutes Walter bowed his head and pursed his lips. “There’s something I need to ask you.”

Miranda looked up from the still warm cup in her hands. “You never just ask how I am,” she said. Even to her own ears, she sounded petty and childish.

Walter ignored the jibe. “Connor’s been working on something for us, something important. I’ve been planning to ask for your help when we’re ready. We both know he’s here for you, Miranda. And his cousin, but mostly for you.”

Miranda rolled her eyes. “Oh, we do, do we? And you know this because of your vast stores of relationship experience? What do you want me to do?”

“I need you to settle whatever there is to be settled between you.” Walter’s eyes bored into her head like a drill. “If we succeed, it will change everything,

but we're only going to get one chance. We cannot fail, which is why I need you. Your expedition made it to the reactor at Rancho Seco when no one else could. I know I can depend on you and I know you'll get it done or die trying. I need to know if you can put everything with Connor aside and work with him. It won't be for long, but I can't have either of you distracted. There's too much at stake."

He knew how to pique a girl's curiosity. She had to give him that.

"What are you talking about? Why all the cloak and dagger?"

Walter's face became serious. Whatever he was about to tell her was big.

"We've broken the monopoly on the vaccine."

Miranda looked at him in disbelief.

"Bullshit."

Walter began to laugh.

"Shit, Father Walter." Miranda started laughing too. "You almost had me for a second."

"No, really, it's true," he insisted, grinning.

It wasn't his words as much as the lack of a flinch followed by a dismayed lecture about her language that killed her smile.

"Henry is dead, and Mario betrayed us," she said. "The Council and GeneSys have the vaccine, not us."

"Henry didn't die," Walter answered. "We staged the crash and got him to Santa Cruz. He's been there ever since, reconstructing his and Mario's work."

"But...that's impossible. GeneSys did the genetic testing. It was Henry's body in that car."

"We had help with that, Miranda. We've been producing post-bite for over a year now, tiny amounts at first. We still haven't cracked the preventative vaccine, but Henry says he's very close. Any day now."

"And you're going to just start handing it out? That will start a war with the City!"

Walter shifted in his seat and leaned forward. "Let me explain," he began. "You know Henry was convinced the City Council would try to kill him and Mario once the development of the preventative vaccine was announced."

"Yeah, and they did try, right after they and Mario reneged on sharing the

vaccine with everyone.”

“We staged Henry’s crash, but he couldn’t get any of the data out. He had to start all over again when we got him to Santa Cruz. Just getting him an adequate lab took over a year. He started with post-bite. He said it would be the easier of the two.”

Miranda sat silently, trying to absorb this new information. It had been so chaotic then, with the pitched battles after Mario’s defection. An ideal time to slip away unnoticed.

Walter continued. “By the time Mario reached out to us to broker the Agreement, Henry was beyond the Golden Gate.”

Miranda’s chest contracted and her stomach flipped. Still, after all this time. “You make it sound so noble, ‘broker the Agreement.’ Fucked us over is more like it.”

“Whatever else he did, Mario saved us with the Agreement,” Walter said softly, his expression acknowledging the fact that she didn’t want to hear it. “We couldn’t have beaten the City then. We didn’t have the leverage we do now with the Missions and the Farm. And we didn’t come out of it empty-handed, Miranda. Everyone in the Valley at the time got the vaccine, and it gave us time to regroup and figure out a way to turn things around.”

Miranda took a deep breath. She could not stand hearing him defend anything that Mario had done, even obliquely, and especially when it was true. Noble Prize winning Stanford professor Henry Chan, one of the world’s most distinguished virologists, and Mario Santorello, his former student, founder of GeneSys and biotech wunderkind, cracked the zombie virus. She remembered the excitement and hope, how proud she had been of Mario when he burst into the Farm to tell her. The vaccine was supposed to save the world but instead became a precursor to betrayal and depravity. She knew Walter believed anyone could be redeemed, but she didn’t. Not anymore.

“So what’s the rest of the plan?” she asked after giving herself a mental shake. She had wasted enough time trying to understand why Mario had done what he had. She was damned if she would go down that rabbit hole again.

“We’ll be shipping the post-bite vaccine and the data to make it soon.

Hopefully we'll have the preventative by then, but if not, we're still going to move forward. Ships will sail to different locations on the North and South American coasts, and I want you on one of them. There are labs ready to go. That's what Connor and one of the people with him have been doing: finding sites and equipment, finding scientists to do the work. We'll be using the missions as starting points to retake territory and start vaccinating. That's what you'll be doing. If you're in, that is," he said, smiling. "By the time the Council and GeneSys find out what's going on, it will be too late. The genie will be out of the bottle."

"But there are billions of zombies out there. Are we supposed to kill them all?"

"I know it seems impossible, but what else can we do?" Walter replied. "We kill them all, and it will take a very long time. There are people out there, Miranda, but they're too vulnerable and isolated to do anything on their own. When they hear what we're doing—and they will—they'll find us. They'll join us, and the days of the Council will be numbered. I don't know how long it will take, but we will rid the world of zombies, God willing."

Miranda looked at Father Walter, who had given her refuge when the world ended. He was more of a father to her than her own had ever been. Walter had been there when she needed him. He had never let her down. She wanted so much to believe what he was telling her, to believe she was hearing a plan that could be realized, not a delusional pipe dream.

"You are one crazy-ass optimist, Father Walter," she said finally. "You've either gone batshit crazy or you're going down in the history books as the guy who pulled humanity's ass out of a sling."

"Ach, Miranda, your language! You'd make a sailor blush, you would." Walter shook his head as if he could dislodge the profanities from his ears. "Anyone as smart as you should have a better ability to express herself."

"I do. Swearing is just more fun."

Walter looked at Miranda narrowly, his expression halfway between amusement and exasperation. "So I take it you're in?"

"You bet I'm in. Worst case scenario, I get a high school named after me."

“And you can you work with Connor?” Walter persisted, more serious. “You can settle whatever you need to settle?”

“Already done. You can count on me.”

Walter stood, then bent to kiss the top of her head. “I can always count on you. You’re a good girl, Miranda.”

“I’m twenty-nine years old!” she protested, laughing. “When do I stop being a girl?”

“Never, as far as I’m concerned. You’re a youngster compared to an old man like me.”

Miranda threw back the afghan and began to get up.

“Where do you think you’re going? You have a concussion. Doc said you’re to rest.”

“Are you serious? There must be a zillion things to do.”

“We have six weeks, give or take, before we’ll be ready to go. There’s nothing for you to do just now.”

“You tell me the most exciting news I will ever get and I’m supposed to lie here in bed?”

“I suppose not,” Walter allowed. “Unless you want Doc making good on the psych ward.”

Damn. He had her there.

“I forgot about that. You don’t really think he’d do it, do you?”

“You can never be too careful where Doc is concerned.”

Miranda sighed, annoyed and frustrated. “Fine. I’ll stay here, doing *nothing*.”

“I’ll put out word to leave you be,” Walter replied, looking far too pleased with her predicament for Miranda’s liking. “Try to rest, a ghrá, even if you can’t sleep.”

She smiled when he called her by the Gaelic endearment that meant “my love.” The first time he had done so, as she lay injured in the Cowell Health Center following an expedition that had gone very wrong, she had asked what it meant. After explaining its meaning, Walter had shyly confessed it was what his grandmother had called him.

Walter stopped at the door when she asked, “How long have you known he

wasn't a priest?"

He turned back to face her. "Before, Miranda. I knew before."

Miranda absorbed the news for a moment. "What am I supposed to say to him? 'You dumped my ass to be a priest, but it's nice to see you again? Guess the whole God thing didn't work out?'"

Walter smiled. "You're asking for wisdom from my vast stores of relationship experience, are you? Why don't you see what he has to say?"

"What if I don't want to hear it?"

"Trust your instincts, Miranda. They'll never steer you wrong."

She considered his advice for a moment, then slumped against the pillow in resignation.

"You need to rest, Miri, and you don't need to figure it out today."

Another quick smile and he left. Miranda set her empty teacup on the nightstand and took another pain pill. Probably not so good for her brain, but she wasn't taking it to feel high. It might stop her mind racing. She burrowed under the covers and wondered who was watching Delilah, realizing too late she should have asked Father Walter to bring her up.

"A world without zombies," she whispered. She surprised herself by being unable to envision it. She had lived over half of her life in that very place but it felt like a fairy tale. A world without zombies was on par with girls who desired nothing more than to meet their handsome prince, by glass slipper or dwarf or True Love's First Kiss and live happily ever after.

Fairy tales are pretty but they never come true, no matter how much you want or wish it, she thought drowsily. A wave of sleepiness caressed her as the painkiller kicked in, pulling her down, down, down.

We might as well be off to see the Wizard.

IT WAS TOO WEIRD, all of it, like being in a time warp. Phones, cars, electricity. People didn't shut and lock doors and forget to turn the lights off when they left a room. It wasn't as if things hadn't changed; of course they had. Just not enough. It creeped Connor out.

"What are the crosses for?" Seffie asked.

They stood in front of the Mission Church. Two clusters of simple wooden crosses were staked on either side of the central walkway that led to the entrance.

"Oh," Connor said, looking more closely at the names painted on them. "The ones here on the right are for the Salvadoran Jesuit martyrs."

"Martyrs?" Seffie's voice brimmed with skepticism.

"As in died for a cause, yes. The ones with S.J. after their names were Jesuit priests who taught at the University of Central America in El Salvador. The other two crosses are for their housekeeper and her daughter. The Salvadoran military murdered them."

"Huh," Mike said. "That's pretty harsh."

"This other group is also priests," Seffie said, having moved away to inspect the other cluster of crosses. "They have the S.J., too. What does S.J. mean?"

"S.J. is for Society of Jesus, the name of the Jesuit order," Connor explained. "I don't know these names except for Gilbert Martinez. He led SCU before Father Walter did. These must be the people killed when the City attacked SCU."

Seffie nodded. "That was about the vaccine, right?"

“Yeah,” Connor replied. “The Jesuits said they wouldn’t supply the City with food from the vertical farms if they reneged on the vaccine being free. The City had a huge crop failure that year, so they attacked the Jesuits. The raid didn’t succeed, but things got out of hand.”

“Doug, Father Doug, was telling me about it last night,” Mike offered, his voice tinged with amusement. “He said your girlfriend was a big part of the reason it failed.”

Connor rolled his eyes. Mike had been teasing him without mercy since hearing about his dramatic reunion with Miranda.

“She’s not my girlfriend, and yes, that’s what I heard, too. Apparently, Doug was no slouch himself.”

Mike ignored Connor’s deflection. “But you’d *like* her to be your girlfriend. Don’t lie, Connor. God hates a coward.”

Connor shot him a disgusted look. “You suck, Mike.”

“You got him!” Seffie crowed, giving Mike a high five. Mike’s friendship, including his many amusements at Connor’s expense, seemed to be the only thing that smoothed out Seffie’s abrasiveness.

Connor endured their combined laughter. “So, do you two want the campus tour or not?”

“I’m only teasing, man; don’t be so defensive,” Mike snorted, then added, “The ladies don’t like it.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” Connor deadpanned.

“These roses are great,” Seffie said, stopping to smell a flower at one of the hundreds of rose bushes that lined the paths. “And they’re everywhere! I’m surprised they kept them. They must use a lot of water.”

“I don’t think they use that much,” Connor answered. “Besides, they’re kind of a tradition. Anyone who’s been here remembers the roses.”

Connor led them under the long wisteria arbor adjacent to the Mission Church. There were bullet holes and scorch marks, but not one new beam.

“What is it?” Mike asked him.

“I don’t see any beams that look like replacements,” Connor said.

“So it hasn’t changed much.”

“No, it hasn’t,” Connor replied, uneasy. “All these gardens were lawns before, and nothing was fortified like it is now. A few buildings are gone. But no, it’s so much like I remember that it’s kind of creepy. It’s almost like the ZA didn’t happen here.”

The Mission Church bell began to toll. Almost immediately, people began coming out of buildings in twos and threes.

“Must be lunchtime,” Seffie observed. “Do you want to show us the rest later? I’m starving.”

“Sure.” Connor nodded. “Lunch will be at Benson Center. It’s that way,” Connor said, pointing after the groups of people.

“Good enough for me,” Seffie declared. “You guys coming?”

Mike nodded, but Connor shook his head. “I’m going to go by the Jesuit Residence first. I want to see if Miranda’s around.”

Mike smiled. “Just don’t make the poor girl keel over again,” he said as he and Seffie started off. “Causing concussions is no way to win her heart.”

Connor laughed, finally getting into the spirit of things. “Fuck you, too.”

He headed in the opposite direction, butterflies rising in his stomach. He had not been foolish enough to think that he and Miranda would have a fall-into-each-other’s-arms sort of reunion. But he had not expected her to be sick, and so shocked at seeing him that she passed out and whacked her head. He realized that she was injured already and on painkillers but even so. Not an auspicious sign.

And then there was his cousin Emily. He, Mike, and Seffie spent the better part of the morning with Walter and Doug, debriefing about the trip and what the situation had been in Mazatlán when they’d left. After Seffie finished up, he and Mike filled them in about scouting lab locations.

The conversation had turned to other matters and he tried to find out more about Emily: where she lived, how he could contact her. He knew she was local, but that was it. Both Walter and Doug had been noncommittal to the point of evasiveness. When Connor got more insistent, they outright begged off, citing a pressing engagement that required their presence elsewhere. There was something they didn’t want him to know or did not want to be the ones to tell

him, but he didn't know who else he could ask. If they weren't talking, it was a sure bet no one else was, either. Maybe if he patched things up with Miranda, she might be more forthcoming.

He crossed the street, then slid the Access card he'd been given and opened the Jesuit Residence door. He headed down the hall to the spacious living room and there she was, sitting on one of the couches. She was by herself, no book, no people, just petting her dog. The dog heard him first and turned her head, then started thumping her tail against the floor.

The dog seems to like me, he thought, that has to count for something.

He took a deep breath and continued forward. Miranda turned toward him. Her face lit up.

"Hey, I've been looking for you!" she exclaimed as she made a beeline for him. And then she was in his arms, holding him tight. Time seemed to distort, stretching slow and thick around them.

"I still can't believe it. I can't believe you're alive!" she said, her voice giddy.

She started to laugh. Connor kissed the top of her head and pulled her closer, surprised at how small she seemed. Her hair smelled of soap, and he inhaled the scent like a suffocating man would oxygen. He pulled back to look at her. She glowed. A delighted smile stretched across her face and arced up to her eyes. She was so goddamned beautiful.

"I was so afraid I'd never see you again, Miri."

His voice wavered, struggling to get through a throat that had become tight. She laid her head on his chest, sighing, and he could feel her smiling against him. He realized he was trembling; he didn't care. He knew it could not be this simple, but he wasn't going to worry about that now. She was alive, happy to see him, and in his arms, and that was enough. All the rest—the history, the hurt, the misunderstandings—none of it mattered in this brief, sweetest moment.

Then he felt her stiffen, just a little. She loosened her grip and stepped back. They were still in each other's arms, but Connor saw an almost calculating look beneath the genuine happiness on her face. She was about to unleash one of her damn-I'm-hilarious-but-I'm-not-really-joking zingers.

“So you’re not a priest,” she said as she stepped away from him. “Nothing like some desperate the-world-is-coming-to-an-end fucking to make you rethink your career path.”

Connor blinked like a mole in the sun as time snapped forward, leaving him whiplashed and disoriented.

“What? I...no!” he stammered, taking a step back. “I mean, yeah— It’s—”

He stood there, dazed, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to form a coherent response. He could not have been more mortified if she’d accused him of molesting an altar boy.

“I’m just fucking with you, Connor.” Miranda started to laugh. “You should see the look on your face!”

She retreated a few more steps and leaned against one of the architectural columns that lined either side of the room, making no pretense of trying to get her laughter under control. On one level, he knew he deserved it but still felt ambushed and blindsided. Nothing like coming two thousand plus miles, risking life and limb, to be mocked and ridiculed. Probably best to just get it over with.

“I know I owe you an explanation,” he began.

“Don’t, Connor. Don’t,” she implored, shaking her head, eyes wide and abruptly serious. “That was mean; I shouldn’t have said it.” The words tumbled out of her mouth. She looked shocked, like she could not believe what had just transpired. She looked like she might burst into tears. “Can we please not do this now? I’m so happy you’re alive, but I don’t want to do this.”

She was only a step away, but he felt like he was approaching a wounded animal. Gently, slowly, so as not to spook her.

“Sure, Miri,” he whispered. “We don’t have to talk about it.” He started to put his hand on her cheek before hesitating and withdrawing it. They just stood there, looking at each other.

“I have something for you,” he said. “Hold on a sec, I’ll be right back.”

LIKE A WILL-O'-THE-WISP, he vanished. Miranda crumpled to the couch.

What the hell was that? Had she actually said that out loud?

He must think I'm crazy. I think I'm crazy, she thought, horrified. Leaning against him had felt so right, so familiar. A million happy moments spent with Connor had flashed through her mind. He'd held her too tight around her injured shoulder, but she hadn't protested, hadn't cared.

This is the jerk who left you high and dry, her brain shouted as it struggled to establish a toehold against the sensory overload, but her body had not listened. Instead, it had nestled against him, responded to him, started to have its own ideas of what it wanted, of what it needed, and she panicked. The warmth of his body against hers went from wonderful to terrifying, and then she said what she said.

Christ on a bike, she thought, pull yourself together.

She felt a warm weight on her knee: Delilah, ever faithful. She rubbed the pit bull's snout.

"Hey, little dog."

At least Delilah didn't care if she was unhinged. Encouraged by the petting, she put her paws on Miranda's legs and with an efficient hop, settled into her lap. Miranda snuggled her face into Delilah's neck, feeling buoyed by her unconditional acceptance. She had yet to meet a pittie that did not consider itself a lap dog, no matter its size.

After a few moments, she heard footsteps in the hall. Connor returned

carrying a small beaten-up paper bag in his hand. He held it out to her.

“I found this a few years ago. You might still have it, but I couldn’t think of anyone who’d appreciate it more than you.”

Miranda shifted Delilah from her lap and reached into the bag to find a battered CD case. The jewel case was cracked diagonally across the front, but the liner notes were intact. The cover featured a three-quarter profile of a man wearing an orange striped shirt. A cigarette dangled from his lips. *Pass the dust, I think I’m Bowie*, was printed below him. Above was the name of the band: Black Randy and the Metro Squad.

“Oh my God!” Miranda cried, “Black Randy? Where did you find this?”

“In a backpack, lying by the road outside San Salvador,” Connor said. “I couldn’t believe it. Who finds a Black Randy CD in Central America?”

Miranda gave him a look of frank disbelief. “And you never listened to it? Jesus, Connor!” She turned the CD over and squealed. “‘I Slept in an Arcade’... ‘Marlon Brando’... ‘Loner with a Boner’! Oh my God, this is great!”

“I didn’t have any way to play it, not at first, and then I couldn’t waste batteries on a CD. I figured it’d be safer in the case.”

“Come on, we’re playing this right now!” Miranda jumped up, then grabbed his shoulder. She felt a little dizzy. She started across the room, Delilah following in her wake. She turned back when she realized Connor had not moved. “Are you coming?”

He just looked at her for a moment, then almost jumped up from the couch. “Yeah, absolutely.”

“Doug told me they brought my car over,” she said as she walked through the front door. “Do you see it? It’s a green Range Rover.”

Connor looked down the block toward Lafayette Street but did not see anything matching her description.

“Oh! There it is, come on!” she answered her own question and headed for a vehicle that looked like it had seen the wrong side of an incinerator.

“I’ve seen a lot of shades of green, Miri, but this isn’t one of them,” Connor said as he looked at the charred sides of the vehicle. “What the hell have you been doing?”

Miranda paused, her hand on the front door handle, and considered the Rover.

“Well, it used to be. It still is on the hood. That,” she continued, pointing to the bubbling, charred paint and exposed steel of the doors, “is from the flamethrowers. I’ll show them to you later.”

She hopped in the driver’s seat. Connor went around the other side. Delilah, forgotten for the moment, sat on the curb. Miranda turned the ignition enough to engage the electrical system amid beeps and radio static. Just as she went to slide the CD into the player, Miranda paused.

“You found it; you get to pick. What first?”

She needn’t have asked. She already knew what his answer would be.

Connor smiled. “You know it’s ‘*Marlon Brando*.’”

She turned up the volume and queued up the track. Blatantly politically incorrect ‘oh woh woh woh... oh woh woh woh’ “American Indian”-style chanting blared from the speakers, followed by a high, tinny synthesizer. And then Black Randy himself, belting out the melody like a punk rock Sinatra. They began to laugh, sharing the joy of rediscovering a lost pleasure. Black Randy and the fucking Metrosquad, she thought, awestruck. Never thought I’d hear this again.

She lay her head against the headrest and listened, then sneaked a sideways glance at Connor. He caught her looking and flashed a smile that made her pulse speed up.

He carried this around for years, for me, on the off chance he’d see me again. Or did he just not want to listen without me?

The thought startled, pleased, and freaked her out. It had been a long time, but Miranda knew Connor MacGuire. If she’d had any doubts about his intentions, she didn’t anymore.

SINCE SHE DIDN'T KNOW what to do about Connor, Miranda did something she had not done since high school, zombies excepted.

She hid.

There had been a meeting about the upcoming mission a few days after Connor gave her the Black Randy CD. He had tried to talk to her afterward but she shut him down. Doug had suggested they all go get a beer, which pissed her off. She did not appreciate Doug meddling in something he knew nothing about.

She had decided that apart from the mission, there was no *now* for her and Connor. She had promised Father Walter she would work with him, and she would, but she was not prepared to go any further. She wasn't interested in anything Connor had to say about before. It was nice to see him, but she did not want to examine their history together. What was the point?

She was home today, with too much time on her hands. Harold had all but chased her out of the Farm at lunchtime, saying she looked like death warmed over. She could hardly argue since she could pack for a six-month-long trip using just the bags under her eyes, and she still suffered from concussion symptoms. Sometimes she used the wrong word, like when she'd said 'book' when she meant 'cat' just this morning. She still got dizzy, and the room spun a little when she turned her head too fast. She had not bounced back from the scuffs and scrapes and burns she got saving those dumbass kids like she normally did. Maybe she was coming down with a cold.

Yeah, right, a little voice mocked her, or maybe seeing Connor MacGuire

again is too much for your immune system.

She never expected an old boyfriend to show up, much less the first man she had ever fallen hard for before blindsiding her with his decision to become a priest. Connor's reappearance had shaken Miranda's equilibrium. Finding out he had changed his mind about being a priest before the ZA made it worse. Had he backed out because of her or for another reason? Did she even want to know? No matter what scenario played out in her mind, she ended up filled with an undirected anger. That the whole exercise was too stupid to begin with made her angrier still.

She watched through her front window as the gate closed behind Karen's car. Karen had regrouped since last week's breakup and was once again on the prowl. That the next guy would be as forgettable as the last was unfortunate, but at least she was not wallowing in self-pity.

Karen made her way to the door, hands laden with take-out containers. Her sparkly smile accentuated her perfect hair, makeup, and outfit. She had a spring in her step and even wore sensible shoes. Miranda suspected a pair of death-trap heels lurked in Karen's car and her current footwear was a temporary concession to avoid a lecture. Miranda opened the door and watched Karen's brow furrow.

"What kind of zombies did you run into, Miri? You look terrible!"

Miranda shrugged. "Just the regular kind—undead, mindless, wanting to eat me."

"Let's get you fed," Karen said as she made her way to the kitchen. She set the containers down and opened the cupboard, retrieving two large bowls. "I got chicken wonton soup from Chef Chu's. If that doesn't fix you up, I don't know what will."

Karen thrust a steaming bowl into Miranda's hands and set about fixing another while Miranda retreated to the living room and sat on the couch. The clink of silverware and low squeak of the cupboard hinges coming from the kitchen were comforting. Karen breezed in and settled into an overstuffed chair, setting her soup on the coffee table. A blissful expression settled over her face with the first spoonful.

"I swear to God their secret ingredient is crack. I don't know how they make

soup taste like this.”

“Thanks for bringing it over.”

“Of course. When Harold called to say you still looked terrible and that he’d sent you home, I figured cooking was the last thing on your mind.”

Miranda Tucci: Charity Project.

She shoved the ungrateful thought aside and began relating the story of the dumbass kids’ rescue as best she could. Karen kept interrupting with exclamations of “*Oh my God!*” and “*Miri!*” and “*They did what?*” Karen was always an enthusiastic listener, especially if the story or scandal was good. When Miranda’s tale was finished, Karen started telling her about a great sale at her favorite boutique, but Miranda had a hard time paying attention. She could not stop thinking about Connor.

“So then I punched the clerk, cleared out the register, and took all the clothes without paying. It was such a good deal.”

“That’s great.” A second later, Karen’s words actually registered. “Did you just say you punched the clerk?”

“You haven’t been listening to a word I’ve said. What’s up?”

“It’s nothing,” Miranda said. Karen looked at her skeptically. “Really, it’s less than nothing.”

Karen looked at her with an expression that made Miranda nervous. Karen had a knack for going silent when she wanted information that was not being readily supplied. She could keep it up for hours. Discomfort with the lengthy silence usually made the other person talk much sooner.

The second she knows, she’ll start scheming and matchmaking, Miranda thought. She’ll decide his being back is divine intervention that we should get back together. But who else am I going to talk to who might understand?

Miranda bit her lip. The silence was deafening.

“You have to promise to not get mad at me.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it. You cannot get mad at me. I have a concussion.”

“Okay, Miranda. I promise.”

“Like pinky swear promise?”

“I’m going to get mad if you keep this up!”

Fuck, Miranda thought, but she’d already made a fundamental tactical error. Now that Karen knew there was something worth knowing, she’d never let it go. She’d hang on like a zombie.

“So...you know how sometimes people we think are dead are actually alive, and it’s been a really long time and they just show up?”

Karen made an impatient, pained face. “I am not playing twenty thousand questions with you, Miranda. Who is it?”

“You promise you won’t get mad?”

“For Christ’s sake!” Karen cried. “*Who* is it?”

“It’s Connor.”

“Connor?” Karen repeated, puzzled. “*Our* Connor?”

Miranda nodded. “He’s at SCU, hale and hearty.”

“Since when?”

“The day after the zombie was on the Expressway.”

“And you’re only telling me now?”

“I haven’t been feeling so hot. And I didn’t want to deal with you going into matchmaker mode.”

“Matchmaker? Last I heard he was going to be a priest.”

“Me too, but it didn’t take.”

Karen’s face lit up with a conspiratorial smile. “He’s not a priest and he just happens to end up here? Oh, Miri, that’s so romantic!”

“He’s here to do something for Father Walter.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, he is!”

“And there was no one else who could have done it?”

Just lie to her, Miranda thought, as she heard herself say, “He was supposed to stay in Mexico, but he came here instead.”

Karen squealed.

“I don’t see what you’re getting so excited about,” Miranda said. The room felt suddenly hot. “So an old boyfriend shows up. So what?”

“So what? That’s like divine intervention!”

Miranda gritted her teeth. "It's not like I've been carrying a torch for him all this time. First love, first guy to break my heart? Yes. Unfinished business? Please."

"Then why are you blushing?"

"I am not blushing!"

Miranda concentrated on her soup, furious with herself for letting Karen get under her skin about Connor 'Ancient History' MacGuire.

"He still likes you, doesn't he?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?"

"Oh please, Miri, even you aren't that dense. He makes a dangerous trip here and he wants to talk to you. It's not rocket science."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," Miranda said in a tone that pronounced the matter closed.

Karen returned to her soup. After a few sips, she looked at Miranda as if she were trying to figure something out.

"You and Connor were practically best friends before you were a couple," she began. "No one gets a second chance to see someone who was that important to them anymore. I never pegged you for a coward, Miri."

"I'm not talking about this."

"And what if this is a second chance?" Karen persisted. "What if there is still something? If anyone deserves some happiness, Miranda, it's you."

"For the love of God," Miranda muttered under her breath. "It's been twelve years, Karen. He broke my heart and was an asshole about it. Part of me doesn't care, and part of me is still kind of pissed off all of a sudden, which is pathetic."

"He was twenty-two years old," Karen said. "Show me a twenty-two-year-old who hasn't handled their love life badly."

Miranda scowled, her soup abandoned and growing cold. "I don't even know if I want to see him, much less hear what he has to say."

"You are so full of it."

"You know what? I do want to know why he didn't become a priest," Miranda snapped, not sure why she was getting so angry. "But I also don't want to know because what if it was because of me? What if it wasn't? Why the hell

should I even care? Just forget I mentioned it.”

“We have to get together, the three of us,” Karen said. “I’ll call over to the Jesuits’ and set it up. If I wait for you two to get your act together, it’ll never happen.”

The gears and wheels of Karen’s mind were spinning so fast Miranda could hear them. *Clickity-clack, clickity-clack, how can I help him get her back?*

“No fucking way, Karen. Not gonna happen.”

“Oh, Miranda...”

“I’m serious. Leave it alone.”

CONNOR WATCHED Miranda check her watch again. Over the course of the reunion dinner that Karen had organized, Miranda's mood has degenerated from uncomfortable to borderline hostile.

Doug had commandeered the Jesuit Guest House, a Craftsman bungalow next door to the Residence, so that the group could dine with some privacy. Karen had cooked an amazing dinner and Doug, through some feat of black magic, produced a 1997 Ridge Vineyards Monte Bello Cabernet that was out of this world. They had gone all out, but their efforts seemed destined for failure.

"I'm going to take off," Miranda said, rising from her chair.

Karen and Doug looked at her in exasperation.

"We haven't even had dessert," Doug said.

"You can't leave now! We're having such fun!" Karen protested.

Miranda looked at Karen with undisguised annoyance. "No, we're not."

"Why don't you stay for dessert at least?" Connor asked her. As soon as he spoke, he could see that he shouldn't have spoken.

"Why the fuck are you all insisting on this?" Miranda asked. She turned an accusing glare on Karen and Doug. "I don't need you two trying to pair me off with an old college boyfriend like I'm some sort of charity case. Jesus!" She pushed her chair aside and called Delilah from where she had camped out in front of the fireplace.

"Miri!" Karen said, scrambling from her chair, but Miranda was already through the door. Karen threw her napkin on her plate as she dropped back into

her chair.

“Well, that’s great,” she huffed. “I don’t know why she has to be such a drama queen.”

Connor slumped forward, elbows on the table. “Thanks for trying, guys.”

Doug looked at Connor, his blue eyes serious.

“She just doesn’t know how to do this, and her luck has been, well... She gets angry so she doesn’t have to feel the things that scare her. If you’re serious about her, you’re going to have to force the conversation or it’ll never happen.”

Connor realized Doug was right. He sprang from his chair and dashed from the house. Miranda was already at the far end of the block and across the street. She had just shut the back door of the Range Rover behind Delilah when he called out.

“Miranda, wait!”

She frowned at him as he ran down the block.

“Are you deaf, Connor?” she said as he approached.

“We need to talk.”

“Connor, I really need to get home, so if you don’t mind—”

He interrupted before she could finish the brush-off. “I do mind. Maybe you don’t need to talk to me, but I need to talk to you. Not tomorrow, not next week, now. Will it kill you to hear me out?”

Frustration flashed across her face. “I told Father Walter I could work with you and I meant it, but I never said—”

“Ten minutes, Miri. Give me ten minutes and if you don’t want to listen anymore, I’ll drop it. I promise.”

He could see her fighting with herself. Miranda had never been one to wear her heart on her sleeve, but Connor was only now beginning to realize just how much living through the ZA had changed her. The Miranda he remembered had been understated, but she had been open, the kind of person who felt things deeply, even if she did not share that side of herself with everyone. Apart from the day he had given her the CD, the woman in front of him was tied down tighter than a drum.

She cocked her head like she was having an internal debate. “Okay,” she

said. “You want to talk, fine. Have at it.”

Connor looked around, uneasy. “The curb outside the Jesuit Residence isn’t really what I had in mind.”

She almost looked like she was going to leave before she said, “Fine.”

She opened the Rover door to let Delilah out, then flicked her head in the direction of the garden behind O’Connor Hall and started off without waiting for a reply. Connor caught up with just a bit of effort. They crossed the garden, turning right when they reached the sidewalk. The perimeter wall on Lafayette Street was ahead of them, just past the buildings nearby. That left Nobili Hall or somewhere off campus. Then she turned left; Nobili it was.

Nobili Hall had once been the Jesuit Residence, before it became too big for their dwindling numbers. The new Jesuit Residence was nicer, in Connor’s opinion. It wasn’t that Nobili was an ugly building but he’d only ever been on the first floor, which was dark and gloomy. He wasn’t sure how it was possible for the interior of a graceful, enormous building to feel small and oppressive, but somehow the first floor of Nobili Hall did.

Nobili was similar to other buildings on campus but had one feature most did not: a tower. It jutted out from the rest of the building, adorned with bas relief moldings and a statue of a saint above the portico over the main entrance, before soaring high above the third story. The tower’s four-sided roof ended in a belfry-like point with a greening, oxidized bronze adornment at the top. Each side of the tower had three Palladian arches punctuated with thick square stucco columns strung together with ornate wrought iron rails, substantial and airy all at once.

Miranda paused and stooped toward her dog.

“Stay here, Delilah,” she said.

Delilah did not look happy about being left behind but settled in next to the door.

Miranda slid her Access card and waited for the green light on the reader before pulling on one of the huge wooden doors. They were the kind of doors that belonged in a castle or chateau, with inset panels and virtually indestructible metal rivets. They were nicked and scorched in places but had clearly kept the

undead at bay.

Miranda headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time, never once turning back or saying a word. When they reached the third floor, she kept on going, down the hall to a metal fire door marked Authorized Personnel Only. She pushed on the bar as the card reader turned green and held it for him, then started up yet another half flight of stairs that was more like a fire escape ladder. Connor realized with a thrill that they were going to the tower.

The stairs ended at a heavy trapdoor, which gave way under Miranda's firm shove. The lingering evening light filtered down around him as he climbed out after her, gripping the hand she offered.

She kicked the trapdoor shut once he was through and turned to him. "We shouldn't be disturbed up here."

It was even bigger up close than it looked from the ground. Connor looked up, half expecting to see a bell. He followed Miranda to the closest railing and leaned against it, taking in the view. He could see into downtown San Jose, the wall that surrounded it, and beyond to the foothills farther east.

With fewer people came less pollution. He had never seen the air this clear, even after a good rain. He almost thought he could see the edges of the bay to the northeast, but it had to be a trick of the eye and the evening light. For one used to a more rudimentary reality, the entire landscape felt like a burnished, golden paradise. They stood for a time, silent, looking at the landscape below.

"I had no idea how pretty it is up here," he said.

Miranda leaned back against the railing and looked at him.

"You wanted to talk to me, Connor. So talk."

Now that the moment was upon him, Connor did not know where to begin.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"I just don't know where to start."

"You can always start with sorry."

He winced. Not because it wasn't true but because he should not have needed prompting.

"I am sorry, Miranda. For the way I handled everything. I was young and stupid and didn't know how to tell you. I don't think I could have managed to

make it worse if I'd tried."

She laughed, but it was brittle and sharp. "That's true... One day was, 'I love you' and the next, 'I've decided to be a priest.' No warning, no real explanation. I'd have been less surprised if you'd told me you were sleeping with Karen."

"I was never sleeping with Karen," he sputtered. "I know that's not what you meant," he added hastily at her pointed look. "I wasn't lying about how I felt about you, Miri. But I kept feeling like I should... I don't know, that God wanted more from me, had a different kind of plan for me. I'd thought about being a priest since I was a kid."

Miranda looked around the tower like she could not believe where she found herself.

"I don't even know why we're having this conversation. Or why I'm so mad at you about something that happened years ago. It's not like I've been pining for you all this time, and we both know how it worked out for you."

He'd forgotten how skillful she was, using words as weapons. Even when she did not mean to be, Miranda could be sharp. She would make what she thought was an innocuous, offhand comment and be surprised to find its recipient bleeding on the floor. When she was trying, there was no pretense of fairness. You just got bloody.

He looked into her eyes, which smoldered like coals. He saw a challenge in them, to tell the truth. He took a deep breath. He had to look her in the eye, he knew, or he might as well not bother.

"It ended up being the wrong decision, but the first year was pretty great. I felt like I was in the right place, serving a purpose, doing good work. It was fulfilling. The next six months...I struggled. I talked to Father Walter a lot."

"You did?"

"Walter was my thesis advisor, and later he was, well, a mentor."

"He never said anything to me," she said, her voice softening.

"The last time I tried talking to you, you said if you saw me again, you'd rip my face off and feed it to a dog. Walter's too smart to get in the middle of that."

She grimaced, somewhere in the neighborhood of maybe-almost-perhaps embarrassed. It was the first reaction he'd seen all night that was not rooted in

annoyance or anger.

“I knew I told you something, but the details were always kind of fuzzy. I was pretty drunk.”

“It’s not like you were out of line. I deserved it.”

Her posture relaxed. “And after that?”

“I spent another six months trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. I knew I’d made the wrong decision, but it was too painful to face. You’d made your feelings about me clear enough. I heard through the grapevine you had met someone else, a cop of all things. Karen told me you were happy, even said I’d like him.”

“You would have,” Miranda said, her eyes becoming distant. “Sam was a good guy. He saved my life.”

She’s not even here, Connor thought, she’s thinking of Sam. He felt like he was intruding somehow, watching her. He turned and walked to the south-facing railing.

Who the hell am I kidding, he berated himself. She’s comparing me to the guy who saved her life and never let her down. I can’t compete with that.

MIRANDA SHOOK HERSELF. She was not here to think about Sam. Connor had walked to the other side of the tower. He stood almost perfectly still, which was not like him. He had always been one of those people who found it hard to sit still if there was any alternative, but now he just stood there.

She walked over to him. When she put her hand on his shoulder, he startled but did not turn toward her. Even in profile, he looked wretched. The lines around his eyes looked tight, like a person in pain. His mouth twisted in an apprehensive frown and he shifted his weight away from her.

She had been angry with him, to such a degree it surprised her, but he *had* apologized once she gave him the chance. And what did it matter anymore? She didn't like how it made her feel to see him so unhappy. She had done terrible things to stay alive, things that would have shocked her before the world reeked of destruction and death lurked around every corner. Once upon a time, Connor had broken her heart. It hardly seemed worth mentioning compared to everything that had happened since.

"I accept your apology, Connor," she said in a voice that quavered. "Will you accept mine? Life's too short for this."

He turned to her, and the next thing she knew, she was in his arms. His embrace made her feel small and vulnerable and protected, and it also felt kind of dangerous for the same three reasons. She squirmed and stepped back.

"So we can work together and not disappoint Father Walter, right?" she asked, her voice feeling shaky.

He laughed then, a real one. “Hopefully it won’t be more painful than usual.”

She socked him on the shoulder, feeling hugely relieved, but he winced.

“What?” she asked. She had not punched him hard.

Connor rubbed his upper arm just below his shoulder. “It just hurts from the first vaccine shot.”

Miranda’s stomach clenched so hard she almost gasped. “You made the trip from Mexico not vaccinated?”

“We didn’t have it.”

“Jesus,” she whispered, remembering the fear not just of being killed by zombies but knowing you would turn into one. “Your arm is gonna hurt for two weeks, but the booster isn’t as bad.”

“I’ll believe that after I have the next shot in six weeks,” he said skeptically.

“Turning will be one less thing to worry about while we send the old guard packing.” She raised her hand as if making a toast. “To the old guard, good night, goodbye.”

“That sounds familiar,” Connor said wistfully.

Her face brightened. “Are you up for a round of Punk Rock Name That Tune?”

Connor shook his head. “I’m too out of practice. You’ll slaughter me.”

“Really?” she asked, her surprise genuine. Miranda had been among the best of their friends at the made-up game, but she’d never been able to beat Connor.

“Really. I didn’t remember most of the words to Black Randy.”

“You are the guy who told me ‘*I Slept In An Arcade*’ was about a porno arcade, not a video game arcade?”

“I am,” he said with a grin. “It’s pathetic.”

“We’ll have to get you up to speed for when we’re done with Father Walter’s little job. We can play then.”

The hard-won levity evaporated. Thinking about their ‘little job’ was sobering. The changes it would make if they were successful...to even entertain them felt like a jinx. Miranda walked to the east-facing railing and sat down, then leaned her head against the cool wrought iron. Connor joined her. They gazed out at the campus, dusk settling over the buildings and gardens and people

below.

“No one here has any idea how lucky they are,” he said. “It’s so safe and comfortable. I feel like I’ve traveled through a time warp.”

“People realize, Connor, they do,” she replied, before remembering Karen’s newfound interest in death-trap fashions.

“It’s safer than anywhere I’ve been.”

“More savage, too, in some ways.”

“Do you think we can do it?”

“Father Walter makes it sound like a snap, so it’ll probably be FUBAR by the second day.”

“Listen to you... Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition,” Connor teased. “You’re right, though. Nothing ever seems to go according to plan once you put zombies in the mix.”

They sat quietly for a moment, looking at the lights.

“How did you manage to get to the nuclear power plant at Rancho Seco? That’s almost in Sacramento.” At her confused expression, he added, “The lights got me thinking about it.”

“Oh, that,” she said as if he had asked her about a trip to the grocery store. “We still had aviation fuel, so we took helicopters and lots of guns. They asked me to do it the first time, but I turned them down. Assuming the plant hadn’t melted down yet, there were all the power lines and transformers to check out between here and there. When the first expedition failed, I felt so guilty. They all died but the pilots. I wondered if I could have made a difference, but it didn’t stop me from saying no when they asked again.”

“What changed your mind?”

She tilted her head to the side, remembering. “The vaccine research had stalled because we didn’t have a stable electricity supply. Solar wasn’t reliable enough because some of the components were hard to get then. Someone had to do it.” She sighed. “That’s what I tell most people.”

Connor looked at her, his curiosity to hear what she did not tell most people evident.

“I did it because the man I’d fallen in love with asked me to,” she said

through a sudden tightness in her throat, as if the words did not want to be spoken. “He hated when I went on expeditions, but he asked me to do it. The way things turned out I’ve regretted it ever since.”

“I’m sorry, Miri.”

She shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“I can’t believe what you’ve been able to do here.”

“This whole Valley is a fluke,” she said. “Enough smart people survived for the geek factor to kick in once the dust settled. We’re not like San Francisco; our water isn’t coming from Hetch Hetchy. We have a local source with a high water table, even before they started rising. Funny how that happens when millions of people aren’t sucking them dry. I guess zombies are good for something. They stopped us fucking the planet up cold.”

“Going all that way to get the power here... Wow.”

“The way things turned out, I’m sorry I did,” she said with such bitterness she could feel its metallic taste flood her mouth. A rush of impotent fury overwhelmed her, followed by a hollow sorrowfulness. She had been so happy once. Now, that Miranda felt like a different person. Not just younger and naive, but so *sure*. The pridefulness of her younger self took her breath away. She had been so sure that what was righteous would prevail, that people were intrinsically good. She had been so sure that he loved her.

“You don’t mean that, Miri.”

“I do,” she insisted. “A lot of good people died, and we got screwed in the end. They died for nothing.”

“The vaccine isn’t nothing, Miri, whatever happened after,” Connor disagreed. “If we’re successful, they won’t have died for nothing.”

“If I die trying to do anything, it might as well be this. Maybe it’ll make up for all the misery the reactor made possible.”

“We’re not going to die, Miri.”

“Maybe, maybe not. It’s going to happen someday.”

“Not on my watch.”

She smiled, not wanting to contradict him again. No one knew what would happen once they set out. The idea of her own death did not bother her that

much, so long as someone looked after Delilah, but the thought of Connor dying was suddenly painful. It surprised her, to feel it so deeply. She had been spitting nails at him an hour ago, but now she could not even bear the thought. A crushing weight descended upon her. This is what a ton of bricks feels like, she thought, as it got heavier and heavier, and heavier still. She looked at Connor's profile in the fading light. She didn't think she'd be able to breathe under the crushing weight much longer.

"I'm glad you came back, Connor. I'm glad you made me listen," she whispered.

"Me too," he whispered back. He looked unsure for a moment, then said, "I still love you, Miri. I never stopped. It's always been you."

She froze for a harrowing moment as fear snaked its way through her brain. It told her to run, to flee, to get away from this threat, from the demands this man's love might make on her. From something that could not possibly be real. Not for her.

Get a grip for fuck's sake.

She didn't know what to say. She slipped her hand into his as gossamer filaments of possibility spun and glimmered around them. They might have stayed that way all night, his unreturned declaration floating between them, but the Mission Church bell began to peal and broke the spell.

"I can't believe it's eight already." Miranda blinked and checked her watch. She stretched her arms out and behind her, trying to dispel her sudden self-consciousness. "That's for the last Mass tonight. I usually go if I'm here." Her eyes flicked down before she looked at him. She felt awkward, like a teenager with a crush. "Would you like to come?"

Connor smiled. "I'd love to." He gave her a hand up and they headed for the trapdoor. "How do you still believe, Miri?"

She looked up as she flipped the trapdoor open. "In God?" At his nod, she shrugged. "I don't know. I just do."

"Even a God who gave us this?"

She motioned for him to go down before her.

"God didn't do this to us, Connor. We did it to ourselves."

MARIO LOOKED across the ballroom of the San Jose Woman's Club. Ladies draped in diamonds sparkled in the candlelight, so bejeweled that the brilliant reflections glinted off the vaulted ceiling and arched windows. Men in tuxedos strutted, bejeweled beauties on their arms. A faint whiff of cigar smoke wafted through the windows from where the smokers congregated outside.

Funny how not smoking indoors stuck when so many other things didn't, he thought.

The speeches were over, thank fucking God. Servers began to thread their way among the tables, serving real coffee. Soon the Valley's high society would dance the night away in celebration of Agreement Day.

"I used to love this building," Mario sighed.

His brother, Dominic, leaned closer. "And now you don't?"

"It's irrevocably associated with Agreement Day Galas."

"Hang in there, big brother," Dominic said, clapping Mario on the shoulder as he stood. "You're finally in the big leagues. Don't give up yet."

Mario watched his younger brother work the room. Whatever it was that helped Dominic mingle and joke so effortlessly, he did not have it. But Dominic liked these people. Dominic even liked some of their fellow council members, who were about as likable as pit vipers. Dominic liked the power and being important. Mario had resisted admitting it to himself, but his brother was just as corrupt and immoral as the rest of them. At least their parents were not alive to see it.

Mario pushed back from the table and began to work the room himself, his smiles calculated, compliments insincere. He scanned the room for his wife. The witching hour was fast approaching and she'd be getting twitchy. He wanted to get her out of here before she got completely hammered.

When he finally located her, his heart sank. She was seated at a table, her head tilted so she could better hear her companion, Father Walter Brennan. Walter's shadow, Father Doug Michel, was also at the table, laughing at whatever Walter had said. Mario did not begrudge Emily her friendships with the Jesuits. He was actually impressed that she had managed to pull it off. But it left him feeling alone, no use denying it. He could never just sit down at a party and shoot the shit with them. Never again. As the years wore on, the weight of it got heavier. Lately, he thought it would crush him.

He worked his way close enough to eavesdrop as he watched them from his peripheral vision without them noticing him.

"Are you staying long enough for me to get a dance?" Emily asked Walter.

"No, my dear. I'm off as soon as they finish serving the coffee."

Emily's face pursed into a pout. "That's no fun at all. You really should stay a little longer."

Emily prattled on about the children and her charity commitments, looking every inch the rich and pampered high society wife in her shimmery black gown and upswept blond hair. She had already blown past the checkered flag at the alcohol races, Mario realized. Attending the Agreement Day Gala was the only time Emily ever left Palo Alto. Usually the intoxication that made it possible was not so obvious.

"I can't believe I forgot," she exclaimed, startling the server pouring coffee into Walter's cup. "I'm so sorry," she said, turning to the man. A moment later, she called out, "Honey, come here!"

Shit.

Mario turned as if surprised by the summons.

"So this is where you're hiding," he said as he approached. He settled his hands on Emily's smooth shoulders as he leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

"Here I am," Emily said.

Mario straightened and nodded to the priests. “Walter, Doug. Good to see you.”

The temperature dropped twenty degrees when Doug said, “It’s never good to see you, Mario.”

Mario could feel the stares. Anyone within earshot strained to hear every word, commit to memory every facial expression of this interaction between Councilman Mario Santorello and the Santa Clara Jesuits. To witness the legendary enmity in action was an unexpected and juicy prize.

Walter shifted in his seat. Mario sympathized. For an introvert such as Walter, being the center of attention had to be intensely uncomfortable, never mind finding himself smack-dab in the middle a potential public spat.

Emily ignored the hostile postures and asked, “When are you letting Connor out of quarantine, Father Walter? Couldn’t you have made an exception for long-lost family just this once?”

“You know I can’t, but he can leave campus in a few days. Say, why don’t you come stay the night? Then you won’t have to wait.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Emily said, trying to laugh it off, but there was no levity in her voice.

Mario leaned over, close to her ear. “You’re always saying how you miss our old stomping grounds.”

“Come on, Em,” Doug said. “You’ll have a great time. Maybe we nab some of this coffee that I’m enough of a hypocrite to always stay for.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head as she searched the room around them. She looked trapped. Not yet in a full-blown panic, but far more alarmed than the suggestion of a night away from home should cause. She lifted her hand to a server carrying a bottle of champagne, then turned her attention back to the priests. “Liquid courage is the only thing that gets me through this. I couldn’t stay drunk the whole time.”

“Sure you could,” said Doug. “Brother Paul’s working on a ten-year buzz.”

“Doug!” Walter admonished, looking scandalized.

Mario couldn’t smother the laughter that bubbled up inside him. Doug looked at him with such hostility that he had to work hard to keep the grin on his

face. He could not let them get the better of him in public, but he had to get away, before this hurt too much. He'd been indulgent, deciding to join them when he should have ignored Emily's summons.

Emily shook her head. "The kids need me," she said before drinking her champagne in two gulps. She had grabbed the entire bottle from the server. Mario refilled her glass under Walter's reproving frown.

Doug finished the last of his coffee as the band started playing and stood up.

"If I never see you again, Santorello, it will be too soon, but your wife is another story." He turned to Emily, his hand outstretched. "Come on, Em. Let's dance."

Emily finished her champagne as she stood, then smiled, game face firmly affixed. She kissed Mario on the cheek as she took Doug's hand.

"We can go whenever you want," Mario said to her.

"Okay," she said, sounding relieved. "I'm going to dance with Doug first."

Mario watched them make their way to the dance floor. Doug held Emily's waist, managing her fragile grip on her balance so expertly it was almost invisible.

"I'll be going now," Walter said, rising, his tone stiff with public courtesy.

"Say a prayer for me?" Mario asked, feeling insolent and angry, which was ridiculous. Why the hell was this bothering him so much?

"Even I have to draw the line somewhere, Mario."

Walter walked away as the titters and whispers began to sweep through the onlookers. Point, set, and match to the Jesuit. It surprised Mario, how much the insult smarted. He turned to the people seated at the table behind him, which included two other members of the Council.

"Some people never get over losing."

They all laughed, but Mario could tell that they had enjoyed his comeuppance. He made his way to the bar, got a bourbon neat, and headed for the kitchen. In contrast to the ballroom, the kitchen was bright and frantic, as cooks shouted and chopped behind billows of steam, servers rushing in and out. No one paid him any attention as he left the kitchen for the service stairs.

If he hurried, he might catch him.

Slowly, he opened the door to the second floor, looking down the hallway to make sure it was deserted. He hugged the wall as he passed the main staircase, with its peacock green Prairie tiles that Emily always admired, praying that no one walked into the lobby below. One glance up and he would have to wait.

The small second floor restroom was secondary to the main bathroom on the first floor. Hardly anyone used it, which was why it worked. He pushed the restroom door open, squinting his eyes against the brighter light inside. Father Walter stood at the sink, drying his hands. He regarded Mario impassively in the mirror.

“Do I have the room to myself?”

Walter said, “Yes.”

Mario crossed to the row of sinks where Walter stood. He turned on the hot and cold spigots of the sink in front of Walter, as well as the two sinks next to it, just in case. The water splashed against the porcelain with a noisy hiss.

“I’ll make it quick.”

“What is it, Mario?” Walter said, eyes darting to the door.

“Has Henry made any progress?”

“No,” Walter said. “But he insists he can—”

“He’s a Nobel Prize winner. From *Stanford*. His ego is getting in the way. He needs the serum.”

“Henry assures me—”

“We don’t have any more time, Walter. I’m going to get it.”

“Absolutely not,” Walter countermanded, his eyes going wide enough for a moment that Mario could see the whites around the entire hazel iris. “It will blow your cover. They’ll be onto you almost at once.”

“I think I have a way around that as long as we do it the first week of next month,” Mario said. “You’ll have to go two weeks early but that can be managed. Once they’re gone, my cover won’t matter.”

An anxious scowl twisted Walter’s features.

“We don’t have anyone else who can get in there like I can, Walter,” Mario pressed, needing Walter to agree. “It’s not that Henry’s idea is bad, but he’s not going to crack it in the next six weeks. If we have the serum, then we don’t have

to engineer another strain. We go straight to synthesizing more and have the preventative vaccine within months. Then the scouts can get out of here and set the plan in motion. I know it's a risk, but playing it safe isn't working anymore."

"And what happens to you?"

"I get out if I can."

Walter opened his mouth to object, but Mario cut him off. He had never let himself think this far ahead, but as he spoke, he knew what he was saying was true.

"We've always known how this would play out. Forget the rest of the Council, the people here want my head on a pike. You coming out to say I'm not the bad guy, after all, won't change that. It won't bring back their children who turned or their loved ones we disappeared in the night."

How many, he wondered. How many people had died while he wormed his way into the graces of the Council, getting them to trust him enough to loosen the reins so that he could betray them? How many times had he needed to go along with it, to inure himself to the suffering as he played out their long con? How many times had he instigated the cruelty himself to prove his loyalty and protect his family? Once was too many, and a thousand would never be enough to satiate the Council. Its power was built on blood and there was still so much of it left to spill.

He felt the weight, like a blanket of lead, descend. He would never get out from under it, no matter how pure his motives. He could never undo the damage he had done.

Indecision showed plainly on Walter's face. Poor, dear Walter. Before, he had embarked on a life that suited him: unassuming service to others. Walter had done the things that no one noticed, the things that, in aggregate, made the difference between existing and living, but that life of quiet service ended when the dead began to rise.

"We'll bring Emily and the children to SCU, of course," Walter managed, tripping over the words. "We'll keep them safe."

"I know you will," Mario said, surprised by the tears that prickled at the corners of his eyes.

To the outside world, he had everything: wealth, power, a fine house, and a beautiful family. As he and Walter looked at each other, the Rubicon finally forded, he realized that Walter could see what the outside world could not: a weary man, a fraud, racked with guilt and self-loathing. A man who couldn't take much more.

"I'll be off," Walter said, checking the door again.

"Yeah, me too."

Mario shook himself to cast it all off, to get back into character so he could take Emily home while she could still walk.

"You're a good man, Mario."

A low chuff of disbelief rumbled in Mario's throat. "We both know that's not true."

He stopped just short of the bathroom door and turned back to face Walter. In the mirror, he saw a bleak resignation settle in the lines around his eyes.

"If there had been another way, I would have taken it. Will you tell her that? Will you tell her I'm sorry?"

Mario knew that Walter had disapproved, long before his so-called defection. Walter had always acted as if Mario had hoodwinked her, had coaxed her somewhere she had not wanted to go. He would never believe that she had joined him willingly, without hesitation, that doing otherwise would have been like deciding not to breathe. It was as if Walter was heaping his own guilt about what happened after onto him. It was probably easier than admitting that he had let her down, too.

What a mess he had made of everything, not least this request. Why would Walter do anything that implied it had been real? Whatever anyone thought, it had been real, but Walter would never acknowledge that. Mario even understood why.

"I'm sorry, forget it. I shouldn't have asked."

Mario pushed the door open and stepped into the hallway. As the door sighed shut behind him, he heard Walter say, "I'll tell her, Mario. You have my word."

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER, Connor was still reeling.

As he and Miranda had walked to the Jesuit Residence after Mass, after reconciling to a degree greater than he ever dared to hope for, he asked, “What’s going on with Emily, Miri? Father Walter won’t tell me anything. All I get is the runaround.”

Miranda stopped. She looked thunderstruck.

“They haven’t told you?”

“Told me what?”

Frustration seemed to make the air around her body vibrate. “I can’t believe them!”

“What’s going on, Miri?” Connor demanded. “Is she a doser? Has she lost her mind?”

Miranda reached for his hand. “Emily’s fine, Connor, she’s fine, but there is something.” She was forcing herself to speak calmly, which only scared Connor more. “Let’s walk over to The Hut. You’ll probably want a drink.”

“Will you just tell me what’s wrong?”

“Emily’s fine,” she assured him. “It’s who she’s married to that’s... complicated.”

“Who the hell is she married to?”

Miranda had sighed. “She’s married to Mario Santorello.”

Connor shifted in his seat as he thought of Emily, his favorite cousin and only living relation. How could she have married Mario Santorello? To be fair,

how could she have *stayed* married to him after he aligned himself with the City Council, effectively keeping the vaccine out of reach for most people? Considering all the havoc they had wrought, even Sonalto wasn't in the same league. Sonalto's screwup had been just that. Motivated by lust for profits and an always improving quarterly statement? Yes. Created zombies on purpose? No. Santorello and the City Council, on the other hand, created a whole new standard for greed.

Connor looked out the window at the gray concrete wall as they sped north on the Expressway toward Palo Alto. The scenery wasn't what it used to be. He rode shotgun after Karen had insisted he take her seat. At first he thought she was matchmaking again but soon realized she did not want to be next to Miranda. The atmosphere in the Rover was poisonous; even the dog was subdued. They'd been late picking him up because of Karen's shoes. Miranda had made her change them and Karen was furious. He couldn't believe they were so angry at each other over shoes.

If I live to be a hundred, I still won't understand women.

He studied Miranda's profile as she drove. He didn't think he would ever get tired of looking at her, even with her mouth twisted down in a frown. She had not wanted to accompany him since Emily's husband would be there. Karen had told him that Miranda visited Emily only when her husband was not there, but Emily had spoken to Miranda at length earlier in the day, pleading and cajoling and eventually, begging, until Miranda finally—reluctantly—agreed.

The Rover slowed as they approached the Sand Hill Road exit. They were through the double gate in under a minute.

"Welcome to La-La Land," Miranda muttered.

A Humvee convoy awaited them. One rode point, with two more flanking either side of the point vehicle a car length behind. This pattern was repeated inversely behind them with the Rover in the middle of the diamond-shaped formation. The road they traveled was secured in the same fashion as the Expressway: high concrete walls on either side of the blacktop topped with concertina wire, proximity alarms and sniper towers at regular intervals. Connor could hear the buzz of constant moaning, faint but ever present, beyond the high

walls.

“This is quite a welcome,” Connor said. Miranda gave him a disgusted look, but he could tell it was not directed at him.

“When you’re rich enough and live in The Land of Make Believe, you can pay other people to deal with the unpleasantness of zombies.”

“Oh, don’t listen to her, Connor!” Karen piped up, leaning forward between them. “Miranda’s had a bug up her ass about Palo Alto since day one. I think it’s great! I just wish I could afford it.”

Miranda said, “It’s the most inherently unsafe place there is, *including* the wilderness.” Karen snorted with derision—she had obviously heard this all before—but Miranda was on a roll. “It’s filled with people who pretend there’s no such thing as zombies and never, ever leave.”

“What do you mean by that?” Connor asked.

Strains of “Hotel California” buzzed through his brain. Most people were resigned to a world of smaller horizons since the ZA, but the way Miranda said it, never leaving sounded sinister.

“Just what I said. They never, ever leave if they can help it. There’s no way you can see Emily anywhere else because she lives in the Happiest Concentration Camp on Earth,” Miranda said, scorn suffusing every syllable. “She was at the Agreement Day Gala the other night, but that’s it, and she had to get hammered to do it. She was just down the street but couldn’t bring herself to stop at SCU to see you! Everyone in Palo Alto is the same. This little convoy is the biggest dose of reality you’re going to get while we’re here, so enjoy it while it lasts.”

“That doesn’t sound like Emily,” Connor said.

“People change when the world falls apart.”

As they turned the corner, the convoy slowed and approached one of the biggest walls Connor had ever seen.

“How tall is this thing?”

“Forty feet, I think. It’s just the first one.” Miranda slowed the Rover to a halt and looked over to him as she opened the door. “Zombie Dog inspection.”

They got out of the Rover and waited. A two-story guard house sat next to

the gate. It wasn't an old house that had been converted, but a newer purpose-built structure. Dog handlers and the Watch Commander approached, and they were inspected by three different dogs.

The perimeter walls of Palo Alto were fifteen yards apart with miniature DMZs between. The area beyond the gates was fenced off. Warning signs were everywhere.

“DANGER!!! THIS AREA IS MINED - DO NOT PROCEED! VIOLATORS
WILL BE SHOT!!!”

When they reached the third checkpoint, there was a twist to the routine they had gone through at the others. They were asked to surrender their weapons.

Karen began shrugging out of her shoulder holster.

“What are you doing?” Miranda demanded.

“They want our weapons, Miri. It's not a big deal,” Karen answered. She gave Miranda a *don't-embarrass-me* look that rivaled a fourteen-year-old mortified by her parents.

Connor watched, gobsmacked, as Karen handed over her gun, ammo, and machete to the young security officer in exchange for a claim ticket. He looked to Miranda, his shock so profound he could not wrap his mind around what he was seeing.

“Are they serious?”

“Yeah, but so am I.”

The guard stowed Karen's weapons in a locker and then turned his attention to Miranda and Connor. “Ma'am, sir, I'm going to need your weapons.”

“You're new, aren't you?” Miranda asked.

“Yes, ma'am, I am.” The young man smiled. “I need you to surrender your weapons, if you don't mind. Palo Alto is a weapons-free community.”

Miranda smiled at the young man. “Look, kid, I'm not trying to give you a hard time, but I mind. I don't surrender my weapons to anyone, and neither does he.” She motioned to Connor with a tilt of her head. “I saw you check the list, so you know we're guests of the Santorellos. Why don't you go in and get the

Watch Commander on the line. Tell him Miranda Tucci's being a pain in the ass again."

"Uh, well, I can do that, of course," he said, flustered. "I don't think it will do any good, though. Everyone surrenders their weapon, ma'am, even Councilman Santorello."

The dog handlers had left to conduct a perimeter sweep, presumably along a route that would preclude being blown to smithereens. There was no one in the immediate vicinity that the guard could appeal to. Connor saw the young man's mental arithmetic plainly. He couldn't just insist since they were guests of important people, but he couldn't let them keep their weapons, either. With a sigh, he left for the guardhouse.

"What the fuck, Miri?" Connor said.

"Palo Alto is a weapons-free community," Miranda mocked.

