

The End of All Things

By
Lissa Bryan

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The Writer's Coffee Shop
(Australia) PO Box 447 Cherrybrook NSW 2126
(USA) PO Box 2116 Waxahachie TX 75168

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*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹*

¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*, st. 1.

Chapter One

“He’s still out there.”

Sam wagged his tail.

“What do you think he wants?” Carly asked Sam as she let the curtains fall closed. “Never mind. I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that question because it’s probably nothing good.”

It had been a week since the Biker Guy appeared and set up camp on the sidewalk across the street from her apartment building. He was the first healthy person she’d seen in weeks. At first she wasn’t sure. His behavior was odd enough to make her think he was one of the Infected. Why would he set up a tent across from her apartment building when there was a motel right down the street? It made no sense. He would wave at her and smile cheerfully whenever Carly peeked through the curtains. He would be reading, cleaning a gun, or cooking over the fire he had built on the sidewalk, but as soon as she looked out the window, his head would snap up and he would stare right at her, as if he had some sort of weird sixth sense about when she was looking.

He was trying to starve her out, waiting until she *had* to leave, and then he would . . . what? She wasn’t sure. She had a bad feeling she was going to find out very soon. She and Sam were out of food. Carly could have tolerated the hunger a while longer, but Sam had gone over to his bowl a few times today and batted at it with his paw, and she couldn’t stand the idea of the puppy being hungry.

Carly went to the closet and got out one of her dad’s golf clubs, the closest thing she had to a weapon. She’d taken it from the trunk of his car the first time she’d gone out. She slipped a steak knife in the back pocket of

her jeans, though she wasn't sure it would be effective if someone got close. Some of the Infected had seemed impervious to pain, and the little flimsy knife didn't seem like it would inflict much damage. She thought about the long, wickedly-sharp knives her mother had hanging on the magnetic rack in her kitchen, but there was no way Carly could go back into her parents' apartment.

Sam pranced by the door. He thought she was going to take him out. The apartment building was built in a square around a small, grassy courtyard where Carly walked him. Those blank windows staring like sightless eyes always made her nervous. There could still be Infected inside some of the apartments, which was why she tried to keep Sam's visits outside to the early mornings and late evenings, when it was almost dark and less likely she'd be seen. He used a pan lined with newspaper the rest of the time, but the garbage hadn't been picked up in months, and the newspaper machine in the building's lobby was empty.

"I'll be back soon, Sam," Carly said. She knelt down and hugged him. He licked the underside of her chin as she stood. "Be good, okay?" She closed her apartment door after her and twisted the knob to make sure it had locked. At the end of the hall was a fire door that led to the stairs, and Carly took the three flights down to the ground level. She wished there was another way to get out, but her building only had one street-level exit, aside from the fire escape, and she wasn't brave enough to try them. She had a pathological fear of heights that was so bad she would rather face the Biker Guy than try to climb down a rickety metal ladder.

She peeked out the window in the lobby. *Yep. Still there.* And currently staring right at her. She clutched the handle of the golf club like a baseball bat.

For a moment, Carly considered turning around, going back upstairs, and just hoping he'd leave before their situation became desperate, but she'd given the rest of the food to Sam yesterday and the little guy was growing. He needed to eat.

She had to do it. She had no choice. But she couldn't force herself to open the door. Biker Guy got up from his seat on an overturned bucket and walked straight toward her. The guy was *huge*. Carly swallowed a gasp and backed up until her heels bumped against the stairs.

He was even scarier up close. Her dad had been six feet tall and this guy was even taller, built like a linebacker with heavily muscled, broad shoulders. He had tattoos on his arms and a scruffy beard on his jaw, which matched the dark, tousled hair on his head. His eyes were so dark, they seemed black. "Hello," he said through the glass door.

Carly scrambled up the stairs to the landing and backed into the corner. *Nope.* No way was she going out there. She trotted back up the stairs to her floor, listening carefully for any sounds that might indicate he was forcing his way in, but she heard nothing beyond her own raspy breathing.

She took out her key ring, pausing when she saw the key next to her own.

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She bit her lip and looked across the hall at the door the key unlocked. The apartment belonged to Mrs. Lincoln, a retired elementary teacher. Carly had been in her class when she was in the second grade, and there had been a mutual affection between them ever since. Carly had a key because she ran occasional errands for Mrs. Lincoln and watered her plants whenever she was out of town.

She hadn't seen Mrs. Lincoln since the start of the Crisis due to the quarantine, and she hadn't answered her phone when Carly tried to call. Carly fervently hoped the elderly widow had gotten away before the Infection reached Juneau. There were supposed to be some areas in Canada that weren't affected. Maybe she and her son had holed up in his fishing cabin in Vancouver.

She knew if she asked Mrs. Lincoln, she would *encourage* Carly to get what she needed from her cupboards, but it still made Carly very uncomfortable. It felt like . . . looting. It felt *wrong*. But she had a hungry puppy to feed and no choice unless she wanted to face Biker Guy. Carly gritted her teeth and used the key.

With her next breath, she knew Mrs. Lincoln hadn't made it to Canada. Choking, gagging, Carly held her arm over her nose to try to block the stench. She held her breath as she darted inside to the little kitchen and opened the cupboards. Only a few cans remained inside. Carly felt tears gather, and she wasn't sure if it was because of poor Mrs. Lincoln or her disappointment in the lack of food.

She took what was there. It would tide them over for a couple of days. She dashed back out into the hall and shut the door. An explosion of breath left her, a ragged sob which sounded horribly loud in the silent hallway.

Carly unlocked her own door and slipped inside. Sam bounced joyfully, as though she'd been gone for weeks, his tail wagging so hard he was hitting his flanks with it. She smiled at him and gave his ears a rub. He looked at her quizzically. "I'm okay," she reassured him. "I'm okay."

She didn't have a choice but to be okay.

Sam wasn't fooled. He leaned against her leg and looked up at her with a soft whine.

She felt tears sting her eyes. "You never met Mrs. Lincoln, but she was very nice. I just wish . . . I just wish she could have been with her son if she had to . . ." Carly couldn't say the last word.

She turned away and began to sort the cans she'd found. There were kidney beans, beef stew, corn, and green beans. She fished her can opener out of the drawer and before long was pouring the can of beef stew into Sam's bowl. He dug in with relish. Carly opened the kidney beans for herself and ate them right out of the can. She'd never been much of a cook before the Crisis, but since the electricity was gone, she couldn't even warm up her dinner. At least the beans were filling, she thought. Pretty tasty, too. Her mother had always said, *Hunger is the best seasoning*. Carly cut off that line of thought abruptly.

She threw the empty cans into the trash and went over to sit down on the sofa. She stared at the blank screen of the television in front of her. Her watch no longer worked but she had learned to tell the approximate time by the shadows on the wall. *Troy Cramer's News Hour would be on right about now*, she thought. During the Crisis, he had been the nation's most trusted source of news. He had seemed indefatigable, staying on the air for inhumanly long stretches, especially toward the end, when he had been the last man standing. And there had been no one left to turn off the camera when he began raving in delirium. She was almost glad the power had gone off before she saw the inevitable conclusion. She would have felt compelled to watch, to be with him in his final moments, even in this remote fashion.

Sam hopped up on the sofa beside her and laid his head on her thigh with a contented sigh. He had a full belly, and Carly petted him as he drifted off to sleep. All was right in his world. Carly envied him.

His fur had been darker when she first spotted him on the sidewalk in front of her building, and his eyes had been blue. He was a lonely little puppy trying to tear open a trash bag, looking for something to eat. He must have remembered humans since he'd run right to Carly when she dashed outside to scoop him up. She had to take him in. She knew what would happen to him if she didn't.

She'd named him Sam, after Frodo's loyal friend in *The Lord of the Rings*, the last movie she and her father had watched together. And Sam had kept her going when giving up seemed like a much more attractive option. She couldn't leave him with no one to take care of him. Until Biker Guy had arrived and set up camp across from her building, she had seemed to be the only person left in Juneau.

Ω

Two days later, they were out of food again, and Carly was faced with the prospect of trying to make it out to the store.

Sam swatted his metal bowl with his paw, and then stared down at it with a hint of expectation, as if rattling it would make food appear. Perhaps, in his little doggy head it did, because Carly had always filled it whenever she heard the bowl clatter on the floor.

Carly went over to the window to peek out at Biker Guy. *Still there*. Yesterday, she had gathered all of her courage and gone down to the lobby door again, but he had met her there with another *Hello*, and she'd panicked and darted back upstairs.

He was looking up at her window. He waved and reached down beside his bucket to pick up something that looked like a large white sheet of poster board. He held it up, and she could see the words he'd painted on it

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in black: PLEASE DON'T BE AFRAID. I WON'T HURT YOU.

He dropped the top poster to reveal another beneath it: I JUST WANT TO TALK TO YOU.

Carly thought that was highly unlikely. *Whatever this guy wants, it isn't just a scintillating conversation.*

He held up another sign: I'M REALLY A NICE GUY. HONEST.

Yeah, like he'd tell me if he wasn't.

He grinned as he held up the last board: SURRENDER, DOROTHY.

Carly had to giggle, but it faded as she realized it was the first time she'd laughed since the Crisis. She retreated and let the curtain drop. Indecision gnawed at her. She had to get food, and that meant confronting Biker Guy, whether she liked it or not.

She decided to wait until the middle of the night, when he'd hopefully be asleep and wouldn't see her leave the safety of her building.

Carly slept during the afternoon and evening, setting her wind-up alarm clock for after midnight when it would be dark. Well, as dark as it ever got in Juneau during summer, anyway. She sat up, and Sam, who slept at the foot of her bed, thumped his tail against the mattress. She could see the question in his eyes. *Out?*

"No," she replied. "I can't take you with me." He was around three months old, knee-high with big, clumsy paws. He was still vulnerable, and it tore at her heart to think of someone hurting him. She told him to stay and went into her closet to change into dark clothing. She took her large canvas shopping bag, the steak knife, and her dad's nine iron. *As the old saying goes, God hates a coward,* she reminded herself.

Carly patted her pocket to make sure she had her keys and then shut the apartment door behind herself. She crept down the stairs and approached the lobby door. Biker Guy was nowhere in sight. His fire had burned down to red embers. She took a deep breath and pushed the lobby door open a crack. She waited, looking around the dark and silent street. No movement, no sounds. Carly pushed the door open wide enough to allow her to slip through. She froze again, but nothing happened. So she set off down the street, walking as quickly as stealth would allow, with the nine iron over her shoulder like a soldier carrying a rifle.

The grocery store wasn't far, but then again, nothing in Juneau was very far from anything else. Carly gagged at the smell of rotten meat, spoiled produce, and sour milk. The stink hadn't dissipated at all since her last visit over a week ago, before Biker Guy had trapped her in her apartment building.

Her lantern was by the door where she'd left it. Carly picked it up and turned it on before she put it into the child seat of an empty cart, along with a fresh pack of batteries in case the lamp began to dim. Being in the dark in there was a terrifying thought.

Carly went to the dog food first and heaved the largest bag of puppy food they had into the cart. There was still plenty of that left, though the

selection of human food left was slim. Troy Cramer had shown video footage of grocery stores all over the country cleaned out by shoppers or looters at the height of the Crisis.

Carly didn't take time to make selections based on her preferences. She grabbed whatever cans were still on the shelf and dumped them into the cart. She'd been back in the stockroom on a previous visit. It was empty except for a few cases of bottled water.

A dark feeling of unease was stirring within her. What was she going to do once it was *all* gone? She doubted if what was left would last until the end of the summer. *But surely things will be back to normal by then.*

There was a gas station up the street. She wondered if she should check it to see if there were more groceries there, but it made her feel uneasy since she was already breaking quarantine to come here and the gas station was even further away. *And after that's gone, then what?* Carly didn't know. She'd expected the Crisis to be over by now and for things to be getting back to normal, and she wasn't prepared for the world to be out of order for the long term.

She swallowed back a gasp when she heard something—a foot crunching down on the spilled rice that she had seen in the next aisle. She realized then she had left her golf club by the door when she picked up the lantern. She pulled the knife out of her pocket, her hand shaking.

Another step and a small sound, like a moan or a sigh.

Time to go. Carly pushed her cart toward the front of the store. Before now, she'd been diligent about writing down the UPC codes of the products she took and always left a check to cover the cost, but not today.

"Mother?" She recognized the voice of Merle Campton, who owned the automobile service garage. His mother had been dead for years. "Mother?"

Carly knew better than to answer. She hurried past the darkened dairy cases.

"Mother!" Merle's boots clomped on the tile as he ran after her.

Her cart hit an unseen obstacle, and the jolt knocked the knife out of her hand. Carly looked around for it, but it must have skidded under a shelf as she saw no sign of—

"Mother!" Merle appeared at the end of her aisle and ran toward her.

"No, please, Merle, it's Carly Daniels! Carly!"

Merle's eyes glittered with eagerness. He ran toward her with his arms outstretched. Carly backed away, her own arms stretched out to ward him off. Her foot tangled around an empty rack of potato chips, and she fell with a short scream of surprise.

Merle's face was the brilliant red of the Infected, and sweat beaded on his forehead. He was grinning merrily as he bent over to grab her. But the grin disappeared when Biker Guy swung the nine iron into the back of Merle's head. Merle fell like a sack of potatoes onto his side, out cold.

"Important safety tip," Biker Guy said, "weapons only work if you keep them with you."

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Carly tried to blink back tears. “Is he . . . Is he dead?” She reached over to check him for a pulse.

“Jesus! Don’t touch him!” Biker Guy lunged forward and grabbed her hand before she could make contact. “He’s one of them!”

“I *knew* him!” Tears spilled down Carly’s cheeks against her will.

Biker Guy glanced down at Merle. “If he’s not dead, he’s going to wake up with one hell of a headache. If he is, I’ve just saved him from a lingering and painful end.”

He used his grip on Carly’s hand to pull her to her feet. She tugged her hand from his and dashed away her tears. “I hate just . . . leaving him here.”

“Ultimately, it makes no difference,” Biker Guy said.

Carly didn’t want to admit the truth of that statement.

Biker Guy propped the nine iron on his shoulder. “What’s your name again? Harley?”

“Carly,” she said, correcting him automatically. He must have heard her shout it at Merle. “Carly Daniels.”

“I’m Justin Thatcher.”

She stuck her hand out for him to shake, an automatic courtesy. He took it in his own massive paw and gave it a gentle shake. “What were you doing here?”

“Shopping.” Justin gave her a small smile.

“In the middle of the night?”

“Yeah, just like you are. What a coincidence.”

Carly flushed. It was rather obvious she’d been trying to avoid him.

“Thank you for helping me.”

He handed her golf club back. “Told you I was a nice guy.”

Carly grabbed her cart. “Yes. Thank you. Bye, now.” She rammed the potato chip rack aside and hurried up the aisle.

“I’ll walk you back,” Justin said.

“No need. Thank you.”

She could hear a smile in his voice. “No trouble. It’s on my way.”

Carly stopped at the register and pulled out her checkbook. She wasn’t going to itemize as she had on her previous visits; one hundred dollars should more than cover it. She clicked her pen and began to write.

“What are you *doing*?” Justin asked. He leaned on the conveyor belt beside her and grinned.

“Paying,” Carly said shortly. She signed the check with her loopy signature and slipped it through the slot in the cash register’s till. His grin faded when he saw the list Carly had been keeping on the shelf beside it.

She knew what he was going to say, and she didn’t want to hear it. She quickly stuffed the cans into her canvas tote. She put her arms around the bag of dog food and tried to lift it out of the cart, but the position was awkward.

“Let me get that.” He lifted it easily and tucked it under one arm. “You have a dog?” he asked. She knew why he was surprised. There didn’t seem

to be many dogs or cats that survived. She hadn't seen one in weeks.

"Obviously. Why else would I be buying dog food?" Carly pushed her empty cart up to the front and tucked it into the row with the others.

He shrugged. "Because there isn't much food for people left."

Carly blinked. "So you think I would eat dog food?"

"It's food. It's not like it's dirty or anything. The FDA monitors it just like food for human consumption."

"Gross," Carly muttered.

"Before this is over, I'll wager you'll eat worse things than dog food."

Tears stung Carly's eyes. "Stop it."

He nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry."

They walked in silence back to Carly's apartment building. "I'll take that." She tugged at the bag of dog food. "Thank you."

"You sure you won't let me carry it up for you?"

The thought was alarming. "No, uh, that's not, um, necessary. I'll get it."

He transferred the bag to her, and she staggered slightly under its weight. She tried to fish her keys out of her pocket, mentally kicking herself for not doing so *before* he handed her the fifty-pound bag. He watched with an expression of slight amusement as she struggled and juggled and tried to keep her tote from slipping off her shoulder.

"Need some help?"

"I've got it." She managed to work a hand into her pocket and then promptly dropped the keys. He bent to pick them up, and she panicked. *He had the keys to her apartment now!*

But all he did was unlock the lobby door and hold them out to her. She snatched them from his hand and darted inside, where she felt safe. He stood on the other side of the glass door and watched as she charged up the stairs as quickly as she could.

Carly was exhausted and out of breath by the time she reached the third floor hallway. She set down the bag of food with a grunt and dropped the tote beside it. She braced herself on the doorframe for a moment to rest. She used to use the Stairmaster at the gym. She shouldn't be so tired, but then again, she hadn't been eating much these days and that could explain why she felt so weak. She grimaced at the bag of dog food. She wasn't that desperate yet.

