

The Upheaval

The Survivor Chronicles: Book 1

Erica Stevens

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Historical Romance

A Stolen Heart

This book is dedicated to Eric and Steve.
Thank you for bringing so much joy and laughter into my life.
You are still loved and missed every day.

Special thanks to my husband and best friend, and
my parents, siblings, nieces and nephews who make life more interesting and fun.
To Leslie Mitchell for being such a good friend and amazing help.
To Kevin Mills for his sense of humor, hard work and dedication to those less fortunate.
Stay safe out there!

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CHAPTER 1

John

Cape Cod, Mass.

7:22 am

John hit the blade switch on the mower, threw the safety locks, and turned the key off. The grass of the large field was blowing gently in the breeze; the heads of the uncut dandelions dipped and bowed. The scent of fresh cut grass permeated the air from the three passes with the mower he had just made. He frowned as he searched the clear blue sky. Birds had taken flight, but that meant nothing. They were always taking to the air in search of some fish, new clams, or fresh road kill. The tops of the trees swayed, and fortunately a sea breeze helped to ease the oppression of the humid July day.

"Did you feel that?"

Carl was leaning against the hood of the work truck; the cigarette dangling from his mouth caused smoke to trail lazily up into one of his eyes. Years of smoking had inured him to this small annoyance, however. Beneath the brim of his beaten Red Sox hat, Carl's weathered face was scrunched as he worked. The ends of his light brown hair, already damp with sweat, curled against the bottom of his cap.

"Feel what?" he inquired as he pulled on the string of the weed whacker and popped the head back on with the ease of an expert.

"I think the ground just shook."

He looked up at John in disbelief before bursting into laughter. Pulling the cigarette from his mouth, he flicked off the growing ash before propping it back between his lips. "Are you high?"

"No."

"Still drunk from the weekend, then?"

Annoyance coursed through John as he shook his head and released the handles of the mower. He was tired; it was Monday morning, the start of what was going to be a long, hot workweek. He wasn't in the mood for Carl's sarcasm, and John *knew* he had just felt something. He didn't need Carl laughing at him for it. "No man, I'm telling you I felt the ground shake. Like a tremor or something."

"What do you think this is, California? Last time I checked, earthquakes weren't all the rage in Mass."

John didn't think anything was all the rage in Mass, but he bit back his retort. Carl was a good guy, they had been working together for almost two years now and got along well enough, but Carl gave life to the term *Masshole*, and anyone who knew him would agree. Carl was set in his ways, and he didn't like to have his world shaken in any sense, regardless of what John was *certain* he had felt.

It wasn't the end all and be all of the world. Earthquakes had happened before in Mass, but it was the first time John had actually felt one, and though it had been disconcerting, it had also been kind of cool. That was what he'd been trying to get across to Carl, but he wasn't about to start the week off on a bad note by arguing with the guy over it. They'd done so before, and they were both stubborn enough that it had only ended up making the week far more miserable than it had to be. Otherwise, Carl was good to pass the time with. They had enough in common that the conversation never got old, and

they had enough original stories to keep each other laughing through the repetitive days of mowing lawns. But whenever they argued the week was uncomfortable and boring, and John really wasn't in the mood for one of those weeks. The impending heat wave was going to make it bad enough as it was.

"Whatever. You'll see. It'll be on the news later," John told him.

"I'm sure it will. Now, how about you get your mower fired back up, and let's get this place done already. There's a cold beer calling my name."

John sighed. Seven in the morning or not, he would've loved a cold beer right now. It would taste great on this already hot day and help ease the lingering headache he had from late Saturday night/early Sunday morning. He'd spent most of yesterday sleeping, but he could still feel the effects of too much booze in his partially dehydrated body.

John was just reaching for the key when he felt it again. A strange shuddering in the earth, but it wasn't an actual *shaking*. It was almost as if the ground was vibrating, building toward some cataclysm he couldn't begin to fathom. For a second he thought perhaps a ship was passing by, since they were close enough to the canal to hear them, but then he dismissed the idea. There wasn't a boat big enough to give off these vibrations from such a distance. He looked down, expecting to see the earth jumping and lurching beneath his feet like it did in the movies. Instead it seemed to be shimmering as it pulsed with a vibrant force that wasn't exactly an earthquake, but didn't quite fit into any other term he'd ever heard used for natural phenomena.

Awe and shock fading, true terror burst through him as he realized this wasn't cool, and it also wasn't stopping. He jumped away from the mower as it also began to shudder, the motion of the earth causing the machine to twist on its wheels with a small groan. It wasn't running, but it was heavy and he definitely didn't feel like getting run over by the thing. John scurried to get out of the way, struggling to keep his balance as he staggered over the pulsating ground. The land was flat, but it was suddenly an intense effort to make it the few feet to where Carl was clinging to the work truck, his mouth gaping and his face ashen as he gawked at the earth beneath his feet.

Birds soared high, cawing and shrieking loudly as the trees began to shake forcefully. Something snapped loudly to his left, perhaps it was a branch, perhaps a tree, or perhaps it was the ground itself. The sound beat against his eardrums, then continued to echo throughout the air. The truck began to make an awful, twisting metallic sound that caused Carl to release his death grip on it.

He was only twenty-four years old; he wasn't ready to die. Yet as the ground continued to make any escape near impossible, he was consumed with the certainty this would be his last day on this planet.

And then, just when he thought he couldn't stand anymore, as he prepared to scream like a girl and tear his hair out...

...it stopped.

The ensuing silence was nearly as unnerving as the turbulent quivering had been, but it was also blessedly wonderful. He staggered forward, nearly falling to his knees as he strained to stay upright. The world had stopped shaking, but his balance had been thrown off by the upheaval. Taking a deep breath, he focused his attention on Carl. John was about to tell him *I told you so*, and inform him of just what a Grade A dick he was, when a rending occurred.

John was never entirely sure if there actually was a sound, if he actually heard the

tearing of the Earth, or just felt the jolt of it in the marrow of his bones, perhaps all the way to the center of his soul. He felt something drain out of him, maybe his blood dropped into his toes; maybe he pissed himself.

All he knew for certain was he would never again know the world as he'd known it before that moment. He knew everything would be forever changed, and not in a good way.

The noise seemed to echo throughout the sky. It rolled for what seemed like an eternity. When it was over the ensuing hush proved to be almost as unnerving as the rending and shaking had been. For a few seconds nothing moved or made a sound as the entire world seemed to hold its collective breath.

Then it erupted in a clamor. Car alarms began to blare, echoing through the day as horns and beeps pierced the profound silence. Birds shrieked in distress as squirrels darted crazily through the trees. John took a startled step back as one of them suddenly came shrieking across the lawn toward him. It jumped and bounced wildly, chattering shrilly as it dashed forward. John just managed to avoid the creature as it screamed past him and ran headfirst into a tree.

He stood still and watched in horrified fascination. The dazed creature staggered around for a moment, righted itself, and then slammed head first into the tree once again. Blood sprayed from the wounded animal's battered skull. It fell but gathered its remaining dregs of strength and slammed into the trunk again. Finally, thankfully, the creature lay still.

A blue jay suddenly plummeted from the sky, diving head first rapidly. It didn't hesitate, didn't even attempt to pull itself up as it smashed into the ground with a sickening crunch of bone. A plume of feathers shot up around it, but John didn't have time to ponder what had just happened before a seagull nose-dived directly behind it.

His mouth dropped, he took a startled step back as yet another, and then another bird slammed into the field. It took him a few seconds before he realized the formerly harmless, feathered creatures were turning themselves into dangerous, and quite possibly deadly, missiles.

Finally breaking free of the half paralysis clinging to him, John took a few more steps back before spinning and lunging for the work truck. Carl was still clinging to the side of it, his mouth gaping, and the weed whacker forgotten as he gawked at the scene unfolding before him.

"Get in the truck!" John screamed.

Carl's eyes were glazed and dull as he looked toward John. John wasn't sure Carl had heard a word he'd just said, even though he'd bellowed it at him. "Carl! *Get in the truck!*"

Carl shook his head, finally seeming to come to his senses as he tossed his cigarette away and jumped into the open passenger side door of the truck. He fell across the seat, pulling the handle to shove the driver's door open. John dove inside, struggling to shut the door behind him as birds continued to plummet from the sky. His mouth gaped as he watched from behind the safety of the glass as an assortment of feathered friends plunged into the ground. Not a single one of them hesitated before diving to their deaths. Outside the truck, random feathers began to litter the air. They floated about in a way that might have been captivating, maybe even peaceful, if it hadn't been so damn disturbing.

A crow smashed off of the truck roof with a loud crash that caused them both to jump. John released a sound that normally would have embarrassed him, but seemed

entirely appropriate in this situation. To his left another squirrel barreled out of the woods, followed by two chipmunks and a rabbit moving far faster than John had ever thought possible for the fluffy creature. John didn't watch the squirrel, he couldn't bring himself to watch that nightmare unfold again, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the frantic hopping of the bunny. He was certain Thumper was about to bash itself against the tire of the truck when a plummeting heron managed to take him out first in a grotesque puff of blood, feathers and fur.

Carl cursed under his breath. "Drive," he commanded.

"What? Where?" John demanded, fighting against the panic trying to consume him.

"I don't care! To the shop! Anywhere! Just get us outta *here!*"

John nodded; his hand shook as he turned the key. AC blasted into the vehicle on a rush of cold air that normally would have felt refreshing, if he hadn't been so horribly and unreasonably chilled. His bones felt brittle; his blood was like ice in his veins. His heart lumbered in his chest. Carl grabbed his cigarettes off the dash and lit one with a trembling hand.

For the first time in his life, John desperately wished he smoked too, if only to have something to take his mind off of the disaster unfurling around him. He hadn't made it two feet when he realized something about the truck was off; something was... wrong. A loud grating sound set his teeth on edge as two more birds bashed off of the truck's hood. The vehicle was brand new, just purchased at the start of the season. Now it was going to look like a demo car by the time all of this was over.

"Crap. The gate's still down," Carl groaned.

John was frozen, uncertain what to do. A part of him was tempted to say "screw it" and pull out of there at a hundred miles an hour. The other part, the one that had been trained on safety and procedures for the past two years, protested loudly against allowing that to happen. The trailer would be ruined, or someone could get injured if they left it down as they drove. Not to mention he really didn't care to draw any more attention to themselves than necessary, and a metal gate dragging loudly across the road would do exactly that. Plus, it would slow them down, and he had a sneaky feeling they were going to require as much speed as they could get.

"We have to get it," John said.

Carl was silent as he chewed on the filter of his cigarette in quiet contemplation. Finally he turned to John, his gray eyes dark as he nodded firmly. "We do," Carl agreed.

John swallowed heavily; a part of him had been hoping Carl would be able to come up with some reason to just leave it, to just go anyway. To get out of here as fast as possible. But "fast" wasn't really an option if it remained down. "Count of three?" he asked.

Carl nodded, his eyes troubled, but his hand resting on the door handle as he watched John. "One."

"Two."

"Three!"

They both swung their doors open and plunged back into the hot July air. Carl hadn't taken five steps before a small catbird crashed into his shoulder. Carl grunted from the impact, but continued to run toward the lowered gate. John beat him to it and threw the heavy metal up and dropped the pin in place in one fluid motion. He didn't spare a glance for the mower still sitting in the field. At this point he didn't care if it cost him his job, he

was *not* going to take the time to put it back on the trailer.

He turned and dashed back to the truck, clamping his hands over his head as he darted back and forth in an attempt to evade the feathered missiles. He tumbled back into the truck, breathing heavily as Carl hopped in and slammed the door. "Go! Go!" Carl ordered briskly.

John nodded as he shoved the truck into drive and stomped on the gas. The trailer bounced over the rutted drive of the field as he sped toward the road. Dead animals crunched sickeningly beneath the tires. John barely hesitated before turning onto the main road and back toward the center of town. He sped down the street, trying to evade the suicidal animals, as well as the other crazed and dazed drivers on the road.

He was almost to the center of town when he realized what they'd experienced in the field had been nothing. It was there, amongst the busy shops and invading tourists that all hell had broken loose.

CHAPTER 2

Mary Ellen
Newport, RI.
7:15 am

The whistling set her teeth on edge. That incessant, infernal whistling. Fifteen years ago, when she'd first been in love, and young, and *dumb*, she had found the whistling endearing. Almost charming. Today? Today it made her feel like ripping her hair out, screaming at the sky, and jumping over the edge of the balcony to smash mercifully onto the ocean rocks below.

It just didn't *stop*, and she was no longer some fifteen year old girl in the first throes of puppy love. No longer a pregnant eighteen year old, too frightened of her parent's disapproval to tell them she didn't want to get married. She was a woman now, she was thirty, and her life was slipping past in a blur she'd been cautioned about as a child, but never truly grasped until last year.

She'd woken up one day and had a clear epiphany; she didn't love her husband anymore. Hell, she didn't even *like* him anymore. Not even a little. As she reviewed the past few years and became brutally honest with herself, she'd realized she'd actually *never* really liked him. She'd simply been in awe of the striking, slightly older boy who had desired her too.

And now the baby they had married for had just turned twelve. Their daughter, Rochelle, was smart and beautiful. She'd inherited her mother's looks and her father's brains. Unfortunately, she also inherited her mother's rebellious, know-it-all streak. The combination was brutal, especially with the hormonal teen years looming. Though she dreamed of it every day, Mary Ellen knew she wouldn't leave the marriage, not until Rochelle was out of high school. She was terrified a divorce would send her already headstrong daughter into a perilous emotional spiral that could never be controlled.

She'd done many things wrong in her life, but she'd be damned if she took her daughter with her too.

Six more years, she told herself. Six more years and she could be free of the whistling, and the controlling, and the shirts holding a different array of perfumes. Mary Ellen didn't *wear* perfume. In the beginning, she fought with him about it; she cried and carried on about his affairs, railed at both him and the heavens for the sheer unfairness of it all.

On the day she had her realization; however, she quit fighting. Quit crying. Instead, she hired a private investigator who had now been tracking Larry for a little over six months. The day Rochelle left for college Mary Ellen was going to file for divorce, and she planned on taking her fair share with her when she went. The PI was accumulating a good amount of damaging evidence against her husband. Without it, she knew Larry would leave her with nothing. She'd endured too much for too long to allow that to happen.

Larry had the college degree and a law degree on top of that. Incessantly manipulative, he had a cruel streak that somehow still managed to astound her, even after so many years. Shortly after the wedding she'd found herself shoved into the role of meek little housewife. To be fair, however, she had allowed him to delegate this role for her,

willfully accepting it. It seemed easier to compromise than to fight with him over it.

In the beginning she'd done everything she could to make him happy. In the middle, she had continued to do so in the hopes he would come home; he would somehow learn to appreciate her and the things she did for him.

Today? Today she didn't give a rat's ass if he *ever* came home again, and she definitely didn't expect him to appreciate anything. Honestly, she wished she could get back all those years she'd wasted trying to make him happy; years she should have used to make herself happy, or be happily married to someone else. *Anyone* else.

She sighed. As her mother always used to say, *if wishes were horses then beggars would ride*. It had seemed like such a silly saying when she was growing up. As an adult, she understood it all too painfully.

The back sliding glass door slid open behind her as Larry stepped onto the porch with her. Mary Ellen turned as Larry strode toward her, adjusting his tie as he moved. He was still striking, handsome, and tall with dark hair going partially gray, and a firm physique. She found him ugly now, repulsive even.

He broke off whistling. "Fix my tie."

It wasn't a question. It was a *command*, and Mary Ellen's jaw locked. She quietly placed her coffee cup on the railing, smiled at him and grasped his tie. For one brief moment she allowed herself the delightful image of pushing it all the way up, shoving it into his throat, and finally ending the unremitting whistling for good as she happily choked the life from him.

Her smile widened into a grin as she released the tie. "All set."

"I'll be working late tonight."

"Would you like me to keep dinner warm for you?"

"Don't bother. I'll be having dinner with clients." *Or whatever new girl he was dating this week*. He jutted his chin out. "You have to dust better; there was some on top of the bookshelf in my den this morning."

Mary Ellen gritted her teeth as she forced a tight smile to her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said with a nod. "I'll make sure to take care of it today."

"Good." He turned away from her, whistling again as he grabbed the briefcase from inside the glass door. "You might also consider hitting the gym again. You're putting on weight, you know."

No, she didn't know. Other than pregnancy, she'd always been the same size six she'd been since she was fourteen. Not that she expected *him* to notice. She didn't say any of this though; she simply nodded and continued to smile her irritating, phony smile at him.

Six more years. Just six more. On days like today, it felt like an eternity.

"Of course," she placated, unwilling to give him the pleasure of seeing her upset by his words.

She knew, without having to look, it was seven nineteen. It would be exactly seven twenty when he stepped outside the front door. It always was. She waited, listening as the door opened and closed behind him before she started her day. Walking into the kitchen she rinsed her coffee cup and placed it in the sink. The dishes could wait till later.

She jogged upstairs, pulled out her workout clothes and quickly slipped them on. This was her favorite part of the day, the simple hour she had to herself to walk down the beach and savor the beauty the rest of the world had to offer. An hour in which she could remind herself not everything was awful in life, and there *were* good things out there, just

waiting for her to discover.

She was making her way back downstairs when she felt the first tremor, a small shaking. Rochelle's fifth grade picture rattled beside her on the wall. She clasped the railing tighter as the photo continued to shake. It broke loose and plummeted onto the stairs. Mary Ellen jumped back as glass shattered around her feet.

"What the...?"

The question broke off as the world settled around her again. She'd felt a tremor last year, but not this much, and at the time she'd written it off as a passing train until she'd heard about it on the news. There was no denying this, it was obvious she'd just experienced some sort of earthquake. She'd heard of the New Madrid fault line, knew it would affect them if an earthquake was large enough, but something about this just didn't feel right.

Not like she was an earthquake expert. She'd spent a summer, when she was eleven, visiting her aunt and uncle in San Francisco, but she'd only experienced one small tremor while there, and her aunt had insisted it had actually been a passing trolley. As she got older Mary Ellen suspected her aunt was right, and she'd simply wanted it to be an earthquake so she would have something exciting to tell her friends about after the summer.

But now? Well, now there was no denying what she had just felt.

She waited breathlessly for a minute, but it seemed the world had settled back into place and the small tremor had been an isolated incident. She stooped over and began to carefully gather the larger pieces of glass within her cupped hand. She had just placed the last piece into her palm when the world seemed to drop out from under her. She cried out as she was violently thrust to the side.

She felt glass slice into her hand; blood flowed forth as her shoulder bounced into the wall and the shattered pieces scattered again. Instinctively, she put her hand out for balance, but it was already too late. Slick from the blood, her hand slipped awkwardly. She was thrust forward as the world lurched once again. Tumbling out of control, she ricocheted down the stairs and off the wall before crashing into the back of the couch.

She moaned, her body aching and throbbing as she tried to right herself. From somewhere deep in the house a loud crash reverberated. She suspected the bookcase Larry had complained about had just toppled over. *At least now the top of it would be easier to dust*, she thought to herself. Somewhere closer, another crash and shattering glass. For the first time since it began, she didn't feel just confusion, but actual *fear*. She realized she had to get moving; she'd die in this place if she didn't.

Her hand continued to leave a trail of blood as she ran; one she was dimly aware Larry would later berate her for. The glass in the grandfather clock in the corner shattered, blowing outward with a force that seemed entirely out of place for an earthquake. Stumbling and staggering, she made her way to the front door and flung it open.

People were emerging outside. Some were screaming as they fled the deathtrap their houses had suddenly become. Others had fallen to the ground, seemingly astounded and lost as they stared at their tumultuous surroundings. Mary Ellen tripped down the outside stairs, fell to her knees, and forced herself back to her feet. Her heart hammered; she could barely get air into her lungs as her body became coated in a thin sheen of sweat. It seemed as if the shaking had been going on for hours, like it was never going to stop.

Something broke, or at least that's what it felt like to her. A cracking, like an eggshell against a bowl, seemed to slash through the air. She stood, frazzled, stunned, unable to move as she somehow sensed a rending deep within her soul. A long, sad breath escaped her, and for some inexplicable reason tears suddenly sprang to her eyes.

And then, finally it was over. The silence that ensued was almost as overwhelming as the quake had been. Then car alarms began to blare, dogs barked riotously, and an anguished scream pierced the still air. Mary Ellen fought the urge to cover her ears as the scream caused her bones to tremble.

She couldn't breathe as she stumbled down the last few steps onto the sidewalk. Her neighbor, Mr. Shandling, was just emerging from his house. In his seventies, he was a kind old man, with smiling blue eyes, and a quirky sense of humor Mary Ellen adored. She didn't get to talk with him much, as he had worked mostly the same hours as Larry. And seventy or not, Larry didn't like her talking to any man. But Mr. Shandling had retired from his job last month, and at least three times a week now she found herself drifting over to his garden to share coffee and chitchat, as he pulled weeds and admired his tomatoes.

He looked disorientated now as he blinked at her from behind the lenses of his glasses. Blood was trickling from a cut in his forehead; it had turned some strands of gray hair pink and ran in a perfect line down his nose. "Mr. Shandling!" Mary Ellen called out, terrified for him and his safety.

Gathering her scattered wits, Mary Ellen forced her trembling legs to work properly as she ran toward him. He turned to her, seeming dazed and disoriented as he blinked at her. "Mary Ellen?"

"Yes." She arrived at his side. "Are you ok, Mr. Shandling?"

His hand went gingerly to his forehead. He seemed amazed as he pulled it back to examine the blood coating his fingers. "I think so," he muttered.

It wasn't the best of responses, but at least it was a response. She needed a towel, or something to wipe the blood away, so she could see the wound better. She was grabbing hold of his arm to steer him back inside when the barking filling the air stopped. Bewildered by the sudden reprieve, she lifted her head to warily take in her surroundings. It was still loud, still unbelievably chaotic as people cried, screamed and carried on. Then the howling began.

As one unnerving unit, every dog within earshot let loose a series of cries that caused her heart to stutter. She heard birds shrieking, but when she tilted her head back the sky remained clear.

"What the..." Mr. Shandling broke off as a frantic woman raced across the yard toward them. Mary Ellen recognized her from the neighborhood, but they'd never really spoken before.

"Your husband," the woman panted, pointing frantically toward the end of the street. "I called nine-one-one, but all the circuits... There's no phones. Your husband..." she trailed off. "You have to come. Hurry!"

A cold chill crept down Mary Ellen's spine. Mr. Shandling's hand enfolded hers. "Go. I'll be fine. Go on," he urged.

She reluctantly released his surprisingly strong, weathered hand. She ran beside the woman, her heart hammering not so much with apprehension, but with a certain excited expectancy. It made her wonder just what kind of person she really was. They passed

more people stumbling numbly around. On her left, a house had half collapsed. Outside, a woman was on her knees in the front yard crying loudly for her cat. Holes had opened up in the ground, appearing as if out of nowhere in peoples yards and the street. There was steam rising from one of them, but Mary Ellen didn't begin to guess the source.

At the end of the road, she spotted Larry's new, shiny black Mercedes embedded in the trunk of a tree. Judging by the tire marks in the road, he had swerved to avoid one of the larger holes in the road. Cautiously, breathlessly, she approached the driver's side door. The air bag had deployed, but it hadn't done Larry any good. She stood, gaping and confused, as she stared at the broken body of her husband. The right side of his face had been crushed by a severed tree branch that had plunged through the roof of the car, impaling itself in his leg.

Six years.

It took her a moment to realize she wouldn't have to wait those six years, to realize what she'd been waiting for was *now*.

She was *free*. She thought she should be more upset. After all, they had been together for fifteen years, half of her life, but all she felt was a sense of lightness as the severed bonds of oppression and unhappiness fell away from her. *Free*.

She lifted her head, inhaling sharply as she tried to retain control of her swaying emotions. The street was a mess, people were everywhere, emergency vehicles could be heard in the distance, but she saw no way they would be able to make it past the collection of hole-filled road, wrecked cars, and traumatized people. She stumbled backward as the first bird plummeted from the sky, knocking a man to his knees as it struck his head.

A strangled cry escaped her. The neighbor woman seized hold of her arm, pulling her back as more birds began to fall. "Run!" she cried.

Mary Ellen didn't have to be told twice; she turned and immediately bolted back toward her home. Mr. Shandling was waving and shouting at her from beneath the shelter of his porch roof. Mary Ellen ran as fast and relentlessly as she could, with only one thing on her mind:

She had to get her daughter.

CHAPTER 3

Riley
Foxboro, Mass.
7:22 A.M.

Riley jogged backward as she called to her softball team to keep up. They were slacking, and she didn't care how hot it was already. They needed to get their butts in gear if they were going to make it into the tournament finals next week. Last year she wouldn't have cared about slacking. She probably would have been in the back of the group along with her friend Carol, snickering and complaining about the run. But now she was going into her senior year, and she'd already been elected Captain of the team. These were going to be the first games with her in charge, and she'd be damned if they were going to fail under her watch.

"Come on, guys! My grandmother can run faster!"

There was a collective series of groans. Carol stuck her tongue out and made a sour face. *Traitor*, she mouthed.

Riley grinned and had just started to laugh, when she was suddenly thrown off balance and knocked back. She bounced on her butt across the sidewalk, a groan swelled up in her throat as her bruised ass protested the jarring impact. She suppressed it only because she was humiliated by her unbelievable, and uncharacteristic, clumsiness. She must have tripped over a crevice in the sidewalk, or perhaps a stubborn root that had somehow worked its way beneath the surface, as was common in this area.

Yet even as those thoughts ran through her mind, her body continued to process a variety of other stimuli. The ground was *vibrating* beneath her fingers. She hadn't noticed it at first because she had been so startled, but she felt it now. There was a tingling working its way up her hand, into her arms, and pulsating through her chest.

Carol stepped forward, her hand out to help Riley up, but then she froze. Carol's eyebrows drew together in confusion, her mouth parted as her eyes lifted to scan the street, then the treetops. Riley went to push herself up when she realized what had caused her to fall. It had been a tree root, but this one had not worked its way beneath the surface of the walkway, it had ripped its way up from the maple that had tipped over in the yard next to her.

A young boy raced out the front door, his mother close on his heels as he bolted into the front yard, screaming incoherently. Riley was screaming without realizing it, and then she realized she wasn't making any sounds, not out loud anyway. Instead, a silent cry echoed loudly in her head that she couldn't drown out, or release.

Then the real screaming started, not the panicked shrieks reverberating through her head, but agonized screams that left Riley numb inside. She felt a fracturing somewhere, perhaps in the deep recesses of her mind, she didn't know. But what she was seeing, what her eyes were trying to process, couldn't be real. It just *couldn't*, she insisted internally.

Carol had fallen back, nearly tripping over Riley as she scrambled to get out of the way. Carol was not the one screaming; instead strange almost grunting and animalistic noises were coming from her as she fell against the uprooted, thick dirt base of the maple. Other members of the team had fallen back; Jenny turned and bolted into the street. The girl was running faster now than at any time during practice. Alice was screaming at the

top of her lungs, alternating between pulling at her short brown hair and reaching and retreating from... something...

From something Riley was sure couldn't possibly be real. But it was. Riley stared, astonished, gaping; her mind slowly accepting what her eyes were seeing was *real*.

Their second baseman, Kelly, stumbled first to the left, then to the right, before bobbing forward and back again. But something... wasn't right. Kelly's hair, her beautiful, shimmering, nearly impossible blue black hair was gone. It seemed to have shriveled, curled up and disappeared as if it had been lit on fire. Only a few strands of hair remained attached to Kelly's now visible, puckered, and reddened scalp.

Riley didn't really understand why the lack of hair bothered her so much when she was looking at the gaping hole in the right side of Kelly's face. A hole that revealed blood, and muscle, and exposed *bone* where Kelly's bronzed skin had been just seconds ago. A side that seemed to have simply shriveled up and disappeared with Kelly's hair. The left side of Kelly's face was almost intact... minus the lips, ears, and eyelid. *But who needed those things anyway*, Riley thought hysterically, *when all of those beautiful locks were gone?*

Who gives a crap about the hair! Riley snarled at herself. Get a grip, get a grip! Oh God, she was an idiot. She dimly realized she was in some sort of shock.

A low groan escaped Riley as Kelly's one remaining brown eye locked onto her. Riley felt the connection deep in her soul, felt her friend's suffering as if it were her own. Tears of loss slid down Riley's face. How was Kelly still *alive*?

Then her brown eye rolled up. Kelly took a stumbling step back and fell into the steaming hole that had appeared beside her, and had been the source of her destruction.

More shouts filled the air. Riley shoved her fist into her mouth and bit down on her knuckles as she screamed against them. She didn't know why she didn't just scream out loud, like the remaining members of her team as they staggered away from the boiling remains of their friend. But Riley clung to the improbable, and insane, thought that as Captain she had to set a strong example. Though she was certain no other Captain, in the history of time, had watched one of their team members practically parboil in the middle of a freaking sidewalk!

Hands seized her arms, causing her to jump. "Riley! Riley, get up!" Carol's words finally penetrated the haze clinging to her. "Get up, Riley!"

Riley allowed Carol to help her to her feet. "What's happening?"

Carol shook her head. Her hazel eyes were frantic as they darted over the street, the homes, and the falling trees. Riley could barely bring herself to look at Carol, never mind the chaos surrounding her, the death she felt in the air.

She couldn't keep her head buried in the sand though; it would only get her killed. She had to be aware and alert, even if she didn't want to see what was going on. Little by little, she found the courage to lift her head.

All around her there were people running, screaming, and crying. The ground had stopped shaking, but the chaos was spreading like wildfire as the earth continued to crumble and pockets of deadly steam sprouted up. Dogs were barking crazily. Something else was shrieking, and she finally realized it was the squirrels as they fled into the street, into the trees, or just ran heedlessly into things. She winced, unable to look as some of them battered themselves to death.

Carol's hands tightened on her arms; they were bruising, but Riley found she almost

welcomed the pain. It meant she was alive. To her left, another unfortunate person fell into a hole. Three more looked like they'd been electrocuted by fallen power lines, a car was embedded in the front porch across the street, and at least two houses had flames shooting out of their roofs.

The remaining members of the team huddled close to her. Other than losing Kelly, and Jenny bolting, they appeared to have all remained. Most of them had been together since elementary school. They were friends, or at the very least friendly. They relied on each other; they trusted one another.

Now they were all staring at Riley as if she might somehow have the magic answer to this mess. But this wasn't knowing what glove was best, or what kind of dress to buy... she didn't have the first clue as to what was happening. Judging by the hysterical people surrounding her, young and old, no one else seemed to, either. She didn't know if they should try and go to Carol's, whose house was closest, or if they should stay here. Apparently the earth beneath their feet was no longer stable, apparently it was looking to cook them like lobsters, or crush them like nuts.

She shuddered at the comparison and purposely tried not to think about how many nuts she had cracked every Christmas with her grandparents. The thought of her grandparents caused a tug at her heart. Her family. *That's* where she should be, and she didn't care if it was safe or not to try and get to them.

But she did care. Tears burned her eyes, she couldn't abandon the girls, her team; her friends. With new determination, she turned toward them. "Brie, do you have your phone?"

Phones were supposed to be left behind during practice and training runs, but Riley was well aware Brie always kept hers stashed between her ample breasts. The girl was unable to part with the thing for a minute. For the first time Riley was truly grateful for that.

"Huh? My uh... Oh! Yeah! Yeah, I do!" Brie responded dazedly.

Riley thrust her hand out and seized hold of the small phone. "Who are you calling?" Carol asked tremulously.

She was tempted to call her family, but she wasn't the most important thing right now. She quickly dialed nine-one-one. She hadn't known what she expected, to get through, perhaps not. To get an all circuits are busy was a more obvious choice. But the dead silence, the absolute nothing accompanying her pushing the send button was enough to make her skin crawl. She swallowed heavily, pulled the phone from her ear, and hit the buttons again with a trembling finger.

Nothing.

She blinked back the tears burning her eyes and numbly handed the phone back to Brie. The faces surrounding her were all ashen; their eyes were larger, rounder; more childlike as they looked to her. For the first time she wished they had elected another Captain this year.

"We can't stay here; we have to find shelter, or somewhere safe. Carol we should go to your house first. Perhaps a landline..."

Riley broke the sentence off. If a cell phone wasn't working, and all around them lines were down, what were the chances a landline would work? Somewhere in the distance a siren began to wail, followed swiftly by a second one. Something popped and exploded with a loud BANG. Riley ducked, instinctively throwing her arms over her

head. A few seconds later, she peeked out from under her arm as the transformer across the street began to smoke.

They had to get out of there, *now*.

"Go. We have to go." She couldn't stop the tremble in her voice.

"Yes," Carol agreed. Carol took a few tentative steps backward before she seemed to recall what had happened to Kelly and looked nervously over her shoulder.

Riley and Carol led the way down the suddenly hostile sidewalk. There were plenty of times they had to move into yards, into the street, and go well out of their way to avoid the multiple holes. Though not all of the openings were steaming, but none of them were brave enough to chance going near the possible death traps. As they ran, they passed dead birds, but when Riley looked to the sky she didn't see any in flight.

She continued to hear sirens, but saw no emergency vehicles. Though not everyone seemed to be losing it, confusion still ruled. The screaming had died down, and some people were gathering their wits, while others wandered in a haze that frightened Riley more than the suddenly deadly world surrounding them.

Carol's house came into view, the vivid blue of its front door clearly visible from anywhere within eyesight of the structure. No one could miss that blue. It was worse than The Smurfs. Carol's mother liked things bright, and thankfully her father was colorblind, but the rest of the world had to deal with the color. A fact Carol's mother found entertaining, and laughed about when people complained. She somewhat enjoyed aggravating people, said the color amused her. It embarrassed Carol, but Riley thought it was hilarious.

She broke into a jog, mindful of obstacles in her way as she began to move faster. Her legs pumped vigorously as she bolted up Carol's stairs and thrust open the hideously blue door with no thought to any peril lingering within. Her only thought was the phone.

She'd been in Carol's house often enough to know where everything was located. She shoved the toppled coatrack out of her way in her rush to get to the living room. The once tidy room was a mess, but she scarcely noticed the broken glass, scattered books, shattered TV, and fractured ceiling. She picked the phone up off the floor, slammed it back into its cradle, and waited a few seconds before snatching it back up.

Silence.

Frustration filled her; she bit back a groan as she placed the phone down, impatiently tapped her foot, and counted to ten. The team remained silent as they watched and waited from the doorway. Riley snagged the phone again. This time silence didn't greet her on the other end.