Connor could not believe what he was hearing. It was ridiculous. It was insane.

"No one is armed in there?"

"Connor, look, it's not a big deal," Karen interjected in a placating tone while shooting Miranda a dirty look. "Palo Alto has the best security in the Valley. There's no way a zombie can get past it. It's just not possible, so you don't need to carry a weapon."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Connor," Karen said. "I've been here tons of times and it's really safe. Of course people have weapons in their houses! They just don't carry them."

For a moment, Connor was robbed of speech. Karen stood before him, explaining that people out and about without weapons was as normal as whatever the hell normal passed for anymore. He suddenly wondered what kind of shoes she had been wearing earlier.

"Do you have any idea how many times I've been told 'there's no way a zombie can get in' by some jackass who's now a zombie?" he asked.

He might have said more, but the guard was returning. Connor saw the barest suggestion of a smile perk up the corners of Miranda's mouth. She had known all along she would get her way.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” the young man began. He had the look of someone who’d been ripped up one side and down the other. “I didn’t realize you and members of your party are exempt from the weapons policy. I should have, though.”

“No worries, kid. I’m used to it,” Miranda replied, pushing off the Rover to stand straight.

The guard turned to Karen. “Would you like your weapons back, ma’am?”

Karen looked appalled. “God, no! Keep them. I don’t mind following the rules.”

“Let’s just go,” Miranda said.

They got back into the Rover. Delilah was practically prancing on the back seat having watched the heated conversations. She obviously felt she had missed out on something exciting.

Connor looked back at the guard while Miranda started the engine. He could tell the young man wanted to ask them something.

“Miri, see what he wants.”

She called over to the guard. “Hey, kid. What’s your name?”

He perked right up. “It’s John, ma’am.”

“So what do you want to know?”

John looked at her like he’d been caught out in a lie. “Uh, well, I was just wondering. Why won’t you surrender your weapons? Everyone I’ve seen is thrilled to not have to carry them.”

“Let me ask you something first. What’s the drill around here if a zombie gets in?”

“There’s never been a zombie in Palo Alto since the walls went up, ma’am.”

“Humor me.”

“Well, the first line of defense is the deterrent systems that keep zombies at least five miles away. We have dogs, firearms, flamethrowers, mines. There are a lot of options at our disposal.”

“And what if there’s more than one?”

“We can handle any number of hostiles, ma’am. We have the three walls.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Miranda allowed. “Just for the sake of argument, let’s

say that a small group of zombies breaches the third wall. Then what?"

"Same as before. Security will neutralize the threat."

"There are tens of thousands of zombies on this part of the Peninsula. For a small group to breach the third wall, almost all of them would be here," Miranda said. "If you've got zombies inside, do you really think there will be any of the security team left out here to help those of you trapped inside?"

John's brow furrowed. It seemed he had never thought of that. "Well... there's still security in Palo Alto to protect the residents."

"How much?"

"Fifty, at any given time."

"And there's what, three hundred, three hundred fifty people who haven't seen a zombie in God knows how long? You've got a good ratio if all the guards survive, but that won't happen. Never does. How well do you think people who've been living in there for a few years will react if there are zombies running around all of a sudden?"

"All they have to do is retreat to a secure location, ma'am. We'll take care of it."

"Well, John, it sounds like you've got it all figured out," Miranda replied with a nod. "To answer your question, I won't surrender my weapons because I wouldn't count on hired security to choose saving me over saving themselves when push comes to shove. There's not enough money on Earth to bring a person back from the dead. As a person, anyway."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but that's what we're paid to do. To protect these people," he countered.

"You are, John, of course you are. Anyone who's willing to die for some rich idiot who thinks their money allows them to farm out responsibility for their own safety is stupid in my book, and stupid people aren't good at security."

"I'm *not* stupid," John said, his face flushing.

"I never said you were," Miranda replied. "You seem like a smart kid. You're the only one to ever ask me why I keep my weapons and I come here almost once a month, ever since this shithole opened."

Connor struggled to contain his laughter. It wasn't fair, setting the kid up

against Miranda, but he had asked. Miranda would not be Miranda if she did not answer him honestly—even a little too honestly. Karen ‘harrumphed’ from the back seat.

“There’s no such thing as an impenetrable fortress,” Miranda said, her tone sympathetic. “It can take a very long time for the weaknesses to show, but they always do. Every impenetrable fortress turns out not to be. I don’t think you’re stupid, John. I expect you to be with the smart guys who get the fuck out of Dodge the day you realize you’ve got a full-blown clusterfuck on your hands. You take care now.”

Miranda nodded at the young man and drove the Rover through the final gate, leaving dun-colored dust swirling in its wake. Connor twisted in his seat to see John the Guard standing in place, staring after them as the gate closed behind the Rover.

“He looks like he can’t decide if you’re right or if you’re crazy, Miri.”

Miranda smirked. “If he’s smart, he’ll realize I’m both.”

IF WALKING around the SCU campus made Connor feel like a time traveler, Palo Alto was like visiting another planet. It had the same easy affluence as before the ZA. The houses were as beautiful as he remembered. The lots of destroyed homes were absorbed into the yards of their neighbors, making a good third of the residences mini-estates if not outright ones. The only concession he could see to the present were bars over all the windows, but even these were artful curlicues of wrought iron that managed to be as decorative as they were functional.

Massive sycamore and oak trees created leafy canopies over spacious streets. Children played in their front yards, running and shouting or whizzing around on bikes and skateboards. Most of the lawns in the semi-arid climate were grass. Connor did not even want to think how much water it took to keep them green. Nannies and well-coiffed mothers supervised the organized chaos of playtime. Two young women chatted as they walked down the sidewalk, their stretchy, form-fitting exercise clothes accentuating the work they performed on the yoga mats tucked under their arms. Not one person in sight carried a weapon of any kind.

The center of Palo Alto was still the commercial strip along University Avenue. It housed all manner of shops and boutiques: grocers, butchers, upscale fashions, bakeries, restaurants, and countless fitness studios where one could perfect their yoga, capoeira, jiu-jitsu, judo, and kickboxing. The fitness and martial arts studios seemed to be the closest Palo Alto came to acknowledging

that the world outside its walls had changed.

“Here we are,” Karen announced as they turned the corner.

A regal wrought iron fence started at the corner of the block and stretched far in both directions. If there were proximity alarms on the fence, they were an unobtrusive design Connor did not recognize. They pulled up to a gate painted shiny black with gold leaf on the points and cornices. Men in dark suits who talked into their sleeves and touched devices nestled in their ears stood guard. Their menacing-looking but obedient German Shepherds and Dobermans following them like shadows. Unlike everyone else they had seen these men were armed, but unobtrusively so as not to disturb the illusion.

This is how it must have been to go to the White House.

They were waved through and started up the long tree-lined drive, which blocked their view until they turned at the end and were presented with one of the biggest Mediterranean Revival houses Connor had ever seen. A mansion, in point of fact. Two stories of Palladian arches, verandas, French doors, and brown slate roof stood before him, surrounded by tall, graceful palm trees. There was even a multi-tiered fountain between the curved drive and the entrance. Not carrying weapons was crazy, but the houses were pretty damn sweet.

One of the massive front doors flew open and Emily darted out, the smile on her face so wide her jaw looked like it was wired in place.

“Connor! Oh my God! Connor!” She jumped up and down as he got out of the Rover, then wrapped him in a hug so tight he felt like the occupant of a Chinese finger trap.

He hugged his cousin back. A dark-haired man and three children stood at the front door. Connor looked at his cousin, drinking in the sight of her. It was Em, alright. Her gray eyes were alight with joy and overflowing with tears. She was the spitting image of Aunt Maureen, especially around the eyes and nose.

“I don’t even know what to say, Em. It’s good to see you doesn’t begin to cover it.”

“I can’t believe you’re here, Connor! I just can’t believe it!”

Emily wrapped her arms around him tighter. Connor saw Miranda and Karen over her shoulder. They both smiled and cried, their shoe quarrel forgotten, but

Miranda's body language was off. When the dark-haired man, who had to be Emily's husband, approached them, she stepped away. Delilah did not share her mistress' sentiments, for she jumped and wriggled in front of the man, warbling with delight. The smaller boy called for "Auntie Miranda" to pick him up. An older boy and a toddler, a girl if the pink trousers were any indication, joined their father in fussing over Delilah before the older children ran off with the overstimulated pit bull.

Emily loosened her grip a little and turned, wiping her eyes. Keeping her left arm around Connor, she said, "Come meet my family."

The dark-haired man, now carrying his young daughter, stepped forward. He smiled at Emily with affection as he shifted the toddler to his left arm and reached to shake Connor's hand.

"Connor, this is my husband, Mario," Emily said.

"It's great to meet you, Connor," Mario said. His square, even teeth were the white of toothpaste commercials. "Her feet haven't touched the ground since she heard the news."

"It's good to meet you, too," Connor replied, not sure if that was true.

Mario Santorello was not what Connor had expected. He knew Santorello was thirty-five, a few years older than himself and his cousin, and that he was a celebrated biochemist, but had never seen his picture. His eyes were dark, brimming with an intelligence that was almost tangible, but what struck Connor most was how ordinary he looked. He was dressed in blue jeans, a white polo shirt, and wore (of all things) espadrille sandals. Not quite the Prince of Darkness that his imagination had conjured.

"It looks like the boys have run off with Delilah," Mario said. "Why don't we go inside and get a drink?"

"I'll drink your good booze any day," Karen laughed, accepting a peck on the cheek from their host. To Connor's ear, her laughter seemed forced, too cheerful. But Karen had told him she liked Mario. Miranda's discomfort around Emily's husband was obvious. Karen must be worried about Miranda, he thought, I better make sure she's all right.

But Emily hugged him again and asked a question as they entered the house,

and the thought flew away.

THEY WERE DINING AL FRESCO ON A VERANDA OVERLOOKING THE EXTENSIVE grounds with the help of several patio heaters. Emily had taken Connor on a brief tour of the richly appointed residence. Emily's home was on the decadent side, but what else would the home of one of the world's most powerful men be?

"So, Connor," Mario started. "What are you planning to do with yourself once you get settled?"

"Mario, he hasn't even eaten his dinner and you're already grilling him!" Emily protested.

"No worries, Em," Connor answered. He passed the platter of homemade fettuccine in a basil cream sauce, topped with sliced tomatoes, down the table. "I have no idea, Mario. I've only been here for two weeks. I still don't know the lay of the land."

Mario sat down, now that everyone had food, and spread his napkin over his lap. "If you ever want a job, just let me know. I'm sure we can find you something." He raised his wineglass and the rest of the table followed. "To family."

"To family," they echoed, glasses clinking together.

The conversation meandered from old family stories to getting to know you chitchat. Emily told Connor how she had gone to GeneSys for an interview and never left. Her first impression of her husband had been poor but improved while they were holed up in one of GeneSys' bunker-like labs. Every so often Mario would offer his perspective, which sometimes diverged from his wife's account, but humorously so.

Connor watched the interplay between them and had to keep reminding himself that Santorello was the enemy. Emily's husband was intelligent, charming, and personable. If he had run for president before the ZA, he would have won the all-important "Who would you rather have a beer with?" poll. His actions around the vaccine, the source of his considerable power and wealth, left

no doubt as to his true nature, but even so, Connor could not help but like him. No matter how evil, every person has at least one good quality. Even Hitler liked dogs.

“Business must be good, Mario, if you’re already offering Connor a job,” Miranda remarked mildly.

“Good enough. A little slow just now, but there are always ups and downs.”

“Maybe you could expand into agriculture. If you perfect the Sonalto tomato, it might expand your market share.”

“Miranda!” Karen hissed as the table fell silent. She raised her voice and continued. “Emily, this pasta is wonderful! Did you make it yourself?”

“Yes,” Emily replied, giving her husband, his face flushed with anger, a warning stare. “I made it this morning.”

“It’s great, Em,” Connor added, trying to neutralize the now charged atmosphere. “Aunt Maureen’s recipe?”

Mid-bite, Emily nodded.

“Dad, what’s a Sonalto tomato?”

The table fell silent again.

“It’s nothing to discuss while we’re eating, Michael,” Emily said to her oldest son.

“Are they on our pasta?” the boy persisted.

“No, of course not!” his mother said. She shot Miranda a filthy look. “And it’s nothing we’re going to discuss today.”

“What’s the big deal about a tomato?” the boy asked again, perplexed.

“Michael,” Emily said, but Mario interrupted her.

“He’s almost nine, Em. He’s old enough to know.”

“Anthony and Maureen aren’t,” Emily disagreed in a low voice.

“And they’re eating mac and cheese in the kitchen with Inez,” Mario replied. “It’s okay, I’ve got it.”

“Okay, Michael,” Mario said, directing his attention to his son. “You know that people turn into zombies after being bit by a zombie.”

The boy nodded his head.

“Have you ever thought about how the first zombie came about?”

“Well, yeah...but no one ever talks about it,” Michael said, his voice soft.

“Well, before there were zombies, there were biotech companies like mine. Some of them made food and things to grow crops, and Sonalto was one of them. You remember what DNA is?”

“Only the building blocks of life on Earth,” the boy said, sounding insulted.

“You’re so smart, Michael,” Karen interjected. “Maybe you’ll be a scientist like your dad.”

“Well,” Mario continued, “Sonalto changed the DNA of some of the tomatoes they sold so that farmers could spray their crops with pesticides that would kill weeds but not the tomato plants. Since they didn’t have to spray *around* the tomato plants, the farmers could do it quicker, which let them plant more crops and make more money.”

Miranda snorted. Connor jabbed her with his elbow.

“Did it work?” Michael asked.

“For a while,” Mario answered. “But after a few years the DNA they added to the tomatoes mutated and people who ate those tomatoes turned into zombies. It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. No one had ever seen a zombie before, so at first, we tried to help them. We thought they were just sick, but then we realized they weren’t. Before, there used to be restaurants that were the same company all over the world, and they bought a lot of Sonalto tomatoes. Some of those restaurants were in airports, which is one of the reasons the epidemic spread so fast. But those tomatoes that Sonalto made don’t exist anymore. All the tomatoes we eat are safe.”

“Are you sure?” Michael looked down at his plate in alarm.

“I’m sure. See?” Mario popped a tomato wedge in his mouth and chewed, smiling widely. “We eat these all the time and none of us have become zombies, have we?”

“I guess so,” the boy answered with a marked lack of confidence.

“And besides,” Emily added. “We’ve all had Daddy’s vaccine, so there’s no way you can ever turn into a zombie no matter what you eat. Or even if you got bit.”

“Some people still won’t eat tomatoes because they’re afraid, but it’s

impossible to be Italian and not eat tomatoes,” Mario said to his son, his voice that of a conspirator. “Isn’t that right, Miranda?”

All eyes turned to the other end of the table, awaiting her reply.

“That’s right,” she said. She bit into a tomato wedge for Michael’s benefit even though Connor could see it killed her to agree with Mario. “That’s one thing your dad and I agree on.”

“I know I said it already,” Karen said with forced good cheer after draining her wineglass, which she held up for a refill. “But really, Emily, this pasta is fantastic!”

Emily latched on to Karen’s conversational lifeline. They chatted about cooking while Michael peppered his father with more questions about zombies. Connor leaned over to whisper in Miranda’s ear.

“I can’t believe you. You’re upsetting Emily!”

“This is why I never come when he’s here,” she growled. “We always end up sniping at one another.”

“Well get your shit together and act like a grown-up. This is supposed to be my family reunion and you’re busy scaring a kid.”

Connor watched her bite back an angry retort. Emily and Karen moved on from cooking to eligible bachelors that Emily might introduce to Karen. Mario started offering suggestions and soon they were all out brainstorming. Michael vetoed two of his parents’ choices of potential suitors with loud exclamations of “Him and Aunt Karen? Ewww!” but gave his stamp of approval to two others.

“Miri, can you pass the water pitcher?” Emily asked, still smiling from the spirited matchmaking session.

“It’s empty, Em.”

“Lupe can get it,” Emily said, looking around. “She must have gone into the house for another bottle of wine. Pass it over and I’ll go get some.”

“I can do it,” Miranda said, starting to stand up.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Miri. You’re a guest.” Emily snatched the pitcher away and excused herself from the table.

“Speaking of fixing people up,” Mario said, “I understand you and Miranda were quite the item when all of you were at SCU, Connor.”

From the corner of his eye, Connor saw Miranda stiffen.

“That was a long time ago,” he said.

“Maybe the spark is still there?” Mario asked, a devilish gleam in his eye.

“Or maybe not,” Miranda snapped.

What the fuck, Connor thought, not sure if he should be worried that Miranda just said she was not interested in him almost to his face, or if her comment had more to do with who had asked the question.

“You were a Jesuit for a while, weren’t you, Connor?” Mario queried.

Preoccupied, Connor only half heard the question. “Um, yeah, for a short time.”

“What was it like?”

Connor could not say why, but Mario’s questions about his time as a Jesuit made him uncomfortable. “I learned a lot about myself, but I just wasn’t cut out for religious life.”

“It definitely takes a special kind of man to be a priest,” Mario agreed. Connor watched his attention shift from himself to Miranda. “I imagine it would be difficult for any man to be celibate after having a lover as passionate as Miranda.”

“You motherfuck—” Miranda snarled, her cry lost in the clatter of bumped plates and tipping glasses and cutlery as she rocketed to her feet. Connor jumped up as well, grabbing her arm to keep her from flying over the table.

“What the heck is going on?” Emily asked, out of breath. The pitcher in her hand was half empty, and there were wet patches on her blouse and skirt. She must have seen the commotion as she left the house and dashed over to intercede, splashing the pitcher’s contents on herself in the process. She looked around the table and settled on her husband. “Honey, why don’t you help me in the kitchen?”

Mario smiled like a mean-spirited Cheshire Cat. Karen sucked down another half glass of wine. Michael watched the commotion, wide-eyed.

“Of course, sweetheart,” Mario said, his venomous stare focused on Miranda.

“You too, Michael,” Emily said as Mario rose from his chair to follow her

rigid form into the house.

“That fucking asshole! That fucking piece of shit!” Miranda spat when they were gone. She wrenched her arm free of Connor’s grip, stumbling over the chair she had knocked over when she had rocketed to her feet.

“Miri, you shouldn’t get into it with him,” Karen scolded.

“So it’s my fault he’s a bastard?”

“You’re the one making smart-ass remarks about tomatoes,” Karen countered. “If you’re upset, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

Miranda spun on her heel and stormed off, slamming the French doors that led from the veranda to the end of the house away from the kitchen. Connor started after her, but Karen called to him before he had gone ten feet.

“Let her go, Connor. She’ll just take it out on you. Let her cool down.”

Connor was taken aback by the viciousness of Miranda and Mario’s riposting. He knew Miranda loathed Emily’s husband but had thought they could at least be civil. She was Michael’s godmother; the kids thought of her as their aunt. Connor had assumed they could put a good face on things in front of the children at least. He was afraid to think what might have happened had Emily not all but dragged Mario from the table.

“They really don’t like each other,” Connor said.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Karen muttered as she drained the rest of her wineglass dry. The absent Lupe reappeared to refill it almost before Karen set it on the table. “I knew this would be a disaster.”

MIRANDA WANDERED THE HOUSE. She was not sure how much time had passed since she fled the dinner table, but she needed a bathroom. Every time she thought she found one, it turned out to be a room she did not recognize. She knew Emily's house better than this. Why was she so lost? She finally found a bathroom she had never seen before. It was huge, with fixtures that were undersized and mismatched. The geometry of the room felt wrong, but there was nothing she could identify to support the feeling. It just did.

She rifled through the medicine cabinet, then the linen closet, then the drawers under the sink. As she gripped the handle on the last drawer, she realized what she was doing.

I'm looking for a razor.

She froze, outstretched arm trembling. The scars on the insides of her forearms and biceps itched and throbbed. She knew everyone thought it was terrible. She knew herself that it meant something was wrong with her, that something was broken. What no one else understood was that it wasn't about the sharp bite of metal into her skin or the fiery pain or the blood that welled up in the razor's wake and trickled around the curve of her arm. It let the pain, the fear, every bad thing seep out. She didn't know why or how, but it helped. Sometimes it was the only thing that did.

She couldn't go back to the others with her forearms in bandages, not after the scene she had just made. She could not handle more disapproval. She stepped away from the sink on shaky legs, turned to leave, and realized she

really did need to pee.

She sat on the toilet, replaying the disaster again. She ought to try acting like an adult and return to the so-called celebration. Storming off like a child was pathetic. She *had* instigated the antagonistic exchange; Karen was right about that. It didn't excuse Mario's behavior, but it didn't make hers any better.

She headed for the door, resolving to keep her mouth shut, play nice, and drink heavily, then tripped so badly she almost fell. As she righted herself, she saw that her foot had caught on a toy dump truck, its scuffed metal attesting to years of use. Where had it come from, she wondered, as she realized the entire bathroom was littered with toys. Rubber duckies and wind-up swimming otters were near the tub. There were Tinkertoys, stuffed animals, children's books, wooden blocks, and a step-up stool painted in bright primary colors by the sink. They were everywhere.

How did I not see them?

She grasped the doorknob but met resistance when she tried to turn it. Someone was turning it from the other side. She let go and stepped back. The door opened. Mario stood before her.

"You look lovely today, Miranda. I forgot to tell you earlier."

She glared at him. "I don't have time for this, Mario. Get out of my way."

Instead, he pushed the door shut and walked toward her. Miranda backed up, stumbling on yet another toy she had not seen a moment ago before bumping into the long marble counter of the oversized sink.

"Playing hard to get these days, Miri? It suits you."

He stopped in front of her, an inch between them. Miranda tried to sidle past, nonplussed at the invasion of her personal space. He closed the tiny distance, pressing his hips against hers.

A traitorous flame of desire rippled through her body. Her pounding heart filled her ears with white noise.

"Don't."

He leaned closer, forcing her back over the sink. Her head pressed against the mirror and still he leaned into her, gripping behind her shoulders. His chest crushed against her breasts.

“I think Connor is in love with you,” Mario whispered in her ear. She arched her neck toward his warm breath even as she cringed at his words.

“Leave him out of this.”

“You told me in no uncertain terms that there is no ‘this’ anymore.”

His hands traveled to the small of her back. She barely stopped herself from pushing her pelvis against his.

“Mario,” she pleaded, breathless. She looked into his eyes, deep and fathomless, for the first time.

“Just say the word and I’ll stop.”

He undid the top three buttons of her shirt, then the clasp at the front of her bra. Her breasts spilled out from the sheer, nearly translucent fabric. He cupped them gently in his hands before pinching her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers so hard tears sprang to her eyes.

The room slipped out of focus. She could hear the children shouting nearby as they played. She thought she could hear Emily laugh and the low murmur of Connor’s voice. But they weren’t at this end of the house.

Mario latched on to her nipple, teasing with his teeth and tongue. Her breath hissed out as a jolt of raw need raced through her body. His strong hands felt blazing where they held her waist. Had she worn this top and almost see-through bra hoping this might happen? She couldn’t remember if he had bothered to lock the door.

He unzipped her cargo pants, shoving them down past her knees. She heard the rip of fabric as he tore her panties and pushed them aside.

An urgent voice in her head shouted: *Get out of here!* But the voice seemed far away, and Mario was so near. His hand traveled down, stopping just short of exploring the folds of her sex. He looked into Miranda’s eyes, a dare in his own.

“Just tell me to stop.”

She tried to say it. She tried to say stop, go away, leave me alone, but deep down, she was not sure she wanted to. His fingers continued their caresses and she trembled, on fire where he touched her. A delicious heat snaked up from her center along her spine, leaving sensuous ripples in their wake.

All I have to do is tell him to stop, she thought, frantic. Just push him away

and walk out that door. She thought of Connor, of Emily. The toys of Mario's children cluttered the room. His eyes held hers like a magnet.

"Don't stop."

She pushed against his hand as his fingers slid inside her. When his thumb made lazy circles around her clit, she groaned with pleasure.

"Fighting it only makes this better, Miri. You're so wet. You never could lie."

His tongue crashed between her lips to claim them. His kiss was possessive, lips scorching and burning along her jaw as he made his way up to her ear.

She pulled him back to her mouth. Aching need consumed her. Her hands burrowed under his shirt, over the muscles of his stomach and chest. He helped her pull the shirt over his head, then pushed her back and dropped to his knees. One pant leg stuck on her combat boot, he pulled it down and inside out. He ran his hands halfway up the inside of her thighs and pushed just enough that her ass crested the edge of the sink. She settled her boot-clad feet on his shoulders, too turned on to care how heavy and awkward they were. His hands slid down the inside of her thighs. When he reached her knees, he spread them wide, putting her on brazen display.

Jesus Christ, what am I doing?

Heat radiated from his parted lips, but he made no move to touch her. Desire and frustration rolled off her in waves.

"Mario, go down on me, please. *Please.*"

He moved fractionally closer and blew on her swollen flesh. Goose bumps prickled up her abdomen and breasts. When he nuzzled her inner thigh, she began to cry from frustration.

Stop this, you idiot! Stop! Get away!

She writhed, trying to move closer so he could not resist.

"Please, Mario, please. I'm begging you."

Her heart filled with self-loathing for being unable to stop herself, for the pathetic, uneven voice that helped him humiliate her. She hated what he'd done, hated what he represented. And she was begging for his touch like a beaten-down dog. Her body felt like it would dissolve into a million quivering pieces.

He pulled away and looked up at her, hunger and triumph in his dark eyes,

like he knew this would happen. Like it was inevitable.

“You’re mine,” he said. “You always will be.”

Miranda’s entire existence narrowed to the intersection of her blazing flesh and Mario’s mouth. She sunk into the lush pleasure rushing through her. Mario no longer blocked the door—he had not even bothered to close it! Connor could walk by at any moment and what would he see? The man they were supposed to destroy nestled between her legs while she trembled like a teenager about to have her first orgasm.

Oh my God, what would he think of me?

The thought of discovery—of such humiliating disgrace—pushed her over the precipice. She teetered for a stretched-out moment of exquisite agony before exploding in Mario’s mouth. He held her tightly against him as she rode the waves of her climax, biting her lip to muffle her cries. Just when she thought it might never stop, her whole body released, catching her in a lazy downward drift that left her trembling and panting on the edge of the sink.

Mario turned her so brusquely she squeaked in surprise. She heard a metal *zzzzzzzzpt* before he pushed her over the sink and entered her with a shove. A startled sigh escaped her as he grabbed her hips and began to move inside her, his breath ragged and uneven. He tugged her shirt off her arm, sending the remaining buttons pinging against the marble basin. He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her toward him. She cried out as her back arched painfully. He dug his fingers into her hair above the barrette that held her ponytail in place and yanked it, hard. The barrette snapped open. Her hair not clenched in his fist tumbled down in a shimmering auburn wave.

“Don’t you dare close your eyes, Miranda. Watch me fuck you.”

She whimpered and moaned. Her lust-flushed face glowed with a fine sheen of sweat. Her treacherous body moved in time with his, an inexorable tension building within her. She watched his reflection wrap her hair around his hand like reins as he rode his frenzied passion.

She bucked against him as she came again. He let go of her hair, covering her mouth to stifle her cries. He lowered his head, caught her bare shoulder between his teeth to muffle the strangled cry of his own release. He pressed deep

inside her one last time before his jaw relaxed. The angry red marks of his teeth were stark against her pale skin.

Miranda sprawled over the sink while he pulled away and fastened his jeans. There were even toys here, next to the spigot. But they had not been there a moment ago; she was sure of it. How could she have missed them? Miranda pushed herself up, disoriented and confused. This room, the toys, what she had just done. Everything felt wrong.

She started to turn away, but Mario pinned her against the sink. He pushed the shirt barely clinging to her left shoulder aside. His hands slid around her. One caressed her breast, the other rested on the tiny swell of her stomach just below her belly button.

“Do you still think there’s no ‘this’?” he panted in her ear.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” she whispered, waves of humiliation threatening to drown her. “You can never change what you did.”

She locked eyes with him in the mirror, her visage still clouded with lust and her heart overflowing with shame. Long auburn locks draped over her breast below the shoulder he had bitten. The still erect nipple peeked out from the silken strands. A defiant gleam filled her stormy eyes. Her lips curled in a sneer at odds with her flushed, pink face.

“I hate you.”

He only smiled in answer, then turned her around and raised his hand to her chin. He tipped her mouth to his. Unlike before, this kiss was soft, even tender. He gently explored her mouth and she responded, arousal beginning to stir once more.

Ashamed, Miranda tried to pull away, but he caught her face in his hands and stroked her cheek with his thumb.

He said, “I know you believe that, Miri, but I still want you. I still *need* you. And you still need me, no matter how much you deny it. We’ll never be finished with each other.”

He stepped back, then stooped to retrieve his discarded shirt and left without a backward glance.

Miranda began to cry, then sob. She doubled over, tears splattering on her

knees, and realized she was going to be sick. She stumbled on the cargo pants still stuck on her boot, barely making it to the toilet in time. When she quit retching, she sunk back and rested her sweaty forehead on the cold toilet basin. Part of her wished Mario would come back.

What if I get pregnant? What the fuck is wrong with me?

It took a few minutes before she felt she could stand up without getting sick again. She went to the sink and rinsed her mouth and face. Mario's words echoed through her mind as she began to untwist and refasten her disheveled clothes. She had managed to avoid him for so long, for almost five *years*, and now this. She felt like an addict, like a junkie who had blown years of sobriety for a fix.

I'm losing my mind... He doesn't love me. He doesn't know the meaning of the word. How could he when he knows I despise him?

But even as the thought formed, she knew it for a lie. Her hatred was intense but had never been as total as she claimed, as she knew it *should* be. Beneath it, something else, something unspeakably shameful, refused to die. She glimpsed her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

He chose the dark side with such ease.

That was what stung.

Still.

"What is wrong with you?" she shouted, unleashing her fury at her reflection. "Why did you do this?"

Miranda shut her eyes, unable to stand the sight of herself, and crumpled to the floor.

"What the hell have I done?"

MIRANDA WOKE WITH A START, heart hammering in her chest. Her cheeks were sticky with tears. Delilah yipped in alarm as she fumbled in the darkness, almost knocking over a lamp before switching it on. She was in her bed. That meant she was at home. She pulled at the collar of her t-shirt. Relief that there were no teeth marks flooded through her. It had been a dream. A horrible dream, but nothing more.

The sexual afterglow of her dream state encounter hummed beneath the subsiding panic. She had read once that the human body is unable to distinguish the sensory input of dreams from waking life, which is why they seem so real. Her body's current state of panicked arousal seemed a powerful affirmation. Miranda had not had a dream about being with Mario in a very long time.

He was cruel in her dreams...controlling her, owning her, proving her wrong. The waking world had never been like that. She groaned as she lay back against the pillow.

What was I thinking, going to their house when I knew he would be there?

He had reappeared as they were leaving, timing it so he caught her alone. Connor and Emily were already out the door helping a very drunk Karen, who weaved crazily while insisting she did not need their help. Miranda was almost at the door when he called to her.

"Miranda, wait."

She turned to find Mario standing in the foyer near the table at the foot of the curved staircase. He looked awkward and out of place, shifting his weight from

one foot to the other, a far cry from his usual Lord of the Manor airs. The idea of engaging in another verbal sparring match depressed her.

“I don’t have the energy for this. Coming here was a mistake.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I want— I need to tell you. I’m sorry about earlier, what I said.”

She was taken aback, not sure she had heard him correctly. He came closer but stopped well short of her.

“I uh, I got... He’s in love with you.”

“Connor?” She spoke without thinking. If she had taken the time to think, she would not have spoken at all.

“Yeah, Connor,” Mario replied bitterly, looking away. “He’s in love with you and I...lost my temper, when you brought up Sonalto. But mostly—” He stopped and raised his eyes to hers. He looked desperate. “Mostly I was jealous.”

What did he expect her to say to that? And why tell her this, why apologize, why now? She searched his face, confused, like he had popped out of thin air in front of her. But it wasn’t Mario Santorello, Petty Despot, standing in front of her. It was *Mario*, the man she had loved before he ruined everything.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

A sad half-smile crossed his face. “Seeing you today, seeing him... I miss you so much, Miri.”

Mario’s voice trailed off. He had closed the distance between them while he spoke. She could smell the sweet tang of bourbon on his breath. Tentatively, he raised his hand and touched her cheek, feather-light.

“I miss us,” he whispered.

The unreality of the conversation made Miranda feel light-headed. She felt like she had on that fateful night. It was as if the two of them existed in a bubble out of time from the rest of the world.

“I miss us too.”

The words were out of her mouth before she realized it. Her Mario stood before her, and he still loved her. She could see it in his stormy eyes.

She had bolted for the door.

Miranda began to relax, and Delilah snuggled back down into her nest of

blankets. *I wish I could settle as easy as you, little dog.* She swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool and the distance between the bed and the dresser seemed greater than usual. She had taken a Percocet earlier, crushing the pill so that when it kicked in, it felt like being hit by a freight train. A freight train washed down with a glass of red wine in the hope of falling into a dreamless sleep. She looked down at her arms, crisscrossed with new cuts.

She stood up but felt wobbly, so sat back down. I'm still high as a kite, she realized with a giggle. *If this was a zombie movie, this is where I'd buy the farm.* That made her laugh out loud, being a farmer and all. She stood again, prepared for the wobbles this time, and walked over to the dresser. The top drawer held her underthings as well as a wooden box made of cherry. She ran her fingers over the satin smooth surface, finished with Danish oil so that nothing came between the wood and her fingers.

Mario had made it as a present for her twenty-second birthday.

Miranda returned to the bed and sat cross-legged, settling the box in front of her. She slid the lid along the carved grooves to reveal crinkled letters and dog-eared photographs, pieces of sea glass and small stones with colors that had caught her eye, or shapes that felt good in her hand. There was a lock of Michael's hair tied in a thin blue ribbon that Emily had given her the day she stood as his godmother.

She rifled through the contents until she found the picture, the first she had printed after the ZA. Younger versions of herself, Emily, Mario, Doug, and Karen grinned at her. Happier faces from a simpler time, at least interpersonally. It had been taken near the end of the first year. Mario and Emily had not been married that long.

Miranda had met him three months earlier. She arrived at The Hut first, which was out of character. Usually she was fifteen minutes late at least. The Hut had been a student bar before the ZA. It was on the edge of the SCU campus and because it had been secured by undergrads trapped in their watering hole, was behind SCU's original wall fortifications. In those days you could get homebrew beer, moonshine, and very bad bathtub gin. Good booze—real booze

—the stuff scavenged from warehouses, vineyards, and distilleries, was hoarded as a universally accepted currency but a libation rarely imbibed.

She saw Emily walk through the door with a man.

That must be the guy.

“Miranda!” Emily called. As she came closer and the glare of the late afternoon light was blocked by the closing door, Miranda saw that she was smiling. Emily had not done that in a long time.

“Hey,” Miranda answered, hugging Emily tight.

“I’m so glad you’re safe, Miri. I can’t believe you go on those scavenging missions. You’re insane to go out there!”

Miranda shrugged. She had no good comeback to that.

“So,” Emily continued, stepping back from Miranda to include her companion in the circle, “Miranda, this is Mario. Mario, this is my good friend, Miranda Tucci.”

“Hi,” Mario said, reaching forward to shake her hand, “it’s nice to meet you.”

Wow, Miranda thought, he is something else.

The slow smile that curved Mario’s lips reminded her of the fluid grace of a stretching cat. Light-brown eyes hooded by a half-formed squint danced with good humor, as if he and she were in on a joke. He had dimples—of course—to go along with the smile, like an actor plucked from central casting. His nose was straight above a strong, square chin and his short dark hair had a slight wave that reminded Miranda of her brother Matthew. She swallowed around a sudden lump in her throat.

Mario grasped Miranda’s hand in his and a shock snapped against her palm. From his look of surprise, she could tell he had felt it, too—less pinchy than static electricity but more intense. She almost jerked away but did not want to let go of his hand. The way it fit around hers felt right.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” she finally said.

Mario had barely excused himself to get some drinks when Emily blurted out, “What do you think?”

The last time Miranda had seen Emily, she had been withdrawn and

depressed, flinching at any loud noise and rarely speaking, let alone gushing. Now, she vibrated with excitement.

“I’ve only said hello, but he seems nice. He’s a total dish, Em.”

“He is, Miranda. You’re going to love him.” Emily sighed.

“Sounds like you do already,” Miranda teased.

“I really like Mario,” Emily answered, then stopped and looked at Miranda, uncertain. “This is going to sound terrible, Miri, but I feel safe when I’m with him. That’s what I love. Does that make me a horrible person?”

Two months ago, Miranda thought Emily was always going to be a basket case. She just could not adjust to how the world had changed. And then she reconnected with Mario Santorello, who had taken charge of the group of survivors Emily had been among at the very beginning. When Emily went to SCU, he stayed behind to help fortify the GeneSys building and they lost touch, until now.

Only a fool would let an opportunity for happiness pass them by. You had to grab it while you could because it might never come by again. Tomorrow might never happen. If Miranda had learned nothing else from living through this zombie apocalypse, she had at least learned that.

“Only the horriblemest,” she said with a grin.

Emily laughed. She honest-to-goodness laughed, and it sounded merry, not tinged with fear or hysteria. Miranda looked at her friend and then at Mario as he approached holding three glasses between his hands.

Well goddamn.

Soon the bar was busy. A pickup band played and lots of people were singing along and dancing. Emily had gone to the bathroom, leaving Miranda and Mario alone at the table.

“So what exactly did you do?” Miranda asked Mario. “Before.”

Mario smiled. “I was probably someone you wouldn’t have had much time for.”

Miranda’s brow wrinkled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You strike me as someone who doesn’t have much tolerance for bullshit.”

“I guess that’s true,” she admitted, feeling caught out.

“I was pretty full of myself before.” Mario sat up straighter and puffed himself up. He had a way of holding himself completely straight, even stiff, but when he moved, he reminded Miranda of water. “I have doctorates in Computer Science and Biochemistry, from M.I.T. and Stanford, mind you. I started a biotech company called GeneSys and we had just received a second round of venture capital funding. I was CEO and awfully important.”

“So you were Chief Ego Officer?” Miranda asked, grinning.

Mario laughed. “Something like that. Turned out the most important thing about me is our lab facility is built like a bunker.”

A spray of liquid accompanied Miranda’s bark of laughter.

“Oh God, sorry!” She choked as Mario tried without success to duck out of the way. He handed her a napkin while he mopped up the table with his handkerchief.

“You couldn’t have been that bad,” she said.

“I was worse. Trust me.”

“So what were you doing with those important Ph.Ds.?”

“Mycoviruses. They’re viruses that infect fungus. There were lots of applications. We were going to make a shitload of money.” Mario smiled as he shook his head, as if his former pursuits had been childish. “Now my work actually means something. We know it’s a virus that turns people into zombies, but there’s something else, I’m sure of it. Just haven’t figured it out yet.”

“So you might be able to prevent people from turning into zombies?”

“Wouldn’t that be great? I’d win the Nobel Prize.” He took a drink of his beer and grimaced. “What the hell are they making this from?”

“I stick to the moonshine. The beer is bad, and the gin is worse, and if you start comparing it to what you remember, you might as well not bother. Moonshine, on the other hand, is supposed to taste like paint thinner. It’s disappointment free.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

“Are you calling me a lush?”

“I’ve heard some stories.”

Miranda tried to glare but couldn’t keep up the pretense.

“So you’re the one who got the farming started here,” Mario said.

Miranda shrugged. “There were a lot of people involved in that.”

“A good friend of mine went to Santa Clara Law. Our favorite Frisbee spot is planted with beans.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“No complaints from me,” Mario assured her. “I was reading about those Vertical Farms that Emily said you want to build.”

Here we go again, Miranda sighed to herself, another ‘Are we going to starve?’ conversation. She felt disappointed that Mario would turn out to be just like everyone else.

“I’m not sure we even *can* build them, but I think they could shore up the food supply.”

“So what is it? What do you love about it?”

“Love about what?” she asked, uncertain what he was getting at.

“Farming, growing things.” Mario’s eyes glowed with curiosity. “I can tell from the look on your face it’s about more than making sure we have enough to eat.”

No one had ever said that before. Miranda felt seen, known, in a way she hadn’t in a long, long time. Aloud she said, “I’ve always liked to grow things. My nana used to have this amazing garden when I was a kid. I’d help her, digging, planting, staking tomatoes—”

“Italian grandmothers,” Mario interjected. “It wasn’t just my nana’s recipe for her sauce that was top secret. She wouldn’t even tell people what variety of tomatoes she used.”

Miranda nodded, grinning. “Mine was the same.” Thinking of her grandmother, who had died long before zombies came along, made Miranda feel alone, even in the middle of the bustling bar. “Mostly I liked hanging out with my nana.”

“It’s your connection to the old world, to the people you loved.”

The hairs on the back of Miranda’s neck stood on end. “I miss them all so much,” she whispered, eyes filling with tears. She looked away, horrified that she could not suppress the grief that had welled up within her. Her pain was no

worse than anyone else's and here she was, whimpering like a baby.

Mario took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. He didn't say anything, just moved his thumb back and forth across the palm of her hand. She felt so comforted by the simple gesture, but also like she was standing on a precipice. His sly grin was gone, eyes gentle instead of teasing. And he still held her hand, long after most people would have let go.

Mario released her hand and smiled sheepishly. "I'll go see what's happened to our girl."

Miranda watched his ramrod-straight form that somehow moved liked water work its way into the crowd. What had just happened? She had not known it herself—the Farm, what it meant—until she heard him say it. How could he have known what she didn't know herself? She had scurried off, not wanting to be there when he got back.

Miranda ran her thumb along the edge of the picture. *Then Em got pregnant and that was that.*

They became more accustomed to the "new normal." Getting the Farm underway kept Miranda busy, but she still went on missions. She developed a reputation as an expedition leader, regaling her friends with tales of derring-do. Her skill at killing zombies was second to none, yet Mario urged her to be more cautious.

"You don't have to sign on for every dangerous thing that comes down the pike," he would tell her.

"And if I don't, who will?" she would always reply.

Miranda smiled as she remembered how, after a while, he began to preempt her by adding, "And I don't care who will if you don't."

Mario worried about her, but he was a worrywart. Anyone still in their right mind worried when a friend went outside the walls, and Mario had become one of Miranda's best friends. Maybe he worried a little more than he should, but best friends worry more. That's why they're best.

He almost always managed to be there when she rolled home, always on his way somewhere else but long enough to see that she was back in one piece. Sometimes the look of relief on his face unnerved her. She was happier he was

there than she had a right to. She tried not to be. She told herself she shouldn't look forward to seeing him so much, but it did not make any difference. She couldn't stop feeling that way. She gave up in favor of trying not to let it show, even as his smiles grew tighter and his hugs more fierce.

And so it went, until the night he offered to walk her home from The Hut. Emily had canceled the sitter and stayed home with Michael, who was almost two and running a temperature. Karen had departed before them with the latest Asshole du Jour. Doug, who had not yet felt God's tap on the shoulder, waved them on. He was busy chatting up a girl and told Miranda he'd never get lucky while she was around muddying the waters.

They set out from the bar, but as was becoming their custom more and more when they were alone, they ended up in the St. Clare Garden. The garden was a relic from when SCU had only been a university. It was the length of a football field from the bar, and its small square space offered nothing in the way of privacy. There were two benches on one side. Herbs, succulents, and flowers filled the rest, planted around a statue of the community's patroness.

"I hate that statue," Mario said as he sat down. "She looks sad and worried. Saints should look serene."

"You'd look worried if your kid was being nailed to a cross—oh, no, that's Mary. You can't even see her face from this side," Miranda countered, as if the thought had just occurred to her rather than their banter being the same as the last time and the time before that. She gave Mario a nudge as she sat down. "Budge over so I can stretch out."

The warm night air felt soft against Miranda's skin. She lay down so that the top of her head almost touched Mario's thigh, then extended her right leg over the arm of the bench to elevate it.

"How's your leg?"

"Doc says I'm fit as a fiddle, but it feels better if I set it up for a bit when I've been standing."

Mario began to tickle her nose with the ends of her ponytail. "I almost had a heart attack when I saw you brought in on that stretcher. Your broken leg took years off my life."

“Stop that,” she said, batting the hair in his fingers away. She felt a little dizzy, with just enough of a buzz that she would not feel it tomorrow. “You always go straight to the disaster scenario. Tickle fights happen all the time when you’re waiting to clear medical, and Doug is a sadist, I swear. Never occurred to me I’d thrash my way off the damn truck.”

“I wish you’d quit doing expeditions,” Mario said, his voice unhappy.

Miranda sighed. They’d had this conversation a million times.

“You know I can’t do that. There are so many things we still need that help your research. The sewers aren’t going to keep working unless we get out there and take care of them. If they don’t work then we’ve got cholera, and typhoid, and—”

“I know,” he interrupted. “I just wish you weren’t doing it.”

Miranda closed her eyes and listened to the symphony of crickets. She turned her head toward the center of the garden, felt Mario’s hand brush against her head as he fidgeted. He did that when he was unhappy.

They had been doing this for months, hanging out like this. Fifteen minutes here, an hour there, never doing anything she couldn’t tell Emily all about, but she felt guilty anyway.

“If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll sign a ‘No Dying’ contract,” she offered, trying to sound lighthearted. “We can even get it notarized.”

She could feel his frustration in the long pause before he said, “That’s not funny, Miranda.”

“I was just kidding,” she huffed, annoyed.

“No, you weren’t. Whenever I try to talk to you about anything real, you make it into a joke to shut me up.”

Miranda sat up and turned to face him. “That’s not fair!”

“For Christ’s sake, Miranda. At least have the courtesy not to insult me.”

Mario hadn’t raised his voice. It wasn’t even tight or angry, but it felt like he had slapped her across the face. The garden wasn’t lit well, but it was not completely dark, either. His face was stamped with longing and fear and something that looked very much like hunger.

“You’re the only thing I think about,” he said, his voice pitched low. “I know

I shouldn't. I know it's not right, but God help me it's true. Knowing I'll see you is what gets me out of bed every day. You're the first thing I think of when I wake up and the last at night, and every damn minute in between. And I think you know it."

Panic and excitement seized her. "You shouldn't—" she whispered, but then he flung himself headlong into the void where she hid all the feelings she worked so hard to deny.

"I can't stand the thought of losing you, Miri, and I cannot pretend for another *second* that you're just a friend. I've tried to ignore this, pretend it's not real, but I can't. I just can't. I can't pretend anymore."

Miranda tried to speak. She should say something to save them from doing what could not be undone, but instead she leaned into him. They both hesitated when his lips brushed hers, as if to gauge, would the other change their mind? And then they were kissing, a tangle of tongues and lips. The reservoir of pent-up longing she had denied for so long blazed and exploded like a solar flare.

Mario held her tight in a hungry embrace. His lips moved to her forehead, her eyelids, the hollow of her throat. She felt the air slip past her scalp when he inhaled, greedy even for the scent of her hair.

"This will kill her," Miranda whispered. "If she ever finds out..."

His hands settled on either side of her face. "If I can't feel you, be with you, I'm going to lose my mind."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know... The only thing I know for sure is that I love you."

Her heart soared to hear him say it. She wasn't carrying a lonely torch. It wasn't her imagination. Mario loved her like she loved him. The rest didn't—couldn't—matter.

They started for Swig without a word. The two-minute walk seemed to take forever. They sauntered through the lobby with exaggerated nonchalance, never looked at one another in the deafening silence of the elevator as it groaned its way to the top floor. Miranda fumbled with her keys outside her apartment, cursing the lock before it finally gave way.

As soon as the door shut behind them, the facade slipped away.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he said, pulling her to him.

Miranda could not catch her breath to answer. Eventually they made their way to her bed. Their naked bodies intertwined on the soft, worn blanket. He entered her with a gasp, and then they moved as one. Climbing and rising, riding a wild desire filled with longing and need, desperation and joy, until his cries of release had mingled with hers.

Miranda put the picture back, drowning in sweet melancholy for a thing so rare and so irretrievably lost. They had been so innocent then, as they tumbled from grace to answer love’s heady imperative. Another Miranda, another Mario, another lifetime ago.

“You can’t still miss me, you can’t still care. You can’t still love me. You *can’t*,” she whispered. Tears blurred her vision. The smiling faces of the photograph warped and ran together. “Even I wouldn’t wish that on you.”

“HOW THE HELL did you think it would turn out? Did you really believe that we would just magically get along?” Mario snapped. He pulled his shirt over his head and threw it to the floor.

Emily glared across the bedroom at her husband. “You didn’t even try!”

“That is such *bullshit*. I lost my temper when she made that crack about the tomatoes. I admit it. What the hell was I supposed to do?”

“Act like a goddamn grown-up,” Emily shouted. “That’s what you were supposed to do!”

“You’re the one who insisted that I be here for your little reunion. *‘It’s been almost five years, Mario. It’s time you two got over yourselves.’* Now we know! Five years wasn’t enough.”

“What did you say to set her off? Why do you have to be like this?”

“You’re not on the receiving end of her relentless disappointment so don’t fucking lecture me,” Mario growled. He turned on his heel to leave, before he said something he would really regret.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you? You saw her with Connor, and you got jealous.”

Her words froze him in place.

It always came back to this.

His anger, and the energy that came with it, abandoned him. Mario felt hollow and exhausted and worse for all the bourbon he had knocked back after locking himself in his study. He turned around to face his wife.

The color drained from Emily’s face. “Oh my God, you are. You’re jealous.”

She crumpled onto the bed and began to cry.

Great, fucking great. Way to go, asshole.

Mario walked over and sat next to his wife. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She didn't pull away.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said, remembering his first glimpse of Miranda earlier in the day. She had been holding the back door of the Rover open for Delilah, who barreled straight to him. He knew right then he was in trouble because he was so happy to see that damn dog. The memory of surprising Miranda with the half-starved, flea-infested puppy he had found hiding behind a dumpster outside the GeneSys lab had overwhelmed him. Until that moment he had not understood just how much he nursed the futile hope that it might work out for them in the end.

He blew out a deep breath. "I was jealous."

"I thought our family was important to you. Important enough—" The rest of whatever Emily had been going to say was lost in a frustrated growl.

"You know you and the kids are my first priority."

It was true. He absolutely meant it. And it had taken every gram of self-control he possessed to not drag Miranda away and tell her everything, consequences be damned.

"I stood by you, Mario," Emily said, a note of reproach in her voice. "I paid a price too."

His anger blazed bright once more. Emily had gotten what she wanted in the end, yet thought she was the one who had suffered?

"You haven't spent the last five years punishing yourself because you loved me and can't accept what I did."

Emily's breath caught in her throat. Her body went rigid before she pulled away. He was never this honest when it came to Miranda. The carefully constructed truce that was their marriage did not allow for it. But this time he couldn't help it; it just came out.

"I guess I thought after all this time—" Emily started. She stopped and sighed. "I know our marriage doesn't have everything you want."

Like love? Mario thought bitterly, but he knew that was unfair. Emily wasn't

the one who had confused the impulse to protect with love. She had been so beautiful and terrified, had needed someone to make her feel safe so badly. No one had twisted his arm to be that person. When Emily realized she was pregnant, there was never a question in his mind about what to do because now she *really* needed him. The baby would need its father in this dangerous new world. Of course they got married. It had been a no-brainer.

He never saw it coming. He had liked Miranda immediately and God knew she was attractive, but fall in love with her? She wasn't his type. She was too... much. Too much *everything*: passionate, open, willing to risk. She overwhelmed him, swamped him, left him floundering for purchase over a high slick abyss. Mario had never bought into that soul mate crap until the day he realized she filled all the hollow spaces in his own. That the vestigial organs of his soul weren't vestigial at all; they just had not encountered the person they belonged to yet. That was when he finally figured out that Emily needed him, but she didn't love him, and he didn't love her, either.

"We're a good team, Mario." Emily leaned in and kissed his neck just below his jaw. "And we have the children to think of."

"I know we do."

He put his hands on her shoulders to disengage himself. Emily was not who he wanted, today of all days, but she recognized the tactic. She slid off the bed to her knees and began to kiss him just above the waistband of his boxer shorts.

"Emily, don't—"

But she was already rubbing him through the thin fabric, her warm hand encircling his stiffening cock.

"Stop it," he said as he started to stand.

She let go then, but only so she could pull his boxers down far enough to take him in her mouth.

He gasped, unable to push her away now and hating himself for it, but his longing, jealousy, and anger ignited. He thrust against the motion of her mouth, keeping hold of her head to control the pace. He knew he pushed too hard and far, but he couldn't stop, couldn't slow down. He came with a gasp, buried deep in Emily's throat.

Mario slumped back on the bed, filled with self-loathing. What the hell was he doing? Emily crawled on top of him. She pulled her nightgown over her head. Even after three children, her figure was svelte, her breasts small and firm. He reached for them with his hands and mouth, kneading their softness and sucking the pebble-hard nipples.

Emily pushed him back, her blond hair encircling them in a golden web. “It was such a long time ago. I can make you happy if you let me.”

She leaned in to kiss him, her lips hungrily pressing against his. Mario ran his hand through his wife’s soft hair. He shut his eyes and tried to pretend, if only for a moment, that she was Miranda.

“AREN’T you even going to say hello?”

Miranda looked up. Father Doug Michel stood outside the main door of the Mission Church wearing a t-shirt that said, *‘why yes, I **AM** a rocket scientist’* under a rumpled brown-striped blazer that was too short in the arms. His dark skinny jeans made his legs look even longer and skinnier than they were. Only Doug could make that outfit look cool, Miranda thought. She had been so wrapped up in her thoughts she had not even seen him.

“I didn’t see you there.”

“I noticed. You were a million miles away.”

“Yeah, well, things have been kind of weird,” Miranda said, her mouth twisting into a frown.

Doug sat down on the steps and patted the space beside him. “Not sure what to do about Lover Boy?”

A surprised laugh escaped her. Doug could say what everyone else was thinking and it never annoyed her. Probably because he was irreverent to a fault. She sat down beside him on the cold tiles.

“Yes. That’s exactly it.”

“Ah, my child, tell Father Doug all. I’ll lay some wisdom on you,” he said, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

Miranda watched him try to keep a straight face. He almost managed, but could not completely iron the smile from his lips.

“What makes you think I want advice from Father What-A-Waste? You

didn't even have enough sense to not become a priest."

"You win some, you lose some."

Neither spoke for a full minute. Finally, Miranda said, "So what do you think of him?"

"Lover Boy?" Doug considered her question for a moment. "Connor seems like a good guy. I like him. He's obviously insane since he's so crazy about you, but other than that he seems all right."

Miranda sighed. "He is a good guy."

"And the problem is?"

"I just don't know what to do about him. You're not so old and removed from the dating pool to have forgotten."

"I did romance the ladies back in the day." He grinned. "I have a better perspective on this than you do, Miri."

She regarded him dubiously. "Which is?"

"You make things more complicated than they need to be."

Miranda pursed her lips, dissatisfied with his answer. "Apparently I'm good at it. Why stop now?"

"Because it makes you miserable?"

"Way too easy."

Doug leaned into her. "Speaking of which, Karen tells me dinner at Casa Santorello the other night was a bit of a fiasco."

Miranda shuddered. "More than you can imagine."

"That bad?"

"Worse. Guess what Mario did right before we left."

Doug frowned. "Karen only told me about dinner."

"Karen wasn't around for this."

"What did he do?" Doug asked warily.

"He caught me alone and apologized. *Apologized!* He said he got jealous and then he said he *missed* me. Just like that, apropos of nothing. 'I miss you, Miranda. I miss us.' I was so shocked I just stood there like an idiot."

A troubled expression clouded Doug's face for a second. Sympathy, and something else, but it was gone too quickly to identify.

“And what did you say to him?”

Miranda’s voice dripped with self-loathing. “I said I wished things were different too. It was out of my mouth before I knew it was open.”

She leaned forward and hugged her knees against the increasing chill. The shadows had grown long while they talked, twilight hastened by gathering clouds that promised rain.

“I know there’s no going back. I know that. But when I saw him...” The conflict between desire and duty, love, and betrayal, filled her trailing voice. “I’ve never been more surprised in my whole life, even by zombies. For a second, I wanted what I wanted, and to hell with everything else.”

Doug leaned forward and put his arm around her, squeezing her shoulder tight. “I’m sorry, Miri. I really am.”

“It’s my own fault. I should know better,” she replied, shaking him off. She was furious with herself for having feelings that did not fall into neat categories where bad people were hated and good people loved. She felt helpless and adrift when the lines between them blurred.

“I wanted to talk to him, of all fucking things! Like we used to, instead of seeing who could draw blood first. So then I was a bitch, just to keep myself in check. I wondered what if I’d met him first, what if I’d let him leave her? Would he still have done it?” A tear slipped down her cheek that she quickly wiped away.

“And why was I so adamant he stay married? *Everybody* knew. Emily never loved him; she just needed— It’s not like we would have abandoned her and the children to fend for themselves. What the fuck was I thinking?”

“You felt guilty, as I recall,” Doug said. “You are Catholic, Miri. And Italian. And a woman. When it comes to guilt, you’re kind of screwed.”

Miranda smiled despite herself, shivering in the breeze. She had left her jacket in the Rover, not expecting the temperature to take such a plunge.

“So, little Coppertop,” he said, giving her auburn head a rub. “You’re going to see Lover Boy.”

Miranda hid her face on her knees. The whole situation felt over-the-top ridiculous.

“I’m on my way to see Lover Boy, yes,” she admitted, never lifting her head. “I might as well see if it’s any less weird today.”

“It can’t be that weird if you’re asking me what I think of him.”

She sighed and raised her head. “It’s not. I just don’t know what to do, or what I want. And that’s without He Who Shall Remain Nameless screwing with me. I don’t want Connor to think I’ve been hanging around pining for him all this time. That’s just too humiliating.” Her frown returned. “Why are you pushing this, anyway? Has Karen recruited you for her Miranda and Connor Live Happily Ever After Campaign?”

Doug’s face became serious. “I’m not pushing anything, Miri. Maybe there’s still something with you and Connor; maybe you just need to get laid. I sure as hell don’t know. Why do you feel like you have to decide now?”

“I don’t,” she said, sounding more defensive than she cared for.

“That’s not what it sounds like.”

“It’s not every day someone really important to you turns up alive.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to rush into anything, especially right after you’ve seen Mario for the first time in years. I know you’re beating yourself up because you can’t just hate him.”

“I do just hate him.”

“And I’ve got a bridge to sell you.”

Miranda scowled at him, annoyed. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is simple. You’re putting all this pressure on yourself when there’s no need for you to make decisions about anything.” Doug stood up, pulling her with him. “I was going to go to karate and then teach physics to some acne-afflicted teenagers, but you need an intervention. Let’s get Lover Boy and go to The Hut. We can get good and drunk and just be silly.”

“I have a pretty good idea what’ll happen if we do that.”

Doug laughed and twitched his hair out of his eyes. “If all it takes for you two to hit the sheets is a couple of drinks, there’s your answer. Problem solved.”

Miranda pretended to be shocked. “Aren’t you supposed to be worried about my soul?”

“And watch our friendship go kaput? Walter can worry about your soul. But

seriously Miri, don't rush into anything? Can you just enjoy hanging out with a friend, maybe have some fun? You do remember what fun is?"

"I've got a priest lecturing me about not having enough fun." She smiled, shaking her head. "I need to call Karen. We're supposed to meet her at Trials. She's my out."

"I'm a much better out than she is," said Doug. "She'll meet some creep and leave you stuck."

Fat raindrops began to fall all at once.

"Have I ever told you you're far too handsome and entirely too much fun to be a priest?" Miranda asked as they ran for the shelter of the Jesuit Residence.

Doug grabbed her hand and picked up the pace. "All the time. You're not allowed to stop."

THE HUT WAS PACKED, ESPECIALLY FOR A WEEKNIGHT. "FREE BIRD" BLARED from the jukebox in a lazy twang of electric guitar. The music was just below the threshold of too loud for conversation where they sat at the back of the bar.

Crammed into the booth between Connor and Doug, Miranda was enjoying herself immensely. She had been annoyed with Karen for shoving her into the booth so that she was next to Connor, but a couple hours and drinks later, she didn't mind anymore. Karen, and Connor's friend, Seffie, were perched on either end of the worn black Naugahyde cushions. They snagged the waitress to off-load the empty glasses and bottles that littered the table to make room for new ones.

"We thought we had cleared the room, so Miri climbs up to check out the loft," Doug said.

He was telling his favorite Miranda story. Connor and Seffie were the only ones who had not heard it. Miranda sat back, waiting for the punch line.

"The loft wasn't high, maybe six and a half feet from the floor. All of a sudden, this shambler staggers out of a nook by the fireplace that I never even noticed. The place smelled like a slaughterhouse; it wasn't like I could smell it.

It startled me, so I kind of hopped back and ended up tripping and falling flat on my ass like it was amateur hour. I knocked my head so hard I saw stars! Miranda takes one look and lies down on her stomach with her arms out over the side, holding this machete in her hand like Thor's hammer."

Doug held his beer bottle high over his head in demonstration.

"She reaches down over the edge and catches it by the hair. Before I can even get up, she cuts clear through its skull with the machete. She's lying there hanging over the edge of this loft, holding the back half of this shambler's head by the hair with black blood dripping and its brains falling out and says to me, 'Are you seriously going to be a priest?'"

The table erupted. Seffie fell out of the booth, which made Karen snarf her drink up her nose. Connor laughed so hard Miranda thought he might hyperventilate. Even she and Doug, who had heard and told the story countless times, could barely breathe.

"That story never gets old, Doug," Karen snorted, dabbing the front of her top with a napkin.

Doug squished into Miranda, trying to make room for Seffie to cram herself back in the booth.

"You are unbelievable," Connor said, still laughing as he reached for his beer.

There was a momentary lull while the jukebox switched to a new song. A dramatic ascending slide of piano filled the bar, then Gloria Gaynor's voice began to sing about how she had been alone and petrified.

Karen dropped her glass onto the table. Doug bolted up like he had just received an electric shock.

"They're playing our song, Karen!" Doug cried as he pushed Seffie out of the booth. He grabbed her hand as he and Karen bounded toward the dance floor. "You haven't lived till you've survived with us."

"Do you want to join them?" Connor asked as the trio headed for the dance floor.

"Nah," Miranda said. "'I Will Survive' is much more fun to watch."

Now that there was more room in the booth, Miranda and Connor readjusted

themselves, but only slightly. She could feel his arm where it rested over the top of the seat behind her.

“Are they always so outrageous?” Connor asked, tipping his head toward Doug and Karen, who bounded around the small dance floor like bouncy balls.

Miranda smiled over her gin and tonic. “Always. You should see them at weddings.”

“Were they ever a couple before he became a priest?”

“Seriously, Connor?”

“Oh, right.” Comprehension filled his voice. “He’s way too nice a guy for her.” He paused. “How about you?”