Carly unlocked her apartment door and dragged the bag inside instead of lifting it. Sam danced around her in circles. He was obviously praising her skills as a hunter. She tore open the top and scooped out a bowl of it. She had learned from her dog-training book that owners were supposed to give dogs the same food all the time in order to avoid upsetting their stomachs, but Sam seemed to be thriving on his varied diet.

She put all the cans away, except for a can of ravioli she opened and consumed on the spot. Both she and Sam finished eating at about the same time, and they settled into their spots on the sofa together. Carly stroked Sam's fur absently, thinking about Justin, the Biker Guy. He'd had her at

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his mercy in the store after he'd hit Merle, but he hadn't tried to hurt her. Instead, he'd offered to carry her groceries.

It made her nervous because she wanted to trust him. Her father had warned her about that before he got sick. He'd said there would be bad people out there who would pretend to be nice so that she would let her guard down. He'd warned her to always be cautious, always be vigilant, and to trust no one. She was on her own, just her and Sam. That thought made her feel small and lonely, made her want to hide in her little apartment, where she felt safe from the huge world outside. But that safety was an illusion. The door to the lobby was glass; it would only take one rock to break down that barrier. And her apartment door was made of thin metal over a foam core—meant for insulation and sound-dampening, not for security. One well-placed kick and it would fail.

She hugged Sam and wondered—not for the first time—if she should move somewhere else. *But where?* The thought of leaving her home and everything familiar was terrifying. She wanted to be home when the world returned to normal. She just wasn't sure how long she was going to have to wait for that, or how she would survive in the meantime.



Justin, the Biker Guy, was still there when Carly looked out her window in the morning. She surprised herself by feeling strangely relieved. How odd that he had become something stable in her world.

He was cooking something. He had set up some kind of tripod over the fire, and hanging from it was a strange, small, circular, flat surface with arms at the sides joined over the top. He was using it as a frying pan. He looked up and waved at her. She ducked behind the curtains.

Carly took Sam down to the interior courtyard using the back stairs. He bounded out the door and sniffed around, looking for the exact spot while she watched the windows around them, growing more nervous by the moment, as she always did. She felt like a rabbit in the middle of a football field. *No place to hide.*

“Hurry up,” Carly said to Sam, but he was intent on locating today's precise deposit location, using criteria only dogs knew. After he finally finished, Carly cleaned up after him and dropped the plastic sack into the overflowing trash can. *Back inside, where it's safe.* Sam followed at her heels. Like his namesake, he was always cheerful and exuberant. His tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth as he bounded around beside her.

Carly filled his bowl with dog food again, but something strange happened when she went to fill his water bowl. Nothing came out of the faucet when she turned the taps. There was a strange clunking and sputtering sound, but no water.

She tried the bathroom taps with the same results. Nothing. Carly felt her heart sink. She knew nothing about plumbing, so fixing it was impossible, and she had no idea what she was going to do. She could get bottled water from the store to drink, but that wouldn't help when it came to hygiene and flushing her toilet.

Carly considered her options for a moment and then went over to the window. She unlocked the top and slid it open. It would only open partway, as a safety feature, but it was large enough for her to stick her head out.

Justin looked up from his cooking and waved to her. "Hi, Marly!" he called.

"Carly." She corrected him automatically. "Um, Justin . . . Do you know anything about plumbing?"

"Sure."

"My water doesn't work."

Justin stood, wrapped the handle of the skillet-thing in a cloth, lifted it off the fire, and set it aside. He walked over to stand beneath Carly's window, craning his neck back to look up at her. "What do you mean, it doesn't work?"

"I turned on the tap and nothing came out, and it made weird clunking noises."

"The noises are from air in the pipes."

"Oh." That couldn't be good. "How do I get it out?"

Justin shrugged. "I can't tell you without looking at it."

"Can you . . . can you at least suggest something for me to try?"

"Not without looking at it myself."

Carly bit her lip. "Can you look at the pipes in the basement and fix it from there?"

"Nope."

Carly was on the verge of telling him to forget it, but then she thought about not being able to flush her toilet. "All right," she said. "I'll be right down."

She left the apartment door slightly ajar and walked downstairs to the lobby. Justin was waiting by the door. She hesitated for only a moment and then pushed it open for him. He strolled inside and started up the stairs as if he knew right where he was going. With a small frown of concern, Carly hurried to catch up to him.

She opened the door to the third floor hallway, and Justin blurted out, "Jesus Christ!" He grabbed Carly by the waist and thrust her behind him.

Startled, she peeked around his side to see what had alarmed him so much. "Oh, that's Sam. He must have pushed the door open."

"Carly, where did you get him?" Justin asked, speaking slowly, never taking his eyes from Sam. Sam, for his part, simply stood there and eyed Justin with curiosity, his head tilted to the side.

"I found him outside, trying to eat out of the trash. He's still just a puppy."

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“That’s no puppy,” Justin said. “That’s a *wolf*.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.” Carly pushed past him, darting around the arm that tried to block her path, and went to rub Sam’s head between his fuzzy, triangular ears. “See? He’s gentle and friendly.”

“A wolf isn’t a dog, Carly. They’re not pets.” His tone was gentle, but firm, as though he were trying to get her to see reason.

Carly’s eyes flashed with anger. What did he think she was going to do? Say to Sam, *Oh, sorry, you’re the wrong species*, and toss him out to fend for himself? “I’ve had him since he was a baby. He wouldn’t survive out there alone.”

“Carly—”

She knelt and hugged Sam. “It’s none of your business! Go away! I don’t care about the water now.”

“All right,” Justin said, trying to sound soothing. “Calm down. I won’t take him away from you, okay? Now, let me see your pipes.”

Carly hesitated. *Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea.*

Justin spread his hands, as if to show he was unarmed, harmless. “Carly, if I was going to hurt you, I would have done it by now, don’t you think?”

She’d had a similar thought earlier. But it was another long moment before Carly led him into her apartment and pointed at the kitchen. He went inside and opened the cupboard doors under the sink. “Hmm. Interesting.”

“What?”

“I’ve never seen anyone put their cleaning products in alphabetical order.”

Carly sighed. She wanted to know how to fix her plumbing, not his opinion on her organizational skills. “Can you tell anything about the water?”

Justin unhooked the fat white pipe shaped like the letter J. He showed her the interior. “See? No water. Your pipes are empty, Carly. You used it all. The water is gone, and it won’t come back because there’s no electricity to run the pumps.”

“What am I going to do?” Carly wasn’t really asking him. She rubbed her forehead. Water had always been something that was just *there* at the turn of a tap. She had no idea what to do, and a sensation of dull panic churned in her gut.

“You can’t stay here.”

She had been thinking the same thing earlier, but hearing Justin voice it upset her. “This is my *home*,” she said. “I can’t just leave it!”

He was quiet for a moment. “What were you planning to do this winter? You don’t have a fireplace and the temperature is usually around freezing or just above. It’s not as cold here as most people think it gets in Alaska, but you could still freeze to death.”

She looked at him in confusion. It made little sense to her that Justin was worrying about winter when everything would surely be back to normal by then. Order would be restored, and the lights would be back on. Carly

would be back to managing the souvenir shop, and the stores would be full of groceries.

“Go away,” she muttered.

“Carly—”

“Go away!” she cried. Sam, sensitive as always to her moods and correctly identifying Justin as the cause of her distress, let out a growl and bared his sharp little milk teeth. Justin didn’t even glance at him.

“All right, Carly. I’ll go. I’ll be outside if you decide you want to talk.”

“Just go!”

Justin nodded and pulled the apartment door closed behind him. Carly slid down to the floor in front of her silent refrigerator. Tears slid down her cheeks, and Sam licked them off gently. He wagged his tail, but Carly remained where she sat, unable to move or think.

Ω

When Carly peeked through the curtains the next morning, she found Justin sitting on his bucket by the fire, stirring something in a pot hung below the tripod while he read from a well-worn paperback. She slid the window open.

Justin waved to her and called “Hi, Charly!”

“Carly,” she said. He didn’t seem to be very good with names.

“Would you like some oatmeal? I made plenty.”

Her mouth watered at the thought of hot food. She’d never particularly cared for oatmeal, but it sounded absolutely *delicious*. But still Carly hesitated. She hadn’t figured out what Justin wanted. He could be dangerous. Just because he hadn’t chosen to strike yet didn’t mean he was safe.

“I have coffee,” he called.

That sealed the deal. “I’ll be right down!” Carly called. She went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth, rinsing with water from one of the bottles she’d found by her door when she’d taken Sam for his last trip outside for the evening. She could only surmise it had been left by Justin—perhaps as a peace offering—though how he had gotten inside was anyone’s guess.

She thought it was very nice of him, especially after the way she had yelled at him yesterday. After she’d calmed down, she’d felt embarrassed about it. He was trying to help, even if he didn’t understand why she was so reluctant to even consider leaving her home.

Her wavy, caramel-colored hair was petulant at being denied its daily wash and conditioner treatment, so it frizzed and stuck out all over her head. Her vigorous brushing made things worse before she pulled it back into a ponytail. Her brown eyes were bloodshot from crying after last night’s bad dream about her parents.

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Carly retrieved a bottle of maple syrup from the cabinet, just in case he didn't have any, and put it into a small bag with a bowl, mug, and spoon. Justin appeared to be alone, so it would be silly for him to carry around extra dishware if he didn't need it.

She put a leash on Sam and led him down the front stairs. Puppies needed to be socialized, according to the dog-training book Carly found at the grocery store. They needed to be around people in different types of situations in order to grow up to be friendly, well-behaved dogs. Sam was already very well behaved, though not due to any vigorous training on her part. He was sharply attuned to her moods and body language. All she had to do was look at him crossly to make him stop whatever he was doing, and he seemed to have a remarkable memory for those moments.

Justin had set up a second bucket as a chair for Carly. She sat down on it, and Sam lay down on the sidewalk beside her. "I brought some syrup."

Justin smiled. "That's great. All I have is sugar." He already had enough dishes, made out of lightweight metal, and he scooped out a portion of oatmeal for her. "You might want to put your bowl under it since we don't have a table. Those aluminum dishes can get hot."

Carly did as he suggested and then drizzled syrup over her bowlful. "Thank you." She handed him the syrup, and he did the same.

"No problem." He put the bottle on the ground between them. Sam looked at it and licked his chops in temptation, but a glance from Carly made him lay his head back down on his paws with a sigh.

Carly picked up her coffee cup and inhaled with something akin to ecstasy. One sip and she was in heaven. "God, I missed this."

Justin chuckled. "There's plenty if you want more."

Carly had to restrain herself from gulping down the rest of the cup so she could ask for another. She sipped the coffee and ate her breakfast in silence for a few minutes. Justin scraped the rest of the oatmeal out into a bowl and put it down in front of Sam. Sam looked up at Carly for permission before digging in.

"I thought about what you said," she told Justin. "And I'm sorry I was so rude to you yesterday."

He waved a hand. "Don't worry about it."

"Well, as I said, I thought a lot last night about what you told me, and—" Carly was uncertain of how to proceed.

"And?" Justin prompted gently.

Carly swallowed. "You're right. I don't know what to do about this winter. I mean, I'm sure everything will be fixed by then, but just in case . . . I need to figure something out. Like a kerosene heater or something."

"You don't have water."

"I haven't figured that part out yet. But I'm sure I'll come up with something."

She hated the pity in his eyes. She dropped her gaze down to her plate.

“You can’t stay here, Carly. It’s not healthy for Sam.”

She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“He shouldn’t breathe in kerosene fumes. It’s not good for dogs . . . or wolves, for that matter. It will be almost impossible to ventilate your apartment properly. Secondly, Sam needs space to run. He’s going to get a lot bigger before he finishes growing, and your apartment is just too small for him. He’ll be unhappy there.”

Carly hadn’t thought of that. She wondered what had changed Justin’s mind about Sam. Whatever had caused it, she appreciated the kindness.

“You’ll run out of bottled water very quickly. If you give him unfiltered water from a creek or river, he could get sick. He could get parasites, and you can’t take him to a vet.”

“I have nowhere else to go.” Carly had lost her appetite. She poked at the oatmeal with her spoon.

Justin sipped his coffee. As he did, the sleeve of his T-shirt slipped up, and she got a good look at the tattoo on his upper arm. It was a snake wrapped around a lightning bolt. “You were in Iraq?” she asked, surprised.

Justin froze. “How did you know that?”

“Your tattoo. My dad had a ring with the same symbol on it. He said it was the symbol of his army unit or something like that. He was in the first Gulf War.”

Justin looked at her sharply. “You said your last name was Daniels? Was your dad Carl Daniels?”

Carly nodded, her eyes wide. “Did you know him?”

“Not well. He was getting ready to retire when I joined up.” Justin shook his head. “Small world, huh?”

“I guess so.” Carly was remembering what her dad said to her once about the symbol; any man who wore it was like a brother to him, someone she could trust or rely on for help. “Is my dad why you’re here?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t know.” Justin poured more coffee into her cup and then topped off his own cup. “But now that I *do* know, I can’t just leave you here. You understand that, right?”

Carly cursed herself for saying anything. The firmness in his tone told her he wasn’t going to let this go easily. “What do you want, Justin? Why are you camped out in front of my apartment?”

“I told you why I’m here; I wrote it on the sign. I just wanted to talk to you. You’re the only sane human being I’ve seen in weeks.”

“You’re not from here, though, are you?”

He shook his head. “I’m from Nebraska, actually. Omaha. I was up here for the Deadhorse Rally. I got here earlier than expected and decided to take a detour and explore a bit.”

Justin was referring to the annual motorcycle ride from Fairbanks to Deadhorse, a town on the northern coast of Alaska, the most northern point on the North American continent riders could reach. It was supposed to be one of the most challenging and scenic rides in America.

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“Where’s your bike?” Carly asked.

“I left it in Haines when I took the ferry here.” The ferry was the only way to reach Juneau as none of Alaska’s eleven highways led to the town. He smiled, and it was a bit wistful. “This is a beautiful area. For all the tourists you get, the forests are practically pristine.”

“I’m sorry about your bike.” Carly knew some riders were attached to their motorcycles the way car buffs cherished a classic automobile.

Justin merely shrugged. “I couldn’t ride it now, anyway.”

“Why?”

“Too loud. Everyone for miles can hear you coming.”

“The ferry isn’t running, so I’m stuck here.” Carly was relieved, in a way. It was a decision she didn’t have to make.

“You’re not stuck. There are plenty of boats. You could take one all the way down the coast.”

“To *where*? I have nowhere else to go.”

“South.”

“You mean, like, Ketchikan?”

“No, I mean, like, Florida. That’s where I’m headed.”

Carly was bewildered. “Why would I want to go there?”

“The climate, for one thing. You wouldn’t have to worry about freezing in the winter, and you can grow food year round down there.”

“I don’t know how to farm.”

He shrugged. “Neither do I. We can learn.”

“I don’t understand why you think I’d need to. Pretty soon everything will be back to normal.”

“Jesus, Carly, look around you. Do you see society rebuilding itself?”

“It may take a little while—”

“No.” Justin’s voice was soft, but firm. “Carly, you have to accept it. Life as you know it is over. America is dead. There isn’t a president or police officers. No one will ever cash those checks you wrote. The power won’t come back on, not for a very, very long time.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said stubbornly.

“You don’t *want* to believe me, but you know it’s true.”

Carly stood, and her forgotten bowl of oatmeal tumbled off her lap. Sam was delighted and looked up at her for permission to eat it, but Carly took hold of his leash. She wasn’t looking at Justin, her face firmly turned away. “I’m going home now. Leave me alone. Just go away and leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that. Your father—”

“He’s *dead*,” Carly snapped. “And you just told me there’s no government, which means there’s no army either. Your obligations are at an end.”

She tugged Sam away from the pile of oatmeal and went back to her apartment building.



Justin sighed as he watched Carly retreat to her apartment building. He'd taken a bit of a risk trying to jar her into accepting reality. She was still in shock, still in the denial stage. He had known as much when he saw the detailed list of items she'd taken from the store. She'd even calculated the tax on the non-grocery items. He could see a few cracks in the careful façade she had constructed to hide from the truth, and with more careful prodding, he might be able to break through.

He picked up her plate and bowl and washed them in the bucket of water he'd drawn from a nearby creek and purified with bleach. He needed to give her time to come to grips with the fact that the world she had known was gone, but it was already the middle of June. They couldn't wait much longer if they were going to reach a more temperate climate before winter set in.

He'd known the moment he spotted her, almost two weeks ago, he couldn't leave her behind. It just wouldn't be right. But it was clear he was going to have a hell of a time convincing her to leave the only place she felt safe in this new, uncertain world.

His first indication that there was something wrong had been the fire. He'd been camping in the silent serenity of the hills around the sleepy little town. Sometimes the noise and bustle of the civilized world got to be too much, and he'd need to retreat for a while, to recharge his batteries in solitude.

He smelled the fire before he saw it. It was only once his curiosity had lured him in closer to the town that he'd seen the smear of black smoke besmirching the crystalline, blue sky. He'd frowned as he found a comfortable spot and pulled out his binoculars. Seemed like a hell of a big one, but he heard no sirens. Even when the sun had finally set for the night, he hadn't seen any flashing lights reflected off the nearby buildings or the haze of smoke that hung low to the rooftops. Fortunately, the building had been far enough from its neighbors that the fire hadn't spread, or the whole town might have burned.