As she pressed the receiver to her ear, a strange, almost electrical whistling rattled across the line. It clicked, hissed, popped, and whistled again before once more going silent. Riley's hand clasped the phone tighter, and she found she was paralyzed as the silence was broken once more by the same series of sounds. She would have preferred silence; there was something eerie in the noises, something inexplicably terrifying.

Something *inhuman*.

Her hand shook as she gently placed the phone back in its cradle, suddenly frightened of the inanimate object.

"Nothing?" Carol asked.

Riley swallowed heavily. Her eyes traveled over the frightened faces standing behind Carol. "Nothing good," she whispered.

Carol frowned. She hurried across the room and grabbed the phone. Her face scrunched as she stood and quietly listened. "What... *is* that?" she breathed.

"I don't know."

"I don't like it in here," Kelsey muttered, warily studying the cracked ceiling Riley had chosen to ignore. She couldn't ignore it now as the house made a strange groaning sound. The structure seemed to be sagging in on itself, but would tremors do that? And then Riley understood; it wasn't tremors that had caused this sagging, but the *holes*. *There were holes under this house.*

"We have to get out. *Now.*"

She practically shoved them out the door and down the hideously blue stairs of the drooping porch. She ran toward the street as the house released a heaving sound. It did not collapse on itself, not yet anyway, but the second floor was gradually making its way into the first floor, and Riley was certain the first floor windows were lower than they had been.

The horn blared behind her. She whipped her head around in time to see a car swerve frantically to avoid one of the holes, pop the curb, and spin out of control. Riley was frozen, trapped within the headlights as the Honda barreled down upon her. "Riley! Riley, *move!*" Carol screamed.

Her legs remained frozen though, locked in place. Her gaze was riveted upon the badly battered and bleeding man behind the wheel. She felt arms wrap around her waist as she was propelled out of the way of the oncoming car. She bounced over the ground, her breath knocked out of her. She lay, staring up at a pristine and beautiful blue sky that was completely out of place in this horrific new world surrounding her.

Then a new face loomed over her, a face she instantly recognized. Carol's older brother, Alexander, stared back at her. She dimly recalled Carol saying Xander had returned a few days ago from his college trip to Australia, but Riley had blown it off, as she did with most everything having to do with him.

He looked her over with concern, seemed to decide she was ok, and broke into a grin. "What's the matter, Dumbo?" he said, bringing up her hated childhood nickname; a nickname *he* had given her. "Those ears can't help you fly out of the way?"

He just saved my life, she thought. *I should be thankful.*

Instead, she hauled off and punched him square in the jaw.

CHAPTER 4

Carl

Cape Cod, Mass.

7:32 a.m.

His hands shook so much he could barely light his cigarette, and he wasn't using a lighter. He'd never really been a chain smoker. A heavy smoker, sure, but never a chain smoker. Now he lit one up right after the other, barely tasting them as he sucked them down with enough force to make his lungs ache.

His heart hammered, not so much from the effects of too much nicotine, but from the growing certainty they might not survive whatever was going on around them. In all of his forty-one years he had never imagined he would see anything like this, let alone live through it.

The scientists, news media, radicals, religious zealots, and every loony with a story to tell had prattled on and on about this stuff, *this* moment, right now. They urged people to recycle, preached about global warming, spouted about calendars, recited passages from The Bible, and talked about looming prophecies of doom. All of which Carl had never actually believed a whit. Not one iota.

Oh, he'd kidded about it, joked about what he'd do if the prophecies and calendars ever came true, but as far as he was concerned it was never going to come. That day was for future generations to worry about, it wasn't going to happen in *his* lifetime, he thought.

Carl did his bit to help by returning bottles, but he did so mainly for the deposit, and he didn't dump things into the water supply, at least not anymore. When he was younger no one cared about gas, oil, paint, or littering, and he'd left his fair share of pollution around. To be fair though, he'd never really known what it could do back then. None of them did. Now he was more careful, but he still wasn't a fanatical member of the pollution police.

Yet he realized what was occurring now didn't have to be a result of global warming. It could be the calendar thing or some prophecy or Bible verse he didn't know about.

It could be all of those things occurring at once, or it could simply be a single, isolated incident. He could be dead wrong about his unspoken, unshakable certainty today actually *was* the end of the world as he knew it. Two hours from now he could find out only the Cape had been affected by whatever was going on, that they were the only ones experiencing it, but he didn't think so.

The radio offered only static broken up by a strange whistling noise. At one point he'd thought he'd heard some kind of voices coming through too, but he wasn't entirely sure they were there, or that they'd been human. Frankly, the noise had creeped him out. The hair on his neck had stood on end as the noise had hissed over the airwaves before returning it to the unnerving silence again. It was like eavesdropping on a CB conversation in another country, and not having a clue what the speakers were talking about. He'd turned the radio off with the silent vow not to turn it on again.

His shaky hands lit another cigarette and tossed the spent one out the window. He'd crushed the filter in-between his fingers. "Jesus," John whispered in the driver seat next to him. "Jesus. What the hell?"

The kid had been uttering the same sentences repeatedly for a few minutes now. It was beginning to grate on Carl's nerves. But then again, the kid was right, this was a *Jesus* and *What the Hell* kind of situation they were in. Carl couldn't take his eyes off the window as they drove sluggishly through the town. Some of the buildings had crumpled, literally just crumpled like dominoes one on top of the other.

It was the heart of tourist season, and Sandwich was a picturesque town. There were always tourists meandering the streets and checking out the shops Carl himself had never once stepped foot in, even though he'd lived here for eight years now. It was still early, but there had been plenty of people on the streets looking to beat the crowd of sightseers, antique hunters, and candy fanatics who would mob the streets later in the day.

The ones who had escaped the crumbling buildings were staggering dazedly down the street. He thought they should help, but John crept steadily onward, and Carl didn't tell him to stop. He didn't know where to begin to help. A young boy was standing in the middle of the street, crying loudly as blood ran down the side of his face. Carl had no children of his own, but he did have a heart and he couldn't just leave the kid.

"Wait," he said sharply.

John seemed not to hear him over his tenth *What the Hell*, but finally Carl's command pierced his haze, and he slid the truck to a stop. A woman emerged from the drifting dust of the debris. She lifted the child high, holding him in her arms before she disappeared into the dust and rubble once again.

"Never mind."

John didn't move. His hands twisted on the steering wheel, his knuckles had turned white. His suntanned face was three shades lighter than it had been at the start of the day. What dark hair wasn't plastered to his forehead with sweat, stuck out at odd angles from his narrow face.

"Go on, John."

John stared at him, his brown eyes nearly bulging out of his sockets as he blinked rapidly at Carl. "What is going on?"

Carl shook his head as he lit another cigarette. "I don't know, but you gotta move, John. We can't just sit here." He didn't know why, but he felt staying still was the equivalent of death.

"Try the phone again."

That was the *last* thing he wanted to do again, but he grabbed hold of it as John drove down the road once more. There were other vehicles on the road, inching steadily onward, the drivers looked just as flabbergasted as Carl felt. He hit the buttons on the phone and received the same response he'd received before.

"Still nothing."

"The radio?"

"No," he said.

John was rocking subtly back and forth as he stared out the window. Thankfully the birds had stopped plummeting from the sky, but their bodies crunched under the solid tires of the truck as they rolled down the street. "We should go to the shop," he said.

Carl inhaled smoke deeply and pondered the idea of returning to their workshop. "We should get off this island," he decided.

"We'll get our cars..."

"No. We'll take the truck."

"What? No, we'll lose our jobs..."

"Do you honestly think it matters anymore?"

John blinked rapidly at him again before turning his attention back to the road that had become rutted from the upheaval of the earth. "What are you talking about?"

Carl waved a hand at the windshield. "Look around, John. This isn't exactly normal circumstances. I think keeping our jobs is the *least* of our worries right now. We have to get off this island. We're trapped here. When people begin to realize they should escape the bridges are going to be a nightmare. We'd *never* get off, and that's if the bridges are still standing."

More rapid blinking from John, he was growing steadily whiter by the second.

"We... we have to get our cars," he protested.

"How much gas do you have in your car? A quarter, possibly half a tank? John, we filled up the truck this morning; we have the gas card..."

"It's stealing."

It was stealing, and right now Carl didn't care. "If all of this ends up being nothing but an isolated, freak incident, then I'll take the heat for it. I will personally pay the company back. Hell, I'll go to jail if it comes down to it. But for now we're taking this truck, full of fuel, and we're getting off of this damn sandbar while we still can."

"I'd still go to jail too..."

"Then hop on out and go get your car, but I'm taking the truck, 'cause I have a feeling it's going to come in handy."

John blinked rapidly again; he swallowed heavily as he managed a nod. "Ok. Yeah. Yeah, you're right. My mom and dad work on the other side. I want to see them and make sure they're all right"

Of course he did. Any normal person would want to make sure their family was safe right now. Carl, on the other hand, had no family to worry about. "Maybe I should drive."

He'd thought John was going to argue with him. Instead he stopped, shifted the truck into park, and they exchanged positions quickly. Carl put his cigarettes away and drove onward. The going was tedious, simply because of the sheer amount of people crowding the streets and staggering around in an aimless daze.

Every single apocalyptic movie he'd ever seen ran through his head as he watched the scene unfolding before him. He'd seen plenty of them, but none of them seemed to be the same as what was happening here. He kept waiting for a big explosion, waiting for something more. He wouldn't have been a bit surprised if people started suddenly jumping on each other and trying to eat brains. However, after the shaking there seemed to be a collective inhalation, a waiting expectancy in the air. An inexplicable, communal pause as they all waited to see what would happen next.

And there *would* be a next. He didn't have a freaking clue what was going on, but there was more still to come. He knew it. He could *feel* it.

Power lines had crumpled, their poles snapped like toothpicks. A police car drove unhurriedly past; its lights were flashing, but its siren was off. The officer behind the wheel was young; the poor guy actually looked like he might be a rookie. There were some obstacles in the road, but for the most part Carl was able to navigate around them with relative ease, and the truck was big enough to drive over the worst areas of the jugged pavement.

They passed more crumpled buildings; there were areas where people were

screaming incessantly. The heartbreaking screams made Carl wish the radio worked again. But as much as he longed to drown out the screams, he wanted to hear the sounds on the radio less.

The birds hadn't been the only animals that had gone crazy. Dogs were barking and howling; they ran through the streets, nearly plowing into the truck a few times. He spotted a pair of foxes racing around the buildings, a few raccoons and skunks as well. At any other time they would have seemed out of place, would have been a cause for concern, but Carl found it almost fitting to see them now.

There were cars in telephone poles, on front yards, and abandoned by the side of the road. He was thankful it was a Monday, and this had occurred so early; otherwise, he didn't think he would have been able to navigate the small roads in the center of town. As it was, there were a few abandoned vehicles he had to nudge out of his way with the bumper of the truck. A cat zipped in front of them and into the branches of a large locust tree that had been half uprooted by the force of the tremors. Flames shot from the house on his right, but there were no rescue crews on site.

How would they know about the blaze unless they saw it? Carl realized with a growing feeling of unease. For the first time since things had hit the fan, he became acutely aware they were on their own, isolated, cut off. All he had to rely on right now was John, and the kid was still muttering *Jesus* and *What the Hell's* with alarming, and annoying, frequency.

Carl made the turn onto the highway ramp not knowing what to expect. He thought the highway would be littered with people trying to escape. However, other than a few vehicles on the side of the road, in the median, or crashed on the side, the highway was eerily empty. John stopped muttering. He leaned forward in his seat, his fingers resting on the dashboard as he stared out the windshield with bug eyes and a gaping mouth.

There was another car a short ways ahead of them, a small Toyota with a bike rack attached to the back; the wheels of the bike spun leisurely in the wind. Carl pulled beside the vehicle; he briefly met the eyes of a frightened looking woman and her two young kids. The woman nodded to him before focusing her full attention on the road again.

He rounded a bend in the highway, keeping pace with the woman as they neared the approach to the bridge. A row of vehicles was lined up before the bridge. The cars gleamed in the beams of the sun rising over the top of the metal structure looming before them. People were huddled before the bridge; they stood shoulder to shoulder as they stared at the bridge.

"Do you think it's safe?" John inquired.

"I don't know."

"That earthquake, or whatever it was, maybe it messed it up or something?"

"Maybe."

Carl parked the truck behind a Jeep Cherokee and climbed out. The Toyota stopped beside him; the children remaining inside as the woman stepped outside. They walked in silence toward the others. It was impossible to see the other side of the bridge; impossible to know what damage may have been done to the structure. No vehicles were coming from the other direction. The people gathered around glanced at the three of them but said nothing.

Carl studied the bridge. He had never really liked the two bridges connecting the Cape to the mainland. He'd done a lot of traveling in his time, bounced from state to state

and town to town, but for some inexplicable reason he'd always hated bridges, avoiding them whenever possible. But these bridges were impossible to avoid. And now they may be damaged, probably *were* damaged, and they were the only chance of escape he had.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with the others, staring at their possible demise, Carl began to feel an odd connection to the people around him that he hadn't felt in years. They were all in the same boat, all sharing somewhat different experiences of what he suspected was the end of the world. They had all been driven here, to this point, to this escape.

They were also all scared out of their minds.

"I'll walk out there," an older looking man with graying hair and a cane stated. "See if there's any visible damage."

"I'll go with you."

Carl hadn't known what possessed him to volunteer. He could practically picture the metal and concrete structure crumbling from beneath him, but he wasn't going to let the man go alone. No one should be alone now.

"I'll go too," said a woman with reddish-brown hair. "Three sets of eyes are better than one, and if we fan out we'll be able to see more."

Carl turned to John and grabbed hold of his arm. "Pull the other mower off the trailer, and get the trailer off the truck. It's added weight, and it's only going to slow us down. Keep the gas cans, and do whatever you can to get the gas out of the mower tank. We may need it."

Though John was pale and still seemed shaken, he nodded firmly and broke into a brisk jog toward the truck. Carl swallowed heavily as he turned back to the bridge. Putting one foot in front of the other, he moved to the left side of the road, the woman took the center, and the older man stepped onto the sidewalk at the edge of the bridge. He moved cautiously forward; his eyes straining to see every detail of both the steel rafters above him and the pavement below. There were cracks running through the structure, but he didn't know if they were new, or if they had been there all along.

His lungs labored to breathe, as every step made him feel more and more certain the ground was going to crumple away. They made it to the middle of the bridge, but his tension didn't ease as he looked out at the highway stretching before him. It looked almost as vacant as the one behind him, but smoke curled with far more intensity from the tree line and amongst the homes and businesses. The damage to the road seemed worse over there, with holes and ruts, and giant blocks of asphalt tossed around. It was still drivable, but the going would be much more time-consuming on the mainland than it was on the Cape side.

He didn't care, if this structure supported them he was getting off the Cape while the getting was good. He briefly contemplated just leaving the truck behind, but it was a good vehicle, solid, new, and full of gas. It was big enough to drive over or crash through certain obstacles, if it became necessary, and there were no guarantees they would be able to find another automobile as convenient as the truck.

An ambulance screamed down the highway; its siren blared as it swerved around the potholes with the expertise of someone accustomed to dodging and avoiding obstacles. It was reassuring to see the vehicle; it was something normal and familiar in a world that no longer was.

He released a pent up breath when they finally made it to the other side of the bridge.

Surprisingly, there were no cars there waiting to drive over. For once people weren't trying to cram themselves onto the Cape on a hot summer day.

As one, they turned around and moved steadily back across the bridge.

"I saw nothing obvious," the older man informed the waiting people when they returned. More people gathered, as well as more vehicles. John had rejoined the growing group. "I think it'll be ok, if we go across one vehicle at a time, at least in the beginning."

"Who is going to go first?" another man inquired.

Silence descended over everyone as they stared expectantly at each other. When no one spoke, Carl volunteered, "We will."

"Jesus," John muttered.

CHAPTER 5

Albert (Al) Shandling
Newport, RI
7:45 a.m.

Al held the towel full of ice to his head as he watched Mary Ellen fiddle with the radio. It was still making the same awful sound that had been coming out of it for the past five minutes, but she seemed determined to try and find *something* on the airwaves. He quietly longed for her to turn the thing off; the noise was unnerving. She was obviously frightened and searching for some answer, some kind of communication with the outside world. The television had already proven useless; there was no power to run it.

"I have a handheld CB downstairs; perhaps it will be of more use."

Mary Ellen's dark brown eyes were wide as she stared at him with blossoming hope. "Do you think?"

"It can't hurt."

He pulled the towel away from the gash in his forehead. His wife would have been upset he'd used the good towels for such a thing, but Nellie wasn't here to be upset anymore, she'd been gone for five years now. There were times when it seemed like it was only yesterday she'd passed, and other days when it seemed as if lifetimes had slid by. Mainly his. He missed her every day. He still sensed her displeasure when he did something she wouldn't have approved of, such as ruining one of the good hand towels by bleeding all over it.

He tossed the bloody towel aside as Mary Ellen rose to her feet. Though he thought she was going to go running to his basement, she came toward him instead. "That's really deep. I think it might require a stitch or two."

"You have medical training?"

A faint red arose on the freckled cheeks of her broad boned face. "I planned to be a nurse or doctor when I was younger, but I'm afraid the only training I have is the school of motherhood."

"Well, that's just as brutal as medical school, sometimes," he said, smiling.

Her eyebrows rose, and then she let out a loud bark of laughter that briefly lit her face, causing the lines around her eyes to crinkle. She'd been tense, aggravated, and desperate ever since she'd entered the house. It was good to see her relax, if only just for an instant, as her smile and laughter slipped away again. Al didn't kid himself into thinking she was upset because of the loss of her husband. He was aware his neighbors had not shared the same kind of relationship he'd had with his Nellie.

He'd begun to suspect the relationship was abusive. He wasn't sure if it was physical or not, but he wouldn't have been surprised to learn Larry hit her. He also wasn't surprised Mary Ellen wasn't showing much grief right now. No, her only concern was trying to find out what had happened, what areas had been affected, and how to find her daughter.

"If you have Band-Aids, I can butterfly it; that should hold it over for a little while, at least," she told him.

"I have a first-aid kit."

They left their neighbor standing by the picture window, staring out at the street with

a gaping mouth. Mary Ellen followed him into the bathroom where he pulled the kit out from under the sink. She opened it with deft hands and began to pull out the contents. She set aside the butterfly bandages and antiseptic cream before pulling out the hydrogen bottle.

"I'm sorry about your husband," he told her as she bandaged and cleaned the deep gash in her hand before turning her attention to his wound. He thought he should be a little warier that she was also wounded and recently bleeding, but truth be told, he simply didn't think it mattered right now.

"It's ok," she muttered.

He looked at her as she gently pressed cotton balls of peroxide to his forehead. It stung slightly as the medicine fizzed, but he kept his face impassive. "How long were you together?"

"Too long," she murmured.

It saddened him to think of how unhappy she'd been. He had come to like Mary Ellen over the years. They'd grown closer since he'd retired, and though they'd never really gotten personal before, he had a feeling that was about to change. "Do you know the woman out there?"

Mary Ellen frowned as she gently placed the small band-aids on his forehead. "I've seen her around before, but not really, no." She sat back and smiled. "You're all set Mr. Shandling."

"I've told you before Mary Ellen, call me Al."

She smiled wanly at him as she tossed the wrappers into the trash. "Well Al, you're all set." She hefted the medium sized kit up and enfolded it against her chest. "We should probably keep this close by."

He walked beside her as they made their way back toward the living room. "Where is your daughter?" he inquired. The woman was still standing by the window. She glanced at them as they entered the room, but her attention was immediately drawn back outside.

"She's at a riding camp in Middleboro, Mass. She loves horses," Mary Ellen said fondly.

"I'm sure she's enjoying it."

"She was..." Mary Ellen whispered. "Do... do you think this is everywhere?"

"I don't really know what to think."

"Maybe we should try to go to the police station. It's only a couple miles away."

"Let's try the CB first."

"I'll get it for you."

He shook his head. He barely recalled where the thing was, and he sure wasn't going to make her go tromping through the dusty old basement to find it. "It's all right. I'll be right back."

Leaving Mary Ellen by his couch, he hurried to the basement stairs. He flicked the switch three times before recalling there was no power. Feeling silly and a little annoyed with himself, he retrieved a flashlight from the junk drawer and clicked it on. Normally he would have been amazed to find it working, but when a hurricane had nearly made landfall last year, he'd actually stocked up on supplies like flashlights, batteries, and first-aid kits for a change. He usually blew off the weather people, they were never right anyway, but this time he'd decided not to take the chance. The hurricane had missed, but he was glad he had the supplies now.

He found the handheld CB at the bottom of a box marked hunting supplies. It actually could have been marked garbage for as often as he'd gone into the woods these past ten years. Once Nellie had been diagnosed with cancer, he'd spent all his free time striving to find some answer, some miracle that would save her. There had been none, at least not for Nellie, but he'd donated a fair amount of his money in the possibility there might be a miracle for someone else someday.

Al pulled the CB free and retreated back up the stairs. Mary Ellen had abandoned the radio and now paced anxiously from one end of the room to the other.

"Does it still work?" she inquired.

"We're going to find out."

He placed it on the table and settled onto the couch. It had been years since he'd used the thing; he wasn't sure he'd remember how or that the batteries were still good. But static filtered out when he turned it on and began to move through the channels. Mary Ellen hovered restlessly nearby, but the other woman had still not vacated her spot by the window. He was looking to connect with someone, anyone, but there seemed to be no one out there, as he was greeted with nothing but static and silence.

He turned it off, unwilling to drain the battery, but also unwilling to give up on it just yet. He might get a better response somewhere else. He looked over at Mary Ellen. She was visibly pale; her hands shook as she pushed back a loose strand of chestnut brown hair and tucked it behind her ear.

"It's getting strange out there," the other woman muttered.

Al exchanged a look with Mary Ellen. "Getting?" she inquired in disbelief.

The woman turned away from the window, and her lower lip began to tremble. "Yeah."

Al didn't like the sound of that, or the look of the woman. He placed the CB down and rose to his feet. Mary Ellen stepped next to the window and pulled the other curtain back. He stood beside her, staring out at the darkening day. It was still early in the morning; the sun was somewhere behind his house, but the shadows were all wrong. It shouldn't be this dark.

"What are they doing?" the woman inquired.

Her attention was engrossed on something across the street, alerting him to the fact the darkening sky wasn't the strangest thing occurring right now. His focus became riveted on the sidewalk across the street. In all of his seventy-two years, including the five years he had spent watching his wife waste away, he had *never* seen anything quite as terrifying as what he witnessed now.

Across the street, lined up in a perfect row, were a collection of dogs from the neighborhood. They sat in a straight line, and although their gazes were directed on his house, it seemed as if they somehow saw *through* the house to whatever was causing the darkness behind them to grow. Their tails and ears were pricked. They didn't move, didn't bark, drool, or wag. There were large dogs and small ones; there were even a few he wasn't entirely sure were domesticated. There were about twenty of them in total, sitting, staring.

Al's breath hissed out of him. Mary Ellen released the curtain, letting it settle back into place, as she stepped to the side to peer through the opening left by the drapes.

"What are they doing?" she whispered.

"Nothing good. I'm certain of it," the woman answered.

There were still people out there, and though most of them seemed to have started noticing the dogs; there were still some who were walking around in a dazed oblivion. He wanted to open the door and yell at them to run, to get away. But he couldn't bring his feet to move. A young man, holding a hand to his bleeding cheek bumped into a Husky, but the dog didn't move. The man staggered back, stared at the dogs for a minute, and then turned and bolted down the street. Al held his breath, waiting to see if the dogs would take off after him and attack.

They remained immobile.

"That's my Moogie."

"I'm sorry," Al said. "What's a Moogie?"

The woman raised a trembling hand and pointed out the window at a golden retriever seated in between a poodle and a dachshund. "The retriever, her name is Moogie."

Al quirked a brow over that one, but bit his tongue on a response. He'd probably go a little crazy too, if someone had named him, "*Moogie*." He realized he now knew more about the woman's dog than the woman herself. "So, if that's Moogie, what's your name, may I ask?"

"I'm sorry." She colored as she thrust out her hand. "It's Rita."

He shook her hand firmly as he introduced himself and then Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen barely acknowledged the woman as she quickly shook her hand. Her gaze was still riveted on the sidewalk and the sky. "The birds stopped falling," she said quietly.

Al watched as a small dog that looked like a cross between a Jack Russell and a Chihuahua padded over to the others and sat at the end. It frightened him that they all seemed to be staring at *his* house and beyond. He'd always been more of a cat man himself, and now, looking at the dogs, he was reassured by his preference.

"Maybe I should get Moogie," Rita pondered.

"You're crazy if you try," Mary Ellen told her.

Al silently agreed, as he was seized with the sudden urge to get his guns. He turned away from the window and hurried into his back den. His youngest son had moved out years ago, but he still kept the gun cabinet locked. He pulled it open and critically eyed the three rifles tucked safely inside. He'd bought them years ago, when he'd still gone on his yearly hunting trips to Maine with some of his college friends. He'd never been much of a hunter, but he had enjoyed the week they had spent drinking and catching up on each other's lives.

He'd only ever shot one deer in his life, and he'd only shot that one because someone else had maimed it first and had either been too inept to track the deer, or too lazy to be bothered. Al couldn't walk away and leave the animal to suffer, however. There was no way it was going to survive with the bullet wound it had sustained to its hindquarters. Not only had the hunter been too lazy to track the deer, he'd also been a poor shot.

Al may not have been much of a hunter, but he was deadly accurate with a gun. He'd made sure to be, had spent hours at target practice just in case there ever came a time when he would actually *have* to shoot something. He'd never gone out there to kill anything, but if it ever became necessary, or if he ever had to defend himself, he was going to make sure it was with a kill shot. He wasn't about to let anything suffer because of his incompetence.

It had been years since he'd met with his friends in Maine, but he'd kept the guns in excellent condition. He'd cleaned them regularly, taken each of them to the shooting

range twice a year to keep them in good, firing condition. Growing up, his family had had little; they'd scrimped and saved and gone without, and he'd grown up believing everything ought to be treated with respect. He'd had a lot more in his later years, but he'd never wasted unnecessarily, and he took care of every one of his possessions, only getting rid of them when they were beyond repair.

Now, he was grateful for his meticulousness as he pulled the gleaming rifles from the cabinet. There was a twenty-two Winchester he had bought for Nellie when she had expressed a desire to learn to shoot. The other two were both thirty-aught-sixes with top notch scopes. He grabbed the boxes of ammo from the cabinet and tucked them into his rifle bag. There were also two Smith and Wesson nine mm's he hefted into his hands. The weight of them in his hands reassured him.

As he turned away from the gun cabinet he had intended to ignore the back window, but his inherent curiosity drew him to it. He used the muzzle of the handgun to push the curtain aside. The day had grown darker, the sky was shadowed and hazy, but he spotted the source of the unexpected, sudden nightfall. The moon, or perhaps it was dark clouds, stretched over the sun to create a vibrant halo he had to look away from. There wasn't supposed to be a solar eclipse today, but that's what it appeared to be as darkness enshrouded the Earth.

"An eclipse." Mary Ellen's words were hushed, awed, as she stared past his shoulder from her place in the doorway. Al released the curtain and turned away from the strange phenomena. She massaged her forehead as she frowned. "I didn't know there was supposed to be one today."

"There wasn't," he grunted. "And I'm not sure it is one. Have you ever shot a gun before?"

"No."

Al studied the twenty-two and then the handgun. Mary Ellen and Rita were both about the same size, but he felt Mary Ellen would probably be more capable of handling a gun, as well as reloading it with a steady hand. He held it out to her. She hesitated before taking it from him.

"Do you really think guns are necessary?" Mary Ellen inquired.

"I'd rather have them than *not* have them."

She nodded. "You're right. How do I use this thing?"

He didn't like that all he could give her was a crash course on how to stand, shoot, and reload, but it was the best he could manage right now. If everything remained calm (which he didn't think it would), he'd give both women a better lesson, but right now he just wanted her to know how to use the weapon, and where the safety was.

"You feel comfortable with it?"

"I think I'll have to be."

Al admired her resolve and determination as she threw back her shoulders and nodded. Rita was by the window still, her gaze focused across the street. "There are more of them," she stated as Al handed her the twenty-two and explained it as quickly as he could.

Across the street the dogs continued to amass; the darkness continued to creep over them. There were still a few people outside, but they went out of their way to avoid the dogs as they walked toward the main road. The fire finally consumed the house down the road; sparks shot out of it as it collapsed upon itself in a crumpled heap.

It was nearly dark as night now. He had the frightening thought the glow of the sun would be blocked permanently. The deaths that would result, the deaths that were *already* resulting from whatever was happening, would be astronomical. The day became night, and in one fluid, united motion the dogs rose to their feet.

CHAPTER 6

Xander
Foxboro, Mass.
7:45 a.m.

Xander worked his jaw back and forth as he rubbed at the tender bruise he knew was forming. Jeez, but the girl had one hell of a right hook, and if the glare she was shooting him was any indication, she felt absolutely no remorse for punching him in the jaw.

Hard. Apparently she couldn't take a joke, but to be fair she'd never truly appreciated the nickname he gave her to begin with. He didn't think she'd said more than a cold 'hello' to him since he'd come home for the summer.

When she was a kid the nickname had been appropriate. Her ears had stuck out drastically from her head. But now, though they were slightly larger than normal, they weren't as bad, and she no longer looked as if she could take flight if handed a magic feather. She'd become annoyed, irritated, and angry with him from the first time he'd called her Dumbo. Apparently her mom had never told her boys only teased the girls they liked. That had been years ago, he'd been just a kid, but she held a nasty grudge. And a solid fist to go with it, apparently.

He cracked his jaw.

"You had it coming," Carol told him.

"I saved her life!" he retorted.

His sister shrugged a dainty shoulder and pulled up the strap on her loose tank top. "Yeah well, you're not in fourth grade anymore, pulling on her pigtails and hoping she'll notice you."

"Bite me, Carol."

She grinned at him and chuckled. "It's already bruising."

"I can tell," he winced.

Carol's smile slipped away. "Do you think Mom and Dad are ok?"

Xander's amusement vanished. His hand fell from his offended jaw as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sure they're fine," he lied.

"How will we get in contact with them?"

He fell silent as he pondered the question. At the end of the road a police car crept forward with its lights spinning. The police officer loudly announced instructions for people to proceed safely to the police station, if possible, and to hang a towel from their windows if they required assistance. "We'll find a way," he assured Carol when the car disappeared from view.

"What do you think happened?"

Xander looked around the crowded street. He didn't have a clue what had happened. Some kind of earthquake or some shift in the earth? Perhaps the poles had reversed? He'd heard about that possibly happening one day. Or maybe it had been some sort of solar flare, or a volcano erupting in Hawaii or Italy or wherever. For all he knew, an iceberg had hit Canada, or California had fallen into the ocean, and the whole country was affected by it. Honestly, he didn't know *what* had happened, and judging from the terrified looks and frightened chatter of the people surrounding him, no one else did either.

People filtered out of their houses, joining the growing crowd on the street as it headed toward the center of town, and further toward the police and fire stations. Xander tightened his hold on Carol's shoulders, pulling her against his side. "Mom and Dad will find us. They'll probably go to the police station."

"Yeah," Carol mumbled. "Did you see what happened to Kelly?"

"I did."

He didn't want to think about it. Nor did he want to think about the bodies he saw sporadically in the streets, or the cars that had been driven into buildings and telephone poles, or the houses smoldering or succumbing to the flames eating through them. Everyone seemed aware of the hazards of the steaming holes as they were all given ample berth.

Something had happened with the birds too, as their bodies were scattered across the ground. Domestic animals ran past them, unnervingly all heading in the same direction, seemingly toward the same destination. Dogs and cats flowed past his legs with little thought to his presence, there were a few wild animals mixed in. The animals seemed strangely aware of the destination of most of their human owners as they flowed toward the emergency services buildings.

Xander knew animals had better instincts than humans, that they sensed and averted danger far better, but he was still entirely creeped out by them and wasn't entirely sure they were doing the right thing by going in the same direction. Still, it seemed like a worse idea to turn around and go in the opposite direction, toward whatever was driving the creatures.

Riley, seeming to decide he wasn't quite the lowest life form known to man, came over to the softball team that had surrounded him shortly after she had punched him. The team had turned to him for leadership when Riley had stormed away to take her frustration out on the driver who had nearly killed her. The guy in the car had apologized profusely to Riley before shifting into reverse and making the bad choice to continue driving down the broken road again. Riley had never rejoined the group, but kept her distance as she walked with a pair of elderly women who had emerged from an apartment building a little while back.

"Was there supposed to be an eclipse today?" Riley inquired.

Xander frowned. He tilted his head back to search the pristine sky. And then he saw it. Over top of the library the very edge of the sun was beginning to vanish. It looked as if the moon was causing the sun to disappear, but he couldn't be sure, as clouds seeped over the sky like insidious snakes. His arm fell away from Carol's shoulders. Carol stopped to watch as he took a few quick steps forward. Riley was beside him; her chin jutting in the way he knew it did when she was annoyed or confused.

"Was there?" The self-assurance in her voice had slipped as it trembled a little.

Chills ran up and down his spine as he turned to face her. "No."

Her big blue eyes widened, her full mouth parted, and she visibly paled beneath her summer tan and freckles. Her dark, nearly black hair blew around her face as a gentle breeze wafted over them. When he was eight, and she was six, he'd enjoyed teasing his little sister's friend; when he was twelve he began to realize why he'd always liked to tease her, and by the time he was fifteen he'd realized he'd been a moron, and she wasn't an awkward looking, irritating child anymore. He had stopped looking at her as a kid, but she still thought of him as Carol's highly infuriating brother who had made her cry

numerous times, and given her the hated nickname that followed her ten years later. He still had a crush on her, and she still disliked him, a lot.

"Well then," she muttered.

"Well then, what?"

"It just keeps getting weirder and weirder."

She turned away before he could respond and headed back to the group of elderly women who had stopped to look over the library. Riley touched one woman's arm reassuringly, she gestured for her to move on as she slid her arm into the elbow of another woman. Xander started walking with the team again, their chatter had died off as soon as Riley came over, it didn't return. This time it was Carol who slid her hand into his.

"I don't like this, Xander."

"Neither do I," he admitted.

He wanted to be strong for her, wanted to pretend he was still the big brother who knew all the answers, but Carol wasn't an idiot. She knew no one knew anything, at least not any of *them*.

The growing darkness of the day set his teeth on edge. The more the sun was blotted out, the closer everyone pressed to each other. More animals filtered past, mice, rats, and what he thought might actually be a ferret ran ahead of him. Riley and the elderly women dropped back when only a quarter of the sun was still visible. Carol took hold of Riley's free hand, squeezing it as the sun disappeared.