“Me and Doug?” she said, her voice squeaky with surprise. “No, though sometimes people thought so.” She watched Doug twirl Karen and Seffie at the same time. “And I used to worry he’d get all priest-y on me.”

She felt Connor’s torso shake more than heard his laughter. “You have nothing to worry about, Miri. The guy is out of control.”

Miranda nodded, fuzzily remembering what Doug had said earlier. Not rushing into anything made sense, yet she could not shake the feeling that doing nothing meant missing her chance. But what if Connor let her down? She didn’t think she could handle it. After Mario...she was not sure she *deserved* to be happy. She wasn’t sure she was capable of letting anyone get close to her, even if she wanted. What if she managed to let Connor in and he decided she was too fucked up?

“What are you frowning about?” Connor asked, his breath warm on her ear. His arm slid down around her shoulders.

“Nothing.”

He tipped her face up to look at his. She could tell he did not believe her.

“What’s wrong?”

His face was an open book, earnest and honest. This is a no-brainer, she thought, unable to stop herself from comparing him to Mario. Connor wasn’t perfect, but he’d never do what Mario had done. She felt it in her bones. Connor had broken her heart all those years ago, but only because he’d been young and clueless. It had not been malicious, though it had felt that way at the time.

Connor hadn't used her before smashing her soul into a million pieces and grinding them into dust. He had loved her all this time, and come so far to tell her, with no guarantee what the outcome might be.

A longing, sharp and bright, welled up inside her.

"Do you want to get out of here?"

An eternity of seconds passed before he answered, his question at odds with the desire that infused his gaze. "Are you sure? I don't want this because you're drunk."

"I'm not *that* drunk. Let's get out of here."

He didn't need telling twice. She held his hand tight as they wound their way through the bar. A heady mixture of relief and anticipation thrummed through her. She could easily pick out Doug, head and shoulders above the others on the dance floor. He led a laughing Seffie through a faux tango.

"Do you want to let them know we're going?" Connor shouted over the music.

Miranda smiled at him and shook her head. "They'll figure it out."

MIRANDA NESTLED into the crook of Connor's arm, her head on his shoulder. Earlier, Delilah had whimpered from exile on the floor until Miranda had gotten up to let her out. She stopped at the bathroom to pee and brush her teeth before crawling back into bed and Connor's warm body. She had forgotten how warm he was. She smiled against his soft skin as he stirred beneath her. She had forgotten a lot of things, but he had reminded her with hands and lips and whispers in the dark.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

Connor rolled onto his side to face her. Their noses almost touched. "Hey yourself."

"Sleep okay?"

He grinned. "Eventually."

Miranda felt a blush that started at her breastbone creep upward.

"I've managed to make Miranda Tucci blush," Connor said as he kissed his way across her face. "She's remembering all the terrible things I did that made her squeal like a little girl."

"I do *not* squeal."

Connor smirked, then ducked his head and made lazy circles around her nipple with his tongue. She squealed.

"Maybe I squeal a little," she allowed, breathless. "But only when it's done right."

"Hopefully that means a lot more squealing in my future," Connor

murmured, his hands beginning to roam farther afield.

“I should really go to work.” She sighed.

Connor kissed his way up her neck and along her jaw. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She could tell from his tone he knew she was teasing. “It’s not every day you wind up in bed with me, and it must be almost noon, anyway.” He reached the hollow of her collarbone and, rolling onto his back, pulled her on top of him. “We didn’t get to sleep until at least five or six.”

“That’s true.”

Her aspect became serious as she looked down at him. She smoothed his hair back from his eyes, dark-brown eyes she could lose herself in. His lazy smile was suffused with sleepiness and desire. She felt like she was falling into a chasm, into the landscape of tender feelings she worked so hard to keep under wraps, locked away where they could not hurt or betray her.

“It’s okay, Miri,” Connor said softly, brushing her cheek. “Just be here with me.”

A rush of affection swelled her heart. She kissed him and forgot about everything else.

MARIO JABBED HIS PHONE. WHOEVER KEPT CALLING WAS NOT GETTING THE HINT that he was unavailable, and anyone who had this number knew this was his day at the lab. Only Emily called him here, and only if it was an emergency.

“What?” he snapped.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you for half an hour,” his brother’s voice bellowed. “I was just about to come over.”

“This better be good, Dom. I’m in the middle of something here, at the *lab*.”

“The Navy intercepted a small ship outside the Golden Gate. It was smuggling post-bite with no customs stamps.”

The floor seemed to fall out from under Mario.

“What?”

“I don’t know more. I’m on my way to Council Chambers now.”

“They think it was stolen from here?”

There was a pause before his brother answered. “Where else would it be from?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Mario said. “Just, how?”

“You tell me. They were sailing out of Santa Cruz, which doesn’t make any sense. Why take it south only to go north again?”

Mario couldn’t breathe. From Santa Cruz with no customs stamps?

“Mario, are you still there?”

“Yeah,” Mario said, trying to keep his voice even. He could hear the rev of the engine from Dominic’s car. “They must be lying about where they sailed from.”

“That’s what I thought. We need your people to start an inventory to find out what batch it was from. Then get to chambers as soon as you can.”

“Of course,” Mario said, willing his voice and breathing to return to normal. I’ll need to doctor the logs, he thought, mind racing. How the hell had this happened?

“There’s one more thing, Mar,” Dominic said. “We have information we can move on now, known associates. Three of them used to work for the Farm. We’re going to bring Miranda in.”

Mario’s stomach clenched as if to ward off a blow. He grabbed the edge of the lab table, almost dropping the phone in the process. His stomach heaved so hard he thought he was going to be sick.

“Mario? Are you there?”

Mario looked at his hand that held the phone. It buzzed with his brother’s voice. “I’m here, Dom.”

“I didn’t want you to hear it from anyone else.”

“I understand,” he said more smoothly. “I’ll get the inventory review started.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It was a long time ago, Dom. There’s no love lost between me and Miranda.”

“Okay then,” Dominic said, his relief evident even as a disembodied voice.

“I’ll see you soon.”

Mario was out the lab door before the call ended. He had to find Miranda before they did.

CONNOR NUZZLED MIRANDA'S NECK. "Do you really have to go to the Farm?" he asked, pulling her closer. The muffled drum of a steady rain beat against the roof. "It's going on eight, and it's dark and miserable out there."

"I don't want to go," Miranda said, wriggling away from him and climbing out of bed. "But they never call me unless they really can't figure something out."

"You can walk away from me any day, so long as you're naked," he said as she walked down the hall.

"You're ridiculous."

She slipped into a robe to ward off the chill and began brushing her teeth. They'd stayed in bed all day, apart from taking Delilah out for a walk and finally succumbing to hunger pangs in the early afternoon.

Connor spoke again, this time from the bathroom doorway. "I'll come with you. I'm pretty handy."

Miranda rinsed out her mouth and turned off the faucet. Connor tossed her a towel.

"Okay," she said, wiping her mouth.

A hint of a smile curled his lips. For a moment, she thought he was going to rip off her robe and take her against the wall.

"Do we have time for a shower?" he asked.

"A quick one. They need me there now."

AN HOUR LATER THEY WERE ON THE EXPRESSWAY, HEADED FOR SAN JOSE STATE. Raindrops splatted against the Rover's windshield so heavily that Miranda could hardly see before the wipers swished back again. Delilah sat in the back seat, unable to sustain her sulk at being displaced from her bed in the face of an open window she could stick her head out of, even though it meant she got wet.

"He's in a hurry."

Miranda had noticed the SUV behind them as well. It was gaining fast. Then flashing overhead lights came on. The rain made them look twinkly, like Christmas lights.

"That's Council Security. Fuck."

Connor turned to look out the rear window. "How bad is that?"

"It's usually not good," Miranda said. She pressed down on the accelerator.

"You're not going to stop?"

"I don't want to get stuck here on the Expressway where no one can see us. We'll try to get to the Farm, or at least to the exit." She checked the rearview mirror again. "Are they leaning out the windows?"

Connor twisted in his seat as he pulled his handgun from its holster. A boom, followed by a hail of glass, pelted the interior of the Rover.

"Jesus Christ!" Miranda cried, ducking low. She looked in the rearview mirror. The back window was gone. She stood on the accelerator, willing the Rover forward on pure adrenaline. She glanced over at Connor. Dozens of small cuts covered his face. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, his head now even with the dashboard. He touched his face gingerly and pulled a nugget of glass out of his cheek. Delilah barked like a banshee from the back seat.

Connor peeked over the seat. "They're close, Miri."

"I can see that."

The SUV shot forward and rear-ended the Rover with a frightening crunch of metal on metal. Miranda checked the mirror again. She put twenty feet between the Rover and the SUV, then pulled the parking brake and prayed as she jerked

the steering wheel. The Rover spun about, a spray of water flying in its wake. The SUV veered away to avoid a collision. Miranda jammed the Rover into gear as she released the brake and accelerated in the opposite direction. She looked back. The SUV had turned around and was once again in pursuit.

“Miri, watch out!”

Miranda looked ahead. A second SUV with lights and sirens merged onto the Expressway only six car lengths ahead and headed straight for them. Miranda waited a moment, then swerved. The second SUV’s front fender connected with the rear fender of the Rover. The Rover jerked hard to the right, but somehow Miranda kept it moving forward.

“The first one’s coming up on your left!”

She was ready for them this time. As the SUV moved to overtake them, Miranda swerved and smacked into its side. The SUV pushed back, trying to trap them against the Expressway wall.

She switched on the flamethrowers. Yellow flames shot up the side of the Rover, so bright they were almost blinding. She glimpsed the horrified look on the face of the man nearest to her as he flinched away from his open window. She slammed the Rover into the SUV again, pushing it past the center line of the road. She looked ahead and her heart sank. Another SUV approached.

“There’s another one,” Connor groaned.

“I see it. Hold on.”

Miranda headed straight for the oncoming SUV. It adjusted away from a collision course with the Rover, which put it on a collision course with the SUV trying to pin them against the Expressway wall. Then a man leaned out the front passenger window of the oncoming SUV. They were so close Miranda could tell he held an AK-47.

“Get down!” she cried.

The first SUV had caught up to them. It rammed the Rover from behind. Shots rang out, from ahead or behind she could not tell. Miranda braced for the next impact, but suddenly the steering wheel listed left. They shot out our tires, she thought. Then the SUV beside them flipped.

Connor shouted, his words lost in the noise of the flipping SUV crashing into

them. The impact smacked the Rover against the wall. Miranda yanked the steering wheel hard, trying to spin out around it, but the slippery road offered no purchase. Gunfire seemed to come from all directions as the blur of the oncoming SUV rocketed past them.

The Rover spun in a circle before tipping on two wheels. Miranda tried to correct, but it was too late. The concrete roadway rushed toward her window, and then she was upside down. Her head thumped the headrest and spots danced before her eyes. They slid across the pavement in a shower of sparks and flame. Delilah yipped and whimpered in the back seat.

The noise and chaos was supplanted by an eerie silence and the steady drum of the rain. She felt Connor's hand on her arm.

"You okay?" she asked. The coppery taste of blood tinged her mouth. She smacked at the flamethrower switch. The reflection of bright yellow flames vanished from the wet concrete.

Connor grimaced as he moved his shoulder. "Good enough. We have to get out of here."

More gunfire—short, controlled bursts—then footsteps running toward them. Miranda heard the click of Connor's seat belt while she struggled with her own. He fell to the roof of the car with a groan.

"Mine's stuck!" she hissed. She felt for the machete mounted on the ceiling below her, but it wasn't there anymore. She tried the door. Jammed.

I can't believe this is it, she thought, dazed. I'm going to die in a drive-by. I always thought it would be a zombie.

"Don't shoot!" a voice called out. "We're here to help."

Five sets of feet stepped into the Rover's headlights, then a man dressed in black combat fatigues with a machine gun slung over his shoulder crouched by Miranda's window.

"Are you okay?" his muffled voice asked through the rain-spattered glass.

Before she could answer, the door on Connor's side creaked opened. Hands reached in to pull him out, followed by a murmur of voices.

The man outside Miranda's window spoke again. "Turn away, ma'am. I have to break the window."

Miranda twisted away as best she could. She heard two loud *thunks*. The third blow was accompanied by a sharp crack, the next with a spray of glass.

“My seat belt is stuck,” Miranda said, turning back.

She shook her head to dislodge pieces of glass from her hair and the world tilted and swayed around her. She did not know who these people were, probably had another concussion, and was trapped upside down in her own car. Given the circumstances, it was hard to think of this man as her rescuer. For all she knew the Rover was the frying pan and these people were the fire, but she didn’t have much choice.

“Is my dog okay? She’s in the back.”

The man switched on a flashlight and squinted through the open back window.

“I see her,” he answered. His face went out of view as he turned away. “Miller, come get the dog! I have to cut her out.”

A second man appeared and started calling to Delilah through the open back door window. Miranda heard Delilah wriggle through the window and begin to whine. The man beside Miranda produced a utility knife.

“She’s okay?” another voice demanded.

“Looks like it,” the man working to free her said.

“Liley,” the demanding voice said. “What a good girl you are! I’m glad you’re all right.”

Miranda couldn’t place the voice. There were other people talking and the rain seemed louder than ever, but whoever it was knew Delilah. She relaxed the tiniest bit.

“Can you put your hands down so you don’t fall, ma’am? Can you take any weight on your arms?” At Miranda’s nod, the man wrapped his arm around her waist and cut her seat belt. He helped Miranda ease herself down, then put his hands under her armpits and began to pull her backward out the window.

She was halfway out when she saw him in the headlights.

Miranda instinctively recoiled and began struggling with her rescuer. Catching the man by surprise, she shrugged him off. Lacking better options, she tried to scoot back into the Rover. Two sets of hands grabbed her shoulders and

pulled her out again.

“We’re here to help you!”

Miranda looked at Mario, wild-eyed. He had her under one arm, the first ‘rescuer’ had her by the other. She bucked and kicked as they dragged her from the Rover.

“Let me go! Even I never thought you’d stoop this low!”

When her feet hit the pavement, she pushed. All three fell back in a heap. She elbowed Mario in the ribs as hard as she could. His cry of pain was satisfying, but the tactic ineffective. Almost instantly he was on top of her, pinning her hands above her head.

“We’re here to *save* you!” Mario shouted, rain dripping from his nose. He motioned toward the crashed SUVs with his head. “They were trying to hurt you, not us! Settle the fuck down!”

Connor limped into view behind Mario, leaning on one of the armed men in black. “Hey!”

“Get him off me!” Miranda shrieked.

Mario moved aside and Miranda bolted to Connor. The motion made her head swim so much she thought she would pass out. She’d lost her Desert Eagle in the crash and apparently Connor had lost his gun, too. Six armed men surrounded them in addition to Mario. One of them had Delilah by the collar.

“We do not have time for this,” Mario said urgently. “The Council is after you. We have to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Miranda snarled.

“We just saved you from people who were trying to harm you, and you think *I’m* going to hurt you?” Mario pointed at Connor. “He’s Emily’s cousin, for Christ’s sake! What kind of person do you think I am?”

“You can say that with a straight face? For all we know you staged this whole thing.”

“You are the most pigheaded, vindictive woman on the planet,” Mario shouted. “Get in the goddamned car!”

“They did save us, Miri,” Connor said.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

“We can’t stay here.”

“We can try one of the other SUVs,” she said. Which is totally stupid, the rational part of her mind piped up. Connor was right. They had to get out of here before anyone else showed up.

The scowl on Mario’s face hardened. Despite his assurances, Miranda thought he would happily kill her if the look on his face was any indication.

Mario shifted his attention from her to Connor. “Will *you* come with us, or would you rather stand here in the rain and wait for the next hit squad?”

“He’s not going with you,” Miranda said, not giving Connor a chance to speak. “Let’s try the other SUVs first,” she said, desperate, but her mind shouted, *Go with him, you idiot! It’s the only way.* “I know going with them seems like the smart thing, but you can’t trust him.”

“You’re being irrational.” Connor grabbed Miranda’s arm and dragged her with him toward Mario. “We’re coming with you.”

“No, we’re not!” Miranda cried, trying to pull free of Connor.

“Thank God someone has some sense,” Mario muttered. He turned to the man closest to him. “Find their weapons if you can and get them in the car. And if she fights you, tie her up.”

“I didn’t agree to that!” Connor protested.

Mario headed for the SUV. “Tie him up, too, if you have to.”

SHE WOULD KILL HIM. If she ever got out of these restraints, she would hunt Mario down, to the ends of the Earth if that's what it took. She would rip his beating heart out of his chest with her bare hands and make him watch while she fed it to Delilah. She had not thought it possible to hate him more than she already did, but once again he had proved her wrong.

She would kill Connor, too, she decided. He sat next to her, unbound. He decided to go with them and dragged her along, then stood by and did nothing when they bound and gagged her. He had the gall to try and pat her arm after she was unceremoniously dumped into the back seat of the SUV. She had shrugged him off with venom enough that he had not tried again.

You have only yourself to blame, her conscience said unhelpfully, if you had just gone with them you wouldn't be so vulnerable, tied up and at his mercy, but oh no... You had to fight, knowing you never had a chance.

Miranda glared at Delilah, sitting happily in the front seat next to Mario. She was relieved Delilah had made it through the crash with just a few scratches, but still. *Her dog, her faithful companion*, had snuggled up to Mario without missing a beat.

You little flea-bitten traitor, your taste in men is as bad as Karen's. I'll get a new dog to feed his heart to.

"Are you going to tell us what's going on?" Connor asked Mario again.

"No," Mario answered. "I'll let them explain. She'll never believe it coming from me."

“Who are ‘they’?” Connor persisted.

“We’re almost there,” Mario replied. “You can see for yourself in a minute.”

The SUV exited the Expressway. Between the tinted windows of the SUV and the inky darkness made blacker by the rain, not to mention her pounding head, Miranda could not tell where they were. Connor looked over at her, giving what she supposed was meant to be an encouraging smile. After a few more minutes the SUV slowed, then drove through a gate.

Miranda strained to see beyond the tinted windows as the SUV stopped. A moment later the doors on either side of Miranda and Connor opened. Rough hands hauled her out and cut the restraints on her ankles. She looked at the building before her, dumbfounded.

They were in front of the Jesuit Residence.

Miranda and Connor were propelled through the foyer and down the hall by Mario’s armed goons so quickly that Miranda did not have time to feel humiliated by the shocked stares of the people they passed. They shoved her through the chapel doors. The world was spinning again. Before she could steady herself, Walter and Doug rushed in.

“God save us, Mario! Was this really necessary?” Walter cried, shock plain on his face. He hurried over to Miranda and unfastened the gag and wrist restraints, then handed her a hanky to dry her face.

“It was,” Mario answered, leaning against a pew. He winced and cradled his side. “I think she cracked a rib.”

“What the hell is he doing here?” Miranda blurted as she spit out the gag. She rubbed her wrists and looked around the room. “What is going on?”

Walter put his hands on her shoulders. “There are some things you don’t know, Miranda.”

“Well no fucking shit,” she said, shrugging Walter off.

The room got very quiet. The sinking feeling Miranda had had on the Expressway when she saw the first SUV returned.

“Mario’s been working with us,” Walter said.

Miranda started to laugh. It was too absurd. She looked from Walter to Mario and Doug, saw identical expressions on their faces. They all looked guilty.

“Mario’s been working with us to get the vaccine back. He’s been our man at GeneSys.”

Miranda stared at Walter. “What are you talking about? He betrayed you. He betrayed all of us.”

“He was always on our side, Miranda,” Walter said softly, his hazel eyes brimming with sympathy. “I am so very sorry, more than you can know, but he never betrayed us. He’s been on our side the whole time.”

The chapel was silent except for the rain battering the windows. Miranda stared at Walter, unable to comprehend his words. Her chest felt tight. Blood roared in her ears. A drop of water trickled down between her shoulder blades.

“I don’t know what he told you—”

“He’s always been on our side, Miranda. He didn’t betray anyone.”

Miranda shook her head. Why was Walter saying these things? She felt Delilah rub against her leg, whining in response to Miranda’s growing distress.

“That’s not true,” she insisted. Her voice wavered, and she began to shake. “If that were true, I would have known.”

“He couldn’t tell you, Miri, none of us could. It was safer if you thought—”

“It was safer?”

Miranda looked from Walter to Mario and abruptly realized what Walter was saying to her was true. The sorrow she saw on Mario’s face was real, and he had apologized to her, said that he missed her. It had not made any sense at the time, but if he had lied to her...

Comprehension—a white-hot spike—crashed through her skull. Mario had *lied* to her. They all had, every last one of them.

“I know you can never forgive me,” Mario said, voice hoarse, his relief at ending the charade beyond question. The flesh of his body seemed to sag against his skeleton. Relief radiated from him, dragging him down like intensified gravity.

It was his relief that did her in.

The jolt of impact traveled from knuckles to elbow to shoulder before Miranda realized she had crossed the room and thrown the punch. Mario staggered back.

“How could you do that to me?” she shouted. “How could you do that to *me?*”

She punched him again, and again, and again. Rage and betrayal blinded her vision. Doug’s strong hand caught her from behind and dragged her away, but not before he caught an elbow in the face for his trouble.

“You son of a bitch!” she hissed, twisting free of Doug’s grip. Her breath came in shuddering gasps. “You let me think—oh my God, you all let me think —”

“Miranda,” Walter said.

“What about me?” she whispered, eyes filling with tears as she backed away. “What about me, or don’t I count? You let me think he betrayed us, that everything was a lie. How can you say he didn’t betray anyone? He betrayed me, didn’t he? *Didn’t he?*”

Walter tried again. “If you’ll let me explain—”

Miranda bumped against the end of a pew. She reached blindly to steady herself and felt something wet and warm hit her arm. She touched her face as she reeled toward the chapel doors. It was wet, too.

“Miranda,” Walter called from behind her. “The Council is after you. I know you don’t want to hear anything I have to say, but there are things I need to tell you. You can’t go anywhere, not when you’re upset like this.”

Miranda turned back. “Now you need to tell me something, *Father?*”

She hurled the honorific like an epithet. She glimpsed her horrified reflection in one of the chapel windows, amazed that the hurricane raging inside her could not be seen.

Hold it together for a minute, just a minute don’t let them see, don’t let them see...

Connor’s face was pale and shocked. When she looked at him, a choked sob forced its way past her lips.

“Will you come with me?” she asked, hardly able to speak.

She had to escape. She didn’t know how to stop a hurricane and she couldn’t let them see.

Connor crossed the room, silent save for the echo of his footsteps and her

barely contained weeping. When he reached her at the chapel doors, she fled.

CONNOR COULD NOT CATCH Miranda as she ran from the Jesuit Residence into the wet, inky night. She was headed for the Mission Church. He knew it before she darted up the steps and pulled on one of the massive doors. A few moments later, he stepped inside, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the murky interior. Her sobs echoed off the walls like forlorn prayers.

He couldn't believe he had missed it, but how could he have known? She hated Emily's husband so much she only visited if Mario was not there. The vicious riposting and malicious digs that she and Mario had traded at dinner, and Karen's comment that he did not know the half of it. In hindsight, it was lit in neon, but there was no way he could have seen it. He hadn't had enough pieces of the puzzle to fit together.

Connor wiped the rain from his face as he walked past the row of tapestry draped columns that demarcated the entryway from the sanctuary proper. In keeping with classical Mission style, the church had no fixed pews. Often the altar was set up against the far back wall, but at the moment it was in the center. Rows of sturdy wooden chairs surrounded it, utilizing an in-the-round style. Massive iron candelabras glowed, candlelight flickering off the stark white walls and golden decorations. The timbered ceiling was almost lost in the cavernous gloom, and the deep-set windows high along the walls stared out into the night like sightless eyes.

Miranda huddled on the floor in the aisle by the first row of chairs. Sobs racked her body. A few people milled nearby, not sure what to do. Connor waved

the concerned onlookers away and knelt down beside her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, her head and shoulders on his lap. He ran his hand over her soaked head, making sure to tuck imaginary strands of hair behind her ear. Her mother had smoothed her hair behind her ear when she was sick as a child. She told him that the first time she was stuck-in-bed sick her freshman year. Funny the things you remember, and when.

The familiar motion seemed to soothe her. Eventually she began to settle a little, sobs replaced by weeping.

“You loved him.”

She shuddered, and for a moment he thought she might begin to sob again. He slid his hand under the fingers of her right hand so he could get a look. The knuckles were scuffed and scratched and beginning to swell.

“We should get some ice for your hand.”

She shook her head and mumbled.

“I can’t hear you, Miri.”

Miranda’s tremulous voice was barely audible. “God is punishing me, I know He is.”

“Miranda... It doesn’t work like that.”

“He’s punishing me, He is,” she insisted. She began to cry harder. “He wasn’t free. I was so, so selfish.”

“Look at me.”

Miranda shook her head. Connor burrowed his hand under her chin and raised her head. Tears ran unchecked down her face. Even though he held her chin, she tried to look away.

“Look at me,” he said again.

Slowly, she raised her eyes to his. The fear and self-loathing Connor saw in them tore at his heart.

“You must think I’m horrible,” she said, almost unintelligible through her tears. “I know you do. I’m the worst kind of— God’s been punishing me all this time and—”

“*Stop it,*” Connor said. “Stop right now. Do not put words in my mouth. *I don’t care,* Miranda. I love you whether you think you deserve it or not, and God

loves you, too. God is *not* punishing you; that's not how it works." His voice softened. "I only care that he hurt you so much."

Connor pulled her close and held her tight and rocked her like a baby. She wept with her face pressed against his chest. And then, finally, she surrendered. Her body relaxed and went limp.

"I can't believe you have to see me like this. Crying over someone else, I mean," she said. Tears that she quickly wiped away still leaked from the corners of her eyes.

Connor shrugged. "I was gone a long time. I never thought you were waiting for me."

"That might have worked out better," she muttered. She looked up at him, then straightened up, concerned. "Connor, your face... It's all cut up."

Connor touched his face. He felt small cuts on his left cheek and forehead. His fingers came back with red smears.

"There's a big piece of glass in your cheek." Miranda leaned over and pulled out a long, sharp sliver. Warm blood began to run down the side of his face. "Ah, Jesus, I should have left it alone. You're going to need stitches." She dug in her front jeans pocket and produced a handkerchief which she pressed against his face.

The squelch of wet footsteps echoed from the direction of the main doors. Doug walked toward them looking uncomfortable but resolved. When he saw the blood-stained handkerchief in Connor's hand, he stopped short.

"She didn't punch you, too?"

Connor swallowed his annoyance and shook his head.

Doug looked at Miranda. "We need to talk, Miri. I know you don't want to hear anything I have to say, but things are going sideways. We need you."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before," Miranda said. She had her voice under control, but she still swiped at tears.

"That's part of what I need to talk to you about," Doug answered. The exuberant young priest looked more serious than Connor would have thought possible. "I don't mean to sound like Walter, but this is more important than any one of us."

From the look on her face, Connor was sure Miranda would hurl an insult, but she surprised him.

“It’s about the vaccine.”

“Yes,” Doug answered.

She gave a disgusted sigh. “Fine, whatever. I could give a shit, but fine.”

Doug looked at Connor expectantly. Ah. Apparently he was supposed to beat it.

Fuck that, Connor thought. Aloud he said, “Do you want me to stay?”

Miranda turned to look at him, misery stamped across her face. Seeing her like this was torture. I’ll kill that asshole if it’s the last thing I do, he vowed.

“It’s okay,” Miranda said tiredly. “You should get your face looked at.” She kissed him, then lingered, like she didn’t want him to go. “Thank you.”

“You silly,” he said, his voice pitched low for her ears alone. “I’d do anything for you.”

“I know.”

Her cornflower blue eyes, beautiful despite being red and puffy, regarded him gratefully for a moment.

Connor grasped Miranda’s hand as he stood. “I’ll be just outside if you need me.”

“No. Go to the Jesuit Residence and get someone to stitch your face. I’ll be there soon.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. Connor saw hints of a steely strength in her eyes, behind the brave face she had begun to put on like armor.

She still cares about Mario that’s for fucking sure, Connor thought as he walked away. He pushed the main door of the church open. A blast of cold, wet air hit him in the face.

She might even still love him, but I’m damned if I’ll let her go without a fight.

DOUG SPUN the chair across the aisle backward and straddled it to sit opposite her. He looked like there was no power on Earth that could compel him to sit within striking distance.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am that we lied to you, Miri.”

Miranda looked at Doug sidelong, unable to face him directly. She looked at her friend and felt like she did not know him anymore. She could also see that he meant what he said. The cheekbone she had inadvertently elbowed sported a puffy red splotch with a dark bruise forming at its center. His blue eyes brimmed with remorse.

“That’s generous of you.”

“I *am* sorry, Miranda. We all are. It was a terrible thing that we did to you.”

“And now that you’ve apologized, everything’s hunky-dory. Fuck you.”

“Of course it isn’t.” Doug took a deep breath. “When the fighting began after the Council reneged on the vaccine, there was no way we could defeat them. We didn’t have enough leverage, even with the farms and their failed harvest. They had the police, we didn’t. The only thing we had was influence on the people who were rioting. If the riots had continued, we might have lost everything. Some of the people fighting the police were planning to firebomb the lab that warehoused what little of the vaccine there was.”

She remembered of course. How could she forget?

“Mario thought if he approached the Council, he could make them see reason, but he couldn’t. So he and Walter came up with the idea to have Mario

seem to betray us. If Mario could convince the Council he'd rather throw in with them, maybe we could end the fighting and get control of the vaccine that way."

"Or maybe you could have tried something that didn't involve screwing me over!"

Doug sighed. "If we had someone on the inside, at least there was a chance. And if Mario didn't appear to join them, they would have tried to kill him. They already thought they had killed Henry. If he wasn't on their side, getting Mario out of the way would have been the next logical step from their point of view. Think about it, Miri. You know it's true."

He's right, she thought, her mouth twisting into a frown.

"Even after the deal was brokered, they didn't trust him," Doug continued. "They wanted his expertise, but if he stepped out of line at all, you can imagine what they'd have done."

"They'd have gone after the kids," Miranda whispered. If they had killed Mario and Emily's children... She felt sick just thinking about it.

"They'd have gone after you, too. He was trying to protect you."

The Council *would* have tried to kill her if they thought it would keep him in line. They had just tried it not an hour ago. The Jesuits were powerful now and she was one of their people. It was a stupid, dangerous play, but they made it anyway. But she was not ready to concede anything, no matter how right Doug might be. What they'd done to her was unconscionable.

"And all of you thought it would be better for me to not know? To think he betrayed us? Used me?" She couldn't stop her voice from cracking. "What gave you the right?"

Doug received her anger without flinching. "We didn't have the right. We just knew you could never pull it off."

"You never gave me the chance!" Miranda jumped to her feet, unable to stay still.

"How long would it have been before you started meeting him in secret? Three months? Six months? A year?"

Miranda stared at him, openmouthed. "I don't fucking believe you."

"How long?"

“I would have done whatever it took!”

“I gave it six months.”

“Did you fucking place bets?” she shouted.

“We didn’t have to! You suck at lying.”

“Go fuck yourself, y—” Miranda started, but Doug cut her off.

“You can be sneaky and devious, absolutely. But lie? About something that important? You wear your heart on your sleeve, Miranda, and you follow it no matter what! You wouldn’t have been able to stay away. It might have taken a while, but eventually you’d have tried to see him. And if you had known the truth, he wouldn’t have been able to stay away either. The pair of you would have blown his cover and that would have been that.”

A grief so pure Miranda was sure she would die flooded through her, and then she was floating. We look so tiny from up here, she thought. She supposed she ought to wonder why she was looking down at herself, but she could not muster the will to care. Not caring was so much easier than what Miranda-on-the-floor was doing. That Miranda flung the reliquary at a confessional door so hard it got stuck in the lattice. That Miranda pounded the altar. She heard the smack of that fist against the marble but did not feel a thing where she hovered by the timbered ceiling. No bruising of tendons or snap of bones. Her hand should have hurt, but it didn’t. All the hurt was twined around her heart.

She watched Doug scramble to grab the other Miranda’s arms. “Miri, stop! You’re going to break your hand!”

“Leave me alone,” the other Miranda cried, and then she was back in her body, dizzy and sick. Doug was holding her wrist and her hand hurt like a motherfucker. She looked into Doug’s glacier-blue eyes and couldn’t take it anymore. Helpless, she began to cry.

“You are my best friend, Miranda. I would never hurt you if I had any other choice. You *know* that,” Doug said, pulling her to him. “You and Mario... You never could have lied about it. You’re not made that way. Why do you think everyone knew? And he couldn’t have done it, not if he knew you were waiting. We’d have lost our only chance and we could not let that happen.”

Miranda cried because it was true. When Mario confessed that he loved her,

she dove in headlong. It had not mattered that he was married to her friend. It never occurred to her to do anything other than grab what happiness she could, for as long as she could, because she did not live in a world that gave second chances. Doug was right. She could never have done it.

“We never thought it would take so long.” Doug rifled through his pockets before holding up the hem of his t-shirt. Miranda took it and blew her nose. “Mario didn’t make contact for over a year. We started to worry maybe he *had* sold us out.”

Miranda crumpled to the floor. “This is why you told me not to rush into anything with Connor.” Too tired to accuse him, she merely stated a fact.

She heard Doug curse under his breath as he sat down next to her.

“No, Miri, it’s not. I didn’t know things were going to play out like this. You, Connor, and the others were supposed to get out with the vaccines. Mario was going to South America to oversee production there, but that was supposed to happen later, after you’d gone. It’s not like he can stay here. Too many people want him dead. You were just so unhappy yesterday.” Doug stopped, then added softly, “I know you still love him.”

“I don’t,” she said, the denial automatic.

Doug didn’t say anything, but his silence spoke volumes. She scrubbed her face with her functional hand, unable to remember the last time she felt this tired.

“Walter said the Council is after me.”

“You know we’re manufacturing post-bite in Santa Cruz?” Doug asked, pausing only for a second. “Some dumbasses stole a few crates to sell on the black market. There were no customs stamps on it because we weren’t ready to move it yet.”

“You have customs stamps?” Miranda said, surprised. Customs stamps were locked down as tight as the vaccine itself.

“We have very good forgeries,” Doug said with a sly smile. “The Navy intercepted their boat and your name came up because some of them worked at The Farm a few years ago.”

“But I don’t know anything about those people,” she protested.

“The Council doesn’t know that. Mario only found out because without Customs Stamps, the assumption was that it was stolen from the GeneSys facility. If his brother hadn’t called him, the Council would have you and Connor right now.”

“No wonder he was so pissed,” Miranda muttered, remembering how hard she had fought Mario on the Expressway.

“He wasn’t exaggerating,” Doug said. “You fractured two of his ribs.”

She did not even know how to respond to that. Instead she asked, “So what do we do now?”

“We have to figure out a way to get to Santa Cruz. We have to get Henry and Mario and all their research data far away from here.” Doug looked at her funny, like she would not like what he said next. “Mario’s gone to GeneSys to get the preventative vaccine serum.”

“He went to GeneSys?” she cried. “But they might already know he’s involved!”

“There’s no one else who can do it, Miri.”

“Did I really break his ribs?”

“Fractured. Mario’s going to make it back, Miranda.”

Beneath her fury at how Mario had deceived her, an unwelcome pang of regret took hold.

What if I never see him again?

“He’s going to make it back,” Doug said again, as if reading her mind. “He will, Miranda. He’ll be back.”

Miranda wanted to believe him, but Doug did not sound like he was trying to reassure her. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

HER HAND FELT A BIT BETTER, thanks to the ice pack and aspirin. Connor had been waiting with both. The cuts on his face had been cleaned up and swabbed with iodine. The big cut on his cheek had three stitches. Miranda sat on the love seat in Walter's office. Delilah had squirmed her way between Miranda and Connor, crowding them both. Doug and Walter bickered in circles.

"Homing pigeons?" Doug said, incredulous. "You want to send it using *pigeons? In this weather?* That's a stretch, Walter, even for you."

"How do you propose we get the serum there?" Walter challenged. "The Navy has the bay shut down tighter than a drum, by sea is a nonstarter. The drones are unreliable in heavy rain and you can't just fly off in a helicopter."

"It's not going to get there using pigeons, for crying out loud."

"We take 17," Miranda said, raising her voice to be heard.

"Seventeen what?" Walter snapped.

"*Highway 17*," Miranda clarified. "We take Highway 17 to Santa Cruz."

Everyone, even the dog, stared at her.

"Do you have a better suggestion?" she asked. "You just said so yourself. We can't go by sea and we ran out of aviation fuel years ago. It's the only other way to get there, and it won't be on anyone's radar."

"Because it's suicide!" Walter sputtered. "Those mountains are full of zombies. There's a reason no one goes that way!"

"Connor made it here from Santa Barbara on foot," Miranda said. "We'll have transportation. It's only thirty miles."

“That was a fluke, not proof it can be done!” Walter countered.

Doug’s expression became thoughtful, then he started to nod his head. “The road will be trashed,” he said to Miranda, paying Walter no mind. “We’ll need a Humvee or an APC.”

“Connor started with fourteen people and three made it!” Walter fairly shouted.

“Harold can get us vehicles,” Miranda said to Doug.

“Will you listen to yourselves?” Walter implored. “What you’re proposing is madness. No one has ever made it over 17! You might as well shoot yourselves in the head.”

“It’s a little late to start playing it safe, Father Walter,” Miranda said. “If you hadn’t kept me in the dark all this time, maybe I could come up with something else. I don’t hear you coming up with better.”

Miranda’s rebuke transformed Walter’s look of dismay into indignant anger. “I know you’re angry with me—”

“Don’t even go there,” she snapped, surprised at the ferocity of her anger.

Miranda and Walter glared at each other. Connor spoke into the uneasy silence. “Are you sure about this, Miri?”

“No,” she said, tearing herself from Walter’s glare. “But what other option do we have?”

A shiver ran down her spine. Her response to Connor’s question was too similar to Doug’s explanation about why they had deceived her about Mario.

Miranda stood up. She winced as she peeked at her hand, then reapplied the ice pack. “I’m going to call Harold and see what vehicles he can manage on short notice.”

“See what kind of arms and ammo he can get us,” Doug said. Then he smiled at her. “Lingerie is a bonus.”

Miranda sighed and could not help but smile. He was back to giving her the business already.

“I’m going to get Emily and the kids. I told Mario I’d handle it myself,” Doug added.

Connor jumped up. “I’m coming with you.”

“Me too,” Miranda said. “It’ll only take me a minute to make my call.”

“You’re staying here,” Doug said. “Round up a gunner and a medic. And keep that ice on your hand. You’re no use to us gimpy.”

“We can’t really change anything if we don’t have the preventative vaccine,” Walter said. “But half a break on their stranglehold is better than none. And we still have Henry. He’ll figure out the preventative serum eventually. Even if Mario doesn’t make it back, we have to try.”

Walter’s words made Miranda sick to her stomach and furious. If Mario didn’t make it back, it would serve him right, but there was more at stake than his life. Fractured ribs could slow him down just enough... It would be her fault if he was captured. If he was killed, she would never be able to forgive herself, which made her so angry she wanted to murder him. Why should she care after what he had done to her?

But she did care. Whether she liked it or not, Mario had become very important to her again.

MARIO WALKED across the darkened GeneSys parking lot, head ducked against the rain. He had pulled around to the back of the building so he could use one of the service entrances. He would not go unnoticed, but there would be fewer people compared to the main entrance. He keyed a generic maintenance security code into the keypad by the door. A determined enough analyst would be able to track it back to him, but by then, he would either be long gone or already captured.

He wiped his forehead and pushed his hair back from his face before approaching the security desk. He tried to take a deep breath, but Doc had wrapped his ribs so tight he felt like he could barely breathe.

“Mr. Santorello,” a friendly voice exclaimed.

A few feet away sat Gus, the first security guard GeneSys had ever hired when the company was still small enough that security had been a one-man operation.

“It’s nice to...” Gus’ voice trailed off as Mario came closer and his bruised face became evident. “Sir, are you alright?”

Mario opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, wincing. His jaw and cheek throbbed. She knows how to throw a punch, he thought.

Aloud he said, “You should see the other guy.”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t want to if he looks worse than you,” Gus said, his blue eyes beginning to glint with mischief as a smile spread across his thin face. None of his colleagues would dare smile in Mario’s presence, let alone tease

him, but Gus had known Mario before the ZA. Before the vaccine, before the betrayal. Gus had always treated him, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, as if he believed Mario was not a terrible person.

“I’ll go get some ice for that,” Gus offered, beginning to rise from his chair.

“Don’t bother, Gus,” Mario answered, waving him back into his seat. “If you can think of something to tell the wife, let me know.”

“Better you than me, boss,” Gus said. “If you change your mind and want some ice, just let me know.”

Mario entered the stairwell that led to the Biosafety Level 1 lab in the basement, wincing with every step. He fumbled with the thumb drive in his pocket, nervously anticipating the moment he would execute the computer virus that would cover his tracks—or not.

The door at the bottom of the stairwell opened to reveal a long white corridor illuminated by bright fluorescent lights that reinforced the sterile atmosphere. To the left was the BSL-4 lab, where they worked with the live ZBZ-1 virus. By the time the process got to serum synthesis, the BSL-1 lab to Mario’s right was more than adequate. Even so, he still had to pass through three manned checkpoints of reinforced steel doors and floor-to-ceiling bulletproof glass. The gray uniforms of the two-person security details at each station were the only relief from the stark white landscape.

Mario passed through the three checkpoints before arriving at the BSL-1 lab’s only door. As part of his role as a Prince of Darkness, Mario made a point of never speaking to the security personnel unless he was giving an order. Except for Gus, of course. From the way they straightened up, it was obvious the men working the night shift knew who he was.

“Good evening, sir,” one of the guards ventured.

Mario did not answer.

He punched in his access code. His hands felt clammy. His heart threatened to thump its way out of his chest as the door shut behind him. He had to use his own access codes because biometric scans were part of the security protocols. Nothing short of an appropriate hostage, or a clever computer virus, could assist him in covering his tracks.

If that damn boat had been intercepted twenty-four hours later, I'd be doing this at the same time as the system upgrade, Mario thought. He was over ninety percent sure that running the program during the upgrade would go undetected; now his chances were fifty-fifty. He retrieved four square, red insulated vial carriers that looked like padded lunch boxes with long straps from a supply cabinet and headed for the freezer.

Mario stuck the thumb drive into the computer workstation next to the freezer door. He realized he was holding his breath. He exhaled, waited a moment for his rib to not hurt so much, and clicked the "Execute" button. He keyed in his access code, placed his palm on the hand scanner, and leaned into the retina scanner. A discreet beep indicated that the door had unlocked. Misty condensation swirled and enveloped him as the warmer air of the lab collided with the frigid air of the freezer.

The refrigerated room was a sleek version of a meat locker. Mario went directly to the first serum cabinet where he again entered codes and submitted to scans before swinging the doors open. On every shelf sat row upon row of squat vials stored in pressure sensitive holders that automatically triggered the inventory system when removed. Removing a vial without a request from an authorized user sent the entire building into lockdown. The program he had loaded onto the freezer workstation would assign his request to someone else with access to the BSL-1 lab and change the palm and retina scan logs to match. That was the idea, anyway. Right now, every code and scan correctly indicated that Mario Santorello was in the lab removing the serum. The only upside about that was his access and authorization codes were still working, which meant the Council had not connected the dots yet.

I should deal with the guards to give us more time. The program can't take care of them. Mario tried to ignore the leaden feeling that settled on his chest. Those men probably had wives, children—

It can't be helped. Don't think about it.

Mario grasped vial after vial with fingers made clumsy from the cold even though they only needed one vial to synthesize a vaccine that could then be replicated. The rush of warm air that greeted him as he left the freezer came as a

welcome relief. Mario checked the computer workstation again. The program was still running. He could not stick around to see if it would work.

Slowly, he raised the carrier straps over his head. It hurt. *She'll be the death of me... Of all the days to fracture my goddamned ribs.* As he walked across the room, the carriers bumped against his back. That hurt too.

He paused at the door that opened to the corridor and almost took a deep breath before he remembered that was a bad idea. He squeezed his eyes shut.

St. Jude, please, if you've never heard me before, hear me now. Help me get out of here. Help me get the serum to Walter. I know I don't deserve your help, but I'm not asking for myself.

He opened the door.

Pass the guards, walk fifteen feet, get through the next door.

Simple, but Mario felt like he was in one of those dreams where he ran and ran, but the hallway only got longer.

The first door clicked shut behind him.

Pass the guards, walk fifteen feet, get through the next door.

The guards were looking at him. Had they ever done that before? He had no idea; he had never paid attention. Their scrutiny made him certain they were toying with him before they pounced.

The second door clicked shut.

Pass the guards, walk fifteen feet, get through the next door.

Mario grasped the handle of the last door when red lights began to flash. Sirens wailed. He heard the snick of the automatic lockdown deadbolts and the scrape of chairs pushed back hastily. He turned around. Through the glass walls, he saw the other security teams checking consoles and making phone calls. His heart plummeted into his bowels.

I'm fucked.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, sir," the guard at the computer console answered. He ceased tapping on keys to look at Mario, then bit his lip and ran a hand over his buzz-cut hair.

Just being in the same room with me freaks them out.

It wasn't much, but he would take any advantage he could get. Perhaps the Patron Saint of Lost Causes had not forsaken him.

"We don't have much information, sir." Buzz Cut continued, "Just a lockdown order. I'm sure we'll have it cleared up in a minute."

"I don't have time for this," Mario said. "Open the door."

The second guard, who was talking on the phone, ended his conversation mid-word. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I have a pressing—" Mario began, then scowled. "I don't need to explain myself to you. Open the door."

"You know we can't do that, sir," the second guard said. He set the phone receiver down but did not hang it up. "We have to wait for the lockdown order to be lifted."

Mario looked at the man, eyes flint-hard. He walked to the desk and hung up the phone receiver.

"I'm not interested in what you can't do. Use your override codes and open the door."

The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Buzz Cut watched Mario and his colleague warily.

"I'm sorry—" the man started to say again, but Mario cut him off.

"If you don't open that door right now, I will have the residency permits of your family revoked."

Mario's fury was genuine. If he didn't get out that door he was doomed. This minute delay could derail years of planning. If they failed now, they would never get another chance. All the anguish and pain he had caused, the oceans of blood on his hands, would be for nothing.

Both guards blanched. Their terror at the idea of living outside the safety of the City's walls was palpable.

Buzz Cut's hand shook as he bent over the security keypad in the center of the desk. "I'm keying in my override code now, sir."

Buzz Cut's partner looked at him in disbelief. "You can't do that!"

"Just enter your code," Buzz Cut snapped. "He's the boss."

"Are you out of your mind? There's still the rest of the Council to answer

to!”

Buzz Cut seemed to appraise his partner for a moment, then pulled his sidearm and pointed it at the man’s head.

“Enter your code. I have *kids*, for Christ’s sake!”

His partner froze. “You cannot be serious.”

“Do it.”

Mario could see the other security teams gesticulating to one another. The unfolding drama had attracted their attention. The phone on the desk in front of him began to ring. Dull thumps emanated from the bulletproof glass that separated this checkpoint from the next, but whatever the man pounding on the wall shouted was drowned out by the alarm klaxons. The recalcitrant guard, now held hostage, glanced through the glass to the others.

Despite the noise, all three men heard the soft but ominous click when Buzz Cut switched off his gun’s safety. “I won’t ask again.”

Without a word, the other guard turned and punched in his override code. The door unlocked.

Mario turned on his heel and left, shutting the door behind him. He had three minutes of automatic lockout before they could override again. He headed for the stairwell next to the elevator, willing himself not to run, then abandoned the pretense the moment he was through the doors. He took the steps two at a time, groaning at the pain from his fractured ribs. He fitted the suppressor to his M9 pistol as the shrieks of the alarms reverberated and echoed off the stairwell’s concrete walls.

Mario cracked the stairwell door open and heard voices approaching. He stepped back behind it. A moment later the door opened. Four Council Security Officers stormed through and down the stairs without even clearing the area.

Thank you, St. Jude.

Mario waited until the man on point had almost reached the landing before he fired.

Tiny hisses and the first two men were down before their companions realized what was happening. Mario shot the third through the throat as he turned. The last man, the one closest to him, managed to turn completely around.

The boom of his weapon made the din in the stairwell unbearable. He too went down, but not before Mario felt a bullet bite into his arm.

He couldn't go out to the corridor now. Even with the alarms wailing, the security detail at the entrance would hear the gunfire. Mario lurched up the stairs, desperately trying to formulate an escape.

The laundry!

Lab coats and scrubs were washed on site. There was a chute on the second-floor landing that went directly to the laundry on the ground floor, one story below where he entered the building. Hope energized him. He sprinted up the last fifteen steps. The stairwell door below him opened with a dull *thunk*.

Mario dove for the chute and tumbled headlong. He tried to slow his descent by pushing his arms and legs against the sides but was hampered by his injured arm. He tucked his head as he landed atop a pile of blue scrubs. White-hot bolts of pain radiated from his bicep and side. Blood ran down his wrist and seeped through his coat sleeve.

Still have my gun.

He staggered to his feet and set off for the loading dock, grabbing a clean pair of scrubs from a stack of folded laundry on an industrial-sized cart. He slowed down as he got closer to the loading dock, then stopped and listened. The area appeared deserted, but he would not be able to open the loading dock door. Instead, he entered a break room next to the exit. He hopped on a table near the wall and peered through the high window above.

Mario could see part of the rear parking lot from his vantage point since the ground sloped down from the window. His car was awash in a sea of flashing lights. He shrugged out of the carriers and his coat. His arm was not as bad as he'd feared, but he had to bind the wound—they'd bring dogs out to track him. He wrapped the scrubs top around his bicep and bound it tightly to his arm with the matching bottoms.

Mario shot the window twice, thankful that he had not lost the suppressor in his tumble down the laundry chute. The safety glass stayed in place, but spider webs of cracks radiated from the bullet holes. Three quick jabs of his elbow and the glass gave way. He shoved the carriers out. One caught a piece of glass stuck

in the frame and fell back inside. Mario grabbed the carrier strap, then laid his coat over the window ledge. He was just about to holster his gun and hoist himself up when a voice called out.

“Freeze! Hands up now and turn around!”

Gently, Mario eased his pistol onto the window ledge. If he could turn fast enough...

“Move your hand away from the gun. Don’t try anything smart.”

Mario turned around. A glowing red bead from a gun sight appeared on his chest. Gus stood in the doorway.

“Mr. Santorello?” the old man asked, surprised. “What the hell are you doing here?”

The red bead on Mario’s chest barely moved. “I need you to do me a favor, Gus. I need you to turn around and pretend you never saw me.”

“What have you got in those carriers?” Gus demanded, but with less conviction. “Get down from there and let me see.”

“Let me go, Gus. No one has to know.”

“You just get down,” the old man said, but his voice was filled with uncertainty.

Slowly, Mario climbed down. He leaned against the table as if he favored one leg over the other.

“Walk over here to me.”

Mario took a step, then grunted with false pain. He leaned against the table once more. “I hurt my leg.”

Gus approached Mario cautiously. “Open that thing up,” he said, gesturing to the carrier in Mario’s hand.

Mario unzipped the carrier. Gus peered in, then looked up, his expression puzzled.

“Is that what I think it is? Why are you stealing from your own lab?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Mario said. “But if you don’t let me go, I’m a dead man.”

Gus smiled like a conspirator and Mario relaxed.

“You were a dead man the minute you walked through the door, Mr.

Santorello.”

Mario stared at Gus, dumbfounded for a heartbeat. The old man who had been kind to him... Jesus! How could he have been so blind?

“You’re on the Council payroll.”

“It’s nothing personal, Mr. Santorello,” Gus said, sounding genuinely apologetic. “I never cared what you did; you were always good to me. But a fella has to take the opportunities that come his way.”

“I can protect you,” Mario said. “Just let me go.”

“And who would protect my family?” Gus asked. “No, I don’t think so, thanks all the same. I don’t know what you did, and I don’t want to. I didn’t even know it was you they wanted till now. The Council guys just said to look for anyone out of place.”

Mario slumped in defeat.

“You had a good run, son. Be content with that.”

Gus stepped closer and put his hand on Mario’s shoulder. The red bead on his chest slipped and Mario exploded to his feet. He barreled into Gus with his shoulder, knocking the old man back. He pressed forward and punched Gus in the throat, felt the windpipe crunch under his fist. The old man collapsed to the floor, his gun sliding from his nerveless fingers. A strangled wheeze added its high, thready pitch to the cacophony of alarms.

Mario re-zipped the carrier, then stooped to retrieve Gus’ gun and tucked it into the back of his waistband. Gus lay on the floor like the feeble old man he was. His mouth opened and closed like a fish on a creek bank, his face already turning blue.

“That *was* personal,” Mario said, but his words came out as a half-smothered sob.

Mario Santorello had been one of the most powerful men in the Valley, even with the hammer of a suspicious City Council hanging over him for so many years. He had played the role for so long that at times he feared he had become a soulless monster with not one true friend to his name. Now Gus lay on the floor in front of him, suffocating. Even he, the kindly half-friend of sorts, had been a lie.

Mario scrambled onto the table. He shoved his coat and the last carrier through the window, grabbed his pistol, and hoisted himself up. He squirmed through the mud outside, half-sliding down the small hill to retrieve the other carriers. Flickers of light from search parties setting out from the parking lot winked at him. He scurried back to the window, snatched his coat, and tossed it in the direction of the parking lot.

His hand wrapped tight around the carrier straps as he set out in the opposite direction, toward the eastern edge of the GeneSys campus. The sodden ground squelched underfoot in time with his pained breath as he ran into the rainy night.

“ARE you sure there’s nothing else you need?” Harold asked again.

“No. Really, Harold, this is great,” Miranda said. “More than I expected.”

“I wish you’d tell me where you’re going,” Harold said, worry plain on his face, before adding, “I understand why you can’t. I hate the idea of missing something you need because I didn’t understand all the requirements.”

“You’ve outdone yourself, Harold.”

Miranda’s long-time admirer looked at her. “Just be careful, okay?”

“I will, I promise.”

She allowed a hug, which Harold managed to make too long and completely uncomfortable. She stepped through the door into the Jesuit Residence’s underground garage, where the armory was housed. The entire garage had been turned into a staging area which bustled with activity. Harold sent so much equipment that Miranda half expected to find a box with nothing but lingerie. There were flak jackets and radios, guns and ammunition, far more than she had asked for. The empty crate for the .50 caliber gun fitted to one of the M1113 Humvee’s gun turret leaned against the wall between a box of grenades and a small pallet of C-4.

The rain continued unabated, sheeting down the garage ramp to create a shallow puddle at the bottom before running down the floor drain. The Humvees were parked at the top of the ramp, indistinct shapes in the darkness. Harold had told Miranda if they wanted a truck large enough for eight people, they would need to push their departure back a day, but they could not afford the delay.

Miranda and several helpers were only halfway through deciding what to bring and what to leave behind when Doug appeared.

“Miri!”

One look at Doug’s agitated face was enough for a dark foreboding to settle around Miranda like a cloak. She hurried over to him.

“What’s happened?”

Doug motioned for her to follow. They climbed the stairs against a tide of bodies going the opposite direction. Miranda checked her watch. *It’s after ten... Something’s gone wrong.* Organized pandemonium ruled the foyer. The entire building buzzed, queries and commands shouted from all directions. Miranda saw Father Al and the other elderly priests being ushered out the front door along with the household staff. As the Mission Church bell began to peal, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

They were mobilizing for an attack.

She followed Doug up the stairs to and through the door to Walter’s office. Walter was on the phone, his voice insistent.

“What happened?” Miranda asked as soon as the door shut behind her.

“The Council knows,” Doug answered. “How much I’m not sure, but they know something. We were attacked by Council Security as we were leaving. We barely made it out of Palo Alto.”

“Did you get them? Are they okay?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. Connor’s getting them settled, then he’ll be right over. We had to drag her out of the house, so the kids were scared and crying, and then Council Security showed up. Palo Alto hasn’t seen that kind of shoot-out in, well, ever.” Doug laughed almost merrily, his upbeat nature refusing to surrender, even now, but his countenance sobered as he continued. “I think they figured out Mario’s connection to what happened with you on the Expressway.”

Miranda’s foreboding blossomed into full-blown dread. “He’s not back yet.”

“I know, and we have to leave. If they weren’t mobilizing before, they are now.”

Walter hung up the phone. “All the militia units have been activated,” he said, voice tense. Miranda could see the strain and worry around his eyes as he

cursed under his breath. “Is there any word from Mario?”

Miranda shook her head.

He went there injured because of me.

“No,” Doug said, “nothing.”

“Then we have to assume he’s been captured. Goddammit!” Walter slammed his fist on the desk so hard that Miranda flinched. Such an uncharacteristic display of anger unnerved her. “You’re going to have to go now, in the dark! In the goddammed fucking dark!”

“We’ve been in tough spots before and got through them, Walter,” Doug said. “We’ll get through this one, too. It will be all right.”

“It’s not all right,” Walter grumbled, “but there’s nothing to be done for it.” He took a deep breath, then directed his attention to Miranda. “Are the vehicles ready to go?”

“We’re getting there,” she said, “but we’re not even through everything Harold sent. Two hours more to finish and get people ready.”

“Make it an hour, a ghrá.” Walter tried to smile at her and failed.

Miranda left Walter’s office, her mind racing. If they didn’t have Mario, they didn’t have the serum, and they could not make the preventative vaccine without it. Doug had told her that Mario didn’t think Henry Chan was getting anywhere trying to synthesize it on his own.

We need both vaccines to break the Council’s monopoly, she thought, post-bite alone won’t be enough to change things.

She felt helpless. Mario had blown his cover trying to save her. She was the reason he went to GeneSys injured. If he died, it would be her fault, and if they failed, nothing would change. Instead of deliverance, humanity would still be at the mercy of the Council and it would be her fault.

“Stop it,” she said out loud. “Stop it and get a grip. Don’t crack up now, you idiot. Father Walter is depending on you.”

Miranda returned to the garage and began lugging gear up the ramp one-handed since the Humvees were too tall for the garage entrance. Even as she answered questions and gave directions, her thoughts kept circling back to Mario and what she had learned...today? Had she really only found out today? It felt

like everything she had done since that moment had made the situation worse.

And then they were stowing the last box into a Humvee. She glanced at her watch, surprised to see it was not quite eleven. They were almost ready.

“You’re done?” a voice called from behind her.

Still standing in the rain, she turned back to see Connor jogging toward her. She could not believe how happy she was to see him, but guilt crept over her. She had not spared him a thought the last few hours. She had been too preoccupied worrying about Mario. That jerk didn’t deserve her worry, even though they needed what he was trying to get.

“I hear Palo Alto got a little exciting.”

Connor stopped in front of her and took her hands in his, careful to squeeze only her uninjured hand. Miranda leaned into him. She needed to feel something real, something good. She needed to feel *him*, even if it made her feel self-conscious to stand there in an embrace. There were people everywhere, swarming in and out like bees from a hive. It seemed like everyone at SCU knew the details of her private life, including how badly she had lost it when she learned the truth about how Mario had deceived her. She had seen the surreptitious glances at her hand and heard the murmurs when people thought she was out of earshot.

Connor made a grumbling sound of annoyance as they ducked under the overhang at the bottom of the ramp.

“I know you told me Emily never left the place but Jesus... I thought I might have to deck her. We’d never have run into Council Security if she hadn’t been such a pain in the ass.”

“But you’re okay, right?”

Connor smiled. “Of course I am.”

“Don’t be too hard on her, Connor. She can’t help it. Besides, it’s better we know about the Council.” Miranda wiped at her face as she led him to the stairs but her hand only moved the wet around. “I need to let Father Walter know the vehicles are ready and check in with Naomi and Gabe.” At Connor’s quizzical expression, she added, “Our medic and gunner.”

The door to Walter’s office stood ajar. As Miranda pushed it open, the

antiseptic smell of rubbing alcohol made her nose twitch and she knew.

Mario had made it back.

The reading lamp on Walter's desk cast a bright puddle of light that left the rest of the room in half-shadow. Mario sat slumped in the chair next to Walter's desk. Doc Owen knelt beside him; scissors, bloody gauze, and a twisted piece of shrapnel were heaped on a tray beside him. Doc's brow furrowed in concentration as he irrigated a wound on Mario's arm.

What Miranda could see of Mario's face around the ice pack he held against it was drawn and mud splattered. His filthy wet shirt crumpled on the floor atop a pile of bloody rags. The bandages around his ribs were soaked and mud-smeared, and his hair clung to his scalp.

Relief that had nothing to do with their mission washed over her.

Father Walter looked up at her. "What is it?"

Miranda looked at Walter for a second. "When did he get here?"

"About fifteen minutes ago."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Mario lowered the ice pack. The bruises on his face were dark smudges. The sight of them made Miranda's stiff knuckles throb.

"Not dead yet," he said, wincing as Doc probed his bicep. "Maybe next time."

"That's not what I—"

She wanted to kill Mario, but she did not want him dead.

"Get out of my light," Doc barked, giving Walter an irritated glance. "And you too, Tucci. Are you deaf?"

Miranda realized she was standing almost next to where Mario sat, but she did not remember crossing the room. She retreated like an errant child.

"He'll live," Doc muttered, as if his patient's prognosis aggravated him. "For how long I can't say but *this* won't kill him."

Doc applied a topical medicine and began wrapping up Mario's arm. The bandage glowed like a star against his iodine-stained skin. Doc retrieved a syringe and an antibiotic from his bag and gave Mario a shot in his other arm.

"That should be all the antibiotics you need unless you do something stupid

again. Your ribs need to be rewrapped but someone here can do it. I need to get back to the health center.” Doc looked at Walter. “Call if you need me,” he said, but it sounded more like a threat than an offer. He took his leave, barking at Connor for good measure as he passed him.

Miranda saw four small red carriers on Walter’s desk. “That’s the serum?”

“Yeah,” Mario said, his voice so low it was almost a whisper.

Miranda looked at him. Mario had done it again, something only he could do, to save the human race. If by some miracle their mission succeeded children everywhere would be raised on tales of his bravery. Reduced to a bedtime story, he would become a noble, even tragic, figure. That she had borne so much of its brunt would never be mentioned.

And what if it was, she thought. What could describe the pain of believing the lie and learning the truth? A sour acid taste filled her mouth as a wave of nausea hit her. She looked at Connor. He still stood by the door, his mouth twisted by a frown.

“Looks like we’re in business,” she said.

AS MIRANDA LOOKED at the grim faces around the table, a sense of unreality crept over her. She was so exhausted her fingernails ached. Her head pounded. She needed to sleep. Just half an hour, thirty short minutes to close her eyes and lapse into oblivion, but that was not going to happen. It had seemed so simple when Father Walter first told her the plan. Now everything was spinning out of control.

She reached for a lock of hair to twirl around her finger before she remembered it was gone. The clippers had seen to that. She ran her hand over her head, the quarter inch of peach fuzz that was left felt soft against her palm. Serious missions meant serious hair. She'd seen too many people get caught by zombies because they refused to cut long hair.