That was when he'd taken the wind-up radio from his pack, and when he couldn't make sense of the disjointed babble, he'd turned on his cell phone for the first time in over a month. Dozens of messages. He listened to them at first in shock and then in slowly dawning horror as he realized what was happening.

After that, he'd watched the town through his binoculars as he lay on a small bluff that provided an excellent vantage point. After a while, the only people he saw were the Infected, shuffling aimlessly through the streets like zombies, and soon they were gone, too.

He'd seen Carly by chance during one of his brief forays into the town,

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dashing from her apartment to the little grocery store, her eyes wide with fear and confusion. He'd watched her for a while to gauge how best to approach her. After checking her building for any potential threats, he set up camp in front and settled in to wait. Humans were social creatures, after all, and it was only a matter of time before loneliness would lead her to initiate contact. He hadn't counted on the wolf pup, however.

Like most modern Americans, Carly was completely unprepared for survival in a world without technology. To people like Carly, food came from a grocery store, and its origins beyond that point were vague. Water came from a tap, safe and purified, and there was always a doctor to tend to any injuries with safe, FDA-approved medications. People like Carly rarely survived for long when the center did not hold. She'd armed herself with a steak knife and a golf club, for God's sake! Still, he recognized a spark of strength within her that told him she was a survivor. She just didn't know it yet.

He hadn't lied to her when he'd told her he had an obligation to her father, an obligation that still held even if he was the last surviving member of what had simply been called "The Unit." It was part of the oath. If a man should fall, the rest of them would take care of his family. He hadn't even been aware that Carl Daniels had a family. Most of them did not. One of the things that made them so effective was none of them had anything to lose.

Justin poured himself another cup of coffee and sipped it while he watched Carly's window to see if she would reappear. The first step would be to earn her trust.



Carly was dreaming of her parents again. She hated this dream and always tried to fight it off, but at least twice a week, her mind replayed the last weeks of her parents' lives with horrifying, crystalline clarity.

Her mother, Gloria, had fallen sick first, but it had been mild, like a spring cold or a persistent case of allergies. Both Carly and her father had watched anxiously, and at the end of the week, her mother had actually seemed like she was getting better. Gloria had been in the kitchen, cooking dinner, when she'd collapsed to the linoleum. Carl had rushed in and scooped his wife off the floor, and she had vomited helplessly as he lifted her. She'd been burning up with fever. Carly had held her father's gaze in a moment of silent, horrified communication. There was no denying she had the Infection.

There was still hope. The news had said over half of the people who caught it survived. Carly would wonder later if that was just a way of trying to keep the panic down, to keep the Infected in their homes drinking chicken soup instead of clogging the roads and trying to reach the already

overcrowded hospitals.

The violent illness wracked Gloria's body as her fever climbed to alarming heights. Then the delirium set in, and she talked to long-dead relatives, screamed that there were spiders crawling on her, and failed to recognize either her husband or daughter. Carl had to tie Gloria's hands to the headboard to keep her from digging bloody furrows in her arms, clawing away the spiders only she could see.

They'd tried everything. They tried putting Gloria into a tub of cold water to bring down the fever. They'd given her aspirin, which was the only drug they had in their apartments. They tried to keep her hydrated, though every drop of liquid they put into her came right back up. Carl had tried to contact the hospital, but 911 rang busy. When he drove to the hospital to see if there was any way he could get Gloria admitted, he had come home pale, his eyes filled with the horrors he had seen there. He hadn't mentioned the hospital after that.

And then one afternoon while Carly was sponging the sweat from her mother's shivering body, Carl had looked at his daughter and said, "I have it, too."

His illness seemed to progress much faster, or perhaps Carly had been so wrapped up in trying to help her mother she hadn't noticed when he'd had the lightly symptomatic stage. Carl had known what was coming and faced it with calm stoicism.

"Listen to me, Sugar Bear . . ." He had used the nickname he'd given Carly as a baby. Carl looked over at his wife, who had slipped into unconsciousness so deep it was probably a coma. He smoothed the hair back from Gloria's sweat-soaked forehead. Her breaths were shallow and panting. "We're not going to make it." Carl's smile was gentle, even though tears glittered in his eyes.

"Daddy, please—"

"I don't have much time, and I need to talk to you while I still can. I want you to leave, Carly. Get out of here and go home, and don't come out for anyone. Understand? You stay inside, where it's safe, until this thing is over."

"I can't. I can't leave you." Carly wouldn't go, no matter how much he begged. To be honest, a small part of her was almost hoping she would become infected herself so this horror would all be over.

When she took small breaks to get food for herself, Carly watched the news, watched the world fall apart, live, in living color. Her mind replayed some of those images in her dreams. She saw the famous HOLLYWOOD sign ablaze from uncontained wildfires, the riots in Chicago, the refugees trying to pour out of New York across the Brooklyn Bridge, stopped by National Guard troops, and the horrible moment when the crowd had realized they were more powerful in their sheer numbers.

Carly took care of her parents the best she could. She tried to keep them cool, to pour liquids into them, and clean up the mess when those liquids

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came back up. Days blended into one another, and it seemed as if she had spent a lifetime in that room of suffering. Carly was so exhausted she started having small hallucinations herself. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw tiny movements that made her jump and gasp. Her overwrought nerves reacted to the shots of adrenaline through her system, which made her more exhausted.

Her dream mercifully skipped over what had happened next. Sometimes it didn't, and she was forced to relive their deaths. During the day, she could shove the thought away by force, but her dreams were uncontrollable.

Carly had clasped her parents' hands together before covering them with the blanket and returning to her own apartment, numb with horror and grief. She'd tried calling 911 to report her parents' deaths, but it always rang busy. It rang busy until the day the phone didn't work any longer.

She woke with tears on her cheeks. Sam gave a soft whimper and crawled closer to lay his head on Carly's stomach. His eyes were sad and sympathetic. She scratched behind his ears to show him she was all right and sat up on the side of the bed. Another day to get through.

Carly scooped out a bowl of food for Sam and went over to the window. She let out a gasp of distress when she saw Justin's tent was gone. She was surprised at how upsetting it was. She spun, ran to the apartment door, and flung it open. Sam bounded after her, ready for his morning outside time. She skidded to a halt when she found Justin in a sleeping bag in the hallway. Relief washed over her, a feeling she didn't quite understand.

Justin's eyes opened, and he gave her a sleepy smile. "Morning, Darly."

"Carly," she said, too distracted by his presence to be irritated at him for getting her name wrong again. "What are you doing in here?"

"The mosquitoes were bad." Justin sat up and yawned. "Hope you don't mind."

"I . . . uh . . . I guess not." Carly wondered how he had gotten through the locked lobby doors. It was a thought that made her vaguely uneasy.

"I'll take Sam outside for you, if you'd like."

Carly hesitated. She wasn't sure if she trusted Justin enough to let him take Sam, but not because she thought Justin might hurt him. Sam meant everything to her. Without him, she might have surrendered to her despair. He had given her a reason to go on, a listening ear, comfort, and companionship. Carly was reluctant to let him out of her sight.

"Just out to the courtyard," he said. Carly was a little startled he knew about it, but she supposed he was the type of person who would explore the whole building and search for other exits. Her dad had been the same way. Thinking of him made Carly recall Justin's tattoo and what her dad had said the symbol meant.

"All right. I'll be right back." Carly went into the kitchen and got a plastic shopping bag.

"What's this?" Justin took it from her.

"To clean up after him. There's a trash can—"

Justin shook his head. “Do you think that’s necessary?”

Carly blinked. “Of course it is. It’s rude just to leave it.”

Justin stuffed the bag in his pocket and said nothing.

“Out,” she said to Sam and pointed at Justin. Sam understood and trotted over to Justin with his tail wagging expectantly. Justin patted him on the head, and they started down the hallway toward the back staircase.

Carly left her door open, though it made her very nervous, and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She couldn’t help trying the tap again and was a little disappointed when nothing but air came out. She’d hoped Justin was wrong and the water would come back. She used her toilet, and with regret, she flushed it for the last time. She’d been trying to save that last flush, but since Justin was there, she was too embarrassed not to do it.

Carly heard the jingle of Sam’s collar before he bounded into the apartment. He stood on his back legs, bracing his front paws on Carly’s thighs, his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth. She gave him a hug and looked up at Justin in the doorway. “Thank you.” She meant that for more than just taking Sam outside, but she didn’t know how to express her gratitude for all of the things he had done for her. It wasn’t only the kindness of sharing his food and bringing her water, but also saving her from Merle and trying to help her figure out what she was going to do next.

Justin nodded. “You’re welcome. Do you have anything for breakfast?”

Carly considered his question. She had food, but not really “breakfast” food. “I have a can of condensed clam chowder, some cans of tuna and green beans.”

“How would you feel about coming with me to scout for supplies?”

“We can’t. We’re still under quarantine.”

Justin shook his head slowly. His eyes held a hint of sadness. “That’s not in effect anymore, Carly.”

“Are you sure?” Going to the grocery store was bad enough, and as far afield as Carly had ventured since the Crisis. She felt guilty for that, but after she’d gotten Sam, she felt she had to do it. She knew she couldn’t go back to the store down the street. *What if Merle was still there?*

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Carly thought about it for a moment and decided it wouldn’t hurt anything, as long as they stayed far back from any people they encountered. And if they happened to run into Infected, Justin would be with her, and he seemed strong and smart.

She picked up her dad’s nine iron and got another steak knife from the kitchen while Justin gathered his own supplies. Carly flinched when he took out a gun and slid the top of it open. He checked something and let it slide back into place and then put it in a holster on his hip. On the other hip, he attached a wicked-looking knife in its sheath.

“Come on, Sam,” Justin said, and Sam trotted out behind them.

“I don’t know if we should take him with us.”

“He’ll be fine. And he’ll warn us if anyone tries to sneak up on us.”

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Carly thought of all the ways the puppy could get hurt out in the world while snapping his leash to his collar. Justin looked like he was going to say something, but he seemed to change his mind.

The lobby door of the apartment building was still intact. Carly wondered how Justin had gotten inside without breaking the glass door or the lock. Justin held it open for her, and they stepped out onto the silent street. It was so quiet the rustle of the breeze through the trees across the street and the click of Sam's nails on the sidewalk seemed loud. Carly stayed behind Justin, experiencing that awful rabbit-in-a-football-field feeling again, terribly exposed with nowhere to hide. Justin didn't seem troubled at all. He strolled down the street, his stride casual, one hand on the strap of the backpack he had slung over one shoulder.

When they came to the corner, Justin glanced back at her. "This is your town. Which way?"

"There's a Food Mart up the street about three blocks." Carly pointed the way.

"Good place to start." Justin sounded cheerful.

"I didn't bring a lantern or a flashlight."

"I have a couple in my bag."

She should have known he'd be prepared. Carly glanced down at Sam to see how he was taking this new experience, and he seemed delighted by all of the new smells and sights.

The parking lot in front of the store still held a handful of cars. An elderly car with blooms of rust around the wheels was parked in front of the store, the driver's door yawning open. Justin made a quick "stop" gesture, and Carly froze. He crept up and reached inside the car, but his broad shoulders blocked Carly from being able to see what he was doing. He backed out and motioned her forward.

"What did you do in there?"

"I checked the key to see if the battery was still charged. If it was, the person who owned the car might still be inside the store, but the battery was dead from the door hanging open."

"That's clever."

Justin shrugged. "One of the tricks of the trade."

"What trade is that?"

"Survival." Justin took off his pack and unzipped the top. He fished out two heavy metal flashlights and handed one to Carly. "These things weigh a ton, but they're as tough as hell and can be used as a weapon in a pinch."

Carly tried to imagine clubbing someone over the head with it and shuddered. She wasn't sure she'd be able to do it, if it came right down to it.

The glass door was locked when Justin tugged on the handles. Without even blinking, he used the butt of his flashlight to smash the glass. Carly looked around the empty parking lot, as though someone might hear the shattering of glass and come running with the cops in tow.

Justin reached in through the hole he'd made and turned the lock button on the inside of the door frame. He pulled the door open and gave Carly a little bow. "After you, my lady."

Carly bobbed a little curtsy with a small smile. "Thank you, my lord."

"I could get used to being called that." Justin's grin was infectious.

"I wouldn't count on it happening."

"Ah, but a man can dream."

"Can you lift Sam over this glass? I don't want his paws to get cut."

"He's a lot tougher than you think he is," Justin said, but he picked up the puppy and carried him inside before depositing him on the tile beyond the shards.

Carly pulled a cart out of the line and laid her shopping tote inside the child seat as Justin turned on his flashlight and shined it around in a swift arc. The vestibule was littered with discarded sales fliers. There was a corkboard beside the entrance door, which had been used to hold notices of garage sales and free kittens, but currently was covered with fliers asking people to call if they'd heard from missing relatives or had news about other cities where their loved ones lived. Carly had to look away from it quickly. It hurt too much to remember the desperation of those days.

"Stay beside me," Justin said. Carly nodded. What happened with Merle was still fresh in her mind.

The store was in the same condition as the one near Carly's apartment building, and had a similar stench. Carly gagged but continued inside behind Justin, her hand cupped over her nose. The shelves were almost bare, and what was left was in shambles. Cans and boxes were scattered on the floor. Justin picked up one. "Ooh! Jackpot! A box of Lucky Charms!" He tucked it into Carly's shopping cart.

"Now all you need to find is a cow for some fresh milk."

He shook his head. "Condensed milk or powdered milk will work just fine."

Carly wrinkled her nose. "Powdered milk? Gross."

Justin cast an amused glance at her. "You must not have gone camping much."

"No, Mom wasn't into that kind of thing. Dad took me fishing once, but that's about as much as we enjoyed the great outdoors."

"Well, trust me, powdered milk is great when it comes to weight, and when you're carrying a pack for twenty miles, every ounce counts."

"Jeez, you used to hike twenty miles? For *fun*?"

Justin chuckled. "I once did the entire Appalachian Trail, all twelve hundred miles of it."

Carly grinned at him. "I once walked all the way to the Food Mart from my apartment building."

"I'm so happy I could be part of the momentous occasion." They entered the drug aisle, which was cleaned out of cold medicines and fever-reducing medication. It made Carly sad to see it, for it was silent testimony to the

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number of people who thought cough syrup could combat the Infection.

Justin tossed boxes of bandages, eye wash, and topical antibiotics into Carly's cart, along with all of the bottles of iodine on the shelf.

"Peroxide stings less," Carly said.

"It's not for cuts and scrapes. You can use it to purify drinking water." Justin had moved on to anti-diarrhea medication, of which he took every bottle and box.

"Expecting an upset stomach?"

"This stuff is going to be worth more than its weight in diamonds." Justin waved a box of tablets before he dropped into the cart. "Trust me."

At the end of the aisle, they approached the pharmacy counter. The place was in shambles, even more so than the rest of the store. Justin, surprisingly lithe for such a large man, jumped over the counter and began to read the labels of boxes and bottles, tracing his finger under the lettering.

Sam bumped Carly's leg with his head, and she saw he had something in his mouth. She put down her hand, and he spat out a can of beans. "Good boy!" She rubbed his ears, and Sam wagged his tail, delighted. He started searching the floor beneath the shelves again.

"Are you on birth control?" Justin asked.

Carly felt her face flame and was glad it was so dim back there. "Excuse me?"

"Don't be embarrassed. I'm asking because there's a fuckload of the pill back here, and we should grab it if you need it."

"No, I'm not on the pill," Carly muttered.

"You'd better grab some of your girly shit while we're here."

Carly's blush remained firmly in place at his words. She walked the few paces over to the feminine hygiene aisle and grabbed several boxes of tampons, which she stuffed to the bottom of the cart. She didn't know why she was so embarrassed about it when Justin didn't seem to be.

He came back with a small shopping basket filled with drugs.

"What is all that?"

"Antibiotics, mostly. A few pain-killers, though the junkies already got most of those. A couple other odds and ends."

Carly wondered why he thought he'd need so many antibiotics. Maybe he had some health issues.

They collected what food was left on the shelves. Very little in the way of canned goods remained. Sam bumped Carly's leg twice more with cans in his mouth. Justin stared. "Did you train him to do that?"

Carly shook her head. "I think he just figured out I want cans, so he's bringing them to me." Sam couldn't differentiate between the cans, though. One had been a diet soda, which she opened and gulped down on the spot, only afterward thinking she ought to have offered Justin a drink. She flushed again and dropped the empty can, but he shrugged and said he disliked diet soda, anyway.

They went into the next aisle, and Carly struggled to push the cart past a

fallen rack of batteries. Justin took control of it and swung the cart to the side with ease.

“Hard to believe I once went to the gym twice a week,” she said.

“You haven’t been eating enough. That’s what this is for.” Justin held up a can of powdered weight-loss shake.

“How’s that going to help?”

“You mix up a shake to drink along with what you’re eating. It gives you the extra calories and vitamins you might be missing.”

Justin headed back to the stock room but paused in the doorway and told her to wait where she was. Carly wondered what he’d seen but shrugged and spent the next few minutes in the health and beauty aisle, where she selected a few sticks of deodorant and some leave-in spray conditioner that might help contain the frizzy mess her hair had become. She saw a row of baby wipes and flung a few large packets into the cart. If she couldn’t shower, she could at least wipe herself down. It was better than nothing, she supposed.