As one, everyone stopped moving; they stood upon the street and sidewalk, looking indirectly to where the sun had once warmed the day. Though he knew it couldn't be possible, it felt like the temperature of the day dropped ten degrees. Goosebumps broke out on his flesh. Carol was shaking as she pressed closer to him. After so much noise, chaos, and confusion, the silence was unnerving. Not a single person moved. The library was bathed in a golden glow that was nowhere near as beautiful as it appeared; for beneath the beauty, he sensed something ominous.

He stood, waiting, waiting, for it to move on, if it was the moon that had swallowed the sun. It remained. He'd seen a solar eclipse only once, when he was a kid. They'd made special boxes at school so they could look at the sun. It had seemed so fast then, most likely because they'd been able to escape class for a while to see it, but today it seemed as if time had completely frozen when the sun vanished. This couldn't be an eclipse, or at least not a regular one, it would already be ending if it was.

For a strange, disconcerting instant, he felt as if he'd just stepped into the pages of an H.G. Wells novel. That reality had shattered, and all that was left was this world straight from a twisted sci-fi novel. He half expected some Morlocks to jump out of the earth and start chasing them all down the street. It was darker now; the Morlocks could come out to play.

Xander shuddered, Carol pressed closer, but Riley was the first to take a step forward. "We have to keep moving," she told Carol, who was absentmindedly pulling her back. "We can't just stay here, Carol. We *have* to move."

Xander could only stare at her before closing his mouth and nodding. "She's right."

Riley turned from them and held her hand out to the elderly woman in the middle.

"Mrs. Mackey, we have to go."

Xander stared at the watery blue eyes of his kindergarten teacher. He hadn't seen her

in a couple of years and wouldn't have recognized her, if Riley hadn't said her name. Mrs. Mackey smiled at him. "I hope you're paying more attention in college than you did in my class, Mr. Noland."

"Absolutely Mrs. Mackey," he responded, feeling like a chastised child all over again.

The team began to move once more. They brushed past the people who were still stricken in the street, unmoving, watching as the darkened sun hung in the sky. Xander fought the urge to look at the sun to see if it was beginning to clear, but he kept his head bent and his eyes diverted as he held firm to his sister. People began to move with them, flowing forward as the hush of the day became more profound. Though animals still ran past, their numbers were becoming more infrequent. He didn't know where the creatures were heading, and he was becoming increasingly certain that for some freaky, insane reason, they were all gathering somewhere together.

"I'm scared," Carol said.

He hugged her closer. "We all are."

The police station and fire station came into view as they rounded a bend. Newly built, the emergency buildings had been enlarged to help support the demands of the growing town.

Neither one was still standing.

The fire station, ironically enough, was on fire. There was one truck sitting outside of the smoldering brick building, the rest had been destroyed by the blaze. Parked beside it were two police cars that hadn't been crushed by the collapsing building.

Outside of both buildings, emergency workers were directing the flow of people toward a large field across the street. There were more emergency personnel there, evaluating the injured and separating them depending upon the severity of their wounds. Between the mutilated and bleeding, and the upheaval of the earth, steaming holes, and dazed people, it looked like a battlefield. Yellow crime scene tape had been placed around the majority of the deadly holes. Carol's eyes were huge as she surveyed the carnage; Riley had stopped walking with the elderly women.

"What do we do?" Carol asked.

"Keep moving!" A portly older man barked at them, elbowing Xander in the ribs as he pushed past.

"You heard the man," Xander said, pulling Carol with him as they moved through the growing crowd of beleaguered people. Most of the softball team broke off in search of their families. His parents wouldn't be here; they worked in Boston. It would be a while before he got the chance to see them again. If ever...

Xander shut the thought down; it was too much to process right now.

"There's Bobby and Lee." Xander followed Carol's pointing finger to two of his best friends from high school. He hadn't had a chance to see them since he'd been back, but over the past two years they had drifted apart. Bobby had stayed in town and now worked at his father's plumbing company, and Lee had gone to college in California. Though they weren't as close as they had been, Xander was unbelievably relieved to see them.

"Hey," Bobby greeted. His brown eyes were glassy as he shook Xander's hand.
"Good to see you, man."

"You too."

"This is crazy," Lee muttered. He shook back hair bleached to a fairer shade of blond

from the heat of the California sun.

Xander searched the sea of heads. They'd lost Riley somewhere in the crush of bodies. Xander released Carol with the intent of searching Riley out. He knew her parents weren't in the crowd either. They commuted into the city with his parents every morning. The only reassuring thing about not having his parents here was knowing at least the four of them would be together.

He'd just taken a step to go hunt Riley down, when she appeared from the middle of the crowd. Her mouth was pinched, her nose scrunched, as she struggled through the sea of meandering people.

"No one has a clue what is going on," she announced when she reached them. "None of the phones are working, and the police won't say if they've had any contact with anyone outside of town."

"They probably have no way of knowing anymore than we do," Xander told her.

She glared at him, her hands balling into fists. He thought she was going to slug him again. Then her shoulders slumped and her eyes slid to Lee and Bobby. Xander didn't like that most of her annoyance seemed to vanish, especially when she greeted Bobby. But then again Bobby had stayed behind, and they saw each other far more often than he was able to see her.

"Hey, Lee." Riley said. "Where's your father, Bobby?"

"I don't know. He was at an early morning service call when this happened. I kinda expected him to be here."

"I'm sure he will be," she said kindly.

Bobby nodded but didn't seem convinced. "Yeah."

Xander turned away, frustrated by the whole hideous situation. The sun was still blocked and he was beginning to think it would never be clear again. He maneuvered through the crowd, keeping his gaze averted so he wasn't looking directly at the sun, but watching it from the corner of his eye. He finally found an open patch of unmarred lawn and paused to try and get his bearings in a world that suddenly made no sense.

"If it wasn't for the destruction, terror, and death, it would almost be a beautiful show," Riley said beside him.

He hadn't heard her approach, but she was standing by his side, her head tilted at the same odd angle as his as they tried not to look at the sun. "It would," he agreed.

"They're talking about putting people up in the apartments in the old state hospital."

"Ok."

"Do you think we should stay here?"

He was astonished she was asking his opinion; she must have been more frightened than he realized. "Where else would we go?"

She frowned at him as she shrugged. "Our parents...?"

"I think it would be best if we stayed somewhere they could more easily find us. It might not be possible to get into Boston, and we don't know where to start looking for them. I'm assuming GPS won't work now either."

Her frustration was nearly palpable as she shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I always hated the state hospital. It's creepy."

He nodded his agreement. A growing murmur amongst the crowd drew his attention away from her. Following the lead of everyone else, his head tilted back as a green flare shot high into the sky. It burned vividly before falling from view. Nearly a minute passed

before a vivid red flame shot into view.

"Flares," Riley whispered.

"They're coming from the stadium."

"They must be gathering people there also," she said. "We should go. They may know more about what's going on over there."

"Riley..."

"I know it's unlikely. I do. But if there's even a small chance, don't you think we should take it?"

He thought it was a horrible idea. They'd found somewhere at least somewhat safe, and they were around emergency workers. He believed the answers would eventually come, but judging by the look in Riley's eyes she was determined to go. "Why don't we wait till tomorrow at least," he suggested.

He thought she would fight him on it, just for the sake of disagreeing with him, but instead she simply nodded. "You're right." Xander was pretty sure Hell had just frozen over. He almost looked at his feet to see if it had. "I'm exhausted, and it's not even eight in the morning. At least, I don't think it is. Hopefully there's some food around here somewhere."

"I'm sure there is."

She turned away from him but didn't make it one step before the ground began to shake again. Xander seized her arm and pulled her back as the earth began to fracture around them.

CHAPTER 7

John

Cape Cod, Mass.

John had one foot braced against the dashboard and his hand wrapped around the handle above his head. He didn't really know why he bothered, if the bridge collapsed beneath them there was nothing one braced leg, and an 'oh shit' handle were going to do for him. He was certain all he would accomplish was breaking his leg before he died, but he didn't care. He couldn't bring himself to release the handle or drop his foot as Carl edged the truck onto the bridge.

John's teeth locked so tight his jaw ached. He silently pleaded for Carl to just hit the gas and race over the bridge; at the same time he prayed he wouldn't. They were going to die, he was certain of it.

"You don't have to do this with me," Carl muttered around the cigarette he was chewing on, literally chewing on instead of smoking as it had stopped burning.

John knew he could have stayed on the safe side; he could have kept his feet firmly planted on the land he'd been born and raised on, but he couldn't shake the feeling Carl was right. That leaving was the best thing they could do right now. It was strange to realize his home no longer felt safe. He could stay behind, but he felt it was the wrong decision to make, and he wanted to see his parents, to make sure they were safe.

"I know I don't," he said. Carl's knuckles had turned white from his death grip on the steering wheel. "But I'm going with you."

"Then could you please stop with the 'Jesus' and 'What the hell's'?" John blinked at him in confusion. "It's all you've been saying for the past half an hour."

John fell silent as he thought over Carl's words. He shifted uncomfortably as he realized it *was* all he'd been saying. "Yeah, whatever," he muttered.

"Seriously, it's driving me nuts."

"Oh, and this whole mess is keeping you *sane*?"

Carl snorted. He finally realized he was massacring the filter of his cigarette and tossed it out the window. "Hardly."

John's hand clamped around the handle; he was ashamed by the small tremor working through his arm. He hated this.

In the large mirrors, on the side of the truck, he could see the people gathered at the edge of the bridge behind them. They were all staring, all motionless, all breathlessly waiting to see if they would survive. If *he* would die. "Jesus," he muttered. His face reddened as Carl glared at him. "Sorry, but I feel like we're the lambs for the slaughter; like they're just waiting for us to die."

Carl's hands twisted on the steering wheel. "They are, sort of."

"Why did you agree to go over first, again?"

"Would you prefer to be the fifth car over? After *more* weight has been added to this possibly damaged structure?"

"I suppose not." John didn't want to be the first either though. "I just wish they wouldn't stare like that. I can't tell if they're rooting for us to make it, or not."

Carl barely glanced in the driver's side mirror. "I'd like to think they're rooting for us to make it."

"Me too."

But John wasn't so sure, he supposed most of the people hoped they would survive, but he was sure there were a few in the crowd expecting some big implosion. A few who would like to see the bridge collapse into a twisted heap of metal that sucked them right along with it into the canal. He shuddered at the thought. "Is it better on the other side?"

"No."

Carl's clipped tone and instant response were demoralizing. John sank lower in the seat; his foot was beginning to indent the dash as his hand twisted on the handle. Silently, he began to pray, though he wasn't entirely certain what he was praying for. To make it to the other side sure, but if it was worse then why was he sitting here to begin with? What was he hoping for?

To find his parents. He was hoping to find his parents.

He focused on that goal as the truck moved gradually forward, dead smack in the middle of the four-lane bridge. *It's in good repair*, he told himself repeatedly. *They're always doing work on the bridges, shutting down lanes and backing up traffic for miles.* It was a nightmare every time bridgework was announced, but John was grateful for that nightmare now. The bridge had withstood the quake; it would withstand the weight of one lone truck.

He refused to look down, refused to see the churning waters of the canal. On the horizon he could see tendrils of smoke, curling ever higher into the air. In the distance he heard a siren, it sounded forlorn as its lonesome wail echoed through the streets it traversed. There was no way to know where it was going, John was certain there were thousands, if not millions, in need of assistance.

They made it to the crest of the bridge and broke over the top. John's foot fell to the floor, his mouth dropped as he leaned forward in his seat, temporarily forgetting his own peril as he gaped at the dismal scene before him. So much had already happened today, he should have been prepared for the spectacle before him. He wasn't.

His heart lumbered, a cold chill crept up his back as he forced his mouth closed. Beside him, Carl's breath hissed out. He'd already seen it; yet, John could tell Carl still hadn't fully comprehended the devastation that had been waged on the *other* side of the bridge.

"Maybe we should go back," John managed to choke out. "It's not as bad on the Cape; we might be safer there."

"We're not safe anywhere right now, but we're damn sure not safe over there."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"I just am."

It wasn't a very reassuring answer. He glanced in the mirror again, but he could only see the tops of a few heads now. They were standing on their cars, straining to see the dwindling vehicle. Not like they wouldn't know if the bridge collapsed. John was pretty sure it would be blatantly obvious.

And then they were making the descent. John's heart hammered, excitement pummeled through him. They were almost there. They were going to make it. He no longer cared about the destruction on the other side; all he wanted was to plant his feet on solid ground again.

Twenty more feet... Fifteen...

He became certain in the last ten feet they were going to fall, that they would never

make it. That fate was just teasing them with hope before destroying them. He almost threw open the door and raced across to solid ground. He had the sudden, overwhelming urge to fall to his knees and kiss the filthy road repeatedly. It would be worth every single bit of dirt and germs he'd get on him.

Eight feet...

As they neared the final five, his hand fell to the door handle. He braced himself. If it fell apart now, perhaps he could somehow plunge out of the truck and manage to jump to safety before being crushed by thousands of tons of steel. He'd take the chance, that was for sure.

And then the sound of the pavement changed beneath the truck's tires as the wheels hit solid ground. They rolled forward a few more feet before Carl stopped the truck. Carl's breath exploded out of him as his head bent in relief. He worked his hands, clenching and unclenching them as he finally released his death grip on the wheel.

John slid limply out of the truck. Falling to the ground, he bent his head and placed a solid kiss smack dab in the middle of what looked like an old oil, or gas leak spot, and he didn't care one bit. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to the ground as relief and joy pulsed through him. He jumped but didn't lift his head as Carl pressed forcefully on the horn for three long seconds, giving the sign they had made it and the others could follow.

"Hey, kid."

John ignored Carl. He hated being called 'kid,' but that wasn't the reason he didn't look up at Carl. He simply couldn't bring his boneless body to move right now. "Hey kid, come on, I have to move the truck."

"Go ahead, I'm fine."

"Look, not everyone's going to take the bridge as slowly as we did, now that the coast's clear. Do you really want to have made it all the way over here to be smushed by some frightened idiot?"

Carl had a point. He braced his hands beneath him and managed to shove himself off of the pavement just as a small Honda crested the bridge and raced toward them. He leapt into the truck, barely escaping the red car barreling past as it sped down the highway.

To his credit, Carl didn't say 'I told you so,' as he quickly shifted the truck into drive. He released another long beep as he moved about twenty feet away and turned the truck to face the bridge. Carl released a small curse. John leaned forward. His mouth dropped in disbelief as the sun began to disappear into an inky blackness.

He'd been so focused on making it to the other side, he hadn't noticed the increasing darkness seeping across the sky to devour the light. A myriad of rainbow colors radiated from the place where the sun had been, but they were starting to fade away. It was astounding, beautiful, and utterly terrifying. "It's the end of the world," Carl muttered.

John intended to argue with Carl, to tell him not to say something like that, that he was completely wrong, and he didn't know anything. John couldn't find the words though because he didn't think they were true. It was all just too crazy, just too much at once for Carl to be wrong. This was insanity, complete and total insanity, and they were stuck smack dab in the middle of it.

The Toyota with the young mother stopped beside them; she didn't speak as she hit her horn, and then climbed out of her car with a barked command at her children to stay inside. Carl's hand was shaking as he leaned over and clicked on the radio. They sat

silently, listening to the hideous static, clicking, whistling, and strange, almost guttural noises erupting from it.

Carl turned through the stations but nothing changed. Clicking the button, he switched the frequency to AM radio, but they were only met with the same eerie sounds. Carl switched it off. Another truck appeared, followed closely by a small Dodge and then a Ford, apparently the "let's all cross one at a time" thing had gotten old, and smaller groups had elected to go. Either that or they had seen the eerie eclipse and had decided a quick escape was more necessary than consideration and patience.

"I don't know what to do," John glanced at the woman beside him as she spoke.

"None of us know what to do," he told her.

She stared at him with glazed eyes before she began to nod. He was about to ask if she had any family she could go to, when he felt a small quiver in the road again. He stared at the pavement as if that would somehow give him the answers he sought.

"Aftershocks," the woman told him. "I studied abroad in Japan for a year; we'll probably get them for a while."

"Oh," John said dully. "So it *was* an earthquake?"

"What, did you think it was a tornado?" the woman quipped.

Carl snorted with laughter; John just shook his head. "I... don't know. I don't know what any of this is."

She was silent for a minute, and then her shoulders slumped. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be snippy. I'm just... terrified." Her gaze darted worriedly to the car and the children pressed against the passenger side windows. "But yes, it was most definitely an earthquake."

The truck and two cars made it across the bridge and continued onward. A minivan, SUV, and another car appeared at the top of the bridge as the earth began to shake harder. John rested his hand on the side of the truck, bracing himself as the aftershock rumbled across the land. Give him a blizzard or a hurricane, he was used to those living in the Northeast, but this unsteadiness beneath his feet thing was freaking him out. He kept expecting the ground to split apart and swallow him whole, and he couldn't wait for it to stop. If it ever stopped. Five seconds in, and it was still rolling.

The realization it may *never* cease was worse than realizing this may be the end of the world. He didn't think he could handle it if the ground never stabilized again. He didn't exactly like the idea of spending every minute of the rest of his life struggling to keep his balance, and terrified he might just fall into a steaming hole that suddenly opened beneath him one day. It would be a hideous way to spend the rest of his life. He was certain things would, at the very least, never be the same again, but he intended to live for a lot longer. He was too young not to.

Then the small tremors became a sudden, splintering upheaval which caused him to stagger back a good three feet before he was thrown backwards against the truck mirror. The rigid metal bit into his back; he fought back a cry of pain. Like a wave cresting toward shore, the ground rose up a couple of feet and rolled toward them from the direction of the bridge. John did a strange stuttering step as he tried to decide if he should attempt to outrun the rolling earth or stay where he was. In the end, he didn't have a choice, it was moving too fast for him to escape it.

Grabbing hold of the mirror, he wrapped both his arms around it in a bone-breaking bear hug that nearly tore it from the truck. He was tossed into the air as the ground threw

both him and the truck upward. He shouted and closed his eyes as the truck began its downward descent. A silent prayer echoed through him that the truck would come back to solid ground and not just tumble into an oblivion that would devour him. He had a brief flash of falling forever, of the center of the earth becoming an all-consuming black hole. Or worse, he would fall in but continue to live until his body finally gave way to dehydration. Those days would seem like an eternity, but this fall already seemed like it was lasting forever, and he was afraid to open his eyes and look around him, afraid he was already falling into nothing.

Then the truck crashed into the ground with a loud bang and a groaning of brutalized springs, tires, and struts. His teeth jarred in his head; his ribs were bruised from the impact of the mirror smashing against them. He stood, fearful to see the destruction the wave may have just unleashed upon the already decimated area.

It was a loud creaking, elongated groan that caused his eyes to fly open. He spotted Carl first, as he stood across from him, hugging the driver's side mirror. Carl's face was pale, his watery gray eyes held John's for one poignant breath. Then, ever so slowly, Carl's head turned toward the one place John couldn't bring himself to look, as the loud screech of metal twisting violently echoed across the open chasm beneath the bridge.

Finally, unable to deny it any longer, John turned toward the bridge. The rolling wave had caused a large fracture to appear at the foot of the structure, a zigzagging pattern that grew larger the longer he stared at it. Beneath the weight of the metal, with a collection of vehicles still on top of it, the bridge began to give way.

The steel was folding, bending in on itself like an accordion. John had pictured it just dropping away, falling straight down into the canal and being swallowed within the swirling waters of the Atlantic Ocean, instead of this collapse toward its center. It almost felt like the bridge was collapsing that way in order to ensure the entrapment of the vehicles upon it, as the SUV and car disappeared into the center of the asphalt, metal, and concrete.

The driver of the minivan had realized what was happening and hit the gas. John stared into the man's horrified face as he tried to outrun the certain death trying to ensnare him like a Venus flytrap. He had a sudden flashback to the days when he had watched The Dukes of Hazzard with his dad, when he had marveled over The General Lee's flying leaps into the air. The minivan was no orange Charger, but for that brief, heart-stopping second when its tires left the ground and it soared into the air, John was certain it would make it. That the minivan had just made the awe-inspiring leap of a flying car in the space of a miraculous instant.

Then it began to fall.

But it didn't fall onto solid ground, didn't even catch a part of the pavement of the highway. It simply fell away into nothing. Because there was nothing beneath the vehicle anymore.

John tried to look away from the driver's eyes, but he found all he could do was watch as the man fell to his untimely death. The bridge and van vanished with an echoing, gruesome crash that signified more than just human death, but an end to life as he had always known it. The collision of metal and earth echoed through the air, loud and imposing, and seemingly never ending as it resonated across a land John no longer recognized.

John was shaken, torn between tears and screaming in horror. It took everything he

had to lift his head and stare across the empty gap that had once been the Sagamore Bridge. He was now able to see the crowd gathered on the other side, and though he couldn't make out their features, he sensed the finality enshrouding the people still trapped over there. John couldn't shake the feeling that though they hadn't fallen away with the bridge, the collapse had signed their death certificates as surely as it had the people who had been traveling upon it at the time.

And then he realized something else was wrong. The falling vehicles hadn't been accompanied by a splash upon hitting the water.

John swallowed heavily; he forced himself to look down. Where the water of the canal had once churned with rapid currents and swirling blue water, there was now nothing. The wreckage of the bridge lay a hundred feet below him on the muddy and rocky bottom of the nearly empty canal. His mind spun. He couldn't comprehend what his eyes were seeing; he simply didn't understand what could possibly have happened.

And then the woman, who had spent a year in Japan, whispered one single, terrifying word. "Tsunami."

CHAPTER 8

*Mary Ellen
Newport, R.I.*

Mary Ellen took a terrified step back as the dogs continued to stare unwaveringly forward. Though the animals were looking at the house, Mary Ellen had the unsettling feeling they were actually somehow seeing through the building to the ocean, and perhaps to something beyond the ocean; something none of them could see.

She yearned for them to do something, anything, just as long as they finally freaking *reacted*. This waiting was driving her crazier than the whole rocking, shaking, splintering earth had. At least then she hadn't had time to think, hadn't had time to wonder about her future.

Now, every horrifying image she had ever seen or imagined about crazed animals was running through her mind. Not a single one of them ended well.

Her hand clenched around the gun, her fingers stroking the durable metal. She'd never held a gun before, never imagined a time when she would have to, but she knew if it became necessary she was going to shoot it, and she would kill something with it. She just hoped it wasn't a dog.

Then the dogs were moving, as one they were running forward.

"Moogie," Rita whispered forlornly.

Mary Ellen wanted to tell her "screw Moogie," but the words froze in her throat as the dogs raced toward them. She didn't know what they were going to do. Were they just going to plow into the building like the birds had plunged into the ground? Were they going to ram repeatedly into it? Were they going to come barreling through the large picture window and start trying to tear them all to shreds?

Then the dogs split into two groups. In one fluid motion, they broke apart around the house, moving past and out of view. Mary Ellen was curious about what they were doing, but she couldn't bring herself to look. She was terrified the animals had just plunged over the cliff and into the ocean.

She remained unmoving. Why had they done that? What had driven them to do such a thing?

Unlike her, Al didn't hesitate to move to the back of the house. He was gone for a few minutes before returning. Mary Ellen didn't ask; she didn't want to know. It was childish, it was cowardice, and she didn't care.

"Moogie?" Mary Ellen winced at the hideous name. Rita's lower lip began to tremble as Al shook his head. "Why...why would they do that? What *made* them do that?"

"I don't know," Al told her.

"What could possibly be so bad they would do *that*?"

That was the question Mary Ellen didn't want answered. What could be worse than everything else happening? What could be so bad it was driving animals to kill themselves? She shuddered, a chill of foreboding crept over her skin, causing goose bumps to break out as she surveyed the carnage of the birds littering the ground.

"I don't think we should stay here."

"You want to go out *there*?" Rita demanded in response to Al's statement.

"I don't *want* to go out there, but I don't think we have much of a choice."

"We can stay here. Someone will come to help us."

Al shook his head. "I think there are far too many people out there who are going to require help. It could be a long time before anyone comes for us."

"I *need* to find Rochelle," Mary Ellen inserted. Even if they both decided to stay here, she wasn't. She was going out there, into a world driving animals to suicide, and she would find her daughter if it killed her. Which, from the looks of things, might be a very good possibility.

"We will find your daughter," Al assured her. "We'll go to the police station first. Perhaps they have answers."

Rita was shaking; tears brimmed in her eyes. "Where is your husband?" Mary Ellen asked. She didn't think Rita had children; she never saw her at the bus stop or with a stroller.

"He went golfing." Tears slid down her face; her eyes were red rimmed and puffy as she hastily wiped the tears away. "I would just like to speak with him, to see him."

"I'm sure most people will head to emergency services. Your husband will do the same."

Mary Ellen was so focused on Rita, she hadn't noticed Al had left the room until he reappeared with two bulging pillowcases. He thrust one at Mary Ellen, and she fumbled to grab hold of it as she readjusted the gun in her hand. She had been prepared to defend herself against the dogs if necessary, but she had never taken the safety off of the gun. She'd been too afraid of it to do so.

She glanced inside the case, spotting cans of assorted food. There were also boxes of cereal and other dry goods that wouldn't spoil quickly. She was impressed. She'd been planning on plunging outside, storming her way to the police station, and demanding someone help her find her daughter. She hadn't even considered food.

Al tossed the other case over his shoulder and gave her a brisk nod. "Are you ready Rita?"

The woman glanced out the window again and nodded. Mary Ellen hadn't taken the time to notice just how young Rita was until now. She looked to be only in her early twenties, though Mary Ellen knew Rita's husband was easily pushing fifty. She supposed this was what a trophy wife would be considered with her pretty features, blue eyes, and blonde hair. But the woman seemed to truly care for her husband as tears continued to streak down her face.

"Are you sure Gary will go to the police station?"

"I'm not sure about anything right now, but it makes sense most people will go where there may be help." Mary Ellen understood Al's desire not to promise Rita anything, but she thought he could have sugarcoated it at least a little. More tears streaked the young woman's face, and her lip began to tremble. "Perhaps I should take that back."

He retrieved the gun from Rita's shaking hands and slid it into the bag strapped securely to his back. Rita clasped her hands before her and began to wring them nervously as she glanced back out the window. "Moogie was my only company. Gary works so much; he's never home."

Mary Ellen had been so immersed in her own lonely existence, she'd forgotten there were others who were just as lonely and lost as her. She'd locked herself away and become so entrenched in her own misery and revenge she'd forgotten there was a world of people who also required help, and company. It was a staggering realization, and she

vowed not to forget again.

"Mary Ellen?"

"I'm ready," she gushed in response to Al's questioning look. "I'm ready."

She stepped outside, cringing slightly at the smell of smoke hanging heavily in the air. She kept trying not to think of Rochelle, but the growing tension in her chest was telling her she had to move quickly; she had to find her daughter soon. Rochelle was strong and capable, but she was young, away from home, and she would be terrified. Mary Ellen refused to allow thoughts of Rochelle being injured, or worse, enter her mind. She would go crazy if she did. She would breakdown; she would be unable to put one step in front of the other, if she allowed herself to think her daughter was no longer a part of this world. She felt she would know if something had happened to Rochelle, and right now she was certain her daughter was alive, and she would find her.

Her arms began to ache from the weight of the food, as Al led them through backyards toward the main road. She was aware he'd taken this route in order to avoid the wreckage of Larry's vehicle, something she was grateful for. She didn't grieve for him, but she didn't want to see his remains again either.

Rita's tears had dried; she'd gotten a better handle on herself now that they were moving and focused on a goal. It helped to ease Mary Ellen's mind as well. They had a plan, the police would have more information, they would help them, and they would get her in touch with Rochelle somehow. She was certain of all of these things until they reached the main road, and she took in the destruction that had been unleashed upon it.

Even Al, who had been striding forward with determined confidence, hesitated. He quickly recovered as he turned on his heel toward the police station. He continued stalwartly onward as if the burning homes, uprooted trees, damaged vehicles and ruined streets were of no consequence. She admired his determination, his dogged confidence it would all be ok soon.

She wasn't so sure she shared it anymore.

There were still people moving about on the streets, but there didn't seem to be as many as she felt there should have been. Some were bleeding, some were covered in soot and ash, and others appeared to be just as lost as Mary Ellen felt. The police station was almost five miles from their house, and although she wasn't overly athletic, she found a steeled reserve inside of her as she forced herself not to feel the burn already starting in her legs. She shifted the bag in her hands, looking for the perfect position to ease the ache in her arms a little.

"Would you like me to carry it for a bit?" Rita inquired.

Mary Ellen was about to tell her no, when the ground began to shake again. Rita's mouth dropped, her head began to whip back and forth as she glanced around the street. Mary Ellen stopped walking, she was afraid the ground would no longer be there if she took another step.

A man across the street started screaming and bolted into the middle of the road just as chunks of pavement flew into the air, and a fissure cleaved the street in two. He disappeared into the gorge now dividing the road. Screams filled Mary Ellen's ears, and she dimly realized they were coming from Rita. She sounded like a baby bird shrieking for its mother as she hopped up and down a few times before seizing hold of Mary Ellen's arm in a bruising grasp.

More people bolted, Mary Ellen was torn about what to do as Rita's nails dug into

her arm, and she continued to shriek in short bursts. Al turned suddenly and seized Rita's arm, pulling her back as the jagged fissure lanced toward them. Still in Rita's death grip, Mary Ellen was also jerked out of the way.

"This way!" Al yelled over the sound of Rita's screams and the loud clamor of the earth splitting apart.

Steam burst out of a hole, mere inches from Al. He let out a small squeak as he jumped to avoid it. Mary Ellen gawked in astonishment as she spotted the burned remains of the sleeve of his shirt and the puckered pink skin underneath. Rita's screams notched up a level. Her face was florid now, she was gasping for breath, but she seemed to show no sign of stopping.

Al started running. He moved far faster than Mary Ellen ever would have thought a man of his age could. He came to an abrupt halt as they turned a corner in the street. Mary Ellen almost fell over, a lump lodged in her throat as she gazed at the scene before her.

The middle of the street was gone; it was nothing but a vast chasm stretching as far as Mary Ellen could see. She could only stand and stare at the nothing before her as she tried to comprehend exactly what this meant, what had happened. But it was beyond the scope of her reasoning. All she could comprehend right now was the road was gone, they were not going to get through this way, and Rita's incessant screaming was really starting to grate on her nerves.

Al stepped closer to the edge and peered over the side. His gray eyebrows shot into his hairline as he stared into the pit. Swallowing heavily, Mary Ellen pried Rita's fingers from her arm to step beside Al. There was a disconcerting instant where the world seemed to spin as she stared into the emptiness below. The hole seemed to go on forever, and when Al tossed a rock into it, she listened as it bounced off of the sides before falling away into nothing. She wasn't certain if it hit bottom or not. She supposed it didn't matter. Either way, a human wouldn't survive the fall.

She took a step back, unable to look into the crater anymore. It wasn't doing her any good, and she was worried she was going to lose her balance and go tumbling in like the stone. Rita was still screaming. Other people had emerged onto the road. Some had stepped to the edge of the trench, others just stared blankly.

Rita suddenly stopped screaming. The silence was nearly as jolting as the sounds the woman had been making. A loud crash caused Mary Ellen to jump; she spun as more of the road gave way, and the house at the end of the street lurched forward, crashing and churning as it was swallowed by the yawning pit.

Rita let out another loud shriek. It took everything Mary Ellen had not to smack the woman in order to get her to shut up. "Have you been to the police station?" The shout came from a man a hundred feet down and to their left.

"No," Al answered. "Have you?"

The man shook his head; his eyes wandered over the gap and houses before coming back to Al. "No."

Al's hands twisted on his gun as the man stepped away from the edge of the abyss. Mary Ellen swallowed heavily. The man appeared to be in his mid-thirties and seemed nice enough, but Mary Ellen had never really trusted people. It appeared Al felt the same way as he shifted his gun. Mary Ellen realized it wasn't just the environment and suicidal animals they had to be concerned about anymore; there were also people. Everything was

different now; everyone was frightened, and frightened humans were threatening humans.

Sweat trickled down her back. Her mouth was suddenly very dry as the man's gaze raked over the three of them. They were two women, one of whom was still squawking and making dry little shouts, and an older man. They must appear weak, easy pushovers. Mary Ellen wasn't confident in her ability to shoot another person, but she had the feeling Al wouldn't hesitate.

The man nodded to them and moved away. Al's shoulders relaxed visibly, Mary Ellen met his gaze warily over the top of Rita's head. "We'll have to find another way."

Mary Ellen nodded and dropped the pillowcase of supplies. She grabbed hold of Rita's arms, turning the woman toward her. Rita seemed unfocused, lost; adrift. Mary Ellen believed she was witnessing the unraveling and splintering of a human mind right in front of her eyes. She didn't know Rita, but she couldn't bear to watch the woman fracture and break, and she was terrified that is what Rita was doing.

"Rita! Rita!"

Mary Ellen shook her, contemplated slapping her, but another vigorous shake seemed to connect with her a little bit. Rita blinked, her mouth opened and closed. She let out another small squawk, and then finally became blessedly silent. "Rita, you have to keep it together. You have to stay with us. It's terrifying enough without you screaming."

She was no longer screaming, but there was a vacancy in Rita's eyes that frightened her, almost like the woman was no longer with them. She glanced over at Al, who watched them silently. His lips clamped together, thinning out as he shook his head at Mary Ellen.

"Rita?" she inquired.

The woman remained silent. Mary Ellen found herself almost longing for Rita to start screaming again, at least then she was doing something, at least then she was reacting with the world instead of shutting herself off from it completely. Mary Ellen kept hold of her arm as she turned Rita toward Al.

"What's wrong with her?" she asked Al. Though Rita was within earshot, and had more than likely heard the question, she didn't show any reaction to it.

Al studied Rita. "Some people just don't handle things very well."

"Is she going to be all right?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

Rita remained unmoving, barely blinking as she stood as still as a stone in Mary Ellen's grasp. It was unnatural and more than a little creepy. "We can try finding another way to the police station, or we can go to the fire station," he suggested.

Mary Ellen studied the long gouge carved into the earth as she retrieved her pillowcase. She couldn't see the end of it, she was half certain it went on forever, that a gigantic trench had just been slashed into the surface of the land, forever altering its geography. She didn't plan to find out where the end was; she was certain there was no pot of gold waiting for them there. The fire station was further away, but hopefully it would still be attainable.

"I think the fire station's probably the better option," she finally said.

"That's what I thought too."

They moved away from the hole, heading back the way they had come. They encountered few people, and although Mary Ellen thought she should warn them there was nowhere to go in that direction, she was too tired to speak. She simply didn't have the

energy to interact with anyone right now. She could barely keep her hand on Rita's arm as she pulled the unresponsive woman with them. Al remained alert, his eyes bouncing over everyone and everything.