"Here's the deal," Doug said. The expedition members were huddled around a camp table in the staging area. A creased map of the Santa Cruz mountains was spread out and taped down at the corners. A few feet away, the supplies and weapons they weren't taking with them were being distributed. Miranda had to strain to hear over the noise.

"We need to get here." Doug jabbed at a red circle on the map. "The lab is on the old UC Santa Cruz campus."

"Is that even behind their city walls?" Seffie asked.

Doug shook his head. "No, but the area is heavily fortified. Only a handful of people know the exact location." He cast a disgusted glance out the garage entrance. "The telemetry from the reconnaissance drones is terrible because of

the weather, no surprise there. What we do know is the pavement is shot; some parts of the road are at least partially if not totally washed out, and there are several rock slides we need to get around.”

“And it’s dark and pissing rain. What’s the bad news?”

Connor’s friend, Mike Sealy, sported a smile that grew wider with the muffled laughter his smart-ass question prompted. Mike had made a very obvious point of talking to both Miranda and Mario a few minutes ago. The former Marine was still a professional.

Doug continued, this time with a grin. “Each of you has five vials of vaccine serum that you’ll carry. The coating we put on them will keep them cold. It’s tough but not indestructible. If you crack it, the contents of that vial will be useless in an hour. Make sure you know where everyone else is carrying theirs. None of us are carrying in the same spot. Mine’s in my vest.”

Miranda saw everyone but Mike unconsciously reach for their allotment of serum. I hope this doesn’t come down to playing poker, she thought, wondering what her own tell was.

“Based on older telemetry, one thing we do have going for us is there are very few choke points from cars in the southbound lanes,” Doug said.

“But isn’t south away from here?” asked Seffie.

“It is,” Miranda said, “but before KFOG went off the air, they were reporting that San Jose had a defensible perimeter. People were trying to get away from the cities everywhere else, but not here.”

“Then why didn’t they use all the lanes?” Seffie asked.

“Because most people are law-abiding sheep, even when it kills them,” Mario muttered.

Beside her, Miranda felt Connor bristle. His animosity toward Mario was palpable. The habit of contradicting whatever Mario said was so ingrained it was all she could do to hold her tongue, but she had to put that aside. The mission came first.

Mario brooded from the other side of the table. He was the only person sitting down. Miranda tried to ignore him but the bruises on his face were the vivid purples and blues of a gathering storm, and all the more pronounced

because of his appalling pallor. She found herself wishing she had not hit him quite so hard.

Fractured ribs, a couple good belts, a gunshot wound, and I'd look like hell, too. He shouldn't be coming; he's going to slow us down. I know he can't stay in San Jose, but I don't know why Father Walter thinks Henry needs his help. Once Henry has the serum, he can do the rest.

"How old is the last reliable telemetry that gives us any idea how many zombies are up there?"

The question came from Naomi Culpepper, their medic. The young woman's no-nonsense attitude gave her an authoritative presence, despite her age. Naomi looked like a pale china doll—rosebud lips, translucent milky skin, sky-blue eyes, and short blond hair. She only came to Miranda's shoulder, which had surprised Miranda when Naomi fell in beside her for the briefing. She moved and spoke with such confidence that she did not seem small until you got right up next to her.

"It's too heavily forested up there for anything we have to be very reliable," Doug replied. "There's always zombie activity up there. It'll probably be bad."

"Is it possible we're wrong about that?" Naomi asked. "It's been abandoned for years, at least from this side. If there's no food for them, maybe the zombies have moved off."

"What about Salinas?" Connor asked her. "No one has lived there in a decade and there were so many zombies we almost didn't make it out."

"Even if we get lucky with the zombies, we still have the weather to contend with," Mario added. "It's been pouring for almost twenty-four hours and if it keeps up, there will be more mudslides."

Gabe Rivera, the gunner, smirked. "This is a one-way trip for you no matter what."

Gabe's voice was full of youthful swagger that bordered on insolence. He reminded Miranda of a shiny brown colt, all knees and elbows and too much energy, and he was pretty full of himself. Then again, there were very few people who could claim to be a crack shot at sixteen hundred meters on a mounted fifty cal gun.

Gabe's dark eyes assessed Mario. "Either we get there, or we don't. If we make it, you're never coming back, and if we don't, your biggest problem will be finding brains for dinner."

Mario rolled his eyes. "Thanks for clearing that up."

Doug began speaking again. Miranda heard Gabe, who stood on the other side of Naomi, whisper, "El Jefe better watch his step. I don't care what the padres say, thousands of people have turned because of him."

"Any more questions?" Doug said.

"I have one," Mike said. He pointed to Miranda and Mario. "Are these two going to be able to work together? Getting killed is one thing. Getting killed because they don't have their heads in the game is another."

Miranda forced herself to keep breathing as a burning flush colored her face. She had vowed she would leave everything at the door once they were underway and the question, however humiliating, was a fair one.

"Yeah, about that," Doug answered. "Obviously the situation with Miranda and Mario is less than ideal."

"Less than ideal?" Miranda blurted. She looked at Mike, who stood beside Mario. "If it's mission critical, I will take a bullet or get eaten by zombies to keep him alive. Beyond that—"

A smile twitched across Mario's lips before he schooled it away. He finds this amusing, she thought, incredulous. The desire to slap the vanished grin off his face was so intense that she lost her train of thought.

"I'll take a bullet *and* get eaten by zombies," Mario said.

It was such a childish thing to say, the kind of silly stake-raising they had teased one another with once. But if she rebuked him, it only showed that there was a problem. She sucked the insides of her cheeks between her teeth to keep her mouth shut.

"Satisfied?" Doug asked Mike.

Mike shrugged. "It'll have to do. No offense to either of you, but I had to ask."

"None taken," she and Mario replied simultaneously. The sound of their voices so in sync made Miranda cringe.

Doug scrutinized everyone around the table. The look in his eyes was so intense they seemed to glow.

“Our mission objective is simple. We are to deliver Mario and the serum to the Santa Cruz lab, then catch a boat at the harbor. But we’re leaving at night, in the first big winter storm, and we might be pursued. The stakes have been raised from difficult to almost impossible. The only thing you need to know is that I am getting to Santa Cruz alive. I will successfully execute this mission. If any of you have doubts about how you’re going to get there, do us all a favor and back out now.”

The table was quiet. The clamor of the activity around them filled the silence.

Doug grinned. “That’s what I thought.”

The Mission Church bell began to peal once more. Miranda saw Father Walter and several other priests over Doug’s shoulder. Father Walter had a handgun on either hip. The barrel of an assault rifle peeked over his shoulder. Miranda had not seen him suited up like that in a long time. He almost looked like a different person.

“Are you ready to go?” Walter asked.

“Just finished up,” Doug answered.

“Then we’ll bless you and off you go. We have a report that the Council’s forces have mustered at City Hall.”

Father Walter motioned everyone around the table toward him. The garage grew quiet.

“In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” Walter began, making the Sign of the Cross. He held his hands high toward the small group before him. “Holy Father, we ask that you bless and keep our comrades as they begin their journey. The peril they face is grave. We turn to You, we trust in You and Your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, to guide and protect them.”

Miranda reached for Connor’s hand. He turned his head just enough to murmur in her ear. “We’re going to do this, Miri, and then it’ll be you and me. We can leave all this other crap behind.”

He meant to be comforting, but Connor’s words made Miranda uneasy. This

‘other crap’ was her life.

“With Your guidance, we will lead Your children out of this terrible age of terror and death,” Walter said. “May the Love of Christ protect and guide these brave men and women as they set forth. See them safely home to You, Lord, in this life and the life to come. Amen.”

A ripple of ‘Amens’ and hasty Signs of the Cross swept through the room. Then the frantic activity started anew as if it had never stopped.

Miranda turned to Connor. “I have to go say goodbye.”

Connor leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I’ll save you a seat.”

Miranda threaded her way through the crowd. She saw Mario saying goodbye to Emily, who cried like someone had died. Might not be too far off, Miranda thought. The only person she wanted to see less than Mario just now was Emily. She did not have the emotional energy to spare. Thankful she had not attracted their attention, Miranda made her way to Father Walter. She tugged on his arm to get his attention.

“I guess this is it,” she said when Walter had turned to face her.

“Not too angry to say goodbye?”

A lump filled Miranda’s throat. She looked into Father Walter’s kind, plain face, plain except for his startling hazel eyes, and was suddenly sorry she could not stay to fight beside him.

“Not too angry,” she murmured as they embraced. Tears began to spill down her cheeks. “I’d never leave without telling you I love you, no matter how mad I am.” Miranda thought of her mother. She had learned that lesson the hard way.

Walter held her tight. “I love you too, a ghrá. And I’m sorry for what we did, truly. I’d do it differently if I could, but...” He loosened his grip and stepped away, grasping her shoulders in his hands. “Stay alive, d’ya hear me? Don’t be after doing anything stupid.”

Miranda began to laugh despite her tears. “Stupid like what I’m doing, or just stupider?”

Walter’s smile faded. He ran his hand over her peach-fuzzed head. “You know what I mean.”

Miranda nodded, dashing the tears away. “You better be here when I get

back.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. You’re the best daughter I never had.”

Miranda watched after Walter for a moment as he melted into the crowd, then blew out a deep breath.

All right then.

She crossed the garage and looked up the ramp. At the top, Mario climbed into the second Humvee, careful and deliberate as an old man. Naomi slammed the door shut after him. As Miranda stepped into the rain, a hand caught her arm.

“Wait!”

Emily radiated misery. Not just from her puffy face and bloodshot eyes, but from every inch of her body. Miranda’s heart began to race. What was she supposed to say, a minute before she left? When they were both busy pretending everything was normal, it had been easy, but now?

“You okay, Em?”

“Of course I’m not.”

Emily looked down at the wet concrete, up at the ceiling, anywhere but at Miranda for more than two seconds. She seemed small and frail, like a beaten dog.

She’s just as scared as I am, Miranda thought with a start.

“You must be so angry,” Emily said, her voice barely more than a whisper. Miranda had to step closer to hear. “I didn’t know, Miranda. I didn’t know, I swear I didn’t. When I thought he switched sides it was terrible, but I wasn’t in love with him. I rationalized staying because of Michael, but the truth is I would have anyway. I couldn’t give up how safe he made me feel, even then.”

Panic began to rise in Miranda’s chest. Why was Emily telling her this? *She feels sorry for me. After everything I’ve done, she feels sorry for me.*

Tears coursed down Emily’s face. “I know he’s never coming back, Miri. Even if he survives, he can never come back. I need to tell you in case you don’t, either. I need to tell you I’m sorry.”

Miranda stared at Emily. “You’re sorry?”

Now that the dam had broken, Emily could not hold back the deluge. “I should have let him go, but I was too afraid. Mario made me feel safe and that

was what I wanted. It was the only thing I wanted. You always took care of me, worried about hurting me, but I never cared that I hurt you, or him. He finally told me he couldn't live a lie anymore and I—”

Emily stopped. Her eyes lowered to the rain sheeting down the ramp.

“He what?” Even now, after all that had happened, Miranda could not believe he had ignored her wishes by considering leaving his wife.

“I’m sorry, Miranda.”

“What did you do?” The question slipped out, even though Miranda was certain she did not want the answer.

Emily just shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Miranda’s head felt like a top, spinning, spinning, spinning. What could Emily have done that she was so ashamed of? She was the only blameless party to the whole mess. Miranda looked up the ramp and was almost surprised to see the Humvees were still there.

“I have to go.”

Emily grabbed her arm. Miranda jerked away, as if Emily’s touch scalded, but Emily held fast.

“He still loves you, Miranda. You should forgive him if you can.”

Miranda ripped her arm away so hard she stumbled into the rain. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she spat.

Emily’s face was weighed down with regret. “And you haven’t lived with him for the last five years. You should forgive yourself, too.”

Miranda didn’t know what to say. She turned away and walked up the ramp. She never looked back.

GABE RIVERA SQUATTED DOWN from the gun turret, rain dripping from his waterproof jacket. “We going dark?”

“Yeah,” Miranda said.

She flipped the bulky night-vision goggles down over her eyes. The world around her lit up in shades of day-bright fluorescent green and black. Dilapidated buildings lined both sides of the wide road. Cars littered the street. Weeds and trees sprouted from cracks in the pavement and zombies wandered around them. Not a lot, not yet. A decoy vehicle had gone out ahead of them to draw zombies in the area north, but the longer they were out, the more zombies they would attract.

Miranda had done a good job of not thinking about anything by slipping into frosty mode. Her friend Ellen, the nurse practitioner, had told her that what she called frosty would be classified as a mildly dissociative state. Miranda didn’t worry about it. Shrinks seemed to think if they could give something a name and a set of symptoms, it must be unhealthy, but people with enough time on their hands to care about that sort of thing never ventured beyond the safe zones. Unhealthy in safe places kept you alive in dangerous ones.

But now, Emily’s words echoed in her head, demanding that she pay attention to them. *He still loves you, Miranda. You should forgive him if you can.* Miranda did not know what she had expected Emily to say, but it had not been that. When she and Mario had been together, Emily had managed to let Miranda know that she knew without ever acknowledging it, so neither had Miranda.

They simply carried on.

When did he decide to leave her? Miranda had made Mario promise that he would never leave Emily. She wouldn't have been able to live with herself if Emily had fallen apart again. It was the one thing she had insisted on, and the only thing they had argued about as bitterly.

Did he love me that much?

Delilah nuzzled against her neck as if she could sense Miranda's distracted reverie. Miranda snapped back to attention. She looked at Connor in the driver's seat in front of her and felt more confused and conflicted than ever. *You idiot... Keep this shit up and you won't make it to Los Gatos.*

She gnawed on her lower lip when she thought about the reserve fuel tanks. The front Humvee that she rode in had one twenty-gallon tank at the rear; the Humvee that followed them had four. Even though the fuel tanks were armored, the reserve fuel was a terrible risk in a firefight, but they had to take it. Humvees were one of the best vehicles for the terrain they faced but with gas mileage at twelve miles per gallon—at best—they might not make it to Santa Cruz otherwise. If they had to take a detour on the circuitous mountain roads, they might need more fuel.

The next hour passed almost in silence. As they approached the main commercial area of what had once been the Town of Los Gatos, the Humvee slowed. At first, Miranda thought Connor was navigating around an obstacle or zombie, but then they stopped.

"Why are you stopping?" Doug asked.

Connor turned in his seat just as the comm crackled to life. "Because they did."

"Alpha, we're dragging something. We need to take a look, over."

"Miranda and I will join you, over," Doug said. He put the comm back in its cradle and surveyed the street. "This is a bad place to stop," he said. "Come on, Miri, time to sing for your supper. Connor, keep the engine warm."

Miranda stepped into a puddle that reached her ankles. She shut the door to stop Delilah from following her, then tipped her head back to look up at Gabe. Rain pelted her forehead. "Eyes sharp, Gabe."

She took a slow look around, up and down the row of shops along the once upscale shopping district. The area was surprisingly clear of zombies, but Doug was right, it *was* a bad place to stop. The two-story buildings that lined both sides of the street created a narrow, man-made canyon. The number of abandoned and rusting cars in the street could make a quick exit difficult.

Miranda stepped around the back corner of the Humvee just as Doug did the same from the other side.

“Let’s see what the kids have done now,” he said.

Miranda smiled as they walked to the Bravo Humvee, which had stopped a hundred feet behind them. From not far away, she could hear zombies moan.

“You would think they’d get tired of doing that all the time,” she said.

Doug laughed softly. “You’d think they’d get tired of eating the same thing all the time, too, but you’d be wrong.”

The front passenger door swung open when they reached the other Humvee and Mike Sealy, resembling a miniature mountain, got out. Mike wasn’t wearing his night goggles and carried a Maglite. “It’s a piece of scrap metal, to judge by the sound,” he said without preamble. Seffie got out of the Humvee and stood by the driver’s door.

“Miranda, watch our perimeter,” Doug said, “Seffie, stay where you are in case we have to move. I’ll help Mike.”

Miranda nodded, then began a circuit around the Humvee.

Even after a decade, it was still apparent that Los Gatos had been an expensive place to live before the ZA. In the green-black shadows of broken out windows, Miranda saw movement. A gaunt frame lurched forward, followed by another. The moaning grew louder.

“Shamblers at your four and six, fifty yards,” Miranda said as she passed Doug. His feet stuck out from under the rear bumper. Mike was around the corner beside the rear tire, half under the Humvee feet first, kicking.

“We’ve almost got it,” Mike grunted. “Come on, you SOB.”

Miranda nodded, even though they could not see. She glanced in the window of the rear door. Mario leaned back in his seat, eyes closed. Even though the night-vision goggles washed out details, she could see dark rings beneath his

eyes. His head was cocked toward Naomi. Whatever she said was amusing, to judge from his grin.

He doesn't waste any time... Already yukking it up with the twenty-three-year-old, Miranda thought.

"We've got company on my side," Seffie said. "We need to move it, guys."

Miranda continued circling the Humvee and stopped beside Seffie at the driver's door. There were about twenty zombies now, and more were straggling out. Then she heard a hiss. A high whine, descending, trailing. Blistering heat, the roar of combustion, the sharp bite of debris against her skin. Miranda thumped flat on her back; the air in her lungs whooshed out. An impossibly bright light overwhelmed her retinas.

"RPG! Get down! Get down!"

A deafening *chung-chung-chung-chung* filled the air as the .50 cal gun on the Alpha Humvee returned fire. Miranda rolled over, ripping the useless night-vision goggles off. All she could see were bright-yellow spots. She crawled toward the Humvee, gasping, choking, drowning. She couldn't get enough air.

As she blinked her eyes, her vision began to clear. A crater smoldered twenty feet behind the Bravo Humvee. She crawled toward it, stopping at the rear bumper. Intermittent bright flashes, fifteen at least, came from second-story shop windows in the next block.

"They're behind us, a hundred yards," Miranda tried to shout, but it came out as a gasp. She backed up and bumped against something. Seffie lay on the ground, moaning, blood drifting and diluting across the wet concrete from a gash on her forehead. Miranda pressed her hand on Seffie's neck. Relief flooded through her when she felt a pulse, strong and steady, as Seffie's eyelids began to flutter open. The door beside Miranda opened and Naomi ducked out, carrying her medic bag.

"I've got it," Naomi said.

Precise shots rang out, too close for comfort. Miranda looked up to see Mario firing from the open rear door. The leading edge of zombies were ten feet away. Attracted by the commotion, scores more were behind them. She flinched away from another explosion as Doug and Mike dashed toward them. Doug

shouted to be heard over the noise. “Get in there and drive! A direct hit will blow this thing up.”

Miranda nodded and scrambled up. Naomi was pulling Seffie, now semiconscious, to her feet to hand her off to Mario.

“I’ll get her,” Miranda said. She jerked her head toward the front passenger seat on the far side. “Get in!”

Before Naomi could release her grip, Miranda heard the hiss. She shoved Seffie back at Naomi. “Move!”

Miranda clamped her hand around Mario’s forearm, adrenaline and fear propelling them forward. They were halfway across the short distance between the two Humvees when the RPG hit. The thunderous blast shook the ground. A shockwave hit from behind, knocking them from their feet. Mario scrambled and jerked Miranda up.

“Keep going!” she said, shaking him off. She turned back to the towering pillar of fire that seconds ago had been the Bravo Humvee. The yellow-white flames raced skyward, fueling a funnel of oily black smoke. The air sizzled and cracked. A fine mist from the evaporating rain billowed around the burning wreck. Seffie and Naomi were crumpled on the ground, Naomi’s jacket aflame.

Oblivious to the blazing landscape, zombies closed in as Miranda sprinted to the injured women. A brown blur of furious barking and teeth darted between the wounded and the zombies as Delilah joined them. Seffie crawled to her knees. Miranda beat at the back of Naomi’s jacket with her bare hands as she rolled the young medic on her back to smother the flames. Delilah clamped on to the fallen woman’s shoulder and began to drag her.

I can’t save them both, Miranda thought. Then Connor was beside her, scooping Seffie up and hoisting her over his shoulder. Miranda did likewise, groaning as she shouldered Naomi’s weight.

The nonstop staccato of the .50 cal gun grew louder. Miranda splashed across the wet, uneven pavement. When she fell a few paces behind Delilah, the dog circled back, snapping and growling at the undead pursuers. Connor had shoved Seffie into the front of the Humvee and was already behind the wheel. Delilah vaulted across his lap to safety. Miranda shrugged Naomi into the back seat, but

there was no more room. She stepped onto the running board and banged on the roof.

“Go go go,” she shouted, grabbing hold of the open door as zombies closed in from all sides.

The Humvee jerked forward, colliding and crunching over the zombies in its path. Bones popped and snapped. Miranda lost her balance when her foot slid on the slick running board, but a hand grabbed her vest. She instinctively began to slap it away before realizing it was Mario. Regaining her footing, Miranda jammed the Humvee door out to knock the undead back. She finally located the handhold inside the open door and snapped her carabiner in place.

The rain lashed Miranda’s face. She squinted her eyes almost shut while bushes and tall weeds slapped against the Humvee door. They were turning onto Highway 17 now, bumping heavily over the broken concrete. She twisted round to look behind them. She didn’t see anyone pursuing them apart from the zombies that continued to blunder across the road.

“I need a tourniquet strap!” Doug shouted from inside the Humvee.

Mario pulled on her vest. “Get in.”

Miranda collapsed into Mario’s lap and slammed the door shut. When she wiped her hand across her face, it stung as if badly sunburned. An acrid burnt smell filled the vehicle.

“I think my eyebrows are singed off,” she said. Her fingers moved over her face. They hurt as well. When she lowered her hands, she saw small blisters across her fingers and palms.

“Are they following?” Mario asked. Gabe was still up on the .50 cal gun, his feet pulled up on a footrest next to Mario’s head. Mike sat on the other side, catching his breath.

“No.”

“Mike, put your hand here and press hard.”

Doug’s voice came from behind her. He knelt over Naomi in the rear cargo area, crammed into the twelve inches of free space between the back seats and supplies. Mike reached through the space between the seats to press on the blood-soaked bandages halfway up the unconscious woman’s thigh.

“Shrapnel must have nicked her femoral artery,” Doug said. “If a tourniquet doesn’t stop the bleeding, she won’t make it.”

Mario shook his head, a grim expression filling his eyes. He was likely thinking the same thing Miranda was: seriously injured, Naomi was a liability they could not afford. Even if they got her out of her blood-soaked clothes, between blood loss and burns, her chances of survival were poor unless they got her back to San Jose, the one place they could not go. Zombies had a better sense of smell than dogs when it came to human blood. Whatever slim chance they had of getting through the mountains would vanish if Naomi was with them.

“Doug,” Miranda said. “We cannot take care of her out here.”

As if to underscore her words, the Humvee lurched. Connor swore, then backed up and tried again.

“There are doctors in Santa Cruz,” Doug said as he wrapped a strap around Naomi’s leg, just above Mike’s hand. He tied a thin metal tube into the strap and started turning it. “We only have to keep her stable until we get there.”

For the first time, Miranda noticed that Doug was not wearing his waterproof jacket. Both of his forearms were starting to blister. Doug finished twisting the tourniquet and tied it in place.

“The bleeding’s stopped,” he said, relief filling his voice. He wiped his hand across his brow, leaving a bloody streak in its wake. “There used to be houses and park buildings by the Lexington Reservoir. We’ll go there and regroup.”

Miranda nodded. “That might work. It’s not too far off the road, but far enough, in case they follow us.”

Doug raised his voice. “Get off at Bear Creek and head for the reservoir.”

Connor gave a thumbsup.

Doug looked down at his blistered arms, surprise filling his face. “Who else is hurt?”

“I’ve got burns,” Mike said through clenched teeth. “Hurts like a son of a bitch. You okay, Sef?”

“I might need a few stitches. The dog seems fine,” she added, failing to deflect a lick from Delilah.

A chorus of ‘okays’ from Miranda, Connor, and Mario completed the

inventory. Doug slumped against the back of Miranda and Mario's seat.

"What happened to your jacket?" Miranda asked.

"It caught on fire," Doug said. "I guess that's how I got burned."

"The big med kit was in the other Humvee. We've only got the smaller one, plus whatever we're carrying," said Mario.

Doug's brittle laughter filled the cramped vehicle. "That's great. That's just fucking great." He rubbed at his forehead again before adding quietly, "Might try praying, guys. It can't hurt."

THE STRETCH of road leading up to the reservoir was completely overgrown. Road was too generous a description. It was more like a washed-out mud track overrun with nature's version of barbed wire. But there was a house just ahead that they had almost missed from the highway. Others might miss it altogether. Miranda could see its dim outline, a dark shape against a darker background.

Her shoulders felt like they were on fire. She lifted a heavy arm to hack at prickly brambles as tall as the Humvee's roof. Muscle memory—lift and swing, strike and cut—was the only thing that kept her moving forward. She winced with every swipe of the machete; her blistered palms and fingers had long since been rubbed raw. Along with Connor and Doug, she had hacked at the thicket of thorns and briars for half an hour, breaking it down just enough for the Humvee to nudge its way through. Finally, impossibly, the thicket began to thin.

"I think we're through the worst of it," Connor said.

Miranda pushed through the brambles to stand beside him in what passed for a clearing compared to the thorny hedge. Clumps of grass as tall as a man grew in the semi-open space, whipped in all directions by the wind and rain. A simple clapboard house sagged on the far side of the clearing. Behind the house, closer to the water, stood a collapsing garage.

"Thank you, God," Miranda whispered. She sheathed her machete and began to wipe at her forehead, then caught herself. It was not likely to make any difference for more than a second. She drew her handgun instead. It felt too light in her hand compared to the Desert Eagle she had lost in the crash on the

Expressway. Her hands hurt so much and her arms were so tired that she wouldn't have had the strength to hold the Desert Eagle anyway.

A moment later Doug caught up to them, looking like he'd been on the losing side of a fight with a pissed-off cat.

"Scout ahead to the water's edge. I'll tell the others to drive through," he said. He turned and disappeared into the brambles.

"You heard the man," Miranda said, trading a tired glance with Connor. They set off toward the house. Thorns snagged at Miranda's pants. Dead branches reached up from the ground, tripping her. Miranda stopped once, cocking her head to the side to listen, but only heard the rain. She wished she still had the night-vision goggles she had tossed aside in the chaos of the ambush.

They approached the house cautiously. The front door stood ajar.

"Let's shut the doors and clear the garage first. It's smaller and we can do it quickly, then come back to this after we wash off," Connor said, his voice low. He produced a bungee cord from a pocket on his vest. Miranda kept her gun trained on the door. After a few cautious steps forward, he snatched the doorknob and tied the door shut. Then they separated, Miranda on one side and Connor the other, before meeting again at the back porch.

"Nothing on my side," Miranda reported.

"Mine neither, and the back door is locked," Connor said. He leaned against a peeling porch rail. "You up for this, Miri?"

"Are you?" Miranda could not see his shadowed face well but was sure Connor was smiling from the slight shake of his head. She could hear the reservoir now, the water lapping against the land. She wanted to leap into its chilly depths, surrender her blood-contaminated clothes to its cleansing waters. So close, so near, the pull so strong it was almost unbearable.

They headed for the garage instead. The doors hung open, one almost off its hinges. A sweeping flash of light engulfed them, then passed. The Humvee was through the brambles.

Miranda reached into her vest pocket, ignoring the flare of pain when her raw hands curled around the flashlight. She switched the flashlight on, then crossed the wrist of her hand that held her gun over her flashlight hand. Connor

did the same. They stepped inside the doors and swiveled in opposite directions. Utility shelves, rusted and brittle, littered the floor. Paint cans, tools, a ladder, and lawn chairs lay askew amongst puddles from the leaking roof.

“There’s just a bunch of crap over here,” she said, relieved.

Still, they picked their way through the debris, just to be sure. If a legless zombie lay hidden in the debris, they had to find it. It would start to moan with prey so near, and that would bring a stampede of the undead to their doorstep. By the time they finished and propped the doors shut, the Humvee had parked nearby. Delilah ran to Miranda from the water’s edge, where everyone was shedding their clothes. Everyone but Naomi, who lay inert on the ground, rolled onto her side. Miranda gave the pit bull a perfunctory pat on the head before she and Connor joined in, ripping off their boots and clothes, emptying the contents of their pockets into jumbled piles.

“Put all the clothes together. We’ll wash them all at once,” Doug said.

Miranda’s breath sucked from her lungs as she plunged beneath the frigid surface. Tiny needles of cold pierced her skin. She rubbed at the blood that had seeped through her clothes. The water made her hands hurt even more. Delilah doggie-paddled nearby, not a care in the world.

Miranda emerged from the water a few minutes later, shivering uncontrollably. The air felt downright balmy now, in sharp contrast to the soaked bra and panties that clung to her gooseflesh-prickled skin. She squatted next to Naomi and began to unlace her boots with clumsy fingers. A second later, Doug joined her.

“Leave this to me,” Miranda said. “I’ll get started on the clothes. The house still needs to be cleared and my hands are a mess. I’m not sure how good I’ll be with a gun.”

“No worries, Miri,” Doug said with a wink.

She watched his retreating form, pale and tall and skinny. She could count every rib, pick out every joint. *You’d never think he’s so strong*, she thought, thankful for his ability to do just the right thing—a snappy response, a saucy wink—to raise her failing spirits.

Miranda pulled the boot off Naomi’s foot and began unlacing the other. She

looked up to see Doug, Connor, and Seffie creeping toward the house in their skivvies and boots, armed with crowbars and rocks. To her left, Mike was dragging supplies out of the Humvee and stacking them next to the garage.

Miranda started to roll Naomi onto her stomach.

“Hold on, let me put this down.” Mario laid a wet vest on the ground under Naomi’s tourniqueted leg. “I started on the clothes. This one is clean. Well, cleaner.”

They rolled Naomi onto her stomach. Scorched flesh mingled with the oily smell of soot filled Miranda’s nostrils. She switched on her small flashlight.

“Oh Jesus.”

The back of Naomi’s jacket and the top of her pants had burned away. Her exposed back was charred black beneath her shoulder blades, interspersed with white and red cracks. Above her shoulder blades, there was no skin, just red and leathery flesh to the base of her skull.

“Goddammit,” Mario hissed.

Miranda wanted to look away but could not. Third degree burns from ass to neck. She was as good as dead.

Miranda ripped her eyes away from Naomi’s mangled flesh. “What medical supplies do we have left?”

“I don’t think there’s much point, Miranda.”

Mario touched her arm. A simple gesture meant to comfort, but she realized Mario was almost naked, and so was she. Her heart began to beat faster in a mixture of panic and—to her horror—attraction. His brown eyes held hers like a magnet, a flicker of recognition, longing, hope flashed in their depths.

“How bad is it?”

Miranda jerked back to reality, pulling her arm with her. Mike had crouched by Naomi’s head, a bucket in hand. He looked at them, expectant.

“It’s bad,” Miranda said, acutely aware of how close Mario was to her. She shifted away, hoping Mike would not notice.

When Miranda did not elaborate, Mike looked to Mario.

“Third degree burns all over her back,” he said. “I don’t think she’ll last very long.”

“Shit,” Mike said. He nodded to them before walking on to the water’s edge, filling the bucket, and heading back to the Humvee.

Miranda started to cut off Naomi’s pants, steeling herself against whatever Mario might say next, but Doug called out softly, “The house is clear.”

The hustle was on to finish rinsing out their clothes, wash blood from the Humvee, tally supplies, and cover what tracks they might have left behind. Half the ammo and most of the blankets and medical supplies were lost. They still had the C-4, but no fuses to ignite it. All five of Naomi’s and two of Seffie’s vials of vaccine serum had been smashed during the attack. Four of Miranda’s five vials had cracked protective coatings and were ruined. They were down to twenty-nine vials from the original forty in less than two hours.

Miranda walked up the staircase to the second story of their hidey hole, Delilah on her heels. The adrenaline rush from the attack had worn off, leaving her suspended between almost incapacitating exhaustion and paranoid hypervigilance. Gabe stood on the landing at the top of the stairs, whittling a small tree branch into a stake. Behind him, the door to a bedroom was cracked open. A sliver of light that flickered and leaped, leaking into the hall.

“You have watch?”

“Yeah,” Gabe said, pausing his knife mid-stroke. His face was a shadowy imitation of his earlier cocky assurance. “Doug has watch at the front door.”

“I know,” Miranda said, holding up her bandaged hands. “He just cleaned and wrapped these up.”

“Not a look that inspires confidence, chiquita.”

Miranda shrugged. “You saved us back there, Gabe.”

“We got our asses kicked.”

“It would have been a lot worse without you on that gun.”

“Keep an eye on her for me, all right? Naomi’s my girl.” From his tone, Miranda knew he did not mean it romantically. What Gabe was talking about was much deeper.

“This isn’t your fault, Gabe. It just happened.”

“I should have taken them out.”

“Don’t go there.” Miranda touched his arm. “She wouldn’t want you to.”

“She’s not dead,” Gabe snapped, shaking Miranda off. “Don’t talk like that.”

Mentally, Miranda kicked herself. She looked Gabe in the eye, hoping he would see her sincerity. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” he muttered. “It’s just...”

“I know.”

Miranda walked up to the crack of light and pushed against the door. Rusted hinges squawked in protest. The musty room was warm from the fire in the fireplace; pieces of furniture fed its hungry flames. The curtains on the windows were moldered but intact. The smell of oil hung thick in the air from everyone’s chain mail being re-oiled to keep it from rusting after their dip in the reservoir. Naomi lay on her stomach on a narrow single bed against the wall, an army blanket draped over her. Everyone else was huddled around the fireplace, where steaming clothes hung from the simple mantle like Christmas stockings.

Connor stepped aside from his place by the fire as Miranda approached. She took his spot and sank to the floor. Delilah wriggled past her and edged as close as she could to the fire’s warmth to stretch out on the hearth.

“We can’t take her with us,” Mike said. His intense expression seemed to sharpen his rounded features. “She’s got third degree burns all over the back of her body.”

“We can’t just leave her here,” Connor protested. “She’ll die for sure!”

“She’s going to die no matter what. I wouldn’t even be in the same building with her except those brambles outside are so thick, and the rain will mask our scent,” Mike said. “I’m telling you, man, we cannot take her with us.”

Seffie kept her eyes trained on the gun she cleaned with an oily cloth. “I’d be worried about the Padre not wanting to leave her behind, but she’s not gonna make it through the night.”

Miranda listened to them argue as the fire’s warmth rolled over her. Her clothes, still wet from being rinsed out, began to steam. She should care about what they were saying, but she was so tired, and the fire was so warm.

“Are we going to leave Mario behind, too?” Connor asked. “He’s seriously injured. He might even be bleeding again.”

Miranda snapped back to alertness. Connor wasn’t serious, but a spike of

anxiety rushed through her. The idea of leaving Mario behind made her stomach heave.

Mike scoffed at Connor. "It's not the same thing and you know it. Mario's injuries aren't life-threatening. He's ambulatory. He's not broiled like a goddamn burger!"

"I'm sitting right here," Mario interjected mildly. "It's almost four a.m. and we'll be here three, maybe four hours. Let's get some sleep."

Miranda could not help but notice how worn Mario looked, yet he was also calmer than either Mike or Connor. It's like he takes this in stride, she thought, wondering how that could be. It's Mario, she reminded herself, he doesn't care about anyone but himself.

"Whatever we do is Doug's call, not ours. He's mission leader," Mike said as he stood up. "I'm going to join him on watch."

"Work on him is more like it," Connor muttered.

Expendng the energy to stand was more than Miranda could manage. She lay on the floor with her head near the fire. She could see Naomi from where she lay. She shut her eyes. She didn't want to think about Naomi.

A hand touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes and turned toward Connor's voice.

"You okay?" he whispered.

"Yeah," she whispered back, turning on her side to face him. "Are you?"

Connor didn't answer right away. "What do you think we should do?"

She had to fight to not bite her lip. If she did that, he'd know she was lying. "I don't know, Connor."

"You think we should leave her, don't you? You just don't want to say it."

Miranda squeezed his hand in hers. "I don't want to leave Naomi," she said, meaning it, "but I don't see how we can take her with us. If she could move on her own, that would be one thing, but she can't. And Seffie's right, she probably won't make it to morning."

"And if she does?"

Why can't he let this go? Unless we turn back, she's going to die and we can't go back, not now.

Her thoughts must have shown on her face, for Connor said, “I can’t believe you think it’s okay to abandon her, Miri.”

Miranda felt torn between wanting to soothe Connor and wanting to tell him to grow up. “We’ve barely slept the last forty-eight hours,” she said, too tired to defend herself. “Try to get some sleep.”

Miranda turned over. Connor slipped his hand over her waist and tucked his knees behind her own. She was grateful for the warmth of his body next to hers, the soothing feel of his breath against the back of her neck. On the other side of the fireplace, Seffie was already out. Miranda looked at the stitches on Seffie’s forehead and tried to remember how long was too long for someone with a head injury to sleep. It can’t be much more than a few hours, and we’ll be up by then, she decided.

Naomi’s raspy shallow breathing was audible now that everyone was settling down to sleep. Mario leaned over Naomi and checked her pulse. He pursed his lips and for a second, he looked almost stricken, but his face went blank when he realized Miranda was watching. He threw some more wood on the fire and settled himself just inside the net of warmth it cast.

Mario’s eyes glittered in the firelight. He looked at Miranda for a long moment, his expression unreadable, then turned away to face the wall. A few moments later, Delilah left her spot by the fire. She padded up to Mario and began to lick his face.

“Go lay down with your mom,” Miranda heard him whisper, but the little pit bull had a mind of her own. She nestled herself along the line of Mario’s back and would not budge. Miranda shut her eyes. Exhaustion pulled her under.

A NUDGE.

A whisper.

“Miranda.”

Miranda jerked awake. Panic flooded her body. She sat up, gun in hand, looking for the threat.

“It’s okay,” Connor said. He put his hand over hers on the gun’s grip. “We’re getting ready to move out.”

Miranda looked around the murky room. Seffie shoved a blanket into a rucksack and headed for the door. Mario’s voice drifted in from the hall. Faint light seeped between the cracks where the ancient curtains met in the center of the windows. The bright flames and glowing coals in the fireplace were replaced by ashes.

“How long was I asleep? What time is it?”

“Almost four hours, it’s seven.”

Miranda set down her gun and stood, setting off protests from every muscle. Her skin felt clammy, but the first layer of clothes she wore were almost dry. She retrieved her boots from beside the fireplace, hopping first on one foot and then the other as she pulled them on.

“Is it clear of zombies outside?”

Connor nodded. “But it’s foggy. Visibility is terrible.”

Miranda jutted her chin in Naomi’s direction. “How’s she doing?”

Connor shrugged, noncommittal. “I’m going back down. I just wanted to get

you up.”

Miranda started to open her mouth, but Connor was already out the door. She flexed her stiff bandaged hands. They hurt. She flexed them some more. With awkward fingers she tied her boots, donning first her chain mail shirt and then her outer garments.

Miranda did not need to touch Naomi’s flushed forehead to see she had a fever. Blond hair stuck to her sweaty brow. Shallow breaths wheezed in and out of her parted lips. Miranda put fore and middle fingers to Naomi’s neck to check her pulse.

High and thready, she’s burning up.

She squatted down next to the bed and pulled a small flashlight from her pants pocket. She lifted Naomi’s eyelid.

Pupils fixed and dilated. Did something hit her head, too?

Gently, Miranda began to feel Naomi’s head, but after a moment, she stopped. What difference did it make? She looked at the young woman, still covered by the scratchy wool army blanket.

“You’re just a kid,” Miranda whispered. A surge of hopelessness threatened to overwhelm her. They had barely ventured into the mountains and already had lost someone. This wasn’t even the hard part of the journey.

“Heaven has to be better than here. Enjoy it.”

Miranda stepped away from the bed, blinking back tears. She took a few deep breaths, then put aside her sorrow, her apprehension about their chances. She turned to find Mario standing in the doorway.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said, growing angry that he had likely seen her while her guard was down, perhaps even heard what she had said.

Mario walked over to where Naomi lay. Sadness settled on the crow’s feet around his eyes. He leaned over the dying woman and tucked the blanket around her shoulders.

For fuck’s sake, Miranda thought bitterly. Aloud, she said, “There’s no one else here, Mario. You don’t have to put on a show.”

Mario’s astonished face looked into her own when he whirled around to face

her. “What?” he croaked.

“You hardly knew her. If you’re going to pretend you care, at least pick an audience that might believe it.”

Mario’s eyes narrowed. His mouth settled into a hard line. “There always has to be an angle I’m working, is that it? Seeing as how I’m such an evil bastard?”

Miranda’s body thrummed with barely suppressed rage. Mario had not acknowledged the hell he had put her through but had the nerve to stand in front of her misty-eyed over a virtual stranger? She spat her reply as if the words burned her mouth.

“Something like that.”

The ripple started at Mario’s feet and raced up his body. A ripple, a blip, an insignificant thing. It was the only way Miranda could describe the motion that unleashed so much fury.

“Have you thought of anyone but yourself for even a second since you learned the truth?” he snarled. “Have you? Has it even occurred to you to think of anyone but yourself?”

The force of his words felt like a physical attack, sudden and violent. Miranda took a step back, but now Mario was an inch away from her, their noses almost touching.

“Do you know how much blood I have on my hands?” he demanded, eyes blazing. “Do you know how many people died to keep my cover? I killed some of them with my own hands,” he said, raising his hands in front of her face so fast that Miranda flinched away. “They had children, families, and I killed them because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Do you know how many executions I ordered, how many people I let turn into zombies so you can stand there and hurl this *bullshit* at me?”

Miranda wanted to defend herself from Mario’s censure, but instead, she stood frozen. Helpless.

Mario’s voice became a low growl. “What do you think it did to Walter and Doug, watching you self-destruct? When one word could have ended it all, but they couldn’t say it?”

A strangled gasp escaped Miranda’s lips. She stepped back again, tripping

over a discarded shoe. Mario must have thought she was trying to leave, for he grabbed her wrist and held her in place.

“What do you think it did to me? I had to let you think everything about us was a lie, that you were only a means to an end! You were all I ever wanted and instead—”

Mario’s voice broke. He took a shuddering breath, his eyes burning with reproof. “You are not the only one who suffered, Miranda. Quit acting like you’re the only one who paid the price.”

Mario released her wrist as if it were radioactive. Miranda sank against the wall, shaking uncontrollably, as Mario’s footsteps stomped down the stairs. She shook her head, trying to dislodge his accusations from her brain.

“You idiot!” she hissed. “You stupid fucking idiot!”

She opened her eyes. Naomi lay on the moldered bed, unconscious. Blameless. Dying. Shame overwhelmed Miranda. It snatched at her ankles, filled her lungs, shoved her shoulders under its heavy waves.

Then the knife was in her hand, the cool, sharp blade against the soft skin of her inner forearm below the pushed-up sleeve and chain mail.

No, she thought miserably, I’ll put the others in danger.

She pressed the knife against her skin. A tiny bead of blood appeared. Her hand began to tremble. She could feel it just under her skin, scratching against the surface, howling to be let out. All the misery, all the pain. It only needed a cut, just one little cut.

Her hand shook harder. Tears ran down her cheeks, sticky and hot. She imagined the bright-red blood, slipping down over the bones of her wrist to drip on the floor. Her whole body shook.

She dropped the knife as a silent, tearing sob clawed its way through her throat. A moment later she snatched the knife up and stabbed it into the floor. The soft wood yielded under the force of the blow.

You will do your job, she told herself with a ruthlessness she never directed at others; you will fucking get on with it.

She grabbed her rucksack and knife and stumbled out of the room. She walked down the stairs in a daze and stepped through the creaky screen door to

join the others.

Mario hunched against the sagging porch rail. Connor sat on the top porch step with Seffie, a forgotten cigarette burning to ash between her fingers. She glanced up at Miranda, but her eyes immediately slid away. It was then that Miranda saw Gabe and Doug at the bottom of the porch steps. Gabe's upturned face glared at Doug. Delilah stood between the two men, her fur bristling as she growled at Gabe. Miranda dropped her rucksack as she rushed down the steps to grab the dog by the collar.

"Gabe, you need to get out of my way," Doug said.

"We are not leaving her here! You stay away from her!"

Mike stepped beside Doug. Where Doug was willowy, Mike was broad. Doug's pale complexion melted into the fog, but Mike's dark skin stood in stark contrast to the gray vapor.

"She's your friend, Gabe, I get it," Mike said. "But she's not going to make it. She's not going to make it another hour. There's no point moving her."

"Stop saying that," Gabe snapped. "Naomi's tough, she'll pull through."

Doug shook his head. His face was etched with sympathy, but from the set of his jaw and the tension around his eyes, Miranda could also see his resolve. "She's not going to pull through this."

Gabe started to shake his head in denial.

"I'm sorry, Gabe," Doug said, gentle but insistent, "but she's going to die any minute. You need to get out of my way."

Gabe's hand moved to his hip where his knife was sheathed. Quick as a striking snake, Mike reached out and grabbed it. "Don't be stupid, man."

Unable to break Mike's grip, Gabe twisted toward the rest of the group. "Are you really going to let them do this? Am I the only one who thinks this is wrong?"

A board creaked under Mario's foot as he stepped away from the porch rail. "We should bring her with us."

Miranda's head snapped to the porch where Mario stood.

Connor spoke next. "I think we should bring her, too."

Miranda could not make sense of what she was hearing. Mario wanted to

bring Naomi with them? He knew she was dying. And why was Connor, of all people, backing him up?

The look of surprise on Doug's face matched her own. "What?"

"Leaving her here to die alone is wrong," said Connor.

"That doesn't even make sense," Miranda sputtered. "You want to put the rest of us at risk because she'll die alone?"

"See," Gabe said, freeing himself of Mike's grip, "I'm not the only one!"

"Some of you seem to be suffering from the illusion that this is a democracy," Doug said, his voice flint hard. His eyes raked over the small assembly. "Our mission is to get the serum to Santa Cruz so Mario and Henry can make the vaccine and get out of here. Anything that compromises that goal is not part of the plan. This is my call, not yours." He looked at Gabe, his eyes alight with anger. "We are leaving in five minutes and Naomi will not be with us. Get out of my way."

Gabe threw a punch. Doug neatly sidestepped and caught his elbow. Two seconds later Gabe was on the ground, whimpering in pain, his arm twisted high and Doug's knee on his back.

"Naomi is going to die, Gabe. There's nothing we can do about it. Turning her into zombie bait that gets the rest of us killed won't bring her back. You will get up on that gun and do the job you were brought here to do," Doug growled, his mouth close to Gabe's ear. He released Gabe's arm and stepped over him. "Connor, Mario, do not pull this shit again."

Gabe cried, anguished. "You're supposed to be a priest!"

Doug stopped mid-stride and turned back. "And you think I don't know that?" He stood, momentarily suspended, fists clenched, then turned on his heel and stalked into the house.

Everyone stood frozen until Mike reached down to give Gabe a hand up. "You heard the man, we're moving out. Let's go, people."

Gabe picked up his pack. He wiped his tear-stained face and walked slowly toward the Humvee, slumped and broken.

"He's not, you know..." Seffie asked. She had stayed so quiet during the argument that Miranda had forgotten she was there.

“What? No, no...the Anointing of the Sick,” Miranda said. At Seffie’s blank face, she added, “Last Rites. He’s giving Naomi the Last Rites.”

“Oh.” Seffie looked at Miranda, Connor, and Mario. “I’ll see you at the Humvee.”

Connor and Mario stood on the porch steps. Two sides of a coin, the good and the bad of the men she had loved, still loved... She wasn’t sure anymore. Mario saw her looking at them and scowled with such venom that Miranda looked away, unable to meet his eyes. He grabbed a rucksack near the bottom porch step and left for the Humvee. Miranda watched, helpless, as Delilah trotted after him.

“You could have backed me up, Miri.”

Miranda whirled about, startled by Connor’s accusation.

“I could have backed *you* up? Do you have any idea how out of line you were?”

“I’m out of line?” Connor flared, indignant. “We’re leaving her to die!”

“Grow the fuck up,” she said, her shame and fury welling up, seeking a target. “This isn’t the first time I’ve left someone behind, and it won’t be the last. This is the rotting, decomposing shitpile of a world we live in, Connor. You know the worst thing? You already know that, and you did it anyway, like we have the luxury of ethical debates.”

For a moment, Connor didn’t speak. He just looked at her.

“All you see is what’s in front of you. You see this little piece and that little piece, but you refuse to see how they all fit together.”

“I get what needs doing done.”

Connor looked at her with pity in his eyes. “We’ve all done horrible things. Some of them haunt me to this day and they should. It lets me know I haven’t forgotten what it means to be human, that this world hasn’t turned me into a zombie with a pulse.”

Miranda’s chest contracted. Connor looked at her like she was a wild animal, a predator. Was that what he thought she was, a zombie with a pulse? Her eyes filled with tears that she angrily dashed away.

“You show up after all this time claiming to love me and that’s what you say

to me? That's what you think of me?"

"Miranda, that's not what I meant," he said. He started down the steps, his brown eyes begging apology.

Miranda thrust her arm out. "Stay away from me."

"Miranda—"

"Stay away," she repeated, holding her ground.

She walked to the steps where Connor stood and grabbed her rucksack.

"Miri," Connor implored.

If he touched her, if he pleaded, she might believe him. She might believe there was still some small part of her that was not damaged, that was not selfish and mangled and twisted. She might even believe that she had not damned herself by loving Mario when he was not hers to love. Not that it mattered anymore. Mario had made his feelings about her abundantly clear.

Miranda looked up into Connor's anguished eyes. From inside the house, she heard Doug's footsteps on the stairs.

"Don't dump your guilt on me, Connor. We have a job to do. If it's more than you bargained for, that's not my problem."

"Miranda, wait," he said, but she had already turned away.

CONNOR COULDN'T PICK a thing out of the gray mist.

"I don't see anything," he said.

"Maybe it's my imagination then, but I could have sworn..." Doug frowned as he worried the inside of his cheek with his tongue. "Do you think that was just a coincidence, that attack?" Doug asked.

Connor shook his head.

"Do you think Mike or Seffie could have been the ones who sabotaged your sailboat on the way here?"

"And helped with that ambush? No way."

"Are you sure?"

Connor thought about it. They had started with fourteen people from Mexico. Odds were better that the saboteur had died than been one of the three of them to survive, except the saboteur would also have been prepared when things went wrong.

"It's possible, but my gut says no. Mike and I scouted all over South America. I trust him with my life, owe him my life. It's not Mike. I don't know Seffie that well but Mike vouched for her. That's good enough for me."

Doug looked at him for a moment, then said, "Okay. Let's get back to the others."

Connor cast an uneasy glance over his shoulder before he jumped down from the fallen redwood. The soft carpet of needles felt springy under his feet. The last time he had been in a redwood forest the day had been hot, the dry air filled

with the astringent smell of sap and dust. Today a wet fog hugged the ground, concealing the landscape in a shroud.

They had traveled ten miles from the reservoir over what was left of the tumble-down road without incident. They had stopped a few times to give the Humvee a push, or to shift rocks, fallen trees, and the occasional car out of the way. An hour ago they yielded for a pack of wolves. The shaggy patriarch paused to assess them, his yellow eyes wary but unafraid, before leaping over the derelict concrete divider in the center of the road. Although wolves had repopulated their historic range over the past ten years, sightings of the shy creatures were still rare.

Connor found himself wishing there were more obstacles in their path. A nice little land slide or a small traffic pileup. Not bad enough to put them in danger but complex enough to take a little time to figure out. The immediacy of a problem to be solved, a dilemma-free shared goal, was the only time the fractiousness among the group faded. Once the way was clear, the slow percolation of anger and division returned.

Connor had spent enough time in the wilderness to know it was not unusual to go for days, sometimes weeks, without coming across zombies. The world was still a big place. But for it to be this clear so close to the largest known population center anywhere? These mountains were supposed to be crawling with zombies, but since Los Gatos, they had seen no sign.

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement. Connor turned, gun raised. A lone deer regarded him solemnly. He relaxed and it bounded off through the brush. *It's not all monsters all the time.* He turned back to see Doug, barely visible ahead of him. Hurrying, he started off at a trot, but his foot came down on nothing where he expected the ground to be. It was another twelve inches before his boot connected but on a downward slope. Connor pitched forward and fell head over heels, tumbling down before landing with an *ooof!*

When his feet hit the ground again, Connor heard a snap. A net shot up from below him, the edge catching him at the waist. He twisted away, grabbing a tree root, but the fog made the bark slick. His lower body lifted higher. The tighter he clung to the root as he fought the pull of the net, the more his fingers seemed to

slip. He scrambled for a better grip. His hand slid more, another inch—

“Gotcha!”

Doug caught his forearm and after a bit of tugging, pulled him free.

“Are you okay?” Doug panted from the exertion of the sprint he had just made. Despite the close call, his blue eyes flashed with excitement.

He’s an adrenaline junkie, Connor realized as he looked sideways at Doug, but somehow the thought did not disturb him.

“Thanks.” Connor stood and brushed himself off. The empty net dangled twenty feet above the ground. “What the hell is that doing here?”

“There aren’t supposed to be any people up here.” Doug’s mouth turned down as Connor gave him a hand up. “As far as we know.”

“That wasn’t set by a zombie.”

Doug’s face grew pensive. “Don’t tell the others about this.”

“But—”

“We have enough to worry about without throwing human traps into the mix. When we need to, we’ll tell them, but we keep this to ourselves for now.”

Connor was not sure if it was the look on his face or the tone of his voice, but he knew Doug used human not to describe who set the trap, but what it was meant to catch. Connor had not just walked into the net, but tripped on uneven ground that sent him tumbling into it. Only the ground had not looked uneven. He looked back up at the net.

“Why do you think that was set for people?” he asked, hoping his growing suspicion was wrong. “Anything could get caught in it.”

“Most animals would make a lot of noise if they got caught in that. Would you scream for help knowing it would attract zombies?”

Connor couldn’t argue with Doug’s logic. He walked back up to where he had stumbled and squatted down for a closer look. The damp earth showed sharp, slightly curved marks along the vertical edge where he had fallen.

“Here’s where I tripped, dug out with a shovel. If that net had been another foot over, it would have gotten me.”

“Come on, we better move it. The others will think something happened to us.”

As they started back, it occurred to Connor that somehow, Doug had missed the trap completely. “How did you miss it?” he asked.

Doug pointed at the disturbed trail of pine needles that began next to the tree where Connor had fallen. “I went around the other side.”

With the road now in sight, Connor slid sideways down the steep grade, one hand trailing the rocky soil for balance. His boots hit the ground with a thump. He took a deep breath to clear his mind, to stay alert despite his relief at the illusion of safety the Humvee represented.

He couldn’t bring the ghost train of cars that jammed 17’s northbound lanes to San Jose into focus. The fog was so dense all he could see were indistinct shapes. Connor feared there might be zombies trapped in those cars, strapped into seat belts they could never break free of, but there were no moans.

You should be relieved there are no zombies, he told himself, but their absence made him paranoid. There had been no threat from the other side of the road so they had not stopped to investigate. Satisfying his curiosity wouldn’t get them to Santa Cruz any quicker, but he couldn’t ignore the foreboding that settled heavier in his stomach with every meter they covered. Even before his narrow escape from the net, everything about these mountains felt wrong.

He climbed back into the rear seat of the overfull Humvee and pulled the door shut. He tried not to jostle Miranda. She had not slammed the door on him when they left the house by the reservoir earlier. That did not mean she had been friendly.

“Nothing?” Mike said to Doug, who sat across from him in the front seat. Mike popped the clutch into gear.

“Maybe. Probably.” Doug shrugged. “I don’t know. Connor didn’t see anything.”

“As long as it’s not a herd of zombies, I don’t care,” Mike answered.

“Anyway, we’re almost to Laurel Curve.” Doug consulted a map spread across his knees. “The road is less twisty after that.”

As they descended into another valley, the fog began to dissipate.

“Thank God,” Connor heard Seffie mutter from behind him. She was hunkered down in the cargo area, sharing the space with Delilah and what was

left of their supplies. "This fog is creeping me out."

The Humvee came to an abrupt stop. Connor turned forward. Just before the road dipped, it disappeared. In its place, twisted pieces of rebar juttled out from a jagged lip across all four lanes. In the distance, the road reappeared and curved before twisting out of sight.

For a moment they sat there, staring.

"Seffie, take the rear," Doug said, his voice decisive. "Mike and Mario, watch the sides and stay close, all of you. Connor, you're with me." Doug opened his door, then added, "Keep Delilah quiet, Miri. She'll start barking at a squirrel and get us killed."

Everyone scrambled out. Connor looked up to Gabe, who had a better vantage point from his perch at the .50 cal gun.

"What can you see?"

Gabe shook his head. "We need a bridge."

Connor followed Doug, his heart pounding with every step. The break in the fog made it possible to look over the divider and check out the abandoned cars. Abandoned, but not empty. The cars were filled with skeletons. There was something about them that Connor could not put his finger on, something not quite right.

"Doug, come look at this."

And then he saw it. There were chunks of skull missing, or deep cuts and caved in bones. Some of the skeletons had no skulls at all.

"What is it?" Doug asked as he reached where Connor stood.

"Look there, in the blue car. Look at their heads."

Doug's lips pursed, as if he were tasting an idea he did not care for. "Lots of people killed themselves and their families rather than become zombies."

Connor walked to the next car. "They didn't usually beat little Suzie's head in to do it. They used guns or pills, not bats and machetes."

Doug swore softly under his breath. "Figuring this out is beyond our brief. C'mon."

When they reached the edge a minute later, Connor couldn't believe his eyes. The crater, hell, the ravine, was the length of a soccer pitch across and a third as

deep. A melee of debris—fallen trees, smashed cars, boulders—littered the bottom. Rusted rebar that had once reinforced the concrete slabs of the pavement twined skyward from below their feet.

Doug whistled, long and low. “That’s no washout. Someone blew up the road.”

“The rebar’s rusted. This happened a while ago.”

Connor dropped to his knees and peered over the edge. The concrete slab they stood on jutted out into the air like a cartoon drawing. Wind and rain had washed out the earth beneath, creating a shadowy overhang below them.

“We need to back up,” he said as he rose. Looking down into the hole where the road should be sent an unpleasant shiver through him. “This slab is undermined. Our weight might break it free.”

Connor scanned the forest as they retreated. “We need to find a different route.”

“Ya think?”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Connor persisted. “The only thing blowing up the road stops is people in cars. Anyone, *anything*, on foot, can just go around.”

“It’s working on us,” Doug said as he squatted and opened his map on the ground in front of him. Without looking up, he raised his voice slightly and said, “Miri, why are you and Delilah not in the Humvee?”

Connor turned around. Sure enough, Miranda approached. A few feet behind her, Delilah paused to sniff as she followed.

“I had to see.”

“Don’t go any farther,” Connor cautioned. “The earth is washed out underneath.”

Miranda kept her face impassive as he spoke, but she could not hide the spark of pain in her eyes. She stopped next to Doug and leaned forward, as if she might be able to peer over the lip from this distance.

“Jesus,” she said.

“Still just Doug,” Doug quipped.

Connor watched her grin until she looked his way.

“Did you see the bodies in the cars?” she asked Doug.

Doug nodded without looking up. “Yeah.”

“That’s not a good sign.”

“None of it is a good sign,” Doug agreed. “But there’s nothing to do for it. We pay attention and work the problem in front of us.”

Miranda nodded, then looked at Connor. “Did you see anything else?”

Connor shook his head no, thinking of his close call with the trap. Now he was a liar, too, like all the other men Miranda had ever trusted.

“We backtrack to here and take Glenwood Drive,” Doug said. He nudged Delilah’s nose away from the map as he folded it, then stood and held it for them to see. “It goes all the way into Scott’s Valley. We can get back onto the highway from there.”

Miranda frowned as she studied the map. “That’s mostly two-lane mountain roads.”

“It’s the least amount of backtracking. The next place we can get through is back here, at Summit.” Doug jabbed at another point on the map. “That looks like a smaller road.”

Connor scoured the twisting green lines of the map. “A small road like that might be gone by now. The first route is more direct.”

Miranda looked at Doug, then shrugged.

Doug grinned and nodded.

Decision made.

A spike of jealousy pierced Connor as he watched their silent conferral. Doug got Miranda in a way he feared he never would. Doug always knew what she needed—what to say and how to say it—while he stumbled in the dark, kicking land mines. They turned and walked purposefully to the Humvee, so smoothly they might as well have been one person. They even made the same knickering sound to call the dog.

“I’m jealous of a priest,” Connor muttered as he started after them. “Fucking hell.”

Fog snaked down the hillside as Doug motioned everyone to the Humvee. Connor glanced back and saw Delilah sniffing and pawing where the side of the

road and jagged lip of broken concrete and rebar met.

A tingle of alarm scraped against Connor's brain. Delilah was not always as quiet as they might like, but she was otherwise obedient to a fault.

"Come on, Delilah. Let's go."

Delilah didn't budge. The fur along her spine bristled. Her lips began to twitch into a snarl, and a low growl rumbled in her chest. Connor looked across the blown-out road again, fear mingling with an adrenaline rush. Wisps of fog slipped past the dog.

"Delilah," he said, more stern this time. "Come."

Delilah ignored him. She crouched, as if ready to spring.

Connor walked quickly, praying the road did not collapse. Where the hell are they, he thought, scanning the trees on either side of the road, but the fog between them got thicker by the second. Two steps away from the dog, he heard noises. Scrabbling sounds, like a small animal shaking a bush as it passed by.

His finger alongside the trigger of the assault rifle itched as Connor grabbed Delilah's collar with his other hand.

"Goddammit, dog. Come on!"

Delilah began to bark. Five feet in front of her, a wasted hand snaked over the lip of the road and gripped the twisted rebar.

Connor looked at the grasping hand in horror, then down at his feet.

They were under the road.

Behind him, Miranda whistled for Delilah. Connor ran into the fog toward her voice.

"We have to move," he shouted. "They're under the road! We have to move now!"

"Connor, where are you?"

Connor ran toward Miranda's voice. Delilah flashed past him. He heard doors bang open as Miranda came into view. He could see the Humvee now, see his comrades scrambling inside.

"They're under the road!"

"What?"

The moans began.

The Humvee was already moving when Connor jumped in after Miranda. He was behind the front passenger seat this time, near the center divider. Was that movement he saw in the abandoned cars on the other side or was his mind playing paranoid tricks?

“Where are they?” Mario asked as he grabbed Delilah’s snout to stop her barking.

“They’re under the road,” Connor answered. “It was a ledge by the missing part, but we couldn’t really see under it.”

“It’s a mile to the turn, so look sharp! We can’t miss it,” Doug said from the front seat.

“You were over there for ten minutes,” said Seffie. “Why did it take so long for them to react?”

“We backed up from the edge because we thought it might be unstable,” Connor explained. “Maybe they were farther back, too.”