Justin returned, carrying a case of liquor. Carly’s eyes widened. “Headed to a kegger this weekend?”

“Trade goods,” he explained and dropped the case into a second cart that had been abandoned nearby. “It’s a pain-killer, a disinfectant, and a good time, all rolled into one.”

They rolled the carts back up to the front of the store, and Carly pulled her checkbook out of her pocket.

“Don’t worry about it,” Justin told her. “Besides, I hate waiting in line behind someone who’s writing a check.”

Carly gave him a small smile. She knew he was joking to soften the reaction his words were bound to have, and she appreciated it. She considered for a moment and then put her checkbook back into her pocket. He was probably right. Even if the owner of the store returned, who would be at the bank to cash her check? “How are we going to carry all of this?” Her tote wouldn’t hold it all.

“We’ll just wheel the carts back to your place.”

Carly swallowed back a protest about stealing the carts when she considered the fact everything inside the carts was stolen as well.

“Is there a gun shop here?” Justin asked.

“On the other side of the bridge.”

“Care to take a stroll with me?”

Carly smiled at him. “Certainly.”

They walked down 10th Street toward the bridge. Sam trotted beside her, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. He looked happy, and it made her heart lighten a bit. “You said you were from Omaha. Is that where your family is?”

For a moment, Carly didn’t think he was going to answer, and she regretted asking the question.

“I don’t have any family.”

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“Are they all . . . gone?”

Justin shrugged. “I’d imagine so, but I have no way of knowing for sure. I grew up in the foster care system and enlisted as soon as I was old enough to sign the papers.”

Carly didn’t know if she should offer sympathy, or if she should—

“What about your family?”

“They’re . . . gone.” Carly’s throat tightened.

“I’m sorry. Were you close?”

“Very. My mom and dad . . . they were wonderful. But you knew my dad, at least a little bit, right?”

“He was my Arabic teacher for a few months, until he retired.”

That must have been the language her dad had been speaking in his fevered delirium the night he died. She pushed the thought away and blinked hard to combat the stinging in her eyes. Justin gave her a pat on the shoulder, his eyes compassionate. She felt a little closer to Justin, knowing he had a connection to her father, no matter how slight.

“How old are you, Carly?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Did you still live at home?”

“No, I had my own apartment upstairs. Mom and Dad were on the ground floor. So I still saw them every day and went downstairs for dinner all the time since I’m not much of a cook.” Carly gave a little laugh even as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “My mom worried I wasn’t eating enough vegetables and healthy stuff.”

Justin was quiet for a moment. “The men spoke highly of your father. He left the field around the time you were born and became an instructor, but his reputation as a brave man and loyal friend remained.”

“He never said much about his army days. Just that he was in the Middle East for a while.”

Justin nodded. “He *couldn’t* tell you, Carly. And you wouldn’t have wanted to hear it anyway.”

“How old are you, Justin?” Her dad had retired before her tenth birthday, so he had to be at least—

“Thirty-four,” he said.

She peered at him closely. Under that scruffy beard, his features still had a youthful cast, but that might have been because he usually had a mischievous grin and a wicked twinkle in his eye. Knowing him a little better, he didn’t look so scary. “Wow, you look younger.”

Justin cast her an amused glance. “You say that like you think I should have wrinkles and a cane.”

“No . . . you just look . . . young,” Carly said lamely.

“The virtues of healthy living.”

Carly giggled, though the sound of it was still unusual enough to give her a little start of surprise. “Nobody who gets that excited about Lucky Charms can claim to be a health nut.”

“Come on. I get to have *one* guilty pleasure, don’t I?”

“Don’t ask me. The only healthy thing I did was go to the gym to use the Stairmaster twice a week.”

“If your jeans weren’t so baggy, I could tell you if it had paid off or not.” Justin gave her an exaggerated leer, but she didn’t smile.

“They weren’t always baggy on me,” Carly said. Even if there had been plenty of food, her appetite had been virtually nonexistent for a while.

Justin shook his head. “You poor girl. I had no idea you had been hungry for so long.”

“I was afraid to go outside. It wasn’t just the quarantine. At first there were lots of . . . *crazy* people on the street. The Infected. Healthy people would try to walk past them quickly, and sometimes the Infected would just attack them without warning. I didn’t start going outside until I didn’t see anyone. And then it was scary that I *didn’t* see anyone, you know? I started thinking the government may have evacuated all of the healthy people out of Juneau, and I just wasn’t informed because they didn’t know I was in my apartment. I started wondering . . .” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat before she continued. “. . . I started wondering if I was the only one left. I read this book once, *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson. Have you ever read it?”

Justin thought for a moment. “I saw the movie.”

“The book is different.” Carly felt a stinging pain in her hands and realized she had both fists clenched tightly, her nails digging into her palms. “The main character, that’s what happens to him. He’s the only normal person left in the world. I kept telling myself there *had* to be other people, and things would go back to normal, but until I saw you, I—” Carly had to stop. Her throat was too tight to speak any further, but from Justin’s expression, he understood what she was trying to say.

They had come to the Juneau-Douglas Bridge. There was a roadblock of concrete lane dividers set up across the center of the bridge and lines of cars on both sides of it. Out in the harbor beyond, a few cruise ships floated where they would wait eternally to be cleared for docking. Carly considered the cars lined up behind the barriers. “Where were they hoping to go?”

“The problem with quarantine is most people think they should be exceptions to it. They think their circumstances are different, special. They *have* to go get a sick relative or a child. They *have* to go to the store or to the bank to get their money. Just a quick trip; they’ll be right back.”

Carly knew this was true. Her own father had broken quarantine to go to the hospital to see if he could get her mother admitted, and she knew some of her friends had ignored the order because they wanted to go be with their families. Her best friend, Michelle, had set out with her baby, Kevin, intending to drive to Anchorage, where her parents had moved after they retired. Carly sometimes wondered if Michelle and Kevin had made it, or if she had been stopped somewhere along the route, unable to travel onward and unable to come back to Juneau.

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“Some people refused to believe there was a pandemic and thought the government was trying to ‘take over’ and turn America into a dictatorship.” Justin paused for a moment. A hint of a cynical smile tugged at his lips. “You know how it was, Carly. People didn’t trust the government for small things, let alone for something that affects their personal freedom.”

“But they had to know how dangerous it was. They could have been bringing the Infection to their friends and family.”

Justin shook his head. “The Infection had a long incubation period in which people were contagious but asymptomatic . . . People felt fine, so they ignored the quarantine orders, and the government was slow to enforce the quarantine. It was an election year, after all. By the time they got serious about enforcing it, it was far too late.”

An election year. Carly was sickened at the thought that politicians might have been willing to let people get sick and die rather than hurt their chances to keep their offices. She hoped it wasn’t true, but she didn’t ask Justin anything more about it. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Her father had been concerned people were ignoring the quarantine orders. Carly remembered her mother teasing him for being *such a Boy Scout* about following the government’s directives because of his time in the military. Her father had just smiled and teased her back, but even then, Carly had known there was something he wasn’t telling them. In retrospect, she could see her father had known the situation was far worse than Carly and her mother had realized.

Carl had gone to the emergency town meeting to lend his voice in support of those trying to convince the mayor to isolate Juneau, but the mayor refused on the grounds that it was coldhearted. The ferry and airport had been shut down only about a week before her parents died, after it was far too late to do any good.

Justin startled her out of her thoughts when he put a hand on her shoulder. “I think you should keep your eyes on the sidewalk, okay?”

She followed as he started across the bridge, keeping as far away from the vehicles as possible, trying to pretend they didn’t exist. She kept her eyes glued to the heels of Justin’s black leather boots and kept a tight grip on Sam’s leash, clamped under her hand on the handle of the cart. Sam kept casting concerned looks up at her; maybe he could read the tension in her posture. Carly patted him on the head to try to reassure him . . . and to reassure herself as well.

She heard a bang from the other side of the bridge and jumped. It wasn’t loud, but in the eerie silence, it seemed exaggerated. She glanced around to search for the source of the sound, and she saw a small shack on the side of the bridge, built for the troops guarding the barricade. The door swung lazily in the breeze. Then she saw a pair of boots sticking out from behind the edge of the barrier and looked away. She caught sight of a car straight ahead of them, emitting a strange humming sound. The windows were blacked out with some kind of undulating material that had a dull glimmer

to it. *A trash bag, maybe?* But as she got closer she realized it wasn't a trash bag. It was flies. Thousands of flies covering the inside of the windows, and the sound of their wings was the humming she heard. They lined the edge of the small gap in the window, new arrivals and departures.

Carly gagged and fell to her knees at the side of the bridge. Up came the soda she had drunk in the store, and she continued to retch until her stomach muscles ached and quivered. Her head pounded. Behind her, Sam danced and whined, unsure of how to assist her.

Touching her shoulder, Justin put a bottle of water into her line of sight. She accepted it with gratitude and took a drink, which promptly came up again.

"Small sips," Justin said. He sat down beside her on the curb. She felt his hand on her back, rubbing in small, soothing circles. She took a tiny sip from the bottle, just enough to wet her tongue, and her stomach decided to be gracious about it.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to look."

"I know."

The loss of electric power and telephones hadn't done it. The empty stores and streets hadn't done it. But the fact that human bodies were sitting in a car in the middle of a bridge finally convinced her Justin had been telling the truth. Civilization was gone.

There was no one left to collect and bury the dead. They would rot where they fell. Her parents' apartment would be their tomb, but the more she thought about that, the more it seemed appropriate—almost like the pharaohs sent to the afterlife with all of their possessions. Her parents would rest surrounded by pictures of their friends and family and the items that had defined their daily lives. But the people in the car . . . A sob tore from her throat, louder than normal because she had been trying to hold it back. And then she was crying and unable to stop. Kneeling on the bridge over Juneau Harbor, she wept for a world that was dead and gone.

Justin pulled her into his arms and whispered soft, soothing things. He rocked her and let her cry against his chest until her sobs had diminished into hiccups. A wet nose pressed against her face, and Sam cleaned her tears off her cheeks. His amber eyes were strangely compassionate, as if he understood more about the world around him than an animal should.

"Better?" Justin asked, smoothing back her tumbled hair.

"Yes, I'm sorry, I just . . ."

"It was overdue. You needed to get it out." His smile was gentle, and she gazed into his eyes, so dark brown they seemed almost black from some angles. Though the color should have made them seem sinister, they were warm and kind. She lost track of time for a moment, gazing into their depths before Sam jarred her back to reality by bumping her with his head.

Carly realized she was draped over Justin and struggled to her feet. Justin rose, as graceful as a ballet dancer, and took her hand. She held onto it long after they had finished crossing the bridge.

Chapter Two

The door to the gun store was solid metal with a set of bars over the top of it. The windows were darkly tinted and menacing, covered with bars as well, and placed high on the walls. Justin couldn't simply bash his way inside this one. He reached into his pocket and took out a kit of tiny tools. "Hold these for me."

Carly held out her hands, cupping the little tool kit of tiny, pick-like instruments. "What is this?"

"Lock-picking kit." Justin knelt down in front of the door. He inserted one of the tools into the keyhole and jiggled it before selecting another one and inserting it above the first.

"Where did you learn how to pick locks?" Carly asked, both impressed and a little horrified.

"Gymboree."

She giggled, and he turned to grin at her before selecting a different tool.

Within moments, the lock clicked, and he pushed the door open with caution. "Stay out here for a minute," Justin said, and she certainly wasn't going to argue. He slipped inside, and she saw his flashlight beam bounce around through the window beside the door.

"Come on in."

Carly pushed her cart to the side and parked it next to Justin's. She and Sam walked inside in a pool of light from her flashlight. She flashed it around the room and gave an impressed hum to see almost all of the stock intact. The store was overcrowded with merchandise. Racks of hunting clothing took up most of the floor space. Carly wove her way between them to the back where Justin was selecting guns from the wall behind the

counter.

“Yeah, I know. No looting.”

“This shop is—*was*— owned by John Drake. Knowing him, he probably sat outside the door with a loaded shotgun and dared people to try it.”

“Have you ever fired a gun, Carly?”

“My dad took me to the shooting range once.”

“Just once?” Justin seemed surprised. “I would have thought . . . Well, never mind. Do you remember how it’s done?”

“Just point and pull the trigger.” Carly shuffled her feet. He seemed to be indicating he wanted her to have a gun, and she was a little uncomfortable with the idea. Why did he want her to have it, anyway? So he’d be more comfortable with leaving her behind when he moved on?

“It’s a tad more complicated, but that’s a good start, at least.” Justin smashed the butt of his flashlight into the top of a glass case containing pistols and plucked one off the velvet liner. “Hold this one and tell me how it feels.”

Carly took it. She rotated her wrist and looked down at it. “It feels like a gun.”

“Silly girl, hold it like you’re going to shoot it.”

She slipped her finger through the trigger guard and gripped the butt with her palm. “It’s awkward. It makes my hand hurt to stretch that much.”

“Try this one.” Justin handed her a smaller gun, and this one fit into her hand perfectly.

“It’s a twenty-two, so it’s not going to have a lot of power or range, but it will work well on close targets.” Justin hopped over the counter and began to fill one of the store’s shopping bags with small boxes of ammunition. “Give me your tote. We need to take as much of this as we can.”

“What kind?”

“Any of it. If it won’t work in our guns, it will be excellent for trading.”

“You keep talking about trading. With *whom*?”

“We’re sure to meet other people on the road.”

What road? And then she remembered what he had said about leaving. *Going to . . . Where was it? Florida, or something like that?* And then she realized he’d said *we* as though he assumed she would be going along. She felt her temper flare but another idea occurred to her. She forgot about her anger as her eyes widened and her heart sped up. “Do you think there are places where the Infection didn’t reach? Places that are still normal?”

Justin stopped taking boxes from the shelf and turned to her, his dark eyes full of sorrow. “No, Carly. There aren’t any places that weren’t hit by the Infection. I had contacts in other countries, all around the world. No place was left unscathed. There isn’t any ‘normal’ anymore.”

Carly blinked hard, trying to force back her tears. She didn’t want to accept it. She didn’t want to believe it. But she couldn’t hide from the truth any longer. She saw the gun lying on the counter, and for just a moment, she considered—

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Justin put his hand over it and said her name, his voice low and soft. Carly shook her head and turned back to the ammunition, raking boxes into her tote bag.

He selected a few more guns, placing them inside a long tote case he found in the accessories section. Carly winced a little when she saw some of those evil-looking rifles. She was relatively uncomfortable with a handgun. She hoped he didn't expect her to use one of those black machine guns.

Justin selected a folding crossbow and took all of the arrows in stock.

"What's that for?"

"It's silent."

Carly didn't want to think about scenarios where that would be important. She helped him load the guns and ammo into their carts without comment.

They walked back across the bridge. Carly kept her eyes glued to the sidewalk this time and didn't look up until they reached the other side. She trudged behind Justin, leaning on her cart handle as she went.

"Go on upstairs," Justin said when they reached the apartment building. "I'll carry this stuff up."

"I'll help."

Justin shuffled through the bags and handed her several of the light ones, and then he tied the handles of two bags together and laid them over Sam's back, who seemed very proud to be carrying part of the load. Carly trudged up the stairs and unlocked her door. Sam bolted inside and went straight to his water bowl, lapping eagerly.

Carly smacked her forehead. "Oh, Sam, I'm sorry! I should have thought to take along some water for you."

"What's wrong?" Justin asked, a huge mass of shopping bags dangling from each hand.

"He was *thirsty!*" Carly pulled another bottle of water from the case on her counter and poured it into his bowl. Sam wagged his tail and gave her hand a lick of thanks.

"Carly, it's okay. He was fine."

"I'm so inconsiderate!" Maybe it was the combined stress of the day, or maybe she hadn't cried out all of her tears on the bridge. Whatever it was, Carly felt like she was an inch or so away from collapsing into a blubbery mess.

"Stop," Justin said, and his voice was so calm and firm, she felt a little foolish. Her embarrassment actually helped to get herself under control. She didn't want Justin to think she was a flake. "Don't beat yourself up over this. He was fine. Now, come here and help me put some of this stuff away. I don't know where you put things, but I imagine there's some alphabetizing involved."

Carly flushed a little, but she was able to give him a small smile. "It makes things easier to find."

"I'm sure it does. I'm more of a *shove-things-around-and-swear-until-*

you-find-it kind of guy.” He started opening bags and placing the items on the counter. Carly smiled at him, though his back was to her and he couldn’t see it. She appreciated his attempts to lighten the situation with humor. A few days ago, she never would have imagined the scary-looking Biker Guy could be so kind.

She tried for a joke of her own. “It’s not your fault. You’re a man, and you didn’t evolve to be able to find things.”

“Okay, I’ve gotta hear the explanation for this.” Justin crossed his arms and leaned back against the refrigerator while Carly put away the canned food. He smiled at her in encouragement.

“It’s simple, really. Our brains developed in different ways because of the different tasks we had. Men just had to run around, find something to bash over the head, and drag back to camp as food, while women had to remember where the berry bushes and fruit trees were. So, we women ended up with a better visual memory, and you guys ended up standing in front of the refrigerator, yelling, ‘Honey, where’s the ketchup?’”

“That is an interesting theory.” Justin chuckled and scratched his chin. “Another theory is we don’t want to waste time looking for stuff, so we yell to ask you where it is since you’re the one who probably put it away.”