Mary Ellen didn't know what they would do if the way to the fire station was also blocked. She was so focused on her own thoughts that at first she didn't register the strange new noise growing steadily louder. She lifted her head, frowning as she stopped in the middle of the street.

"Is... is that a *train*?" she inquired in disbelief.

It seemed like the most illogical thing in the world for someone to be running a train right now; there was no way to know what condition the tracks would be in.

Al shook his head. "I have no idea what it is."

Over the increasing sound of the train, the screams began.

CHAPTER 9

Riley

Foxboro, Mass.

Riley stumbled as Xander seized hold of her arm and jerked her back. Her head spun; she didn't know which way to go as everything fell apart around them. Screams pierced through the air and echoed jarringly in her head. Her ears were ringing, but she didn't know if it was from the incessant, high-pitched screams, or the grotesque upheaval of the ground as it splintered and broke apart around her.

Dirt flew into the air, and she wouldn't have been at all astonished to see a very big worm come bursting out of the ground, *Tremors*-style, to eat them. She found she would almost welcome it; at least *that* would explain some of what was going on. But no worm burst free as dirt and rocks pelted her.

Xander tugged her backwards. Clutching at the ground, he strained to pull her upward as the ground began to tilt precariously beneath her feet. Her fingers clawed at the grass as she struggled up the hill, a hill that hadn't been there just seconds before.

"Don't look back!" Xander ordered.

Of course, once he said it, she had to look back. A scream rose in her throat and strangled there. Her heart pounded so rapidly she felt it in the tips of her fingers. Her eyes bulged as she stared at the gaping hole that hadn't been there before, a hole that didn't seem to have a bottom.

And they seemed to be tilting toward it.

Adrenaline surged through her and caused her to lurch awkwardly forward. She was at Xander's side now; he was no longer pulling her forward. She dropped to the ground and tore at it in a frenzied attempt to escape her backslide into the yawning abyss at her heels.

One of her fingernails broke, her newly raw, brutalized skin started to bleed. She winced but didn't hesitate as she fought for her life. Xander gave one mighty heave and snagged hold of a tree root exposed by the shifting earth. He glanced back at her, his hand stretched out as he strained to hold the root and grasped for her. She lurched forward, catching hold of his hand as the ground slipped out from under her toes.

She felt as if she were falling for a minute, as if the world had vanished from beneath her. Then Xander was pulling her upward, dragging her over top of the hill and back toward solid ground that actually stayed still beneath her feet. Riley collapsed; the grass tickled her nose and cheeks as she heaved for breath and tried to calm the accelerating beat of her heart. She thought she might have a heart attack before she was killed by some gaping monstrosity of a pit.

Xander's fingers curled around hers before releasing her. Riley couldn't bring herself to move, couldn't bring herself to lift her head and take in the world as screams echoed endlessly around her. They were the sound of death, she realized dimly.

She wasn't much of a crier, never had been, but tears burned her eyes and throat as her fingers curled into the earth. For a split second she was assailed with an overwhelming sense of despair. She just longed to lie there, shut it all out, and deny any of this was happening. Perhaps, if she kept her eyes closed, she could pretend she was in her bed, and this was just a bad dream. A *very* bad dream.

But then Xander was grasping her arms. "Come on, Riley."

She opened her eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. The tears began to fall. The old state hospital, newly remodeled into apartments and condos, was devastated. One of the buildings had flames shooting from the top of it, another had fallen over. People must have been trapped in the rubble, as she watched others frantically trying to heave bricks and debris aside as they dug through the pile, shouting for some sort of response. Steam rose into the air, far more than there had been before. People ran from it, shrieking as they blindly fled the mist rolling over parts of the field.

It was like every war movie she had ever seen, except this wasn't a movie. This was real life. This was *her* life, *her* hometown, and it was falling apart.

"Riley, *come on!*" Xander was tugging impatiently at her hand, trying to get her to move, but she could barely comprehend what was going on around her, never mind actually succeed in putting one foot in front of another. "Riley! Damn it!"

He grabbed hold of her shoulders and gave her a quick, remorseless shake. She blinked at him; her mouth dropped as she tried to focus on his face. His handsome features were streaked with dirt; sweat had caused his short, dark blond hair to stick to his forehead. His hazel eyes, flecked with shards of brilliant green and gold, were narrowed as he searched her face.

"Riley, are you ok? You still with me?"

She closed her mouth, shook her head, and tried to snap out of it, but shock clung to her like a spider web. His impatience disappeared as his expression changed. It was his look, one of loss and desperation that caused some resurgence of common sense to blaze back to life within her. She wasn't gone, she wasn't a lost cause, she wasn't going to fall apart right now, and she sure as hell didn't want his pity.

"I'm with you," she managed to croak out.

Relief filled him, his shoulders slumped as his hands tightened on her upper arms. "We have to find Carol."

She nodded as thoughts of Carol helped to solidify her determination, helped to re-establish her grasp on her sanity. Xander kept hold of her arm as he led her through the crowd of screaming, crying, and maimed people. He moved with far more patience than she would have through the beleaguered cluster as he shouted for his sister. He took her on a windy route that stayed far from the steaming holes and large canyon taking up half of the vast field.

Riley kept her gaze focused on Xander's back as he moved. The black t-shirt he wore was streaked with dirt, and there was a hole in the middle of it that revealed a small patch of skin. She became fascinated with that hole as she watched it slide up and down his muscled back with every stalking step he took. The hole became something to focus on besides the turmoil surrounding them.

"Carol!" he shouted above the rising noise.

One of the emergency workers had located a bullhorn; they were bellowing orders to remain calm, for everyone to stay put, and to aid others when they could. Riley barely registered the words over the incessant screams. "It's the end of the world," she realized.

Xander glanced at her over his shoulder. "And here I always thought you were a 'glass half full' kind of girl."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Well, what do *you* think is going on, then?" she demanded.

He shrugged as he managed a wan smile. "I try not to think D; it's how I make it through college."

She blinked at him in confusion. "D?"

She slapped his hand away as he attempted to flick one of her ears. It took everything she had not to punch him again as she jerked her arm free of his grasp and stormed a few feet in front of him. His chuckle only served to infuriate her more.

"Carol!" she screamed, fury pitching her voice higher than she thought possible. She pushed through people, barreling onward with far less finesse than Xander had exhibited. "Carol!"

Through her anger, apprehension began to coil within her gut. It slithered like a snake up her chest and constricted around her heart. Where was Carol? Panic was starting to rise up inside of her as she pushed through the crowd. Carol had been her best friend for as long as Riley could remember. Carol was the sister she'd never had; she *had* to find her. She *had* to be ok.

Riley burst free of the crowd, her gaze frantically searched over the area where she had left Carol with Bobby and Lee. The substantial split in the earth ran through here too, it had opened a large gouge into the land a good three hundred feet wide and unfathomably deep. She could only stand and stare, mouth gaping, and her heart creating a drumbeat. There were two people struggling from the hole, picking themselves out of the pit with the help of others, but she didn't recognize either of them.

Riley spun, her gaze shot frantically over the crowd. "Carol!" she screamed as Xander pushed his way free and stopped to stare in dismayed silence. "Carol!"

Xander pushed her gently aside as he made his way to the chasm. Riley refused to go any closer to the hideous thing, not one step. Xander leaned over to peer down at it before stepping back to search the crowd again. Riley fought the urge to plunge her way back in, and shove through the bloody people and disordered mob in search of Carol. She didn't know where to go though, and as much as Xander irritated her beyond belief, he was all she had right now, and she wasn't going to leave him behind.

She spotted Bobby being herded onward by a group of emergency personal to an area far from the gorge. Riley shouted to Xander before hurrying after Bobby. She seized hold of Bobby's arm when she reached him and jerked him back toward her.

"Riley," he breathed in relief and embraced her quickly. They'd never been overly close in high school, but after Bobby had graduated school, and started working with his father, he'd come into the hardware store where she worked more often. They'd become a lot friendlier and exchanged updates on their not-so-exciting lives.

Bobby held her arms as he stepped back. "Where's Carol?" she inquired, dreading the answer.

He shook his head, his brown eyes sad and distant. "I don't know," he admitted. "It all happened so fast, one minute we were just standing there and the next... Well, the next it was just... screaming. I saw her run; I think she was with Lee, still." His gaze slid past her; he released her arms as Xander joined them. "I'm pretty sure she's still alive."

Relief filled her; her shoulders slumped as she searched the crowd surging around them. "Go with the flow," Xander murmured. "Carol will go with the others to look for us."

Riley fell into step with Bobby and Xander; she searched the mob frantically as she sought her friend. They made it to the area where everyone was gathered; people had

spread out in search of family and loved ones. "Carol!" Xander shouted, standing on his tiptoes to search over the crowd. Bobby, slightly taller than Xander, did the same thing as he stood beside him.

"Do you see her?" Riley demanded impatiently as she strained to see something other than the bodies surrounding her.

Xander shook his head; he glanced nervously around one more time before dropping down beside her. "She has to be ok," Riley said forcefully.

"She is." But he wouldn't look at her as he said the words, and lines that hadn't been there before were now etched onto his features.

Riley's hands twisted, she searched the crowd frantically, bouncing on her toes as she hopped about. "Xander," she whispered impatiently.

"I'll find her. Stay with Bobby."

She frowned at him, not at all liking the idea of being told what to do. For that reason alone she followed him through the crowd again, Bobby close on her heels. "I've seen enough scary movies to know splitting up is never the right choice," Bobby informed her.

"It's not," she agreed.

Xander frowned at them both, his mouth pinched as he stared at her. "Do you see an ax murderer around here?"

"I think I might prefer it," she retorted.

He shook his head before turning and storming through the crowd. He'd handled the horde of people a lot better than her before this, now he pushed through with the same impatience she'd exhibited. She spotted a couple of girls from the softball team amongst the swarm, but she didn't go to them, and she didn't see Carol with them.

Smoke hung heavy in the air, she pulled her shirt over her nose in an attempt to ease the cloying scent and to block some of her inhalation of it. "Carol!" Xander bellowed.

"Xander!"

Riley spun, searching the crowd as she heard the distant cry. "Carol!" she yelled.

"I'll give you a leg up."

She blinked at Xander in confusion; she didn't comprehend what he meant until he knelt before her. "Oh. Ah, yeah."

Resting her hand on his shoulder, she slipped her foot into his joined hands and braced herself as he lifted her up. She searched over the crowd and through the increasing smoke. She hadn't realized the forest behind the state hospital was on fire. Flames shot high into the air; they consumed the trees with hungry ferocity. Riley shuddered as she realized it wasn't just the heat of the day causing her to sweat so much, but also the heat from the growing inferno less than three hundred yards away.

They had to find Carol and get out of here. Soon.

Then she spotted her friend, jumping up and down as she waved frantically at Riley. Lee was at her side, a cloth pressed against his cheek. Relief filled Riley, she grinned as she waved enthusiastically back. "I see her!" she cried, patting Xander on his shoulder.

"Wonderful," he muttered, his cheek pressed against her thigh, and his face twisted as if he were in pain. Jeeze, she didn't weigh that much.

"You can put me down now." He nodded and dropped her to the ground. "The forest is on fire."

"Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be with everything else that's going on?"

"And I thought you were a 'glass half full' kind of guy." She found a small amount of

pleasure in needling him as he shot her a dark look. She smiled sweetly at him before turning on her heel and leading the way toward where she had seen Carol and Lee.

"Thank God!" Carol cried as she threw her arms around Riley and hugged her close.

"I'm ok, too," Xander informed her grumpily.

Carol rolled her eyes but happily embraced her brother. Riley didn't often see them together anymore, and she was struck by how similar they were in appearance. They had the same eye color, though Carol's hair was a shade darker. Xander was slightly above six feet, while Carol was just under. At one point they had both been lanky, and Carol was still as slender as a reed. Xander had filled out over the past couple of years and become more muscular while at college. "What happened to you?" Bobby asked Lee.

Lee pulled the cloth away from his tanned face. Riley winced at the uneven wound slicing his cheek nearly to the bone. "I think it was a rock."

"That's going to need stitches."

"I don't think stitches are the priority right now," Lee informed him as he glanced at the people flowing around them.

"No, they're not. We have to move," Xander stated.

"Where?" Carol asked quietly. "Where do we go?"

"The stadium. Hopefully it's still standing," Riley said as she glanced at the sky in search of another flare. There was nothing. There had to be survivors over there still, there *had* to be.

"Just as long as it's not here." Bobby said as he looked over top of the crowd toward where the smoke curled high into the air with growing intensity. Riley swallowed heavily; the angry glow of the inferno was stark against the dark day. Her gaze darted involuntarily toward the blackened sun.

She felt like cattle being herded to the slaughter as she fell into step with the bustling and jostling crowd, but there was nowhere else for them to go. Carol's hand wrapped around hers, and then took hold of her brother's. The murmurs of the crowd began to die down as a sense of urgency started to fill it. The blaze would spread; there was no way to put it out right now. There were those who thought the whole town would burn.

Goosebumps broke out on Riley's skin, she pressed closer to Carol as Xander led them onto a sidewalk, separating them a little from the jostling mob. She was grateful for the distance; the air seemed freer now that she didn't have so many people pressing against her, or the madness she sensed swelling amongst them. "This could get risky," Lee muttered as he watched the throng from guarded eyes.

"Could?" Xander inquired.

"You know what I mean. A panicked crowd is a dangerous crowd."

Riley swallowed heavily; they held further back in an attempt to avoid the stampede if one happened to break out. There were still emergency workers in the crowd, shouting instructions, trying to keep people calm, but Riley could sense an unraveling within it.

Glass shattered somewhere to her left. She turned to watch as two men broke out the window on a door across the street. One man lifted his head to glance swiftly around. His gaze found hers. For one long moment they stared at each other across the street. He didn't appear a bit remorseful as he turned away, stuck his arm through the broken window, and opened the door.

Riley stood, uncertain and suddenly more frightened than she had been when she'd thought she was going to fall into the very depths of hell. There were more than just

earthquakes and steaming holes to fear here, she realized as the hair on the back of her neck stood up, and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead.

There were also humans.

She wasn't sure what frightened her more.

CHAPTER 10

Carl

Cape Cod, Mass.

Carl drove like a bat out of hell, or as fast as a bat of hell could drive with the ruts, chunks of asphalt, trees, power lines, and downed street lamps blocking the path. One light was on red as he drove over top of the lines connected to it. He'd been unable to make it down Route three after the new earthquake, and instead had been forced off the exit and down what was known as Scenic Highway. Normally it was scenic, now it was a nightmare he was determined to get as far away from as possible. The road ran parallel to the canal and was far too close to it for his liking.

The truck bounced and jumped over the highway. The canal was still empty, the mud and rock of its bottom clearly, and horrifyingly, visible.

"Faster," John urged. He was still holding onto the handle as he leaned forward and stared unblinkingly down the road.

Carl's arms were deadlocked before him as he pressed harder on the accelerator. If he hadn't been fired for stealing the truck, he definitely would have been fired if his boss could see the way he was driving now. In the side mirrors he spotted the Toyota having more difficulty than he was, but staying surprisingly close as the woman drove as recklessly as he did.

He swerved around a downed oak, fishtailed briefly to avoid a hole, and almost went airborne over a broken branch he was unable to avoid. "A tsunami. A freaking *tsunami*," John breathed.

"We don't know that yet," Carl grated through his teeth. He was too wound up to smoke a cigarette; he hadn't known that was possible until now. He eased on the gas, having to slow in order to navigate a part of the road nearly blocked by debris and ruined highway.

"What else would make the water go away?"

"For all I know an enormous hole opened in the middle of the ocean and all the water was sucked into it."

John gawked at him; his eyes nearly bulged out of his head. "Could that be possible?" he croaked.

"I don't know! I don't know anything anymore."

Carl stomped down on the accelerator again and the truck lurched awkwardly forward. Thankfully the road was mostly straight, and there were only a few cars abandoned, or wrecked, on it. They never would have made it this far, they wouldn't have made it to the bridge, if this had occurred on a weekend. He never thought he'd be grateful it was Monday.

He dodged another tree and aimed the truck at the parking lot of a gas station. It was nearly clear of debris as he swerved into the exit and back out the entrance of the station. The truck skidded briefly, turning sideways on the highway before the tires caught and it lurched forward. A truck, half hanging into a hole, blocked the entrance of the rotary. Carl swerved to the side, driving into the other lane as he skirted the lane barrier and turned onto the rotary with a squeal of tires as the ass end of the truck kicked out.

He was relieved to see the Toyota in his mirror still. He didn't know the woman, but

he didn't want to see anything bad happen to her or her children. He aimed the truck at the exit ramp as a sound much like an oncoming train pierced the turmoil around him.

His arms began to shake. John was deathly pale. He had nearly made it to the exit ramp when he saw the overturned delivery truck blocking it. He swung to the side, slammed on the gas and shot onto the empty entrance ramp of the highway. TGIM, he thought crazily as the truck lurched forward. The overpass rose over the road before speeding rapidly down toward the highway. Steam rose in pockets, the road wasn't any better here, and yet a sense of relief and joy began to grow within him.

The entrenched idea that far from the ocean would be the safest option had been driving him heedlessly onward. Now, his muscles relaxed, and some of the tension in his body eased as he spotted the Bourne Bridge in his mirror. Unlike its counterpart, it was still standing, still rising above the canal.

For now, he thought.

The rising roar of the train reverberated in the air. John had turned in his seat; his hands were resting on the down window as he hung his head and chest out like a dog. Carl wouldn't have been surprised to see his ears flapping in the wind, or his tongue lolling from his mouth. He shook his head, trying to clear it of the ludicrous thought as a hysterical laugh rose in his chest.

He was losing his mind.

And then he felt a forceful collision that seemed to reverberate through the earth. John swore loudly. He jerked back from the window as water heaved violently into the canal. It smashed into the bridge, ripping it ferociously from its moorings and taking it away in the space of a heartbeat. Carl, too busy watching the wreckage behind him, nearly ran straight into the back of a car.

A hiss escaped him; he swerved aggressively, barely missing the Kia as water poured over top of the rocks. John leaned back, his mouth gaping, his eyes as large as saucers as he watched the water barreling toward them.

"Faster!" John shouted.

Carl slammed his foot on the accelerator; speeds this fast were hazardous and could get them killed, but any slower meant *certain* death. He was not a risk-taking, careless driver; he hadn't been since he'd wrapped his first car around a tree and nearly killed his best friend. But somehow he managed to channel the eighteen-year-old hellion he'd once been, and found that years of experience had made him far more adept at swerving around obstacles at such high speeds. The woman was gaining ground on him. If he hit something, there was no way she was going to avoid smashing into his ass end. For the first time, he didn't remotely mind someone tailgating him.

He kept his attention focused forward. John would let him know if they were about to be crushed to death by an enormous wave of water, as he leaned further out the window and made strange gurgling noises and short squeaks. Yep, John was a great barometer on just how much jeopardy they were in. He continuously waved his hand forward, as if that would somehow miraculously move everything out of their way.

The crashing, wrenching roar of the onrushing water pushed Carl faster.

"Ugh! Ugh!" John grunted.

Carl swerved around a large, steaming split in the middle of the highway. They bounced into the median, the truck tires spun as they sought purchase in the spongy grass. Dirt and grass flew, pelting the side and back of the truck with mud. The Toyota, smaller

and more maneuverable, pulled ahead of them as it was able to stay on the highway. Carl steered back onto the road as John began to wave more frantically, his grunting increased, and he began to bounce in the seat.

Despite his every intention not to look, Carl felt his eyes irresistibly drawn to the mirror. His mouth dropped, he understood John's insistent motions as his stomach curdled like spoiled milk. He'd never seen anything like it. Water rolled over water in a ceaseless swell of death and destruction rushing relentlessly forward. Toward *them*. He could almost feel it nipping at the truck tires as it was just fifty feet behind them and closing fast.

It seemed as if all the water of the ocean was pursuing them, looking to destroy them. Nothing hindered its pursuit as it simply sucked any obstacles into it and devoured them with ease. Debris rolled within the wave, cresting to the top before being lost within the crush of water again. Cars rose up, spun away, and fell back; there were rooftops, and porches, trees and poles, and worst of all...

"People," he breathed.

Their bodies appeared within the swirl, before being buried again as new ones surged forth. It was gaining on them, barreling forward with ruthless intent. He knew it wasn't possible, but he couldn't shake the belief the wave was an actual, living thing. That it *knew* they were there, and it was determined to destroy them. They were nearly two miles from the canal and the water showed no sign of easing.

Plastic bit into the palms of his hands; his fingers twisted around the wheel as he tore his attention away from certain death and back to the mangled road. The Toyota was just ahead of them, the eerie glow of the sun in the back window made it impossible to see inside the vehicle, but he could see the woman's eyes in the driver's side mirror.

"Holy shit," John breathed.

Carl wasn't about to look at what had elicited words from John again, instead of just mindless sounds. It couldn't be good.

John flopped back in the seat; he looked about ten years older than he had this morning as he pulled at the side of his face with his right hand. His eyes were haunted as they met Carl's gaze. "You can slow down now."

Carl glanced in the mirror again, his body slumped, his hands eased on the wheel. The water didn't appear to be pursuing them anymore. It had retreated a little to reveal the layers of dirt, mud, and debris it had washed ashore. He expected to see the water receding completely, but it didn't. Instead it seemed to have found a new home, seemed to have decided to claim this land as its own.

Ocean one, land zero. He felt the strange urge to laugh hysterically again, he lit a cigarette instead as he eased on the gas pedal and navigated the highway with a lot more care. The Toyota eased back also and took the next exit. Losing the woman caused a strange sense of loneliness to fill him as he stared at the empty, forlorn highway. In the distance another vehicle was moving through the wreckage, but it was too far away for him to discern what it was.

John was silent as he continued to pull awkwardly at his face. "I'm glad we were able to get off the Cape."

"Yeah," Carl muttered.

The loneliness wouldn't leave him; it was a growing ache in his chest the nicotine did little to ease. He felt as if they could well be the last two people on earth, even with the

distant movement of the other car. "My parents..."

"I'll get you to them," Carl promised. He tossed the cigarette from the window. It bounced off the roof of a black Lexus. The front end was embedded into the back of a pickup truck and blood splattered the windshield. Carl felt a twinge of regret, he hadn't meant to hit the car, but he'd just bounced a butt off of what would most likely become a person's coffin. He felt like an ass.

"I don't know how we're going to find them." John started pulling on his face again. "All those people back there, they're all probably dead. I mean..." he broke off, shaking his head as his fingers made a teepee before his mouth. "I mean... no one could survive that, right?"

Carl swallowed heavily; it was difficult to get his lighter to fire with trembling fingers. "I'm sure some did."

John shook his head, his gaze traveled to the mirror, but there was little to see anymore; they'd moved beyond the scope of the wave and the devastation it had wrought. "Not many," he muttered. "My home... it's all I've ever known. I... uh, I don't know... I don't know."

"Your parents, John. Where are they?" Carl had to have something to focus on, something to do other than navigate through debris and bodies. So *many* bodies. Yes, he definitely needed something to do besides think about what was going on around them. So did John, as the kid looked about ready to lose it.

"Bridgewater. My Mom works at the college, my Dad's a CO at the prison."

He'd been working with the kid for almost two years, but Carl hadn't known these details of his life. It was unsettling to realize how little he knew about the person he spent most of his time with. "Your Mom's a professor?"

"History."

"Interesting."

"What about your parents?" John inquired.

"Dead," Carl said flatly.

"Sorry."

Carl shrugged, this time he snubbed his cigarette in the ashtray; it was the first time he'd used the thing. He'd been smoking for over twenty years, but he'd never liked using the ashtrays in a vehicle. However, there was no way he was throwing another one onto the graveyard now surrounding them.

"It's been awhile. Dad died of a heart attack when I was sixteen, and Mom succumbed to breast cancer ten years ago," Carl told him.

"Still sucks."

Carl refrained from saying at least he knew where his parents were, and what had become of them. He didn't want to scare the kid anymore than he already was. "Yeah."

A small blue Honda crept onto the highway; it came straight up the middle of the grass around the exit ramp. The loneliness eased somewhat, but between the rising steam, the fires burning in the distance, and the darkness of the day, he couldn't shake his feeling of isolation. He was glad he'd been at work today, glad he'd been with John; he didn't know what he would have done if he'd had to face this alone. He'd been alone for a long time, he'd thought he was used to it, that he enjoyed it; he realized now how wrong he'd been.

Just past exit three there were two cars parked in the middle of the highway, people

had climbed out of them and were standing beside the vehicles. Carl stopped beside them. Before him, gleaming in the dull daylight was a river that hadn't been there before.

John was the first out of the truck, he moved forward to stand with the others. Sweat broke out on Carl's brow and trickled down his cheek as he stepped close to the river. Waves of steam rose from the rippling water.

A woman began to cry. "What do we do?" a man.

"Find another way around," Carl said flatly.

"Maybe we can drive through it. It might not be deep in the middle."

Carl expected the river to start boiling any second; there was no way he was going to attempt driving into it. They wouldn't make it five feet before the tires melted off. "John." He nodded toward the truck when John's astounded gaze came gradually toward him.

"Let's go."

"That truck would definitely make it," the man pressed.

Five sets of eyes swung toward Carl as he grabbed the handle on the truck door. The sweat had little to do with the heat of the water anymore as he gazed forcefully at John, urging the kid to move faster with his eyes. "No vehicle would make it," Carl informed the man as he hopped into the truck. "Find another way."

John jumped into the passenger seat; his brow was furrowed as the man started to approach them. "Lock the door."

"Huh?" John asked dully.

"Lock. The. Door." Carl took his own advice as he jammed the lock in place and rolled the window up.

"You could at least *try*!" The man's hand slammed down on the hood as Carl started the truck up.

"What the fuck is this guy's problem?" John demanded.

"Fear," Carl muttered.

"Hey!" the guy yelled. "I'm talking to you!"

"No one cares," John retorted. "Back off!"

"Don't poke the crazies," Carl warned him.

"I'll poke him, he's being an ass." The man slapped his hand on the hood again, causing a dent to appear in the metal as Carl shifted into reverse. "What is *with* this guy?"

Carl grabbed John's arm when he grasped for the handle. "Don't."

"We can't just let him get away with that."

"I understand you're young, but let's not add dumb to it. Think this through: he's terrified, he thinks this truck is going to make it through that river, and he *will* take it from us if we give him the chance. We can't risk losing it."

John looked about to argue further, but he released the handle and sat back. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

Carl eyed the man as he shifted into drive. The man's eyes were narrowed, his hands fisted, as he glowered at the truck. Carl expected him to come after them again, but the guy seemed to decide being run over by a one ton Chevy was only going to make his already bad day worse. Though Carl wasn't eager to fight with the guy, he wouldn't hesitate to use the truck as a weapon; they were *not* going to lose it.

He doubled back, driving the wrong way on the highway, but he supposed it didn't make any difference anymore. Arriving at exit three, he took the ramp and headed north toward Middleboro. He didn't know what he was going to do if they came across another

obstacle and couldn't go any further with the truck. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of having to walk, and he felt much safer in the vehicle.

John rested his head against the passenger side window. "This is insane," he mumbled.

"It's probably only going to get crazier."

John's nose scrunched up. "I don't see how it could."

Carl aspired to believe they had survived the worst, and it was only going to get better from here on out, but he wasn't going to lie to himself. This was only the beginning of the end, the beginning of the insanity; all he could do was hope he survived it. Then he hoped he would still *want* to have survived when this was all over.

He shuddered as they entered a small town. People stopped to stare as they drove by, they were gathered on the side of the road near a church. The desperation in their eyes terrified him.

CHAPTER 11

Al

Newport, RI.

"Run."

"What?" Mary Ellen asked as the roaring noise of the train barreled toward them.

"Run!" Al shouted.

Her dark eyes bulged as her jaw dropped. He grasped hold of her arm and pulled her back a step. The roar of the train became so loud it drowned out the terrified screams preceding it.

"Run!" he shouted at her.

Mary Ellen shook her head, seeming to break out of her stupor as she took a small step back, grabbed Rita's arm, and spun on her heel. Al grabbed Rita's other arm and propelled her down the street as rapidly as he could. The noise became a resonating crescendo that drowned out all thought and reason. The ground shook beneath his feet, but he didn't think it was another earthquake causing the trembling this time.

He didn't know what it was, but he found his feet wouldn't move fast enough as the imposing presence of something powerful barreled down on them. Something crashed, it sounded as if houses were being ripped from their foundations. They turned the corner, the guns bounced against his back as he continued onward. He'd never felt old, he prided himself on his youthful outlook on life, but he wasn't as fast as he once was. His knees ached in ways they hadn't twenty years ago, and he was winded far sooner than he would have liked.

"Up here!"

Al jerked Rita, and in turn, Mary Ellen to a stop at the shout. He spotted people gathered on the roof of the brick school building beside them. "The dumpster, use the dumpster!" The man who shouted at them ran down the roof of the building toward a cluster of dumpsters at the end. Al tugged Rita forward; he wished the woman had waited to have her complete mental breakdown. "Hurry!" the man urged.

"What's happening?" Mary Ellen inquired, her voice barely carried over the increasing roar.

"Just climb!"

She didn't have to be told twice as she dropped the pillowcase of supplies on top of the dumpster, placed both hands on it, and hefted herself up. She turned back to help Al push and shove Rita up to her. "Rita come on," Mary Ellen grated, pulling on her arms as the two of them finally managed to get her onto the dumpster. "Get it together before you get us killed!"

The man on the roof knelt down and extended his hand. Rita remained unmoving, her eyes glazed as she stared blankly at the wall before her. Mary Ellen met Al's gaze over the top of her head as he joined them on top of the blue container. He grabbed hold of Rita's arm and lifted it into the air; it fell limply back to her side. He longed to be able to pick the woman up and heave her onto the roof, or shake some sense into her, but he didn't do either of those things as the train became a roaring plane engine that reverberated in his ears.

"Go!" he shouted at Mary Ellen, a crushing sense of doom descending upon him as

screams echoed through the streets.

Mary Ellen stared at Rita before she grabbed the supplies, jumped up, and seized hold of the man's arm. Another man, and a woman, appeared to help Mary Ellen scramble off the dumpster and onto the roof. She disappeared briefly from view as she collapsed. Al grabbed hold of Rita's arm and picked it up once more. The man leaned further over, the other two held his ankles as he sought to grab hold of Rita.

"Come on lady, give me a hand here." The man grunted as the edge of the roof pressed into his stomach. Frustration filled Al, he tried to heave her up, but she remained as still as stone. "What is wrong with her?"

It was shock, Al knew. Her mind had frayed, but he didn't know how to make it better. Mary Ellen reappeared; she flung one leg over the side of the building. "Stay up there!" Al yelled at her.

"You need help," Mary Ellen insisted.

There was no help for this, but she didn't realize that yet. Al was beginning to, and the man most certainly did, as he turned away from Rita and thrust his hand out to Al. "Give me your hand!"

Al grabbed hold of the man's thick forearm. He wrapped his other arm around Rita's waist in a last ditch attempt to get her onto the roof. The man grunted; his other hand seized hold of Al's arm as he grappled to lift the two of them from the dumpster. Mary Ellen leaned over; she grasped for Rita as Al was lifted a few inches into the air.

The man's face flushed red; his arms were shaking with the strain he was exerting to hold onto them. "You have to help, Rita," Al muttered to her. She remained silent, he found he actually missed the annoying little shrieks, at least then she had been showing some sign of life. There was nothing now. His arms ached; each one of them felt as if they were going to be pulled from their sockets. Rita probably didn't weigh a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, but her dead weight felt more like three hundred pounds right now.

"I don't..." the man broke off. Sweat was pouring down his face, sticking his light brown hair to his forehead. Al knew what he'd been about to say, he didn't think he could do this, and neither did Al, as they hung over the dumpster. Mary Ellen's fingers were just above him, she lurched awkwardly, sliding precariously to the side as she seized hold of the collar of his shirt. The material bit into his neck, but he welcomed the choking feeling. He felt at least a little more secure now as he dangled like a worm on a hook.

"Rita..." What he was about to say was cut completely off as a wave of water smashed around the corner. A strangled cry escaped him; his legs kicked in the air as the urge to run instinctively took over. Mary Ellen jerked on his collar, causing him to sputter as the man's hands dug fiercely into his arm. Rita came back to life, but where he had prayed she'd become helpful, she instead became like a drowning victim. An ear piercing scream escaped her, her fingers dug into his arm wrapped around her waist; her nails raked back his flesh, drawing a stream of blood from him. Pain tore through him as she kicked wildly, clawing at his arm and battering his shins.

"Hey! Hey, stop!" The man shouted. "I can't hold on! Stop lady!"

Rita's screams and motions became more frenzied. "Stop it, Rita!" Al shouted at her as the man's hand slipped on his forearm. "Calm down!"

She elbowed him remorselessly in the gut, knocking the air from him. If the man hadn't been holding so tight, and Mary Ellen's hand hadn't been wrapped in his shirt, he

would have fallen as his fingers instinctively released their grasp on the man's forearm. His arm slipped, he dropped a little bit. The arm around Rita's waist numbly released its hold. She fell back to the dumpster, still shrieking as she began to pull at her hair.

"Rita!" Mary Ellen screamed. Rita spun in a small circle before she jumped down from the dumpster and fled. "Rita!"

The man readjusted his hold on Al and heaved him over the side of the building. The weight of the guns pressed against his back as he collapsed, bleeding and gasping for air. The building was rocked on its foundation; he was certain the school was going to fall down as water splashed over the side and spattered his face. The salty, tangy taste of the ocean coated his lips as he struggled to push himself into a sitting position.

Water roared over and through the streets, it flowed around the building, tore away the dumpster and demolished the smaller obstacles in its path. Mary Ellen scrambled to her feet, she ran to the edge of the roof to watch as Rita fled down the street. Al rose shakily, his whole body ached.

Rita's screams were drowned out by the water barreling down upon her. Al held his breath, praying she would make it, knowing she wouldn't. It was too late, there was nowhere for her to go. Rita glanced over shoulder; she stumbled over an upturned chunk of asphalt and sprawled onto the road. Mary Ellen screamed as the oncoming wave crashed into Rita and swept her up. She swirled briefly to the top, her arms flailed in the air before she was swallowed beneath the crushing weight of the water.

Mary Ellen's scream abruptly cut off, the color drained from her face; her lips were nearly white as they trembled with her unshed tears. "Why?" she whispered. "Why would she do that?"

Al rested his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently as he tried to offer her some reassurance, some strength. He didn't have an answer for her. "I don't know."