Connor glanced again at the cars on the other side of the divider since he couldn’t see through Gabe’s footrest to look for the turn. A bang on the roof made him start with alarm.

“The turn is just ahead,” Gabe yelled.

The Humvee slowed slightly, then took a sharp left. The remnant of the street was narrower and more cluttered with cars and debris than the highway. Mike slowed their speed rather than risk crashing as they bounced and jolted along. Grasses, trees, and shrubs filled the abandoned yards of enormous McMansion-style houses, forlorn with neglect. Connor opened the Humvee door and latched the carabiner clip on his belt to the loop inside the door as he stepped out on the running board. As they descended from the highway, the fog wasn’t as thick, but the landscape still felt ominous. Moans seemed to come from all directions, but mostly from behind. He ducked back inside.

“They’re coming.”

They rounded a sharp corner and the road straightened out. The Humvee picked up speed. Connor heard a pop, then another. The Humvee began to slow down.

“Mike, let’s go!” Doug cried.

“It’s not me,” Mike barked, frustration filling his deep voice.

The Humvee lurched to a halt.

Connor pushed the door open, Miranda close behind him. Mike was already on his knees as Connor dropped to look under the Humvee. Bright-yellow straps were wrapped around the axles like stretched out pieces of chewing gum, all connected to a round disc pulled taut against the Humvee’s undercarriage.

“It’s a SQUID,” Mike said. He deflated like a balloon. “This thing isn’t going anywhere.”

“What the hell is a SQUID?” Connor asked.

“It explodes straps that wrap around the axles to stop speeding cars. Police used to use them,” Mike said, distracted, as he got to his feet. He started scanning the street. “We need a different vehicle.”

Doug and Mario popped up on the other side of the Humvee.

“Grab what gear you can,” Doug commanded. “We’ll fall back and secure a house if we have to.”

Connor turned to Miranda. She had dropped the stone-faced mask she wore earlier. Her blue eyes flashed with determination.

“I’m sorry about before, Miri. I wasn’t saying that about you.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

She turned away and leaned in the Humvee door to grab provisions. Connor didn’t see any zombies behind them as he joined the others at the back of the Humvee, but the moans grew steadily louder. Gabe crouched in the cargo area, pulling out magazines for the .50 cal as Seffie yanked their supplies out of the opened back door. For a precious minute they devoured everything in front of them like hungry sharks, stuffing pockets and rucksacks until they bulged.

Gabe lobbed his rucksack at Doug.

“Take my bag,” he said. “The serum vials are in there, back center zipper pouch. I’ll get on the gun and buy you some time.”

Doug looked at Gabe for what seemed an eternity. “Thank you.”

Gabe shrugged and flashed an insolent smile. “De nada, Padre. No hard feelings. I’ll catch up when I can.”

Gabe climbed to his perch.

Doug said, "Let's go."

Delilah raced ahead. Seffie tripped and stumbled under the weight of her overloaded rucksack, but Mike pulled her upright. Doug seemed to take his lead from Delilah, veering them off the road to follow the path the dog blazed. Just before Doug ducked into the brush, the deafening *chung-chung-chung* of the .50 cal erupted behind them.

Connor looked back. A tidal wave of zombies shuffled around the bend in the road. The vanguard crumpled under Gabe's gunfire, slowing the press behind them. Gabe aimed at the largest concentration of zombies, but it was not going to be enough. There were too many, coming from all directions, and zombies never got tired or winded.

Connor's feet struck the ground. His lungs emptied and filled. The sharp report of the .50 cal remained steady and controlled, but he could feel Death's breath tickle the back of his neck.

ALL SHE COULD HEAR over the rush of blood in her ears and the rasp of her breath were moans. Connor's stride matched her own. Slowing down, she thought, they never slow down. Delilah ran at Miranda's side, inches of pink tongue exposed from her exertions.

Miranda risked a look over her shoulder. They were in sight again, hundreds of zombies, tripping and lurching toward them, getting closer. Gabe had slowed the hoard down, but it wasn't enough. The fleeing humans were attracting zombies from other directions, too. A few times, they had needed to dispatch one that got too close. Soon they'd all be too close.

"Son of a bitch!"

She saw the downward arc of Mike's machete. Disgust and fury filled his face, darkening his brown eyes almost to black. Mike yanked his leg free, checked his ankle, and kept running.

Miranda glanced down as she passed the spot. A wasted form still in a diaper, like a grotesque child's toy, its head cleaved in two.

Connor slowed as he looked. "Oh God, a baby."

"That hasn't been a baby for a long time."

She yanked on his arm and he picked up the pace. Ahead, Doug scanned the houses along the street. Zombies straggled down from the forest on all sides. They only had a few minutes more before they would be surrounded.

Given the housing bubble and building boom in the years just before the ZA, Miranda could not believe they had managed to get stranded in an old

neighborhood like this, full of one-story cottages set far apart amongst the redwoods on a twisty mountain road. They would have been better off back in one of the newer houses where the Humvee got stuck. They needed to get above ground level.

They reached a spot where the narrow road crossed another. “Got one!” Doug yelled. “The blue house!”

Miranda could see it: a plain mid-century house with blue vinyl siding. The house sat at the top of a steep rise, but the prospect of refuge energized everyone. Sensing the group’s excitement, Delilah raced ahead, then backtracked to bark encouragement.

Miranda grabbed Delilah’s collar as they stopped on the small stoop.

“Miranda, Mario, Seffie, clear the second floor,” Doug panted. He stood in front of the door, handgun drawn. “The rest of us will clear the first.”

Mike opened the door. Doug and Connor ducked inside.

“I’ll take point,” said Miranda.

She paused inside the door, squinting into the shadowy interior. Except for a layer of grime and an overall sense of neglect, the house seemed intact. Doors banged and intermittent shouts of “clear” came from other rooms as Doug, Mike, and Connor checked the first floor.

The stairs creaked beneath Miranda’s feet as she, Mario, and Seffie hurried to the second floor. At the top of the steps, four closed doors ringed a central hallway.

“That’s probably the bath,” said Miranda, gesturing to the door opposite the stairs. “I’ll take the room on the left, you two get the ones on the right. Whoever gets back here first, check the bathroom.”

Seffie and Mario moved into position.

“Now.”

The doors behind her banged open as Miranda pushed the door in front of her open. The room was suffused in gloom apart from narrow strips of light seeping in around the curtains. She pressed her back against the wall and slid over to the window. Filmy light filled the room as she tugged the curtains open.

Miranda jerked when a shot rang out from across the hallway, then Mario

called clear.

There was nothing in this room. No furniture, no bodies, not even a rug. The sliding doors of the empty closet were missing.

“Downstairs clear!”

“Clear,” Miranda called as Seffie did likewise. She shrugged out of her heavy pack and dropped it to the floor.

“Bathroom’s clear, too,” Mario told her as she entered the hall. He swayed, his eyes unfocused.

“Upstairs clear!” Miranda yelled down the stairs. She turned back to Mario and Seffie. “Are you okay, Mario?”

“I’m fine,” Mario said. He took an unsteady step toward the stairs and collapsed.

Miranda darted to Mario’s prone form on the floor. His eyelids fluttered as she and Seffie knelt beside him. His pulse below his jaw was strong and steady against her bandaged fingertips. He opened his eyes and looked around, confused.

“What happened?”

“You passed out,” Miranda said, her nerves too frayed to pretend she wasn’t worried. Mario dying was all they needed. She pushed his tangled hair out of his eyes so she could make sure his pupils weren’t uneven.

“I’m fine,” he said, waving her away, but his clammy gray skin did not bolster his credibility.

“You lost a lot of blood when you got shot, and you’re probably dehydrated,” Miranda countered. “And you have rib fractures.”

“I wonder how that happened. I’m not going to die, Miranda. Not soon enough to suit you.”

Miranda recoiled, remembering what he had said at the reservoir. She had made a mess of things. She was angry with Connor. Mario was furious with her and the feeling was mutual. She hadn’t heard the hiss of the missiles soon enough when they were ambushed, and Naomi and Gabe were dead because of it.

“Stay put, Mario,” she said. “Listen, just this once.”

“It was usually the other way around.”

But he stayed, so Miranda joined the others downstairs. Mike and Connor pushed an upright piano against the front door. Delilah pranced around them, unhelpfully underfoot.

“Delilah, come!”

Miranda looked through the living room picture window. Delilah hopped her front paws up on the sill to look out and began to bark. Zombies were already teetering onto the porch.

“Get upstairs!” Doug yelled from the hall. “Miranda, let’s go!”

Miranda continued to stare out the window. A sea of zombies swirled around the house, as far as she could see. She stood transfixed by the churning mass of death that surrounded them. When a hand touched her arm, she startled.

“Miranda,” Connor said. “Let’s go.”

Mike stood on the landing, as if he might need to cover their retreat. Delilah’s nails clicked against the hardwood as Miranda took the stairs two at a time, Connor and Doug right behind her. When they reached the landing, it was empty. Miranda’s panic was instantaneous, even though she knew nothing could have gotten to Mario and Seffie. Then Seffie stepped into the doorway of the room closest to the bathroom.

“We’re in here.”

“I’ll start checking vantage points,” Mike said. “See if we can figure a way out of here.” He disappeared into the room opposite Seffie.

“Do you want the honors, Miri?”

Doug tossed a grenade up and down in the air. Even with the pin in place, playing catch was not a smart way to handle a grenade, which Doug knew full well. His insouciance soothed Miranda. Someday she’d have to figure out why his recklessness made her feel better, but not today.

“Be my guest,” she said, shaking out her arms to dispel the tension that filled her body as she backed up toward the rooms where the others were.

“Everyone stay put,” Doug called out. He moved into the doorway of the bedroom at the top the stairs that Miranda had checked earlier, pulled the pin, and rolled the grenade gently down the staircase. “Fire in the hole!”

The house shuddered as it absorbed the force of the exploding grenade. Miranda stood next to Doug, a bandana pressed over her mouth and nose. Her eyes watered as she waved the dust away from her face. Only three steps remained of the top half of the staircase, the rest—obliterated. Mike and Connor stepped in close to see the grenade's handiwork.

"We're really stuck now," Miranda said.

"Don't sound so grim, Miri," Doug said. "You still have a firm grasp of the obvious. It's not much, but it's a start."

Connor and Mike snickered.

"Oh, fuck you all," she said, but she couldn't suppress a smile.

"I'm spoken for," Doug shot back.

Connor caught Miranda's arm as she tried to sidle by and pulled her close. Despite what he had said back at the reservoir, leaning into him felt good. Then Mario appeared. He still looked pale and drawn, but at least he wasn't swaying. When he saw Miranda, he didn't look crestfallen like before. He looked coldly furious. The comfort of Connor's arms drained out of her body and puddled around her feet.

"What's the plan?" Mario asked while Delilah rubbed against his shins.

"We don't ave uhn," Doug said, his words distorted by a wide yawn.

Mike wiped at the dust on his face that cast a sickly gray pall over his dark-brown skin. "Let's figure it out sitting down. I'm beat."

"Best idea I've heard all day." Doug clapped Mike on the shoulder as he walked in Mario's direction.

Miranda shrugged free of Connor, wishing she could as easily shrug free of the conflicting feelings he and Mario stirred within her. She reached down to rub Delilah's head as she squeezed past Mario, knowing the attention would make the dog come with her.

Focus on the mission, Miranda thought as she sank to the floor, her back against the wall. Sitting down had never felt so good. She felt like she had been running for her life for years instead of hours. Delilah wriggled in close and lay her head on Miranda's thigh. Miranda stroked Delilah's head and a sudden thought cheered her.

If I die out here, none of this shit with Mario or Connor will matter.

CONNOR'S VOICE WAS PITCHED LOW.

"Mike saw what *might* be tanks of *something* in the basement, so you and Doug are going to check it out. If it's flammable, we're going to blow up this house so we can make a suicide run for the house two hundred yards away, because the truck over there that's been sitting abandoned for ten years will magically have a working battery and gas that hasn't turned to jelly. Am I missing anything?"

Miranda clenched her jaw, half expecting to feel the crunch and crack of enamel. She searched the outer compartments of her rucksack.

"That's about the size of it," she said, trying to keep her voice down.

"Have you ever seen a gas explosion, Miranda? It'll be a miracle if we're not all killed."

Miranda's fingers found the thin steel cable. *Thank you fucking Jesus.* She grabbed the cable and started for the door.

"I should be the one going down there with Doug," Connor continued.

"You're not. Let it go."

"You've got burns on your hands," he tried, sounding exasperated.

Miranda whirled around to face him, her body vibrating with anger. The room swam a little, making her acutely aware that he had a point, but not enough of one. Everyone was banged up.

"And you're sixty pounds heavier than me," she snapped, unable to keep her voice down. "I'll be easier to pull up, and you don't know Doug like I do. And you don't get a fucking say. It's decided."

Connor's whole body seemed to slump. "I can't lose you, Miri."

He looked forlorn, lost. Every line of his body implored her to stop, to listen to him.

"This isn't about you and me," she said, trying for a more even tone. "It's about the mission. I'm not trying to get killed, Connor. I'm just doing my job. I

promised Father Walter.”

“This is a terrible idea.”

“Terrible is all we have right now.”

Miranda turned and stalked out to the hallway. Connor’s footsteps fell in behind her. Doug stood next to the blown-out stairs, almost prancing in place, anxious to go. Mike and Mario waited with him. Seffie wasn’t in sight. She must already be up on the garage roof, Miranda thought. It was the farthest point from where the tanks were, if Mike was right.

Mike looked calm, sure. Mario tried to project a similar confidence but couldn’t pull it off. Miranda could see anxiety in his eyes, worry in the straight line of his compressed lips.

At least he tries to pretend he has faith in me, she thought with no little annoyance. She knew that wasn’t fair to Connor, but he was letting his feelings get in the way. Just like you did back at the reservoir, an unhelpful voice whispered in her head. Connor and Seffie thought Mike’s idea would only get them killed. They had a point, but waiting around hoping the zombies would move off was not a realistic option.

“You ready?” Doug asked.

Miranda nodded as she handed the steel cable to Mike.

“We’ll lower Doug first,” he said.

Bigger and stronger, Mike anchored the line. Connor took hold of the cable and stood in front of him. Mario and Miranda positioned themselves nearer to the edge of where the staircase had been, guns trained below in case of trouble. Doug bumped down the top two steps on his butt. If what was left of the steps gave way under him, he wouldn’t jerk the cable as hard as he would if he were standing, which improved the odds Mike and Connor wouldn’t lose their grip and send him falling fifteen feet to the floor below.

Outside, the zombies moaned. They scratched against the siding and windows so insistently that the walls sounded like insects burrowed inside.

Doug lowered himself over the edge.

Miranda scoured the area below as Doug descended. Doug scanned the room as he touched down, then unclipped the cable and looked up at her. “Come on.”

Miranda grasped the cable sliding past her feet as Mike and Connor pulled it back. She clipped it to her belt and looked up at the others.

“Be careful,” Connor cautioned.

Miranda nodded. “I will.”

She sat and swung her legs over the edge. She turned back to say ready, but Mario spoke first through a tight, forced smile.

“Don’t get dead, Miranda.”

His words pulled her up short. Her flippant farewell from the early days did not sound so clever anymore. How many times had she said those three words as she left the safety of Santa Clara’s walls? She always dismissed his worrying, yet her parting words had never been ‘I’ll be careful’ or ‘I love you.’ Just a smart-ass wisecrack about what he feared most. She had done it every time and never considered how her jesting made him, or any of the people who loved her, feel.

What kind of person does that?

Mario wasn’t trying to caution or temper her like he once had, like Connor was now. She couldn’t tell if he meant anything by the remark, apart from the obvious. With an effort, she looked away.

“I’m ready.”

Miranda twisted off the step. Her belt dug into her back. She held the cable tight with one hand to keep from overbalancing and flipping backward. She dangled in the air, feeling suspended not between up and down, but future and past. The somber faces of her comrades slipped out of sight as the cable lowered her down.

When her feet touched down, she unclipped the cable but didn’t look up. She pulled the hatchet from her belt and turned to Doug.

“Let’s do this.”

MARIO LEANED AGAINST THE WALL, doubtful he could stay upright without its assistance. He felt like he was covered from head to toe by a lead dentistry vest, the kind that protects vital organs during x-rays. The longing that washed over him at the idea of doing something as mundane as going to the dentist, instead of waiting for Miranda's safe return, caught him by surprise. He had been spared such vigils the past five years.

The gunshot wound throbbed. He checked the red spot on the bandage, bigger now than when they had stumbled upon their refuge an hour ago. Miranda and Doug's impressive track record at staying alive did not tamp down the almost suffocating fear Mario felt, but if anyone could handle themselves well in a bad situation, it was those two. They always come back, he told himself, this won't be any different.

Mario studied Connor as the younger man paced the hallway. When Connor got to the stairs, he crouched on hands and knees and craned his neck to get a better look before jumping back up. And then, unable to stay still, he did it all over again. Connor's restlessness distracted Mario from his own pain and stupor. If he didn't feel about to collapse, he would probably be just as jumpy.

Connor looked down to the first floor. "They should be back by now."

"It's only been five minutes," Mike answered, voice firm. "Give it another five before you start to worry."

Yeah right, Mario thought as Connor leaped to his feet and paced like a caged tiger, back and forth, forth and back.

Connor had played things wrong with Miranda earlier. Mario had almost felt sorry for him as the entire team listened to them argue, hissing at one another in not-hushed-enough tones. He had been in the same position so many times himself until he realized that he could not change her. Once Miranda decided to do something, there was no dissuading her. Cajoling, begging, threatening, pleading—Mario had tried them all. None worked.

As soon as Mike floated the idea, Mario had known it would be Doug and Miranda. His own injuries ruled him out. And Miranda might shoot him, just because. Mike's strength was best utilized getting them in and out. There was no reason Connor or Seffie couldn't have gone, but it didn't make sense. Miranda and Doug had teamed up for years. Each knew what the other was going to do before they knew it themselves.

"I want to go down," Connor said.

Mike fixed Connor with a stare as unforgiving as a hickory switch. "Connor, you're my friend, so I'm only going to say this once. If you try to go down there, I will shoot you."

"Mike," Connor implored.

"I'm not kidding," Mike answered, unmoved. "They'll be back any minute."

"Why aren't they responding? They should be able to hear us through the hole they hacked in the floor."

"Over all the noise that horde outside is making? Maybe they're actually busy." A sly grin crept over Mike's lips, lighting a devilish gleam in his eye. "Or maybe your lady doesn't appreciate you trying to protect her."

Connor snorted in disgust.

"You know what your problem is, Connor?" Mario heard himself say. "You think you know what she needs, but you don't."

Connor turned and looked at Mario, eyes narrowed. "And you do?"

Mario started to laugh before he remembered how much it hurt. "The last time I thought that... Hell, I don't know what she needs. Some honesty, maybe."

Connor flinched, then nastily drawled, "And when did this confusion cloud your judgment? When you lied to her about switching sides?"

Connor's reaction, the flinch, surprised Mario. Had Mr. Perfect done a little

lying of his own?

"I told myself I was protecting her but now," Mario winced as he took a breath. "Maybe she could have done it, played along, convinced people. Doug and Walter still don't think so. When Walter said it was for her own good, well." Mario scrunched his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose against the piercing stab of his conscience. "What a joke that turned out to be."

"I think I have a better idea what she needs than you," Connor said, his voice full of accusation.

No, it wasn't that. Condemnation. Connor's superior attitude filled Mario with rage. What the hell had this sanctimonious little prick ever done? What had he ever given up? What price had he paid?

"You don't even know who she is anymore," Mario snarled, his hands clenching into fists. A detached part of his brain noticed that his arm did not hurt as much. "You think she's the girl you remember, but she's not."

"Cool it, you two," Mike broke in, "we don't need this kind of—"

"Guys, come here! Come see!" Seffie's voice, from out on the roof.

"Connor, go check it out," said Mike.

Connor shook his head. "I'm staying here."

"Worrying over your girlfriend doesn't help her any, and Mario's in no condition to be out there," Mike answered, his voice rising in irritation.

"Guys, come here!"

Mario looked back to the blown-out staircase, loathe to leave, but Mike was right. Miranda would be okay or she wouldn't. As much as he hated to admit it, there was nothing he could do for her here. He was damned if he was going to be self-indulgent like Connor.

"I'll go," he said. Mike started to protest, but Mario shushed him. "I'm fine, I'll go."

With more effort than it should have required, Mario heaved himself off the wall and headed for the master bedroom. His toe caught on a ripple in the moldering carpet as he crossed the room and he froze, waiting for the howl of pain from his ribs to subside. If it wasn't for this whole breathing thing, it wouldn't be so bad, he thought. Seffie's head and shoulders were outside the

window.

“Don’t just stand there, Mario, hurry up! You won’t believe this!” she said, her face aglow with excitement. “It’s a miracle!”

Puzzled, Mario squeezed through the window. He squinted, even though the day was far from bright. He had not realized how dim it had become inside. An ocean of groaning zombies surrounded them, the smell of rotting flesh even stronger than indoors. He leaned into the house, away from the downward slope of the garage roof, and cautiously followed Seffie. At the far edge of the roof, she thrust out her arm and he followed the line of her pointed hand.

“What am I looking for?”

And then he saw it. Some of the zombies were walking in the direction of the far end of the house, where Miranda and Doug were.

“Miranda and Doug are over there!” he said. “This isn’t—”

“No, no, look,” Seffie urged, still pointing. “That’s what I thought at first too, but they keep going. They’re heading into the woods.”

Mario looked again. Seffie was right. Perhaps fifty zombies had walked beyond the house. But that still left hundreds around them.

“How long have they been doing this?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes?” Seffie guessed with a shrug of her shoulders.

Mario nodded. In the minute he watched a few more zombies began to head in the same direction. If enough of them went that way, if even just a third did, they might actually be able to get out of here.

“We have to stop Miranda and Doug. We need more time.”

“Oh shit,” Seffie said, eyes growing wide.

She turned and scurried toward the window, Mario two steps behind her. His ribs cried foul at the overcompensating required to keep his footing on the slanted roof. Seffie was almost to the window when something flashed past Mario’s peripheral vision, then *thump*! The fletching from an arrow erupted from the side of the house, less than a foot from Seffie’s head.

Seffie reared back, arms pinwheeling as she tried to regain her balance. Mario watched in horror as she fell. Unable to get clear of her, Seffie slammed into his legs. They tumbled and slid, limbs tangled. Seffie clawed at him blindly,

desperate to stop her fall. Shingles crumbled under Mario's outstretched palm as he tumbled headlong toward the edge. Seffie slipped past him, her fingertips skimming his injured left arm.

Mario caught her bicep. Her fingers clamped around his elbow like a vise. He glimpsed a flash of Seffie's terrified brown eyes, then she slipped over the edge of the roof.

As the edge rushed toward him, Mario's right hand scraped against the metal gutter. He jammed it inside and closed his fingers around the gutter's edge. The shove against his arm as their fall slowed shot bolts of pain through his body. His legs pivoted down from above. His left foot sailed over the edge of the roof and into the air. Mario pressed his right foot against the roof and miraculously, his toe caught in the gutter.

"Don't let go of me!" Seffie shrieked. "Don't let go!"

Mario looked down at her as he clung to the gutter. Zombies snapped and snarled below. Their hands ripped the air, mouths opening and closing like unhealed wounds.

"I won't let go. I promise."

Mario tightened his grip on the gutter. Seffie shrieked even louder and started to thrash. A zombie had her by the heel. Mario's arm began to shake as Seffie kicked at the zombie with her free foot, his injured bicep muscle ill-equipped to handle both her weight and the flailing struggle to free her foot.

His grip loosened.

Seffie's panicked eyes met his. "Don't let me go, goddamn you!"

Mario bent his knee slightly and twisted his foot so his toes now rested against the lip of the gutter. He pushed with his forearm and foot to try and slide himself farther back on to the roof, but the zombie below tugged hard. Mario screamed in pain. Black spots clouded his vision. Unprepared for the force of the pull, his foot flew free and his arm slipped out of the gutter.

Mario closed his fingers over the edge.

The zombies pulled.

The gutter began to bend.

A shadow flitted above. Mario looked up. A cable extended from the house.

From the arrow, he realized. Another shadow, no, a person! Voices, and then a hand caught his wrist. Mario looked up into the sun gold eyes of a stranger.

A soft hiss, then the downward pull of the zombies yielded. Another man's face, another hand gripped Mario's forearm. Then slowly, infinitesimally, they began to rise.

He heard Connor say, "What the hell?"

The strangers had Mario waist-high over the edge of the roof. Connor reached down for Seffie. Mario felt almost weightless as Seffie let go. The golden-eyed man and his partner heaved Mario the rest of the way onto the roof. They collapsed back, gasping for air. Tremors that he was helpless to stop racked Mario's body. He saw Seffie scramble over the edge with Connor's help and likewise collapse against the roof.

A crossbow stuck out from under the golden-eyed stranger's shoulder. The clothes he wore were made of heavy homespun in shades of tan and gray. He wore his tawny-brown hair pulled back in a braid, and his complexion was flushed with the ruddy color of a person who spent a lot of time outdoors.

"Who the hell are you?" Mario asked.

The man laughed. Beyond him, his companion said, "We are your rescue."

DOUG TWISTED the knob on the cellar door and nudged it open with his toe. Beyond the door, darkness. It reminded Miranda of a tomb, though their surroundings were hardly silent. It was noisier down here, closer to the zombies. They scratched against windows and walls. Those that spied Miranda and Doug as they made their way through the house moaned louder, which caused a ripple effect. Miranda shivered as she followed Doug into the black.

They made their way down, step by step. The beams of illumination from the lights on their assault rifles lit dust motes swirling on invisible currents. The cellar had been cleared earlier when they first stormed into the house, but they had been in one hell of a hurry. Musty air filled Miranda's nostrils. Musty, but without the smell of death.

At the foot of the stairs, Doug went left, Miranda right. Her heart pounded as she checked the room—opening a closet, checking behind a washing machine. She relaxed as she called clear.

"I'm clear," Doug answered. "The tanks are over here, just like Mike said."

Miranda retraced her steps. Doug's flashlight beam traveled along the wall, illuminating several propane tanks, the kind that used to be used with a gas grill. Doug picked a tank up off the floor a few inches.

"Empty," he said, then tried another. "Much better," he said. He lifted a third tank, then turned to her, a shit-faced grin lighting up his face. "This is gonna be fucking awesome."

They moved the tanks so that they were under the hole in the wood floor

above them, which Miranda and Doug had hastily hacked before entering the basement. Doug dropped to his knees and started fiddling with the valve on the less full tank.

“I just want to stick a pin in this one, let some of the propane out. It’ll pool on the ground but should still ignite.”

“Why? The grenade will ignite the tank.”

“I am cultivating multiple opportunities for success, Coppertop.”

Miranda snorted. “Cultivate faster. I want to get the fuck out of here.” She looked up at the hole they had cut in the floor. “We should make that hole bigger.”

“Why?”

“So we have a higher chance of success with those multiple opportunities you’re cultivating.”

Doug nodded. “Okay. Come hold the light for me. I can’t see shit.”

Doug’s usual good humor evaporated after a few minutes of fighting with a valve frozen shut for at least a decade. “Why the hell couldn’t they have stored these outside like normal people? Then we could just shoot the damn things and yes! Got it!”

Miranda heard a faint hiss as Doug stood up. She sniffed, the smell of gas filling her nostrils for the first time in years. Because of the nuclear reactor the valley relied on for much of its power, electricity had replaced gas-powered utilities.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” she said.

They emerged from the stairs slowly, in case zombies had broken in. They hustled to where Mike stood above them. He threw down the cable. Miranda pulled out her hatchet and began hacking at the hole they had made earlier.

Doug said, “You were right, it’s propane, a tank and a half. Just going to make the hole bigger so it’s easier to get the grenades down. Where are Connor and Mario?”

Miranda looked up. It was just Mike up there. She had been so focused on the task at hand that she had not noticed.

“They’re out on the roof. Seffie called—”

The clang of broken glass stopped Mike mid-sentence. Miranda stood up and whirled around to face the window behind her.

“Back door window, I’ve got it. Finish what you’re doing,” Doug commanded.

Miranda dropped back to her knees. Above, she heard Mike calling for Mario and Connor. The hatchet felt heavier in her hand, the blade duller, the Douglas Fir planks more substantial. Her burned palms felt sweaty and tender under the bandages, and her hand holding the hatchet began to throb, still sore from when she had punched Mario. The moans and groans got louder.

Another window cracked and broke.

Miranda hacked at four separate points about six inches apart until the gouges were an inch deep. She sprang to her feet and stomped with one foot. The wood cracked. She stomped again and it gave way. Not completely, but enough.

“Are they inside?” she yelled as she powered the hatchet down again.

“Just trying to block their path,” said Doug. “How you doing there?”

Another shot, then another.

“I need another minute,” Miranda said.

“That’s about all you’re gonna get.”

Doug’s rifle fired almost continuously. Then the world began to sparkle as bits of glass showered over her. Miranda flinched away and leaped up, turning once again to the window behind her. Zombies were trying to slither through. They cut their arms on jagged glass still stuck in the frame but did not stop. Zombies didn’t feel pain. They never even noticed.

Miranda wielded the hatchet high above her head, swinging down to smack through skull and eye sockets. Black goo splattered her face, her arms, her hands. Doug’s rifle fired nonstop.

“Mike, get us out of here!” Miranda shouted. She looked up. Mike was gone. “Mike!” she screamed, fighting against the panic that tried to fog her brain.

Doug worked his way to her, quick but methodical. He glanced up, then kept firing.

“Where the hell are they?”

Miranda dropped the hatchet. She pulled her assault rifle around from where it was slung across her back and fired.

“Miranda!”

Miranda looked up to see Mike and Connor and Seffie above, plus two other guys. Where the hell had they come from? She grabbed the cable and pushed it to Doug. He shook his head.

Miranda’s ascent was swift with so many pulling. As she crested the edge of the floor, she unclipped the cable and threw it back down. She scrambled, half crawling out of the way, and took the first hand extended down to help her up.

“You okay?” Apprehension filled Mario’s face.

Miranda nodded. “I’m good.”

She looked back to see one of the strangers catch Doug’s arm as the others pulled the cable. Giddy with relief, she leaned against the wall and grinned at Mario.

“I didn’t get dead.”

“I knew you wouldn’t.”

A queer feeling came over Miranda. *He really means it.* Mario had been afraid for her but had not let it get in the way. He was happy she was there next to him, she could tell. She opened her mouth, but Connor swooped in, saving her from saying something she would only regret later.

“Don’t you ever do that to me again,” he whispered.

Miranda looked up into his frightened eyes. She knew it was the fear talking. He had to know that was a promise she could never make, let alone keep.

“I’m okay.” She stepped back and put her hand over his heart. “Really, I’m fine.”

“Jesus, that was close!” Doug gasped. He caught Miranda’s eye and began to laugh. “That was way too close.” He regarded the strangers, then stuck out his hand to the one nearest to him. “I’m Doug Michel. Who the hell are you?”

“I am Finn Butler,” the man said. “It is time we get out of here.”

“LILEY, STOP THAT.”

Miranda twitched her head away. Delilah merely wriggled and whined and licked Miranda’s ear again. She did not like being wrapped into a sling on Miranda’s back. Miranda was not crazy about the arrangement herself. The zombies had thinned out considerably; perhaps two hundred fifty were left. Much of the horde had drifted away into the woods over the past hour. Scent bombs, Finn and Dalton said. Miranda had never heard of such a thing, nor knew of any scent that could lure a zombie away from a human.

Finn and Dalton’s original plan had been to wait it out at the house until the zombies moved on, but the propane leaking into the airless basement made their rescuers uneasy. It had started raining again, which apparently made the scent bombs less effective.

“See the one with the white ring around the trunk?” Finn asked. “That is where the ladder is. We should all be able to get to the outbuilding in ninety seconds, give or take. We stay together, head for the ladder.”

“That’s still a lot of ground to cover, especially using hand weapons,” Doug said as he sized up their route.

Miranda agreed. Two hundred yards lay between the house and the banded tree. The zip line would take care of not quite half, but it took them off a straight path. Even thinned out, it was a fair distance and a lot of zombies. Finn and Doug had agreed using guns in such close quarters could result in friendly fire, so they had to get through the old-fashioned way.

She studied the young man, this Finn Butler, as he rattled off instructions. He was just a kid, couldn't be more than twenty. Despite the strength of his wiry frame, Miranda estimated he might be a hundred forty pounds soaking wet. His cousin, Dalton, stood beside him. Dalton's build was stockier, and he looked older, but Miranda could not judge by how much. People living rough tended to age faster. Younger or not, Finn was in charge.

Everyone crouched low on the ridgepole of the roof. The zip line extended from the chimney to what looked like an oversized chicken coop about halfway to the tree line.

"Our archers will cover us when they see that we're coming," Dalton said. His lips barely moved as he spoke, and his monotone voice sounded as if it were being ripped from his mouth by force.

"But do they have better aim?" Miranda heard Mario mutter.

"Will you be okay on the ladder?" Seffie asked Mario, her voice low.

"The alternative is to be ripped apart by zombies. Let's hope they have better escape technique."

They know it was just bad timing, Miranda thought as she eavesdropped. Finn and Dalton had apologized profusely for almost knocking Mario and Seffie off the roof. It had just been bad luck.

Connor raised his head in an attempt to peek over the lip of the roof. When he noticed Miranda watching him, he smiled tightly.

"You still hate heights?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"Then don't look down."

Connor grimaced. Everyone scooted closer to the chimney while Dalton reached up and clipped on to the zip line.

He jumped off the roof without a word and sailed through the air. Miranda's stomach dropped as she watched the line dip, but he touched down safely and immediately pulled out a crude sword. It took the zombies a few moments to realize their prey was on the move. When they did, the shift in their direction was like a breeze rippling across the surface of a pond. Soon everyone was safely down except for her, Doug, and Finn.

“Go on, Doug,” said Miranda. “I went first last time.”

Doug snapped onto the zip line and hopped off the roof. Miranda moved closer to Finn, who handed her a short strap and a clip.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Finn said.

It was a strange feeling, to jump off a perfectly safe building and glide through the air, zombies trailing in her wake. Their wasted hands reached toward her as she flashed by, rain pelting her face. Delilah whimpered in fear and squirmed. Please don’t let her get loose, Miranda prayed as she tucked her feet and held tight to the knots of the sling. And then she touched down. She felt a tug on the line as Finn started down before she finished unclipping.

She turned and reached for the machete on her left hip. Delilah whimpered and growled.

Finn dropped down beside her, unclipped from the line, and pulled out a long pipe slung across his back.

“Throw those grenades,” he said.

The number of zombies seemed greater at ground level. They were everywhere—staggering closer, slipping on the wet grasses and redwood needles, never stopping—but Mike and Doug were ready. Doug stepped out from behind the shelter of the coop and threw his grenade in the direction they were going, then ducked back. Rotted body parts—legs and arms, only God knew what—flew through the air when it detonated. Finn waved them around the corner of the coop. Mike brought up the rear. He paused and heaved his grenade toward the house, his strength propelling it across the gray sky.

It’s not going to make it, thought Miranda as she traced the arc of the grenade across the sky, but a flash and roar shook the ground. Debris flew through the air as the shockwave of displaced air buffeted them. The propane-fueled flames transformed the little house into an inferno.

Finn led the way. His cousin and Connor fell in step beside Miranda. A zombie on her left lurched close. Miranda raised her machete and hacked into its skull. From all around came *thuds* and *thwacks*, grunts and shouts, zombie moans, and the soft *pffft* of arrows. Zombies would suddenly drop, arrow fletching sprouting from their heads. Snarling and snapping, Delilah scrabbled

her legs against the restraints of the sling, her hard nails digging into Miranda's back.

"Duck!" Dalton shouted as she tugged her weapon from a crumpled corpse. Miranda dropped to the ground. Dalton slashed over her head. The zombie fell, bumping into her and Delilah. She took Dalton's hand and scrambled up.

Finn and Doug fought back to back, hacking their way through the thickening hoard. Mario fought beside Mike, his strikes clumsy using his nondominant arm. Connor dashed forward to help Seffie. Miranda slipped, regained her footing, and hacked into dead flesh.

I will never go anywhere again, she vowed.

"Almost there," someone shouted.

Miranda looked past the zombie she had just killed. The others had gotten a little ahead of her, but the tree was only thirty feet away. Then Delilah twisted in her sling, knocking Miranda off-balance. One moment she was slipping, then mud filled her nostrils and eyes. Stabbing pain ripped through her right leg. Delilah thumped against Miranda's back, her solid sixty-pound weight knocking the wind from Miranda's lungs.

Miranda choked and hacked as she crawled to hands and knees, swiping at the mud in her eyes. Delilah barked and snarled, struggling frantically. There were zombies on all sides. On her knees, Miranda tried to stand, but searing pain ripped through her right knee.

Miranda squinted at the approaching zombies through mud-smeared eyes. She hacked at their ankles, trying to get them down where she could deliver a death blow. But more were coming, far too many to fight from her knees.

This is it, she thought.

Adrenaline, rage, fear, and regret flooded her brain. She would never make amends with anyone. She was going to die on her knees, in the mud. *They'll kill Delilah, too.* She cried out in pain and fear, jerking away from a fallen but not dead zombie that pawed at her. A sudden dread of what came after death overwhelmed her.

A flurry of *pfttt* sounds from arrows engulfed her. Then Dalton was there, with Connor and Mario. Dalton lifted her and Delilah over his shoulder. Miranda

cleared her eyes enough to see Connor and Mario covering their retreat, fighting side by side. At the tree, she was hoisted up and shoved toward the rungs of a ladder that started six feet up the trunk. Miranda winced as she climbed but did not dare accommodate her twisted leg. She couldn't look down without slowing, so she concentrated on climbing.

When she finally reached a platform overhead, Doug was there, his hand outstretched to hoist her through. Miranda shimmied out of the way. Connor didn't say anything when he got off the ladder, just held her and the whimpering Delilah tight. Tears sprang to her eyes when Dalton announced he was the last. They had all made it. Relief flooded her body for a moment, but then she heard Mario's voice. He had come back for her and he shouldn't have. He was too important to the mission. She twisted out of Connor's embrace, clutching the bark of the tree with one hand.

"What were you thinking?"

Mario looked around as if he was unsure she was speaking to him.

"We can't afford to lose you and you risk yourself coming back for me? Do you know how stupid that was?"

Mario just stared at her. So did everyone else. A hand clamped down on her shoulder and whipped her around.

"Not here." Doug's expression was calm, but his eyes blazed. He leaned in close. "We have no idea who these people are. Shut up."

Miranda closed her eyes and bit her lip, trying hard to get her conflicted feelings of relief and anxiety under control. She sat down abruptly, banging her injured leg as a wave of shame washed over her. How could she have said something so revealing? There was no excuse, none.

You were afraid for him, a small voice whispered.

Shut up, she silently hissed back, but it was too late. Now Finn and Dalton knew there was something special about Mario. There was nothing she could do or say to undo it.

Doug untied a bandana from around his neck and handed it to Miranda. He scratched Delilah on the head, then straightened and turned to Finn.

"It's been a long day," he said, his voice indulgently apologetic, as if he were

explaining the tantrum of an overtired child.

“It is just adrenaline,” Finn assured him with an easy smile. He shifted his attention to his cousin. “I will check with the others before we leave for the village.”

Miranda wiped at her muddy face. She looked up in time to see Finn step onto a rope bridge. One rope formed the bottom, with two more ropes on either side at hand height. Loosely fitted webbing was attached between the bottom and top ropes, forming a V. Finn moved swiftly across the forty-foot span, his footsteps on the bottom rope practiced and sure. He was greeted with high fives by several men holding tall recurve bows when he stepped onto the platform built around another redwood.

Connor crouched beside Miranda. “You okay?” he asked. His brown eyes were warm and concerned.

Miranda nodded. She didn’t trust herself to speak.

“You missed a spot.”

He took the handkerchief and wiped her forehead, then sat down beside her and slipped her hand in his. Connor’s kindness only made Miranda feel like a confused and conflicted mess. Delilah began to whimper again. Miranda reached back to pet the dog’s snout with her free hand and for the first time, really looked at their surroundings.

They were at least forty feet above the ground. The rain was barely noticeable now that the redwood’s massive branches sheltered them. A sturdy wooden platform encircled the redwood, sticking out about twelve feet from the shaft of the tree. A well-made picket railing was built along the platform’s edge, in contrast to the rail-less platform the archers in the other tree perched upon. Three rope bridges, all of the same design as the one Finn had just taken, went off in different directions.

“My God,” Miranda whispered. She looked beyond to other trees with similar platforms and even more bridges. “How many of these do you think they’ve built up here?”

“I’m trying really hard not to think about how high we are,” Connor said. He looked downright queasy.

Miranda squeezed his hand in sympathy. "Just try not to think about it."

"Yeah, right."

Finn returned with several of the archers. They stepped onto the platform with an easy grace.

"The village is not far," said Finn. "But we need to go; it will be dark soon. And I am guessing none of you are used to rope bridges."

The ragged company got to their feet. One by one they tentatively followed Dalton onto the bridge. Doug spoke with Finn as the rest filed by. Connor stepped onto the bridge ahead of Miranda, clutching the ropes so tight his knuckles turned white. Doug caught Miranda's hand before she limped onto the bridge.

"You okay, Miri?"

Miranda nodded, still appalled by her outburst. "I just need to get Delilah off my back and sleep for a week. It's been a bitch of a day."

"You will need to stop that," Finn said.

"Stop what?" Doug asked.

"The cursing. Your women should take care. The Prophet teaches that profanity is unseemly in a woman."

An unpleasant tingle raced along Miranda's spine, raising the hairs on the back of her neck.

"The Prophet?" Doug asked. "Is that your leader?"

"The Prophet is the God All-Father on Earth," Finn answered. The archer closest to Finn nodded in agreement. "But do not be uneasy, for He loves all of God's true children. He had a vision that you would come. That is why we were out here to save you. The God All-Father is anxious to meet you and divine the Heavenly Father's purpose in sending you to Him."

Miranda broke out in a chill sweat. Finn smiled at them, his golden eyes as guileless as a child's.

"Well," Doug said, "at least we aren't barging in unannounced."

Finn and his companion roared with laughter. "After you," Finn finally managed, motioning for Miranda to precede them on the bridge.

Miranda clasped the rough ropes in her hands and stepped onto the foot rope

with her good leg. She looked down to the forest floor, to the zombies that wandered below. The distance between the bridge and the ground seemed as nothing compared to the abyss they had just flung themselves into.

THE BRIDGES BECAME MORE substantial as they traveled nearer to the village. Spaced wooden footboards were the first improvement, then the webbing between the hand ropes and the bridge decks became more substantial. The last bridge was the most elaborate yet. Oval-shaped metal supports arched overhead, fastened with industrial-sized metal bolts to a deck of thick wooden planks three feet across. Lanterns were attached, illuminating the walkway, and heavy-duty webbing stretched six feet up the sides. A small child would not be able to fall through it, even where it attached at the bottom.

At the end was a gate.

Miranda's apprehension waned in the face of pain and exhaustion. From knee down, her leg was spectacularly swollen and so painful she could barely limp, even with Connor's help. To divert herself from the unnerving rope bridges she had tried to figure out how much sleep she had gotten in the past three days, only to find that the simple arithmetic involved stumped her. Delilah had finally surrendered fifteen minutes ago. She snored into Miranda's ear. Several times they had crossed small platforms from one bridge to another and the others had offered to carry her, but Miranda was afraid the pit bull would end up plunging to her death in the transfer. Delilah would just have to wait until they were somewhere more secure.

She leaned into Connor whose arm wrapped around her waist. Two imposing, unfriendly-looking men stood outside the gate. The lantern light glinted off machetes slung on their hips. Finn greeted them and conferred for a

moment, then turned to the group.

“Evening service has already started. Miranda and Mario will be taken to the infirmary so that the healer can assess them.” Finn turned his attention to Miranda, who was closer to him than Mario. “Members of the Prophet’s Guard will escort you. The rest of you will come with me to service. Welcome to New Jerusalem.”

After a series of bolts and crossbeams retracted, they stepped over the threshold. More tall, imposing men waited, presumably the escort to the infirmary. As far as she could see, dwellings of all sizes were built in the treetops. Lanterns flickered among them in no discernible pattern. She had caught glimpses as they approached the village, but Miranda found herself unprepared for the sight before her. Giant platforms that dwarfed the one they had first encountered after their rescue were built into the branches of a grove of giant sequoias. Everything was ringed with the same high webbing as on the last bridge. Intricate log support structures girded the platforms and buildings, all of which were connected by the enclosed style of bridge.

“It’s like *Swiss Family Robinson* on steroids,” Connor whispered.

With a leader who calls himself a prophet, Miranda thought.

A middle-aged woman with a practical look about her approached them.

“This is Bethany, our healer. She will take Miranda and Mario to the infirmary,” Finn said. “The rest of you will come with me.”

“Can we get the dog off my back first?” When Finn, Dalton, and both of Prophet’s Guardsmen looked at her warily, she asked, “Is there a problem?”

“Most of the people here have only seen wild dogs,” Bethany said. “We’ll do it at the infirmary.”

“Are you all right, Miranda?” Doug asked, a silent question in his eyes: *Can you hold your shit together?*

Miranda could tell that Doug was unhappy about splitting up, but there was nothing any of them could do about it. “Go ahead. Don’t worry about us,” she answered.

She had fucked up earlier. She wasn’t going to again.

THE INFIRMARY REMINDED MIRANDA OF A FRONTIER CABIN, WITH ITS whitewashed wood plank walls and cozy pot-bellied stove. Frontier except for the salvaged modern windows overlooking the walkway outside. At the other end of the mobile home-sized building, several young women were filling a round wooden bathtub that sat next to the wood-burning stove with steaming water.

Delilah was freed from the sling on Miranda's back. Miranda felt as if she might float away now that the squirming pit bull no longer weighed her down. Mario took Delilah out to do her business and stretch her legs. He had been reluctant to leave Miranda alone but relented when Delilah began to whine and paw at the door. The Prophet's Guard accompanying Mario had kept a healthy distance from them.

When Mario returned, Bethany took him to the examination area near the door. Miranda was led behind a large curtain that divided a row of cots.

"There you go," said Pamela as she helped her into a chair by the cots. The slight teenaged girl had been assigned to look after Miranda. "Let me pull this curtain and I will get you undressed."

Pamela tapped a steaming pail of water next to Miranda's feet with her toe and grinned. "I kept some of the hot water for you before the other girls put it all in the tub."

While Pamela set about undressing and bathing Miranda, Miranda set about feeling ridiculous. After a few minutes, she began to relax. The water was scented with a fragrant herb and the light lather of the homemade soap and soft washcloth felt wonderful against her skin. She could hear the low murmur of Mario's voice answering the healer's questions.

To just sit and be taken care of felt like such an indulgence. Between the pleasurable sensations of the warm cloth caressing her skin and the lack of an imminent threat to her life, a bone-crushing weariness descended. Miranda let Pamela's word wash over her and had begun to nod off when a bolt of lightning-sharp pain shot up her leg. Pamela's face turned up, her brown eyes contrite.

“I barely touched it.”

“It’s okay,” Miranda assured her.

“How many children do you have, Miss Miranda?” Pamela asked. She moved the washcloth over Miranda’s other leg with practiced ease.

“None.” Miranda yawned.

“No children?” Pamela lowered her voice. “Is it that you cannot? How old are you?”

“I’ve never tried, and I’m twenty-nine,” Miranda answered, amused by the girl’s lack of tact.

“Then not *too* old,” Pamela said, sounding satisfied.

“I guess not.”

“I will be fifteen soon,” Pamela said, her voice brimming with excitement. “Once I am married, I will have many children, the Prophet be praised.” The girl wrung out the cloth and set it aside. “All done.”

Pamela allowed Miranda to dry herself while she fetched a long tunic from a hook and helped Miranda up from the chair and into the garment. Pamela shifted Miranda to a cot and cleared away the pail.

“Thank you,” Miranda said when Pamela returned. “Whatever’s in the water smells wonderful.”

“The water is scented with sage and lavender. Sage is the Prophet’s favored scent, and lavender is mine.” Pamela inspected Miranda for a moment. “Your hair is red?”

“Yes,” Miranda said, trying to keep her eyes open. At this rate, she would be asleep by the time the healer examined her.

“Why is it shorn?”

Miranda ran a hand over her head, as if to confirm the state of her hairstyle. “I buzzed it off so there’d be nothing for a zombie to catch hold of. It was as long as yours before that.”

“But you will grow it long again, surely?”

Miranda shrugged.

“You should,” Pamela offered, with an assurance far beyond her years. “The Prophet teaches that a woman with shorn hair is like a flower that has not yet

blossomed.”

“Thank you, Pamela, that will be enough.”

Bethany, the healer, spoke sharply as she walked up behind the girl. “You should be helping the others, not idling here.”

Pamela flushed a deep scarlet, mumbled an apology, and scurried away.

“I’m sorry about that,” Bethany said, her voice more indulgent now that the girl was out of earshot. “That one will talk you to death if you let her. Let’s see what’s going on with this leg of yours.”

Miranda pulled the tunic up. She answered the questions asked of her and tried to not wince or whimper. As thankful as she was to be out of danger, Pamela’s questions made her uneasy. The sooner they were out of New Jerusalem, the better.

FINN LED Connor and the others farther into the village. The density of the village increased until they came to a wide plaza. Across the plaza stood the largest building Connor had seen thus far. The murmur of raised voices from inside the building pierced the silence. Finn stopped just outside the building's wide doors. In the light of the torch illuminating the entrance, Connor could see a life-sized outline of a man, arms raised overhead in supplication, painted on both doors.

"Follow me."

Finn opened the door. The warmer air inside the building enveloped Connor like an embrace. A raised dais illuminated by hurricane lanterns was on the far side of the one-room building. In the rest of the space, where people were crammed into rows ten deep, the hurricane lamps were turned low. There must be three hundred people here, Connor thought. When Finn stopped and leaned against the back wall, Connor and his companions did as well. It wasn't the first time Connor had stood at the back for church.

The slender man on the dais held his arm out to the gathering. He looked taller than Connor but shorter than Doug. One look at his pointed cheekbones, sharp nose, and golden eyes told Connor all he needed to know of who Finn's father was.

"...reveling in the life of an unrepentant sinner. We could not believe Our luck, to live where We did, when city after city had fallen! You would think the end of the world would have caused Us to reflect, to re-evaluate Our life, but We

did not.”

“God All-Father, save us,” the people answered.

The man on the stage continued with the ferocity of a carnival huckster. “We were foolish enough to think Our life, the life of an unrepentant sinner, would continue as before. But the Heavenly Father had other plans for Us.”

He stopped and looked down for a moment. When he looked back up the crackle of energy that raced through the gathering raised the hairs on Connor’s arms.

“Criminals such as We were rounded up, beaten until We could hardly walk, and thrown beyond the barricades. It’s funny,” he said, sounding amused. “How a person can summon strength they never knew they had when it is their own life on the line. We limped a little faster than the others, but not quick enough. We escaped the Hollow Men that attacked Us, but We were bitten many times. We locked Ourselves inside a building and waited to die, to turn.”

Suddenly, the room was filled with upraised voices, calling out to their Prophet. Under the cover of all the noise, Doug leaned over to Connor and said, “This whack job actually thinks he survived an untreated zombie bite.”

“Does it surprise you,” the Prophet demanded fiercely. “That a sinner might be saved by God?”

More cries from the crowd: “All-Father Be Praised this, God All-Father’s Judgment Save Us that.”

“Nothing to do with this,” the preacher said, jabbing his finger into his chest, “this meat, saved Us. We huddled in the corner, waiting to die, when We saw a book.” Jeremiah held aloft a worn Bible. “It made no sense to Us so We threw it aside and slept, such was Our pride! When We woke again Our fever raged worse than before. We glanced at the book that lay open beside Us and the scales fell away from Our eyes.”

The entire congregation said, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”

Connor realized he held his breath. The man who stood before them was

mesmerizing. And completely insane.

“It was as if the words jumped off the page! They demanded Our attention! We realized that the Hollow Men were not a disease, not an epidemic,” the Prophet continued, his eyes fever bright. “They were the judgment of God the Heavenly Father.”

Again, the congregation answered him. “For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

“Humanity had turned from Him. We worshipped the false gods of science and money. We had forgotten that We are only shells for the piece of the Heavenly Father that dwells within Us. *‘He sees every hidden thing, all of it written in His books of life and death.’* When He withdrew from humanity, only empty husks remained.”

“He did not withdraw from you, Pappa,” a high voice, a child’s voice, called out.

“But He did! He did! Don’t you see, My little one?” The Prophet stepped off the dais and walked over to a small boy seated on the floor. He picked the child up and began to pace back and forth in front of the congregation, the child on his hip.

“We had turned into a zombie. We had died and become what We feared. When We grasped that God had turned away from Us, We thought, *‘I should join my brothers and sisters.’* There was no point in denying Our nature, because there is no way to hide from His judgment!”

Connor looked at the child in the Prophet’s arms. The boy was about three, with the soft curve of cheek and chin that came with childhood, but there was no mistaking it: he too was the man’s child. He scanned the rest of the congregation. To Connor’s eye there were at least eight other kids of varying ages who bore such a strong resemblance to this prophet that he might be their father as well.

How many kids does this guy have?

“We accepted Our fate. We opened the doors and went outside, but the other Hollow Men shunned Us! They ran from Us! We pursued them, but they wanted nothing to do with Us. We fell to Our knees and cried out to God! We held His Bible, confessed Our sins, begged for His mercy. We begged to be accepted by

Our hollowed-out brothers and sisters. We told Him that We understood His plan.”

The preacher set the boy down, as the congregation again joined in.

“We heard an angry voice that filled Us with fear: *You understand nothing.*”

Their prophet looked out over the congregation, nodding his head in approval.

“For God had spoken to Us,” he said. “God had restored Us, delivered us from Our fate as a Hollow Man. He commanded Us to collect the righteous and to build a New Jerusalem of God-fearing men. He told Us that We would be His Prophet, His God All-Father On Earth, for those who might one day be worthy of His Judgment. Our wicked, sinful life before would show the righteous His mercy for those obedient to His Will.”

The preacher took a deep breath. He bowed his head and brought his folded hands to his lips. “Praise be the God of Judgment.”

“Praise be the God of Judgment,” the congregation answered.

The preacher looked up. The room brightened as more of the Prophet’s Guard turned up the hurricane lanterns throughout the room.

“Those foretold in Our Revelation have arrived,” he said, hand outstretched to indicate where Connor and the others stood.

Everyone in the room turned in their seats. Whispers began as heads bobbed and necks craned, seeking better views.

“We will conclude Our service now, so that We may offer a proper welcome. Finish your devotions in your homes, My Children. Praise be the God of Judgment.”

The whispers became chattering and gawking. People began to file out the now opened doors, but rubber-necked so much that a bottleneck of foot traffic formed.

The preacher came through the crowd, which parted around him.

Finn addressed him. “Prophet, I present Doug Michel, lately of San Jose, and his companions.”

The prophet nodded and held his hand out to Doug. “We are Jeremiah Butler.”

“Doug Michel,” said Doug as he shook his hand. “We’re in your debt.”

Jeremiah shook his head and demurred. “There are only four of you.”

“Two are with your healer,” said Doug.

“Ah. Healer Bethany is capable, and I am sure you are tired from your trials. Is there anything you wish to know?”

Have you ever been under psychiatric care? Connor thought.

“Since you ask, I’ve gotta say,” Doug said, sounding like he had fallen off the turnip truck yesterday. “I’ve been in San Jose a long time and nobody has any idea you’re here.”

“We offer those who find Us the opportunity to accept Heavenly Father’s true salvation of Judgment. He reveals His Will to me, and We instruct Our people in His ways. If the outcome of His Revelation is that We stand apart from the sin and wickedness of the remnants of the old world, We must believe that is what God the Heavenly Father desires. He sends to Us only those who might be ready to receive the enlightenment of His judgment.”

By now the building was almost empty. Connor saw a teenaged girl catch Finn’s eye just before she passed through the doors. Finn did not return the girl’s expectant smile, but Connor could tell that he was happy to have seen her.

“Finn is your son,” Connor said.

“He is. Like all young men, he is headstrong, but he will learn.” Jeremiah turned to Finn. “See that Our friends are given baths and sustenance and left to rest undisturbed.” He returned his attention to Doug. “I welcome you and your companions to New Jerusalem. With Our guidance, your eyes will be opened to Heavenly Father’s plan for you.”

“If Finn and Dalton had not come when they did, we’d be dead. We’ll never forget that,” Doug answered.

Jeremiah’s smile was small and tight. “You are most welcome, but any praise belongs to the Heavenly Father alone.”

When he didn’t say more, Finn said, “I will see to providing for Your guests, Father. If—”

“Finn,” Jeremiah interrupted. “I trust you saw Tamara?”

Finn went rigid. The change in his body language was so marked that for a

moment Connor thought he was having some sort of fit.

“Yes, Father,” he answered, sounding like he was trying to keep his voice neutral, but he wasn’t able to pull it off.

Jeremiah regarded his son with a nasty gleam in his eye. “Tamara seems troubled. We would have you bring her to Us in an hour’s time. We desire your presence as We pray with her to discern what might be amiss with Our daughter.”

Finn looked stricken. The color drained from his face. His lips pressed together so tight that they barely moved when he said, “As the Prophet commands.”

They stopped at the infirmary to drop Seffie off; she had started to feel faint, and co-ed facilities were not an option in New Jerusalem anyway. Both Miranda and Mario were asleep; checking in would have to wait until morning. Back in their guest quarters, Connor literally had to bite his tongue to keep from speaking before the attendant left them alone to go check on the promised baths.

“What do you think?” Connor asked

Doug started to laugh, but without mirth. “Apart from the obvious?”

“Do you think he might be immune?”

“I think he had a psychotic break that included a one-way ticket to Cuckooville,” Mike said.

Doug bit his bottom lip. Connor had noticed he did so when he was thinking.

“Well,” he said, “either he had a psychotic break and *is* immune, or he had a psychotic break and went on to become your garden variety megalomaniac cult leader, which I think is more likely. I think it’s safe to say he’s never going to get the mental health care he needs.”

“Those Hollow Man symbols are everywhere, on every door and gate,” Connor said. “What the hell is that?”

“Reminders,” Mike said.

“You’re right,” Doug said, nodding his head. “They’re a good way to reinforce his appalling theology and keep people scared. I didn’t think we could be more screwed than when we were trapped in that house.”

“Did you see the way Finn reacted when his father started talking about that

girl?” Mike asked.

Doug nodded. “Finn might be helpful. We’ll have to sound him out.”

Mike said, “These people blew up the road. I’d bet my life on it. Anyone taking 17 to Santa Cruz has to turn back at that point and take one of the mountain roads if they don’t turn back. Roads that just happen to push you in this direction.”

“And if you abandon your vehicle, there are traps set in the forest,” Doug added. At Mike’s quizzical look, he added, “When Connor and I went into the forest he was almost caught in a net. If there’s no one else up here, they must belong to these people.”

“He assumes we’re staying,” Doug continued. “How else have they kept their existence secret unless anyone who ends up here can’t leave? He’s so fucking nuts he probably believes God is sending people to him.”

“He can’t be holding everyone here against their will,” Mike countered.

Below, the moans of the zombies swelled and receded. A shiver tickled down Connor’s spine.

Doug shuddered. “I guess it’s background noise for the people who live here but that moaning...” Doug’s voice trailed off. “Son of a bitch, they don’t have to force people to stay! Think about it. You’ve just been miraculously rescued and there are zombies down below, moaning day and night. I couldn’t believe it when I saw there’s no palisade around the area underneath the village. That’s one of the first things I’d do, but they don’t have one.”

Connor looked at Doug, then Mike. “I guess it goes without saying that we need to get out of here fast.”

Doug shrugged his shoulders, a helpless gesture. “I don’t see how we can. Miranda’s leg, she can’t walk on it. And Mario... The guy’s been shot, exploded, run a half marathon, and almost dislocated his shoulder trying to keep himself and Seffie from falling off a roof in the last forty-eight hours alone. If he doesn’t get some rest, I don’t know how long he’ll stay in one piece.”

All three men jumped when a knock sounded against the door. A moment later it opened, and the attendant’s head appeared.

“The bath is ready, sirs, if one of you is ready.”

“I can wait,” Connor said to Doug.

“You’re the fearless leader,” Mike added.

“And it’s such a glamour job,” Doug muttered as he headed for the door.

Connor unbuckled the weapons belt that held his handgun, machete, and hunting knife, casting it aside. He lay back on the cot and turned the discussion over in his mind, wondering what they had missed and what they did not know yet as he fought the pull of sleep.

“Mike, do you—” he began, then stopped. Mike was already out cold.

Being horizontal made Connor aware of just how exhausted he was. It was definitely better being here than ending up as zombie fodder, but New Jerusalem had lost its *Swiss Family Robinson* charm. Connor thought about the girl and Finn. He didn’t know how they fit into all of this, but it was part and parcel of the Prophet’s insanity. Connor was sure of it.

A BRIGHT SUNLIT room and a damp piney smell—definitely not home. Mario opened his eyes a little more and looked at the roughly hewn timbers of the ceiling. Right, tree house people. He pushed aside the woven wool blanket and sheet that covered him and sat up. His ribs screamed.

In the corner, a fire crackled inside the wood-burning stove, the radiating heat making the room almost comfortable. Two more cots were lined up perpendicular to the wall before a screen blocked Mario's view. Above every cot hung a flat wooden figure with arms held high, outlined in white, a crucifix of some sort. Mario looked around but did not see Miranda anywhere.

He cradled his injured arm, now in a sling, against his body. His arm and shoulder hurt even more than before, which he had not thought possible. He shuffled to the other side of the screen where he found three more cots. A young girl lay asleep in the cot farthest away from the screen. The middle cot had the blankets tucked, but not neatly. Maybe Seffie had slept there, but she was not around now. Miranda slept in the cot next to the screen.

Her leg was propped high to help the swelling. He remembered something about no ice, and he'd bathed after being examined, then changed into the pajama-like clothes he now wore. He must have conked out almost immediately after being steered into bed because he did not remember anything after finishing a cup of bitter-tasting tea that the doctor had given him. He'd drunk it only after being assured that the others would at least stop by the infirmary again after meeting this Prophet.

Miranda's foot stuck out beyond the edge of the blanket, but a thick wooly sock had been put over it. Even with the sock, he could tell the swelling in her ankle was bad. Delilah opened a curious eye from where she lay under Miranda's cot before her tail began thumping against the floor. She rose and nuzzled Mario's hands and knees in greeting. Mario fussed over her quietly, scratching her ears and getting a few kisses in return, before she went back to guard her mistress.

You always were a faithful one, Liley, he thought, a faint smile touching his lips as he sat in the cot opposite Miranda.