Carly closed the cupboard doors as she tried to smother a grin. “You’d rather be thought of as lazy, than accept women have superior brains?”

“Ah, but we men are better at bashing things.”

“Conceded.” Carly went over to the line of bags along the wall that contained the drugs and guns—an awful-sounding combination. “Where do you want to put this stuff?”

“Do you have a spare bedroom?”

“Yeah, it’s down the hall, second door to the right.” Justin hauled it all into the bedroom, except for the bag he brought back with the explanation that it contained her *girl stuff*. Carly snatched it from him with a bit of a blush and took it into the bathroom. There, she stared with longing at the toilet. She really had to pee, but what could she do?

She opened the door. “Um, Justin, could you come here for a moment?”

He stepped up to the door. “Yes?”

“There’s no way to make my toilet work.” Carly bit her lip. “Any suggestions?”

“Since I suppose using a bucket is out of the question, I’ll walk down to the creek and get a few buckets of water you can use for flushing.”

Carly beamed at him. “Thank you! Hey, where have you—” She stopped. “Never mind.”

Justin laughed as he headed out the apartment door.



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Carly thought about it while he was gone and came to a decision as he came through the door, carrying two large pails of water.

“Justin?”

“Yeah?” He put both buckets in the bathroom and took off the lid of her toilet tank.

“I was thinking you could stay in the spare room if you wanted. You don’t have to sleep out in the hall.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Carly. I’ll do that.” His smile told her he understood what a big step she was taking toward trusting him by allowing him to stay in her home.

Carly shuffled her feet for a moment and then headed back into the kitchen. She was a little nervous about it, truth be told. No man had ever stayed in her apartment with her, and she still wasn’t certain she could trust him. But he’d been good to her, kind to Sam, and helpful in ways she didn’t fully comprehend yet. She was thinking about her situation with a clearer mind since they’d talked about it.

Carly opened two cans of pork and beans and poured them into bowls. A cold dinner, but at least they’d have something. If it had been left up to Carly, she would probably be staring with dull helplessness into her empty cabinets, wondering what to do next. She owed a lot to Justin already.

“What’s for dinner, honey?” Justin asked with a grin.

“Pork ‘n’ beans. Eat it while it’s cold.”

He chuckled. “If you’d prefer, I could go outside and start a fire, and we can heat it up and eat hot food like civilized people.”

“Too much effort.” Carly shoveled in her first bite.

“Have you given any more thought to your situation here, Carly?”

She set the bowl down on the counter, no longer hungry. “I have. I think you’re right. I don’t have what I need here to survive. And as much as I hate it, I think I’ll have to leave. I don’t know if I want to go to Florida, but I have to find a better place to live than my apartment. Maybe a house with a fireplace or something.”

“Do you know how difficult it is to keep a house warm using only a wood fireplace or stove?”

“No, not really.” Carly admitted it with a bit of reluctance. “I know there are lots of people who do it, so it can’t be too bad, right?”

Justin shook his head. “For one person? Chopping all that wood?”

“*Chopping*. What do you mean? Like, cutting down trees?” She had been leaning more toward finding wood to burn. There was a hardware store on the other side of town that sold lumber but she’d still have to cut that up, wouldn’t she?

He chuckled, and Carly felt a flare of anger. “Look, I’m sorry I don’t know this stuff. I may look stupid to you, but I—”

“Wait, Carly, no, I don’t think you’re stupid.” His humor vanished the instant he realized she’d been stung by his comment, and his voice gentled. “You just don’t have an inkling of what it takes; most people wouldn’t if

they had no experience with it. But, you need to understand we're talking about life and death here. You could freeze to death if you didn't know what to do, or if you weren't able to get enough wood split to keep you warm over winter. Even with chainsaws and log-splitters, it's a lot of work. That's why I suggested a warmer climate. It would be better for you in the long run."

"I've never been out of Alaska," Carly said. She wasn't sure she could explain to him how awful a prospect it was to leave everything behind, to give up on the idea the world might return to normal if she just waited there instead of abandoning her hope and home.

"I've never been to Florida." Justin took a large bite of his cold pork and beans and chewed with relish. "Here's the thing." He pulled a paper towel off the roll beside the sink and used it as a napkin. "We need to leave *soon*. It's going to be a very long journey, and I don't think we'll manage to make it all the way to Florida, or even south of the Mason-Dixon for that matter, before the winter sets in. So we have to hurry and get as far as possible in the time we have left."

Carly hesitated before asking, since she knew it was another dumb question, but she had to know. "If we can't take a car or a motorcycle, what are we going to do?"

"Ride bicycles. Walk."

"Justin, you're talking four thousand miles here." The idea of moving into a house across town had been daunting enough, let alone the idea of traveling across most of North America.

"I know. It took me about one hundred and thirty days to do the entire Appalachian Trail, and I was going a lot faster by myself than I'll likely be able to go with you."

"How many miles did you hike in a day?"

"Most days, about fifteen to twenty, depending on the roughness of the trail. Since you're not an experienced hiker, I'm expecting us to make five to ten, at least at first."

"What about if we ride bicycles?"

"Double it. Maybe twenty miles per day, at first. More, as you get stronger. Some experienced cyclists can do eighty miles in a day."

Carly shook her head. "You're talking about more than half a year, maybe more."

"Do you understand, then, why I want to leave as soon as possible?"

"Couldn't we go somewhere else, somewhere closer, like Los Angeles? It's always warm down there."

"But arid. The irrigation systems might not work without electricity and regular maintenance. We need to go somewhere we can grow enough food to sustain ourselves. Florida has an excellent climate for farming. I'm not saying we *have* to get all the way to Florida. There are other states in the South that would have a good climate for us, but I'm thinking of Florida as my goal. We may be able to use different vehicles during sections of our

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trip, but that's not a guarantee. The ones we find may have dead batteries, or the fuel could have gone bad. If we encountered a roadblock or traffic jam, we'd have to unload the vehicle and try to find another. Bikes are more reliable."

"Do you actually have this planned out, or is it just an idea you have?"

Justin chuckled. "Once you get to know me, Carly, you'll find I have *everything* planned out." He went out into the hallway and grabbed one of the bags that contained his gear. He opened up the front pocket and withdrew a map. A route had been highlighted, cutting across Canada and through the US, a bumpy line, but almost perfectly diagonal. She saw the first part of the journey took them north to Haines and then to Skagway. From there, they took the only highway east, through the mountains, into Canada.

"But the ferry isn't running."

"I know how to operate a boat."

"Is there *anything* you don't know how to do?" she asked, a hint of a sour note in her voice.

"I can't play the piano, and I can't dance."

Carly tilted her head. "Did they teach you all this stuff in the army?"

Justin's eyes were guarded. "Some of it, yes."

She traced her finger over the long line. "What if I refuse to go?"

"I can't leave you here to die, Carly."

Die? She gave him a startled look, but he didn't back off and admit to exaggeration or soften the comment with a shrug or smile. Instead, he looked straight into her eyes, and his steady gaze told her he wasn't trying to scare her or embellish. He saw it as an inevitable consequence if she were left there on her own, not as a possibility.

She looked away, unable to meet his eyes any longer. "Because you knew my dad?"

"No, not just because of the promise I made when I joined The Unit, but because I fancy myself to be a decent fucking human being. One way or another, I'm going to have to convince you, but I hope to hell it doesn't take very long."

"What about Sam?"

"What about him? He's a wolf. They're tough, and they're built to run for hours without tiring."

She was thankful he wasn't going to try to insist she leave him behind.

"Listen to me, Carly, I know you don't know me very well yet, but you'll find I'm a person who keeps my promises. And I promise you I will do my best to keep you safe, warm, and fed. I'm your best shot at survival." He tugged up the sleeve of his T-shirt and showed her the symbol tattooed there, the same symbol that was on her father's ring. "This once meant something. It meant enough that I had it permanently etched into my skin because it's a part of me. It wasn't just a military unit. It was a code of honor. I may be the last man standing, but I swear to Christ I'm not going

to let that code die, too.”

And gazing into his eyes, Carly believed him. She might have very little experience of the world, but she knew sincerity when she saw it. He truly cared about what happened to her, for whatever reason. Her doubts and fears warred with her instincts, which told her Justin was what he presented himself to be. He was a nice guy with a mischievous sense of humor and a strong sense of honor and duty. Her father had told her to trust no one, but he had also told her about the symbol and what it meant to the men who wore it.

“I’m scared,” Carly said. She felt her cheeks warm in embarrassment at the admission, but she felt like he deserved her honesty.

“I am, too. None of this is going to be easy, but I’d put our chances at reaching Florida higher than most.”

“That doesn’t sound too encouraging.”

Justin was quiet for a long moment. “Do you want me to be honest or comforting?”

Carly blinked when tears stung her eyes again. He already thought she was stupid. She didn’t want to add whiny to the list. “Just for a little while, can you be optimistic?”

He took her hand in his own. “Sure, honey. I understand.”



The first thing Justin wanted to do was find a wagon and a pair of bicycles. Carly directed him to the bicycle shop, which was not far from the bridge, and he returned on a bike, towing a trailer with another bike stowed inside. The wagon was the size of a queen-size bed, with a metal mesh floor and waist-high sides of tubular metal rails. It was surprisingly light when she tried to lift it.

He’d also brought them helmets. Both of them were blue, and she wondered if he’d intentionally selected a matching set or if there weren’t many options.

“We don’t know the road conditions we’ll encounter. We could go around a curve and . . . well, I don’t want to risk a head injury.”

Carly tried hers on and found it was a perfect fit. She turned and saw Justin grinning at her.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen anyone who actually looked cute in one of those before.”

Cute. He thought she was cute. Carly blushed and pulled the helmet off.

She helped him load the wagon, and Justin surprised her with how organized he was about it. He stacked the supplies they weren’t going to use right away—such as the antibiotics and the ammo that didn’t fit their guns—on the bottom.

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The night before, Justin sat at the kitchen counter and had taken apart some of the guns. He used a small, metal file on some part inside the scary-looking black rifles. Carly had watched with interest. “What are you doing?”

“Turning them from semi-auto to full auto.” Justin handed the reassembled rifle to Carly, who turned to carry it into the spare room.

“Something else you picked up at Gymboree?”

“Yep. You know, you look kinda hot carrying that.”

Carly blushed and kept her face turned away from him as she headed for the spare room. Was he teasing her, or was he actually flirting with her? Carly didn’t know. She wished men came with an instruction manual.

That morning, Justin had told her she needed to decide what she was taking, but he cautioned her to remember they didn’t have much space, and weight was an important consideration. “I know you’d rather leave your things here than have to abandon them alongside the trail.”

Carly had ended up taking the string of pearls her father had given her mother for their tenth anniversary and her father’s ring—the one with his unit symbol. She tucked the *Lord of the Rings* DVD into her bag when Justin wasn’t looking. She knew she’d probably never be able to watch it again, but it was her last happy memory with her father before everything had gone to hell.

She took just a few changes of clothes, as he had suggested. She chose two pairs of cotton yoga pants and a small selection of short- and long-sleeve T-shirts that could be layered. A handful of sports bras, boy shorts-style underpants and several pairs of socks completed her packing. Justin looked over her selections with approval, suggesting only that she add a pair of jeans and a sweater for cooler weather.

Sam’s bag of dog food went into the wagon, along with his soft pallet bed and a few favorite toys. Carly insisted if they had sleeping bags, Sam should have a comfortable place to sleep, too. Justin rigged up a water bowl on the back of the wagon so Sam would always be able to get a drink when he was thirsty. Carly thought that was sweet and considerate of him.

And then it was time to go. Somehow, even with all the preparations and packing, the reality of it hadn’t sunk in. She cried herself to sleep the night before, and in the morning she made a slow circuit around her apartment saying good-bye to her things. Her dad had bought her the recliner, joking Carly would never get herself a man unless she had a soft, comfortable recliner for football-watching. Her mom had bought all of Carly’s infrequently used pots and pans, proud when her daughter had set out on her own, even if *on her own* was just two floors above her parents’ place. Her grandmother Sally had made the quilt that lay over her bed, which Carly had smoothed into place with gentle hands when she got out of her bed for the last time. Carly knew, without asking, it was too heavy and bulky to take with them, but leaving it behind hurt just the same.

She chose a handful of pictures from her refrigerator door. Her favorite

photo of her parents at their anniversary party the year before. Her aunt Laura with her twin sons, laughing when the boys had smeared their birthday cake all over their chubby little cheeks. Grandma Sally, with a group of distant family at one of the reunions they used to have every few years, and a picture of Grandpa Mike in his uniform, before he'd been killed in the Vietnam War.

Carly was leaving behind everything she had ever known. Though they were gone, it was still hard to leave behind the place where her family, her friends, her security. . . everything had been. It wasn't easy for her, but Justin didn't tease her for her tears, and she was very grateful for that.

Carly locked the door for the last time, and put the key on the long chain around her neck with her father's ring. "I'm never coming back, am I?"

"It's not very likely," Justin said, his eyes full of sympathy.

Carly nodded and took a deep breath before she followed Justin down the stairs. When they reached the ground floor, she went down the hall to her parents' apartment and laid her hand against the door for a moment. She fought back tears as she slipped a note she'd written to them beneath it.

It was a bright and sunny morning. They wheeled their bicycles outside, and Justin hooked his bike to the wagon. Sam bounced around with glee, excited to go on another walk with his humans.

Carly looked back one last time as they mounted the bikes, and then they set off for the short ride to the harbor. Justin had already selected a sailboat, and they found they had to unload the wagon before they could lift it inside. Repacking it took some time, and Carly grew irritable with the process knowing they'd have to do it all over again once they reached their destination.

Sam wasn't sure about riding in a boat and didn't want to jump on board even when Carly called to him and tried to coax him aboard. Justin wound up having to pick him up and plunk him down in the boat beside Carly. She felt Sam tremble a little, so she sat down on the deck beside him after strapping a child-sized life jacket around his torso.

It was nearly one hundred miles to Haines, so Carly opened up one of the paperbacks she'd taken with her as Justin pulled ropes and rigged the sails. She wished she could have brought her e-reader, which had contained thousands of books, but she doubted she'd have been able to charge it. Like her other things, she would rather leave it in her home than have to abandon it later.

Justin glanced down at her. "Whatcha reading?"

"Thomas Pynchon's *Mason-Dixon*."

Justin whistled. "I could never get into Pynchon. Too dense for me."

"He takes some getting used to," Carly said with a nod, and from there, they launched into a pleasant chat about their favorite books and authors. He confessed a love for *Wuthering Heights*, and Carly admitted a weakness for Dean Koontz. It was a fun conversation until the thought hit her there wouldn't be any more Dean Koontz novels. No more books, no more

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movies, no more music. All of it was gone, and she still didn't know why this awful thing had happened.

"Justin, did you ever hear anything from your sources about what *caused* the Infection?"

"No. As far as I know, no one ever knew. If the government knew anything about it, they weren't talking. I suppose we were just . . . due."

"What do you mean?"

"Humanity hasn't had a widespread plague since 1918. Before that, before the CDC, we used to have them with relative regularity. The Black Death, yellow fever, smallpox, typhoid, cholera . . . Things you don't see in developed nations any longer because of our hygiene, inoculations, and the swift response of the CDC and the WHO when outbreaks occurred. But this one was so insidious. The incubation period was so long . . . People infected hundreds of others before they even knew they were sick. This was no ordinary virus. The lethality rate alone tells me it wasn't something natural."

"What else could it be?"

"Something weaponized." Justin's expression was grim.

"Created in a lab? Someone made this evil thing *intentionally*?" Carly slumped in her seat, stunned and sickened someone could have done such a thing.

Justin hesitated when he saw her reaction, but he answered truthfully, and for that, she was grateful. "I think so, yes."

"And what, it got loose or something? Someone spilled a test tube of it?"

Justin shook his head. "Paris, London, Beijing, New Delhi, Moscow, Osaka, São Paulo . . . My contacts reported almost simultaneous outbreaks. It was intentionally released in the most populous cities all over the world."

"Terrorists?"

"Perhaps."

"Are we immune?"

"It seems that way. You took care of your parents while they were sick. If you weren't immune, you should have caught it for certain from sustained close contact. But even if we're immune, we could be carriers."

"Like Typhoid Mary?"

Justin nodded. "It's possible. There's no way for us to know for sure at this point."

"Were you around any sick people?"

"I was camping when the Crisis hit. I stayed out in the woods until . . . until it was over, but if I wasn't immune, I should have caught it as soon as I came into the city. There were still Infected wandering around. And I wouldn't be surprised if the virus lingered in the environment, perhaps in the water supply or even in the air itself."

"I thought viruses died fast if they didn't have a host."

Justin shrugged. "Some do. Others can survive outside a host for days, even weeks, in some cases. If they made a weaponized virus, they'd ensure

it was able to survive for long periods outside the body.”

“Only two survivors out of over thirty thousand people in Juneau,” Carly mused.

“There may have been others. We don’t know. They could have hidden from us. Or they could have died after the Crisis was over from accidents, suicide, or health issues. People with medical conditions like diabetes would be unable to get their medicine. Most modern people aren’t prepared to survive, and more will die when winter comes.”

Carly fell silent. If Justin hadn’t found her, she would have been one of them. She would still be sitting in her apartment, numb with shock and grief.