She turned away, her gaze dropped to the water. It was not the powerful, consuming rush it had been, but it still swirled around them in a dirty froth of foam and debris. Disgust twisted her features as bodies began to float by. "Awful," she muttered before retreating to the other side of the roof.

She dropped to the roof, drew her legs up and dropped her arm over them. Al turned to the man who had saved his life and stuck his hand out. "Thank you."

The man nodded as he shook his hand. "Wish I could have helped her too."

"I wish I could have kept hold of her."

"You might want to take care of that." The man nodded to the deep gouges on Al's arms. The only thing they had left of Rita. He nodded numbly and made his way over to Mary Ellen. She was already digging through the sack, looking for the first aid kit. His whole body hurt; he felt every one of his seventy-two years. His knees popped as he settled beside her.

She tended the scratches carefully as the two men began to prowl around the roof. The woman sat opposite them, her eyes shadowed and haunted as she watched Mary Ellen. "Are you father and daughter?" the woman inquired.

"Neighbors," Al informed her.

"That woman... the one who was with you," she said hesitatingly.

"Also a neighbor." The woman nodded as her attention drifted to the men gathered at the other end of the roof. "Are the three of you family?"

"The one who pulled you up is my husband Bill, the other one is his friend, Paul."

Mary Ellen wrapped a bandage around his arm and sat back. Al leaned his head against the edge of the roof, and then climbed back to his feet. He joined the men at the edge of the roof. He had no desire to see more bodies, but they couldn't stay up here forever. The water slapped against the building, but showed no sign of receding as it flooded the streets around them.

"I'm pretty sure that was a tsunami," the man identified as Paul muttered.

Bill shook his head. "I don't know what else it could have been."

Al moved to the other side of the building. More water. Things just kept going from bad to worse. He sat by Mary Ellen again. "It should recede soon."

"I can't stay here Al," Mary Ellen murmured.

"I know, but we can't go anywhere as long as there's an ocean beneath us."

"What if it doesn't recede?"

"It has to," he assured her.

"I hope so. Are you hungry?" she asked.

He glanced at the pillowcase and then at the people surrounding him. They seemed safe enough, they had helped to save his life after all, but he didn't know how trustworthy anyone was right now. "Why don't we wait and see if this water recedes soon."

She glanced around the rooftop before grabbing the sack and pulling it toward her. "Rita..." She moved closer to him, her arm pressed against his as she sought some sense of comfort. "She was getting on my nerves; all I wanted was for her to be quiet."

"I know."

"I didn't want this though," she whispered.

He squeezed her hand comfortingly. "I know, neither did I. And she was getting on my nerves too. There's nothing either of us could have done."

"Maybe I could have gotten her to snap out of it."

"Don't beat yourself up over it. Rita couldn't handle this; it was only a matter of time before she was lost." It was cold, he knew, but it was also true. "We don't have time to mourn, not now. *This* world, it's no longer the one we knew."

Her hand clenched around his. "I feel worse about Rita than my own husband. What's that say about me?"

"That your husband was an ass."

She snorted with laughter. "Yeah, he was," she agreed. "What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know. I'm not a scientist, I was never a religious man, and Nostradamus wasn't someone I followed. All I know is it *is* happening, and it's going to take everything we have to survive it."

The two men retreated back to the woman and settled on either side of her. "You don't trust them," Mary Ellen's words were a bare whisper.

"I don't trust anyone anymore. Except maybe you."

Her smile was wan. "Thanks for the vote."

"Humans are perilous when they're threatened and scared," he said honestly.

"And we are most certainly both right now."

"Yes."

"Where did you get the guns?" she inquired.

"I used to hunt."

"I never would have pictured you as a hunter."

"I wasn't much of one," he admitted.

She became silent as she fiddled with the edges of the medical kit. Time ticked by at a crawl as he marked the passage of it on his watch. The woman fell asleep, the two men remained silent but appeared agitated as they would rise and pace restlessly for a while before returning to their places on the roof, and then repeating the same action again only minutes later. Al's stomach rumbled but he was still hesitant to dig into their meager supply. He didn't realize Mary Ellen had fallen asleep too, until she started awake. She stared blearily around before her shoulders slumped, and she began to twist her hands together.

She rose to her feet and walked over to the edge of the roof before returning. "I think it might be receding."

His muscles ached as he pushed himself to his feet. It appeared she was right as the higher water mark was clearly visible on the bark of the trees across the way. The water was still a good four feet high, but even if it didn't retreat further, they might be able to make their way through it. For the first time he felt a spurt of hope. He desired off of this roof as badly as Mary Ellen did.

The men joined them. "Thank God," one of them breathed.

Al seconded that. "Should we go now?" Mary Ellen inquired. "What if something more happens, and we don't get another chance?"

A young man's body was caught up in the doorway of a house to the left; it kept bouncing off the frame with a dull thud that made his skin crawl. Al eyed the water warily. There was no way to know what the water hid, what hazards or obstacles were swirling within its dark depths. He was frightened this might be their only chance, but if they couldn't see the ground, there was no way to know what was beneath them, where they would be putting their feet. It would be near certain death.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he told her. "Not with all those pits, craters, and possible canyons out there now."

She bit her lip, her hands twisted anxiously as she began to bounce on her toes. "Damn," she hissed.

"It won't be much longer," Al assured her.

"Yeah," she muttered.

Tilting his head back, Al realized the sun was beginning to peek out again. His breath caught in his chest, his mouth parted as a small sliver of the sun was revealed through the shadows obscuring it. He was forced to look away when the glare became too much. "The sun's coming back out."

"I'll be," Paul muttered.

"That has to be a good sign, right?" Mary Ellen asked eagerly.

Al was silent as he looked away from the sun again. He'd longed to see it again so at least one thing could return to normal in this messed up world, but he didn't feel anywhere near as elated as he had thought he would. Instead, it felt as if the cool hand of death was caressing the back of his neck. He began to question his decision to remain here as he was seized with the certainty they had to move, they had to get off this roof, and out of this town.

Mary Ellen smiled at him when he met her gaze. He didn't want to ruin that smile, it was so rare, but he couldn't shake his apprehension. He'd never been one to ignore his instincts, and they'd gotten him this far in life. The return of the sun wasn't the beginning

of something better, but something worse. He knew it.

"We have to go. Now."

Mary Ellen's smile slipped away as she looked back at the sky. She opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again as she nodded her agreement.

CHAPTER 12

Xander

Foxboro, Mass.

"They're breaking into that house."

Xander grabbed Riley's arm, propelling her onward as she stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "They are," he confirmed. "The rules don't exactly apply anymore."

Her eyebrows drew sharply together as her mouth pursed. "Going to hell in a hand basket," she muttered.

"Fast. Now come on, we have to move Riley."

He didn't look back as he hurried her forward. Carol, Lee, and Bobby were about twenty feet ahead of them. They waited for them to catch up in the middle of the sidewalk. "Everything ok?" Carol inquired.

"Yeah."

Most of the herd in the street was pushing closer together, but a few were breaking off, going their separate ways as they slid through yards and into the woods. Bobby watched the stragglers intently; Lee was so focused on trying to get to the stadium, he hadn't seemed to realize there weren't as many people with them anymore. This area of the town seemed to be in better shape. The houses weren't on fire, or falling into the earth, and though there were some steaming holes, there were nowhere near as many as there had been near the state hospital.

Bobby fell back to walk beside him as Riley split away with Carol. Riley and Carol walked closely together, their hands entwined as their bent heads pressed close to each other. He'd seen that sight many times over the years, but their closeness still amazed him. "I think we should start thinking about finding some kind of weapon."

Xander's attention was pulled from Carol and Riley as he glanced at Bobby out of the corner of his eye. "What kind of weapon?"

"A gun or something."

"And you would know how to use a gun?"

Bobby frowned as he shook back disheveled brown hair he'd let grow almost to his shoulders. He'd lost a few pounds since high school and grown an inch, but he was still only up to Xander's shoulders. "Well, no, but I've seen enough movies to figure it out."

Xander let out a harsh laugh. "Awesome, Bobby, I'm sure that's all it'll take."

Bobby glared at him. "We have to do something, Xander. We're defenseless now."

"We're surrounded by hundreds of people."

"*That's* what scares me."

Xander's gaze slid over the crowd again. "It's what scares me too," he admitted.

"Maybe some knives would help? At least they would be something."

Xander shuddered at the thought. Were they actually talking about using knives against people? He was having an easier time trying to assimilate the catastrophe surrounding them than the thought of having to stab someone. It made his empty stomach twist with nausea and acid. "Do you really think you could stab someone?"

"Two hours ago? No way. Now...?" Bobby shrugged as he tugged nervously on his hair. "Soon it's going to start becoming every man for themselves. This man would like something to defend himself, and the girls, with."

Xander studied his friend; Bobby had always been the calmest and easiest going out of the three of them. The gleam in his eyes now made Xander realize there was a lot more to Bobby than he'd ever realized. "Yeah, I guess."

"You better do more than guess. It's going to get ugly, Xander. Real ugly."

"When did you start losing faith in the human race?"

"About two hours ago."

Xander nodded. "Fair enough."

Bobby became silent as they continued down the road. Like a flock of geese, people flowed out of the street and seamlessly around another mammoth gorge that had opened in the middle of the asphalt. They moved through several backyards before returning to the street. Xander felt as mindless as the people around him seemed, and he found he welcomed it. He didn't want to think right now, and wasn't entirely sure he still could. His brain was on overload; he just couldn't process any new information right now.

Glass shattered somewhere. Riley and Carol stopped walking as they searched for the source of the sound. A gunshot, or more like an explosion, tore through the air. For a second everyone remained frozen, staggered by the new threat. Then, as another shot was fired, someone started screaming. It echoed loudly in the stillness enshrouding the town since the last earthquake.

The peaceful herd turned into a maniacal stampede as people began to push and shove in the chaos that erupted. Riley and Carol were jostled back as a small group broke off and began to flee into the yards. Some of the people, the ones who had thrown themselves to the ground after the last shot, were stomped beneath the feet of those trying to escape. Others were knocked down and trampled by the crush. Lee grabbed hold of the girls' arms and started running back toward him and Bobby.

Another shot erupted. More screams pierced the air. Suddenly a man lurched awkwardly forward from the crowd. The man's face was twisted in astonishment; a groan escaped him as blood appeared on the front of his shirt. People stared at the man in astonishment before they began to run away from him. The man fell on the curb, his body sprawled half in the street and half out of it; his arms spread wide as he remained unmoving. Xander didn't know much about guns, but if the substantial hole in the man's back was any indication, it appeared it had been a big one.

Was someone shooting at them on purpose? Had the stress of everything finally caused someone to lose it, had it unleashed the inner monster inside someone who had been twisted and vicious to begin with? What was left of laws, and civilization, was rapidly unraveling. It was a perfect opportunity for someone to let their inner psycho out. Or was someone simply trying to defend their home?

Another shot rang out. "Holy shit!" Bobby shouted as the two of them ducked, covering their heads, but no one else fell into the street.

Hopefully if the shooter was a crazy murderer he was a piss poor shot, but Xander wasn't sticking around to find out. He snagged hold of Carol's hand and started running. They fled from the sidewalk and into backyards bordering the edge of the woods. He ran heedlessly forward as he tried to avoid the crush of people also escaping.

"Wait! Stop!" Riley jerked Carol's hand, pulling them both back with her as she came to an abrupt halt. She released Carol's hand and ran up the steps of someone's back porch.

"Riley!" Carol yelled at her.

Riley pounded on the door and frantically rang the bell. Shading her eyes, she bent to peer into the gap the curtains revealed. Before he knew what she had in mind, she lifted her arm and crashed her elbow into the pane of glass. Unlike the movies, the glass didn't break. She frowned and rubbed her elbow as she glared at the intact windowpane.

"Damn it!" Xander hissed. He released Carol's hand and dashed up the steps after her. "Riley, what are you doing?"

"This is Sue Bradford's house."

"So?"

"So, her stepdad's a cop."

He stared at her blankly. "What? Look, I don't give a rat's ass if her stepdad is the freaking President. We have to keep moving, Riley."

She rolled her eyes at him, causing his frustration to grow as he tried to grab her arm. "A cop Xander. With a badge and a *gun*."

He froze. Apparently Bobby wasn't the only one who aspired to get their hands on a gun. "You seriously want to break into a cop's house?" he asked incredulously.

"You're the one who said the rules don't exactly apply anymore."

"*It's a cop's house!*" he nearly shouted.

She continued to glower at him as the others filtered onto the porch. "It is," she confirmed unflinchingly, though she still cradled her elbow. "And I'm getting inside of it, one way or another."

He stared at the backdoor, torn between common sense and his conscience. He was acutely aware his continued existence was nowhere near as secure as it had been when he'd awoken this morning. "You don't know what to do with a gun," he muttered as he strolled toward the door.

"This isn't survival of the fittest, maybe not even the smartest anymore, Xander. This is survival of the most prepared right now, and I plan to be prepared."

"Maybe the luckiest too," Lee added.

"Yeah, and I suck at poker, so I'll take preparation on this one. I'd rather have an unfortunate steaming hole-death over some idiot shooting me, or stampeding me, because I can't defend myself," Riley continued.

"Here's hoping I don't get shot doing this." Xander lifted his elbow and smashed it into the window. Glass shattered inward, he held his breath as he waited for a bullet in retaliation, but none was forthcoming. Reaching in, he flipped the deadlock and pushed the door open. He stood hesitatingly on the threshold, feeling completely uncomfortable with the fact he'd just broken into a house, never mind a police officer's house.

"Hello?" he called into the house.

It was hollow and barren despite being filled with pictures and houseplants that normally would have been inviting. Perhaps it was the knowledge the occupants of this house might be dead, but a chill began to work its way down his spine. It didn't matter this was a cop's house, he felt like he was violating someone's privacy, someone's life, in a *big* way.

"Karma's a bitch," he murmured.

"Probably why the earth is trying to eat us right now," Riley informed him as she elbowed her way past him into the house.

Xander followed her as she crept through the kitchen to the living room. The family photos on the fireplace mantle were a little unnerving, especially the ones with Sue's

stepdad in his Marine, and policeman uniforms. "This guy could kick our asses," Lee said in awe. His dark blue eyes were wide as he met Xander's gaze over the top of Riley's head and made the cutthroat gesture with his hand. Xander shook his head at him, but he knew Lee was right.

"Let's hope he doesn't come back anytime soon then," Carol whispered.

"I think he keeps his guns in the den. I came over once, in ninth grade, when Sue and I were partnered for a history report," Riley said.

"Just once?" Bobby inquired.

Riley shrugged. "Sue's a little weird."

"*That's* putting it mildly," Carol retorted.

"How weird?" Bobby asked.

"You know how every grade seems to have that one kid who sits in the back of the class and chews on their hair?" Carol asked.

Bobby glanced around the room before answering slowly, "Yeah."

"Well, Sue actually ate it."

Bobby and Lee choked on laughter as Xander shook his head. "Great. A Marine and a Carrie wannabe. Awesome house to pick Ri, just awesome," Lee told her.

"It's not like she's going to eat *your* dandruff-ridden hair," Riley retorted.

Lee grinned at her as he pointed two fingers at his sun-kissed hair. "There's no dandruff in this, thank you."

Riley heaved a sigh, but she actually smiled. That smile vanished as she turned to look at Xander. From the disgruntled look she shot him, he would have thought *he* was eating *her* hair. Riley brushed past him, leading the way to the den situated at the front of the house. She pushed open the door and poked her head inside before nodding for them to follow.

The walls of the den were littered with awards and medals. The man was a decorated war veteran. Xander forced his attention away from the walls and onto the gun cabinet in the corner of the room as his scruples started screaming at him. This was such a hideously awful house to rob. "Let's just get this over with."

"We have to find the key," Carol informed him.

"Just break the glass!" His tone was pricklier than he'd anticipated, but being in this place was really starting to make his skin crawl. Carol blanched, and even super criminal Riley seemed uneasy with this suggestion as she shifted from foot to foot. "I'll do it," he muttered.

Grabbing the desk chair by the arms, he lifted it high in his grasp. Carol scurried to get out of the way as he swung the chair forward, smashing one of the casters off the glass front of the gun case. The biting sound of splintering glass set his teeth on edge, but he dropped the chair and strode over to the now open contents of the cabinet.

He pulled two longer guns from the cabinet. "Rifles," Bobby informed him.

"I kinda figured that one out," he told him.

He handed Bobby one of the rifles before reaching back in and pulling out what he assumed was a shotgun. "This will do some damage."

"Do you know how to load it?" Carol inquired nervously.

"Only what I've seen on TV and movies," he admitted.

"This might have been a bad idea," Riley said as she eyed the guns nervously. "Let me see it."

"What, you have a better idea how to do it?" he demanded.

"Not even a little bit, but it can't be that tough to figure out."

"I'm sure," he retorted sarcastically. He handed the gun over to her anyway as he bent to pull cases of bullets out of the drawer beneath, as well as three handguns. He thought he would feel reassured by the weight of the guns, but he was terrified. None of them knew how to use these things; he thought it was a fairly safe bet one of them would accidentally shoot themselves before they ever had to use the weapons on someone else.

Riley clicked something and then tossed him a smug look. "Done."

He took the gun from her and gave her the handguns. "Here you go, Rambo. Figure these out. Just don't shoot yourself in the process."

"I'll keep it aimed at you, just in case."

He dropped the gun to his side as he turned back to her. "Shit, Riley. Let it go."

She stared unblinkingly at him for a minute. He thought she was going to bicker some more, but then her gaze flitted around the room and finally settled upon the deserted and chaotic street. She didn't acknowledge him again as she began to fiddle with the revolver. Her fingers were nimble as they slid the bullets in and clicked the cylinder closed.

At his questioning look she shrugged her shoulders and offered a feeble smile. "I watch a lot of westerns."

"I didn't know that," he admitted.

"You don't know a lot about me." He supposed that was true, even though he'd known her most of their lives. He sure wouldn't have expected her to be the first one to attempt to break into a police officer's house. He pulled a holster from the cabinet and handed it to her. She frowned at it. "You think I should keep them?"

"I don't see any better options in this room. None of us know what we're doing with these things either. Here's hoping Westerns are a good teaching device."

"Sure they are; they taught me how to take whiskey shots and ride a horse." He laughed as she wrapped the holster around her slender waist and buckled it securely. "Feels weird."

"I'd be worried if you said it felt right."

"Very true."

"We should see if they have some food," Bobby suggested.

Xander hung back as they filed out of the room. "Riley?" She frowned at him as she looked over her shoulder from the doorway. "One day you're really going to have to let the whole Dumbo thing go. I was a kid."

"It really sucked being stuck with that name for the past ten years." Her gaze drifted back to the window. "But I guess it doesn't matter anymore."

"Not really."

"And who knows, the way things are going, you might only be around for a little bit longer anyway." She really could melt a man's heart when she smiled, even if it was at the thought of his demise.

"Here's hoping."

She shook her head at him before leaving the room. Xander's gaze fell back to the gun cabinet, there were still weapons inside but he left them behind. He wasn't about to leave these people completely defenseless if they returned.

The others were gathered in the kitchen, apparently eating everything they could get

their hands on. He ignored the nagging pull of his conscience as he made himself a turkey sandwich and bit eagerly in. He couldn't believe he had any kind of an appetite right now, but he was starving.

"It's calmed down out there." Bobby was standing by the backdoor, a bag of chips in his hand.

Xander stared past him, to the strange and suddenly very unfamiliar world beyond the door. Riley joined Bobby in the doorway, her head tilted back as she studied the sky. "The sun is coming out," she murmured.

Xander shoved the last of his sandwich into his mouth and hurried to join them. He tilted his head back, watching as the clouds or the moon, he still couldn't decide which, finally began to slide away from the sun. Relief filled him at this small sign that perhaps things were finally beginning to return to normal. "About time."

He was so focused on trying to see the sun, he didn't catch the strange whining noise until the plane was over top of the trees. Bobby cursed; the bag of chips fell from his hands as he jumped back. There was a small airport in the next town, but Xander had never seen the planes fly this low before. The landing gear had dropped down; its wing nearly clipped a tall pine as the plane swayed in the air. The blast of wind created by the plane caused the trees surrounding it to bend.

It dipped from view, disappearing behind the trees. Xander held his breath, as he waited and prayed, but he knew it was useless. There was no way the plane was going to land safely.

The crash wasn't as loud or as explosive as he expected. Apparently there was little fuel left in the plane to create the blast he'd anticipated. A plume of smoke shot high over the trees as the sound of twisted metal echoed through the air.

"Oh," Riley breathed.

"There's nowhere for them to land," Lee muttered. "At least not near here, not anymore."

"They're running out of fuel."

Xander no longer cared about the re-emerging sun; he studied the sky, searching for more planes. "How many more of them do you think there are?" Carol inquired.

"Too many," Xander muttered warily. Hundreds of airplanes were probably up there, just biding their time until there was no time left. "And they're all going to come down sooner or later."

CHAPTER 13

John

Somewhere in Mass.

"Where are we?"

They'd been twisting and turning down so many back roads John had lost track of their location long ago. It felt like it had been hours since he'd felt that first tremor, but as he glanced at the clock he was stunned to realize it was only ten o'clock. How was it possible things had become so drastically different in such a short amount of time?

"I don't know," Carl muttered.

He made another turn when a large oak lying in the middle of the road blocked their path. "We could be going in circles."

"We could," Carl agreed. "But there's not much I can do about it unless you can move a tree."

"Not exactly feeling that ability today."

"Neither am I."

John peered out at the countryside, there was some upheaval here, but it didn't seem as bad as some of the other areas they had driven through. A barn had collapsed in the middle of a field, but the farmhouse next to it was still standing. Smoldering livestock and bird corpses dotted the land. "It's a war zone out there," he murmured.

"At least the tremors stopped," Carl said.

"Yeah."

Two cars and a motorcycle passed by, going in the opposite direction. He was beginning to think he would never find his parents, or he would probably never see tomorrow. Grief and sadness swelled within his chest, and for a moment he worried he might actually cry. Instead, he turned back to the farmland surrounding them and focused his attention on it.

"A blinker? Really?" John inquired when Carl clicked it on to make the turn into a gas station.

"Habit," he muttered around his cigarette, but he clicked it back off.

"We need gas?"

"Not yet, but neither of us have a clue where we are. If by some miracle the gas works here, we should probably top off. Plus, I'm kinda hungry."

"Coffee would be outstanding," John groaned.

Carl pulled the truck in next to one of the pumps, and they both hopped out. It was obvious the pumps weren't going to work, but like a fool John kept hitting the button beneath the blank screen in the hopes that perhaps he was wrong.

"That sucks," Carl muttered. "There's a car over there." Shoving the back of the bench seat forward, Carl fished around for the funnel stored there. He dug out the pair of snips they used to cut the weed whacker string with. "Maybe we can find some tubing inside and siphon the gas from the car."

After all the noise of the morning, it was disturbingly hushed as they made their way toward the store. John couldn't stop his eyes from constantly darting around in search of some new threat as they made their way to the store. The glass door of the gas station was locked. The power was out, but John was able to see some of the store as he bent to peer

in. Shelves had toppled, goods were scattered across the floor, but the building seemed to have withstood the worst of the quakes. He hadn't realized Carl had walked away from him until he returned with a large rock in his fist.

John opened his mouth to protest, but quickly clamped it shut. What was there to protest? They had to have food, drinks, and whatever other supplies they could rummage. He felt low, but didn't say anything as Carl heaved the rock at the door. The glass spider webbed but held strong until Carl threw it again. The shattering glass caused him to wince and look quickly around again.

John hesitated, but Carl reached through the broken door and threw the lock. A small bell tinkled as Carl shoved the door open. Glass crunched beneath their boots as they moved cautiously into the store. John held his breath as he waited for someone to jump out and hit the emergency button, to shoot at them, or for the police to come screaming into the parking lot with their sirens blaring. Instead everything remained silent, and eerily still.

Carl grabbed a box of trash bags from the floor and tossed another box to John. "Grab what you can," Carl told him.

John nodded as he opened the box, grabbed a bag, and began to pick through the rubble. He shoved whatever food he could into it, as well as some soap, shampoo, and razors. When the bag was full, he started on filling another one, while Carl gathered automotive supplies.

He was near the back of the store when he spotted the full pots of coffee sitting on a counter. A strangled cry of joy escaped him as he dropped the bags and hurried toward the pots. He sorted through the rubble in search of the knocked over stand of coffee cups. Finally he found two cups that weren't completely ruined and eagerly returned to the brimming pots. His eyes closed as he lifted the cup to his nose and savored the delicious aroma wafting from it.

The store clerk must have already been at work, setting up for the day, when the chaos erupted. He imagined they had probably fled swiftly from the store in favor of their home and family over their job. He was halfway through his first cold sip when he remembered the car outside. "Crap," he muttered.

He hurried back to the front of the store where he found Carl stuffing another trash bag with cigarettes. John froze as he spotted the gun sitting on top of the counter next to Carl. "Where did you find that?" he demanded.

Carl glanced briefly around before his eyes fell onto the gun. "Under the counter, behind some cartons of cigarettes."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Keep it," Carl replied as if it were the most normal everyday occurrence in the world.

"Do you know how to use one of those?"

"Yeah."

"How?" John asked incredulously.

Carl shoved the last of the Marlboro's into the bag and came around the counter. Tying the top, he tossed it toward the two other bags already piled by the broken door. "I joined the police academy in my twenties. Wasn't really my thing though."

John was taken aback by the answer. It seemed so out of character with the man standing across from him now, unapologetically robbing a gas station. "Why not?"

Carl shrugged. "I was always more of a lawbreaker, you know?"

"So I've noticed. Why'd you join then?"

"My mom was pressuring me to do something with my life at the time. I wanted to make her happy, but I didn't want to go to college. I'd seen *Police Academy*, and I thought I could be Mahoney. My instructors didn't agree. I lost my temper one day and walked out. Thankfully, it was after I learned how to use a weapon."

"I could never picture you as a cop."

Carl grinned. "I looked *good* in that uniform."

John laughed. "Yeah, right."

"Did you get the food?"

John suddenly remembered why he had returned to the front of the store in the first place. "I think the clerk is still here somewhere."

Carl's smile vanished instantly. He grabbed the gun off the counter, holding it before him with both hands, as his eyes became deadly serious. John never would have imagined this side of Carl existed, he was frightfully callous, and the gun looked surprisingly natural in his grasp. "What makes you say that?" he demanded.

It took John a minute to find words again. "The coffee was already made, the car's still outside."

Carl nudged aside the debris littering the floor as he moved carefully through the toppled shelves and ruined goods. "You didn't see anyone?" he inquired.

"No," John told him.

Carl cautiously opened the door to the coolers and peered inside. He popped his head back out to look at John. "Did you see any flashlights out there?"

"Yeah." John hurried back through the goods, cringing at every crack and snap his passing created. He pawed through one of the bags he had filled, searching for the flashlight and batteries he had tossed inside. He dug out two flashlights, filled them with batteries, and clicked them on to make sure they worked. Carl was standing half in and half out of the cooler when he returned. He took one of the lights from John and held it up to illuminate the cooler. Most of the drinks had broken, their contents had leaked out to create a large puddle on the concrete floor.

Carl crept through the cooler, moving the beam around as he searched over the boxes stacked inside. Though the power had probably been out for a good two hours, John could still see his breath as they moved. Carl rounded a corner and stopped abruptly when an outstretched hand was illuminated by the glow of his light. John took a small step back from the discovery. One of the large fluorescent fixtures had fallen on top of the clerk; the only thing visible was her hand and legs. The clerk's blood had seeped out to mix with the liquid surrounding them, creating a pink puddle that made John's stomach turn.

Carl moved with much more speed and assurance than when they'd first entered the cooler. Stepping around the fixture, he knelt at the clerk's side and pressed his fingers to the clerk's neck. He shook his head as he met John's inquisitive gaze. "She's dead."

John's skin crawled. He hoped her death had been instant, and she hadn't been pinned there for hours praying someone would come to save her before she finally bled to death. Carl led the way back out of the cooler; the lines around his mouth and eyes were more pronounced as he lifted his hat and wiped his brow.

"Can you gather the rest of the stuff?" Carl inquired. "I'm going to siphon whatever gas is in the car."

It was such a morbid thing to do, but John nodded his agreement. John felt shaky as he made his way around the rest of the store, filling trash bags full of some of the crappiest food he'd ever eaten in his life. His mom would kill him if she ever saw the amount of candy and chips he shoved into the bag. He just hoped she would have the chance to do so.

He grabbed a bag of Twizzlers and tucked them into the waist of his jeans "You almost ready?" John jumped and let out a small squeak as he spun toward the door. Carl was standing there, his hands resting on either side of the frame as he fought against the smile tugging at his mouth. "Sorry."

John glowered at him as he tried to steady his frayed nerves. "Yeah, I'm ready."

He twisted the last knot and tossed the bag to Carl. They hauled their load out to the back of the truck. Carl already had the doors open and some bags inside with a freshly refilled gas can. Thankfully they had been on their first lawn when the quake occurred so there was no grass inside, though the bed was still stained green from the previous loads it had held. John tossed the bags up to Carl who hauled them to the front of the truck and covered them with a tarp. They carried out as many beverages as they could salvage and secured the breakable ones to the sides with bungee cords.

"I'm glad I listened to you about keeping this truck," John said.

"Let's just hope we don't have to abandon it at some point."

John closed the large doors and slid the lock into place. "We just robbed a gas station."

"Probably won't be the last time."

John remained immobile as he tried to let that realization sink in. He thought it might be a long time before he fully grasped the strange new world they lived in.

Carl slid behind the wheel and started the truck. John pulled the Twizzlers from his pants, tore the package open and offered Carl some as they pulled back onto the road. For a second, as Carl dug into the bag, John could almost convince himself it was an ordinary day. They were simply in between yards on their schedule, enjoying a bag of candy together. He wondered if he'd ever do anything normal like that again or if this had become their new normal.

Carl carefully maneuvered the truck around a large hollow in the road. John grabbed the handle as they bumped over a pitted field. On the other side of the field he spotted some people walking, but for the most part this area remained relatively calm.

He bit into another Twizzler. His jaw began to ache, but there was something soothing about the repetitive, familiar motion of chewing. Carl took another handful as he swerved back onto the road. "Do you think the army is going to come anytime soon?" John asked.

"I don't know." Carl glanced at the radio, his hands twisted on the steering wheel. "Do you want to try it again?"

"Not even a little bit."

He leaned forward and clicked the radio on anyway. This time there wasn't any squealing, or strange noises. Nothing filled the airwaves as he twisted through the stations before turning the radio back off. He tossed the Twizzlers aside, his appetite effectively squashed by the silence. Carl lit another cigarette; John had never seen him smoke this much in a week, never mind a few hours of a single day.

Carl leaned forward and grabbed something off the dashboard. John didn't see what

it was until Carl tossed it to him. "I grabbed it from the gas station. See if you can figure out where we are."

"I suck at reading maps," John muttered.

"I know." John scowled at him as he unfolded the map before him. It was bad enough trying to figure out The Cape, an area he knew well, but trying to sort out this convoluted mess was enough to make his head throb. He didn't know where to start. "The last road we passed was Jones. Can you see that anywhere on there?"

John searched the map key for the road. "Jones Road or Jones Ave?"

"Road."

John traced over the lines before finding the right Jones. "Got it."

"Can you figure out the best way to get to Bridgewater from here?"

John twisted the map in his hands, turning it first one way and then the other. Carl sighed heavily; he rolled his eyes as he pulled the truck to the side of the road. "You really should learn how to do this, especially now."

Carl tugged the map from his hands and laid it out between them. "Hold it this way, and line the roads up." Carl had tried to teach him this before, when they'd been trying to find a new home on their mowing route, but John had never paid much attention. What was the point of learning how to use a map when he could get directions from a GPS at the drop of a hat? He now had the answer to that question, and for the first time he actually paid attention as Carl showed him how to read the map. "Think you can handle it?"

"Yeah."

Carl handed the map back to him. "Then let's find your parents."

He shifted the truck into drive and pulled back onto the road. They drove slowly, with John navigating his way through some more back roads. His attention was focused on the map, so he wasn't expecting it when Carl forcefully slammed on the brakes with a loud squeal of tires. John smashed awkwardly off the dashboard, his head glancing painfully against the windshield. The map crumpled against his chest as he swore viciously and profusely. His shoulder ached; his hand was numb as he fumbled to push himself away from the dashboard.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he snarled.

Carl sat stiffly, his mouth ajar and his face pale beneath his baseball cap as he nodded to the front of the truck. Standing mere feet in front of them was a young girl, with her hands thrown up in front of her face, as if that would miraculously stop the truck from running her over. She gradually lowered her arms and stared at them like they were a velociraptor going to eat her for lunch. Dirt, and what appeared to be soot, streaked her face and coated her clothes. Her long, coffee colored hair was matted to her oval face.

"She just jumped in front of the truck," Carl's voice was shaky and strained. "I didn't see her. I almost hit her."

The girl ran around to John's side of the truck; she pounded on the window as John continued to stare at her like *she* was the extinct dinosaur. "You have to help me." Deep brown eyes pleaded with him as she slapped on the glass. "Please. Help me."

"Open the door," Carl commanded.

"I thought we weren't trusting people," John retorted.

"She's a child for crying out loud. Open the door."

John fumbled with the lock; the girl stepped back enough for him to open the door,

and then plunged into the truck before he had time to move over. She practically sat in his lap as she slammed the door shut, slapped the lock back into place, and spun toward Carl. "Drive!" she ordered briskly.

John squiggled out from underneath her, scowling as he was pushed into the middle of the truck. He couldn't help but glare at her, but she chose to ignore him as she braced her hand on the dashboard. "Faster! It's coming!" she urged.

"What's coming?" John demanded, trying to scavenge the crumpled map from underneath the two of them.

"Fire," she breathed. "I think it's still right behind me."

"You think? Get off our map!" he snapped in frustration.

The girl's eyes widened, guilt tugged at him as she recoiled slightly. "John," Carl hissed.

"Sorry," he muttered as he was finally able to salvage the map. It was far more wrinkled, and a corner had been lost, but overall it was still in fairly good condition as he attempted to smooth it out.

Then he heard it. A loud pop that swung his head toward the woods the girl had plunged out of. In the distance, trees bent over, shattered, and toppled into the woods. Carl's foot eased on the gas as he turned to survey the spreading destruction. The acrid scent of smoke filled the air seconds before flames leapt high into the air.

The conflagration was massive; it was relentless, and deadly. And it was heading straight for them.