Mario studied Miranda's face as she slept. Dark smudges ringed her eyes, her cheeks flushed bright pink. Her brow furrowed slightly and her lip pursed in a pout, like she was figuring something out as she dreamed. The buzz cut cast her head in a red-gold glow. Mario resisted the urge to rub his hand over it. He'd only wake her up, and with how things were between them, she'd likely break his hand.

"You'd never think she's such a pain in the ass to look at her now," he sighed.

"Really?"

Mario startled, then looked up to see the doctor standing beside him. "I didn't think anyone was here," he said, rising to his feet. The doctor motioned for him to follow her to the examination area.

"How is she?" he asked.

"A severely sprained knee and ankle, maybe some ligament involvement. I'm pretty certain she has a hairline fracture of the tibia given the severity of swelling, and since she can't tolerate any weight, but without an x-ray that's just an educated guess." The doctor shrugged. "Either way, she'll be off her feet for at least a week to ten days."

"A whole week?"

"At least. I didn't design the human body. I just give the bad news."

She directed him to an exam table and helped pull his shirt over his head. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, but still exhausted," Mario answered. "How long was I asleep?"

“Almost twenty hours.” She grinned at his surprised expression. It made her look almost pretty.

Mario submitted to pokes and prods, requests for deep breaths, and to follow her finger with his eyes without moving his head. Bethany (she had to remind him of her name) seemed to be in her forties and told him she was a pediatrician. Her blond hair was shot through with gray, but the silvery, pretty kind, pulled back in a bun. She was friendly and even displayed touches of humor, but the smiles never quite reached her faded denim-blue eyes.

She found more tender spots than the night before as she palpated the shoulder and elbow of his injured arm, pointing out how swollen they were. Mario had not noticed, but it seemed like every part of his body hurt.

“Your elbow and shoulder are some of the worst sprains I’ve seen. Is this the arm you used to catch the girl who fell off the roof?” Bethany asked as she inspected his gunshot wound.

Mario nodded rather than try to talk around the mercury thermometer Bethany had stuck in his mouth.

“Any longer and I think your shoulder would have dislocated. You’re going to have to wear this arm in a sling for a week or so. I’ll irrigate this wound again in a few hours.”

She took the thermometer from his mouth, then frowned. “Hundred point two. Your temperature hasn’t gone down.” Her voice quieted to almost a whisper. “If I had antibiotics, I’d give you some.”

“I have some in my pack.”

“Shh!” Bethany’s face clouded over. She shot a furtive look at the far side of the room, where Miranda and the girl slept. “Keep your voice down. Pills or injectable?”

“Both,” Mario answered, beginning to feel wary.

“Don’t tell anyone you have them,” she said, her voice just shy of a whisper. “You have syringes? Are they glass?”

Her voice brimmed with tempered hope. At his nod, her face lit up just for a moment before she shot another furtive look at the girl in the cot, then at the door. “Where are they in your pack?”

“I’ll get them,” Mario said, now fully on guard. He began to climb down from the exam table.

“No. Stay there in case someone comes in.”

It was the look on her face that made him agree. She looked scared. Mario told her the color of the antibiotic vials, since they were different than the serum vials. Bethany pulled two mugs from a cupboard and put a spoonful of what looked like dried herbs in both. She filled a small camping-style enameled kettle from a pitcher on the windowsill.

She spoke softly as she walked by. “To sterilize,” she said, leaving what needed sterilizing unsaid. At a regular volume, she said, “Let’s have tea.”

Mario’s mind raced as he watched her cross to the wood-burning stove and set the kettle on it before continuing over to his cot. Bethany was making tea as cover? She had been excited that the syringes were glass. You can sterilize glass and use it again, he thought. Plastic syringes were impossible to sterilize but had been cheaper in the old world, the disposable world of single-use everything. Bethany spoke softly but never whispered. She must know that whispers carry more than a lowered voice.

First Doug’s warning about not leaving Miranda or Seffie alone, and now a doctor who acted as if she was being spied on and didn’t want anyone to know about antibiotics and syringes.

What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?

Mario heard Bethany rifling through his things before she reappeared from behind the screen a moment later with her hands tucked in the slightly bulging pockets of her smock. She crossed back to the counter where the cups were, gave the sleeping girl a quick glance, using her body to block the drawer she opened. Mario craned his neck and saw her remove a false back. She stuffed everything inside, including a flash of red.

She had taken the serum vials.

Bethany looked over to him, as if she sensed the angry protest he didn’t dare let pass his lips.

“I took everything,” she said when she was beside him again. “I’m surprised they haven’t searched your packs already.”

Mario glanced at the sleeping girl. Bethany's paranoia was infectious.

"Where's Miranda's pack?"

"She didn't have one."

"Yes, she did," he insisted.

Bethany shook her head, adamant. "She only had the dog."

She's right, Mario realized, his heart sinking. *Doug had her pack.*

Bethany slid the false back into place and pushed the drawer shut, then rejoined him at the exam table.

"You have more than antibiotics there."

Mario didn't reply.

She let it go, willing to let him keep his secret. She picked up the wraparound smock he had been wearing and said, as if the last two minutes had never happened, "Let's get you back into this."

Mario grabbed the smock. "What the hell is going on here?"

Bethany shook her head. "I can't, not here."

She pulled the smock from his hand and held it up. Mario stuck his good arm through the sleeve and let Bethany wrap and tie the smock shut around his bound arm. She looked over at Miranda, then back again.

"You two had a fight?"

"What makes you think that?" Mario asked, utterly bewildered at the abrupt change of topic.

"Besides the spectacular bruises on your face and her banged-up hand? She sat on the cot next to yours last night after you went to sleep. She had the same look on her face that you did earlier."

Mario looked over at Miranda, still asleep, her head sunk deep in a pillow. She had watched him last night while he slept? After the way she had flipped out on him yesterday—who was he kidding, after the way *he* had flipped out on *her*—he found that hard to believe.

"You could say that."

"So you and she—"

The door to the infirmary opened. Bethany turned toward the new arrival. A pale man, about six feet tall with a wiry build and wearing a white long-sleeved

tunic, entered the infirmary. His garments were made of a finely woven linen-type fabric, not the homespun everyone else seemed to wear. Mario could tell he was accustomed to getting his way. When he smiled, Mario's skin began to crawl. He had the same golden eyes, tawny hair, and sharp cheekbones and nose as Finn—they had to be related. But unlike Finn, this man's smile had no warmth.

"Prophet," Bethany said, bobbing down in a half-curtsey. She looked down at the floor.

"Healer, leave us."

"As the Prophet commands," Bethany replied. She walked straight to the door and left, never once raising her eyes.

"You must be Mario," the man said, extending his hand. "We are Jeremiah Butler, the Prophet and leader of New Jerusalem. You are welcome here."

"Thank you," Mario said. He slid down from the exam table and shook Jeremiah's hand. "We're thankful to be here."

"Yes," Jeremiah said with a self-assured nod, "a sentiment your companions also expressed. We have met the others already but left you and the woman here to rest. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes."

"The healer tells Us that you were quite banged up...broken ribs, fever, and a wound on your arm. But not a bite, she assures Us. Your path here has been a difficult one."

"Yes."

Jeremiah waited for Mario to elaborate. Mario stayed silent. He did not want to give more information than absolutely necessary, but Jeremiah stayed silent too. Mario didn't want to risk being rude. They were guests, after all, and it was not smart to alienate your host. Especially when the host in question had saved you.

"Finn mentioned something about you seeing that we would come."

"Indeed." Jeremiah nodded his head, his expression grave. He spoke with an intensity that demanded attention. Mario could see how he had ended up in charge.

“But We only saw five,” he continued. “The red-haired woman was not part of what the Heavenly Father showed Us, but We have learned patience when interpreting His will. Sometimes not all is revealed. We must accede to His wisdom, trust that His Revelation will reveal itself in His time. God is perfect, after all, and We, just a man.”

“It must be difficult,” Mario said neutrally. Talking to Jeremiah felt exactly the same as navigating the treacherous currents of the City Council.

The prophet’s eyes narrowed. “Is it true that she is your leader’s second?”

“Yes,” Mario answered. Judging from Jeremiah’s tone, Mario didn’t like where this might be going.

“Does it not bother you to have a woman outrank you?”

“It’s not my call.”

A small sound, part yawn, part sigh, came from the cots. Jeremiah turned to look as Miranda blinked her eyes and began to stir. She yawned, stretching her arms overhead before wincing and stopping mid-motion. She moved her left shoulder gingerly as she sat up.

“What time is it?” she asked, her voice still heavy with sleep.

“Such blue eyes.”

An icy shiver raced down Mario’s spine. The predatory tone of the Prophet’s voice was unmistakable. Mario forced himself to smile and started over to Miranda, his heart thumping in his chest. “It’s around noon.”

“Really?”

Mario sat on the side of Miranda’s cot, taking her hand in his. The clean bandages around her hands were soft.

“You look so much better today,” he said, meaning it. He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

Miranda pulled back in surprise. She looked at him like he had lost his mind.

“What are—”

“I’m sorry, love, I should have introduced you first,” Mario said through a static grin.

His eyes bored into hers, trying to make Miranda understand, but she didn’t seem to be getting the message. She tried to pull her hand away, but Mario held

fast. Miranda grimaced as he tightened his grip, his fingers digging into her burned and bandaged palms, but he didn't dare let go as he stood up.

"This is Jeremiah Butler, Miranda, the prophet. He came to see how we're doing."

An agonizing moment passed as Jeremiah came toward them. Mario would have recognized Jeremiah's rapacious expression at a hundred yards, but he could not be sure the same was true of Miranda. Despite how smart she was, she sometimes missed what he found obvious. He had often teased her about it when they had been together. And she still had a concussion, so who knew what she might or might not be able to figure out quickly.

"Oh," Miranda said, and Mario relaxed a fraction. He loosened his grip on her hand, which she left nestled inside his own. "I'm honored to meet you, Prophet."

"The honor is mine," Jeremiah replied, his golden eyes alight. He shifted his attention to Mario. "This woman belongs to you."

Mario winced. Jeremiah could not have come up with a poorer choice of words if he'd tried.

"I don't," Miranda began. "Ow!"

"Yes," Mario said, cutting her off with a sharp pinch between her thumb and forefinger. "Miranda belongs to me."

And she's going to murder me.

Jeremiah studied them for a long moment, speculation plain on his face. "And yet you agree to let her outrank you among your companions. Curious."

"Like I said before, it's not my call."

"We will give you private quarters," Jeremiah said, seemingly willing to let the matter of rank drop, "as befits a man and his consort."

"Wife," Mario corrected. Consort felt too flimsy, a bond too easily dissolved. "We're grateful for whatever accommodations you can spare, but we're fine here."

"We will leave you to rest, then," said Jeremiah, his gaze lingering on Miranda. "If the healer agrees you are up to it, you will be guests at Our table soon."

Mario shot Miranda a warning glare when she started to open her mouth again. "I am honored, thank you."

Jeremiah nodded and left. As soon as the door shut behind him, Miranda snatched her hand away.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, her face flushing with anger.

"Keep your voice down," Mario said, tipping his head toward the girl two cots away.

Miranda looked at the sleeping girl, then back at Mario. "I can take care of myself, *honey*."

Mario sat on the next bunk, facing her. "There are lots of predators in the wilderness. You never know when you'll catch one's eye."

"The predators out here can't be worse than the ones in San Jose," she said, her voice just shy of caustic. "I might have been able to turn that to my advantage."

She hadn't missed the Prophet's interest after all. I should have more faith in her, Mario thought, but the idea of Miranda dangling herself in front of that man like a juicy steak for a hungry dog made him feel ill.

Miranda looked at him for a moment, then across the room toward the wood-burning stove, her frustration and annoyance tangible. It seemed to Mario that the gears of her mind were spinning at a million miles per hour. She did not say anything for a few minutes.

"I guess we'll just have to play this out." She cocked her head to one side. "Is that a kettle on the stove over there?"

Mario sighed, relieved. Miranda was nothing if not pragmatic, and while she was not happy about what he had done, she was apparently not going to waste time being angry about it.

"I doubt it's real tea."

Only black and caffeinated counted as tea as far as Miranda was concerned. Mario retrieved the now hot kettle, using the end of his sleeve as a potholder, and filled the cups that Bethany had prepared. He handed one to Miranda and glanced at the girl in the other cot. Still sleeping.

“Mint,” Miranda pronounced after a few sniffs and a careful sip. “Could be worse. Where’s the healer lady?”

“Bethany left when the prophet arrived,” Mario murmured as he sat down. “He commanded her.”

Miranda took another sip of her tea. “Bethany, right. Commanded?”

Mario nodded. “She’s a real doctor, a pediatrician.”

“Sounds like you two had a nice little gab.”

“I think she might be,” Mario stopped, trying to find a neutral word, “obliging.”

“What did she say about my leg?”

“She thinks you have a hairline fracture of the tibia, sprained knee and ankle, maybe even some tendon and ligament involvement. She wants you off it for a week at least.”

Miranda snorted. “That’s not going to happen. Where are the others?”

“No idea.”

The rattle of the door interrupted them. Mario twisted around, his ribs registering their pro forma protest, to see Connor coming through the door. The young man’s face lit up when he saw Miranda.

Delilah trotted out to greet him, intercepting Connor at the foot of Miranda’s cot. With a clean face and the benefit of a good night’s sleep, Connor looked like a new man. He also looked very in love with Miranda, which was not going to work so well in light of Mario’s improvisation.

Miranda looked at Connor with something that approached trepidation. “Uh, hey, Connor. The uh,” she hesitated, then plunged ahead, sounding apologetic. “The husband and I were just discussing my prognosis.”

Connor’s head snapped up. He looked at Miranda, then at Mario.

Mario shifted his weight on the squeaky cot. Connor did not look to be in an understanding mood.

Miranda tried again. “My husband Mario was just telling me what the doctor said about my knee and ankle.”

Connor’s posture stiffened. Delilah retreated to Mario’s knees, as if put off by the sudden tension he now emanated.

“We met the Prophet,” Mario added. “He took a shine to Miranda.” The Prophet had mentioned meeting the others. If he had reacted to Seffie like he had Miranda, maybe Connor would fill in the blanks on his own.

Connor gave them both an appraising stare before looking past Mario to the young girl in the cot.

“I need to talk to you,” he said to Mario. He pointed toward the screen on the other side of Miranda’s cot. “Let’s go over there so we don’t disturb anyone.”

Connor stalked to the far side of the room. Miranda reached for Mario’s hand as he stood to follow.

“Don’t be a jerk.”

Mario snorted. What did she think he was going to do, throw a punch?

“What did you do?” Connor demanded as soon as Mario was close.

Mario sighed. He wasn’t in the mood for a pissing contest. Connor clearly was. Mario pulled over the chair that was next to the nearest cot and sat down.

“You’ve met the Prophet?”

“Yes.”

“He asked if Miranda ‘belonged’ to me. The way he was looking at her, there was no way I was going to say she didn’t.”

“How convenient for you.”

All at once, Mario felt tired again, and too old for this shit. “In case you haven’t noticed, Jeremiah’s a little off.”

“I’ve noticed,” Connor answered. “You’re not wasting time using this to worm your way closer to Miranda.”

“He looked at her like she was a marshmallow at a campfire. What the hell was I supposed to say? She’s a free agent, have at it? Where the hell were you, anyway?”

“I was with Doug,” Connor said defensively. “We had a hell of a time tracking Seffie down this morning, but she’s fine. Doug’s really worried.”

“That makes two of us.”

Connor nodded, though he looked annoyed with himself for agreeing with the competition. Apparently he did not have things with Miranda nailed down as tightly as he would like. If he wasn’t so preoccupied, what with the fate of the

world riding on their success or failure, Mario might have felt hopeful.

“I’ll go see Doug,” Connor offered after an awkward, silent minute while he seemed to digest where things stood. “He needs to know what’s happened so we’re all on the same page.”

They started back toward Miranda. Connor gave her a smile and a nod, then headed for the door.

“Is he okay?” Miranda asked after the door shut behind him, her lack of a poker face on full display.

“He’ll be fine.” Abruptly, Mario began to feel unwell, chilled and too hot all at once. “I need to lie down.”

“I think you should. You look terrible.”

Mario did not bother answering. He turned away, intent on collapsing back into his cot.

“Mario, where are you going? Use the cot next to me.”

Mario stopped and turned. Miranda’s pained expression shouted, ‘Married, remember?’

Mario crawled into the center cot between Miranda and the still sleeping girl. He pulled the covers over his shoulders. His body felt like it was melting into the bedding beneath him. He was just slipping past drowsiness when he heard a creak. He opened his eyes and turned his head, expecting that the noise was the door and that Bethany had returned. Instead, he saw the girl in the next cot as she sat up and threw back the covers. She remade the bed, her movements practiced and sure. She glanced fleetingly at Mario and beyond him to Miranda, then turned on her heel. She exited the infirmary without a backward glance.

Mario looked over to Miranda, but she had fallen asleep again. Left on his own, he played out scenarios in his mind. Each arrived at the same destination, where Bethany was not paranoid, but right.

MIRANDA LOOKED over to where Mario sat by the infirmary's wood-burning stove.

"See, it's not— Ow!"

Pain stabbed her shin and knee. She shifted her weight off her injured leg and abruptly sat down on the cot.

"I know it kills you to be laid up but—"

"Don't say it." Tears—of pain and frustration—prickled the corners of her eyes. Six days of doing nothing and she could still barely stand.

"You're better than a few days ago," Mario offered. "Quit with jiggling your splint, it's going to come loose. You don't want to get banned from our field trip."

Miranda tugged at the bandages that held the splint on her leg in place as Delilah sniffed it for something interesting. Miranda sneaked a look at Mario, who had resumed reading one of Bethany's medical books. His color had improved, and his temperature had come down, but he was not one hundred percent either. His left arm was bound in a sling to immobilize his shoulder, and the fractured ribs still pained him. A fading smile lingered on his lips. She knew he found her impatience amusing.

At the start of the mission, she had resolved to ignore Mario. Now, she was stuck in the infirmary, pretending to be his wife. The rest of the group spent their time going through the motions of figuring out where they fit in New Jerusalem. It did not seem prudent to disabuse the Prophet of his belief that they were

anything other than thrilled to join his cult. There had to be a few non-nutjobs who might, when the time was right, help them retrieve their confiscated weapons and slip past the ever-present Prophet's Guard. They'd never find out who those people might be if all anyone did was hang around the infirmary checking on the invalids.

Miranda still had trouble wrapping her mind around the fact that Mario was one of the good guys. Her bitterness toward him had become so...comfortable. It was a shock to have it short-circuited by Mario's furious accusation that she thought only of herself. His angry rejection of the narrative that helped her make sense of the last five years left her adrift.

She tried to think about it impartially. Had she been in a bad way after he left? Of course. She drank too much, absolutely. And reckless? Probably, at times. But self-destruct? Father Walter sick with worry? She wanted to reject the idea outright, but she couldn't.

It was when she had started cutting.

Perhaps there was some truth to what Mario had said. Since the start of the mission, she was furious with him one moment and frantic he might be injured or killed the next, undergirded by a persistent, aching sorrow. She thought she had finished mourning but now wasn't so sure. Was the sorrow she felt only for the past? Did it even matter? He had made how he felt about her clear. The only future they had was this mission. Which was all she wanted, more than she wanted. Throw in a few awkward visits from Connor under the watchful eye of Doctor Bethany and Miranda was fairly certain this expedition would be the death of her, just not in the manner she had anticipated.

Which left her, perversely, with Mario. He was the only person in the infirmary she could trust, at least as far as the mission went. They cautiously circled one another as they schemed about how to get things back on track. They had even speculated about what the world would be like when there were no more zombies. What would humanity do with a second chance? Miranda leaned toward blowing it again, but Mario was more optimistic. Despite her intention to keep things professional, a subtle familiarity crept into their interactions. But that was muscle memory, she reasoned, not a big deal. Except she usually didn't

notice it happening until she was in the thick of it.

“I see Finn now,” Bethany said, drawing Miranda out of her reverie.

Bethany stood at her workbench by the window, grinding herbs with a mortar and pestle, her motions herky-jerky, which was strange. New Jerusalem’s doctor normally moved with a quiet fluidity, almost floating like a specter, but not today. She had dropped so many things over the course of the afternoon that Miranda had lost count.

Finn opened the door and entered. After greeting Miranda and Mario, he turned to Bethany.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I just need a minute,” she answered. She dumped the pestle upside down. Most of its contents went into a small glass jar, but some spilled on the counter.

“Goddammit!” she muttered under her breath.

Miranda and Mario traded a curious glance. Bethany’s exclamation was the first time they had heard anyone curse since their arrival. Having been warned that swearing by a woman was especially out of line, Bethany’s cursing, however tame, was all the more surprising. Realizing what she had said, Bethany looked up at Finn, her expression trapped and verging on tears.

The dark circles under Finn’s eyes weighed down his weary face. To Miranda and Mario, he said, “Why do you not go outside and get some fresh air? We will join you in a minute.”

“Of course,” Mario answered.

He handed Miranda the crutches that leaned against her cot and gave her a hand up with his good arm, then ordered Delilah to stay. The dog whined as she lowered her head onto her paws before letting out a long-suffering sigh that seemed to start at the tip of her tail.

Miranda swung herself out into the damp air and breathed deep, happy to be free of whatever was going on between Finn and Bethany, but intensely curious as well. As Mario pulled the door shut, she heard Finn say, “You will not be chosen twice.”

Miranda’s excitement at being outdoors was abruptly tempered. Zombie moans tickled a chill up her spine.

“They’re all on edge today,” Mario said. He stopped beside Miranda just outside the door. It seemed the whole of New Jerusalem’s population was hurrying by, their faces grim.

“I heard Bethany’s helpers whispering about a faith walk. Do you think it’s about that?” Miranda asked. She shifted her weight to adjust the crutches. Designed for someone shorter, they dug into her rib cage.

“Maybe,” Mario said with a shrug. “Are those crutches okay?”

“I wouldn’t want to do a marathon on them, but it’s better—”

Mario’s hand rested on the small of her back. When had that happened? Mario looked at her, a question in his eyes for a moment before realization of why she had stopped talking filled them. Behind them, Bethany opened the door.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” Mario said. The weight of his hand disappeared as he stepped away, nonplussed.

Fuck, Miranda thought as Bethany smiled weakly at her before melting into the flow of foot traffic. Bethany had seen Mario practically leap away from her. A husband apologizing for touching his wife looked bad.

She could still feel where his hand had been, still feel the crackle of attraction that had arced toward him when she realized he was touching her. It was the spike of aching desire, or the drowsy sensual drift into him, that pulled her up short, that made her aware they had stumbled into an intimacy they no longer shared. Sometimes the light would catch his eyes, or his lips would curve in a smile, and she had to turn away and shut her eyes as she willed the attraction into submission.

Finn joined them, oblivious. He motioned forward. “This way.”

“So,” Miranda asked. “What’s a faith walk?”

Finn stopped short and looked around as if he was trying to judge how many passersby had heard her comment. His golden eyes narrowed. On the sharp angles of his face, the expression made him look severe.

“You are no longer in the world you know,” he said soft but sharp. “You must be more...circumspect. The Prophet All-Father prefers that His Children learn of His Will from He alone. It would anger Him to hear you speak so casually of that which you do not understand. That can be...unpleasant.”

“I’m sorry,” Miranda said. “I didn’t, I shouldn’t have pried.”

Finn turned and set off at a faster pace. Mario hurried ahead so that he and Finn were two abreast, leaving Miranda crutching doggedly behind them.

“I apologize, Finn,” Mario said. “Miranda didn’t mean offense.”

“Learning the ways of a new place takes time,” Finn answered. “But belief in the Prophet’s teachings runs deep. Most are not as understanding as those of us who have seen the outside world.”

“There must be a lot of pressure on you to be a good example, being his son.”

“Being his child is hardly unique,” Finn spat.

Hardly unique? Mario’s question had not just taken Finn by surprise... It had angered him. Maybe they could use that anger. Father Walter’s voice echoed through her head. *Always trust your instincts, Miranda. They’ll never steer you wrong.*

Finn and Mario were now at least ten feet ahead of her near the entrance to the large plaza farther into the village. People were bottlenecked at the entry points. In the crush, Miranda lost sight of them.

Some fake husband I’ve got...doesn’t even wait for his crippled wife.

A moment later, Mario was back in front of her. “You doing okay?”

She nodded.

“Nice try back there with the new-in-town question.”

Miranda sighed. “Too obvious.”

Mario did not contradict her but smiled. “Finn said we’re going down via a harness since we’re not nimble enough for the ladders.” He pointed to the far side of the plaza. “We’re supposed to go over there.”

“Going down?”

“There’s some sort of meeting enclosure,” Mario said uneasily. He fixed her with that penetrating stare, the one that made her feel like his brown eyes could see right through her.

They worked their way over to Finn. The zombie moans were much louder here than outside the infirmary. The air crackled with tension. The inhabitants of New Jerusalem were joining long lines that stretched across the plaza. One by

one, the first person in line disappeared over the edge through openings in the rails and protective netting.

Miranda leaned against the rail and peered through the netting to the forest floor below. The instinct of fight or flight seized her. Her leg began to throb as if underscoring just how vulnerable her injury made her. Mario's sharp intake of breath hissed past her ear.

On the forest floor below, partly underneath the plaza, sat a large rectangular building with a steeply angled roof. Hundreds of zombies churned around it, desiccated mouths opening and closing, spindly fingers snatching at the air. New Jerusalem's inhabitants descended rope ladders that ended on a small widow's walk at the center of the building's roof; from there, they disappeared inside. The ladders were attached to the widow's walk, but they swayed out from over the safety of the building's roof.

"If they slip and fall, they could miss the platform," Miranda gasped, horrified. "Hit that roof with any momentum and you slide right off."

Mario's brown eyes reflected her own disbelief, but beneath it, she saw a fierce resolve.

"We stick together, Miri," he said.

His hand wrapped around hers. She held on tight.

JUST BECAUSE THEY do things differently here doesn't necessarily mean anything, Miranda thought.

Always trust your instincts.

The second level was a large balcony that ringed the long building. The benches were built on risers, so no matter where a person sat, they could enjoy a clear view. The first level was not in use at the moment, but from under the opposite balcony, Miranda could see the bottom of a door that looked well maintained. There did not seem to be anyone in attendance younger than teenagers, but seating was snug. Miranda and her friends occupied what Finn had explained were places of honor at the center of the length of the building, where the Prophet himself sat. At the moment, the Prophet was nowhere to be seen. Finn, Bethany, Finn's cousin Dalton, and several of the archers who had covered their escape into the forest sat in the row in front of them.

*God is in his holy temple,
in the pure and holy mind,
In the rev'rent heart and simple,
In the soul from sin refined.*

The voices around Miranda rose and fell as the assembly began the third hymn since she had taken her seat. The soothing melody spoke of good endeavors and reverent hearts, but tension filled the building. When the hymn

ended, the moans of the zombies outside grew louder, thumps against the walls of the building startling those sitting closest. Across from Miranda, the people snapped to attention. Jeremiah Butler strode out from underneath the balcony. His feet were bare, his posture ramrod straight. He stopped at the center of the lower level and looked up at the balcony as he turned in place. His white robe seemed to absorb the light from the lanterns overhead.

“Brothers and Sisters, True Followers of the Heavenly Father’s Judgment, today we welcome newcomers to our community.”

Jeremiah’s hand swept toward Miranda and her friends. “Three months ago, I foresaw the arrival of five travelers, refugees from the sin of the City that clings to the ways of the old world. Heavenly Father did not reveal their purpose, only that their arrival portends great changes. Yet when they arrived there were six, and the one unrevealed with hair the color of flame.”

Jeremiah paused. Aware that every eye in the hall was fastened on her, Miranda held her head high, but inside she quaked. Historically speaking, redheads did not always fare well—Lizzie Borden, Mary Queen of Scots, Judas Iscariot...

“So what are we to make of their arrival, My Children?” Jeremiah continued. “Are they sent by Our Heavenly Father? Most assuredly! For red is the color of flame, which purifies the fallen world, just as we purify ourselves when we embrace the truth of God’s Judgment in our hearts.”

“But more is required than simply embracing God’s Judgment. How can we testify the truth of His Judgment?”

A rush of energy hit Miranda. The atmosphere inside the building felt electric, tangible. Miranda had never experienced anything like it. And yet, somehow, everyone became so still that they almost seemed to recede, as if every single person was trying to blend into the background.

Across from them, a woman stood and called out, “One must walk with their faith!”

““Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may live!”” Jeremiah thundered. He shrugged off the robe to reveal his wiry frame, clothed only in a loincloth. He held his arms outstretched and

began to turn in place once more.

Miranda's brow furrowed as she looked at the crescent-shaped scars on Jeremiah's arms and torso. Mario leaned forward, the whistling intake of his breath audible.

"Bite marks?" Miranda whispered.

"It's true," Doug said.

"What's true?" Selfie muttered.

"See the scars of God's Judgment," Jeremiah cried, his golden eyes blazing with an unholy light. "Even a sinner may be spared by God, as We were, if His faith is strong and true!"

A chorus of 'Amen!' and 'As the Prophet commands!' rippled through the assembly. The risers creaked and groaned around them as everyone leaped to their feet.

"Who will walk with Us among the Hollow Men?" Jeremiah shouted as he began to circle along the perimeter of the balcony.

Hollow men? Miranda thought.

He means zombies!

Miranda could not process what she was hearing. No one, not even this lunatic Prophet, could be that insane. She turned to Mario as Doug's hand clamped around her forearm and pulled her up.

"We can't look afraid," Doug whispered as he wrapped his arm around her waist for balance.

Horror blossomed anew in Miranda's brain as the Prophet called out a name. A young man raced down into the pit, deep in a frenzy of religious ecstasy. Another man and woman called down looked dazed, their movements stiff, as if an outside force propelled them forward.

The Prophet stopped in front of them. He looked up, his eyes no longer flashing, but flat and cold. Unfeeling. Miranda had always prided herself on her mettle, but now she began to shake. They were trapped, outnumbered, and utterly at the mercy of this madman. And any second now he might call the names of her friends.

"Bethany," the Prophet called out.

“No!” Miranda cried.

Bethany swayed on her feet and almost fell back over the bench into Doug.

Mario lunged forward and caught Bethany’s arm. “Bethany, you can’t go down there!”

Bethany looked at Mario with wild frightened eyes as Dalton caught and steadied her.

“If she resists, she will be executed, along with anyone who tries to help her,” said Dalton.

“You can’t let him do this!” Miranda protested. The shouting from the restive crowd grew louder at the delay.

“The Prophet’s Guard is loyal and strong,” Finn answered, glancing down the aisle.

Miranda looked around the balcony and for the first time, really noticed the men armed with machetes along the aisles. Finn and his archers did not have their weapons, she realized. After they reached the village, she had not seen them carry their bows even once. She watched helplessly as the doctor stumbled along the row toward the stairs. The Prophet still looked at them, but Miranda felt sure it was not she and her friends he was staring down, but his son.

“Tamara!” the Prophet called out, a vicious smirk spreading across his lips.

Finn started as if he was going to leap over the balcony, but his cousin grabbed him.

“Stay here, stay still!” Dalton hissed.

Finn struggled against his cousin’s grip, searching the balcony frantically. On the other side of the balcony, a slim young woman with mousy brown hair rose and began to make her way through the crowd. When Finn sighted her, he tried to break free once more. The armed men in the aisle stepped forward to engage him, but Dalton and the other archers dragged Finn back.

People began sitting down. Miranda slumped to the bench. She thought she had seen it all. Dalton and the man seated on Finn’s other side wrestled Finn to his seat.

Connor leaned across Seffie to speak to Doug. “It’s her, the girl we saw at the service the night we arrived.”

In the pit, Bethany and the others stood apart from the Prophet, waiting for Tamara. When she appeared in the pit, Miranda realized she was only a girl of fifteen or sixteen. She did not join the others but instead approached the Prophet. She knelt and kissed his bare feet, then pressed her forehead against them. The Prophet reached down, tapped on her shoulder, and motioned for her to rise. He held Tamara's hand and led the entire group to the far end of the building. He captured Bethany with his other hand as they spread out in a line, joined to one another like cut-out paper dolls. Six people stretched across a distance of forty feet.

Dalton whispered to his cousin. "She has invoked the Maiden's Privilege. Now she will be beside him."

Because they had to turn to see the activity below, Miranda could see Finn's profile. His face was stamped with torment, but his eyes smoldered with rage.

"You know what that means," Finn said miserably, but so softly that Miranda had to strain to hear.

"It means she might survive," Dalton answered. "That is all that matters."

"Brothers and Sisters, My Children," the Prophet called out. "Watch as We walk in God's terrible Judgment!"

A creak of hinges filled the hall. Then came the moans. Twenty feet in front of the Prophet, zombies staggered into view from both sides of the building. The Prophet stepped forward, pulling the rest with him.

"Trust in your God All-Father on Earth! Trust the Heavenly Father's Judgment as we face the Hollow Men," he cried.

Miranda could see ten shamblers. They lurched and twitched for a moment, then spied the people walking toward them. As the acrid smell of their rotting flesh filled Miranda's nose, they lurched toward the people. One less recently dead than the rest limped toward the center of the line where the Prophet walked. It lurched at him, then recoiled.

The Prophet did not flinch.

A dark stain blossomed on the trousers of a man as his bladder betrayed him. His screams filled the hall as the shamblers attacked. As he was dragged out of line, the survivors scurried over to join hands with the next person. They walked

beyond the zombies, most of which had joined in feasting on the first victim, when another screech of hinges made Miranda cringe. She watched, stunned, as more zombies tumbled into view ahead of the marching line of people.

A young woman ripped her hand from the person beside her and turned to flee, only to run straight into a zombie behind her. It clamped on to her shoulder and pulled her close, biting into her throat. Her screams continued as a spray of arterial blood spurted into the air. Miranda tried but could not look away. The woman thrashed and twitched as four zombies fell upon her to feed, the grunts and moans as they ripped her apart drowning out her gurgling death rattle.

Another set of zombies was loosed into the pit. The watchers in the balcony cried out and screamed. The metallic smell of blood and the reek of emptied bowels filled the air, and still the Prophet walked forward, resolute. Every zombie that came close to him recoiled, then sought other prey. Their reaction was so pronounced that twice a zombie lurched away from the Prophet and into Bethany but was so disoriented that she was able to push it off.

“That son of a bitch is immune,” Mario growled in Miranda’s ear.

Miranda jumped, so absorbed in the dreadful spectacle unfolding below that hearing a voice so close caused her heart to rocket into her throat.

“What?”

“Have you ever seen a zombie act like that, or anyone survive an untreated bite? What else could it be?”

Another shriek snapped their attention back to the pit. The man to Tamara’s left, who had raced into the pit filled with frenzied belief, was dragged down. He fought Tamara as she struggled to free her hand.

A zombie reached for Bethany. She leaned away as far as she could without letting go of the Prophet. Miranda held her breath, her entire body willing Bethany forward. Just as Bethany cringed free of the zombie’s grasping hand, the Prophet ripped his hand from hers. With a violent shove, he pushed her.

A piteous cry split the air as the zombie bit into Bethany’s shoulder. Her gray-blond hair fell loose as the zombie held her in a grotesque embrace, its arms encircling her from behind.

“No!” Miranda shouted.

The anguished screams of those watching became a roar.

“Healer, no!”

“Prophet, save her!”

Only the Prophet and the teenaged girl named Tamara remained, fifteen feet between them and a white line below the edge of the facing balcony. A zombie lurched toward Tamara. She cringed away and crushed herself against the Prophet. He smiled down at her and slid his arm around her shoulders. Like magic, the zombie shrank away.

As the Prophet and Tamara crossed the white line, the cheers and screams and cries of grief grew deafening. The Prophet motioned for Tamara to stand against the wall before walking back toward the zombies. Miranda could only watch in astonishment as he herded the zombies out of the lower level like they were sheep, even those eating the fallen. It took just a few minutes for him to clear the room and shut the last of the doors that the zombies had entered through.

The Prophet stood by Bethany’s body, her blood pooling around his bare feet. He turned back to Tamara and motioned for her to join him. The crowd quieted when Tamara reached the Prophet. He pulled the quaking girl close, forcing her to step into Bethany’s blood.

“My Children,” the Prophet called out. “The Healer gave Us good service, but she lacked faith.” He took Tamara’s hand and raised it up. “Praise the Judgment of God!”

Shouts thundered through the hall. Miranda looked down at Finn, expecting that he would be relieved that Tamara had survived. Instead, he looked more distressed than ever.

The Prophet led Tamara to the center of the pit, next to the eviscerated corpse of the young woman who had broken ranks and tried to flee. He raised his hands and the crowd quieted once more.

“As any maid may do on her first Faith Walk, Tamara exercised the Maiden’s Privilege.” The Prophet turned and looked at his son. “Praise be the God of Judgment as she prays to His God All-Father on Earth in Thanksgiving.”

“As the Prophet commands! Praise to Him, Praise to Him!” a woman behind

them cried over and over. From all directions, the people began to shout as the Prophet loosened the ties of Tamara's dress and pushed it over her shoulders. He lifted her slip over her head to reveal her breasts, then pushed down her leggings.

"Oh, dear Jesus, this cannot be happening," Doug whispered.

Miranda watched in horror as the Prophet unwound his loincloth. He ran his hands and mouth over the naked teenager's shaking body with such hunger it seemed he might devour her. He pushed her to the ground, into the bloody rope of intestines trailing from the nearby corpse. The girl recoiled in horror, but the Prophet pushed her down.

Finn lunged forward, barely held back by Dalton and the other young man by his side.

"Finn!" Dalton cried. "Finn, you cannot!"

Miranda looked down at the Prophet and the terrified teenager beneath him, then around the balcony. The noise of cheers and shouted praise, the sobs of those mourning the fallen, were so loud Miranda could barely think. The enthusiasm for this twisted blood sport repulsed her. Wrath and hatred of the Prophet filled her with a fury stronger than any she had felt before, its vengeful energy exploding inside her. She started to stand, forgetting about her injured leg, only to fall forward against Dalton. She grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Why don't you do something?" she demanded.

"And what would you have me do? Let my cousin run to his death?"

"He has to be stopped!"

"We are too few, we have no allies," Finn raged, his words little noticed in the tumult.

Miranda looked at her friends. Disgust and anger, and not a little fear, filled their faces.

"You do now."

BETHANY LAY in a pool of blood. Her blue eyes stared at the ceiling. Her body was gnawed and mutilated, but apart from a smear of blood across her neck and jaw, her face remained untouched.

She's dead, Mario thought. The noise and chaos of the crowd around him seemed to recede behind a static-filled buzz. A detached part of his brain knew the sensation was shock.

"He pushed her. He pushed her right into the zombie," Miranda's trailing voice whispered.

It did not make sense. Bethany was a doctor. That made her valuable. She helped keep this place going. Even though she had feared the Prophet, she had also felt a responsibility to the people of New Jerusalem. Mario had seen it firsthand, how she tried to hide her disgust and fear and do what good she could in this awful place. She had even helped him, a stranger, by hiding the antibiotics and serum.

Oh shit.

"Look!"

Miranda grabbed Mario's arm, jarring him into the present. He followed the line of her pointing finger to where Bethany lay on the ground—twitching.

"Oh no," he said. "Oh Jesus."

All around them, the screaming and crying grew louder as the fallen from the Faith Walk began to twitch and jerk. Mario had not thought the distress of the people of New Jerusalem could get worse, but as those who had died began to

reanimate, he feared there would be a riot. The corpse that had been Bethany lurched into a sitting position, twisting their direction, a redundant pink lung visible behind broken and splintered ribs. Already Bethany's face was taking on the look of the zombie she had become: sunken eyes and vacant stare, hollowing cheeks and blackening lips. She struggled upright and swayed, turning her head slowly from side to side, as if overwhelmed by her rebirth.

Bethany—*the zombie*, Mario corrected himself—began to stagger toward the Prophet and Tamara. The mangled corpse of the zombie that lay next to the Prophet and Tamara, what was left of the disemboweled young woman killed earlier, writhed as if in agony. So close to prey, but repelled at the same time. It reached out and grazed Tamara's head. Tamara jerked away and screamed. The Prophet raised his head and noticed the zombie, the lust on his face mingled with annoyance. He reached out with his hand and shoved the zombie away.

The Prophet turned his attention back to Tamara. Mario could tell he was trying to quiet the terrified girl, but it was no use. The light brush of the zombie's fingers had pushed her over the edge. She would not, could not, stop screaming. The Prophet's face darkened with anger. He reared back on his knees and backhanded her across the face. When she did not stop screaming, he hit her again. Furious, the Prophet rolled Tamara onto her stomach, shoving her face into the blood-soaked ground as he resumed the pursuit of his rapine prize.

In the row in front of Mario, Dalton and two of the other archers were physically restraining Finn in what had become an all-out wrestling match. A member of the Prophet's Guard was pushing through the aisle in their direction when a sudden shriek cut through the noise. A middle-aged woman ran toward one of the newly minted zombies. Her husband? Brother? She must have jumped into the pit because she wasn't trying to get away. She ran to the zombie as if running to a lover, barely struggling against its death grip as it started to devour her.

Mario looked around, taking in the rising chaos. He had to get back to the infirmary and see if the vaccine serum was still there. If Bethany had been killed because she had tried to help him, then their situation was more precarious than they had realized. He looked around the balcony. Members of the Prophet's

Guard were stationed at the doors that led to the exit. Other Guardsmen pushed distraught spectators back into their seats.

They weren't going to let him go willingly. He'd have to improvise.

As the Prophet's Guardsman making his way down the aisle to Finn drew near, Mario stiffened his body and pitched himself into Dalton and Finn. He rolled his eyes back in his head and began to shake. He heard Miranda and Doug both cry out his name.

Dalton turned back to see who was shoving into him, making his job of holding on to his cousin more difficult. Mario caught a glimpse of Finn's overwrought face.

Everyone in his group, Mike and Connor, Miranda, Doug and Seffie, were all shouting at once. Mario felt a strong hand grab and shake him. Prophet's Guardsman, had to be.

"Stop it!" the Guardsman roared.

"He's having a seizure!" Miranda shouted.

"We have to get him out of here," said Dalton, his voice ebbing and flowing as he continued to struggle with his cousin. Mario wasn't sure if he was talking about him or Finn.

"The Faith Walk is not over," the guardsman countered. "None can leave until it is finished."

"If you want to distract from the Prophet's veneration of the maiden, then go ahead and arrest us!" Dalton barked.

Mario felt other, more gentle hands seize him.

"It is not—" Uncertainty filled the guardsman's voice. "Go."

Mario was hauled up and thrown over a bony shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"I've got him," Doug said as he started away from the others.

Mario kept shuddering his entire body, which made Doug stumble. He hated doing this to his friends, but there wasn't time to explain. He caught a glimpse of Dalton and one of the archers dragging Finn along behind them.

The sounds of Finn's struggle grew worse as they started up the stairs. Finn did not want to leave, but Mario agreed with Dalton. If Finn stayed any longer, he was liable to get himself killed.

As Doug and the other archer worked together to get Mario into the harness and pulley system that had lowered him down an hour earlier, he let his body go slack. Only one pulley operator for the two-person crank system was there, a middle-aged man who protested. Dalton was busy shoving his cousin toward the rope ladder.

“You must come with us,” Dalton commanded.

“I cannot leave her like this!” Finn protested.

“And you cannot do anything for her,” Dalton countered, pushing Finn into the ladder. “The Guard is looking for any pretext to punish you or worse. You are no use to Tamara dead. Go!”

Reluctantly, a clearly torn Finn grasped the ladder.

“Now!” Dalton shouted, giving him another shove.

Finn shot his cousin a long, filthy look, then started up the ladder.

From barely opened eyes, Mario saw Dalton turn to the pulley operator and motion to his companion as he spoke. “Michael will help with the pulley. Get him up to the village.”

“But the walk is not over,” the man said, disapproval filling his face. “I will not.”

Dalton grabbed the man by the throat and shoved him against the railing so violently that if he relaxed his stranglehold, the man would topple backward over the rail. The zombies that milled below the widow’s walk groaned even louder.

“Get him up there now or I will throw you off this roof,” Dalton snarled. He pulled the gasping, choking man off the rail and released him with a shove toward the pulley.

The frightened pulley operator mumbled something under his breath. The pulley squawked as the men began to turn the crank mechanism. Mario’s feet lifted off, leaving the noise and chaos of the Faith Walk behind.

MARIO WAS ONCE AGAIN SLUNG over Doug's shoulder. He had quit faking the sporadic shaking fits so that Doug would not stumble as they crossed the covered bridges. He had been tempted to drop the ruse the moment they reached the village but decided against it. None of the village's children had been at the Faith Walk. They were up here somewhere, presumably being watched by someone. He just couldn't risk it.

"I don't know what we can do for him without Bethany-"

A guilty stab pierced Mario's conscience. He saw Finn from the corner of his eye. Finn's murderous expression sent a genuine tremor through him.

Finally, they reached the infirmary. Mario heard the door bang open, smelled the familiar scent of mint. Doug leaned down to lay him on the nearest cot, but Mario pushed away from him. They all startled as he raced to the drawer with the hidden compartment, their expressions ranging from confusion to shock.

"I think the Prophet knows about our stuff, Doug. You better go check."

The color drained from Doug's face. He bolted from the infirmary.

"What is going on here?" Finn demanded hotly.

Mario yanked the drawer so hard he expected it to come completely out, but there must have been a stop because the drawer only went so far before refusing to budge. Suddenly Dalton was dragging Mario away.

"What are you doing?" Dalton demanded.

Finn stood between Mario and the drawer, his body tensed for a fight, but a flicker of fear flashed in his golden eyes. They know about the hidden

compartment, Mario realized.

It was time to stop pretending.

“Bethany was keeping something for me in the hidden compartment in the drawer. I need to see if it’s still there.”

The flash of surprise that filled Finn’s eyes was immediately replaced by wariness. Dalton’s grip grew tighter. The air in the infirmary crackled with hostility. A long moment passed before Finn said, “You got her killed.”

Mario looked Finn in the eye. Fury radiated off the young man in waves. He had been helpless to protect Tamara and Bethany from his father. All he needed was a target to unleash his anger on, but Mario couldn’t lie. After everything that had happened today, Finn deserved the truth.

“I think so, yes.”

The murderous rage that Mario had seen earlier flickered across Finn’s face, but he nodded. Dalton’s grip on Mario relaxed.

Mario knelt down and reached for the false back, pressing along the edges until he felt a notch. Heart pounding, he dug his finger into it.

Please let it still be there, please, he prayed, trying to tamp down his rising panic.

The compartment was empty.

Mario stifled the impulse to slump, to give in to the failure that felt woven into his bones. He looked up at Finn and Dalton.

“Are there any more hiding places?”

MARIO RIFLED THROUGH THE BANDAGES AND TINCTURES AGAIN, EVEN THOUGH HE knew it was useless. With drawers pulled open and the contents of shelves and cupboards askew, the infirmary looked like it had been burgled.

“What is in the vials you seek?” Finn asked again.

Mario didn’t answer because he wasn’t in New Jerusalem anymore. The past five years flashed through his brain. Miranda’s anguish the night he told her he was defecting. How she had begged and pleaded before finally shoving him

away, screaming she wished he was dead. Emily's awkward attempts to understand what he had done. The surprised expression on the face of the first person he killed to protect his secret, his abandoned children, the ease with which he could spot a doser from the defeated scurry of their gait. The nameless people who kept coming to San Jose for the vaccine, like a magical cup that never ran dry, only to find that they could never afford it. How many had turned into zombies? How many of the awful moans that filled his dreams were theirs?

The sound of the door wrenched him back to the present. Mario saw Doug's ashen face and knew.

"It's gone."

Doug nodded, looking too stunned to speak.

"Even what was sewn into everyone's clothes?"

"The others will have to check what they're wearing." Doug held out his hand to reveal a carved piece of wood the same size as the missing vials. "That's what I felt when I checked my vest every day," he said. Even now, his hand strayed to the side seam of his vest. "I don't know how he did it, how he even knew."

"What was it you had?" Finn asked again, losing patience.

"The vaccine serum!" Mario spat. "It's taken years to get into a position to use it and your crazy father outplayed us."

For the first time since leaving the Faith Walk, Finn seemed wholly present in the here and now.

"A vaccine? Like Bethany spoke of?" he said, his brow drawing in and down. "Is it truly a disease?"

Mario almost snapped that of course it was a disease, but Finn's guileless face stopped him. Finn had been nine or ten when the ZA happened, then was hauled off and raised in a cult by a lunatic. He probably didn't even know what a virus was.

"Yes," Mario answered, "this whole thing, the zombies, it's a disease and we can prevent it. We can end it forever, for everyone, but we need to get that serum back."

Finn took a step back, stunned. "Bethany said it was not God's judgment," he

began, “but the things she told me, they sounded like magic.”

“It’s *science*, not magic,” said Mario. “Once a person gets the vaccine, they will never turn, even if they are bitten. Infection from the bite might kill them, but they won’t turn. Do you understand? There won’t be more new zombies. We can stop it from spreading and kill off the rest. We can end this.”

“We could leave this place,” Finn whispered, his voice filling with fragile hope.

“If what you say is true, how do you explain the Prophet?” Dalton asked. “He never had one of these vaccines and he did not become a Hollow—a zombie.”

“Because he’s the jackpot,” Mario said, “that one in ten million who can fight off the disease without help. He has natural immunity. That’s how we made the vaccine. We had someone just like him, but we don’t anymore and haven’t found another. That’s why we need that serum, and why we need to get out of here.”

Dalton’s skepticism seemed to thaw. “If the Prophet has gone to such lengths to deceive you, he may have already destroyed it.”

“He hasn’t,” Mario said, emphatic. Every fiber of his being told him Dalton was wrong. “He likes to torture and humiliate. Getting rid of it quietly doesn’t let him do that.”

“Do you have any idea where he might keep it?” Doug asked.

Dalton and Finn looked at one another uneasily. Finally, Finn said, “His private quarters are where I would start.”

Outside, people were starting to trickle back through the village. They looked like refugees, dazed and exhausted.

Doug started for the door. “Let’s go find out.”

“No,” Finn said. “You cannot just barge in. You would never get past the Prophet’s Guard; you are not even armed. We cannot cast about without a plan, but you are right, we must act. Your vaccine flies in the face of his teachings. He will make an example of you. Let us see what we can discover first. There are those who hate the Prophet as much as we do, but most fear him too much to do anything.”

“And you don’t?” Doug said. “He scares the shit out of me.”

“I have feared that man since I was a boy,” Finn said bitterly. “You have seen what he is, how he toys with us to feed his vanity. He perverts any goodness, murders on a whim, abuses women—”

Finn’s voice became a strangled sob. He looked at Mario and Doug with haunted eyes. “Those of us who want rid of him might be too few, but Miranda said you would help us.” He looked Doug in the eye. “At least I will have tried.”

Doug studied Finn for a long moment, a flinty expression Mario knew all too well on his face. He was trying to figure out all the angles, analyze the outcomes that might screw things up even more.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Doug began. “I like you, Finn, and I don’t think you’re like your father. As long as our interests converge, we will help you if we can, but that is not why we’re out here.”

Finn nodded readily. “Where were you trying to go?”

“Santa Cruz,” Doug answered.

“I will get you there.” He motioned for Dalton to follow as he started for the door. “We will see you in an hour.”

Finn and Dalton left. Mario watched them thread through the increasing foot traffic outside until they turned a corner and disappeared.

Doug scrubbed his face with both hands, then looked at the floor for a moment. “Don’t ever tell her I told you this,” he said as he pulled open a cupboard and looked inside. “But Miranda was right. If I hadn’t become a priest, I wouldn’t be in charge of this fucking mission, striking a bargain with a kid to maybe kill his father. And if there was ever a creep that needs killing, Jesus! Priests aren’t supposed to say shit like that, but compared to what that madman is doing...” He turned back to Mario. “Did you see any booze? I need a drink.”

Mario shook his head and sat down on the closest cot. Doug slammed the cupboard shut. “I can’t believe he’s really immune. I thought he was delusional when he told his story.”

“There’s no other explanation for surviving an untreated bite,” Mario said.

“What if we had some of his blood and got it to a lab?” Doug asked. “The serum wouldn’t matter then.”

Mario shook his head.

“We can’t store blood properly, and the serum is ready to go. We won’t be able to synthesize more serum quickly if we’re starting from scratch with new antibodies. That could take months.”

“And we’ve been gone eight days,” Doug added, sounding deflated. “We don’t know what’s going on out there or how things have played out with the City.”

Mario had not come this far and given up so much to fail now. He could deal with zombies getting the better of them, but this madman? Through the infirmary’s front window, he saw the others hurrying their direction. As Miranda came into view, Mario caught a flash of cornflower blue. He had looked into her fearful eyes not thirty minutes ago, though it felt like a lifetime. The memory made his anger burn brighter.

I promised her we were getting out of here, he thought, though how they might do so he could not imagine. Not with the Prophet so many steps ahead of them, winning the game before they knew it had begun.

He watched Miranda as Connor opened the infirmary door. He could see what her future might be, even now. She would continue the work, partner with Connor, maybe even be happy. It was ridiculous, to think of such things at a time like this, with so much at stake, but he did. Whatever life might hold for her, he would never be part of it. As long as she got away from this place, Mario was okay with that.

The love he felt for her—fierce and powerful—welled up within him. Tears that he quickly blinked away blurred the corners of his eyes.

I have to find a way. If Miranda’s alive, she will never give up, never stop trying to finish this. I have to get her out of here.

THE HOUR CAME AND WENT, followed by another, but Finn did not return. Doug decided they would start searching themselves, but it would have to wait until morning. Village life wound down early so the hour, not to mention the collective mental state of New Jerusalem's inhabitants since the Faith Walk, made searching now a nonstarter.

Giving the others the slip took longer than Miranda had anticipated. She had not bothered to run her idea past Doug because she knew what his answer would be.

He should understand seeking forgiveness rather than asking permission...a very Jesuit way of getting things done.

The wood and rope bridge swayed as she made her way across it to the Prophet's house. Swinging herself on the crutches as they, in turn, were rocked by the motion of the bridge made Miranda feel like she was perpetually stumbling and falling. She nearly had tripped a minute ago, practically jumping out of her skin when a horse whinnied, before she remembered Finn mentioning stables on the forest floor on the far side of the village. Luckily, the gate was just ahead. She reached out to knock, but it swung away from her.

A member of the Prophet's Guard stood before her. He raised the lantern he held and squinted at her.

"What do you want so late this night?"

Miranda looked down at her feet. "I wish to speak with the Prophet."

"Where is your husband?" The guard's voice had a mocking singsong lilt.

“Why do you venture out in the dark without him?”

“Earlier, the Faith Walk,” Miranda began, then stopped.

“Go away.”

“But—”

“No one disturbs the prayer of the God All-Father on Earth after a Faith Walk, unless they are bidden.”

Miranda would have tried again, but the look on the guard’s face stopped her. He looked like he would enjoy teaching her a lesson if she pressed the issue.

“It is all right,” said a voice. In the dark beyond the guard’s lantern, it was hard to tell exactly where it came from, but there was no doubt the voice belonged to the Prophet. “Let her pass.”

The guard stepped back and held the gate wide. Beyond him, a shadowy figure stood in the doorway of the structure ahead of her. Miranda took a deep breath and crutched past the guard. She stopped well short of the Prophet and waited.

“What is it that brings you, Our Sister?” he asked. He made no move to come closer so that Miranda might see him better.

“I was hoping to talk to you about today,” she said, ignoring a flutter in her stomach. “The Faith Walk, it—” She stopped, groping for a word that he might find acceptable.

“It woke something in you?”

Miranda nodded.

“Come then.”

He turned and opened the door. Weak lantern light cut a watery rectangular shape into the darkness. Miranda passed him as he held the door, then waited in the spartan entry for him to take the lead. The Prophet passed Miranda and continued to another door a few feet away.

“Come.”

As she stepped through the door, Miranda was reminded of the double parlors common in Victorian houses. These rooms were smaller, about ten feet square, but the effect was the same. She stood in a living room, with two chairs arranged to face one another near a wood-burning stove. A desk and chair were

against one of the walls, and on the other side of the room opposite the stove sat a long bench with a high back. Beyond the open thruway to the next room was a four-poster bed.

His private quarters...yes!

The Prophet steered her to the closest chair, which put her back to the door. His rooms felt opulent. As she lowered herself into the chair and set her crutches on the floor, Miranda realized why. Like the others near the stove, the chair she sat in was upholstered in a dark-gray velveteen. She gave the room a closer look. There were cushions on the long bench. The desk looked similar to the desk that had been in her father's study. And the bed, she decided, had to have been scavenged. It was just too nice, too fancy, compared to everything else she had seen in New Jerusalem.

The outside world is wicked, but that doesn't include its furniture.

When the Prophet smiled at her, Miranda suppressed a shiver. His narrow face, with its sharp cheekbones and nose, lent a predatory cast to his face. His golden eyes were so cold they seemed reptilian. And calculating, she could see that, too. She felt like a fly caught in a spider's web when he looked at her so directly. She had not felt this way when she had seen him before, but she had not known what a Faith Walk was then.

"What is it you wish to know?"

Miranda drew a blank. She had not counted on being so unnerved once she and the Prophet were alone.

"I'm not really sure. I just needed to speak with you after—"

"Are you frightened?" he asked, a sly smile playing across his lips.

Maybe this was a bad idea, she thought, feeling the first inkling that perhaps she should have stayed put for the night.

Aloud, she said, "Yes."

"And what are you frightened of?"

Miranda looked into the Prophet's golden eyes. Such an unusual color, yet one that was not uncommon in New Jerusalem. So many of the children here were his, she realized. His gaze was magnetic, hypnotic, and so very cold. She wanted to look away but could not.

“I’m frightened of zombies. I’m frightened by the Faith Walk.” With an effort, she ripped her eyes away from his and looked down at her feet submissively. He went in for that sort of crap. “I’m frightened of you.”

“And yet you sought me out,” he answered. “Do you always confront your fears?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you fear most?” he asked.

“A life that lacks purpose,” she whispered. “And no one to share it with.”

“You have your husband to share your life with.”

Miranda sighed. “I love my husband, but things with him are...complicated.”

The complicated part was true enough.

She raised her head enough to glimpse his face. It had lighted, as if a star were shining from within. He looked Miranda up and down like she was a prostitute at a brothel where he was getting a freebie. He had taken the bait.

“Do you not think it proper that we should fear God’s Judgment? That we *should* be afraid when we consider our failings in His eyes?”

“I never really thought of it that way,” Miranda said. “I was raised to believe in God’s love, as a Catholic.”

The Prophet hissed in his breath, eyes blazing. “Then you were raised in sin and depravity! Catholics are the worst blasphemers of all!”

Miranda shied away. She had dealt with mercurial people before, but the Prophet was by far the worst. He had pivoted from lust to fury in under a minute.

“Why are Catholics the worst?”

The Prophet seemed to settle somewhat. Maybe she had asked the right question.

“The Jesuits in the Valley have corrupted countless numbers of the Heavenly Father’s children,” he spat. “They fill their heads with lies of forgiveness and cures. A child can see that it is Heavenly Father’s Judgment that has been brought down upon His Children, and only His Judgment can save them.”

The Prophet abandoned his chair and closed the distance between them. He cupped Miranda’s chin to tip her face up to his. His countenance was saturated with a challenging desire that made her stomach lurch. But still, a thrill of

triumph ran through her.

“Catholics have the hardest time accepting the Truth of the God All-Father on Earth, but those who do are among the most faithful of Our Children. You sought out the God All-Father on your own, which is a good sign.”

“But?”

“You are brave, anyone can see that, but it makes you willful when you should be compliant. You have a strong spirit. If you could learn humility and submission...”

His hand slid down along the side of her neck, leaving goose bumps rippling in its wake. It strayed lower, along her collarbone, then lower still, along the curve of her breast. He kept his hand there, cupping her breast as he stroked her nipple with his thumb. Miranda felt a flush creep up her neck and face as the nipple hardened against his fingers. A smile curled the corners of the Prophet’s mouth, but this time, the smile reached his eyes.

“You will require special instruction, Sister Miranda,” he said, the slow circling motion of his thumb on her breast becoming more insistent. “It would be quicker to break you, to punish the defects of character out of you, but We think that We would be squandering the gift that the Heavenly Father has given to Us. We think a more subtle approach might be best.”

Miranda’s face felt aflame. Her heart raced and her breath rasped in and out too fast. A delusional rapist was coming on to her, as she had hoped he would. She just hadn’t counted on it feeling so harrowing.

The Prophet slid his other hand along the side of her face and stroked her cheek.

“Are you in fidelity with your husband?”

“I, yes, of course I am!” Miranda stammered, seizing the opportunity to jerk away from him.

“Do you obey him?”

“In, in the Valley,” she faltered, feeling genuinely nonplussed. Get a grip, she told herself. “We don’t do things—”

“Do you long for more?”

Miranda nodded.

“It is not your fault, Sister Miranda,” he said, his face softening. “A man who does not impose obedience on his wife is a negligent husband. It is his job to guide and teach her, for few women are innately obedient. How can you learn if you have no guidance?”

She needed to put on the brakes. If the conversation kept on like this, he might throw Mario over the rail before the night was through.

She slumped and began to cry. “Prophet, can you teach us?” she whimpered, trying to sound as pitiful as possible. “Can you teach us how to be a better husband and wife to each other? I love him, and I want to be a good wife!”

The Prophet stepped back. Miranda looked up, wiping away tears. He looked slightly disappointed and definitely intrigued. She could see that he was willing to play a long game to work his transformation on her.

“Your dedication to your husband is admirable and is the first step on the road to obedience to him. It would please Us to help you, Sister Miranda. The first thing you must do is grow the beautiful hair that the Heavenly Father blessed you with.”

Miranda’s hand rubbed across her buzz cut as she nodded.

The Prophet’s lips twisted in distaste. “That...shorn style is displeasing. It runs counter to a woman’s true nature. Perhaps—”

A sharp rap on the door interrupted him. The Prophet looked up as the door cracked open. It was the guard from the gate.

“Please forgive me, Prophet, but there is something you should know. I did not think it could wait.”

A brief flash of annoyance crossed the Prophet’s face.

“I will just be a moment.”

“Thank you,” Miranda answered, relieved at the interruption. It would give her a chance to look around, and she could use the break in the conversation to get the hell out of here.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Miranda got to her feet, ignoring the pain that stabbed her knee. She rubbed her hands over her chest, as if she could wipe away the Prophet’s lingering touch, and hobbled to the door. She leaned close to see if they were on the other side but heard nothing.

Okay, she said to herself, if I were the Prophet, where would I hide something?

Miranda started for his bedroom, then stopped. She was not sure how long he would be gone and did not want to get caught anywhere near his bed. If that happened, she would probably have to take one for the team. A super depressing thought occurred to her. Karen would probably find this asshole attractive.