Justin chose not to dock at the pier where the ferry would have docked and Carly saw why as they passed. There were dozens of bodies on the dock, people who had undoubtedly been waiting for the ferry to evacuate, waiting for a boat that never came. The gulls on the bodies took flight as they sailed by, and Carly looked away. Birds, apparently, were immune to the Infection. Nature was not respectful of the dead.

“I haven’t seen any dogs or cats,” Carly noted. “We used to have a couple of bears that came into town and ate from trash cans. I haven’t seen any, and you’d think without the Fish and Wildlife people chasing them off, they’d be scavenging in town.”

“From what I’ve seen, it looks like many mammals weren’t immune, though I’ve seen some rabbits and squirrels. Domestic animals seem to have fared the worst. I’d guess it was because of their close, continual contact with humans. In a way, I suppose it was a mercy since they wouldn’t have anyone to take care of them any longer.”

Carly thought of dogs and cats trapped inside their houses, of farm animals waiting in their pens and pastures for their owners to take care of them, and she had to agree. At least they didn’t have to endure a lingering death from starvation.

Justin docked the boat and Sam jumped out as soon as it came to a halt, as though he were grateful to be back on dry land. Justin lifted Carly out, and then she helped him get the bikes up to the dock. They had to unload the wagon again and then repack it once they had it on the dock. By the end of that process, it was late afternoon, and Justin suggested they stay in town and move on in the morning.

They found a little motel nearby and Justin came back from the office with two room keys. His eyes kept flicking around, watching their surroundings intently. She didn’t know what he was looking for, and that concerned her. Sam picked up on his tension and remained alert, his ears swiveling like little satellite dishes, listening for sounds that might indicate danger.

Their rooms were adjoining, something that made Carly feel relieved. Just a few days ago, she’d been terrified of the Biker Guy, and suddenly she was afraid to be without him. Justin carried in their bags while Carly

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scooped out a bowl of food for Sam and filled his dish with clean water.

Carly went into the bathroom and tried the taps. She squealed with delight when water flowed from them and ran into Justin's room to announce she was taking a shower.

"It'll be cold," he said, warning her.

"I don't care. It'll be such a relief to get all of this grime off me." She'd felt gross for days, since the water in her apartment stopped working, even though she wiped herself down every evening. The shower was icy but felt wonderful, and Carly washed as quickly as possible. She didn't want to use up all the water, not when Justin still had to shower. She dried off, picked up her clothes, and gagged. She knew they were clean, but they *reeked*. They smelled like death, and she couldn't bring herself to put them on.

She wrapped herself in towels and went back into her room. "Justin?"

"Mm?" He poked his head through the adjoining door and did a double take to find Carly wearing only white towels.

"I can't wear my clothes. They smell *awful*."

He nodded. "You were used to the smell. You didn't even notice it, but you were in a building with hundreds of dead people."

"Ugh! I can't . . ."

Justin considered for a moment. "Tell you what, why don't you wash your things out in the bathtub, and I'll go out to that store down the street and see if I can find anything clean for you to wear in the meantime. Okay?"

"Are you sure it's safe?" Carly chewed on her lower lip. She wasn't sure if she wanted to be left alone there.

"I won't be long," he said, and he gave her a reassuring smile. "If you get scared, all you have to do is shout. I should be able to hear you down the block." He went into his room and fished around in his bags until he came up with a T-shirt and shorts for her to wear. A faint odor clung to them, but it was tolerable.

"Give me all of your clothes," Carly said.

Justin playfully grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and whipped it over his head. "Yes, ma'am!"

Carly swatted his shoulder. "Not the stuff you're *wearing*. The stuff in your bags. It stinks a little, too."

Justin put his T-shirt back on. "Carly, you don't have to wash my clothes. I'll do it myself when I get back."

"I can at least start them soaking. I really don't mind. Maybe some bleach . . ."

"No, don't use that. We need it for purifying water. I'll get you some vinegar while I'm out."

"You're putting *bleach* in our drinking water?"

"Just a little. A few drops per gallon. I'll show you when I get back. Which reminds me, don't drink from the taps. Use our bottled water. I'll be right back. Put on the slide locks and don't open the door for anyone."

“I won’t.”

He laid her small gun on the night stand. “Be careful with this. It’s loaded and the safety is off. All you have to do is aim and shoot, okay? Don’t hesitate to use it if you have to.”

“Are we in danger?” The idea of being alone in the world was terrible, but so was the idea there might be dangerous people lurking around. Like many people, she lived in her own little bubble where crime was something that happened to others. With her dad downstairs and a police officer living down the hall, Carly had always felt safe. But currently there were no police officers, either to protect people or to arrest criminals. They were on their own.

Justin hesitated. “My spidey-sense is tingling. I think there’s someone here, watching us. Maybe they’re just as afraid as you were when you first saw me, but let’s be cautious.” He slung one of the rifles over his shoulder and wore it along with his pistol and knife.

“I’ve changed my mind. Don’t go out, Justin.”

“I’ll be fine, Carly. Don’t worry.” And with that, he gave her a swift hug and went out the door. Carly flipped the slide lock and engaged the deadbolt. She watched him through the window until he disappeared around a corner, then she sat down on the bed and opened her bag. She took out the *Lord of the Rings* DVD and traced her finger over the raised lettering on the cover.

She and her dad had watched it during that period when her mom seemed to have just a slight cold. Gloria had gone to bed, but Carly and her dad couldn’t sleep.

They had been watching the news all day. She remembered having the same feeling of shock and disbelief watching the Twin Towers fall when she was eleven. She’d been home with the flu that day and watched the whole thing live. This was so much worse, probably because the horror was sustained with new images every day, day after day. There was footage of hospitals so crowded the doctors had only a few inches of space to walk between the Infected—lying on cots, lying on blankets, and lying on the bare floor. There were piles of bodies outside, stacked like logs. Mass graves were dug by bulldozers. There were riots, looting, and cities ablaze with no one left to fight the fires. Roadblocks were put up to try to fight the spread of the disease, but people stubbornly streamed around them. There were not enough National Guard or regular troops left, not enough police. Not enough anything.

Once upon a time, the government might have been able to control the flow of information, but today’s media was too widespread, too interactive for that. Thousands of people were filming the Crisis with cell phones, iPads, and cameras, uploading the video to the Internet, and sending it to news organizations. The Internet went down at one point, and people accused the government of sabotaging it, but tech buffs all over the country had an “Undernet” up and running within days. Pirate radio stations

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informed people how to use it.

Carl heaved himself off the sofa and went into the kitchen. He returned with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. He poured an inch or so of the liquor into each and handed one to Carly. She wasn't much of a drinker, and she'd certainly never drunk with her dad, but she took the glass from him and sipped from it until it was empty. Carl refilled it, along with his.

The television showed scenes of looting and senseless destruction. One man stood in the front window of an electronics store hurling televisions to the sidewalk out front, smashing them for the apparent fun of it. He was probably Infected, his mind burned away by the fever, but at the time Carly couldn't understand what she was seeing. There was just a constant barrage of nightmarish images her mind tried to deny. Police officers beaten to death when they tried to hold the crowds back. Refugees streaming from cities, weaving between stalled and wrecked cars. From interviews they gave to reporters, many of the refugees had no idea where they were going. They were compelled by instinct to flee from the specter of Death. Some were following rumors there were places in other parts of the country where the Infection had not spread.

Some communities attempted to isolate themselves. One mayor was lynched after he had tried to seal off his town to prevent the Infection from entering. He was killed by enraged townspeople who wanted to bring their families there, where it was "safe." They didn't understand or accept that bringing others in would destroy that safety.

"*Things fall apart, Sugar Bear,*" Carl said, and his voice held a hollow note she had never heard before. "*The center does not hold.*"

He flipped the channel, and there was a preacher behind a pulpit, his face burning red and his eyes bleary with fever, raving that the president had released the virus to kill Christians. On the next channel, a talk show host was insisting the virus had been released by religious zealots trying to bring on Armageddon. An "analyst" on another channel declared it could only be the work of terrorists, and they needed to start bombing immediately before it was too late.

The president himself was on the next channel pleading for peace and order, and begging people to obey the quarantine orders. He swore the government and the CDC were doing all they could to stop the spread of the Infection and find a cure.

"He's in the bunker," Carl said.

"How can you tell? What bunker?"

"The curtain in the background, see how it's folded at the edge there? The cinder block wall behind it? There's a bunker in a secret location where the top government officials are supposed to be moved in case of emergencies just like this. We used to call it the 'Bug-Out Bunker.'" Carl refilled their glasses again.

Carly's hand shook so hard she sloshed some of the liquor out of the glass. She set it on the end table before she spilled it all and dropped her

face into her hands. Her dad rubbed comforting circles on her back until she managed to get herself under control again.

“Hey, why don’t we watch a movie, Sugar Bear?”

“Okay.” Carly’s voice didn’t sound like her own. She liked the idea, liked the thought of being able to escape for just a little while.

“Go put something in. I’ll make us some popcorn.”

Carly had grabbed the first one off the shelf and put the disc into the player, not knowing what she had chosen until the first scene began. And so they had watched all three *Lord of the Rings* movies because Carly didn’t want to go back to watching the news, and when the movie was over, she’d feel like she had to. She had laid her head on her father’s shoulder, and they’d watched the movies as things fell apart all around them. But for a few, precious moments, they escaped reality.

Carly put the DVD back into her pack. Her father had been looking forward to *The Hobbit*. They’d never get the chance to watch it together, and that thought made her throat tighten. Sam, sensitive as always to her moods, hopped up beside her on the bed and laid his head on her thigh.

A large shadow crossed in front of her window, and Carly gasped. She ducked down behind the bed. The shadow moved away, and she heard something clatter, like metal on concrete. It wasn’t Justin. He wouldn’t lurk outside, moving back and forth as though he were searching for a good hiding place.

Carly picked up the gun and gritted her teeth. She had never thought she’d be able to kill anyone in cold blood. It just wasn’t in her nature. But imagining whoever was out there setting up an ambush for Justin made her willing. Carly crept over to the door, crouched low. Sam joined her, crouching himself, his ears pointed forward like horns, and when that clatter sounded again, he gave a soft growl. She had to stand to flip the latch, but she sank back down. *Deep breath. You can do this.*

Carly opened the door in a flash and held the gun out with both hands, prepared to take the shot . . . and found herself staring into the face of a curious horse. Carly was so surprised she lost her balance and fell back onto her ass. The horse lowered its head and snuffled at her. At her side, Sam sniffed back at the horse, and the horse recoiled a bit, its instincts telling it the smell of a wolf meant danger. But it appeared the horse’s fear was outweighed by the desire for companionship since it didn’t retreat.

Carly stood and the horse turned its massive head to look her over with one of its large, soft brown eyes. She reached out and stroked its nose. “What are you doing here, horse? I thought none of you survived the Infection.” She supposed if some people were immune, the same would hold true for animals. And this poor horse must be lonely.

“Are you a girl horse or a boy horse?” Carly peeked beneath it. “Ah! A girl horse.” The horse’s brown coat was shiny, with white socks on all four legs and a lightning-shaped streak down the center of her face. She wore a red halter which had the word “Cloud” stitched on it. “Is that your name?”

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Cloud? You don't look like a Cloud to me."

The horse pushed forward with the obvious intent of coming inside and making herself comfortable.

"Oh, no you don't. No horses on the bed." Carly took hold of the horse's halter and pulled her out of the room, just in time to see Justin coming across the parking lot.

"What the fuck?" he said succinctly.

"I found a horse!" Carly chirped. "I think I'll name her Shadowfax."

The horse lipped at Carly's fingers. Carly giggled and stroked her neck.

"Carly . . . you *named* her?" Justin looked dismayed. "What are you going to do with her?"

"She can come with us." Carly gave Justin no room for argument. Just like Sam, Shadowfax wouldn't survive on her own, and Carly couldn't bear to abandon her to a lonely, miserable fate. "Maybe if we find a saddle, I can ride her instead of the bike."

"Have you ever ridden a horse before?"

"No. But how hard can it be?"

Justin rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Why not? She can pull the wagon, so you don't have to hook it up to your bike."

"Horses need to be taken care of, Carly. If she's going to follow us on the roads, she'll need shoes or her hooves will split."

Carly looked at the horse's feet. She saw a hint of silver metal below each hoof. "I think she has them."

"Right. But what if she throws a shoe?"

"I don't know, Justin, but we can't just leave her here." Carly crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Aw, Christ . . ."

She could tell he was wavering and had to suppress a grin. "And horses eat grass, right? She'll find plenty of that along the road."

"I've been around horses, some. Not much, but enough to know they need more than just grass."

"How do wild horses survive, then?"

Justin swore under his breath and turned the wagon around. "I'm going to the goddamn feed store." As he walked away, she heard him mutter, ". . . *Pied Piper of the Apocalypse* . . ."



Shadowfax stayed in the small grass lot beside the motel all night. Carly got up several times to check on her, peeking through the curtains to make sure she was unharmed. In the morning, Justin slung the bags of feed onto Shadowfax's back and tied them in place.

“She can carry her own food,” Justin said in a tone that dared Carly to argue.

“I don’t think she minds,” Carly responded cheerfully, still secretly gleeful over her victory in keeping the horse.

They climbed onto their bicycles and set off down the road, Shadowfax and Sam following behind them. Shadowfax seemed a little leery of Sam, but Sam seemed to like her, and a couple of times he tried to engage her in chasing games. Shadowfax didn’t speak canine, so Sam’s play bows and yips didn’t mean anything to her. She plodded on behind her new human herd.

It was a lovely day for travel. The sun shone brightly through the trees, and the birds sang as though the world was still the same. In the woods, Carly could pretend it was.

They passed cars stalled on the road, people who had tried to flee for the countryside and had gotten stuck in some sort of traffic jam. At the end of the line of cars, they saw the accident that had caused the traffic jam. It was not much more than a fender bender, but apparently, the people had waited for the police and tow trucks to come as they would have when the world was normal. Carly wasn’t the only one who hadn’t understood or accepted things had changed. The opposite side of the road was empty, but the cars hadn’t tried to take advantage of the clear lane. She wondered why none of them had decided to simply drive down the other side of the road, but she supposed they had obeyed the law up until the very end, just as she had written checks for the things she took from the store.

Carly was very careful not to look inside the cars. Justin, however, stopped on occasion and took something he felt would be useful. He found a rifle, a gallon of water, a case of canned food . . .

At her look, he said softly, “Carly, they don’t need it anymore.”

“It still feels wrong.”

Their route went along Tanani Bay, and when they reached their destination, there was a pier with a ferry boat sitting idle in the dock. The ferry was large, with an open back that allowed for cars to be driven onto it. Justin loaded the bikes, the wagon, and one reluctant horse, who didn’t like the way the vessel shifted beneath her hooves.

“Stay back, Carly. She could kick.”

Carly didn’t have to be told twice. She tugged Sam away by his collar. Justin tied a rope to her halter and fastened it to a railing on the wall, where Shadowfax wouldn’t have to look at the water and realize she was somewhere no horse had any business being.

Justin disappeared to the top deck, and in a few moments, Carly felt the rumbling vibration of the engine starting. “Can you really drive this thing?” she called out when he came down to unfasten the rope moorings.

“Drive, yes. Dock, probably no.” He cast her a grin and went back up the stairs. Carly wished she were the praying sort.

“Wouldn’t the gas be bad?” she called.

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He paused on the stairs. “It’s diesel, and the tank isn’t as exposed to temperature changes as a car. It may be a little gunky, but not too bad yet.”

The trip was shorter than their first boat ride as it was about fifteen miles to Skagway. Justin cut the engine as they approached the dock, and there was a disquieting *CRUNCH* when the boat made contact. Justin jumped to the dock and wound the ropes around the moorings before it could drift away. “We made it!”

“You sound surprised.”

“I actually thought I’d have to run it aground. But it turns out these things are easier to drive than I suspected.”

He put down the gangplank and led Shadowfax onto the dock. Shadowfax made for the solid ground and then shook her coat as if she were shaking off the experience. Carly patted her and said soothing things while Justin unloaded the bikes and the wagon.

“Why don’t you let her pull the wagon?” she asked as Justin unloaded the horse feed and put it back onto Shadowfax’s back.

“Maybe later. We’ll stay here in Skagway tonight. It’ll probably be your last chance for a shower and a soft hotel bed for a while.”

Carly smiled at him, knowing he was anxious to move on, but he was giving her one more night of the comforts of civilization before they continued.

The motel was only about a quarter of a mile from the dock. Carly waited outside while Justin checked the rooms. He said in a nonchalant tone he just wanted to make sure they were *clean* before she went in, but she knew the real reason was probably to keep her from seeing anything that might disturb her, and she appreciated his consideration.

Carly tossed a tennis ball for Sam while they waited, and Shadowfax munched happily on the flowers in the raised beds in front of the parking lot. Justin came back just as Sam was starting to get tired of the game. He jumped up on the foot of the bed as soon as Justin unlocked the motel room door and settled with a happy sigh. He didn’t even get up when Carly put out his food and water bowls, so he must have been tired.

Despite the chilly water, she took a long, luxurious shower while Justin scouted the area and collected a few more supplies. He came back with a Scrabble game, and they played five times because neither one of them was emerging as a clear winner. Carly suspected Justin was cheating, but she couldn’t prove it, and he gave her wide-eyed, innocent protests when she made the accusation. When she started yawning, Justin called a truce and said she needed her rest since they had a long day ahead of them in the morning.