CHAPTER 14

*Mary Ellen
Newport, RI.*

Mary Ellen held the sack of food over her head as she followed carefully behind Al. Her arms ached from the weight of it, but she didn't dare lower it, or the water would ruin their food. Al poked at the ground with the long stick he had fished out of the water, before taking every step forward. The water was down to her knees now, but it was impossible to see the roadway below, the water was too murky from the sand and debris the tsunami has kicked up. Sweat trickled down her back, hair tickled her neck and face, but she couldn't push it away.

Al stopped as the stick dropped away, sinking to almost his hand within the water. Mary Ellen stood silently behind him, her heart hammering as he continued to prod the ground carefully. He began to move sideways, searching for solid ground again, as he poked to the left of him.

Mary Ellen glanced over her shoulder to the school they had left behind. The others were still gathered on the roof, watching as she and Al moved steadily away from the safety the roof had represented. They had chosen to stay behind, opting to wait for the water to recede further before taking the risk of trying to cross through it. She began to rethink their decision to leave.

Frustration filled her as they moved a hundred feet at a parallel angle before Al finally found solid ground again. Mary Ellen kept her gaze focused on Al's back; she couldn't bring herself to look at what was floating in the water with them. She'd seen enough of them already, and she was terrified one of the bodies they might run across would be Rita's. She wasn't entirely sure she could handle that on top of everything else right now.

"I think we're almost out of it," Al muttered. Mary Ellen could only manage a small nod, one he had to turn to see. "You ok?"

No, she wasn't ok. She was sweaty, filthy, terrified, aching, beaten, and sore. She was also alive. It was a lot more than a lot of people could say right now.

"Yeah, I'm good," she assured him.

He continued to poke ahead of him as they made their way around the corner of a building. She glanced back, catching a glimpse of the three people on the school building as they moved across the rooftop in order to keep her and Al in sight. They wouldn't be able to see them for much longer. Al stopped in front of her as they arrived at a section of road completely blocked by debris and cars.

Sighing softly, he tossed the stick onto the roof and climbed the hood of a busted and beaten Nissan. Uneasiness filled her as she watched him; he wasn't moving as fast as he had been this morning. Holding out his hand, he helped her climb onto the hood of the car. They stood, trying to catch their breath, enjoying being out of the water as they surveyed the damage surrounding them.

It took her a minute to realize the temperature had dropped ten degrees since they'd exited the water.

"It's the water making it so hot," she whispered, her gaze sliding over the substantial storm surge that had buried half the town. There was more than just garbage, debris, and

bodies floating amongst the water. Dead fish were also beginning to pop rapidly up; their lifeless and bulging eyes caused her stomach to turn. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know, but it's not good."

"It feels twenty degrees warmer than it should."

"That it does."

He climbed over the side and slipped back into the awful stream. The last thing she felt like doing was crawling back into that germ-infested mess, but she couldn't sit on the hood of the car forever, not if she was going to find Rochelle. Mary Ellen followed closely behind him, hating the feel of the water as it enveloped her once more within its heat. Her heart hammered. She had a brief vision of every lobster she had ever seen tossed into the pot. She couldn't shake the lingering certainty she was about to become one.

As they moved, she became aware of more eyes on them. People gathered to watch them silently from roofs and the doorways of buildings as they passed cautiously by. Sweat trickled down her face and back faster, she wasn't entirely sure if it was from the heat anymore or those eyes. Ahead of them she spotted only three other people in the road, carefully picking their way through the debris and water too.

"It's so lonely."

She hadn't realized she had spoken aloud until Al stopped to look at her. His gaze darted over the buildings before he turned toward where the sun had finally broken completely free. "It is."

The water began to lessen; she sloshed through what was becoming more of a puddle than a stream. A glance over her shoulder revealed that the school was no longer visible. She said a quick prayer for the continued safety of those still on it and turned away. There was no looking back anymore, there was only forward from here on out.

Her feet squished in her shoes, water splattered off of them like a dog shaking its wet coat as she stepped onto blessedly solid, dry ground again. A breath escaped her on a loud rush of relief.

"We have to find a car," Al said as he scanned the broken and mottled street. There were cars parked along it, but most of them appeared to be damaged by water, falling debris, or accidents.

"What about trying to find emergency help?"

"I don't think they're going to be of much use to us right now. We're going to require a car to get to your daughter." The thought of Rochelle brought tears to her eyes. She couldn't speak around the lump forming in her throat. Al studied her sympathetically before squeezing her arm gently. "We'll find her."

"I know." They had to find her, because if they didn't find Rochelle, then Mary Ellen had no idea what she was struggling to survive for.

"Come on."

They trudged down the road until they arrived at a section of town that didn't seem as badly damaged as the areas they had just left behind. Her feet were rubbed raw and sore from her wet sneakers, but she continued stalwartly onward. She would love to find a car just so they could sit; just so she could give her brutalized feet and legs a blessed reprieve.

Al began pulling on door handles, most vehicles were locked, but a few opened to his incessant prodding. None of the unlocked ones still had keys inside. "People are so

untrusting," he muttered as he closed the door on a Dodge.

Mary Ellen raised an eyebrow at him and grinned. "How silly of them."

"It is."

She pulled on the door of a Honda and was rewarded with the muted beeping that alerted the driver they'd left their keys behind. For a second she simply stood there, startled by the sound, and uncertain what had just happened as the beeping continued onward. "Al!" she called out.

He glanced up from where he was standing by a Jeep. He hurried back to her, a subtle limp in his step now. "Finally," he breathed in relief. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Yes."

"You drive, then."

He hobbled around to the other side and threw the door open. His face scrunched in displeasure at the garbage strewn on the front seat and floor. Leaning in, he swept it onto the floor. The car reeked of fast food and sweat; she thought it most likely belonged to a teenage boy, a tall boy if the adjustment of the seat was any indication. It was almost in the backseat of the cramped and dirty car. She searched for the controls on the side of the seat and adjusted it quickly for herself. Revulsion filled her as her fingers came back with a squished fry stuck to them.

"Lovely," Al muttered.

That wasn't exactly what she was thinking, but she shook the fry off and started the car. "There's not much gas."

"Of course not." He sighed heavily and shook his head. "We'll just have to worry about that when it becomes a necessity. Until then, let's just get out of this town."

"Sounds like an amazing plan."

She clicked her seatbelt into place and pulled onto the road. It was tedious trying to navigate through the destruction that had been wreaked in such a short time. Mary Ellen couldn't stop herself from gaping at the town she knew so well, but scarcely recognized anymore. She didn't realize she was crying until Al handed her a napkin from the glove box.

She wiped the tears away and tossed the napkin into the trashcan of the backseat. Al remained silent as she navigated to the highway. There were a fair amount of people on the highway, cars lined the road, most were still moving; some weren't. People were clustered in groups by the broken vehicles. It reminded her of every horrible image she'd ever seen of war torn and broken countries, except these images were from her country, her own town.

"It's Hell," she muttered.

"If you believe in such things."

"Seeing is believing."

"True. How far do you think the gas will get us?"

Mary Ellen studied the gas gauge. "We'll get to Mass on it; I'm not sure how far we'll get after that."

Al turned back to the window; his hands were fisted on his knees as he studied the road. She fell into line with a single row of cars making their way down the tricky to navigate roadway. The simple act of driving, of doing something normal, felt good. She felt as if she was actually accomplishing something for the first time since this had all

started.

The Welcome to Massachusetts sign was one of the best things she'd seen in a long time. Unfortunately, the low gas indicator started blinking only a mile or two past the sign.

"We're not going to make it much further," she told Al. He glanced over her shoulder and nodded as he began to rub at his knee. "Are you ok?"

He followed her pointed gaze to his knee. "It's seventy-two also," he informed her. "And I was pretty active in my younger days."

"You're pretty active now."

He smiled at her, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I doubt we'll be able to get gas out of the stations. We'll have to pull over, maybe find a car to siphon, or something else helpful to us."

Mary Ellen took the next exit and drove down through the broken streets of some town she didn't know. There were people here, gathered next to the roadside as they converged together in order to seek help or shelter. "Just keep going," Al instructed.

She wasn't sure how long they were going to be able to keep driving. Though she knew it wasn't true, the indicator seemed to be blinking more incessantly at her. "Pull in here," Al told her as they drove by the parking lot of a grocery store.

Mary Ellen drove leisurely past the cars scattered through the lot. She assumed most of them were employee vehicles. She slid the car in between two small sedans just as it began to buck from lack of gas. It died as she put it into park. "At least we made it this far."

"Yeah," Al agreed as he thrust open the passenger side door and climbed out. They separated to search rapidly through the cars in the lot. In the bed of a pickup truck that appeared to belong to a carpenter, she found a full can of gas. She didn't know where the owner of the truck was, and half expected him to come out and start yelling at her, but the lot remained blessedly quiet.

"Al! Here!" she called as she labored out of the back of the truck with her find. It was heavier than she had expected, and required both her hands, but she managed to carry it back over to the Honda where Al joined her. He fiddled with the cap, unscrewing it to pull the nozzle out from inside the can. Hoisting it up, he began to pour it into the gas tank.

"Why don't you see if you can find some sort of tubing in the truck?" Al inquired.

Mary Ellen hurried back to the blue work truck. She tore it apart, searching behind the seats and in the tool boxes, but she found nothing of use amongst the assortment of tools. Frustration filled her as she slapped the truck seat back into place. At least they would have enough gas to get them a little bit further in their journey.

She hurried back to Al, eager to get out of this town. Al shoved the small tube back into the gas can and closed it. "I couldn't find anything."

He nodded as he opened the trunk and stashed the can inside. "Let's get out of here."

It took a few tries, and a lot of chugging, but the engine finally fired to life again. Mary Ellen shifted into drive and pulled out of the parking spot. Al turned to the backseat and began to hunt for something; Mary Ellen wasn't at all surprised when he turned back around with a handgun. He rested it on his thigh as he warily studied the streets they drove through.

She drove back toward the highway, trying to avoid the obstacles tossed into their

way by the tremors that had rocked the area. The entrance ramp to the highway was blocked by an overturned bread truck; she had to drive onto the grass median in order to get around it.

"Hold on a second." She barely had time to stop the car before Al was leaping out. Her stomach churned as she watched him circle around the truck. She didn't know what he was going to do until he began to tug on the backdoors of the vehicle. The right door had been broken by the crash and didn't open, but fell off the back of the truck. Al stared at it before shaking his head and disappearing into the back.

He emerged a minute later with loaves of bread, muffins, and a box of cookies tucked under his arm. Mary Ellen shut the car down and hopped out. "Stay with the car," he told her as he tossed the newfound supplies into the backseat. "I'll only be a minute more."

Mary Ellen rested her arms on top of the door, and on the dirty roof of the dingy yellow car. She sensed the presence of someone new, someone who wasn't supposed to be there with them, before she saw him. Turning, she swallowed heavily as she spotted a rugged looking man, perhaps in his late thirties, standing about ten feet away from her. His face was covered with graying scruff; his overly large eyes seemed wilder than they should have been, even after the events of the day.

"Ma'am," he greeted and briefly touched the brim of his baseball cap.

There was nothing overtly wrong with the man; he seemed harmless enough as he offered a small smile, but she couldn't shake the concern clawing its way up her throat. Perhaps it was Al's insistence no one was to be trusted, or her years of poor treatment at Larry's hands, but she lowered her arms from the car as she prepared to jump back inside. She wasn't a good judge of character, hence, her crappy marriage, but right now a part of her was screaming to get away. To get *far* away from this man.

"Ma'am, I need a ride."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," she informed him.

He moved a couple of steps closer to her. "Ma'am, it's only a short ride to Rhode Island."

"We're staying in Mass."

He paused, staring at her. "Like I said, it's only a short trip."

Mary Ellen slid back into the car and pulled the door shut behind her. Rolling the window up, she locked the doors as the man stepped next to the car.

"Hey! Come on!" His hands slapped against the glass of the driver's side window. She fumbled with the key in the ignition. She didn't know where Al was, but she was going to have the car ready for him when he re-emerged from the bread truck.

She had just gotten the car started when two loud shots rent the air. A scream escaped her; she threw her hands up as she instinctively dove downward. Then she realized who had fired the shots, and she lurched back upright. Al had reappeared from the bread truck; he was just lowering his arm from the two shots he had fired into the air. Mary Ellen shifted the car into reverse as the stranger took a couple of steps back, his hands raised as Al leveled the gun at his chest. Mary Ellen pulled up beside Al and leaned over to open the door for him.

Al's arm didn't waver, he kept the gun leveled on the man's chest as he tossed a couple bags of rolls into the backseat and slid into the car. She was still shaking as he closed the door and locked it. She didn't know where her unassuming, well-mannered

neighbor had gone, but she was exceptionally grateful for the badass who had taken his place as he locked the passenger door.

"Let's hope we don't have to stop again for a while," he muttered.

Mary Ellen managed a small nod as she glanced at the man who had been harassing her. His hands were still in the air as she drove past him. They had gotten lucky, this time. There was no guarantee they would be so lucky again in the future.

CHAPTER 15

Riley

Foxboro, Mass.

They stayed within the tree line moving as fast as they could along the edge of the woods. Riley's gaze kept going back to the homes, they were dark and foreboding, and she was terrified by who might be lurking within them. She expected someone to start shooting at them any minute. She yearned to move deeper into the forest, but was unwilling to accidentally stumble across whatever new hazard might now be lurking within the woods.

The unknown hazards within the homes, and the unknown dangers of the earth were scary, but most of her attention had become focused on the sky. She kept expecting a seven-forty-seven to drop on her head at any second. She tried not to think about it, but couldn't fully tear her thoughts away from the people up there, trapped and helpless. Her heart ached for them. It was bad enough down here, but she was extremely grateful she had her feet planted firmly on the not-so-steady ground.

A thin branch slapped her in the face, drawing her attention harshly back to the forest surrounding her. She rubbed her face, already feeling a small welt forming on her cheek as Xander turned toward her. She frowned at him, somehow certain it had been his fault the branch had caught her. His smile didn't help.

"I bet that tickled." Bobby said as he leaned around her and pushed the branch out of her way.

"Like a toothache," she retorted dryly.

Bobby just continued to grin at her as he pressed his hand briefly into her back to get her moving again. Riley resumed walking, but she certainly didn't have the same speed or stamina she'd had earlier in the day. She was thankful she'd always been an athlete, but her feet throbbed and her legs ached. It wasn't far to the stadium, she usually ran more distance in a day than they had already covered, but the uneven terrain and the stress of the day were wearing heavily on her body.

Carol cursed loudly; Xander caught hold of her arm as she tripped over a tree root and nearly fell. Sweat tickled the back of Riley's neck, slid down her face, and plastered her tank top uncomfortably to her. Annoying strands of hair had straggled free of her ponytail to tease at her skin. Now that the sun was out, the day had grown a good ten degrees hotter, even in the shade of the woods. It was summer, but the heat seemed a little higher than normal, and she found herself struggling to breathe. She longed to sit and catch her breath in the oppressive air, but if she sat she might never get back up.

She looked back to the sky. The planes were up there, circling endlessly like sharks just waiting for the kill. The thought caused her to shudder as she hugged herself. Perhaps Logan or Green airport, hadn't been as badly damaged as the airport in Mansfield seemed to have been. She hoped so anyway.

A loud snapping to her right drew her attention to the hill near them. There was a small group of people moving through the forest about fifty feet away from them and further up the hill. Her hand instinctively went to the gun at her side. How that reaction had become an instinct already she didn't know, but it felt right, and she had a feeling it was only the first of many times it would happen. Bobby and Lee grouped closer to her as

they hurried to join with Xander and Carol.

Xander was studying the people on the hill, his brow furrowed as he frowned up at them. He held the rest of them back for a minute, waiting as the other group moved further into the woods and finally out of view. "Maybe we should go back to the street," Carol suggested.

"To become target practice for some psycho?" Lee inquired disbelievingly.

"We don't know that someone was purposely shooting at us."

"No, but I don't want to take the chance they *were*, either. I don't want to be anywhere near a bunch of panicked people with guns."

Riley completely agreed with him. She wasn't about to be some sick jerk's trophy. She patted the damp hair on top of her head; nope, there still weren't any antlers there so she definitely wasn't going back to the main road. "Route One can't be much farther. We'll stay in the woods until then," Xander compromised. "Come on, let's keep moving."

He tugged on Carol's arm as he pulled her with him. Riley followed silently behind, watching where she stepped, anxious she would fall into a steaming pit of death. She hadn't realized Xander had also fallen back until he grabbed hold of another branch that would have poked her in the eye.

She glanced up at him as he pushed the branch aside and smiled at her. "Thanks," she muttered.

"Gotta watch out for those branches; they tend to be attached to the trees surrounding us."

She scowled at him. She should have known he would spoil anything nice with some wise-ass comment or another. He simply continued to smile that infuriating smile at her as he pushed another branch out of the way. She stopped focusing on her feet and started focusing on her surroundings before she lost an eye.

"Look," Lee blurted.

They all froze, Riley's head tilted back as she followed Lee's arm to the sky. She half expected to see a plane spiraling toward them. Instead, she was rewarded with the long green streak of another flare. Her shoulders slumped as she was overwhelmed by the sudden urge to simply cry and to never stop crying. She blinked back tears as the green flare hovered for a brief period of time before spiraling away into nothingness.

"That's a good sign," Xander murmured.

"Yes," she agreed, unable to look at him as she fought against the tears threatening to spill.

He touched her arm soothingly before turning away. She stared at the back of his head, uncertain of this kindness from him. She remembered him as the boy who had tormented her, pulled her hair, called her Dumbo, and hid her toys. Oh, there had been moments over the years when he'd been kind to her. Moments when she'd found him comforting and sweet, and had *almost* liked him, but they'd been overshadowed by his relentless teasing. She was baffled by this side of him, and she didn't know how to combine the frustrating boy he'd been with the self-assured man who was now leading them through the woods.

She was surprised to find Carol watching her with an amused look. Riley didn't understand the heat washing through her cheeks, as Carol wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. She rolled her eyes at her friend and started walking beside Bobby again.

It was unnaturally still, but then she hadn't seen any birds since they had taken their

downward plunge, and she hadn't seen any animals since they'd all seemed to herd into one unknown location. She'd never realized how much she would miss the sound and sights of squirrels, birds, and other active forest creatures until now.

"You know Xander has a crush on you, right?"

Riley's brow furrowed as she lifted her head. She'd been so focused on trying not to get slapped in the face, and wondering about the forest creatures, that she hadn't realized Carol had fallen back to walk with her. "Huh?"

Carol grinned at her as she nodded toward her brother. "Xander. Crush. You."

Riley frowned at her; she glanced at where Xander and Lee were walking ahead of them. Xander was still watching the hill, searching for any sign of the people who had been there before. Lee was focused on the homes just beyond the tree line. "No, he doesn't," Riley retorted.

Bobby snorted as Carol laughed. "Yeah, he *does*," Carol insisted.

Riley continued to study Xander, confused by Carol's statement. "I don't think so, Carol."

"I do," she insisted.

"Since when?" Riley demanded.

"Since he realized you were a girl, and he was a boy," Bobby muttered. "Since the first time he pulled your pigtail on the playground. Since *any* of us can remember."

Riley's frown deepened as she stared at him. That simply couldn't be possible; she would have noticed something like that. Wouldn't she? But then again, probably not. She never really noticed anything like that, and it was always Carol who informed her when a boy liked her. Riley thought of the hundreds of sleepovers they'd had together over the years. All the late night talks they'd had about which boy they liked, their first kisses and boyfriends, the first time either of them had rounded second, and what they expected of their futures. In all of those talks, in all the idle gossip, Xander's name had never once come up as a romantic interest. Why wouldn't Carol have told her about this new development?

"You think she's right?" she asked Bobby.

"Oh, she is definitely, one hundred percent, right," Bobby said emphatically.

"But all he's ever done is torment me."

"No one ever said he was Casanova," Bobby replied with a casual shrug as he shoved his hands in his pockets. "That was his sad attempt at flirting."

"Well, he sucks at it," she grumbled.

Bobby laughed as he nodded. "Yes, he does."

Riley was silent as she pondered their words and studied Xander curiously. "Do you know how many times he called me Dumbo?"

"Come on, Ri. With those ears it was only a matter of time before *someone* slapped you with that nickname."

"Jerk," she mumbled as he grinned at her.

"It's true," Bobby insisted. "He just did it first."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded of her friend.

Carol shrugged; she frowned as she studied her brother. "Honestly, I thought he'd finally stop being an idiot by now, and actually tell you how he felt. I mean we've all been waiting for him to do so for years."

Riley's eyes widened, she'd thought Bobby had only been kidding before. "Years?"

Everyone else has known for *years*?"

"He's not very subtle you know. And that *is* what I meant when I said the first time he pulled your pigtails," Bobby informed her.

"Apparently he was more subtle than you realized," Riley muttered shooting him a disgruntled look. "But it really doesn't matter; I think there's a lot more to be concerned about right now."

Carol was silent, and then she grabbed hold of Riley's arm and pulled her to a stop. "It *does* matter now, more than ever. It's why I told you, instead of continuing to wait for my boneheaded brother to do it. The world is falling apart around us; don't you think living for the moment is a lot more important than old insults and his childish attempts at trying to convey his feelings to you?"

Carol's words were so fervent they tugged at her heart. She'd never seen her friend look so intense about something.

"Isn't he dating that Jenny girl?" she managed to croak out. Riley hadn't particularly liked the blond Xander had brought home from school one weekend last fall. Jenny had been obnoxious, and at one point Riley had been certain Carol herself was going to throttle the girl. Jenny also hadn't been able to handle her liquor. She'd gotten so drunk she decided to streak across the football field. To say Carol hadn't approved of her brother's choice was an understatement, and she'd made it one hundred percent clear afterward.

"That girl," Carol muttered as she rolled her eyes, and Bobby laughed at the memory. "No, thankfully he dumped her."

"I wouldn't have exactly called it dating anyway," Bobby snorted.

Carol elbowed him in the ribs as she scrunched her nose. "Yuck."

Riley silently agreed. "So you would actually *approve* of me dating your brother?"

Carol shrugged as she managed a wan smile. "I'd kick his ass if he messed it up, but yeah, if you thought you might like him too? I wouldn't mind. We could be sister-in-laws!"

"Way to rush things," Riley muttered as Bobby chuckled.

"Do you think you might like him?" Carol pressed.

Before this day, she would have shuddered in revulsion at the mere thought of having to spend an hour alone with Xander, never mind actually spending an hour with him in any kind of romantic way. But now, studying him as he continued ahead of her, she found she didn't dislike him quite as much as she used to. Though she didn't know exactly how, or what, she did feel for him. "I don't know," she admitted.

Carol's eyes sparkled as she grinned brightly. "I suppose that's something. At least it's not the flat out 'No' you would've given me yesterday. I'm not entirely sure there will still be a thing like dating after this day either though."

"That might be the one bonus to all of this," Bobby said. "Save me some money, and some awkward groping attempts at the movies."

"Bobby!" Carol and Riley both hissed as he grinned at them.

"It's true. Dating sucks, and it's *way* overrated."

"Well, I'm glad the pending apocalypse eased your troubles," Carol informed him.

"Yeah, it definitely helped," he agreed as he draped his arms around both their shoulders and started pulling them with him. Xander glanced back at them, frowning as he spotted Bobby. Riley could feel the laughter bubbling through Bobby's chest. "I do so

love to annoy him."

"So do I," Riley admitted.

She couldn't help but study Xander differently though as he continued to stare relentlessly at Bobby's arm. He *was* handsome, with those warm eyes and kissable mouth, but his obnoxious tendencies had overshadowed that years ago. But a crush on *her*? It seemed such an odd thing to realize, and though Bobby and Carol both agreed, she just wasn't sure it was true. Xander had tended to go for the cheerleader types, which she most certainly was not. He'd also done nothing but poke and prod at her for as long as she could remember.

Yeah, he really sucked at flirting, she decided firmly.

His eyes lingered on Bobby's arm before he turned away. "I think I just pissed him off though," Bobby muttered.

Riley shrugged. "You're my friend, Bobby."

"Yeah, and he's my friend too." He dropped his arm from around her shoulders.

She didn't like this whole new dynamic they had thrown into her life, and though she understood Carol's reasoning for it, she would have preferred if her friend had just stayed silent. There was enough going on right now without having to worry about this strange new undercurrent too.

Lee had climbed to the top of a small hill. He stared over the side of it before turning to wave frantically at them. "Hey, come check this out! I think we've got a problem."

Riley forgot about everything Carol had told her as she hurried up the hill to join him. She took a small step back from the giant gash in the earth below them. The heat of it was like a slap in the face as she took another step back. No wonder the day had seemed so unreasonably hot, especially if there were more of these gorges spread throughout the woods. She glanced up at the sky, a chill streaked down her back as she thought about all the horror stories she'd heard about the results of global warming.

She didn't want to be anywhere near that thing anymore. She wanted out of these woods, out of this town, and she wanted her parents. She felt like a child, but she really and truly, one hundred percent, wanted her mother more than anything right now.

"We're going to have to find a way around it," Lee muttered.

Xander glanced up and down the hill as Riley took another step back. Now that she knew it was there, she could see the steam shifting across the trees in a misty wave shimmering over the wilting leaves.

Lee and Xander turned away from the hill coming back toward her with Bobby and Carol close on their heels. Riley felt, more than saw, what happened next. It was as if a screen of the future descended over her mind, and she knew something bad was going to happen, seconds before it did. Perhaps it was *déjà vu*, perhaps it was just simple primitive instinct, but either way she was already lurching forward when the earth gave way. A scream lodged in her throat; the ground dropped with a heaving crack she felt deep in the marrow of her bones.

Time seemed to slow; the horrified look on Carol's face would forever be seared into Riley's memory. Pain flashed through Carol's gentle hazel eyes and warped her features as a wail of anguish tore from her. Riley's fingers brushed over Carol's; she could feel the smoothness of Carol's skin, the warmth of her flesh, before the hill collapsed, and Carol disappeared. Riley fell to the ground, screaming as she fought to pull herself to the hole, as she struggled to get to her friend.

Arms wrapped around her waist; she was pulled back as more of the hill buckled, and more of the earth was eaten by the steaming canyon. She was dragged and pulled backwards as whoever held her scrambled to escape the erosion spreading toward them. Screams echoed in her head, she thought they might be Carol's screams still, but she dimly began to realize they were hers.

The person who held her collapsed. They fell to the ground together in a gasping, breathless heap of entangled limbs. The erosion of the ground finally eased, stopping fifteen feet away from their feet. She wheezed, choking on the stifling air trying to get into her lungs, sobbing so forcefully her back and stomach ached from the strength of her cries. Hands grasped her waist; she was pulled back against a firm chest as agony entrenched her. She came back to life, fighting against the restraining hold as she thrashed to get back to the spot where her friend had vanished.

"Carol!" she cried. "We have to help her!"

"She's gone Riley, she's gone." Xander's words were tender against her ear; his voice choked with tears as he pressed his dampened cheek to hers. "There's nothing we can do."

His arms tightened around her as she began to cry harder. She hurt; she hurt so bad she wasn't sure she would survive it. Her heart twisted and lurched as misery slithered through her belly, into her ribcage, and around her heart. Carol, her best friend, the person who had been more than a sister to her, the person she loved as much as she loved her own family, the person she'd planned her future around and with, was gone. Like that, in the simple blink of an eye, Riley was never going to see her again. She was never going to laugh with her again, stay up late talking, see Carol's dazzling, beautiful smile, or hear her wonderfully carefree laugh.

A moan of suffering escaped her; Xander rocked her against him as he held her close. His chest, pressed against her back, heaved and shook with the force of his tears. Bobby collapsed on the ground beside them, his mouth opened and closed, forming silent words, his face deathly pale. The right side of his body was raw and red; his jeans were frayed from the heat that had seared them. Lee remained unmoving, frozen as he stared at the place where Carol had stood.

"We're all going to die," Bobby muttered before he turned and vomited on the ground beside him.

CHAPTER 16

Carl

Somewhere in Mass.

He was getting tired of driving like a lunatic. It made his throbbing back ache more and set his teeth on edge. He supposed it was better than being engulfed by a ball of flame and Bar-B-Qued alive, but he still wished they could catch a break. Wished they could have one hour where things weren't completely insane, so he could actually take the time to see where he was going instead of just hoping they didn't end up plummeting over the side of one of the new craters.

John was not helping, his sharp intakes of breath, his slamming of his hand on the dashboard, and his constant chatter to "do this" and "don't do that" were driving Carl insane. It took all he had not to scream at the kid, but he knew it wasn't John's fault. He'd be backseat driving too if the roles were reversed.

"Left!" John shouted as he slapped his hand on the dashboard. "Right!" Another slap. "Fence! Fence! Fence!"

He could *see* the fence; it didn't mean the truck turned on a freaking dime. The right front fender clipped part of a pole as he jerked the wheel. The girl let out a small cry and grabbed the handle over her head. John was thrown up against her; they were pinned to the door as the tires skidded, and the wheels sought traction. Something screamed, or hopefully *someone*, Carl prayed it wasn't the truck making that noise.

It wouldn't be good for any of them if it was.

Carl sprayed some washer fluid and turned the wipers on in an attempt to get rid of the dirt and mud that had pelted the windshield. He leaned forward, peering through the smears now streaking his line of vision. He strained to see the field he had driven across in an attempt to outrun the fast moving inferno. He drove parallel to the fence, searching for an opening, praying for some way through the wooden rails. He'd run it over, if he had to, but he was hoping to avoid it if he could. The last thing they needed to deal with was a hole in the radiator.

"There! There!" the girl cried, pointing toward a metal gate in the middle of all the wood. Relief filled Carl as he swung the truck toward the gate and threw it into park far more abruptly than he normally would have. The girl was lurching out of the truck before he could open his door.

He was still five feet from her, but she already had the chain deftly unwound and the gate thrust open. "Come on! Hurry!" she yelled to him.

"She sure told you," John said laughingly.

Carl scowled at him as he ran back to the truck and drove it eagerly forward. He understood John's reasons for staying out of the truck when he gestured for the girl to get in the middle, smirking slightly when she did. "Really? It's an issue *now*?" Carl demanded of him.

John shrugged his shoulders and hopped into the truck. "If I'm going to die, I'm not going to be sitting bitch when it happens."

"Excuse me?" the girl demanded; her face twisted into an expression that made Carl think she might haul off and punch John.

John colored as he began to sputter. "Not you, I wasn't calling *you* that! It's what we

call the middle seat. No one, ah... we just don't like sitting there. It's for the third person on a crew."

The girl's eyes narrowed; she didn't look at all appeased by John's answer as she folded her arms over her chest and glared at him. "He really didn't mean any offense," Carl assured her. He wasn't looking to help John out. It amused him to watch John squirm, but she was young, she didn't know them, and the last thing Carl wanted was for her to be frightened of *them*. There was enough to fear out there right now. "It's just a term we use to annoy the newbies on a crew when we make them sit in the middle."

"I see."

Though she appeared a little mollified, she was still eyeing John as if she were tempted to shove him out of the truck.

Carl glanced in the mirror as he drove through the open field. The flames were still back there, still eating up the earth, but they had gained some distance between them and the hungry inferno. "Are those... horses?" John wondered.

Carl turned to see where he was looking. Nausea twisted through his belly, unease wrapped through his chest as he stared at the mound gathered in the far corner of the field. It was difficult to tell exactly what they were, and if it hadn't been for the shoes he saw glistening on some, he might have assumed the already bloating carcasses were cattle.

"It looks like they herded themselves together to... to die," Carl muttered.

The girl was crying silently as she took in the remains. It seemed impossible to Carl, and if he wasn't looking at it, he never would have believed it. The horses had piled one on top of the other in some kind of twisted King of the Mountain game. He'd seen a lot of crap today, a lot more than he'd ever thought he'd see in his lifetime, but that pile was probably the most unnerving thing he'd ever seen.

He didn't understand why they would just stack on top of each other like that. The birds he'd assumed had been affected by the quakes and their inner homing system had gotten messed up. But this? Well, this he didn't even pretend to have an explanation for.

His breath rushed out of him. He reached for a cigarette with trembling fingers but glanced at the girl sitting beside him. She was staring out the window, oblivious to him, but still he took the butt and tossed it back into the pack. He normally didn't care about smoking in front of other people, but he'd never liked to smoke around children.

Carl studied the pile of dead animals. There was no way a human would ever have the strength to do that, and he didn't think they would have taken the time to do it with some sort of machine. If this farm even *had* the equipment to lift dead horses and stack them high. He was sure some farms did, but it seemed improbable this one did, and it seemed as if it would easily be a daylong project to accomplish.

He didn't believe these animals had died before today and been placed there over time, either. No, he knew this was the result of whatever was going on, and these poor creatures had done this to themselves. Every hair on his body stood on end. The cold chill creeping over his spine reminded him of when he'd been a child, afraid of the dark and terrified to put his feet down because the monster living under his bed would grab his ankle and pull him into the dark underworld he *knew* existed just beneath the dust cover of his Star Wars sheets.

He didn't know much about horses, but from what he did know, they didn't have the homing instincts of a bird, instincts that would be messed up by some event or another.

He could only think of one thing that could have driven the horses to this act.

Fear.

The landscape was quiet now, still in the ever-rising sun. But something around there had been so frightening it drove those animals to trample each other in their attempt to escape it. Perhaps the approaching fire had driven them mad.

His breath hissed out of him, his heart did a knocking the likes of which he hadn't experienced since he'd consumed too many drugs, cigarettes, and booze and stayed up for three days straight in his early twenties. He'd thought he was going to die then and hadn't touched drugs or booze since. Though he still enjoyed a cold beer and smoked a pack a day, but everyone had their bad habits, and he enjoyed his.

Secretly, he realized, he'd been hoping and waiting to find someplace safe, some kind of refuge to rest, regroup and formulate a plan. A part of him had been certain if they just got away from the ocean, if they just made it to John's parents, if they just survived to find the place where everyone was taking shelter, they would be safe. He realized now he was completely wrong.

Sure, maybe they'd find John's parents, and maybe there was a big shelter somewhere, but they would never be safe. He would never again know the peace he had at seven this morning, when he'd pushed the button on the beat up time clock to start the day. He could clearly recall the loud clank the thing made; the quips traded that it may be the only thing in the shop older than Carl. He'd taken the jests with good humor, but secretly he'd kept silent about the fact the clock was actually five years younger than him.

He would miss that clock; he would miss the mornings of peaceful oblivion.

It took all he had to turn away from the piled remains and focus on the field again. He'd been so absorbed in his own thoughts, he hadn't realized he'd stopped the truck. No one else seemed to realize it either as they stared mutely at the scene before them. Carl pressed on the gas again and crept across the field; there was still enough distance between them and the fire that he didn't have to take the unnecessary risks of speeding.