Miranda limped over to the desk and began to check the drawers and nooks, ever mindful of noises from the hall. She felt all the cushions on the chairs and bench but didn't find anything. Next she tried the chairs by the wood-burning stove. Nothing.

It must be in his bedroom. She stood in the thruway, anxious about how much time she had. She took a step forward but put too much weight on her injured leg.

"Holy Mother!" she hissed through clenched teeth as she fell to the floor. She took a few breaths and put her hands on the floor to get up. The wood plank under her left hand rocked. If she had not been looking for a hiding place, she would never have noticed. Miranda tested it again to make sure she had not imagined the motion.

Still on hands and knees, she reached into her splint to retrieve the dagger she had hidden. When she stuck the dagger between the loose plank and the next, it popped free.

Miranda stopped to listen again. Still nothing from the hallway. She peered down into the space below the floorboard but couldn't see anything. She reached her arm in up to her elbow, wishing she had more room to lie down and extend her arm.

She reached a little more. Her fingers grazed something. It's got to be the serum, she thought. She struggled to get a grasp on the container. After what seemed an eternity, she managed to hook her pinky finger over a depression in the lid and pulled whatever it was closer.

Just as she pulled an old metal box out from the floorboards, she heard the Prophet's voice. Faint, but getting closer. She pulled at the lid, but it stuck.

“You were right to interrupt.” The Prophet’s voice, not loud, but getting closer.

The lid popped open. Miranda felt light-headed. The serum was inside!

“We will finish up here, and then We will see to this.”

The Prophet was just outside the door. Miranda couldn’t grab a vial and hide it, put everything back into place, and get back to her chair in time. She shoved the lid back and pushed the box back under the floorboard.

The doorknob rattled.

Miranda grabbed the plank and set it back in place. She heard a click as the latch on the door disengaged. She shoved her dagger hilt first into her splint. As the door began to open, she pulled herself up and darted back to the chairs. She didn’t feel any pain, just euphoria.

As she threw herself into the chair, the door opened wide. She twisted around in her seat to look over to the Prophet.

“We are sorry, Sister Miranda,” he said, “but We are called to other tasks.”

Miranda nodded. Sweat cooled her face. She prayed he would not notice.

“Of course,” she said, sounding so calm she could have fooled herself. “I’ve taken up too much of your time already.”

Miranda reached down to get her crutches and almost passed out. A dark smear of dirt streaked up her forearm. She rubbed her arm against the wrappings of the splint while she grabbed the crutches with her other hand.

The Prophet reached to help her up, his hand cupping her elbow. It would have been a friendly gesture if it had been anyone else. His hand slithered up her arm to her shoulder, then down to the small of her back and over her ass. He was a goddamned octopus.

“We will counsel you again soon.”

“I would be most grateful, All-Father.”

His lips twitched, the briefest flicker of a smile. Miranda swung herself out the door. As she traversed the long bridge, one thought filled her mind. She knew where the serum was, at least for now.

FIVE PAIRS of anxious eyes turned toward her when Miranda opened the infirmary's door. She barely had time to close it behind her before Connor and Doug were upon her.

"Where the hell have you been?" Doug demanded, his low, angry voice at odds with the relief on his face. He yanked away one of Miranda's crutches and gripped her upper arm, propelling her toward the center of the room.

"We've been going crazy trying to find you," Connor said.

Miranda felt abashed. She had known they would be concerned when they could not find her, but not to this degree.

Doug stopped abruptly and turned her around to face him. He motioned the others away, but they hovered close, wanting to hear what she might say. Doug's blue eyes blazed. The scowl on his lips said whatever she had been doing, it better be good.

She took a deep breath.

"I went to see the Prophet."

For a moment, silence and blank faces—no reaction at all—then one gasp of horror drowned out the next. Delilah wriggled between Miranda and Doug, whining at the acrimony.

"What were you thinking, taking off without backup?" Doug said, silencing the others with a sharp wave of his hand as he glanced out the nearest window.

"I was thinking that I might find out where the serum was and—"

"Not that he might rape you?" Connor flared in disbelief.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Miranda said, starting to get annoyed.

“Stow it, Connor,” Doug snapped. “And keep your voices down.”

Miranda nudged Delilah out of the way and sidled past Doug. She had to get off her leg. She set her crutch against the exam table near the center of the room and sat down on a tall three-legged stool.

“I can handle myself, and I’d fuck a baboon if it gets the serum back.”

Seffie snickered. Score for a sense of humor. Connor shot Seffie a dirty look. Mario looked exasperated, while Mike shook his head, unable to suppress a grin. Even Doug’s facade cracked just a little.

Into the moment of quiet, she said, “I know where it is, Doug.”

Doug’s eyes widened. “Seffie, keep watching the windows. Mike, you’re on the door.” He turned to Connor. “Build up that fire,” he said, pointing to the wood-burning stove. “Make it loud.”

Miranda recounted her meeting with the Prophet, the rest of the group gathering round as their jobs allowed. Delilah wagged her tail and trilled, harmony in the pack restored. Quiet filled the room when Miranda finished.

“Are you sure he doesn’t suspect anything?” Doug asked.

“No idea,” she said. “But I don’t think he knows I found it.”

“How are we going to get at it?” Connor asked. “She can’t keep throwing herself at him.”

“Why not?” Seffie asked. “Mario will be there for the ‘counseling’ sessions and that asshole would probably love a three-way.” She looked at Miranda, a crafty smile spreading across her lips. “Jeremiah wants to play Pygmalion *and* bang you. If he can do it in front of your husband, even better. He won’t waste time getting started, especially if he thinks it will take a while to reprogram you so he can keep what he likes while he upgrades the rest to Stepford 3.0. He’s probably jerking off right now just thinking about it.”

“That’s an image I could have lived without,” Miranda said, suppressing a shudder.

“For Christ’s sake,” Connor said. “This isn’t a game.”

Miranda was glad Connor was sitting across the table from her. Otherwise she’d slap him. “We’re trying to save the human race. I’m pretty clear on what

the stakes are.”

“Marriage counseling with the Prophet,” Mario muttered. “And I thought things couldn’t get weirder.”

A buzz of excitement rippled through her. Mario was in. They would go see the Prophet, find a way to get the serum and get the fuck out of here. It was so close she could taste it.

“What about Finn?” she asked. “Did he come back with anything?”

“No,” Doug answered, sounding uneasy. Mike made a skeptical noise in his throat. Doug glanced at him and shrugged. “If he’s not genuine about helping us, then that was one hell of an act.”

“The no-show doesn’t do much to inspire confidence, but it’s the least of our worries,” Mike said. He looked over at Doug. “What next?”

Doug gnawed on his lower lip, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. Miranda could see her news had raised his spirits, but the day’s events had taken their toll.

“Christ, this place,” Doug said under his breath. He looked around the table, addressing the entire group. “I’m not sure any of us can think straight. Let’s call it a night, regroup in the morning. Miranda and Mario can throw themselves at that crazy SOB, and we’ll see if that gets us anywhere.”

An intense desire to giggle hysterically gripped Miranda—shock, fear, and adrenaline catching up with her. The room was too hot, too close, with the fire roaring. The heat made her feel almost disconnected from her body. She bit her tongue, afraid that if she gave in to the impulse to laugh, she would not be able to stop.

“We stay together,” Doug continued. “No more running off on your own initiative. Find whatever you can to keep on hand as a weapon. We’ll keep a watch and try to get some rest.”

Mike shook his head, a rumble of disagreement building in his throat. “Respectfully, Doug, that’s a bad idea. They’ve just shown us the nasty underbelly of this place. To the Prophet, an outsider’s first Faith Walk is a test, an initiation. Will we accept this new reality or reject it?”

Mike tilted his head toward the infirmary’s windows. “There are more

patrols of the Prophet's Guard tonight. Circling the wagons sends the wrong message. If our group cohesion gets stronger when we should be awed by the Prophet's divine powers, then we're not initiated. We've failed the test. The only thing that is going to buy us the time we need, apart from Miranda's considerable charms, is if they think we're part of this now. We should carry on as we have from the start. Miranda, Seffie, and Mario sleep here, and the rest of us in our shared quarters."

Mike sat back and again kept watch on the door without seeming to. He must have been one hell of a Marine, thought Miranda.

"Okay, strike that," Doug said. "It's just me who can't think straight. Sun Tzu here has a much better grasp of the situation, and I'm not stupid enough to disagree with a guy who never lost a battle."

"Your weapon idea was good," Mike offered.

"I don't need your pity," Doug deadpanned as he stood up. "We're shoving off. You three, stay sharp."

Mike and Doug started for the door, but Connor stayed rooted where he stood, looking torn. "Can you give me a minute?" he asked Doug.

Doug looked from Connor to Miranda. "We'll be outside."

"I'll take the first watch," Mario said.

Mario blew out the oil lamp on the exam table. Seffie stomped on one of the stools, then pried the legs free. She handed one to Mario and tossed another on Miranda's cot as she headed for her own.

As the light from the lantern by Seffie's cot faded, the infirmary plunged into darkness, but the effect lasted only a moment. Flickering shafts of red-gold light escaped cracks in the grate on the wood-burning stove. The room felt stuffy and filled with an awkward vibe. Miranda sighed. When had she started to dread dealing with Connor? She motioned for Delilah to stay before taking Connor's arm for support as they crossed over to the counter where only hours ago Bethany had stood, grinding herbs in the mortar and pestle. Moonlight streamed through the windows.

"Are you okay?" Connor asked, his voice just shy of a whisper.

"I'm better than okay," she said. "We're going to get the serum back and get

out of here.”

“Going to the Prophet on your own... Anything could have happened.”

Miranda felt the slightest twinge of temper, but it petered out almost instantly. If he didn’t understand using whatever advantage they had to get the serum back, including herself, no amount of explaining would make any difference.

“I’m going to bed, Connor,” she said.

“Miri,” he pleaded, catching her hand in his. “Please. Don’t be like that.”

His hand around hers felt good. It felt right. Her body plunged into the sensation as her mind tried to ignore it.

“What do you want from me?” she whispered. “If we don’t get that serum back, we can’t break the monopoly on the vaccine. And if we don’t break it, nothing will change. We can end this: the zombies, the petty dictators, all of it. Maybe even have a world more like it used to be. I got results tonight and you’re giving me a hard time? The only person who needs to make it out of here with that serum is Mario, because he can use it to make more. The rest of us are expendable.”

“I just want you to be safe.”

“I haven’t been safe for ten years, Connor. No one has.”

Miranda disentangled her fingers from his. Her hand felt naked as she pushed away from the counter and limp-hopped across the shadowy infirmary. She heard the door open and close.

She sat on her cot and began to unlace her boots, not bothering to fend off Delilah’s efforts to lick her face off. She petted the pit bull’s big head with one hand as she wriggled underneath the blankets. She felt, for the first time, just how exhausted she was.

She lay still and listened: the creak of the building, the hiss and pop of the fire, Seffie’s soft snore and Delilah’s loud one, the distant moaning of zombies on the forest floor below. Bethany was down there now, a hungry, shuffling shroud. However inadvertent, they had helped put her there.

She closed her eyes, sure she would pass out immediately, but sleep eluded her. The room was too warm. She threw off the covers and concentrated on her

breath as it slid in and out. She hovered at the edge of sleep, feeling its steady, drowsy pull, but a wisp of a question tickled the edge of her mind. Ill-formed, amorphous, it circled at the periphery of her consciousness, just out of reach.

Fuck.

She opened her eyes and sat up. Mario stood with his back to her, leaning against the exam table they had crowded around earlier. She stood, careful to not step on Delilah, and limped over. She hesitated for a moment before she rounded the corner of the table and leaned against it to stand beside him.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Can’t sleep.” Without meaning to she added, “Connor wears me out.”

Mario smothered a laugh. Miranda grimaced, embarrassed.

“Like you really care. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Mario said, a trace of amusement in his voice. When she did not answer, he added, “Really.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” A pause, and then, “You did great tonight, Miri.”

“Thanks,” she said, caught off guard. She had not expected a compliment.

“That took guts.”

“Or crazy.”

“Maybe a little of both.”

A tiny smile quirked the corners of Miranda’s mouth. She could hear the amusement, even some pride in Mario’s voice. The cadence of his speech was like the ocean: slow, steady, unconcerned.

They leaned against the table, the silence almost companionable. Miranda looked around the darkened infirmary. The salves, tinctures, herbs, and plants that Bethany had collected were everywhere. It must have been so frustrating, knowing what was possible but being forced to use such crude methods. She thought of Naomi, of the terrible burns the young woman had suffered. In a real hospital, Bethany might have saved her.

“Why did you—” she started, then thought better of it.

“What?” Mario asked.

“It’s stupid, forget it.”

“What is it?”

She should make something up—it would be easier—but instead she asked the question.

“Why did you want to bring Naomi with us?”

Mario’s face seemed to shutter closed as his eyes narrowed.

“I was just wondering if Bethany might have been able to help her,” she said.

Mario looked at Bethany’s tools of the trade in the dim room. “Not with what’s here,” he said. “Naomi was going to die no matter what we did.”

“Then why did you want to bring her with us? Why make leaving her harder?”

Miranda’s curiosity was genuine. The Mario she had known had been kind, but not sentimentally foolish. Not with something so important on the line.

“Having one more person’s blood on my hands,” he finally said. “I just couldn’t stand it.”

Miranda was surprised to find that she wanted to tell him Naomi’s death was not his fault. But comforting him felt too strange, too alien, so she stayed silent.

“Miri, I’m— I’m sorry, for what I did to you,” he whispered. “I told myself it was the only way but if I had known what it would do to you...”

He reached to trace the inside of her forearm. The familiar warmth of his fingers skimmed the slim pink lines of newly healed cuts that overlay the lattice of faded ivory scars.

“It wasn’t worth it.”

Miranda’s heart jumped into her throat, the skin beneath his fingers aflame. When she first learned the truth, an all-consuming rage had engulfed her, made worse by the lack of an apology that acknowledged the damage he had wrought. Now he was, and all she felt was relief. Not validated or vindicated, but relieved, as if a great weight was slipping from her.

“Oh,” she said, more in response to the feeling of relief than his apology. “I don’t— I—” she stammered, feeling the need to draw into and protect herself, to retreat from this sudden intimacy they had stumbled into. She pulled her arm away from his hand. “Thank you.”

Neither of them spoke. His apology and her acknowledgment hung in

silence.

“You’ll be on watch after Seffie,” he finally said. “You should try and get some sleep.”

She pushed off the table but didn’t move further. “Can I ask you something else?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

“Why no lecture about how dangerous it was to go see the Prophet on my own?”

He just looked at her. The moonlight puddled at their feet and reflected up, limning him with an otherworldly glow. The intensity of his stare bored right through her. When his silence was starting to make her uncomfortable, he finally said, “Remember the early days, when you did all those things that needed doing? The sewers and clearing out buildings, and how I begged you not to?”

He stopped. When Miranda realized he was waiting for an answer, she nodded.

“I thought it was about loving you, the begging and pleading, but it was selfish. You needed a clear head and what did I do? I let you know that I didn’t believe you could take care of yourself.” He snorted softly, then said with an edge of bitterness, “And you always made that smart-ass remark: ‘I’ll see you soon. Don’t get dead.’”

“I didn’t...” she said, voice trailing. His confession made her feel thoughtless, but what the fuck did he think she was, especially back then? A mind reader?

Mario sighed and shook his head. “I sure as hell didn’t succeed, but I think I tried to make you as scared as I was so you’d quit leaving safe places for dangerous ones. So you’d quit leaving me. I should have just told you that I loved you and was afraid for you, afraid of losing you, but it felt like tempting fate.”

Loved, past tense.

Even after his apology it stung, being consigned to the past. Rejected. Some desperately foolish part of her had believed that an apology might change things between them, might open up possibilities that just an hour ago would have been

absurd, but it didn't seem to have changed anything for Mario. Miranda felt her gorge rise in her throat as a wave of nausea roiled her stomach. Could she be any more pathetic?

The acid-drenched tone of her voice surprised even herself as she said, "You don't have to waste your time being afraid for me anymore."

A tiny part of her brain, the part that felt like an alien observer, knew it was unfair to be angry or cruel. He was only answering her question. Mario had not forced her to ask, nor promised that she would like the answer, but she couldn't seem to help it. Lashing out to defend herself, to get her guard back up when she was foolish enough to let it drop, was second nature to her now.

She pushed away from the table, rigid with self-loathing anger, but Mario caught her wrist. He studied her face for a moment as if what he saw was familiar—and sad.

"You're so damn smart, but you still don't see what's right in front of you."

He stepped closer and cradled the curve of her jaw, his touch weightless as a dandelion seed in the wind. Miranda's heart beat so loud she was sure it would drown out his voice.

"I'm not afraid for you anymore, Miri. I'm terrified."

“I HAVE A BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS,” Mario muttered under his breath.

Miranda had one, too. Two days after her meeting with the Prophet, the sanctuary was bursting with people. The undertones of anxiety and fear that Miranda had experienced preceding the Faith Walk were absent. The inhabitants of New Jerusalem believed there was nothing to fear. Or in some sad, sick cases, anticipate. The nagging disquiet that began when they had been summoned for the sermon had blossomed into full-blown fight or flight. Mario, Doug, *everyone* in the group felt it.

They tried to sit scattered throughout the crowd to emphasize that they were fitting in and accepting New Jerusalem’s customs, but the Prophet’s Guard shepherded them into the front row, right in front of the pulpit. So much for lessening group cohesion. Miranda sat between Mario and Doug. Mike sat on Mario’s left, Seffie and Connor to Doug’s right.

Even now, in the middle of what felt like a full-blown crisis, Miranda felt distracted and anxious but not about their current situation. She did not understand why the revelation that Mario still loved her had thrown her so badly. Emily had told her as much. She had not believed Emily, but that wasn’t it. This was about her.

She was even more hyper-aware of him now, but it was more than proximity that had her attuned to where he was and what he was doing every single second. He had brushed against her as they went through the door earlier. Her entire body had leaned into it, even though she had not actually moved toward him.

She could still feel it, the reaching for him. It was driving her crazy.

As a hush fell, murmurs of ‘All-Father be Praised!’ and ‘As the Prophet Commands!’ began to grow from the rear. Miranda turned around and saw Jeremiah, surrounded by a phalanx of his guard. He looked excited. Finn followed his father, stony-faced and eyes forward, along with his cousin Dalton. Miranda turned to look forward as the procession passed by, praying the dread she felt was only her imagination.

The Prophet strode to the pulpit. Behind him, high on the wall, was the outline of a hollow man. Its white edges seemed to leap from the dark background like a malevolent gingerbread man. Finn and Dalton sat on a short bench against the wall on the Prophet’s right; the Prophet’s Guard stood in a line behind him.

“My Children,” the Prophet called out.

“God All-Father on Earth, Master of the Hollow Men,” the people answered. An expectant hush filled the room.

“It is never easy to be among the Heavenly Father’s Chosen. On all sides, unbelievers and blasphemers will assail the Truth of Our Righteous Judgment. Those of Us who have been chosen must be ever vigilant. The sin and decadence of the outside world will always try to undermine and pervert the holy teaching of your God All-Father. We must guard what We have built. Yet We must also open Our Heart to the Heavenly Father’s will. We must be open to others, as He is to Us, so that We may offer Our Salvation to those who seek it.”

The Prophet paused. He looked from one side of the room to the other.

“Our purpose in building this refuge was not just to stand apart from the old world that Our Heavenly Father has condemned, but to serve as a beacon of His Righteousness. A beacon that will shine so that others might join Us and know the Truth of Our Judgment. It is a difficult balance that We seek to maintain.” Jeremiah reached into his pocket and set a squat red vial of vaccine serum on the pulpit. “But We fear this balance may be in peril.”

Miranda felt the crush against her chest, as if she’d taken a punch to the solar plexus. Murmurs of apprehension filled the sanctuary. Almost instantly, Doug was on his feet.

“That belongs to me,” he said. “It and several others were taken from my things yesterday.”

“You admit that it is yours?” the Prophet said, surprised.

“Of course. They’re antibiotics.” Doug waited a beat before continuing, a note of doubt now tinging his words. “Is that a problem?”

“We reject the fallen world and all it stands for.”

Doug shrugged. “I’m sorry if I offended you, Jeremiah. It didn’t occur to me. It’s just medicine.”

“It is blasphemy!” the Prophet roared, spittle flying from his teeth.

The Prophet’s anger made the assembly grow restive. Miranda grabbed Doug’s arm.

“Don’t do this!” she hissed. “Don’t make yourself the target.”

Doug winked before shaking her off. “If this is a problem, we can be on our way.”

The room grew quiet once more. Miranda could feel the change, the tension in the air. All eyes were on Doug. When she looked around, she saw fear on the faces of the people surrounding them that anyone would defy the Prophet so brazenly. Finn and Dalton, their supposed allies, stared at them. The Prophet’s Guard bristled. Miranda had a sudden flash of déjà vu: a line of police at a demonstration, back when people did things like demonstrate. The Prophet’s Guard looked just like the police had then, right before they started cracking skulls.

“There is but one way to deal with corruption, of the flesh or of the spirit,” the Prophet replied. “It must be cut out before it spreads, as you and your followers shall be!”

Half of the members of the Prophet’s Guard standing behind the Prophet moved forward. Miranda heard footsteps behind and turned to see more approaching from the rear of the sanctuary. The space between her and her companions and the people seated behind them swelled, like an invisible wave flowed between the rows, pushing them away from danger. As if being seated near them was enough to make them culpable too. A moment later, rough hands seized her and the others, dragging them into the aisle.

Doug struggled with the guard attempting to shove him to his knees. Even though the guard was larger, his difficulty controlling his prisoner was plain.

“This isn’t necessary!” Doug shouted. “The mistake was mine! You don’t need to punish the others.”

“They will be as you have molded them,” the Prophet sneered. He snatched the vial from the pulpit, dropped it to the floor, and crushed it under his foot.

“No!” Mario cried, trying to get to his feet. Mike slipped the two guards holding him and lunged forward. The Prophet shied back from the pulpit in surprise. Behind him, Finn and Dalton sprang up into defensive positions. Mike almost reached them before two guardsmen set upon him with clubs. A blow connected with his temple and Mike crumpled, groaning, to the floor. They dragged him back and dumped him, semiconscious, next to Connor.

The Prophet murmured something to the guard closest to him, who handed him a bag. The Prophet loosened the drawstring and dumped the contents on the floor. Red and blue vials hit the rough wooden planks and rolled across the dais. The Prophet nodded, and the guardsmen began to trample them.

Miranda stopped resisting the man who held her and fell limply to the floor. The grip on her shoulders loosened. She pulled free, rolled onto her side, and slammed the heel of her good leg into the guard’s knee. A bark of pain and the man went down. As she snatched the man’s club, the pain from her injuries receded. She lunged toward the dais. A single red vial rolled toward her. All she needed was one vial, for someone to escape with it, and—

Blinding pain exploded against the back of her head, then she was looking at the ceiling. The room spun, and something warm and wet dripped down her neck. She turned her head toward the dais. The vial still rolled toward her. It was too far away, but she reached for it anyway. A roar of helpless fury savaged her throat as a boot crushed down, splintering the fragile glass. Puddles of liquid, all that was left of their hopeful undertaking, littered the dais.

She must have blacked out, because the next thing she knew Mario leaned over her.

“Are you okay?”

Mario was yanked away. Miranda tried to climb to her knees but was

knocked back down.

So this is how it would end. The fury, the rage, that exploded in her chest left Miranda unable to breathe. They were going to be killed. There was nothing she could do to stop it. This madman would ruin everything. The world would stay the same.

The Prophet's commanding voice cut through the noise. "Start with their leader."

Miranda raised her head. Two guards grabbed Doug and dragged him forward. Another walked toward him, wielding a sword.

"All-Father, wait!"

Miranda turned toward the interceding voice.

"Would it not be more fitting to make them walk with you, All-Father?" Finn asked. "To let them feel the hand of the Heavenly Father's Judgment directly?"

"We walk to testify our faith," Jeremiah said. "Not to punish."

Finn nodded. "Of course. Forgive me, All-Father, I do not mean to anger You. It is just...they have seen Your power, the miracles You have wrought." Finn glanced at Miranda, then back to his father. "Might not even one of them have accepted Your truth, All-Father, even if they do not yet realize it?"

The Prophet's eyes narrowed. He looked at his son as if he might turn into a viper, but then his expression softened. He looked at Miranda.

"Our son reminds Us that even We cannot know the heart of another," Jeremiah said. "We are the instrument of the Heavenly Father's Judgment, but not its arbiter." He turned to Finn. "We shall walk Our Faith with these," he pointed vaguely in the direction of Miranda and the rest, "in the morning. That will be sufficient to make ready. Confine them."

"As the Prophet commands," Finn replied, bowing low.

The Prophet motioned for two of his Guard to join him. As he left the building, people began to cry out, "As the Prophet commands!" and "Praise to Him, the God All-Father on Earth!"

Finn called to his cousin and the remaining Prophet's Guard. Miranda was hauled to her feet. She sought out Mario as she was shoved toward the others. He caught and steadied her.

“You’ve got a nasty cut,” he said.

“I’ll live.” She winced as he touched the back of her head. “Until tomorrow, anyway.”

Finn approached them. Miranda’s temper began to flare, but it made her head hurt.

“Your wounds will be tended in the infirmary, where you will be confined overnight.”

“Fuck you,” Seffie spat.

Finn ignored her. “Quit fighting a battle you cannot win and rest. You will need it.”

“So much for our interests coinciding,” said Doug.

Finn looked at Doug evenly. “Anything can happen during a Faith Walk.”

Finn turned and left them. Doug’s mouth settled into a hard line, but the anger in his blue eyes softened. Something had happened, some dynamic had shifted. Miranda feared her pounding head muddled her thinking. Had Finn just offered them help?

“Did he just say what I think he said?” she muttered to Mario.

“We still have our heads, so yeah, I’d say he did.”

PINCHED, terrorized faces looked down from the balcony to where Miranda stood, waiting for the Faith Walk to begin.

You're a bunch of fucking sheep, she thought contemptuously. So many of you and only one of him. You deserve the whack job for being so spineless.

Almost immediately she saw the reproachful frown, the disapproving shake of the head, that her scorn would elicit from Father Walter. No one deserves this, she thought, closing her eyes.

Picture a meadow, a lake, any place that isn't here... Take a deep breath.

It did not help. She did not feel any calmer. Blood still sang in her ears and thrummed under her skin, reminding her just how alive she was now that death was so close. As if she needed persuading that her job was to survive, to live.

I'm finally losing it, she thought, looking up at the balcony again. Calm? Now? Father Walter was always telling her to take a moment, to center herself, to think first. She could imagine the sparkle of mischief in his hazel eyes, hear the indulgent sigh of his voice: *Miranda mo ghrá, if there's anyone with more talent than you for ending up in the thick of it, I've yet to meet him.*

Fury that she might never see Father Walter again rushed to the surface. How was she supposed to imagine a meadow that didn't include Delilah chasing a rabbit? The stab of pain that leaving her dog in this sick, savage place produced was too painful to bear. What was the point of knowing Mario still loved her? What could calm offer her that anger could not? She and anger were on intimate terms, so familiar it was indecent. It would be the familiar that she would fall

back on. The familiar is what any frightened animal falls back on.

She peeked over her shoulder at the archers lining the wall behind her, one for herself and each of her companions. However things played out, whether the archers would come to their aid or enforce their compliance, this was going to be the most memorable Faith Walk in New Jerusalem's nasty little history. Either they escaped, which seemed fantastical as she inspected the fresh blood stains on the uneven ground and tried to ignore the doors on both sides of the building creaking under the press of the zombies that would soon spill through them, or they went down fighting.

The only thing Miranda knew for sure was if they didn't make it out, neither would Jeremiah. She would cower close to the creep and use the dagger hidden in her splint to slit his throat. She could beat a guard or an arrow, just. If Jeremiah was going to snatch away any chance at a future worth living, make every painful sacrifice for nothing, Miranda was determined that he would never enjoy a second of it.

In the center of the pit stood the man of the hour, the God-fucking-All-Father, droning on about God's—so, therefore, presumably, his—Judgment.

Christ Almighty, can we just get on with this?

Doug caught her eye. He stood two people to her left, three once the Prophet joined them. Even now, he winked at her, triggering a rush of gratitude. He was so fucking cool, the best friend she could ask for. Seffie was immediately on her left and wound so tight Miranda was sure the slightest touch would cause her to explode.

He puts the women on either side of him. He's pathetic.

The Prophet stuck Mario next to Doug, on the end, the most vulnerable spot on the line. The tiny flicker of affection in his brown eyes filled her own with helpless tears. Despite everything, she still loved him. She could admit it now, if only to herself. As usual, her timing sucked.

Connor squeezed her right hand. She squeezed his back. Beside Connor stood Mike. Since Mike's size and strength posed the most obvious physical threat, the creep put him on the other end of the line.

“What does it say about me that I feel better down here on the ground,

surrounded by zombies than I do up high?” Connor said softly.

The tiniest of smiles stole across Miranda’s mouth. “That you need to work on your threat assessments.”

“We’re going to be okay, Miri.”

“He’s cutting this awfully close. If he’s doing anything at all,” she added under her breath.

Connor, Doug, and Mario were sure that they would escape and be able to take the Prophet as well. Whatever Finn had planned, they were convinced it would work. Miranda’s confidence in Finn had eroded with every step toward where she now stood. Being in a zombie pit was not her idea of a clean getaway.

A wave of nervous murmurs spilled down from the balcony. The Prophet walked toward them, his greedy golden eyes undressing Miranda with frank anticipation. She searched the balcony one last time. No sign of Finn or Dalton. Whether their absence boded well or ill, she had no idea.

Jeremiah stopped in front of her and proclaimed, “Is there anything you wish, Sister Miranda?”

It took Miranda a moment to figure it out. When she did, her bark of laughter silenced the nervous voices above. In the quiet that followed, she could hear the zombies outside moaning.

“The Maiden’s Privilege?” she blurted, her voice carrying through the hush. “You’re fucking delusional.”

Jeremiah’s face darkened. “You dare mock your God All-Father?”

Miranda raised her voice. She wanted everyone to hear. “The first guy I fucked was Oliver Mattheson. I was sixteen and he was...” she purred the next word suggestively, “imaginative.”

The Prophet’s body vibrated with rage. “I shall enjoy breaking you!”

Miranda looked sideways at Seffie, eyebrow raised. *Are you ready?* Seffie’s infinitesimal nod answered. *Yes.*

Miranda turned her attention back to the Prophet. “I might have slept with you the other night to get that serum. The only intimate act you’re going to get out of me now is when I kill you.”

Miranda’s cheek exploded in a white flash of pain as the Prophet backhanded

her.

“You will be silent!” he roared.

His arm cocked back, telegraphing the punch. Still dazed from the first strike, she couldn’t get her arm up quickly enough to block. His fist rammed into her eye, snapping her head backward. Silky blackness seeped along the edges of her vision. She fell as bright points of light glowed against her eyelids. The madness in his golden eyes burned like an inferno. He dragged her to her feet and took his place in line between her and Seffie, clenching her hand in his vise-like fist.

“Brothers and Sisters, My Children,” the Prophet called out, raising his hands high. “Watch as We walk in the ways of God’s terrible Judgment among the Hollow Men! Unbelievers and blasphemers shall perish, surely!”

Miranda held her breath as she blinked to clear the vision in her left eye. Nothing happened. No distractions or explosions, no sign of the cavalry coming to their rescue. The Prophet stepped forward, so they did, too. Behind them, Miranda heard the creak of the archers drawing their bows.

If this asshole fractured my eye socket, I’m going to murder him.

The first set of doors opened. The rank smell of rotting flesh burned Miranda’s nostrils, even from thirty feet away. The zombies lurched into sight from both sides of the building, but in far greater numbers than the last Faith Walk. The human line kept moving forward as the zombies reeled toward them, fuzzy with flies.

A cold, sticky sweat soaked Miranda’s body. Her heart thrashed against her sternum. The zombies were twenty feet away now. It had been years since she had faced one unarmed. She looked over to Doug for the signal, but he kept his eyes forward as he walked.

He’s trying to let Finn make the first move, she realized. A scraping sound ahead. The second set of doors were opening.

The Prophet’s eyes widened. “It is too many, too soon,” he said. “It will be over too quickly!”

Fuck this, Miranda decided, when a strangled gasp above caught her attention. A second later, the Captain of the Prophet’s Guard thumped to the

ground in front of Connor, an arrow piercing his throat. Blood gurgled and foamed at his mouth. The Prophet stopped short, staring at the man in disbelief.

Miranda ripped her hand from the Prophet's. She stepped into him and smashed her elbow against his Adam's apple. He staggered back, stunned and gagging. Seffie felled him with a ferocious, bone-popping kick to the side of the knee. He writhed on the floor, hacking and groaning.

"I need him alive!" Miranda shouted over and over, hoping she could be heard over the chaos and noise that suddenly enveloped her. Without the serum, the Prophet was all they had. Now was not the time for an archer to settle an old score.

Miranda pulled her dagger from her splint and tossed it to Seffie. Seffie pivoted to a zombie two feet away. She drove the dagger hilt-deep into its eye socket.

Screams of panic, crashing sounds of combat, and the stampede of hundreds of feet intensified in the balcony. An arrow brushed Miranda's shoulder as it whizzed by. The archers in the pit were killing zombies!

Two more members of the Prophet's guard fell into the arena, but these men were alive. The undead swarmed, crawling over one another like ants. The men's agonized shrieks amplified the uproar. The zombies began to break into smaller groups, snarling at one another over bloody limbs and trailing intestines in the fine mist of blood that hung in the air.

The Prophet climbed to his knees, his eyes unfocused. "You will die, blasphemers."

Miranda punched his temple. He fell face-first in the mud, unconscious.

Doug slammed a zombie's head against the wall until it went limp. Its smashed skull left a trailing smudge as it slid to the ground. Connor stomped on the face of a downed zombie, black blood and brains spattering his trousers. Archers loosed arrows with abandon, but no one had counted on there being more zombies than the last Faith Walk.

A zombie dressed in clothing made from the plain homespun fabric that the inhabitants of New Jerusalem favored staggered toward Miranda. A mother or wife once, perhaps both, but now its bloodcurdling moan and snapping teeth

made every hair on Miranda's body ripple unpleasantly to attention. Miranda tugged on the bandages of her splint. Hastily, she tied the Prophet's hands behind his back as the zombie closed in. She pulled one of the slats from her disentangling splint and stood, ready to charge.

Miranda looked at the zombie, really looked at it, instead of simply registering it as a threat to be eliminated. Her heart plummeted.

Oh God, it's Bethany.

Two days ago the zombie had been New Jerusalem's healer, an ally who paid the ultimate price for helping them. Miranda raised the splint, resolute, when the Bethany-zombie stopped and turned away.

Of course, he repels them!

Even though she had seen their behavior during the last Faith Walk, with zombies so close Miranda had gone on defensive auto-pilot. She caught up to the zombie in three steps, the splint solid in her hand. As the zombie turned toward her, she plunged the splint into its eye. The creature that had once been Bethany crumpled to the ground.

"Fall back!" she cried, trying to be heard over the chaos. She could see Mike and Mario. They swung truncheons that must have fallen clear when the Prophet's Guardsmen plummeted into the pit. Seffie still wielded Miranda's dagger. Even with the archers firing from within the pit and the balcony, where the sounds of fighting had abated somewhat, the battle was fierce and closely fought.

They're cut off, she realized.

A piercing whistle cut the air, followed by a voice. "To me," it cried. "Here, to me!"

Miranda turned to see Finn standing in the first doorway on the south side of the building, waving his crossbow above his tawny maned head.

"Fall back," the archers began to shout.

Mario, Doug, and Mike fought against a rising tide of zombies on the other side of the arena. There were too many. Only the Prophet, who began to thrash feebly, could save them. Miranda propped the semiconscious man into a sitting position and tried to drag him toward the melee. She looked over her shoulder at

the three men she needed to save. I won't make it, she thought desperately.

Then Connor appeared. "I've got him," he said as he squatted down to shift the Prophet onto his shoulder.

With a grunt, Connor stood upright. Miranda kept close, unsure how far away from Jeremiah she could be and still be protected. She saw Mike say something to Doug. Doug pointed to her and Connor, but Mike shook his head. Then he ducked and plowed into the horde. He sidestepped and twirled with the grace of a running back, deflecting with shoulder and elbow, every movement precise as he worked his way deeper. And then he stopped.

"Mike, no!" Miranda cried, horror enveloping her even as the zombies nearest to her jerked away from the Prophet.

One moment Mike was there. In the next, he was not. Zombies engulfed him. As if by hive mind, most turned toward the nearest, easiest target.

Mario and Doug made a break for it across the pit as a howl sliced the air. Seffie charged the horde. Miranda grabbed her arm, barely able to hold on.

"Mike!" Seffie screamed, anguish and fury filling her voice. "Mike!"

"He's gone!" Miranda shouted.

Somehow, she managed to turn Seffie around. Mario and Doug were almost even with them now.

Seffie looked at Miranda blankly, as if she did not know where she was. Miranda dragged her along for a few stumbling steps before Seffie began to run for the door where Finn waited. Bolts spit from his crossbow, but zombies were no longer a concern at such close proximity to the Prophet.

Finn led them down a corridor, which opened into a small corral. Zombies pressed in from all sides, rotting arms stretching through the spaces between the slatted fence. Finn stomped on the ground. A moment later, a trapdoor opened. Dalton squinted up at them.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Doug said, shoving the shell-shocked Seffie toward the trapdoor.

Connor hopped down after Seffie. The tips of his fingers stuck out of the ground as Doug and Finn lowered the Prophet to him.

"You okay?" Miranda asked Mario, a tremor in her voice.

Mario nodded. He looked depleted, but whole. Miranda felt like crying with relief but clamped down on the impulse. She still had a job to do.

“Go,” she told him. When he started to protest, she said, “I’m right behind you.”

Mario climbed down the ladder. As Miranda followed him, Doug said to Finn, “What will you do now?”

Miranda looked up at Finn. The young man’s face was grim, but he radiated an energy of liberation long-repressed and suddenly released. His presence filled and overflowed the space around them.

“I will burn this cursed building down.”

FINN HELD true to his promise to help. He gave them horses and supplies, returned their weapons, and told them the best route to take. He had even remembered Delilah, who trotted alongside Miranda's horse as if she did this sort of thing every day. The opaque silvery mists that had descended without warning only to dissipate just as abruptly, the freezing rain that never let up, the skirting and backtracking to avoid zombies that had given the journey a feeling of one step forward and two steps back—none of it had phased Doug. Doug's tenacity, the force of his will that they would succeed, had been enough to make Miranda believe they just might pull this thing off.

Until now. First, the smell pushed their way by the northerly wind off Monterey Bay. Wet soot and smoke mingled with the stink of roasted meat. The inky-black plume became visible as soon as they emerged from the forest. And moans, always the goddamned moans, distorted by remnants of the patchy fog.

Miranda looked down at the roiling zombies in the valley below the bluff where they had stopped. At least a hundred blackened, charred corpses staggered amongst the later arrivals, whose rotted, gray pallor looked healthy by comparison. Dilapidated buildings dotted the descending hillside, remnants of the UC Santa Cruz campus. A small cluster of buildings surrounded by a concrete wall lay in ruins, belching dark smoke into the sky.

The lab, she thought, even though she had never been to the Jesuits' secret installation on the UCSC campus. It had to be the lab. There was nothing else up here worth burning. Eight scientists and as many in the security detail. Had

anyone escaped or were they all dead? Even if they could get close enough to investigate, how would they tell human skeletons from those of the undead attracted and burned up by the fire?

Several miles beyond the campus, the town of Santa Cruz sat nestled between a fortified concrete wall and the ocean. A small warship, a frigate by the looks of it, was parked halfway between the shore and the horizon. The Navy's changeable loyalties never boded well, as the ruins below attested. Miranda could not think of a reason for them to be in Santa Cruz now, the timing could not be coincidental, unless an alliance had been struck with the Council to stop their mission.

A cold fire exploded inside Miranda's brain. Her swelling black eye throbbed. If they had not been trapped by Jeremiah, they might have been here. They might have been able to help, to prevent this, instead of finding a smoldering wreck. They might already be at sea, bringing the vaccine to the rest of the world.

She turned away from the ruined buildings and zeroed in on Jeremiah. New Jerusalem's recently deposed Prophet lay slung over the back of a docile mare like a sack of grain. His hands were tied together and then to his bare feet, blue from the cold, by a rope that passed under the horse's belly. A sack over his head hid the blindfold and gag. Jeremiah had started the trip upright but had made too much noise. He didn't need to worry about the zombies he attracted, but they did.

"This is your fault!" Miranda cried, furious. The dismount from her horse turning into a controlled fall when she had to bend her injured knee. She steadied herself for a moment, then went for Jeremiah's mount. She released the slip knot that tied his hands to his feet and dragged the bound man from the horse. He hit the sodden ground with a thump.

"You fucking piece of shit!"

She kicked at Jeremiah, but the lack of strength in her injured, stationary leg robbed the kick of power. She ripped the bag from Jeremiah's head. His golden eyes were filled with fright.

"Not smiling anymore, are you?" Fueled by her ineffectual attempts to vent

it, her fury mushroomed. She could hear the others scrambling toward her.

“Stop it, that’s enough,” Doug said, pulling her away from Jeremiah,

“It’s not nearly enough.”

Doug’s blue eyes were angry, too. He pushed his wet hair off his forehead. It stayed in place, instead of tumbling back down like it did when dry. “You’re right, but we need him alive.”

Doug’s blue eyes bored into her. They had been through so much on this godforsaken mission. They had finally, impossibly, caught a break, only to encounter another setback.

Seffie’s brittle laugh cut through the air. “There’s no lab. That’s it, game over.”

“It’s not over until I say it is,” Doug snapped.

“Does anyone in Santa Cruz even know what’s happened here?” Connor asked.

“Maybe,” Doug answered. “But there’s only a handful of people who even know the lab is here. Downtown doesn’t look disrupted. They’re probably using shore leave as cover.”

“If they’re trying to be stealthy, setting it on fire was stupid,” Connor said.

Doug shook his head. “The wind blows north off the bay this time of year, away from town.”

“Henry’s probably dead,” Mario said, turning toward the rest of the group. Until now, he had been silent as he stared down at the ruined lab.

Doug hoisted Jeremiah up from the ground. Within minutes everyone was remounted. Jeremiah’s mare ate a mouthful of grass before the tether attached to the saddle of Doug’s stallion pulled it along.

Miranda coaxed her mare alongside Jeremiah’s. Softly, so only he could hear, she said, “Just remember, asshole. One day we aren’t going to need you anymore.”

AN HOUR later they were holed up in the second story of the Sinsheimer Lab building. The Prophet sat on the floor, hands lashed to an ancient radiator.

“The horses are tethered,” Doug said as he and Connor entered the room. He leaned against the wall, then slid to the floor. Connor sat down heavily between her and Doug. He sat close to her, unlike Mario, who was on her other side. Seffie squatted a few feet away, cursing as she tried to light a small camp lantern. Miranda wondered why she bothered. It would raise the light level to gloomy, if that. Eventually the lamp flickered to life and Seffie sat down beside it.

Miranda was about to screw the cap back on her canteen when she eyed Jeremiah. Giving him a drink would be the Christian thing to do, she supposed. A day without water hardly constituted a threat to his survival, but it would give her a reason to move. At the moment moving was more compelling than Christian duty. Sitting so close to both Connor and Mario made her antsy. She would sell her soul right about now just to be held, to be told that everything was going to be all right, but which of them would she choose? The one she still loved despite herself, or the one she had most recently slept with?

Karen would get a good laugh out of this. I’m supposed to be saving the world and my head is stuck in junior high.

Connor reached over and took her canteen. As if he’d read her mind, he got up and crossed the room, then offered some to Jeremiah.

“Behave,” he said, “or you won’t get any.”

Jeremiah glared at him. Connor reached behind his head and untied the gag. Jeremiah opened and closed his stiff jaw, making dry, puckery noises with his tongue. Connor held the canteen to his lips, trying to keep the water from dribbling down his chin as he sucked on it greedily.

“You will not succeed in thwarting the Heavenly Father’s will,” he said when he had finished drinking. “You will die among the Hollow Men for your blasphemy and sin.”

“They’re not Hollow Men, they’re zombies. And you’re not a prophet, Jeremiah. You’re just crazy.”

“How dare you insult Us!” Jeremiah sputtered.

Connor shoved the gag back in his mouth, then checked his restraints.

“Who tied him up?” Connor asked. He still stood by Jeremiah. A rigid stillness had settled over him.

Miranda rose to her feet without knowing why, except that Connor sounded off. Dangerous.

“I did,” Seffie answered.

For a moment Connor looked at Seffie. Then he lunged. He lifted Seffie by the shoulders and threw her against the wall, like a child taking out a tantrum on a doll. His hands clamped around her throat. Seffie flailed, trying to break free, but was totally overpowered by her larger opponent.

“You killed them all,” Connor shouted at Seffie. “All of them! You killed all of them!”

“Connor, stop!” Miranda cried, grabbing his arm, but Connor didn’t acknowledge her. His muscles flexed, shaking with effort beneath Miranda’s hands. Seffie’s face flushed darkly. No sound escaped her mouth. Her panicked eyes bulged from their sockets. He’s going to kill her, Miranda realized.

Doug’s voice cut through the others. “Let go of her!”

Connor didn’t hear, or didn’t care. A moment later the hard smack of Doug’s punch caught Connor on the jaw. Connor staggered back a step. He never let go, but his grip loosened enough that Miranda and Mario could pry his hands away. Seffie collapsed to the floor between them, gasping and hacking for air. She wrapped her hands around her throat.

“What is wrong with you?” Doug demanded, shoving Connor away. He positioned himself between Connor and the others.

Connor stood chest to chest with Doug, a furious, murderous stare directed at Seffie over Doug’s shoulder. Miranda had seen Connor in action. She knew that he could use violence as well as anyone. Until a moment ago she could not have imagined him attacking a woman. He was not that kind of man.

“You said you never sailed before,” he spat.

Seffie stared up at him, scared and confused. “What?” she whispered hoarsely.

Connor hurled his accusation with such venom that Seffie flinched. “You said you never sailed before, that you didn’t know anything about it, and then you tie him up using constrictor knots?”

“I’m not following you, Connor,” Mario said, his calm voice trying to placate Connor’s fury.

“Oh shit,” Doug muttered. The tension drained from his body as he turned to face Seffie, Miranda, and Mario.

Connor tore his eyes from Seffie with visible effort as he answered Mario’s question. “Someone sabotaged the sailboat we took from Mazatlán. That’s why we lost it in the storm, why everyone died!”

Connor directed his attention back to Seffie. “Why would you use one of the most difficult sailing knots to tie him up if you don’t know how to sail?”

“Never said that,” Seffie croaked in protest.

“You killed them,” said Connor. “Everyone who drowned, everyone who died after. And Mike, too. You killed all of them.”

Seffie’s face crumpled. “I did not kill Mike,” she said furiously, but her raspy whisper drained her protest of strength.

“But you helped sabotage the yacht,” Doug said.

Seffie looked from face to face, panicked, shrinking in on herself like a sick animal. A sinking feeling took hold of Miranda’s stomach.

“You don’t understand,” she rasped. “My sister...taken by a Navy ship.” Seffie stopped, interrupted by a coughing fit. “If I did a job for them, they said they’d let her go.”

“Well, shit,” said Doug. “That explains a lot. And it means the Council knows where we were going.”

Miranda believed Seffie. Slavery had become rampant since the ZA, and her anguish felt real. But she had to think of the mission first.

“If she’s telling the truth,” Miranda said.

“It doesn’t matter either way,” Connor countered. “We have to get rid of her. We can’t trust her.”

Seffie appealed to Doug, fear transforming her face into a rictus of pain. “Please,” she begged, sobbing. “Please don’t leave me out here. I didn’t know you had the vaccine!”

“How did they contact you? What did you tell them?” Doug asked.

“Said to go to the church, morning, for an hour, last row,” she rasped, then was racked by a coughing fit. “Second time I met a guy, but only twice. He asked about the journey, what I knew.” She stopped again to cough. “I didn’t know anything...then we left in the night.” Seffie paused and cleared her throat. Pain spasmed across her face. She appealed again to Doug. “Out here alone...it’s a death sentence.”

“What did he look like?” Doug asked.

“Just a guy.” She hacked again. “Five ten, one sixty? Brown hair, eyes.”

“He must have said something,” Miranda said. “Think. It might be something minor. Did he live at SCU?”

Seffie thought for a moment, tried clearing her throat again, then shook her head. “He was...average.”

Alarm bells began to sound in Miranda’s brain. No, she thought, he would never side with the City. Her mouth felt cotton dry. “Did he offer you anything?”

Seffie shook her head no. A soft wash of relief cascaded through Miranda’s body.

Seffie was gripped by another coughing fit, then said, “He bragged he could get anything.”

All the annoying, obnoxious flirting that Miranda had put up with because she thought he was harmless, because she wanted the things he gave her. Her skin began to crawl. There was only one person she knew who could get almost

anything: her annoying as fuck, just would not take the hint admirer, Harold.

“I should have just fucked him,” she said, her mind reeling. “It would have been cheaper.”

“Harold?” Doug barked in surprise. “Are you telling me it was Harold?”

Seffie looked up at him fearfully. “Never said his name.”

Miranda’s horrified shock began to give way to anger. “That fucking weasel! He got us the Humvees and weapons! I gave him more intel than she ever could!”

“Holy shit,” Mario said under his breath, his eyes meeting Miranda’s. His face said it all. What else can go wrong? He crouched down next to Seffie and put his good arm around her shoulders. She clung to him, weeping pathetically between coughing fits.

Doug turned to Connor. “Check those ropes again. Retie them, move him if you want, I don’t care.” He stepped in close. “You will not touch her again.”

Connor’s face contorted, anger curling his lip. “She—”

“Do you understand me?”

Connor nodded, then turned on his heel and stalked toward Jeremiah.

Doug motioned for Miranda to follow him. Painfully, she limped after him into the hallway just outside the door.

“What should we do?” he asked, still sounding stunned.

“The ambush, the lab.” Miranda couldn’t look Doug in the eye. “It’s my fault.”

“Jesus, Miri, don’t be so melodramatic. You didn’t tell him we were taking 17, did you?”

“No, but the kind of terrain I told Harold we needed to travel—”

Doug waved off her self-reproach. “They made some educated guesses and went from there. They discovered what they did about Santa Cruz on their own. I meant Seffie. What do you think?”

“We take her as far as the town,” Miranda answered, shocked that he had even asked.

“Of course we do,” Doug snapped. “We’re not leaving her out here to die, for Christ’s sake.”

Miranda waited.

Doug took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. It’s just— Jesus, we cannot catch a break! Harold a City spy? Come on,” he said in disbelief. “Now we’ve got three people to watch and guard instead of one, and you and Mario aren’t in peak condition.”

“We’ll manage.”

“Because we’ve done great so far.”

A crash came from inside the room the others occupied, followed by Seffie’s raspy yelp of surprise. A shout from Connor, followed by a *thud*.

“Goddamn him!” Doug hissed.

Miranda took a step toward the door when what felt like a freight train hit her in the chest. She flew off her feet and landed hard on her back. She gasped for breath, her lungs emptied by the impact.

Jeremiah ran past her, a length of rope still tied to one wrist, and disappeared into the stairwell. No, she thought, still gasping for breath. Connor followed a moment later. Miranda glimpsed blood coursing down Connor’s face. Doug sprinted down the hallway after them.

Miranda climbed to her feet and leaned against the wall. Mario appeared in the door, an assault rifle in his hand.

Seffie darted past Mario. “Come on!” she croaked.

“Give me that,” Miranda wheezed, hand out to Mario. “Was it Seffie?”

“No,” he said, moving past her to follow Seffie without giving Miranda the rifle. “Stay here. You can barely stand.”

“You should stay, too. We can’t risk losing you.”

“Just stay here, Miri.”

There was no point, no time, to argue. Mario turned and left. She watched, helpless, as he disappeared into the inky black of the stairwell.

CONNOR SWIPED warm blood and cold rain from his eyes. Thick underbrush clutched at his legs. The contours of the uneven ground reached up to trip him. He could hear the madman ahead, calling out to his undead ‘children’ for protection. From every direction, they moaned their reply.

If I’d just left the freak alone...

Furious with himself, Connor pushed harder. The knots Seffie tied were secure. He had said so himself. There was no rational reason to retie them, even less to move him, but reason had nothing to do with it. Learning that Seffie was at least partly responsible for the death of almost everyone who had left Mazatlán with them had not just clouded Connor’s judgment. It had obliterated it.

He squinted against the rain, saw a glimpse of Jeremiah’s silhouette against the lighter background of one of the buildings ahead. Connor pivoted to follow and tripped, an ensnared foot dragging him to the ground. He started to push himself up when he heard a raspy hiss, like air leaking from a tire. He snapped his head toward it. A rush of decay hit him full in the face. His eyes widened in horror at the skeletal face inches from his nose, almost invisible in the dark underbrush. Connor reared away, crab-walking backward. Over his initial panic, he stopped and kicked his heel into the writhing zombie’s face. He reached for the machete on his hip. It wasn’t there. He had set it aside so that Jeremiah couldn’t make a grab for it while he moved him.

Another zombie came toward him from the tall grass to his right. He sprang

to his feet and started to run.

“Connor, wait!” a voice called out.

Connor looked away from the zombie to see Doug closing the distance between them. “I’ve got it,” Doug said as he approached the staggering cadaver. Connor heard a dull *thwack*. The zombie dropped.

“This way,” Connor said, gesturing in the direction he had last seen Jeremiah.

The moans of the zombies grew louder. The torrential downpour seemed to marry the faint sound of Jeremiah’s voice with that of the zombies’ moaning. A damp rustle that the rain could not account for sighed from the overgrown trees and underbrush.

“I’ll go around to the north of that building, in case he heads that way. Keep going east,” Doug ordered.

“I don’t have a weapon. I just took off after him.”

Doug produced a bowie knife from a sheath on his thigh. He handed the knife hilt first to Connor but did not let go when Connor gripped the hilt.

“Don’t fuck up again.”

The wind picked up, pelting the stinging rain against Connor’s face. He slowed as he approached the building ahead. He poked his head around a corner, praying Jeremiah wasn’t poised with a zombie to set loose on him. There was movement ahead.

A hand gripped his shoulder. Too tight. Too cold. Connor knew it was a zombie before he turned around. He shoved the zombie against the wall as he turned toward it, using its grip on his shoulder as leverage. The zombie lurched at him again, catching Connor’s shoulder and elbow in its hands, its grip so tight Connor almost dropped the knife.

The zombie didn’t moan, but its jaws snapped with a nasty clicking of teeth. Connor fought to raise the hand that held the knife. The zombie’s grip tightened. Its jagged fingernails scraped against the chain mail protecting his elbow, twisting the metal against his skin.

With a grunt, Connor kicked. His boot connected with the zombie’s knee. The vise-like grip he had struggled against loosened. He wrenched his elbow

free and jammed the knife into the creature's eye. He pulled the blade out and sent the zombie crumpling to the ground.

He rounded the corner. There were zombies everywhere. Staggering figures distorted by the rain: ahead of him, behind, closing in from the exposed side not sheltered by the building. A few more minutes of this and he was done for. He had to find the Prophet or retreat. Not retreat, he thought, fail. If he did not capture Jeremiah, it was over. The whole world would be doomed because of his stupidity.

Connor heard a snatch of a human voice from across the clearing. He charged toward it. Zombies snatched at his clothes as he ducked and shoved, deflecting their attack with elbows and punches. He didn't try to kill; that would slow him down. He had to reach the voice of the lunatic, not just to capture Jeremiah, but to save himself.

Then he saw a lone figure inside a ring of zombies, maybe ten feet away. The zombies lurched toward the central figure, only to be repelled when they got too close. For a moment, it seemed as if Connor's and Jeremiah's eyes locked, even though Connor could not make out more than a shape and white shirt. He could feel the insanity behind Jeremiah's golden eyes pulse like a beacon before Jeremiah pivoted away.

Jeremiah broke for the tree line. Connor strong-armed the closest zombie, knocked another to the ground with a shoulder check. If Jeremiah made it, he would get away. Desperate, Connor leaped over the nearest zombie and dove, stretching his body as far as he could. He hit the ground with a tooth-rattling thump. His fingernails scraped against Jeremiah's bare ankle. Scrambling on the sodden ground, Connor lunged and caught Jeremiah's foot.

A startled cry escaped his quarry's mouth as he almost tripped. Then a yank and the slippery bare foot slid through Connor's fingers.

Connor scrambled to his feet, swaying like a drunkard as he dodged and deflected zombies. He squinted through the rain, but Jeremiah had slipped through the tree line.

Connor surged forward, lungs afire, summoning his last reserves of energy. He followed Jeremiah under the sparsely spaced trees, but the underbrush and

the silhouettes of thickening redwood trees made it hard to see. Instead of capturing Jeremiah, he tumbled onto the fragrant carpet of wet redwood needles.

Connor looked ahead: slow shapes that were somehow closing fast. Everywhere he looked walking death advanced upon him. The moaning became a dull roar in his ears. The stench of decay filled his nose, penetrating his mucous membranes to coat his mouth with its bitter taste. Would it be so bad to just stay down? The mission had failed. None of them would make it to Santa Cruz. One by one, they would be picked off. The vaccine would remain a perquisite of the powerful, and the world would continue as it always had, its indifference to injustice intact.

It would be okay, he thought, dazed. I'll just stay here a little while. He looked forward, into the slack, blank face of the nearest zombie.

"Fuck that."

He sprang to his feet. He had to get out from under the trees. A zombie lurched toward him. Connor looked for something, anything, that might save him. As he ducked under the arm of another zombie, he saw a boulder, perhaps three feet high. Not enough in itself, but enough to give him a boost to the branch above it. He ran, blind to the peril around him as he jumped onto the boulder. Connor crouched low, then exploded upward. His fingernails scratched the branch, and then he was falling. He crunched down to the boulder's uneven surface and fell to the ground.

He climbed back up, zombies footsteps away. Again he crouched low, praying as he forced his legs upward to break gravity's hold. He stretched his arms above his head.

The rough bark bit into his palms. Miraculously, the branch was dry, sheltered from the storm by those above it. Connor pulled himself up. As he slung his arm around the branch, a hand grabbed his foot. Heart racing, Connor kicked wildly. He felt his foot slip free and pulled his feet up, then swung his leg over. It took every ounce of strength to wriggle onto the prickly limb. He leaned back against the tree trunk, gasping.

The zombies below him moaned and thrashed, driven wild by his presence. Connor slumped against the tree, relieved to be alive but knowing he was

screwed. Sleep or water, taking a piss or getting tired from standing, zombies were troubled by no such considerations. The horde below was focused on him and going nowhere.

They have the horses; maybe they'll make it, he told himself, thinking of Miranda. The light blue of her eyes as they shone with laughter. The mutinous set of her jaw when she was angry. The way her body felt nestled against his as he had watched the fear recede from her eyes and be replaced by a cautious fondness. A fondness that he had hoped might turn into something more, but she was slipping away from him, bit by bit, and he couldn't stop it. He saw it in the tilt of her head as she listened to Mario speak. The way she looked at her former lover, as if she was trying to figure out something necessary to her survival. But with him, she was impatient and short-tempered, felt smothered. However it might once have turned out, it wasn't going to end with him and Miranda together. But he had to believe she would survive. The alternative was unbearable.

The zombies below shifted. The moans turned to snarls, as if they were angry. Connor peered down. The horde moved almost like a wave, forward and back, as if pulled by a magnet and then released. Before he could puzzle it out, a voice cut through the gloom.

"We told you, did We not? You cannot thwart the will of God the All-Father on Earth."

The zombies below the tree began to roil. For a moment, Connor thought he was hearing things, but the strange behavior of the horde below told him otherwise.

He's come back to gloat, Connor thought, stunned.

Aloud, he said, "You did."

Jeremiah laughed softly. "How did you think you could succeed?" he asked. "When the righteousness of Our Will is so plain?"

"Because we had to."

The space around the boulder cleared. Jeremiah strolled into view a few feet away, a light-colored shape in the gloom. But he stood too straight, moved with too much purpose, had too much personal space around him to be a zombie.

“But We can move among the Hollow Men. We understand more clearly now. They are not just Heavenly Father’s Judgment, but Our Children. They become Our Shield.”

And you can be mine.

He just had to keep him talking. Since he was pretty sure Jeremiah was a pathological narcissist, Connor figured it wouldn’t be too hard.

“What will you do now?” he asked. “Return to New Jerusalem?”

“We will,” Jeremiah said, his voice becoming flinty. “We will purify Our Body of infidels and rebels. We will restore Our Order. Our Justice will be terrible.”

“Finn killed the Prophet’s Guard. Who will help you?”

Slowly, to try and mask the movement, Connor pulled one leg closer to his body. He shifted his hip just enough to set his heel on the branch.

“Still, you think Our Will can be thwarted!” Jeremiah exploded.

Connor let Jeremiah’s unhinged tirade wash over him as he shifted his other leg into position. Now crouching on the branch, he took a deep breath.

“You have no answer?” Jeremiah sneered.

Connor’s stomach flipped over. He had been so intent on getting into position without detection that he had not been paying attention to Jeremiah’s tirade. Then he grinned.

“Damn straight I’ve got an answer.”

Connor sprang from the branch. Jeremiah stumbled back. A second later, Connor landed on top of him. Jeremiah thrashed against him with surprising strength, slippery as an eel.

“No fucking way,” Connor hissed, jerking Jeremiah toward him.

“My Children!” Jeremiah screeched.

The madman bucked and thrashed. No longer needing to protect himself from zombies, all of Connor’s attention was on Jeremiah. He straddled him, wrenching Jeremiah’s arm up behind his back. A thrill of triumph raced through him at Jeremiah’s furious howl of pain.

“No more!” Connor shouted. He wrapped his free hand in the neckline of Jeremiah’s shirt and hauled him to his feet. “I will break your fucking arm,”

Connor threatened, cranking Jeremiah's arm higher. Immediately, the thrashing subsided.

Connor turned himself and Jeremiah around, strong-arming his captive out from under the trees into the rain. He picked up the pace, hoping to outstrip the zombies behind them. Even though he knew they could not get close enough to Jeremiah to be a threat, the ebb and flow of the ever-growing horde surrounding them unnerved him.

They hurried to the building where he and Doug had split up. Jeremiah did not struggle anymore but muttered under his breath. As they rounded the corner where he had last seen Doug, Connor stopped without warning, the yank on his captive's arm producing a yelp of pain.

It seemed as if every zombie in the world lurched toward them. The number of undead among the cluster of buildings they had chosen to shelter in had quadrupled in the time it had taken to catch Jeremiah. There were hundreds of zombies between Connor and the building he had to get back to.