“But we’ll have a fire and hot food, at least,” he said. Neither of them had found their dinner of cold ravioli to be very appetizing.



Justin woke with a start when Sam pressed his cold nose against his shoulder. When he saw he had Justin's attention, Sam let out a low whine and darted over to the door that led into Carly's room. There he pranced a bit and whined again, obviously trying to get Justin to follow him.

Justin rolled out of bed, his eyes automatically searching the shadowed room for danger, though he didn't think there was any threat to Carly's safety, based on Sam's response. The wolf was anxious, not frightened.

He heard Carly moan, and she tossed her head on her pillow, her breath coming in gasps. Justin crouched down beside the bed and shook her gently. Carly woke with a small scream. She swiveled her head, looking around in confusion. Justin turned on the battery-powered lamp, and she relaxed slightly.

Justin sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. "Are you okay, Carly?"

Tears sparkled in the corners of her eyes, and her voice was unsteady. "It's always the same. The same nightmare over and over."

"Can you tell me about it?" Justin considered hugging her, but he wasn't sure how she would take it.

Carly shook her head.

"If you figure out why you're having it, the dreams will stop coming back." Justin walked into the bathroom and brought back a handful of tissues. Carly blew her nose, and Justin had to suppress a smile at the cute little honking sound she made.

"I once had the same problem," Justin said. "I kept having a bad dream about one of our missions. Once I talked it over with someone, I realized it was happening because I felt guilty about something that wasn't really my fault. After that, I never had the dream again. Do you feel guilty about something?"

Carly nodded. She couldn't meet his eyes.

She didn't want to talk about it, something he well understood. He wouldn't pry; she'd tell him when she was ready. "Is it something you could have done differently, or changed?"

She shook her head.

"Then you have to let it go, Carly. If it wasn't your fault, you shouldn't carry a burden of guilt." He patted her hand. "Maybe someday you can tell me about it, and then you'll feel better about it. All right?"

"All right." She gave him a watery smile and lay back down. Sam hopped up beside her and circled around a few times before he plopped down with a contented sigh. Justin headed back to his own bed, but it was a long while before he could fall back asleep.



Carly drifted back to sleep, but it was filled with the images she'd seen on

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television. Troy Cramer talking until his voice was hoarse, filling them in on the *latest developments* in the Crisis, and every *development* was worse than the last. Bodies, always bodies everywhere. Violence and fear as society crumbled to ash.

She woke groggy and grumpy. Sam wasn't in his place at the foot of her bed. Carly called for him and heard nothing but silence. She went to the doorway of Justin's room, but he wasn't in his bed, and when she checked, he wasn't in his bathroom, either.

Going to the window, she breathed a sigh of relief. Justin was sitting by a small fire built in the parking lot. Sam lay by his side and Shadowfax munched on some grass at the edge of the asphalt. As she watched, Justin picked up a metal coffee pot, after wrapping the handle in a cloth, and a plate covered in a napkin. Both animals followed him back to the room, and he had to dissuade Shadowfax from following him inside.

"Morning, Carly."

"Do I smell coffee?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, and I have another surprise for you." Justin pulled the cloth off the plate like a magician revealing a woman sawed in half. "Ta da!"

Carly could have wept. "Are those *eggs*?"

He grinned. "Yep. Not fresh, I'm afraid, but pretty good, if I do say so myself."

Carly took a bite and moaned in bliss. "Where did you get them?"

"They're powdered." She noticed Justin wasn't admitting where he'd come by them, and she supposed it was probably better she didn't know. She ate like a starving lumberjack. Justin seemed delighted by her appetite, even though Carly blushed a little when she handed him the empty plate.

"Thank you, Justin. That was the best meal I've had since . . ." She'd been about to say something about her mother's cooking, but she wasn't ready to talk about that.

"I'm glad you liked it. I'll get us loaded up while you get dressed. Remember, don't use the water for brushing your teeth. Use one of our bottles, okay?"

"Okay."

Carly pulled her hair back into a ponytail and dressed in one of her long-sleeve shirts with a T-shirt over it; it was bound to be cool this morning. She joined Justin outside. Shadowfax loped over to her and butted Carly with her massive head, and Sam did the same, both of them demanding attention at once. Carly giggled and distributed the requested pats, one hand for each animal. She wondered if they were competing with each other for her affection. Well, she wouldn't play favorites.

They mounted their bikes and started out along the Klondike Highway, riding roughly northeast, as Justin had shown her on the map. "How far are we from the next town?" She hadn't checked the scale.

"White Pass is fifteen miles, but it's uphill. I doubt we'll make it there tonight."

Carly thought about what he'd said about experienced bikers being able to make up to eighty miles per day, and she set her jaw in determination. She'd impress him with her stamina, she vowed.

But by lunchtime, Carly was already feeling the strain. Justin offered to start a fire and cook something, but Carly refused. The sooner they could get back on the road, the sooner they could make their destination and she could rest. She swallowed her share of the ravioli Justin gave her and climbed back onto the bike. Carly envied Sam, who trotted at their side with his tongue flopped out of the side of his mouth, enjoying the trip. Behind them, Shadowfax ambled along, comfortable with the pace. She slowed now and then for a nibble at something tasty along the way, but never let them get out of her sight.

"How much further?" Carly asked Justin when she was certain they had to be getting close.

"About six miles or so."

Carly wanted to cry.

"We're going to stop soon," he said and gave her a little encouraging smile.

Carly gritted her teeth. "Not yet."

"Carly, you're wiped out."

"No, I'm not!"

"You're also a terrible liar."

"I want to keep going."

"Carly, come on. You did good for your first day, especially since we're going up an eleven percent grade."

"At this rate, we won't even make it out of Alaska by wintertime."

"We're not always going to be going at this rate," Justin said patiently. "Carly, listen to me. I know what I'm talking about here. You don't want to exhaust yourself. You need to take it slow and easy until you build up your stamina because you've been half-starved for three months. You're not as strong as you once were."

"I can go more, honest!"

"I know you could, but there's no need. Tell me something, are your calf muscles aching?"

Carly didn't answer.

"I'll bet when you used the Stairmaster at the gym, they told you to do it only for a few minutes at first, even though you felt like you could do more. Right?"

"Yeah."

"They didn't want you to tear up your muscles needlessly. Besides, we need to think about Sam, too."

"Sam? What about him?"

"He's not used to walking long distances on asphalt. His paws are probably sore."

Carly hadn't even thought about poor Sam. And Shadowfax, too . . . she

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might be sore or tired from walking such a long distance. Carly started wondering if she could get the horse to let her check her feet without being stepped on or kicked from annoyance.

“I’ll pick the next good campsite,” Justin said, and she wondered why he sounded a little smug about it.



Carly had never slept in a tent before, and she’d certainly had never put one together. But for some reason, Justin insisted Carly help him with the bewildering tangle of nylon and metal tubing. She watched him connect the posts and tried to do the same, but she realized she’d done it opposite the way he had, and she had to take the whole darn thing apart again. But the smile he gave her when she got it assembled made it all worth it, and Carly liked feeling that she had at least something to contribute instead of simply standing around and letting Justin take care of her.

Next, Justin showed her how to build a fire. It turned out to be yet another of one of those things she thought would be easy but was much more complicated in reality.

He started by scraping a patch of earth bare and building a ring of rocks around its perimeter. “You don’t want to wake up and find you’ve started a forest fire,” he explained. He then built a small pyramid of twigs, with bits of paper from a McDonald’s bag lying beside the road and leaves between them. “You have to start with things that catch fire easily. Start as small as you can. You can use paper if you have it, shredded fiber, bits of cloth, though you want to use natural fibers like cotton or wool.”

“Synthetics don’t burn as well?”

Justin smiled at Carly. “Right.”

He showed her how to pull little shreds from a piece of soft wood to make it easier to light. “Now, what are you going to do if you don’t have a cigarette lighter or matches?”

“Rub two sticks together? I saw that movie where the guy is shipwrecked on an island and has to start a fire that way. It took forever, but he finally got it to work.”

“Do you remember how he did it?”

“Yeah. He had a flat piece of wood with a groove in the middle, and he rubbed the stick in there.”

“Anything else?”

Carly thought for a moment. “He had the fluffy stuff at the top of the groove.”

“Tinder,” Justin said. He gestured to his little pyramid. “Now, there’s something we have the guy in the movie didn’t. My knife.” Justin took the knife out of its scabbard and pulled something from the end—a little gray

rectangle he laid in Carly's hand. "Flint and steel." He pointed to a small rough patch on the blade of his knife up near the handle. "Strike it hard and fast, like you would a match."

She struck the corner of the flint against it and was surprised at how many sparks it produced.

"It's another sort-of-slow method. You have to catch your sparks against very light tinder. Paper won't do it unless you have it shredded very fine. Since I'm feeling sort of lazy tonight, I'm not going to demonstrate the whole process. We'll save that for another night." Out of his pocket he took a Zippo lighter and ran the flame around his little pyramid. Once it was blazing, he slowly added larger pieces of wood until the fire was steady and strong.

"Think you can light it tomorrow?" Justin asked.

"I can try."

"You're a smart lady. I think you'll figure it out."

"Do you really think I'm smart?" she asked, her voice hesitant and soft. "I sometimes feel like a moron because I don't know these things."

"Yes, I think you're smart, Carly. You've just never lived a life where you need to know all of this. Most people would be in the same situation, I assure you." Justin stood and gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm going to scout around a bit. Why don't you relax and read for a while? I'll be back soon, and we'll cook dinner."

"Be careful," Carly said. Having him gone made her nervous because she didn't know what she'd do without him.

He grinned at her. "I always am."

Sam bounded off after him and left Carly and Shadowfax at the campsite. Shadowfax was grazing on the nearby vegetation and didn't even look up as Carly approached. "I'm going to look at your feet, okay, girl?" Shadowfax chewed placidly as Carly crouched down beside her and tugged her foreleg until she lifted her hoof.

It was the first time Carly had ever looked at a horse's foot, so she wasn't exactly sure what she was looking for. The metal horseshoe was attached well; it didn't wiggle when Carly tried to move it. The underside looked smooth and uninjured. Carly walked around to the other side and performed the same examination. In one back hoof, she found a little pebble wedged under the shoe and decided that couldn't be comfortable, so she dug it out with a small stick. She stood and patted Shadowfax's neck. "Thank you for not kicking me."

She settled down to read, leaning against her rolled-up sleeping bag. Justin returned a few minutes later carrying an armload of large sticks. Carly looked around in alarm. "Where's Sam?"

"I thought he was with you."

"No, he followed you." Carly's heart began to pound. If they didn't find him, there was no way Sam could survive out there on his own.

"Carly, don't worry," Justin said, his voice low and soothing. "He

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wouldn't have gone far, and he can't get lost. He'll follow his own scent trail back. Or he'll find mine and follow me back to camp. He—"

Justin didn't finish the sentence as Sam came bounding through the brush. He stopped in front of Carly and dropped a dead rabbit at her feet.

"Well, I'll be damned. Good boy, Sam!" Justin picked up the rabbit and rubbed a grinning Sam between the ears.

Carly hugged Sam tightly. "Good boy," she said, though she wanted to scold him for taking off like that.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here and assume you've never had rabbit for dinner, right?"

Carly shook her head.

"Then you may not want to watch this next bit. Why don't you walk back to the creek and get us some water?"

"Where is it?"

"About a hundred yards that way." Justin pointed. "You should be able to see the tracks I made in the leaves. But if you get off the trail, just yell. You'll be within earshot."

She found the creek and washed her face and hands before filling the bucket. Sam started lapping at the flowing water. "No! Don't drink that until Justin purifies it." Sam just looked at her with those eerily sentient eyes.

Justin had constructed a spit using two forked sticks with a parallel one across that held the cooking rabbit. It smelled delicious. Carly's stomach growled, and Justin grinned at her. He had raked out some hot cinders upon which a pot simmered.

"Where's the first aid kit?" Carly asked.

"Are you hurt?" He rose quickly to his feet and headed to the wagon.

"No, but you said Sam's paws would be sore. I wanted to put some cream on them."

Justin shook his head for some reason but got out the antibiotic cream. Sam was not happy about having the greasy substance smeared on his paws, but he submitted to it with a sigh.

Justin took the cooked rabbit off the spit and cut it up on their plates before adding a helping of canned corn from the simmering pot. "*Bon appétit.*"

"*Merci beaucoup,*" Carly replied.

"*Parlez-vous français?*" He sounded a little surprised.

"I took it for two years in high school. What about you? I know you took Arabic, but do you speak anything else?"

Justin shrugged. "A couple of others."

Hearing that made Carly feel a little better. Apparently Justin was one of those people who made everyone around them look dumb by comparison. Carly speared a piece of rabbit with her fork and popped it in her mouth. Her eyes widened. "This is delicious!"

"You sound surprised," he said. She'd noticed that his eyes crinkled at the

corners when he teased and it always made her smile too.

“I know it’s one of those stereotypes, but it really does taste like chicken.”

“It’s the secret ingredient.”

“What’s that?”

Justin lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned in close. “Salt.”

Carly giggled and gave his shoulder a playful swat.

He glanced over at the book she’d left lying open on top of her sleeping bag. “A bilingual girl who reads Pynchon for fun.” He shook his head in amusement. “Why didn’t you go off to college, Carly?”

“I took some classes at the local branch campus. The thing is, I could never figure out what I wanted to do. I was happy where I was, and honestly, it didn’t seem worth it. My dad really wanted me to go, which is why I took the classes. Mom took my side and said I shouldn’t have to go if I didn’t want to, but Dad said he wanted more for me than being the manager of a souvenir shop and getting married to some guy who ran a fishing charter, or something. I felt like I let him down in that respect.” She took another bite and chewed it while she wondered about Justin’s education. As smart as he was, he would probably shrug and say he had a double doctorate in Sanskrit and particle physics. “What about you, Justin? Did you go to college?”

“No.”

Carly waited for him to elaborate but all he did was finish his food and take his plate over to the bucket to wash it. She finished her last few bites and brought him her plate as well. Justin washed them, and Carly silently dried them and put them back into the backpack where he stored their cooking and eating gear.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Carly caught a glimpse of his dark eyes as he glanced up at her. “For what?”

“It seems that’s a sore subject with you, and I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s not a sore subject, and I’m not upset. I just . . . didn’t go, okay?”

“Okay.”

Justin puffed out an exasperated breath. “All right. The real reason is I don’t read all that well.”

She blinked in surprise. She’d seen him reading books once or twice, and he played Scrabble like a champ.

“Most of the books I’ve ‘read’ were audiobooks on my MP3 player. Since the Crisis, I’ve been trying to force myself to pick up reading books again since the batteries won’t last forever. I was almost hoping it was something I’d outgrow, but apparently I’m stuck with it.”

She hoped she wouldn’t offend him by asking, since he seemed to be sensitive about it, but her curiosity was irrepressible. “Is it dyslexia or something like that?”

Justin nodded.

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“Wow, you must be brilliant!” Carly blurted.

He stared at her. “What?”

“To have learned all of those languages without being able to read them to study? That’s amazing.”

Justin’s face slowly split into a grin. “Carly, *you’re* amazing. That has to be the first time anyone has ever been *impressed* I’m dyslexic.”

“And you’re one hell of a Scrabble player, too. You *bet* I’m impressed.” She supposed the plainly-inscribed letters on the tiles would be easier to distinguish than those printed in a book, but it must have been quite a feat to memorize the spelling of words without being able to always see them properly.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Carly.”

Carly blushed fiercely and her cheek tingled where his lips had brushed it. She didn’t know what to make of him sometimes, whether he was teasing or flirting, whether little gestures like his hugs and this kiss on the cheek were meant to be platonic. Maybe he was just an affectionate guy.

She was grateful for the distraction of putting away the rest of their cooking supplies and the entertaining spectacle of watching Justin climb a tree to hang their non-canned food from a high limb to keep the bears out of it.

“But wouldn’t the bears have died from the Infection, too?”

“Yeah, just like the horses and the wolves. With the way you draw animals, I’m not taking any chances that the only bear left in the Yukon will find us. And before you ask—no, we’re not adding a bear to our motley crew.”

Carly laughed, changing into her pajamas behind a tree while picturing a bear napping beside Sam in front of the fire. She felt the need for a shower, or at least a wipe down, but didn’t feel as if her location was private enough for that, and she wasn’t about to wander off into the woods by herself at night. They unrolled their sleeping bags in the tent. Funny how it had seemed so much larger before they were both confined in its space.

Carly called for Sam, and he spun around in circles before settling on the foot of her sleeping bag with a sigh. Justin zipped it up and lay down on his own sleeping bag, instead of inside it. She wondered why, but decided not to question it. For all she knew, it was one of those survival things that would make her look stupid again for not knowing it. He didn’t use a pillow, either, though Carly had one taken from the hotel in Skagway. He put his handgun on the tent floor behind his head and his big hunting knife under the edge of his sleeping bag beside him. “Sleep well, Carly.”

“Good night.” Carly snuggled down into her pillow.

Chapter Three

“I can do this,” Carly said to herself. “I can. It’s just a matter of willpower. Keep pushing. We’re almost there. I can do this.”