The field was relatively intact, but when they broke over top of a small hill, he saw the house was not. It had crumpled in on itself like a house of cards beneath a heavy breath. The chimney remained standing; a tall, lonely, reminder of the lives that had once existed within the red farmhouse. He saw no sign of life as they moved past, and half expected to see a pair of feet sticking out from beneath the rubble.

Seeming to be running along the same track of thought the girl whispered, "We're not in Kansas anymore."

"No, we're not," John agreed.

John jumped out at the next gate, unraveled the chain and thrust it open. He held it open, his eyes dark and distant as he surveyed the changed landscape. "Look at the map and see if you can find where we are," Carl told him when he climbed back in.

John's hand rested on the dash as he stared out the smeared windshield. "Do you think it matters anymore?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because *something* has to."

John remained motionless before he nodded and dug out the crumpled map. The girl helped him hold it against the dashboard as they searched for street signs. The girl was shaking her head as they passed Maple Road. Her dark hair fell about her dirt streaked

features as she pointed at something on the map.

"I think we have it," she announced proudly. "As long as we're in Bridgewater."

"Is it possible we're not?" Carl inquired.

"Yeah," John answered. "There's a Maple Road in Bridgewater, along with a Maple Avenue in Halifax and Raynham."

"I thought every town had an Elm Street, who knew it was Maple?" Carl muttered.

John chuckled, but the girl looked confused. "Nightmare on Elm Street? Freddy Krueger?" John explained.

She continued to stare blankly at him. "Before your time," Carl informed her, feeling even older.

The girl shrugged. "Ok, well, that was Josey Ave so it looks like we're in Bridgewater."

John's shoulders slumped in relief. "She reads a map better than you," Carl informed him.

"I'm ok with that," John replied flippantly as he placed his finger against the map and began to trace the lines.

"Where are you trying to go?" she inquired.

"The prison or the university," John informed her.

"Why?"

"My parents work there."

She nodded. "Prison first then. It's closest."

She leaned away from John, her eyes darted nervously toward the side mirror. The blaze wasn't as close as it had been, but it was there, rising over the horizon in sparking bits of flame and towering plumes of smoke. The lingering scent of smoke still clung to the girl.

"How far were you from the fire?" Carl inquired.

She shrugged. "Not far."

"Where are your parents? Were you at home?"

She shook her head; her gaze became distant as tears shimmered in her eyes. "No, I was at summer camp. At first, all the counselors were telling us we couldn't leave, but then the fire came, and everyone took off in different directions. I was with some friends, but we were separated when the fire spread. I just want to go home."

The longing in her voice tugged at his heart, even John was eyeing her with sympathy now. "We'll get you there," Carl assured her, hoping he could keep his promise.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He turned away from the single tear sliding down her cheek, leaving a clean streak through her dirt-smudged face. "We're going to make the next right," John instructed. "The prison is only another mile or so away."

Relief filled Carl, at least they would find someone, accomplish *something* today. It was also a prison; there would be people of authority there, perhaps people who had a clue as to what was going on. He just hoped none of the inmates had escaped during the chaos. Having to deal with a bunch of convicts would be the perfect cherry topper to this craptastic sundae of a day.

"Another right," John said.

They drove onto a back road he never would have noticed if John hadn't instructed him where to go. "This should be it."

John folded the map up and leaned eagerly forward as he braced his hands on the dashboard. The truck bounced over the bumpy road, large fences topped with barbwire started to come into view. On his left was another building, one that seemed to have been built in the eighteen hundreds and didn't appear to be any sort of prison building. Carl found himself leaning eagerly forward too, his breath held, as they rounded a turn and part of a wall came into view.

And beyond that there was nothing. Carl had never heard a sound like the one that came out of John as he stopped the truck. It was disbelieving, wounded, broken in a way Carl had never heard broken before. Trapped, frightened animals didn't make a sound like the one John issued.

John plunged out of the truck, stumbling, tripping, and nearly falling over as he raced toward the gaping hole in the earth.

"Oh," the girl breathed as she slid silently from the truck. "Is this really it?"

Carl pointed wordlessly toward the sign by the sweeping fence that now encased nothing. *Correctional Facility* was printed with large black letters upon the tilted sign. John stopped ten feet away from the ravine; he fell to his knees, his mouth gaping as tears slid down his cheeks.

Carl left the truck as the girl crept closer to John; she hesitated before resting her hand on his shoulder. Carl stepped beside him, unable to believe the spectacle before him, unable to take it all in. He'd never been there, but he'd seen pictures of the Grand Canyon, and though this did not have the same colors and panoramic beauty, it seemed just as vast and consuming. It stretched for as far as he could see, devastating the landscape for miles upon miles.

It was dark, so dark. Blackness rolled throughout, steam or smoke wafted from inside the pit. If flames had been shooting from it, it would have been exactly like the many pictures of Hell he had seen over the years. For a disconcerting second he was almost convinced it *was* Hell. The heat almost forced him away, but he remained where he was as he rested his hand on John's other shoulder. John's thin frame shook beneath his touch.

Carl gazed into the hole, and though he couldn't see the bottom through the steam, he did see broken bits of brick, wood, fencing, trees, asphalt, and cars that had made up the prison compound. He saw no people; he heard no cries for help. It was hot enough up here; he imagined within the chasm it was a blistering inferno.

Feet away from them, more land crumpled into the hole. Carl took a step back, worried about the stability of the ground they stood upon. "John, we have to go," he said softly. John remained on the ground, seemingly shocked into immobility as he wept. "There's nothing here. We have to go John."

The girl knelt beside him. "I'm sorry for your loss, but we must leave. If we stay here we could die too."

John didn't seem to hear her. Carl hated to do it, but he grabbed hold of John's arm, threw it around his shoulder, and pulled his friend to his feet. John didn't protest as Carl led him back to the truck, and the girl scooted silently into the middle. Carl helped John into the truck and slammed the door. He ran around to the other side, growing increasingly apprehensive the ground would give way at any moment.

John was crying silently as Carl shifted the truck into reverse and drove quickly away from the complex. "We have to find a way around that thing. Can you find

something on the map?" The girl nodded mutely. He realized referring to her as the girl probably wasn't the best way to continue, not anymore. He had a feeling they would be spending a lot of time together from here on out. "We haven't been properly introduced yet, I'm Carl, and that's John."

She took hold of his extended hand, her grip surprisingly firm for someone so young. "Nice to meet you. My name's Rochelle."

CHAPTER 17

Al

Somewhere in Mass.

When Al was seven years old, he'd contracted influenza with his older brother and sister. He could still vividly recall how sick he'd been; the memory of it hadn't faded over the years as those of his other bouts of sickness had. He clearly remembered the fever that had burned through him, the chills that had wracked his slender frame. He'd been certain he was going to die as he'd wasted away in bed, his sheets soaked with sweat, his entire body aching and sore.

His mother had labored over them with cold compresses and ice baths, when they were required. She'd gone numerous days without sleep as she'd fought to save her children. It was the first time he'd ever seen his father, typically aloof and unrelenting, actually scared. As the youngest child, the baby, it had been assumed he probably wouldn't survive. He'd been determined to prove them wrong, but when his brother Phillip had succumbed to the illness, Al had felt his chances dwindling before him. Phillip had always been so strong, an athlete, Al's hero. Al's grief over the loss was the only thing that had punctured his sick haze.

His mother had cried endlessly, but she had forged on, determined to save her remaining two children. And then Nancy was lost. Al had become certain he was next; he would never survive. It was only a matter of time before he was taken too. But somehow, through the perseverance and prayers of his parents, the baby, the one they had been certain was going to die, had miraculously survived.

It had been lonely afterward without Phillip's constant chatter and Nancy's incessant baking. He'd often wondered why he'd been spared, and they'd been taken. They'd been stronger than he was; he was certain they had been better people. Phillip would have accomplished much in life, and Nancy's love and good hearted nature would have made a difference to many people. On the lonely nights that had followed, when Nancy was no longer around to tell him bedtime stories, he'd often wished he hadn't been spared. His mother, weighted by her heartache, was never the same. She had handled it with the silent grace and dignity she had handled every other hardship she'd endured over the years.

He'd been so broken then So frightened of the world and the cruelty it possessed. His childhood and his innocence had been torn from him along with his siblings. Though it had taken him years to come to terms with it, he realized he had survived for a reason, and he'd vowed to carry on Nancy's goodness and Phillip's energy. Years ago he had established a charity, in their names, to raise money for childhood illnesses.

That event had been almost seventy years ago, but he'd never forgotten how terrified of everything he'd been afterwards, how hollow and broken he was as he labored to understand his new role in the world. He hadn't thought he would ever feel like that again, but he felt that way now as he stared helplessly at the carnage surrounding them. Just like back in those days, the world as he had known it had ceased to exist and would never be the same.

He was a terrified seven year old again, and he didn't like it.

Mary Ellen was excruciatingly silent; her hands trembled on the wheel as she stared ahead. The brief and thankfully uneventful encounter with the man had rattled her. He

knew her thoughts were on her daughter. He didn't know the girl well, and in the beginning he had been certain they would find her, but now he couldn't help but wonder how a twelve year old was going to survive when he wasn't certain the two of them would be able to.

He wondered if Mary Ellen would be as strong as his mother had been, or if she would crumple beneath the weight of life as Rita had done. He hoped she was able to pull through this. He liked her. Since Nellie's death his life had largely been walked alone, but he didn't like the idea of taking this journey by himself. It was far too lonely a journey for that.

"Are you going to be ok?" he inquired.

She was silent as her hands twisted. "I wonder if she's still alive. I thought I would know if she had died. I thought I'd feel it somehow, but now I'm not so certain."

"You'd know," he assured her.

She glanced at him. "Would I?"

"Yes."

"Do you think your children are still alive?"

There was no way for him to know right now, and unless things became drastically different sometime soon, he didn't think he would ever have the answer to her question. They were too far away, a vastly different and deadly world away. When he thought of his children an empty feeling settled in his stomach, one that made him think his kids were no longer alive.

It would break him if he focused on that hollowness.

He opened his mouth to tell her, yes he believed his children were out there, carrying on; doing the good he was so proud of them for. George was a doctor with two adorable children, Linda had become a veterinarian and had multiple children in her animals, and though Luke had been the more rebellious child, he'd recently met a woman whom he loved, and who was actually settling his unruly ways.

"No."

The answer astounded him as much as her. Her hands jerked on the steering wheel; her head turned toward him so quickly he thought she might have given herself whiplash. She gawked at him in disbelief. "I do not believe they are still alive. Please watch the road, Mary Ellen."

She blinked at him before turning back to the windshield. "How... How are you able to carry on if you believe that?"

"Because there is no way to know for sure and because I must. Life doesn't end simply because there are times when we would like it to. I've lost a lot of loved ones in my life, and there have been many times I've longed for the world to stop turning, but thankfully it's continued stubbornly onward. Until now."

A single tear slid down her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It's not definite. It could just be an old man missing his children that caused me to say it."

She pondered his words for a little bit. "I don't think Rochelle is dead."

"I think you're right," he agreed with a reassuring smile.

"Is...is that smoke?"

He turned back to the windshield, leaning forward as he stared in disbelief at the billow of smoke floating over the trees. "Yes."

Her foot eased on the gas pedal. "That's coming from the area where Rochelle's camp is."

"She's alive, remember," he told her.

They broke around a curve on the interstate. Flames shot high across the highway, a rolling inferno encompassing the road. He could feel the heat of it licking against the windshield, and practically blistering the paint. Without a word, Mary Ellen turned the car around and slammed on the gas and raced away from the blaze. Al's eyes fell nervously to the dashboard; sweat beaded his brow as he spotted the needle hovering precariously close to E.

Not now, he prayed silently. *Not now*.

If they ran out of gas now, they would be dead. There was no way they could outmaneuver those flames on foot; they'd be encircled and crisp fried before they made it a mile. Mary Ellen swung off the next exit, moving parallel to the inferno as she tried to find a way around the conflagration. Al couldn't tear his eyes away from the gas gauge. His old ticker was beating so fast he was half worried it was going to stop.

She swerved around a large tree as they drove over the road at a treacherous speed. "Go through the field."

She followed where he was pointing, aiming the car across the open expanse of grass. The old vehicle didn't handle the ruts well. The shocks and struts creaked and clanged; Al bounced so high in his seat he thought he was going to smash his head off the roof. Mary Ellen jerked on the wheel, turning the car suddenly to the right. He didn't know what she was aiming for until they soared over the top of a small hill and bounced onto a back road.

He nearly crashed off the dashboard as the car lurched awkwardly. Houses and barns whipped by in a blur. It seemed as if a tornado had swept through here, leveling some homes while leaving others strangely unscathed. They made another right. "That's Rochelle's camp."

They were moving so fast he almost missed the sign next to the road. *Camp Howland*, was hand painted onto the sign with an arrow pointing down the road. The only problem was the arrow pointed to an area engulfed in flames.

Mary Ellen eased the car to a stop; heat engulfed the interior of it as she climbed out. Al slid out also; he nervously observed the blaze, now a mere two hundred feet away and moving relentlessly closer. Mary Ellen's glazed eyes came back toward him. "She's not there anymore," he answered her unspoken question for her. "She would have fled before the fire made it to the camp."

She nodded mutely as she closed her slack mouth. "Where would she go though?"

"We'll figure that out, but right now we have to get as far from here as possible." Trees cracked and popped loudly, ash began to leave a fine coating on the roof of the car. "Would you like me to drive?"

She shook her head and climbed back into the vehicle. Al clicked his seatbelt on as she shifted into reverse and turned the car back to the field they had just vacated. Her driving was more cautious as she steered around the holes in the ground. "Stop here," he told her as the gas light popped on.

He watched the fading inferno warily as he hopped out of the car and hurried to the sagging barn he'd instructed her to stop at. Grasping the rusted handle, he leaned his weight into the door to slide it open. The cobwebs in the corners billowed in the slight

breeze the opening of the door had created. There was something almost soothing in the familiar scents of earth and mildew. The small tractor and riding mower inside offered him some hope as he gazed around the aging structure.

"What are you doing?" Mary Ellen inquired behind him.

"Thought there might be some gas in here."

"Hopefully," she muttered.

He moved gradually into the shadowed interior, searching for a promising red can as Mary Ellen moved in the other direction. He unscrewed the cap from the mower and tapped the side of the gas can as he peered inside, but he couldn't see how much gas it held. He was screwing the cap back on when he spotted two cans sitting behind the tractor.

He lunged for one of the cans, accidentally kicking it and causing it to tip over. His breath froze in his lungs, but thankfully none of the precious fuel spilled out. He grabbed the can, disappointed to find it empty as he lifted it up and set it back down. He didn't have much optimism about the other one so he was pleasantly surprised when it resisted his quick jerk.

"Here," he croaked out. Mary Ellen was at his side in a flash. He handed her the full can. "Fill the car with it."

She nodded and disappeared outside. He moved through the barn with more speed than he had originally. Searching the shelf, he grabbed a half full bottle of oil and a coil of tubing. He wiped his dirty hands and the first few inches of the tube on his pants. Returning to the mower he siphoned the remaining gas into the empty fuel can. He had just turned his attention to the tractor when Mary Ellen returned with the empty can.

He filled the other can and was able to get another quarter's worth out. "Let's go."

She clasped hold of his hand as he held the can out to her. "I'm glad you're here with me."

"Uh, me too," he muttered uncomfortably.

"I mean it. I wouldn't have made it this far, I would have completely crumpled and lost it like Rita if you hadn't been here. When we find Rochelle it will be because of you. Thank you, Al."

He offered her a halfhearted smile, flustered by her gratitude. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for."

She shrugged as she took the can from him. "I think we're both going to find out the truth to that soon enough."

She followed him from the barn and stood watchfully beside him as he poured the rest of the gas into the car. It would get them further than they'd gotten so far, but it wouldn't last long. Mary Ellen drove across the field, slowing as they passed a mound of horse corpses that caused bile to heave up Al's throat. It was one of the strangest things he'd ever seen, and he couldn't begin to contemplate what could have driven them to do such a thing.

"Horrible," he muttered. He turned away and twisted to search through the backseat. There was so much trash he half believed the owner had lived in the vehicle as he tossed aside discarded wrappers, cups, and clothes. "What a mess."

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"A map or something."

"Good luck with that."

He chuckled, but she was right, if there was anything useful in this car he wasn't finding it. He turned back around, settling in again. "We'll have to find a store, and maybe we can figure out where she may have gone to search for help."

"You don't think she would try and go home, do you?" she asked worriedly.

"I don't know. For now, I think we're better off trying to find a place around here she would have gone. It makes more sense she would seek out help before doing that. Do you know this area at all?"

"Not really. Rochelle's been going to camp here for two years, I've been to the outlet mall in Wrentham a few times and the football stadium twice. Rochelle has spent more time around the stadium though; she likes to hang out with her friends from the camp, go to the movies, and shop there."

Al was silent as he pondered this. "We'll get a map and find the closest police or fire station; I think the stadium could be a good bet. It would make sense to set up a shelter there with all the new stores and restaurants they've put in around it."

"You're right."

They maneuvered onto another road. Al glanced in the rearview mirror, but the blaze was fading behind them. It may not be as close, but it had enough fuel to keep it going for days, if not weeks. Maybe forever, he thought with a shudder. Mary Ellen pulled into the parking lot of a convenience store and parked next to the door.

A man's face appeared behind the glass door, his beady eyes were squinted as he stared at them. His belly hung over his belt, and sweat slid down his scruff covered cheeks. Wariness crept down Al's spine, but he climbed out of the car and led the way to the door. The man continued to eye them suspiciously, but he unlocked the door and opened it for them.

"Can I help you?" he demanded gruffly.

"We were hoping to find a police or fire station," Al told him.

"Three miles that way." He pointed back toward the blaze.

"Both of them?"

"Yep," he replied as he slid his thumbs into the waistband of his jeans.

"There's a bad fire over there." Mary Ellen's voice was resigned.

"That's all there is," the man informed her briskly.

"Do you have a map?" Al inquired.

He nodded toward a rack near the coffee pots. Al went to search for a map of Massachusetts as Mary Ellen remained with the man. "The fire might spread here soon," she warned him.

The man shrugged, his eyes were pinned to Al as he searched through the rack. "I'm not staying here for much longer anyway."

"Have you seen any other people?" she asked eagerly.

"Nope, you're the first since it started. Where you from?"

"Rhode Island."

For the first time the man showed something other than anger and distrust as his shoulders slumped and he seemed to deflate like a balloon before them. "This is happening there too?"

Mary Ellen nodded sympathetically. "We think it may be everywhere, or at the very least the Northeast, but we haven't found anyone who knows anything. It's chaos out there, and I really wouldn't stay here for much longer."

The man nodded as Al made his way back toward him with a map and a case of water. "How much?" Al asked.

"Take it; I don't think I'll be around to sell many of those anymore anyway," the man told him.

"Thank you."

"How far away is the fire?"

"Not far and it's moving fast."

The man nodded and grabbed a set of keys off the counter. "Time to go."

Mary Ellen held the door for Al as he stepped outside; he was dismayed to see smoke curling over the horizon once more. He watched as the man waddled toward a large SUV, pulled himself inside and started the vehicle. He had just abandoned his store, but he waited until Mary Ellen and Al drove out of the parking lot before leaving too.

Al pulled the map out and unfolded it before him. "There are a couple of places where they might be establishing shelters, but if your daughter has been to the stadium and likes it there, it might be the place she's drawn to."

Mary Ellen nodded. "She'll look for a little familiarity amongst this mess."

Al wouldn't mind a little familiarity too. "Foxboro bound we are, then," he told her with a smile.

CHAPTER 18

Xander
Foxboro, Mass.

Xander's cheek was pressed against Riley's as her slender body shook and heaved from the force of her sobs. The sounds she made were heart wrenching. Even if he hadn't been swamped by his own melancholy, her sorrow would have been enough to make him cry. As it was, he couldn't hold his own tears back.

Gone. His sister was gone. In the blink of an eye, from the space of one heartbeat to the next, her life had been snuffed out as effectively as a birthday candle. She'd been there with them one instant, and the next... he had lost her.

Since he was two years old, Carol had been a part of his life. He didn't know a world without her, wasn't entirely sure how to navigate one that didn't have her in it, and he couldn't bring himself to stand up and face it right now. All he could picture was the chubby child with blonde curls who had toddled after him, sucking her thumb as she dragged her dirty doll across the ground. A toddler he'd been instructed to protect and take care of, a toddler who, though she had annoyed him, had also fascinated him. He'd loved her, had defended her when she was teased, had protected her.

He'd just failed her.

His arms clenched around Riley as she began to gag and choke from crying so violently. He patted her back, attempting to soothe her as he struggled through the grief and guilt trying to drown him within their dark depths. What was he going to do? What were *any* of them going to do?

Bobby hadn't moved since he'd collapsed beside them. He was unbelievably pale as he stared at the area where Carol had been. The vacancy in his gaze terrified Xander; he felt that same helpless feeling trying to take control of him. No matter how relentlessly they fought, they were still going to die. It was too brutal and cruel, and none of them had ever endured this kind of adversity before. Every other difficulty he'd ever encountered was child's play compared to this. Girls, school, peer pressure, crashing his car... it was all nothing.

Everything he had ever known was nothing now, mere cinders of the burnt remains of his life.

The things that had so occupied him before faded from his mind as he stared at his friend and clung to Riley. Lee had moved away from the crater, but he was still too close for Xander's liking.

They could sit here and wait for death, or they could stand up and fight to survive. He had to make a choice.

Bracing his hand behind him, he wrapped his arm around Riley's waist and strained to lift the two of them to their feet. Lee glanced at him, opened his mouth to say something but ended up closing it. What was there to say?

Xander leaned against a tree, fighting against the tears still threatening to fall as he turned Riley around. Tears streaked her reddened face; her eyes were already bloodshot and puffy. She was gasping for breath as her shoulders heaved.

"Riley, listen. Listen to me. You have to get it together."

Her vivid eyes were unfocused; she leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his

waist as she pressed her face into his chest. For years he'd yearned to hold her, but not like this. *Never* like this. Xander hugged her back as her tears wet his shirt. "Riley, please. I need your help now. Please."

Her sobs increased, it was a battle to keep his fear and anguish at bay. The unraveling was there, just beneath the surface, trying to undo him. Judging by the look of Lee and Bobby though, if he fell apart now none of them would make it.

He grasped Riley's face, pulling it out of his chest as he wiped the tears from her cheeks. "This isn't what Carol would want Riley." She took a hitching breath; her eyes flickered as they came briefly into focus before fading again. "She would want you to survive, and if we're going to survive, you have to pull it together."

Tears slid down, but she seemed to be focusing on him a little better, seemed to be seeing him again. "Ok?" he asked.

"She's gone," Riley croaked.

Xander shuddered at the reminder. "I know."

He barely got the words out past the constriction in his throat. It took all he had not to start crying again, but if he gave into the urge they would never get out of here, and right now getting his friends out of here was what was keeping him going.

"Xander..."

Her lower lip began to quiver. He pulled her against him, hugging her close as she embraced him. She had stopped crying though, and simply seemed to desire another person to hold.

He looked to his friends, but they were both motionless. He couldn't carry all three of them out of here. "Bobby, Lee, we have to go." Bobby looked dazedly at him; Lee simply appeared terrified at the thought. "Now. We have to go *now*."

"But, it's... it's... ah... It's *death* out there, Xander," Lee stuttered.

"It's death here too." He pressed Riley closer before reluctantly releasing her. She made a move to grab at him again, but went still as her hand fell limply to her side. She seemed to have regained enough control to be able to stand alone. He watched her to make certain she wouldn't collapse again, but when she remained unmoving he was reassured she would be ok.

He walked over and knelt before Bobby. "You have to get up, Bobby. Come on." He grasped hold of his friend's arm, and though Bobby rose with him, that awful vacancy didn't leave his gaze as he stared numbly at Xander. He was terrified Bobby would never come back to them, that something had broken inside of him, and he would forever be this strange, deadened shell of a person he'd once been.

Xander released Bobby and hurried past Lee.

"What are you doing?" Lee took a hasty step toward him as Xander hurried to the hole that had claimed his sister.

"I have to see."

It was the last thing in the world he wanted to do, but he had to make sure Carol wasn't alive. The not knowing would drive him crazy for the rest of his days, even if today was that day. He approached the crater with care, nervous it would give out beneath him as he leaned over the edge and peered into the dark depths. He was terrified he would find his sister's body, broken, battered, beaten beyond recognition. There was simply nothing but a yawning abyss of death and misery.

He retreated from the hole, feeling almost as hollow as that encompassing darkness.

Riley was staring expectantly at him as she twisted her hands before her. He shook his head at her, unable to form the words that would crush her again. To her credit she didn't fall apart again.

"Let's go," he said briskly. He had to do something before he completely lost his mind.

"Go where?" Lee demanded.

"Same as before, we go to the stadium."

Though he didn't know how he would face his parents if they somehow, miraculously, had survived this disaster, and had more miraculously managed to make it home. He didn't hold out much hope for that, not anymore. All he hoped for now was to somehow keep himself, and the others, alive. He'd failed his sister; he wouldn't fail again.

He was moving past Riley when she stretched out and brushed his arm. He looked questioningly at her, but she was silent as her fingers slid into his, and she clasped hold of his hand. Her eyes were wary as she watched him, seemingly worried he might rebuke her or release her. That was something she would never have to worry about from him. His hand tightened around hers as he tugged her gently along, moving back toward the edge of the woods and the homes beyond.

He stopped at the edge of the forest to survey the darkened homes. He didn't trust they were empty.

Riley's hand trembled within his, sweating slightly in his grasp. He could feel the calluses from softball that ran across the base of her fingers. "I don't think we should go out there."

He glanced back at her. Though she was more composed, her eyes still shimmered with unshed tears. "We're not going to," he assured her.

He stayed within the tree line, but hovered near the yards bordering them. A driving sense of urgency built within him as it propelled him onward. They had to get to the stadium, it was something he could attempt to *do*, perhaps something he could succeed at. The piercing reminder that he'd failed Carol was like a knife to his chest, and he could barely breathe around it.

He avoided the highway, choosing to stay within the woods, away from other people and the main areas. He knew this area well. From the time they were fifteen, he had snuck out of the house to meet Lee, Bobby, and a few other friends. During the summer, if there was a concert they would like to hear, they went to the stadium. Not having been the first ones to do it, they'd found a well-worn path in the woods that led down to the railroad tracks and eventually the stadium. They'd sit at the edge of the woods and listen to the muffled music. Most of the time it had been difficult to decipher what was playing, but the thrill of being out, without their parents knowing, and the occasionally smuggled alcohol, made it more than worth it.

He was heading for that path now, silently praying it had not been as ruined as almost everything else they had encountered today. Riley's hand remained in his, he could hear the increase of her breath, but she kept up as he jogged relentlessly onward.

"The path?" Lee panted beside him.

"I think it's our best bet," Xander told him.

"I agree. I would prefer to stay away from the highway. I imagine it's chaos, and I'd like to see what's going on at the stadium before we go in there."

"You read my mind."

"What path?" Riley inquired.

Lee explained it to her as Xander shoved some branches out of the way, holding them back so they didn't slap her, or a still dazed Bobby, in the face. "I never knew about that," she murmured.

"It was a guy thing. No girls allowed," Lee informed her with a small smile that half an hour ago she would have returned, but her face remained stony and her eyes somewhat glazed. Xander hated that look on her, but he was more concerned about the continued lack of response from Bobby.

"I have to walk for a minute," Lee told them.

Xander eased to a walk, his lungs burned, his legs felt like rubber, but he would have preferred to keep running. His mind could focus on other things now that it wasn't focusing on going forward, on attaining their destination. Riley released him and bent over to inhale great, shuddering breaths.

Xander rested his hand briefly on her back before turning his attention to Bobby, who was still carrying their bag of supplies. "How about some water?" he inquired, hoping to get Bobby engaged again.

Bobby stared mutely at him before nodding and pulling some water out of the bag. They rested for another couple of minutes before continuing onward. Surprisingly, and *finally*, the way was actually relatively easy going. There were a few new holes, and some trees had fallen in their way, but once they made it to the path they were able to move rapidly toward the tracks.

They had just arrived at the tracks, and paused to take another break, when a flare shot high into the air. It burned over them, a greenish glow not as noticeable now that the sun had moved higher into the sky. Xander screwed the cap back on the water bottle and dropped it in the bag. Riley stepped beside him, her arm touched briefly against his as her head tilted back to watch the flare.

"Do you think it will be safe?" she inquired.

"Hopefully."

He slid his hand back into hers. She stared at him for a moment before her eyes fell to their joined hands. He expected her to pull away, that she had simply been looking for comfort before and was now back to hating him. Her forehead smoothed as she gave an almost imperceptible nod. His fingers tightened around hers as eyes the color of tanzanite met his again.

It was a damnable thing to have her stop hating him on the worst, and quite possibly the *last*, day of their lives. He wished Carol had been here to see it; she'd been pushing him for years to stop being a moron. She'd been his biggest champion and would probably be doing her happy dance right now, laughing loudly as she told him, 'I told you so,' repeatedly.

The ache in his chest spread. Mourning swelled so fiercely inside of him for a split second he couldn't see Riley before him. All he could see was an image of Carol jumping from foot to foot as she waved her arms in the air and twirled around. He could almost hear her laughter. It was all so crisp, so clear, he couldn't believe it wasn't true. That her happy dance was forever gone.

Seeming to sense his distress, Riley released his hand, wrapped her arms around his waist, and rested her head on his chest. He enfolded her, fighting against the hot burn of tears in his eyes as he relied on her solidity in the shifting reality before him. He buried

his face in her hair, inhaling the fruity scent of the shampoo still faintly detectable beneath the dirt and sweat coating her.

"I miss her too," she whispered.

Carol had been his sister, but she and Riley had been two peas in a pod, thick as thieves, and inseparable since they'd first met. They'd been closer than sisters, closer than he'd ever been with any of his friends. Their fights, the few he'd ever seen them have, had consisted of brief periods of bickering before both of them simply moved on. Not only would he never see Carol's happy dance again, but he'd never see her and Riley's heads bent together as they conversed quietly or simply sat in amicable silence.

"I know."

"It's not your fault, you couldn't have done anything. I was closer... I should have reached her..." A shudder ran through her, she broke off as a small sob escaped.

He cradled her neck and pulled her closer as he pressed his mouth against her ear. "No, Riley, you couldn't have done anything either. It's no one's fault."

Though he said it, he knew they would both blame themselves for a long time to come, if not the rest of their lives. He could only hope they would one day come to terms with that guilt, and that it didn't eat them alive from the inside out. He felt her tears against his shirt again, but they had subsided by the time she pulled back from him. "We should go."

He sighed regretfully as he nodded and released her. Bobby had moved further down the railroad tracks; his head was bowed as he stared at his feet. Lee was a little bit away from him, he studied the horizon with phony intensity. He seemed more than a little relieved when Xander and Riley rejoined them.

"How much further?" Riley inquired.

"Only about another half a mile," Lee told her.

They followed the tracks for a few minutes before branching off onto another path. He heard the sounds of the stadium long before he saw the massive structure. Voices boomed over what he assumed was a bullhorn, or perhaps some sort of loudspeaker system. At the hole in the fence, he pulled back the metal wiring to allow Riley and the others to crawl through before following after them.

"What are they saying?" Lee's head was tilted to the side, his face scrunched in concentration as he tried to decipher the blared words.

"I don't know." Riley looked just as perplexed as Lee. Bobby remained strangely impassive.

They crept forward. Having been here before, and knowing how to avoid the security staff, the three of them knew the best places to hide in order to survey the stadium. The parking lot came into view as he moved around an oak.

It was bedlam below, a rolling sea of turmoil and confusion as people mulled around. They had formed ten enormous lines that wound toward the gates. State Troopers, police officers, some firemen, and what he assumed were National Guard, or some type of military were lined up inside of the gates, searching people, and patting them down as they entered. Other public safety members patrolled amongst the crowds in the parking lot, their weapons shone threateningly in the radiance of the sun.

There was still more people filtering down the highway, maneuvering through abandoned cars either on foot or by vehicle. He moved a little closer as the voice boomed out again, but this time he was able to decipher most of the words.

"No weapons of any kind will be permitted within the gates! All weapons will be confiscated! Anyone caught with a weapon will be evicted from the grounds! Put your name on the list, but do *not* stop to look at the lists! Updated lists will be posted every hour; you may look for your loved ones then!"

The voice broke off briefly before the words were repeated.

"Are we going down there?" Riley inquired nervously.

"I don't want to lose our guns," Lee said.

Neither did he, and he wasn't entirely certain going down there was such a good idea. There was something disconcerting about the scene below. It reminded him of far too many scary movies and videos of war he'd seen.

"Our parents may be down there."

Xander felt like running down there simply because Bobby had been the one to utter those words. Simply because it seemed as if Bobby might actually be coming back to them, and it was the prospect of finding his parents that was finally getting to him.

"We don't have to stay there," Lee suggested. "We can come back out."

"We'll hide the supplies up here," Xander told them. "Keep 'em buried so no one else can find them. If we don't like what's going on, we'll leave."

He didn't add he hoped they would be allowed to leave after they were granted access; he knew by the look on their faces they were all thinking the same thing.

CHAPTER 19

John

Bridgewater, Mass.

He felt as if he was watching his life from a movie. Crumpled houses and buildings, and the dark canyon straight from Dante's version of Hell were all just opening credits in a bad horror flick. He was *seeing* them, but he wasn't really *experiencing* them.

He wondered if this was what an out of body experience felt like. He'd heard people talking about a disassociation from the body, but they were dead when it happened or dying.

Was he dead? The thought was terrifying, but not nearly as terrifying as the realization he was actually pondering the possibility. Had he died in that field, when the first tremors hit? Was this all some sort of death-inspired hallucination? Were the last neurons still randomly firing in his brain to create this world of ruin and suffering?

He wasn't as frightened by the idea as he thought he should be. He could be dead. This could all be just some strange dying nightmare, and the thought didn't bother him. He didn't feel connected anymore anyway.

He could hear Carl and the girl, Rochelle? They were talking softly as she studied the map. They sounded like the grown-ups in Charlie Brown, though, just a lot of *wah, wah, wah* in a strange droning tone that barely penetrated the detached haze surrounding him.

His father was dead, he was certain of it. He held out no hope of finding his mother anymore. He didn't cry though; the tears had dried up. What was the point of crying when it wasn't real anyway? Not anymore, nothing was real. He was dead, he was certain of it. He'd wake up on some strange tropical island, or just simply pass on any minute now.