How the hell was he supposed to rejoin the others without risking their being eaten alive before he got Jeremiah close enough to protect them? How was he going to find Doug? He'd only had a piece of rebar. He's probably dead, Connor realized.

For a moment, he just stood there, overwhelmed by the sheer number of zombies he now had to contend with. Jeremiah began to laugh, as if sensing Connor's fading resolve.

Connor shook himself. *One problem at a time. I need to get back to the others.* As he started forward, a whistle pierced the air. Connor turned toward the sound, the building on his left.

"I'm up here," Doug cried. "Second floor, come get me!"

Connor scanned the second story of the building the voice seemed to come from. Through the downpour, a faint motion caught his eye.

"Get moving," he said, giving a resistant Jeremiah a shove forward. They slogged across the sodden clearing toward Doug's voice. As Connor approached, he saw Doug's lanky form, hunched on the sill of a second-story window above a growing group of determined, if out of reach, zombies.

“Hurry up,” Doug shouted. “There are more inside and this window isn’t going to hold!”

When Connor and Jeremiah were below Doug’s perch in a newly created clearing, Doug turned toward the window, positioning himself to lower down from the sill. Then the glass cracked ominously. He jumped, landing almost at Connor’s feet.

“I thought you were dead,” Connor said as Doug climbed to his feet.

“Me too.”

“Your evil plans will not succeed,” Jeremiah ranted.

“For the love of God,” Doug said. He pulled a bandana out of his pocket and shoved it in Jeremiah’s mouth. The Prophet’s muffled protests continued while Doug helped tie his arms behind his back.

“I could see the others from up there,” Doug said as they dragged Jeremiah between them. “They’re saddling up the horses.”

A BURST of red caught Connor's eye. He recognized it immediately: a flare. Relief surged through him. The flare's incandescent glow was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

"Thank God."

Doug started to laugh. "I should know by now that God is always good, but sometimes"—he motioned at the sea of zombies surrounding them—"it's hard to hold on to."

They had lost track of the others. Doug had seen them saddling up before he jumped from the second-story window ledge ten minutes ago. They hadn't been able to see anything since, with hundreds of zombies surrounding them and nightfall approaching. The ground was slick and uneven, churned by hundreds of feet to the consistency of sticky taffy. Even with Jeremiah and his immunity-produced zone of protection, it had been slow going.

They turned south, toward the flare. Slowly, zombies moved out of their way. Occasionally one would lunge toward them before jerking back. Connor's heart leaped into his throat every time. He had often imagined what it would be like to walk by zombies undetected or unharmed, thinking it would be liberating, but this was one of the most harrowing journeys he had ever taken.

They stepped into the red halo of the flare's burning light. The zombies ahead of them began to move to either side of the three men, then spilled back out into the horde like a riptide. A section of chain-link fence blocked the gap between the corners of two buildings, the flare tied to its top rail. The hastily

erected fortification from some poor bastard's doomed last stand was rusty, ten feet tall, and in poor repair. The much smaller building on the right had "N.S. 2 Annex" stenciled on a metal service door. Connor couldn't tell what the other building was and didn't care. All he cared about were the people on the other side of the fence, three figures on horseback about fifteen feet from the fence in the area between the buildings. The two outer figures turned their horses sideways for a moment, almost perfectly synchronized. They turned away again.

Standing guard, Connor thought.

Mario rode into the light of the flare. "Imagine meeting you here. Let's make this fast; the horses are getting spooked."

"Tie him to me and I'll climb up with him," Doug said to Connor.

Connor balked. "I lost him; I'll bring him over."

"You have more than redeemed yourself."

Connor shook his head. He wanted to set things right. "There's no way—"

"Will one of you get over the goddamn fence?" Mario said, sounding short on patience.

As if on cue, one of the horses darted away from the buildings behind Mario. Connor could see Miranda's silhouette hacking at a zombie.

Doug held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, you win."

After helping Connor with the short rope tethering him to Jeremiah, Doug scampered over the fence like a squirrel. Despite the quickness of his climb and descent, the surrounding zombies became even more riled up. They pressed against the fence on either side of Connor and Jeremiah. Connor looked up at the rusty bolts holding the fence in place, then shook it off. They would hold or they wouldn't.

"Here's how we're doing this," Connor said to his captive. Still gagged, Jeremiah glowered at him. "If you decide to jump off, Doug will shoot you. I'll die too, but I don't care anymore," Connor said, surprised to find that he meant it. He was tired of chasing this asshole, tired of the mission, tired of the constant struggle for what constituted a normal life anymore.

"Got it?"

Jeremiah nodded.

Connor waited until Jeremiah had the toes of both his feet stuck into the fence before starting to climb next to him. The metal mesh chilled Connor's fingers. More clatter of horse hooves. Both Miranda and Seffie rode out to kill zombies coming from the far side of the buildings. As soon as they were seven feet up, the zombies below rushed the fence. It swayed, but not terribly. Connor pushed away the spike of anxiety. The fence only had to hold for another sixty seconds.

Connor straddled the top of the fence, one leg on either side. When Jeremiah was halfway down, Doug caught him by the waist. Connor flipped his left leg over the fence, perching on the top rail to get his balance before jumping down.

The sky filled with a bright-yellow flash, followed by a thundering explosion from the town below.

What the fuck?

An ominous metal creak scraped against Connor's ear. The fence pitched forward. But instead of throwing him over to safety, he tumbled backward, as if he had hit an eddy line in a river while sitting on the side of a raft.

The sensation of falling, the sick realization that he was going the wrong way, flashed through Connor's brain as he grabbed for the fence. Another explosion lit up the sky. Shouts and screams from the others, the clatter of hooves. Then the rope strung through his belt loops pulled him up short.

Cold hands clutched him. Connor thrashed, twisting away, trying to catch the fence with his hands. He kicked his legs, breaking one free. His instinctive reaction made a liar of him: he did care if he died. He cared very much.

Connor looked through the fence. Doug was almost to the top shouting, "Don't cut that rope!" Mario had jumped from his horse. His good arm was wrapped around Jeremiah's neck, pinning him to the slanting fence. Seffie and Miranda rode toward them. A crack, like a gunshot, then the fence tipped even more.

"Grab my hand!" Doug shouted, reaching for him. Connor swiped and missed. He tried again. Doug's strong hand clapped around his wrist. Doug pulled, but Connor felt cold fingers catch his other arm.

Connor looked over his shoulder at the frenzied pack of zombies, then up at

Doug. If they didn't free him quickly, Doug would be pulled down, too.

Two more thunderous explosions came in quick succession. "They're shelling the town," someone cried.

Connor looked at Doug. "Cut the rope!"

Doug's blue eyes flashed with determination. "Not yet."

Connor wrested his arm free and caught Doug's arm, but now they had his boots. He glimpsed Miranda on the ground. She had something in her hands. Seffie stood next to her horse, reins held tight. She had backed the alarmed animal's flanks against the fence where it was breaking free, trying to hold it in place. Gunshots rang out, so close Connor's ears rang. Then his feet were free. Doug wrenched him up. His boots found purchase against the metal mesh. Then he and Doug fell to the ground with a thud.

More explosions rocked the valley below. Connor climbed to his feet, adrenaline-induced tremors racking his frame. His ears buzzed and rang. The screech of twisting metal sounded far away.

Doug and Jeremiah were mounted up together. Mario and Miranda seemed to blur together as they shoved Connor up on a restive horse that stamped and pulled. Connor looked over his shoulder, trying to find Seffie. Nausea overwhelmed him. Seffie was still on the ground, fighting to mount her frightened horse before the fence collapsed.

Another bolt popped out of the fence's moorings, whizzing past Connor's head. Seffie's horse bolted and the fence lurched, the top rail four feet from the ground.

Connor wheeled his horse around. As soon as the horse's front hooves hit the ground, it balked, refusing to go forward.

More shells exploded in the valley behind him. Seffie sprinted for Connor. The fence crashed to the ground. Connor leaned down, hand outstretched, kicking his horse's sides in a vain attempt to make it go toward the imperiled woman.

"Sef, take my hand! Come on!"

The flare tied to the fence began to pop and spit as water on the ground pooled around it. The chain-link mesh rattled as zombies spilled into the space

between the buildings, only feet behind Seffie. Her face lit up from another exploding shell in the town below. She looked over her shoulder and stumbled. When she turned back, Connor could see the realization in her eyes.

She was too far away.

Seffie waved Connor on, urging him to leave. Connor couldn't hear her voice but could just make out what she said by reading her lips in the guttering light of the flare.

I'm sorry.

The horse hit its limit as the dying flare's twinkling pink reflection on the slick black concrete winked out. It turned and bolted after the others.

Connor ducked low against the horse's neck, its musky sweat penetrating the odor of rotting corpses. Icy needles of rain stung his face. He gave the horse its head and followed the others.

DUST FILLED Miranda's nostrils and coated her throat. She looked out the shop window at the carpet of thick clouds overhead. They brightened inconsistently, as if they would concede to dawn, but grudgingly. A zombie staggered past the building across the street, others trailing in its wake. The high whine of an incoming mortar did not concern the zombies, but it sounded close to Miranda.

She ducked as a hand grabbed her shoulder. A deafening explosion shook the ground as the building across the street exploded. Miranda flinched and ducked lower as the window overhead blew out. Debris flew through the open space. Glass, rocks, wisps of insulation, and shards of wood tumbled around her. She looked over at Mario. His hand shielded the back of her head.

"I didn't see him."

"How long did Doug say it would take?" Mario asked.

"Forty-five minutes."

"It's been over an hour."

His mouth settled in a grim line. He was covered in dirt and muck and dust. The fabric strips of his sling had been a light color once, but not anymore. His face was pale and drawn with fatigue.

"You can take your hand off my head," Miranda said.

She half hoped he wouldn't. He'd only been shielding her, acting on instinct, but the warmth of his hand felt...nice. Like something she would not mind him doing again if they survived. He was so different from Connor, whose attempts

to be protective felt smothering. Mario's protectiveness felt matter of fact. If she was barefooted and had dropped a glass, he'd tell her to stay put while he swept it up because that made sense. Connor would insist on switching to plastic tumblers.

Mario pulled his hand away. "We should go back."

They walked carefully through the racks of clothes in the darkened shop. Apart from the front window, this building was intact despite the shelling. It felt strange watching zombies roaming an area that showed signs of human life. She was used to seeing them in abandoned ruins, but the buildings along Pacific Avenue were tidy and well cared for, inhabited. Thanks to the shelling and the influx of zombies that resulted from it, destruction stretched in all directions.

Mario stopped short of the shop's back door to the alley. Following closely behind, Miranda ran into him, almost knocking him against the door.

"Sorry," she whispered.

Mario looked back at her, exasperation plain on his face that she would make such a rookie mistake.

Miranda put her ear to the door, then stepped back. "Better give it a minute."

Mario leaned against the wall beside her. Miranda wiped her hand over her face, feeling the grime and grit, wincing when she touched her swollen cheek. If she lived long enough to take a bath, it would be at least a week long. She looked over at Mario.

"What?" he asked, voice pitched low.

"Just thinking how filthy we are."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "You wear it well."

In a heartbeat, he was in crystalline focus: his dark-brown eyes, the straight Roman nose, and curve of his lips. Miranda reached for him before she knew what she was doing. The feel of his lips brushing against hers, his hand alongside her face, the weight of his body pressing her against the wall. She felt like she was drowning, falling, diving into him, unable to get close enough even if she could burrow under his skin. She arched her neck as Mario trailed kisses along her jaw, felt his groan of desire tingle across her ear as her hips rocked against his. She tangled her fingers in his hair to pull him back to her mouth, but

Mario pulled away.

“No,” she protested, breathless, then understood as the high whine of an incoming mortar pierced the haze of desire enveloping them. The mortar wasn’t close enough that they were in danger, but close enough to bring them back. Mario brushed his hand lightly against her face, as if to smooth back hair that was no longer there to fall into her eyes. She saw her own longing mirrored in his eyes. Her entire body thrummed with the need to reclaim him.

“We should go,” he said but didn’t move.

Miranda unwound her fingers from his hair. Mario stepped back, but his eyes never left her own. Then he shook himself and slowly opened the door. Miranda pressed her hand against her mouth, still tasting him on her lips, and followed him into the alley.

Two slanted doors sprouted from the ground to attach to the building’s foundation like lichen on a tree. Mario tugged one door with his good arm. Dim light radiated up at them.

Miranda descended the uneven steps. They’d found a medical kit in the root cellar earlier with ibuprofen seven years past its expiration date. She had taken eight, along with one of her few remaining Percocet. To her surprise, the ibuprofen still worked. Now her knee only looked slightly swollen, instead of horribly. She was most definitely not healed but compared to how her knee had felt before, every step she took seemed to be lubricated with oil.

Connor and Jeremiah were huddled against the far wall of the cramped root cellar, sitting on bins of potatoes, Brussels sprouts, and beets. Mario sat down on the floor beside the battery-operated camping lantern. Delilah hunkered low to the floor near the bottom step. Her tail thumped against the concrete block wall as Miranda settled herself on the bottom step and petted the frightened dog’s head. Delilah had not stopped whining since they took refuge in the confined space.

Miranda felt sure she was telegraphing the past few moments for all to see. She looked over at Connor. He smiled, unaware of the needful urgency of her body, craving for someone else.

They all looked up at the high whine of an incoming shell, but from the

muffled report of the explosion, Miranda figured it had landed several blocks away. Doug had gone to meet his contact, the man who would help them. Delilah began to whine even louder. A moment later the door behind Miranda opened.

“We’re back,” Doug said as he came down the stairs.

A large bear-shaped man pulled the cellar door shut. Miranda scrambled out of the way, scuttling over to the empty space on the bin where Connor sat.

“It’s okay, Liley,” Miranda said. She patted the front of the bin to indicate where Delilah should sit next to her. Delilah hovered a foot from Miranda’s feet, whining, before squirming into the corner next to Mario.

Connor coughed, deep and wet. Miranda looked at him more closely. Dark circles pulled at his eyes. His face was flushed. She felt his cheek with her hand.

“Are you all right?” she asked, even though his skin felt just a little warm under her hand. “You look terrible.”

“Don’t look so hot yourself,” Connor answered. He kissed her palm, then folded her hand into his.

She felt like a fraud, or at least a keeper of secrets, having just moments ago been wrapped in Mario’s embrace. Even now she could see what a good life she could have with Connor if she chose it: he was kind and sweet and loved her. He would quit being overprotective eventually. He would never lie to her, either, but something would always be missing.

“You look like you’re getting sick,” she persisted, genuinely concerned.

“Just exhausted, Miri. When this is over, I’m going to sleep for a week.”

“Sorry it took so long,” Doug said. “The wall along Bay Street near the lagoon took a direct hit. Zombies are pouring in, worse than on the other side of town. This is Philip.”

Miranda’s first impression of a bear turned out to be apt. Philip stood by the bottom step where Miranda had been, but his shoulders were so broad he filled the width of the steps. A bushy beard and mustache hid his face. When he spoke, Miranda detected the faint lilt of an accent she could not place.

“This is everyone?” Philip asked.

Doug nodded.

“I’d rather do this by vehicle, but with the shelling, I think we’ll make better

time on foot.” As if on cue, Miranda heard the high whine of an incoming shell. Philip looked the group over. “We have almost a mile to cover before we can get to a truck and up to Davenport. Doug tells me you all aren’t so dumb that if you threw yourselves on the ground you’d miss. Don’t make a liar of him, because I would like to survive this favor long enough to regret it.”

As everyone stood, a low buzz sounded. Philip dug in his front jeans pocket and pulled out a slim phone. He tapped the screen.

“Shit,” he said. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

“What is it?” Doug asked.

“Looks like those Navy assholes are getting ready to send in a landing party. Loading up four landing craft, one’s just launched, heading for the beach at the boardwalk. Come to finish what they started, or looking for you all, or both.”

“Do you have any way to repel them?” Doug asked him.

“Not after the shelling,” Philip answered. “They might not realize that they blew out the wall by the lagoon and it’s letting zombies in. That might slow them down. Goddammit.” Philip looked at Doug as if he wanted to say more but couldn’t think what. “We better get moving.”

“Wait a minute,” Doug said. “From where they’re moored, they can’t see that breach in the wall. If we could hold up those zombies so that it looks clear enough to get off the beach, and then get them moving toward the boardwalk again—”

“Doug, no,” Mario interrupted. “Whatever you’re thinking, we can’t risk it.”

“Philip,” Doug asked, ignoring Mario, “how long will it take them to get to the beach?”

“I don’t even know what kind of landing craft they’re using,” Philip said.

Sounding more agitated than before Mario said, “Doug, this is a bad—”

Doug talked right over him. “Can you set up coverage so they wouldn’t be able to retreat to the beach? Put some snipers up on the roof of the boardwalk’s arcade? If we can pin them down between the zombies and the boardwalk, the zombies will do the rest.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Philip asked. “We can’t just send people into a horde to cover a position. I’ve shifted zombies before. It takes days

to set up.”

Oh fuck, Miranda thought, catching on to what Mario had already realized.

Doug wanted to use Jeremiah.

“Doug,” she said. “Mario’s right. We have to finish our mission.”

“What the hell are you all talking about?” Philip demanded.

Doug held a hand up to fend off Philip’s question. He spoke instead to his companions.

“Look,” he said, “I do not accept that the God I serve wants the human race to die out and become zombies. They don’t do anything. They don’t create, procreate, they don’t even die. They just...exist and destroy. There’s nothing about them that makes sense.”

“Viruses don’t care about making sense,” Mario countered. “This is a really bad—”

Again, Doug cut Mario off. “I know these Navy commanders. I have to, because of the Missions. People hate them so much that recruiting is hard, but they don’t impress recruits anymore. It all works better when they have people who want to be there. The one thing they cannot afford is to lose personnel. If they’re sending in a landing party, then they’re after us. It has to be that important or they wouldn’t do it.” Doug gestured above as the whine of another shell passed overhead. “All of this is because of us, but if they start taking casualties, they’ll leave. We can make a difference here.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Connor muttered.

Doug continued. “We’re going to use Jeremiah to help out the folks here, and then we’ll leave. If we don’t have to sneak past the Navy, it’ll be easier for us, too.”

Connor began to laugh, but it was almost unhinged. “Seffie hasn’t been dead twelve hours and now you want to pull some Moses routine? Have you not been paying attention? Half the people we started with are dead. We’ll be lucky if any of us survive long enough to get out of here, never mind anything else! You have lost your fucking mind.”

“It’s my call. I don’t care if you don’t like it,” Doug said. He turned to Philip. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

MIRANDA SHIFTED her weight off her injured knee as she dry-swallowed a Percocet and three more ibuprofen.

Doug said, “The pill popping doesn’t inspire confidence.”

“I’m fine.”

Fifteen minutes of helping Doug herd zombies had taken a toll, but she would never admit it. She could do it. It was just going to hurt.

Miranda, Doug, and Jeremiah, the latter gagged with hands bound, stood close together where Raymond Street ended in a “T” intersection at Beach Street. Raymond was one of those roads that didn’t have normal blocks because of the curve of the San Lorenzo River, which emptied into Monterey Bay at the east end of the boardwalk beach less than half a mile away. Behind them, a hundred zombies were contained behind a hastily erected temporary barricade of chain-link. More zombies arrived every minute. Ahead of them, another barrier stretched across the four lanes and grassy divider of Beach Street. On the other side of Beach Street, across from where they waited, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk wafted in and out of view in the patchy early morning fog.

The boardwalk hugged the coast for half a mile along the wide beach. The main entrance to its rides, games, and attractions welcomed visitors one block west of their location and was where they figured the invaders would try to enter town. The buildings that blocked any view of Raymond Street from the boardwalk’s westerly entrances made it ideal for staging the first part of Doug’s plan.

They were hiding by a restaurant with large picture windows that wrapped around the building's front corners. They could peer through to Beach Street without exposure.

"D'you think the trucks blocking the boardwalk's main entrance will be enough to get them to move down to the next one?"

Doug shrugged. "We're about to find out."

Miranda looked to the boardwalk building across the street. Its bright-orange paint popped against the leaden sky. Scattered zombies, in ones and twos, wandered along Beach Street. A few had approached the trio but were always repelled by Jeremiah. Their captive sat on the ground near Doug's feet, a mutinous gleam in his eyes.

"Here we go," Doug said. He ducked low, his head eye-level high with the bottom of the picture window.

Miranda edged closer, peeking past the edge of the window from where she stood. She wasn't going to bend her knee to crouch unless her life depended on it and right now, it didn't. Below the towering skeleton of the roller coaster she saw flickers of movement, heard the ebb and flow of soft voices near the vehicles that blocked the main boardwalk entrance a block away.

Then nothing.

For five long minutes, nothing seemed to happen. She was beginning to worry when a helmeted, black-clad figure appeared at the next entrance, five hundred feet down the boardwalk. He was joined by three more figures, similarly armed and wearing body armor. Miranda watched as they began to scope out their surroundings, moving forward, slow and methodical.

Jeremiah lunged toward the corner of the building, attempting to crawl away on his elbows and knees. He tried to yell through his gag, but only managed muffled moans similar to the zombie he believed he had once been. The sound he made wasn't a problem because of the zombies wandering around, but any movement that caught the eye of an invader might give them away.

Doug scrambled after him. He pulled Jeremiah back so fast that all Miranda saw was a blur, followed by a thud. Jeremiah's head snapped back from Doug's receding fist. He shoved Jeremiah to the ground against the building, his knee on

the madman's chest.

Adrenaline flooded Miranda's system. About thirty men were now in the street. Half of them wore body armor, which might drag things out. They began to fan out. Most headed up Pacific Avenue which paralleled Raymond a few blocks west. Miranda still thought it was dangerous to try and repel these attackers when they could have slipped out of town, but it was too late now. All she could do was help Doug's plan succeed.

Five armed men started down Beach Street toward their location. Miranda and Doug grabbed Jeremiah and fell back to the fence, holding back the zombies.

Doug looked up at the sky. "What are they waiting for?"

The moans of the zombies behind the fence grew louder, their movements more agitated with food nearby. Miranda shifted her weight off her injured knee, trying to ignore the feeling of hundreds of spiders creeping over her bare skin. Picking zombies off because you had to did not phase her. Standing still just inches away while they hissed and moaned, straining against the fence, set her nerves jangling, even with Jeremiah as a shield.

Doug looked at the sky again. Miranda watched the end of the street. She could hear voices now. In another minute the enemy would be in sight and they'd have to go, whether the others were ready or not. She heard a hollow pop and looked up. A bright-red flare hung suspended against the gunmetal sky. A voice from Beach Street, its owner still out of sight, called for others to hold up. The zombies, hearing the voice, moaned even louder.

Miranda looked at Doug, then slipped one of her arms through Jeremiah's. Doug did likewise. The metal of the chain-link barrier burned cold against her fingers. She and Doug tugged the edge of the section of chain-link loose. Hugging Jeremiah between them they walked backward, pulling the fence with them. It opened like a door on a hinge. The zombies, their forward movement no longer frustrated, spilled out, staggering and limping past them toward the voices coming from Beach Street.

As soon as the pack of zombies reached the end of the block, Miranda heard the order to fall back. She, Doug, and Jeremiah sidled out from behind the chain-

link and hurried back to the restaurant at the end of the street. There were more men along Beach Street than before, but they were falling back. When gunfire started a few blocks west, the retreating men all looked that direction.

“There’s Pacific Avenue,” Doug whispered.

Miranda saw a flicker of movement on the roof of the boardwalk’s arcade. “Here we go.”

Bright flashes of muzzle fire winked along the roof of the arcade. Armed men in the street began to fall, then dived for cover once they realized they were taking fire from behind. The zombies that Miranda and Doug had released still bore down on the men, some dropping as bullets hit their mark, but now Miranda could see the leading edge of a wave of zombies coming from the other end of Beach Street, on the far side of the besieged invaders. The pincer began to close on the pinned down unit as more of their comrades suddenly appeared, falling back down Pacific from where they had been ambushed by Philip’s squad.

From a strategic standpoint, Doug’s plan had executed flawlessly. Zombies were overwhelming the enemy from two sides. Hostile gunfire from the boardwalk arcade prevented them from falling back to the beach to escape, and they could not move forward up Pacific Avenue for the same reason. They were trapped.

From a human standpoint, the scene that played out before Miranda should have been sickening. Men were being ripped apart, blowing their own brains out rather than become the monsters that were attacking them. But she did not, she would not, allow herself to feel sorry for them. The men dying down the block had picked this fight. Now they were losing it.

THEY WERE ALMOST to the rally point at the bridge when Miranda's knee started giving out. She began to hop on her good leg, blatantly using Jeremiah as a crutch.

"I'm fine," Doug said, his voice pitched high.

Miranda looked around Jeremiah to Doug's smirking face.

"I was fine," she insisted, but she couldn't help smiling.

They had gotten rid of the Navy and would soon be on their way. The thrill of victory hummed inside her, along with cautious relief. As soon as she saw the pickup truck ahead, the relief evaporated. Mario leaned against the open tailgate beside Connor. Both of them had guns drawn on Philip, the guy who was supposed to be helping them. Four men stood around the truck, their rifles trained on Mario and Connor. In the bed of the truck behind Mario and Connor, Delilah growled, the ruff of fur along her spine standing on edge.

"What the fuck?" Doug said, quickening the pace.

Miranda couldn't keep up so was dragged the entire length of the block. Eyes flicked their direction and just as quickly away as everyone in the standoff noted their approach. Doug handed his .38 to Miranda. She pressed the muzzle against Jeremiah's rib cage, thankful for the lethal threat that would keep him from running off. She was in no condition to keep him compliant without it.

"Liley, quiet!" Miranda hissed, afraid that Delilah's menacing behavior might trigger a shoot-out.

Doug held his empty hands up as he approached the standoff. When he was

ten feet away from Philip, he stopped.

“What’s the problem, guys?”

“Your friend here got bit, Doug. We need to take care of it.”

Miranda’s heart lurched. She scanned Mario and Connor, trying to figure out who it was. Her stomach plunged when she saw the dark, oily-looking patch on Mario’s ripped pant leg just above his boot.

“It’s me,” he said.

“He’s vaccinated, Philip,” Doug said, turning to address him. “There’s no need for this.”

“He needs antibiotics to keep from going septic,” Miranda said, surprised at how even her voice sounded.

“He doesn’t have the tattoo,” Philip countered.

Mario raised one hand. The flicker of rifles being gripped tighter stopped him.

“I’m just going to pull back my collar.”

He unbuttoned the first button on his shirt and tugged at the material to reveal a bright-green triangle at the base of his neck above his shoulder.

“It’s not in the right place,” said Philip. “It should be up near his jaw.”

“He was one of the first people to be vaccinated,” Doug said. “They were moved higher later. He’s well known enough at home that people know he’s okay.”

Philip lowered his gun, motioning for his men to do likewise. “Well, all right,” he said. “But we don’t have antibiotics to spare.”

Miranda’s heart contracted. Without antibiotics, Mario would die. He wouldn’t turn into a zombie, but zombie bites always went septic without treatment. Either way, they were always fatal.

“Listen, Philip,” Doug said, but now his voice was hard. Now, Miranda knew, he was dangerous. Dangerous Doug genuinely frightened her. “We had an agreement. You would get us out of town with *whatever* we need. We need antibiotics.”

“Maybe we can make a deal,” Philip said. He motioned to Jeremiah. “That fella would come in handy, being able to do what he does. How about a trade?”

Miranda's heart began to beat faster. She gripped the .38 tighter. Doug nodded at her. She waited a moment, imploring him with her eyes, but he shook his head.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm sure."

Miranda raised the gun to Jeremiah's temple, not sure if she'd be able to shoot him. Doug was willing to do it; she could tell from the look on his face. Jeremiah began to shake. Terrified pleas for his life were lost in the muffle of the gag. Two of Philip's men trained their guns on Miranda as Philip and Doug attempted to stare one another down.

This better fucking work, she thought, her heart hammering against her rib cage. Otherwise, she was going to die. They all were. The mission would fail, and zombies would overrun the Earth. It was a simple numbers game and humans did not have them. Without a cause to rally around, without the hope of protection for all, they never would.

Miranda looked at Mario and Connor, suddenly unable to swallow around the lump in her throat. She couldn't let not breaking Connor's heart be what mattered. She could not help how she felt. She had known for days now, for years. When it would have been wiser and easier not to, her feelings had never changed. She loved Mario. If she was going to die, it was not going to be without telling him.

"Mario," she said, voice quavering. "I— I love you."

Mario and Connor stared at her. Mario's eyes suddenly glistened with tears. Connor's face filled with stunned disbelief.

"This is what it takes for you to admit it?" Doug said, shooting her an incredulous look. "Jesus, Miri..."

He shook his head as he looked back at Philip, as if her declaration was more than he could take.

"Here's what's going to happen," Doug said to Philip. "We just helped defend this place, which we did not have to do, so you're going to give us antibiotics and take us to the boat as agreed. If you don't, and if you survive the shoot-out that's gonna happen any second now, they'll send someone to find out

what happened. I just helped slaughter thirty men, so do not make the mistake of thinking that priests are different than anyone else. When my brothers find out what you've done, they'll forgive you. And they will hunt you down to the last man. We can all walk away from this, or we can all die. Your choice."

Miranda watched Doug and Philip. Her life and everyone else's hung in the balance but in a way she didn't care. If she died now, it would not be with one more regret. And if she lived—

"Fine," Philip muttered. "Drawdown, fellas." His men lowered their weapons, but the tense atmosphere remained. "Let's get them what they want and get them out of here."

Miranda lowered the .38. Jeremiah crumpled to the ground in relief. She handed the .38 and her captive off to Doug and limped to the truck, to Mario.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"I'll be fine."

"What happened to your chain mail?"

"New Jerusalem."

He looked at her like he wanted to say more, but Delilah wriggled up to Miranda and began licking her face with unbridled enthusiasm.

"I know, I love you, too," Miranda said, trying to both pet and fend off the dog. When Mario shifted closer, Delilah began to growl.

"She knows you've been bitten."

Mario smiled. He looked exhausted. Battered. Hopeful.

"I'll be better soon enough."

Miranda slipped her hand in his.

"Me too."

AN HOUR later they were in Davenport. Miranda limped down the dock, Delilah padding alongside her. Anticipatory nausea swelled in her stomach. Why does it have to be a boat, she thought miserably. It was a bigger sailboat than she had expected but it would not make a difference... She would be sick the whole time. Doug and Mario scurried around the deck, preparing to depart. When Miranda saw Connor approaching the swim platform to help her on board, her heart sank.

“Take my hand.” His brown eyes were flat, his manner and tone impersonal, as if they were strangers.

“Connor, I’m sorry.”

His pale face turned toward her. He looked more tired than before, the rings under his eyes like bruises. His entire body telegraphed pained impatience.

“I don’t want to do this, Miri. Okay?”

Miranda stood there, flummoxed. She wanted to explain, even though she knew it wouldn’t make him feel better. It wouldn’t make her feel better, either. When Delilah began to growl, she shushed her.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I can’t help how I feel.”

“You can help how you act,” Connor snapped. He extended his hand. “Are you getting on or not?”

“Go on, Liley,” she said, using the dog as a buffer against Connor’s anger.

Delilah sat down on the dock.

“For Pete’s sake,” Miranda said, annoyed. Delilah had been on any number

of boats and leaped over obstacles like a gazelle. Miranda turned back to Connor and took his extended hand. He pulled as she pushed off with her good leg. When she was safely on board, she turned back and called Delilah to her.

Delilah took a tentative step forward, then began to whine.

“Goddammit, Delilah, get on the fucking boat!”

Miranda immediately felt terrible when Delilah began to cower. She wasn’t mad at Delilah. She was frustrated with Connor, with the anger and pain that radiated off him like a storm cloud, one that she had caused. What if he was right? What if she was making the wrong choice again?

“I’m sorry, Liley,” she tried again. With the slightest touch of iron, she said, “Let’s go.”

The dog inched forward, whining with every step. When she was within reach, Miranda gave her collar a tug. Delilah hopped onto the swim platform, then scurried by.

When Miranda turned to follow, Connor looked at her with such pain that she cringed.

“Connor, I didn’t—”

“He’s only going to hurt you. This time you’ll have only yourself to blame.”

MIRANDA WOKE TO A BOOT PRESSED AGAINST HER FACE. THE GENTLE RISE AND fall of the bed brought her back to reality with an unpleasant lurch of her stomach. Doug lay on the double berth next to her, his head by her feet and limbs sprawled everywhere. Why is he sleeping in here, she thought, then decided it did not matter. If she could blow her nose on his shirt, he could hog the bed and put his boots on her pillow.

She exited the cabin at the aft end of the sailboat and limped into the galley. Beyond the galley was a sitting area. Jeremiah was tied to a cushioned couch, snoring to beat the band. The Mystery of Doug In Her Bed: Solved.

This was easily the swankiest boat Miranda had ever set foot on, with honey-colored wood and tasteful upholstered cushions. *This kitchen is nicer than in*

most houses. Must've been a dot.commer's yacht. Beyond Jeremiah was a tiny cabin at the fore of the ship. Delilah had curled up near its door. Miranda approved of her choice. It was a good spot to guard Jeremiah.

Miranda bunny-hopped to the ladder and called above deck. A minute later, Mario peered down.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

He nodded. "The rest of you have been out cold most of the day." As she opened her mouth, he added, "I got some sleep, don't worry."

"Is Connor feeling better?"

Mario shrugged. "Dunno."

"I'll check on him."

But she just stood there, looking up at Mario. For years, without even knowing it, she had felt like a planet knocked off its axis, spinning out of kilter. Now she didn't.

Shyly, she smiled. "This is much better."

Her stomach began to quiver, but it wasn't the unwelcome motion of the sea. A frisson of worry percolated inside her, warning that as much as she loved Mario, she could not afford to trust him.

Mario grinned. "It is."

Miranda tamped down her anxiety. "I'm going back to sleep after I check on Connor. I won't puke if I'm sleeping."

"I'll be up here," he said, then raised his head and squinted his eyes at something she could not see. "I gotta get that. Dream sweet."

Holding on to things to spare her knee, Miranda limped over to where Delilah lay. Connor was not out here, so he must be in the fore cabin. When Miranda brushed past her, Delilah began to whine.

"Quiet, Liley."

She pushed the door open and stepped through. The cabin was tiny, just two feet between the narrow berth and the closet opposite, and maybe nine feet long. Connor lay on the berth, his head toward the bow. Miranda let go of the door, which swung shut behind her. The portholes in the narrow V-shaped cabin offered scant light. Connor's wheezy, congested breathing sounded terrible.

Whatever he had must have settled in his lungs. Maybe the antibiotics they had would work for Connor, too.

“Connor?”

She turned on the reading lamp on the wall above him. Connor lay on his side, his back to her.

“Connor?” she said again, touching his shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

Connor stirred. “Like crap,” he whispered. He coughed wetly and rolled onto his back. On the other side of the door, Delilah began to growl. When the light shone on Connor’s drawn face, Miranda froze. Icy shock coursed through her veins, so overwhelming she felt dizzy.

She knew if she touched his forehead that his flushed face would not feel feverish, but cool. His sunken eyes were wreathed with bruise-dark circles. Labored breaths passed over his peeling lips and chattering teeth. Already he looked diminished. He coughed again, but it wasn’t just wetness she heard. A wheeze, almost a moan, hummed beneath the sound, undergirding the cough like subfloor.

Connor had been infected by a zombie.

His symptoms were classic. So was Delilah’s reaction, which hadn’t registered with everything else going on: the shelling, the ambush, the bite Mario received. The infection should have overwhelmed Connor’s immune system quickly, but it hadn’t. Somehow, impossibly, he had been dying by inches.

“That bad?” he wheezed, struggling to keep his eyes open.

Miranda opened her mouth, but nothing came out. How could this be? Connor would never hide a bite from them. He might hate her right now, but he would never endanger her like this.

He doesn’t know, she realized, a coherent thought penetrating the maelstrom raging inside her brain. She looked around the room for a weapon. Connor’s clothes, boots, and holster sat in a jumble on the floor beside the berth. She ripped the pile apart, but neither his assault rifle nor his handgun were there.

Doug stowed all the weapons in the cockpit, she remembered, heart sinking into her stomach.

Miranda straightened up and pivoted to the door, the stab of pain in her knee

barely registering through her fear. She had to get out of the cabin. She would get Mario and Doug, and they would take care of Connor together.

She jumped when Connor's hand clasped her wrist.

"I'll be right back," she said, pulling away, but his grip tightened.

When Miranda turned back, Connor stood inches from her, swaying with the motion of the waves beneath their feet. The labored breathing had ceased. His face no longer looked flushed. His skin seemed to sag from his skull, sunken cheeks grotesquely overemphasizing the bones above. His clouded eyes bored through her, devoid of human sight, of everything that made him Connor.

Only hunger remained.

Miranda shoved, pushing him back into the berth. She twisted away as he fell, trying to break free, to reach the doorknob just a few feet away, but Connor's grip on her wrist tightened. He dragged her to the floor, smacking her knees against the side of the berth.

Eldritch moaning filled her ears. Delilah's barking grew more furious on the other side of the door. Connor yanked her hand toward his snapping teeth. She reached out with her free hand, desperation blocking out everything but the will to live. Her hand raked against something pliable, but sturdy. She grabbed it and swung, smacking the side of Connor's head with the combat boot she now held. She hit him again, full in the face.

Miranda snatched her wrist away, stumbling backward along the berth. She reached behind, feeling for the doorknob, afraid to turn her back on him. Connor lurched upright and lunged, grabbing her by the waist. The impact knocked her on her ass and slammed her against the door. She writhed against him, screaming, kicking her legs to avoid snapping teeth.

She folded the boot's pliable leather over her hand and shoved it in Connor's mouth. Bright bolts of pain detonated her fingers now trapped between layers of leather and teeth. Delilah barked and voices shouted. The door nudged against her, but hers and Connor's weight held it shut.

She pushed her hand trapped inside the boot against his face, bucking against him as he straddled her. His arms began to pull her closer in a grotesque pantomime of sex.

She had to get him off her. She pushed harder with the hand trapped inside the boot, trying to make space between them. The door bucked against her back, almost shoving her into his arms.

“Stop!” she cried, panicked.

She felt the door shudder. Miranda dug her other hand under Connor’s knee and pushed. Relieved of some of his weight, she bent her own leg, pulling her foot to her buttocks to get it flat on the floor. Then she heaved and shoved, pushing off her foot. She roared as she flipped Connor away, but the hand still trapped in his mouth pulled her with him.

Sprawled almost astride him, Miranda grabbed Connor’s hair with her free hand and smashed his head against the floor. The grip of his teeth on her trapped hand stayed vise-tight. Using hands free and trapped she pulled his head toward her and pounded it into the floor. He thrashed beneath her as she pummeled his head over and over. Bloodcurdling moans, banging, shouting, snarling, a ratcheting sound as familiar as it was irrelevant, melded into white noise.

She felt bones crunch with every impact. Black puddles oozed beneath them, spattering her arms. A sour, cloying smell filled her nose as she hammered Connor’s head off the floor.

“Miranda, stop! He’s dead!”

A hand touched her shoulder. She struck out blindly, twisting away. Mario stood in front of her, an axe in one hand. Doug was just beyond, a shotgun hoisted to his shoulder. Half of the door had been hacked away and from somewhere behind Mario and Doug, Delilah’s barking filled the cabin.

“Miri, it’s me. You’re okay.”

Miranda looked into Mario’s anxious face, finally comprehending that he wasn’t a threat. Her hand had come free, revealing crooked, broken fingers. She looked at Connor sprawled beneath her, as if seeing him for the first time. He lay still, his eyes filmed gray, brains spilling out from his battered skull.

Connor had turned, and she killed him. The horrifying knowledge blossomed in her brain, unfurling like a flag in the breeze. Connor, who had loved and come back for her. Who she had loved once, and if things had been different, might have loved again.

She had killed Connor.

A low howl, like an injured animal might make, filled the cabin. Even after she realized it was coming from her, she couldn't stop.

THEY MOORED in a cove the night before because of the storm. Mario thought they would reach Puget Sound in ten days but warned it might take longer because of the weather.

Miranda sat in what she called the corner, a metal seat built into the corner rail by the swim platform. It was gray again, windy and cold. If the clouds above made good on their threatening color, it would rain soon. The weather was a bummer since she felt less nauseous up on deck, but it was too cold to stay out for long. She was not sure of the time but knew it was early.

“There you are.”

Mario’s head appeared at the top of the ladder from below deck. Holding two steaming mugs in one hand, he climbed into the cockpit. A moment later he joined her, handing off a mug which she took awkwardly on account of her splinted fingers. She took a deep breath, inhaling the coffee’s heady vapor.

“This boat is ridiculous. It has *coffee*,” she said. “You’re gonna have to drink this, though. I’ll just barf it up.”

“This is a yacht, not a ‘boat,’” Mario said, grinning. “We’re headed for Seattle, coffee capital of Before. Your stomach needs to get with the program. How’s your knee?”

“Still fucked, thanks for asking. How’s your bite?”

Mario pulled up his pant leg. The bite was almost completely healed.

“Nice of them to give real antibiotics. I guess they believed Doug’s story.”

“Father Walter, killer priest,” Miranda snorted, laughing.

Mario nudged her over with a nudge of his hip so they could share the seat. He drank their coffee, the silence companionable.

After a while Mario said, "I've been thinking."

"About?"

"Connor."

He watched her closely, trying to gauge if it was okay to continue.

"And?"

"I think he was infected by that scratch. His chain mail had a chink on the elbow, the same one that looked like the infection point."

Miranda shivered. She could still see the spidery black streaks that had radiated from the scratch on Connor's elbow. Mario and Doug had not wanted her to look at his body, but she had overruled them. She needed to know.

"I knew someone who turned, a long time ago," she said. "His family swore up and down that he was never bitten, that he just got sick. I thought they were lying."

Mario nodded. "Connor was sick those last twenty-four hours. I thought he was just exhausted like the rest of us but now... He was definitely sick. If he was infected by a scratch, it would take longer to build a high enough viral load to overwhelm his system."

"He only had the first shot," Miranda said bitterly, more to herself than Mario. "We left before he could get the second one, but it never occurred to me because he wasn't bitten."

Mario sighed. His hand lighted on the back of her neck, thumb stroking her skin. "It's not your fault, Miranda. Even if we'd had post-bite with us, he didn't know he'd been infected. We wouldn't have known to give it in time."

"I know it's not my fault," she whispered, the sudden pressure of tears prickling at the corner of her eyes. She could still feel his skull cracking in her hands. She kept reminding herself that it hadn't been Connor, that the zombie hadn't been *him*. It didn't help.

She swiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks. "I'll be okay. It's just..."

A loud yawn preceded Doug's head appearing at the top of the ladder from below deck. His hair stuck out in every direction.

“Hey, lovebirds,” he drawled. “Who’s making breakfast?”

A flush of heat made Miranda’s face burn. She still felt shy about Mario. He felt as familiar as her favorite pair of jeans, but she was not used to it, this ‘them’ that had so abruptly reasserted itself. Part of her was still afraid to trust it.

Her retort was good-natured. “The joy you get from teasing me means I never make breakfast again.”

Doug grinned, a wicked gleam in his eye. “So you keep me up all night with those”—his fingers made air quotes—“‘pillow fights’ going on in your cabin but I have to cook?”

“Oh fuck you, go make breakfast,” she snapped.

Doug laughed so hard that he cried. Whether his own jibe or that she had taken the bait again amused him more, Miranda couldn’t tell.

“I’m just saying, don’t shoot the messenger,” Doug said, sounding insincerely aggrieved as he disappeared below deck. “I really hope you’re planning on getting an annulment, Mario, or at least a divorce,” he called up to them. “Because otherwise, the pair of you are definitely going to Hell. I gotta say something cause you know Walter. He might fire me if I don’t.”

They looked at one another, chagrined.

“He’s never going to stop,” she said.

“He’s happy you’re happy, but pass up an opportunity to harass you?” Mario sighed, sounding anxious as he continued. “We’ve been off the grid so long... If we’re lucky, the Jesuits still control Seattle University but with everything that’s happened who knows? We need somewhere to go to ground, and a good lab.”

“If my knee is better by then. I don’t know why I keep letting these priests talk me into this shit.”

“It’s the guilt,” Mario said, laughing.

His piercing brown eyes were so beautiful it almost took her breath away. Miranda forced herself to speak, to say it.

“This scares me,” she whispered, feeling small and childish, hating that she felt so exposed and vulnerable.

Mario’s fingers traced lightly across her chin. “I know. I keep thinking to myself, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’”

A startled peal of laughter erupted from her belly. When she could speak again, she gasped, “*That’s* reassuring.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking sheepish. “But it’s true.”

Miranda looked at his fading smile, the way it transformed his face, how the crow’s feet around his eyes tempered his intensity.

“You can’t decide things behind my back, or think you know better. This has to be different.”

“It will be,” he said.

“I can’t do it again, Mario. I can’t decide to trust you and—”

“This food won’t eat itself,” Doug called from the galley. “And your dog needs to pee!”

Mario helped her up and wrapped her in an embrace. The wind whistled over their heads, then lulled. The shrill cry of seagulls carried over the water as Jeremiah’s muttered ravings filtered up from below deck.

“I won’t let you down this time, Miri,” Mario said fiercely. “I promise.”

She didn’t know if the love she felt for him, so urgent and needful, was good or bad. It just was, like the sun or time or weather. It could not be controlled or explained or avoided. She had tried that already—it didn’t work. Father Walter had told her to trust her instincts, that they would never steer her wrong. Right now, they were screaming at her to let him in and hang on, even though it felt like jumping off a high-wire knowing there was no net, when it hit her: love is always a leap of faith.

Miranda loosened their embrace enough to look at him. As she smoothed Mario’s wind-whipped hair away from his face, she took a deep breath.

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

THE END

Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Damage in an Undead Age*, the second

installment of the Undead Age series.

[Damage in an Undead Age](#) - Book 2 of the Undead Age Series. Read it now!

[Sign up for my newsletter](#) and be the first to know the latest news, advance notice of sales, and other special treats.

[Please leave a review](#) if you enjoyed this book. They don't need to be long, and I appreciate each and every one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A.M. Geever lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, birthplace of the modern zombie genre. She credits her love of all things zombie to her older brothers, whose influence in books, music, and film continues to this day, although her tolerance for puns and movies that are “so bad they’re good” is a whole lot lower than theirs. The idea of becoming a zombie because her car runs out of gas gets her to the gas station when she would rather not bother, and she thinks she has a good chance of surviving the Zombie Apocalypse if she can make it the eighth of a mile to Mueller’s house—otherwise she’s probably toast. *Love in an Undead Age* is her first novel.



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character is and the life she or he has lived, I remind myself that Anti-Flag has always stayed true to their convictions, especially when it was not popular—nor particularly safe—to do so.

I would be remiss if I didn't thank both Justin and the *AMAZING* Lauren Millar for reading the book and insisting that the Father Walter chapter not be cut when I narrowed the book down to three points of view 'cause yinz guys was right n'at.

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All errors, flaws, omissions, and liberties taken with science (science and facts are important in real life!) are mine alone.

DAMAGE IN AN UNDEAD AGE, CHAPTER ONE

“I’M LIVING proof you can die of seasickness.”

Miranda rested her sweaty forehead on the icy metal of the yacht railing. The raw wind lashed from the north, needles of cold sinking deeper into her chilled bones. She clenched her teeth to stop them chattering, wiped her mouth with red knuckles, then spat into the choppy waters of Puget Sound. The bitter taste of bile still filled her mouth. Three weeks of feeding the fish. One more and she would be dead for sure.

“Miranda, come see.”

Mario’s voice sounded a thousand miles away. She did not want to come see anything. She wanted to be left alone to die in peace.

Doug’s voice this time. “Miri, you’re going to want to see this.”

She straightened up. Another wave of nausea hit her, but what she saw through the morning fog caused a dizzy head rush of relief. The white spire of Seattle’s Space Needle raced up from the earth to pierce the sky, its flying saucer observation deck hovering just below the iron-gray clouds. In the fog, the Needle’s graceful tripod legs seemed to melt in and out of focus, but the dark band of the observation deck’s windows hovered in place.

The Space Needle.

If she had not been so exhausted, Miranda would have whooped for joy. Instead, she leaned against the rail and gave Mario a wan smile. They were almost to their destination. They could start looking for a marina and meet up with the Jesuits at Seattle University. They might even get word of what was

happening at home. A shiver of apprehension raced up Miranda's spine. They did not know what had happened in San Jose after they had tried to smuggle out the zombie vaccine serum. Doug's contacts in Santa Cruz had not heard from anyone at Santa Clara University. She wanted to know if Father Walter was all right, hear his lilting Irish brogue. That something might have happened to him sent a shot of fear through her, so deep she almost could not breathe.

Get your shit together, Tucci.

She pushed the worry and speculation aside, shoved it down deep where it could not distract her. She would concentrate on what she could control, on what they were here to do. Since they had lost the zombie vaccine serum they had smuggled out of San Jose, Mario would need to develop another at Seattle University. The Jesuits had a lab ready to go. The madman Jeremiah, with his naturally immune blood, was imprisoned below. He would make a new vaccine possible.

She looked over to Mario and Doug, standing in the yacht's cockpit. Father Doug Michel's skinny six-foot-four frame stood ramrod straight, as if the wind, cold, and rain did not affect him. His blue eyes were vivid patches of color against his pale skin and the grayed-out horizon. He kept tossing his head to get his sandy-colored hair out of his eyes and looked as if his restless energy might make him burst. Miranda could tell he was excited to finally get here. Mario only reached Doug's ear but looked shorter with his shoulders hunched against the wind. His dark, wavy hair reminded Miranda of Medusa's writhing snakes with the wind whipping through it from every direction. He watched her expectantly, his dark eyes filled with excitement, and a very different kind of shiver flitted down Miranda's spine.

She limped over and took Mario's hand as she carefully stepped down into the cockpit, ignoring the lurch and swoop of her stomach. He gathered her in his arms and held her tight against him, pressing his cold cheek against her own. He was beyond stubble but not quite sporting a full-on beard. It had surprised her that it suited him. She looked over his shoulder at Doug, whose beaming smile would match the brilliance of the sun had it not been so cloudy. He reached over and rubbed her auburn peach-fuzzed head like he was shining a lucky penny.

“See, Coppertop? You did live long enough to get here,” he said, his blue eyes twinkling.

Miranda grinned at him over Mario’s shoulder. “Saying ‘I told you so’ is bad form.”

“It probably is,” Doug answered, “but so is making our boat smell like a vomitorium.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER IN THEIR CABIN, AS SHE WATCHED MARIO GETTING READY to leave, Miranda thought, I just got you back. Mario stopped zipping his jacket and looked up, his brown eyes filled with concern.

“Did I say that out loud?”

“Yeah,” he said, and smiled, just a little.

He sat next to her on the edge of their berth, his warm callused hand slipping comfortably around her cool red ones. She had grown tired of taking off her gloves every time she threw up over the rail but was paying the price. At his touch, she could feel her dread lighten by the tiniest fraction. He looked haunted for a moment, as if the years they had spent apart were waiting to pounce and snatch her away again.

“If your knee was okay, you would be going with Doug to make contact with the Jesuits, not me,” he said. “I know you would rather do anything else than be the one who waits.”

She sighed. “How’s that for karmic payback?”

In the grand scheme of things, the guy who could make a new vaccine was far more valuable than she was. Mario would never be going with Doug to find their allies if she was not still recovering from her sprained knee and hairline-fractured shin bones. She had lost fifteen pounds if an ounce since they started their voyage. Being sick all the time left her weak, which made her feel useless and helpless. To add insult to injury, she had to mind whack-job Jeremiah. Life wasn’t fair sometimes, but she already knew that.

“I promise, Miri. I’m coming back.”

Miranda gave herself a mental shake.

“Of course you will,” she said, but her forced cheerfulness sounded hollow.

She stood up as Mario shrugged into his backpack. He pulled her close, and when his lips brushed hers, the feeling that she would never see him again overwhelmed her. She wanted to hold him tight and never let go. She wanted to pull him to their bed and make love, knowing it would be the last time, so she could commit to memory every contour of his body, the firm and the soft, the rough and the smooth. She wanted to feel their bodies move together one last time, feel the gratitude that they had found one another again crackle and snap as it ricocheted between them until it could not be contained.

When the kiss ended, she took a step back and smiled at him. “You should go. Doug’s waiting. Don’t get dead.”

WHEN SHE HEARD THE MOANS, MIRANDA KNEW THEY WERE IN TROUBLE.

She had known for hours that the day was not going to plan but had made herself ignore it. The sun would be setting in thirty minutes and the moans were the first sign of anything since Mario and Doug left that morning. No calls on the radio. No flares. Not even a fucking smoke signal.

She climbed to the highest point of the yacht’s deck above the cockpit seats, keeping hold on the canopy rail, and raised the binoculars with her free hand. The moans were faint but growing louder. She could not tell how serious the trouble was from their slip at the end of Bell Harbor Marina’s pier. Across the roadway, cookie-cutter low-rise condos blocked her view.

“We hear Our children!”

Jeremiah’s voice, coming from the parlor below deck. He must have heard the zombies moaning.

“Your blasphemous treachery against Us will end, and God the All-Father will judge you as you deserve,” he continued. “But first We will teach you submission and obedience! Perhaps We will keep you for Ourselves if you can learn. You will be an example of Our power and truth...”

Ignore him, she said to herself as he kept ranting. The moaning might not mean anything. The zombies could be chasing a shadow for all she knew. The growing noise did not mean squat. Not yet.

Sure it doesn't... Just keep on telling yourself that.

She strained to see beyond the condos, standing on tiptoe as if it would help her catch a glimpse of the streets between or see through the tall buildings that climbed the steep hills of Seattle. Improvised bridges—ladders, fire escapes, scraps of metal, rope, or combinations thereof—connected clusters of buildings. People had lived there at some point, but she had not seen any signs of life so far.

Farther up the hill, walls snaked out of sight. Most seemed intact, but one had a section that had collapsed a long time ago if the weeds and saplings growing among the jumble of fallen concrete blocks were any indication. Along the waterfront some buildings were intact while others, like the aquarium, had caught fire at some point. The aquarium wall facing Puget Sound had fallen in. The roof was gone. The steel beams that had supported its weight sagged despite being relieved of their burden. Seattle oozed emptiness and decay. Without people to maintain them, the artifacts of civilization that had seemed so permanent when humanity fell almost eleven years ago had begun to fall apart almost immediately. Miranda's knee twinged as she set her foot flat again. She looked up the mast. Another fifty feet of elevation might let her see enough to make the difference between—what? She had no idea. But she knew she had to hurry or she would lose the light.

She limped to the other side of the yacht and stepped into the mast-climber harness, securing it around her hips. She shoved her feet into the foot straps, then bent her knees and straightened them.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed, tears springing to her eyes at the sharp slice of pain that bisected her kneecap and shot down her shin. She winched her way up the static line attached to the mast, opening and closing the top line clutch, the pain worse every time she pushed against her body weight. It still beat how old-time sailors had done it: free-climbing hand over hand with their bare feet shimmying along the ropes.

Midway to the top of the mast the wind picked up, threading its way through the fibers of her clothes. She thought she saw movement beyond the harbor-front condos. The setting sun behind her cast long orange and pink shadows between the buildings. The wind gusted, and the harness twisted right, away from the city.

She fought the swiveling harness as she cursed everything: this boat, the unknown city, staying behind to watch Jeremiah, Mario and Doug being gone so long, and the fucking zombies that had made all of this happen. Finally, two more pushes up the static line and she was sure. A dark shadow of zombies, a tidal wave of putrefaction, staggered toward Puget Sound. They weaved and reeled, stumbled and shuffled, unsteady yet determined like a group of drunk revelers intent upon reaching the dilapidated Ferris wheel at the south end of Waterfront Park.

Then Doug and Mario burst into the open from the shadows below the elevated freeway, hauling ass, the dipping sun illuminating them with a translucent pink glow. Miranda nearly choked as they slowed when they saw what lay ahead. They glanced at one another before they turned northwest on Alaskan Way, toward the marina, and picked up the pace.

They had emerged on the roadway just a few seconds ahead of the great mass of zombies descending on the Ferris wheel at Waterfront Park. Retreat to the south was cut off. On the path to the marina, from every street that tumbled down the hillsides of Seattle, zombies spilled onto the road the two men sprinted along. When they disappeared from view behind the aquarium, Miranda released the top rope clutch and worked her way back down the static line. If she cast off and got the boat moving toward them, maybe she could get close enough to make a difference, to help them make it.

I should never have stayed behind!

She wriggled out of the mast-climber harness and released the docking rope, knowing the sentiment was ridiculous. She just hated how helpless watching them made her feel. Jeremiah's zombie repellant effect would have let them move safely through the infested city, but Doug had not been willing to risk Jeremiah's escape. Doug had made the right call. Besides, she would not be able to run for her life the way they were now.

She cast off the mooring ropes keeping the yacht at the dock and hurried back to the cockpit. She looked at the controls, her hands slick with sweat.

You can do this.

Since she always got seasick, Miranda avoided boats, which made her the least experienced piloting watercraft. She pumped the shift lever and made sure the boat was in neutral. She turned the key to the on position.

Nothing happened.

“What the fuck!”

She looked up at the shore. Zombies began to stumble up Piers 62 and 63, one pier down from the marina. With a city’s worth of the undead coming from three sides, Piers 62 and 63 were the closest, most direct route for Mario and Doug to get to the water. She fought against panic as the moans grew louder and more excited.

If you panic, you cannot help them.

She checked again. The motor was in neutral; she had pumped the shift lever. She pumped it again and turned the key.

Nothing.

Then she remembered the kill switch.

She almost laughed out loud with relief when she saw it was in the off position. She turned it on. This time the motor began to power up. By rights she should wait half a minute to let the engine power up all the way. Instead, she applied a little choke, then some gas, and let out the throttle out in five seconds. The sputtering from the motor sounded awful because she had rushed it, but it did not stall. She depressed the button on the shift lever and pushed it forward. The motor’s hum gained strength, and the yacht slid through the water.

When she looked up, she felt the blow to her stomach as if she had taken a punch. At least fifty zombies were on the pier, sniffing the air, trying to locate the men. She turned the wheel away from the dock as Mario and Doug came into view. At least as many zombies were on Alaskan Way, between the two men and the pier.

It was the most helpless moment of her life, being consigned to the role of spectator while Doug and Mario fought for their lives. With that many zombies,

the fact that both of them were vaccinated against the ZBZ-1 virus did not matter. If they stopped for anything, if they even slowed down, they would be ripped limb from limb.

Blurs of motion.

Decomposed figures lurching and swaying.

Flashes of metal that glinted in the setting sun.

Doug and Mario were trying to push, duck, and deflect rather than stop and fight. A knot of zombies stopped, churning together like sharks in a feeding frenzy. Was one of them down? She gaped at the pier, struck dumb at the idea that one or both of them might be gone. Then a sudden burst of movement, black blood spurting in all directions, and both men surged into view. They hurtled down the long pier with the zombies swarming close behind.

They'll follow like lemmings, she thought, impotent anger rising at the relentlessness with which the zombies pursued them. They're both wearing chain mail, she remembered, her heart sinking even more. She did not think Doug would have a problem with the extra weight. Normally Mario would not either, but he was recovering from a gunshot wound to his arm, and his shoulder on that same side had almost dislocated. That had been almost two months ago, but he was still not back to normal.

She jammed the shift lever forward, and the yacht sped up, eating the distance to the pier. She eased off thirty seconds later, not wanting to get too close to the zombies that would soon be in the water.

Doug and Mario jumped. As they splashed into the water, the first zombie fell off the pier. A torrent of the undead followed, churning the water, but she still had not seen Mario or Doug surface.

"Where the fuck are you?"

Miranda kicked off her boots and grabbed a life ring. She hurled it over the side, climbed over the handrail, and dove into the dark, choppy water. Every muscle in her body contracted from the shock of cold, but by the time she surfaced, her limbs were cooperating with her brain. She stuck her arm through the life ring and looked toward the pier.

The water churned with the zombies' flailing limbs. They lacked the

coordination to do anything besides splash, but they could still bite, or depending on how waterlogged, drag a person under. Lack of mobility never stopped them being dangerous.

Just as she was starting to panic because she still had not seen anyone break the surface, Doug's head bobbed into view. His dark clothes blended into the water, making him hard to see.

"Over here," she shouted, waving the life ring over her head. She swam toward him.

Doug shouted back. "Where's Mario?"

She was now close enough to shove the life ring at him. He latched on to it.

"I can't see him!"

"There," Doug said, pointing.

She saw Mario's head slip beneath the choppy water. She dove for him, unable to see in the dark water. Then a light flickered, descending beneath her.

His flashlight!

It was him, had to be. She swam after the light, lungs burning, kicking harder, and caught an arm. She held it tight and pumped her legs hard, but with his pack and the chain mail, it wasn't enough. She flipped back and caught him under both arms, then kicked her rigid legs to propel them up, toward the fading light above. The weight of Mario's body got heavier the higher they climbed. Her lungs pushed against the inside of her rib cage, the instinct to breathe impossible to resist. Her head broke the surface. Icy water rushed down her windpipe as she opened her mouth to suck in air. She gasped and coughed, struggling to keep her head above the surface, and pulled on Mario as hard as she could. He broke the surface beside her, his head lolling to the side.

Miranda's arms and legs were jelly, all strength depleted. She couldn't stop coughing as she flailed, and she felt Mario slip under the water again. She couldn't keep him up, didn't have the strength, and felt herself going down.

Doug shoved the life ring at her and pulled her arm through. She clutched it feebly, wrapping her other arm around the opposite direction, violent coughs still racking her body, throat and lungs raw. Through the dark water splashing in her face, she saw Doug pull Mario to him. Mario coughed, then retched up water as

Doug slipped his arm through the life ring. Miranda clung to the life ring, unable to do anything but let Doug do the work for all of them.

Miranda's whole body shook by the time they reached the yacht, her body heat wicked away by the frigid water. Doug heaved himself over the edge of the swim platform, then reached back for her. She kicked her legs feebly, trying to help him get her out of the water, only now noticing how much her knee hurt.

"You're in my way," Doug said, pushing her aside when she tried to help him get Mario on board.

Delilah barked from the cabin below deck. Miranda's teeth chattered, in counterpoint to her shaking body, as Doug heaved Mario onto the swim platform. She could see he was shielding his shoulder, holding his arm tight to his body. They all lay gasping, muscles depleted from the cold and the sudden subsidence of adrenaline. Mario reached out and caught her hand.

"Th-thanks," he said.

"Y-you two o-okay?"

Doug pushed himself upright, squirmed out of his backpack, and pulled himself up the guardrail to his feet. "Never b-better."

Mario pushed himself up to sitting and started to speak to her, but Miranda cut him off.

"I already k-know, babe," she managed through her chattering teeth. "S-Seattle's gone."