Her calf muscles burned with exhaustion, and it wasn’t even lunch time yet. Carly leaned forward and pushed. The bike wobbled beneath her. She pushed down with the other leg. “Come on. Come on . . .” She was going at a slower-than-walking pace. Justin turned to look at her, and that’s when Carly lost her balance and toppled over. The bike clattered on the pavement, and she scraped her palms when she landed. Fortunately, she was wearing her jeans, so her knees were protected.

Flushed with embarrassment, Carly climbed to her feet.

Justin hopped off of his own bike and came over to help her up. “Let me see your hands.”

“I’m fine.”

“Carly, let me see.” His voice was low and coaxing, which made her feel even more foolish for objecting, but she just wanted to get back on her bike and forget about it. “I’m *fine*.”

“No, you’re not. Even a small scrape is nothing to fuck around with now. If you get an infection . . .”

“Justin, it didn’t even break the skin. I’m *fine*.”

“Sit down,” he coaxed. “Come on. Please?”

With a sigh of exasperation, Carly did as he asked. Justin took her hands in his and examined her palms.

“See? No big deal.”

“They should still be cleaned, just in case.”

“Fine,” she said with ill grace. “If it means that much to you.”

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He went to the wagon and brought back a bottle of peroxide. She stretched out her arms and let him pour a stream of it over her wounds. She hissed at the sting; maybe it was deeper than she thought.

“Your knees?”

“Will you believe me if I say I’m fine?” she asked with a small smile.

“Probably not. And anyway, it gives me a chance to check out your legs.”

Carly giggled and pulled up the hem of her jeans daintily, like a Victorian maiden displaying a bit of ankle. “Seen enough?”

He grinned at her and pushed up the cuff to her knee to examine the bruised skin there. “Better check the other one, just to be on the safe side.”

She pulled up the leg. “There. Satisfied?”

“Oh, honey, the jokes I could make with that one . . .”

Carly blushed and wondered, not for the first time, if he was flirting with her a little. But then again, knowing him, it could be something to take her mind off unpleasant topics, like how she was going to get up the stupid mountain.

“Why don’t we walk?” he asked. He sounded relaxed and casual, as though the slower speed didn’t bother him a bit, but then again, as slow as she’d been pedaling, walking would probably be faster. “Toss your bike in the wagon.”

She didn’t want to give up. She hated looking weak and helpless in front of him, but she had to admit to being tapped out. “Maybe we can walk for a little bit.”

“Sounds good.” He helped her to her feet and put her bike in the wagon.

“Why won’t you hook that thing up to Shadowfax?”

“We don’t know what kind of training she’s had. Give her a little time.”

“You’re afraid she’ll run off with our stuff?”

“It’s always a possibility.”

Carly hitched up her jeans. Even with the belt Justin had made for her by cutting down one of his, her jeans were too loose and kept drooping down to her hips. But as Justin thought they would reach White Pass today, he wanted her to wear her gun. She wore the rectangular nylon holster pouch with the .22 inside clipped to her belt, and she was always aware of its somber weight against her hip. She was nervous carrying a loaded gun around with her, but Justin said he wanted her to get used to wearing it.

“Do you think I hurt the gun?” she asked. The woven nylon of the pouch was scuffed from her fall.

Justin’s eyes sparkled, but his voice was solemn as he answered. “Nah. They’re tough.”

“I really wish I didn’t have to wear it.”

“Remember, I told you we’re bound to run into other survivors,” he said. “Some of them might not be nice people. The law is dead, Carly. We’re in the jungle now, and the only law is survival of the strongest.”

“Why did you bring me, then? I’m not one of the strongest. All I’m doing is weighing you down.”

He grinned at her. "I keep picking up trade goods. I bet I could get at least a dozen cans of ravioli for you."

"That's it?" She pretended to be offended. "I would think a *case*, at least."

He shrugged. "Well, you can't cook. That brings down the price a bit. And you talk in your sleep."

"I do not!" she said, indignant.

"Then how do I know you dreamed of french fries last night?"

Carly fell silent. Well, maybe she *did* talk in her sleep. She tried to remember all of the dreams she'd had since they'd begun sleeping in close proximity, hoping she hadn't babbled about anything embarrassing.

"Oh? No witty retort? Don't leave me hanging."

She said nothing. Her cheeks felt hot.

They were silent for a few minutes until he glanced over at her. "I don't think you're weak," he told her. "I think you've just been dumped into a situation you weren't prepared for. Now that you know what we're up against, I'm absolutely confident you'll rise to the challenge. I've seen weakness, Carly. And you're not weak."

Carly didn't look at him. She appreciated the kindness, but she didn't entirely believe him. He was just being nice about it. Carly knew she didn't contribute anything of value. She kicked a rock lying in their path and sent it skittering across the pavement. Sam gave a joyful bark and chased it. They'd played a lot of games of fetch when he was smaller and could be exercised by running back and forth across her little apartment. He brought her back the slobber-covered rock, and she patted him. She threw it overhand, and he bolted after it.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

How did he do that? Sometimes it seemed as though he could read her mind. "I think you're trying to be nice."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't have brought you if I didn't think you were a survivor. You'll surprise yourself, Carly. Mark my words."

They stopped for lunch at noon, judging by the position of the sun. Carly didn't feel all that hungry, but Justin insisted she eat to build her stamina. Their current meal was cold spaghetti rings from the can by the side of the road. Carly watched Sam try to coax Shadowfax into a game of chase, but the horse still didn't cotton to the idea of being chased by a wolf. It brought up her instinctual fears. He nipped at her forelegs a couple of time, and Carly saw a big "trouble brewing" sign flash above them. Before she could swallow her bite of cold pasta, Justin called Sam to come over and lie down beside them before he made Shadowfax nervous enough to lash out with one of her hooves. Carly gave him a tentative smile. It was nice to know she wasn't the only one Justin was looking out for.

Late in the afternoon, they finally arrived at the summit of White Pass and the border between the U.S. and Canada. Cement barriers, like those on the bridge, had been erected to block traffic, and a line of cars sat on both sides. Tattered flags flapped on the poles mounted on the rocky summit.

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Carly was disappointed. "I thought there would be something *here*."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Tourist shops or something. A building of some kind." Not just a tiny log shack that held maintenance supplies. It wasn't even large enough for them to sleep in with all of the stuff crammed inside, and they were too tired to even consider hauling it out.

"I learned in history class there used to be border guards who stayed out here to check to make sure each man had the required ton of supplies before allowing them to pass."

Justin glanced at their wagon. "Puts it in perspective, doesn't it?"

She stopped at the base of the flags. One more foot forward and she would leave Alaska for the first time and likely never see it again. She looked back over her shoulder for a long moment and was hit by the fleeting temptation to turn around and coast back down the mountain to Skagway. But she turned to face forward, to face the future, full of unknown perils and uncertainties. It was a long and winding road to an unknown destination, a road that would take courage to face. And she found she had that courage, the same courage her history teacher had said drove the gold miners onward when there was just a narrow trail through these mountains.

Perhaps it was because the border was so anticlimactic, but Carly was much happier when Justin told her that night they would make it to Fraser the next day. "Seven miles, all downhill," he said, and in the morning she was eager to go, wolfing down her eggs and coffee with gusto. She couldn't have said why seeing buildings and some measure of civilization was so important to her, but she was excited to get moving.

The downhill trek would have been more fun if Justin hadn't been such a killjoy about her speed. He insisted she take it slow and easy, and Carly teasingly stuck her lower lip out at him. He reminded her that the animals couldn't keep up such a pace, which convinced her to slow down.

Justin gazed around them, his eyes wide as he took in the vista before them. "Carly, are you seeing this? It's *beautiful*."

Carly had to admit she hadn't noticed it. She'd grown accustomed to the majestic views, but she supposed someone from Omaha would find them incredible even if he had seen them once before on the way into the state. The awe on his face made her take another look at the jagged mountains over the sparkling water in the valley below, an image she engraved in her heart, knowing as she did, she was unlikely to ever see it again.

Fraser had only about half a dozen buildings, including a corrugated metal customs hut in a repulsive shade of yellow-brown and a small collection of identical split-level houses for road crew workers. Beside the tracks stood a red clapboard railroad station with a train parked in front of it. Carly nudged Justin with her elbow when they dismounted at the edge of town. "Can you drive one of those?" she challenged.

"Nope, you got me," he said with a grin. "Never had an occasion to drive

a train.”

“Yeesh, look at that thing.” Carly pointed to the strange, fan blade-like machine on the front of the train. Sam trotted around sniffing at the wheels.

“I think it’s a snowplow for the tracks. I’ve heard of them, but I’ve never seen one before.”

He wandered over to look at it, and Sam bounded after him. Carly headed toward the train station. The door was unlocked and she walked inside the silent and stuffy building. A pair of restrooms was in front of her, and to the left a door led into the rest of the building. It creaked when she pushed it open, and she had only a moment to gather an impression of a large, dusty room with an office desk before a blinding pain slammed across her upper arm and back. She was knocked to the floor by the force of it and saw a man standing above her, holding a two-by-four. In her old life, he was the kind of man she would have asked for directions—a plump, pleasant-looking man in his mid-fifties wearing rimless glasses. But behind the lenses, his eyes gleamed with gleeful hate.

“The black cowboy says you’re the seventh!” He drew out the “s” sounds with a snakelike hiss and swung the board down. Carly rolled, avoiding the blow, which would have probably crushed her skull. The man howled and dropped the board from the painful vibrations of striking the floor, and Carly scrambled to her feet to dart around the back of the desk. The man charged at her, and Carly grabbed the back of the office chair and slung it at him. He tripped over it as she had intended but regained his footing and lunged at her with an inhuman screech. “You won’t take my petals!”

Sam burst through the door and used the top of the desk as a launch pad to pounce on the man with a vicious snarl. He sank his teeth into the man’s shoulder, and the man screamed in pain. He punched Sam in the side, and Sam went sprawling with a high-pitched yelp from the force of the blow. Carly fumbled at her belt and pulled the gun out of its holster. She didn’t even have time to shout a warning as the man surged to his feet and barreled at her. She pulled the trigger as fast as she could, nailing him with three shots to the chest. It didn’t stop his momentum; he plowed into Carly and knocked her flat on her back, landing on top of her with a bone-rattling thud.

“Get *off* me!” She shoved him to the side and scrambled over to Sam, who had gotten to his feet and was testing out his legs. Carly grabbed his collar and hauled him toward the door. Her only thought was to get them out of there and away from the crazy man.

“Jesus Christ!” Justin shouted as he ran toward her. He caught her as she staggered out the door. “Where are you hurt? Show me, Carly. Where are you hurt?”

She realized she was still holding the gun, and the front of her body was soaked in blood. Justin yanked up her shirt. “It’s not me, it’s not me. Check Sam.”

“What the *fuck*?”

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“I shot the man,” Carly said. “I shot him.” She looked at the gun still in her hand and released it. It dropped to the gravel with a dull clatter, and Carly swayed on her feet.

A mantle of icy calm fell over Justin. “Tell me what happened.”

Carly pointed. “The crazy man, he tried to hit me—he *did* hit me. With a b-board. He was crazy. He—he was going to k-kill me.”

“Stay here,” Justin ordered. He dashed inside the building as he drew his own gun. Carly sank down until she was sitting on the ground. She spotted a penny mashed down into the gravel. She picked it up and rubbed off the dust with her finger. Canadian. Sam, limping with every step, circled around Carly as though trying to guard her on all sides.

Justin’s boots crunched on the gravel again when he returned. He took her by the arm, and Carly cried out in pain. Without a word, he whipped her shirt over her head and examined her arm and back.

“Check S-Sam,” Carly said. “He got p-punched.”

Justin said nothing. He was gently prodding Carly’s arm. He moved to her back, pressing all around the wound. He let out a relieved breath and handed Carly her shirt. He felt over Sam’s ribs with the same gentle prodding. Sam whined but endured it.

“There’s one hell of a vicious bite on that man’s shoulder.” He rubbed Sam’s ears gently. “Good boy, Sam.”

Carly started to pull her shirt back over her head and then recoiled from the blood. She tossed it aside with a grimace.

Justin scooped up the gun and helped Carly to her feet, keeping a grip on her forearm. Her body shook from adrenaline, and she felt a cold flutter in her stomach. “Is he dead?”

“Yeah, Carly. He’s dead.”

She nodded. “Excuse me.” She staggered over to the side of the road and lost her breakfast, from the pain as much as from the shock. She’d killed someone and it wasn’t even noon yet.

Justin’s large, warm hand was on her back. He held out a bottle of water to her. Carly took a small sip and swished out her mouth. She handed it back to him. “I’m sorry.”

“For wandering off like that? You should be. You nearly got yourself killed.”

“No, I mean for wussing out and getting sick.”

“I did the same thing.” He stared off into the distance for a moment and his voice was low and gruff. “The first time I killed someone, I puked, and *then* I cried. It’s not supposed to be easy, Carly.”

“Can we—Can we please move on, Justin?”

“Yeah, honey, we can. You want to rest for a minute?”

She shook her head and climbed onto her bike. As soon as she tried to lean forward to grip the handlebars, she knew she couldn’t do it. Pain ripped through her back where the board had struck her. She glanced over and saw Justin hadn’t tried to mount his own bike. He was watching her,

waiting for her to say she couldn't ride. But why?

Probably so he doesn't have to listen to you yammer on about how you can do it, her mind helpfully supplied. She flushed and dismounted from the bike. The compassion in his eyes made it a bit worse. Was she really that predictable? She tried for dignity. "Should we set up camp here or try another one of those buildings?"

"I'm going to check out the houses. Rest here, all right?"

She nodded.

"Sam, stay," he ordered and Sam gave a little "woof" of agreement. She leaned her bike against the wagon and sat down in its shade. Sam lay down beside her and pillowed his head on her thigh, though he remained alert, his ears locking in on any sound. He sighed, puffing air out the sides of his muzzle, and Carly stroked his head. "Thank you for coming to rescue me. I hope your ribs aren't hurt."

He licked her hand.

"It's so strange," she told him. "It's already starting to feel like a dream I had instead of reality. I know I had to, but . . ." She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "But it doesn't make it any easier. Do you think he had family? Friends? At one time, I bet he did. Before the Infection, at least, even if he doesn't now."

Gravel crunched and she looked over her shoulder to see Justin approaching. She stood.

"I found us a house," he said. "And I've got a wonderful surprise for you."

She followed him up the hill without much interest. They walked inside the house, and Justin flipped a switch. The lights came on.

Carly jumped and gasped. "How is this *possible*?"

"There was an article on the refrigerator. They have a micro-hydro station. The electricity is generated by the creek, powering a turbine."

"Oh my God, Justin, does this mean . . ."

He grinned at her. "Hot showers!"

Carly burst into tears.

Justin took her into his arms and stroked her hair. "Hey, honey, no reason to cry."

But she couldn't stop. A tumult of emotions, into which guilt and some leftover adrenaline were stirred, had broken loose, and she had to get them out. He murmured to her while she wept and waited until the storm had passed. He led her to the living room and instructed her to lie down on the sofa. Sam lay down on the floor right in front of her, his head pillowed on his paws.

Justin returned in a moment with a few bags of frozen vegetables in his hands.

"I really don't feel like cooking now," she said with a wry smile.

He chuckled. "They're for your back. Lie on your stomach."

She realized at that moment she wasn't wearing a shirt. Her sports bra

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was more concealing than a bikini, and she'd worn it several times in the gym with nothing over it. But she was acutely aware of the amount of skin she was showing. Justin didn't appear to be. He laid a towel over her back and then put the frozen vegetables on top of it. "I'll get you something for the pain and swelling."

"No," Carly said. "Save it. We may need it later."

"Just over-the-counter stuff, honey. We can find more. In fact, I bet if I look in the medicine cabinet, I'll find a bottle of it."

He went upstairs instead of out to the wagon and returned with a bottle of naproxen, and he dumped out a number of tablets. "Take two of these and call me in the morning."

She didn't get it.

"Sorry, old joke. Here." He dropped the tablets in her hand and got her a bottle of water with which to take them. She tossed them back into her mouth and swallowed them before stretching out on the sofa with her head resting on her arms. She watched as he pried open Sam's mouth and expertly shoved a pill into the back of his throat before Sam even realized what had happened. Sam gave Justin an offended look and huffed as he lay back down.

"I'll be right back," Justin said. "You all right for a few minutes?"

Carly nodded. It was a lie; she didn't want to be alone. But she didn't want Justin to think she was a coward, either. She heard the front door open and gazed around the room to take her mind off being alone.

The house was sternly utilitarian, with no attempt at decoration on the white walls. The carpet was plain beige, as was the cloth sofa upon which she lay. Two matching recliners shared the other wall, and all of the seating pointed at a television.

Television! They had electricity! The remote control lay on the end table between the sofa and the recliners. Carly grabbed it and turned the television on. A place this remote would have satellite, and sure enough, the remote bore the logo of one of the satellite companies. She turned it on and began to flip through the channels.

No signal.

No signal.

No signal.

Carly tried every channel, and none of them showed anything but a black screen with those two words. She turned off the television and dropped the remote back on the end table. Sort of silly of her to hope for anything different, she thought, but tears still stung her eyes. Modern America was truly gone if there was no television.

No more *American Idol*. No more evening news. No more daytime soap operas. At that moment, *The Young and the Restless* should have been on. It had been her daytime guilty pleasure when she wasn't working. No more commercials, even. She would have given anything just to see an infomercial, something that would tell her there was someone out there, and