Or maybe, just maybe, there *was* a heaven. He wasn't sure he'd be accepted there, though. He wasn't a bad person, but he wasn't a great one either. He felt his odds of the tropical island were far better than heaven.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his father. Two... three days ago? He lived in his parent's house, but he wasn't a cellar dweller. His room above the garage was airy and private, but it had still been in their house. He'd seen his mother yesterday when he'd stumbled downstairs, still somewhat drunk from the night before. She'd made him some coffee, a grilled cheese, and sent him back to bed with an indulgent smile he'd been unwilling to admit made him feel happy and safe, like she had when he'd been a child.

But his father... well, his father was a different story. They lived in separate worlds, rotated on different schedules, and barely saw each other. They got along well, always had, but his father worked a lot of overtime so he could retire early. John spent most of his time with his friends and at the bars. He'd thought there would be plenty of time for them to spend more time together later.

Actually, he hadn't really thought about it all. He'd known his parents would die one day; everyone would, but never today, and probably not tomorrow. Twenty, thirty, maybe fifty years in the future, sure, but not anytime soon.

Not today.

But it was today.

The time had come, his father was gone, and John was growing increasingly certain

he was gone too. Maybe one of the birds knocked him in the head, or perhaps he'd been swallowed by a hole. Maybe the lawn mower had run him over, as it did in every bad dream he'd had about the heavy piece of industrial equipment. He shuddered inwardly at the thought.

He thought to ask Carl if they were dead, but he found he couldn't open his mouth. What did it matter? Dead or alive he was still sitting in this truck, and his father was gone. Or perhaps his father was still alive and *he* was the one who was dead? It was too confusing, he didn't like these thoughts and he didn't have the energy to pursue them. Not anymore.

So he simply remained silent, sullen, and miserable. The town beyond the window was gone. He'd been here a few times to visit his mom at the University and to scope it out when he was still debating college. In the end he'd opted to stay closer to home and attend the Community College, but after two semesters he'd decided it wasn't for him. Landscaping had been a job to pass the time and make some money, but he'd discovered he really enjoyed it and had a knack for it. He'd been contemplating taking some classes to further himself, perhaps starting his own business.

That didn't matter anymore, nothing did.

They had to drive far out of their way to avoid the gaping hole, so far it took John a long time to realize they were still trying to make their way toward the college. He blinked, his head swiveled to take in the two people beside him. They were still talking Charlie Brown gibberish but they seemed enthusiastic about something.

What was there to be enthusiastic about? The world was ending, and they were dead. He assumed the two of them were dead too, if they were sitting beside him right now. He wondered when they would realize they were deceased. He hoped it was soon so they'd shut up with that incessant, useless talk.

He turned away, unblinking, as they traveled beside the edge of the strange Grand Canyon he was certain led into the very bowels of Hell. There had been nothing but despair down there from what he'd seen. And his father was somewhere within it.

But if that was true then John was still alive, wasn't he?

He reached out and pinched himself, *hard*. He winced, gritted his teeth, twisted his skin, and pinched harder. He welcomed the pain blazing up his arm, surging through his nerve endings, and bringing tears to his eyes. He meant for it to hurt. Hurt meant life.

Did he still *want* to be alive?

Did he want *this* life? It wasn't even lunchtime, and he no longer recognized anything he'd ever known. No longer recognized himself. In five hours the house he'd left this morning, the family he'd been certain would always be there, the friends he'd spent hours playing video games and partying with, and the girl he'd been chasing, no longer existed in this new reality of endless mayhem.

The girl, Rochelle, grabbed hold of his hand. Her dark eyes were wide as she peered up at him. Her mouth was moving, there were sounds coming out, but he didn't hear her. What was she saying? He tried to tell her to slow down, to speak English. He found his mouth would part, but no words would come out.

She tugged at his hand; her head turned worriedly to Carl as they began to speak excitedly in what he realized were deeply troubled tones, but the words were all wrong. He didn't understand why Carl would start speaking this strange language with the girl when he'd been speaking English all day. They weren't speaking Spanish, as he had a

rudimentary knowledge of that, and he'd learned Pig Latin like every other kid who thought they were slick and discovering something new their parents would never figure out.

He turned away from their buzzing, only to be brought back as the girl pulled incessantly at his hand again. It was only then he realized he was still pinching his skin. His fingers relaxed, falling limply to his side. His forearm was red, already bruising, and he'd pierced the skin. Blood welled up and slid from the two fingernail gouges he'd dug into his forearm. He didn't feel it.

The girl was peering up at him again, concern radiated from her as her mouth continued to move. "I don't know other languages!" he shouted the words at her, but she didn't react. He dimly realized he'd never actually said the words aloud.

Oh well, she wouldn't understand him anyway. He turned away from her and back to the window. He wondered if there would be some kind of a handbook for this death like there was in *Beetlejuice*. He'd discovered the movie when he was eleven and had watched it over and over again as a kid. To the point where his mother could recite it line for line with him. He'd often hear her absently singing the songs even if the movie wasn't playing. In a time when kids his age had been listening to The Backstreet Boys and Christina Aguilera, he'd thought Harry Belafonte was the man.

He'd never been one of the popular kids.

He hoped there was a handbook like there was in the movie, it would come in handy. Perhaps it would show him how to get out of this never ending nightmare he was ensnared in.

He didn't realize the truck had stopped moving until he felt a hand on his shoulder. The brusque shaking was jarring. Carl was staring at him, his mouth moving; his voice loud. He was shouting in that strange language, as if that would somehow make it possible for John to understand him. He was turning away when Carl grabbed hold of his chin and jerked it toward him. Carl's fingers were rough on John's chin, he didn't care.

The girl said something, and Carl released him. Carl raised his hand, looked as if he were considering slapping him, but lowered his hand again and exchanged a disheartened look with the girl. She shrugged, but her eyes remained on John as Carl started driving again.

At least they had finally stopped blathering on like idiots.

There were more houses in this area, though none of them had fared well. They were sagging and crumpled. Some had caught on fire and were nothing more than rubble. People were on the streets here, moving about, they looked like he felt. Were they dead too?

No. Not dead.

He shook his head; his gaze fell to his wounded arm. The dead didn't bruise, and the dead didn't bleed. The dead didn't hurt like this, either. The dead did not miss the living.

Death was always hardest on the living, he'd heard that somewhere, but he'd never understood it. How could anything be harder than death?

He understood it now.

Now, beneath the confusion, beneath the fear and the grief, understanding was taking root. He had been left behind; he would have to deal with the devastation of the world, his family, and his life. He'd have to deal with the mourning and the loss; he'd be the one left with the memories but none of the tangible entities that had created the very fabric of

his existence.

His parents, or for certain his father, no longer knew suffering. He wondered if it was death, or living, that was more terrifying.

He wasn't ready to die yet to find out the answer.

Though understanding was beginning to churn through his dulled mind, he still couldn't seem to find the strength to move, to speak, to acknowledge the girl worriedly patting his arm like he was a puppy requiring comfort.

He tried to emerge from the fog, but though he lifted his head, sorrow rose back up to pull him back down. His father had taught him to ride a bike, had coached his little league team, and had picked him up from the principal's office when he'd been busted skipping school to smoke pot. He'd expected a lot of screaming, perhaps a beating, even though his father hadn't done so much as spank him since he was seven.

Instead, he'd been given a glimpse into a man who wasn't so different from him. A man who had wandered a near-identical path to John's, and had floundered until his mid-twenties when John was born. A man who had listened to John instead of screaming, and explained that though he understood, he didn't approve, and wouldn't tolerate it again. John had been grounded for a week, but he'd never felt closer to his father and had grown to realize that though their relationship was still authoritarian, they may one day become friends. He'd been suspended again after that, but he'd never gotten high at school again. When he'd turned twenty they had started to forge the friendship John had sensed at fifteen. He'd lost more than his father today, but also the friend he'd trusted the most.

Tears slid down his face and dripped onto the girl's hand. She patted enthusiastically; her chatter became more eager as she looked rapidly between him and Carl. She bent low, peering expectantly up at him again.

Yes, death was definitely toughest on the living. He knew this now. He wished his parents were here to talk to, to guide him, and to show him the way as they'd done so often over the years. But they weren't here, and they never would be again. If his father was still here though, he'd tell John to pull it together. There was still a chance, no matter how miniscule, his mother was still alive, and he had to do everything he could to get to her.

But it was so grueling.

Another tear slid free. He could do this; he knew he could. It felt like he was trying to swim out of a pool of mud, but somehow he managed to lift his head and take in the world beyond the windshield. It *was* the real world out there. He wasn't dead; he was pretty certain of that at least. Too many TV shows and movies had played with his mind to be completely sure, but he was ninety-nine percent there.

This wasn't a movie. His father was dead, and he was still alive. As he watched part of the rotary leading to the college came into view. The other half of it was gone.

It looked as if a perfect line had been drawn through the middle of the campus, half of it had vanished; the other half remained untouched, perfect, dazzling and eerie in the light of the day. The campus contained a lot of older buildings, but they were gone now, eaten by the pit. The other side, the one with the newer buildings, remained intact. His mother, as a history professor, had taught and had her office in the oldest building on campus.

He didn't look in that direction, he didn't intend to see into the hideous hole again.

He took a deep breath, bracing himself. He hadn't held out hope, but acute anguish

still twisted through his heart and stabbed into his gut.

Students had gathered in front of what he dimly remembered as one of the few dorms on campus. There were teachers, or perhaps older students, gathered out front in a large clumping of nearly a hundred people. He could see more people inside the building, filling the hall, and pressed up against the glass doors. Security personal also milled about in the crowd. Thanks to the summer semester, the number of people was lower than it would have been during the school year.

A young girl, with blood streaking her cheek and dirt smudging her features, raised a hand in a shaky greeting. John pressed his hand against the glass; it was the only action he could give in return. Others watched warily as Carl drove past. Someone was talking again, and judging by the deeper tones, it was Carl.

John opened the door as the truck stopped. He took in the eerily silent world as he watched the people milling about the dorm. He heard nothing as he made his way forward, searching the crowd for a familiar face, but knowing it wasn't going to be there.

He stood on tiptoe, peering over and around the mob as he moved through it. He pushed his way into the building, ignoring the strange faces turned toward him. He barely saw the dirt, blood, and tears covering a good portion of the survivors.

He passed by what he assumed was the public gathering room. A large TV was hanging on the wall; it was on, but only static flickered over the screen. They must have turned the sound off as it made no noise. They had turned the large room into a makeshift hospital ward. People were spread out on twin beds they had pulled from the rooms branching off the hallway. John stopped in the doorway and stared at the carnage spread out before him. There was so much blood, too much. Many would not survive.

One young man was missing an arm. There was no way he was going to stay alive judging by the sparse medical supplies John spotted in the room.

John turned away from the carnage, continuing down the hall, but the crowd began to thin out the farther into the building he went. He found a bathroom; he used it, and returned to the hallway. A set of stairs was at the end, but he knew it would be useless. His mother was not up there; he didn't think anyone was up there.

He turned back around. Carl and Rochelle were at the end of the hall, speaking with a middle-aged woman who was shaking her head. Tears ran down her face as she gestured around the building. Carl looked up and spotted him. John didn't move. People walked and flowed around him, some seemed just as dazed as he felt.

Carl nodded toward him, and the woman turned to face him. The left side of her face was a large bruise; her features were swollen and distorted. It looked as if she was having a bad reaction to a bee sting. He didn't know who she was, but the look of sympathy on her face was enough to confirm what he had already known deep in his heart.

He inhaled sharply, releasing it on a harsh breath that irritated his raw throat. Reality seemed to crash back over him, the fresh wave of heartache pierced the strange veil enshrouding him. The eardrums that had been unwilling to process any noise were suddenly filled with the screams and tears of the dead and dying. The static of the TV grated on his over sensitized nerve endings.

It was anarchy within the building, people pushed and shoved past him. The potent, metallic scent of blood filled his nostrils. There were other smells too; smells he couldn't begin to place. They weren't smells he'd ever thought he'd encounter on another human being.

Carl was watching him warily; the girl seemed just as troubled as John stopped before them. The woman had already turned away, distracted by another maimed student being led in by a security guard.

"We should go," John said. Carl's shoulders slumped. Relief filled his gray eyes as he nodded eagerly. "There's nothing for us here."

"We'll go." Carl no longer spoke some sort of cartoon language. He turned on his heel and pushed past the weeping students by the door. John followed silently behind, not feeling quite as vacant, but certainly not feeling anything like the human being he'd been only five short hours ago.

His old life was over. A new one had begun.

CHAPTER 20

*Mary Ellen
Foxboro, Mass.*

The road was clogged with cars, some of which had been abandoned either due to lack of gas, damage, or the inability to move the larger ones through the mass obstructing the roads. People trickled down the battered highway, though most of the road had fared the destruction of the quakes fairly well.

Absently, she flipped the visor down against the blinding sun. It did little good. She lifted her hand against the glare of the massive orb. It was not yellowish, or orange, but a vicious shade of red that she had never seen before. Al handed her a pair of reflective sunglasses far too large for her, but they helped to shade out the sun a little.

"Is it just me, or does that look wrong?"

"It looks wrong," Al confirmed; his head was turned toward her, and his hand was out against the harsh rays. "But not much has looked right today."

"True."

She steered around an overturned truck and the group of people sitting upon it. They appeared to be taking a break as they passed a jug of water between them. Despite the stifling heat of the day, a chill crept down her spine as the group eyed the car far too intently for her liking. She found herself praying, something she hadn't done in years, that there would be safety at the end of this road. That the stadium would offer some sort of reprieve, some sort of shelter. Prayed that even if her daughter wasn't there, they would at least be granted a little break from the constant turmoil and movement, they had endured for the past five hours.

Five hours. It felt more like five *days*. She thought she'd like to sleep for five days, at least. She rubbed her right eye absently beneath the glasses; it felt unusually gritty.

Her eyes narrowed, she lifted the glasses as she studied the air around them. It seemed foggy, perhaps smoggy or smoky, but she hadn't seen any more fires since they had left the area of Rochelle's camp behind.

It's just the heat of the day, she told herself.

She dropped the sunglasses back into place. She wasn't at all convinced it was just the heat of the day. If she'd learned anything today it was that nothing was as it seemed, and even the most innocuous of things could be dangerous.

She didn't like the foggy air, the red sun was beginning to frighten her, but there was little she could do about either, and she was too exhausted to stress about it right now.

She swerved around a group of people who tiredly lifted their heads to watch the car go by. There were a lot of people on the road, but there weren't as many as she had expected. Was this it? Was this the majority of the survivors around here? She wasn't overly familiar with the area, but she knew it was well populated. Perhaps there was somewhere else people were looking to take shelter. There was a mall somewhere nearby, and probably other places for people to go, but she had still expected thousands upon thousands, but there were only hundreds littering the road.

A flare shot into the sky, causing her to jump as it burned hotly before disappearing. "That's always a good sign," Al murmured.

They passed by restaurants, bars, car dealerships, and hotels. It seemed as if people

had taken up residence in some of the hotels as they mulled around the parking lots. Billboards came into view as they drove over the top of a hill. One, for some new movie, swung precariously back and forth over the road in the breeze created by the slow moving vehicles. Two more billboards were securely intact; another had crashed over a fence and into a pond.

Signs for parking began to appear; advertisements for upcoming events decorated the roadside. Finally, the stadium area came into view. Though there were some fractures in the parking lots, some of the fencing had toppled, and a few stores and restaurants looked a little worse for the wear, she was relieved to see it was mostly intact. The stadium itself appeared to be completely unharmed.

People flooded the vast parking lots, but it appeared the gates had been moved around and reorganized to control the flow. Al rolled his window down, leaning out as a voice boomed over the land. His hand grasped hold of the roof as he pulled himself half out of the vehicle.

"Al!" she cried, trying not to chuckle at the spectacle of the older man leaning out the window like a golden retriever enjoying the ride. She shook her head as he slid back inside.

"I didn't catch it all, but the general idea is no weapons," he informed her.

"Well, that's a good thing."

He continued to frown as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He glanced into the backseat, his frown deepening as he studied the contents. "I suppose so, but I'm not ready to give up what we have. Drive past the stadium. Maybe we can find a place to hide the car."

Mary Ellen was desperate to get into the stadium, but she bit back her argument. She trusted his instincts, they had gotten them off of the school roof, and they had made it this far. She wasn't about to start doubting him now. She drove past the main entrance of the stadium, which was more crowded than the areas by the newly erected stores, hotels, and restaurants.

They made a right at a set of dark streetlights. She drove down the constricted road, passing by small homes that were either dark, or crumpled from what had occurred today.

"Pull in here."

Her head tilted as she stared up the long driveway Al had indicated. She turned into it and climbed the hilly drive that wound behind the house. She was halfway up the drive when she realized the back half of the cottage style house was gone, crumpled beneath the weight of a massive white pine.

"Perfect," Al muttered.

Mary Ellen eyed the house warily. If anyone had been in there, they would have fled with the intrusion of a tree into their kitchen, part of a bedroom, and what appeared to be the remains of a bathroom. She steered the car around the tree. Thanks to the angle at which it had fallen, and its size, she was able to pull underneath a few of the branches and park there.

The doors scraped against the branches, needles shed around her as she shoved the door open. She had to stoop to avoid being entangled within the limbs, but she still had sap and needles in her hair by the time she managed to extricate herself. Al had grabbed the keys and locked the doors; he was holding them loosely in his fingers as he slammed the trunk and surveyed the house and yard.

"If it's discovered at least they won't be able to steal the car or get into the trunk. The guns and most of the supplies should stay safe," he said.

She nodded as she worked to free a tangled twig from her hair. Al broke off from her as they passed a large wooden fence. She followed as he pushed the door open to reveal the underground pool sheltered by the fence. Mary Ellen hurried toward it, eager to clean some of the dirt and grime from her arms and legs. She knelt at the side to splash the chlorinated water onto her face, and over the scratches and cuts marring her dirty skin.

Though there was debris from the trees floating in the pool, it thankfully wasn't scummy, and the chlorine would have killed off any germs in it. She didn't think it would have bothered her if it was filthy though. It felt good to wash some of the grime off. She scratched at the sap clinging to her, but for the most part her skin only became redder and the sap clung stubbornly to the hairs on her arms.

Al opened a door to the pool shed; a beach ball fell out as he disappeared from view. Mary Ellen finished cleaning herself the best she could and rose to her feet. She peered into the pool shed, her eyebrow quirked as she took in the vast array of pool toys and supplies packed into it. Al pulled a flipper down from one of the shelves, dropped the keys inside and returned it to the shelf.

"Good hiding spot," she commented.

"Let's hope so."

"If anyone thinks to look in that flipper for the keys, they deserve the car."

He smiled wanly as he nodded. "You're probably right."

She waited as he took some time to clean himself in the pool too. It wasn't a far walk back to the stadium, and it only took them about a half an hour before they made it to the main roadway entrance. They floated into the parking lot toward one of the long lines winding through the spaces and spreading toward the railroad tracks and Route One. There were more people filtering down the road, and it seemed as if a fair amount were already inside, but she still felt there should be more.

"How many have died?"

She didn't realize she'd spoken the question out loud until Al turned toward her. "More than we'll ever know," he muttered.

She pulled the glasses from her face. She'd forgotten she was wearing the bulky things. "Ever?"

He glanced around the cramped parking lot, his eyes narrowing briefly on a group of men in camouflage patrolling the area. Some had rifles resting against their shoulders; others were wearing them strapped to their hips. Mary Ellen thought she should feel more relieved to see some form of military and authority. For some reason, it only caused her anxiety to grow.

She couldn't shake the feeling something was off about this whole thing. Or maybe because this was the first good thing she'd seen in so long, she couldn't accept it might actually get easier from here on out.

"It just seems as if nothing will ever be the same."

"But the quakes seemed to have stopped," she pointed out. "We're away from the ocean, maybe things will get back to normal. It'll be awhile of course, but eventually it will have to, right?"

He tilted his head back to look at the sky. The hideously awful, *hazy* sky. She shuddered; she didn't like to think about what they might be inhaling. "Maybe," Al

sighed.

He didn't believe it, and neither did she.

They crept steadily forward in the line. For the most part people remained stunned into silence, but every once in a while the muted sound of weeping or an angry shout would pierce the air. The announcement against weapons, and some sort of list repeated continuously. Mary Ellen had the gift of selective hearing from years of listening to Larry blather on, and quickly tuned it out.

She felt half asleep on her feet as her head bowed, and her eyes closed. The press of people against her was almost comforting, despite the stench of body odor and the oppressive heat of the day. The low murmur of voices lulled her further.

She almost jumped out of her skin when a stream of loud shouts pierced the air. It sounded as if two or more men were fighting somewhere in front of them, but it was difficult to discern exactly where it was coming from. Rapid fire, of what she thought was some kind of automatic rifle, blasted loudly in the stifling air. She was pushed roughly back as terror spread through the mob. *Like cattle ready to stampede*, she thought worriedly. Al grabbed hold of her arm, holding tight to her as they were pushed roughly back ten feet.

"Remain calm!" a voice blared over the bullhorn. "Please! Everyone remain calm. The situation is under control!"

She wondered what the "situation" was as they were pushed back another foot before the mob eased. Her heart lumbered in her chest; she struggled to inhale. The press of bodies no longer seemed comforting but as volatile as a ticked off rattle snake.

She wanted out of the line now, but there was nowhere else to go if they planned to gain entrance into the stadium. She looked at Al, but whereas she felt half crazed, he remained unfailingly calm as he stood on tiptoe to survey the crowd. He wasn't an overly tall man, and she was sure age had shaved some height off of him, but he was taller than her and able to see more than she could above the heads.

He dropped back down, shaking his head at her. He pushed back a strand of lank gray hair falling into one of his eyes. "This isn't good," he muttered.

"What did you see?" she demanded in a low whisper.

"I can't see anything, but I don't like this. There's no one controlling them."

"What about the soldiers...?"

"That's who I'm *talking* about. I can't tell if they're actually soldiers and not just some men and women with camos and guns. Even if they *are* soldiers, who's controlling *them*? Who's in charge? Who put these regulations in place so fast?"

Mary Ellen glanced over the crowd, but she didn't see any of the men or women who were patrolling the parking lot. It was bad enough to have to be anxious about people like the man by the bread truck, but she didn't want to be concerned about the ones who were supposed to protect them too.

"Maybe I'm just being paranoid in my old age," he frowned.

She really hoped so, but at the same time she couldn't bury the doubt rising inside her. What moments ago had been a welcoming place now seemed frightening and overwhelming. "If Rochelle's not here, I think we should leave."

He pondered her words before finally responding. "Let's just wait and see what happens."

"But you just said..."

"I know, and it does worry me, but it could just be my mistrust of the human race as a whole. This could be the safest place we find."

"Or the most unsafe."

He nodded as he surveyed the crowd. "We'll give it a chance, but if we don't like what we discover, I'm all for leaving."

They crept steadily closer to the gate. The going was achingly slow, but after the events of the day, she found herself surprisingly unruffled by the pace. She searched the people around her, none of them were familiar to her, but they were far from home. The people gathered around looked just as uncertain as Mary Ellen felt, and more than a few of them were in far worse condition than she was. The badly injured, when discovered, were brought to the front of the line and rushed into the stadium, but the ones who weren't as bad off were left in the lines with them.

She kept an eye out for Rochelle, but she didn't see her daughter anywhere in the crowd. The closer they got to the gates, the more concentrated the security became. But now instead of eyeing them with some measure of relief, all she felt was alarm as she watched them searching people at the head of the line.

She stepped to the front, bracing herself as a set of distant brown eyes settled upon her. Though the man was wearing a Foxboro police uniform he seemed far too young for it, and he was obviously out of his depth. "Anything in your pockets?" She shook her head in response to his question. His eyes were deeply shadowed, his shoulders hunched as he looked her over from head to toe. She thought she should take offense to a man being the one who did this as he quickly patted her down, but she found herself too numb to care, and she was pretty sure this kid didn't realize she was a woman right now.

He nodded at her and turned to Al. Mary Ellen tilted her head back as she took in the immense structure of the stadium before her. There had been banners hanging from it, but most of them had been knocked down by the tremors. She studied the remaining ones marking the achievements and victories of the Patriots. She'd watched some football, as Larry had followed it, but it had never been something she'd really paid attention to.

"Keep moving!" someone commanded, startling her out of her contemplative mood.

She glanced at the cold, large man beside her before hurrying forward to join the line filtering past a grouping of tables. A pen was thrust into her hand; she stared at it for a few seconds before bending to place her name into one of the notebooks on the table. Though Al felt his family was gone she added his name too.

"No one will come here for me," Al reminded her as he reached her side.

"Someone has to know," she muttered as she dropped the pen down.

"Know what?"

"That you were here, *we* were here. Even if it doesn't matter, even if they don't know who we are, someday someone will see our names and know we survived for this long."

He smiled as he squeezed her arm. "You're right."

"Keep moving people! Keep the line moving!" someone called from the back.

Mary Ellen stepped away from the table, following the line winding past the stadium toward some of the stores and hotels. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the flow. She couldn't tell if they were being herded somewhere for a reason, or if everyone was going this way simply because that was what everyone else was doing. Either way, she continued to follow because she didn't know what else to do right now.

"You know what the kicker of it is?" Al asked.

"You mean there's something worse than all this?"

"Yeah."

She frowned at him in confusion. "What could *that* possibly be?"

"I'm a Giants fan."

She was unblinking as she tried to process his words. And then, when they sank in, she burst into laughter. Loud, echoing laughter that drew the curious and horrified looks of the people around them. But once she started, she couldn't stop. It had been a long time since she'd laughed, she couldn't recall the last time, and now that she was doing it, she couldn't seem to stop. This laughter felt wonderful, and though she tried to stifle it, she was unable to as she laughed until tears began to roll down her cheeks.

Al grinned at her. He grasped hold of her arm as she bent over and laughed until her stomach hurt. It felt good, this release in so much chaos and disorder. This brief moment of actual joy at a time when she hadn't been sure she'd ever find or experience joy again. For the first time she realized that no matter what happened, she would survive it. There would always be a reason to go on. No matter how small or trivial that reason may be, she knew now there would always be something good to find in all the misery surrounding them.

CHAPTER 21

Riley

Foxboro, Mass.

Riley brushed back her straggling hair as she glanced over her shoulder. Apprehension trickled through her as she held Xander's hand and followed him past the stadium, restaurants and toward one of the larger bars and hotels. Military and police personnel continued to usher them onward, standing beside the line and yelling out commands.

Her chest ached; the pressure of impending tears had not eased as it compressed the air in her lungs. She enfolded both her hands around Xander's as she took comfort in his strength. She was awed by the way he continued stalwartly onward. He may have teased and tormented her as a child, but he'd always been protective and loving toward Carol. She knew he'd loved Carol as much as she had. Yet, where all she longed for was to sit down, curl up in a ball, and sob out her despair, Xander was dragging them all with him, forcing them to go on whether they liked it or not.

His steady, soothing strength kept her on her feet right now.

He stopped suddenly, pulling her behind his back, as three men with terrifyingly large rifles ran past them. Riley eyed them warily; the hair on her neck stood on end.

"Come on, Ri."

He tugged briefly on her hand, drawing her attention back to him as he started to make his way forward again. She stayed close, trying to avoid the crush of the crowd pressing against them as Xander wound through the mass of people.

"Where are we going?" Lee asked.

Riley shook her head in response, and Xander didn't look back as he lifted up on his toes to survey the crowd. He pulled her closer, looping her arm through his as he pulled her back to let another group of men with guns go by. "Where are *they* going?" she whispered.

Xander shook his head. "I don't know."

"I don't like this."

"I'm sure everything's fine," Lee murmured. "They're necessary to keep everyone calm. Just keep moving."

Riley didn't buy his words; she was beginning to think this had been a very bad idea. She stared worriedly at the people surrounding them as they shuffled their way forward again. The crowd began to disperse as they reached a long hall winding through the inner workings of the stadium. The paper covering the walls fluttered in the breeze created by the passing people. She frowned at it, uncertain what was going on, until Bobby broke away from them and eagerly hurried over to it.

"It's the list," Xander muttered.

Riley simply continued to stare at it for a minute before she joined Bobby. Some of the papers were notes to loved ones, listing a time and place to meet in case they couldn't find each other right away. She'd gone to the Vietnam Wall a couple of years ago for a school trip, and this ramshackle set up reminded her of that, as she stared over the poems and letters and fliers stuck to the wall with tape.

There were some photos, not many, but a few of lost loved ones or loved ones who

people were searching for. A purple teddy bear propped up next to a piece of paper with the name Linda on it brought tears to her eyes. Riley turned away; searching the crowd, she spotted what she sought about thirty feet away. A table with notebooks and markers set up on it had been pushed against the other wall.

Riley ripped a sheet out and grabbed hold of a red marker. Her hand shook as she wrote Carol's name down; she didn't write her last name though. If, by some miracle, Carol's parents managed to get here, the last thing she wanted was for them to find out their daughter was gone from a piece of paper on the wall. She encircled the name with a large heart and drew a small angel in the corner. She'd never been much of an artist, but she was passable at it, and the angel came out better than she'd expected.

She tore off some tape and found a bare spot on the increasingly crowded wall. Her hand lingered on the paper as she stuck it to the wall. She couldn't bring herself to turn away. She knew Carol was gone; she understood this paper had no link to her friend, but for some reason she felt as if she was losing her last connection to the girl who had been a constant in her life for as long as she could remember.

She didn't realize Xander stood beside her until he took hold of her hand and pulled it away. He stared at the paper before turning his attention to her. His hazel eyes were inscrutable as he studied her. "I didn't see our parent's names anywhere," he informed her.

She hadn't been holding out much hope they would be here in the first place, but she still felt a stab of disappointment in her heart. "It would take them a while to get back here."

He nodded, but his attention was pulled away from her as Lee reappeared. "My parents aren't listed either," he informed them. "I lost Bobby."

Xander nodded behind her. Riley turned to find Bobby rapidly searching the list; he didn't seem to be having much luck as he shook his head and muttered to himself. He turned toward them frowning fiercely.

"We'll check again later," Riley assured him.

"Yeah," he muttered, unappeased by her assurances. She shook her hand free of Xander's and wrapped it around Bobby's arm. He managed a small smile, though it looked strained and didn't reach his eyes.

She kept hold of Bobby, half pulling him along as they walked up the long ramp and then back down before reemerging outside again. She lifted her free hand to the sun, blinking against the harsh glow. She tilted her head back, not at all liking the vision of the furious scarlet orb burning in the sky.

She shook her head and turned away as Xander touched her arm in order to draw her attention to Lee standing by the propped open door of a restaurant. There was a mass of people inside. They reminded her of a serpent as they coiled and flowed through the building. Apprehension bristled through her as she wondered when this serpent would strike. She was wary of going anywhere inside right now, but the building had withstood the other tremors, so she hoped it would survive future ones. Besides, if she remained outside the thing might just fall over on top of her.

She moved into the building, beckoned more by the prospect of some shade and a place to sit than anything else. The scent of food hit her, as did the overwhelming stench of body odor. Her nose wrinkled, but she imagined she didn't smell any better; she was probably worse than a lot of people in the room.

Xander stepped into the line; he studied her as he took hold of her free hand, trying

to gauge her reaction. She didn't know how to react to him, or what was going on, but she did know she required his strength and familiar presence more than anything right now. She managed a small smile as she squeezed his hand. It was strange to realize she actually enjoyed holding it.

She released Bobby. Taking a step closer she wrapped her arms around Xander's waist and buried her face in his chest. She thought it should feel strange to hug him, feel awkward. Instead it felt right as he embraced her back, rocking her slightly as he held her. The reassuring beat of his heart lulled her further as she closed her eyes.

She continued to hold him as they inched through the line. People blocked her view of what was being offered, but when they were close enough she spotted the pile of rice in a large metal serving tray. Next to it was another tray of baked beans and small pieces of chicken. The people dishing out the food were wearing uniforms, and it took her a minute to realize they were from the restaurant, as well as a couple of the surrounding stores. Their faces were expressionless as they mindlessly heaped food onto the plates being held out before them. So focused on the workers, Riley didn't notice the soldiers standing behind them until one of them shifted subtly.

The soldier's faces were remorseless as they surveyed the crowd with uneasy distrust. Xander released her and thrust a plate into her shaky hands. She pushed back a straggling strand of hair as she took her place for a spoonful of rice. She imagined things were going to get ugly pretty fast if some semblance of normalcy didn't return soon.

What's going to happen when the food started running low? she thought, then shuddered. Human beings were all just animals after all. She may have been fortunate to have never witnessed it in her lifetime, but she knew what people were capable of, how horrifically savage they could become when stripped of the basic comforts and routines.

Xander watched her worriedly as she took an instinctive step closer to him, pressing against his side. "What's wrong?" he inquired.

"It's going to get real ugly," she whispered.

He lifted his head to study the crowd as they crept forward. Riley held her plate out to receive her small piece of chicken. She went to turn away but something stopped her. She turned back, her gaze focusing on the toughened soldier standing guard at the end of the line. The rifle he held made the rifles they had confiscated look small and highly inefficient. It was intimidating, but she'd had enough of being intimidated and afraid.

"What is going on?"

The man's eyes barely flickered to her. "Move on, ma'am."

Her nose wrinkled at being called *ma'am*, but she braced her feet and focused on the ice blue eyes refusing to meet hers. "Do you know anything? Have you had any contact with the outside world?"

His gaze finally shifted toward her; his hands tightened on the gun as she stepped toward him. "Keep moving, ma'am."

"If you know something you have to tell us!" she said forcefully. Xander grabbed hold of her arm, trying to pull her back as she stepped closer. She thrust her plate at Xander instead, refusing to be pulled away. "We deserve answers. *We need answers!*"

"Ma'am, you have to keep moving, or I will have you removed from this area and escorted back outside of the gates." Frustration filled her, it took everything she had not to stomp her foot. "Now!" he yelled.

Despite her intention to stand against him, she jumped at his barked command.

Xander thrust her plate back into her hand, wrapped his arm through hers, and pulled her forcefully away. Another uniformed man had started to come forward, apparently with the purpose of removing her from the premises. She stared the man down as he met her gaze with a solid, unflinching stare.

"We deserve answers," she muttered.

"We're not going to get them from him, and until we decide what we plan to do, getting yourself kicked out of here isn't exactly the best option," Xander grinned as she scowled at him. "Ah, now there's the look I'm most familiar with from you."

Her scowl deepened, but he wasn't paying attention to her anymore. He surveyed the tables pushed closer together in order to make more room for the crowd within the building. He led her toward the back, claiming a small table in the far back of the building. He pushed aside the plates and silverware still piled on it and held the chair out for her.

Her forehead furrowed as she studied him. "When did you become a gentleman?"

"Always have been, you just never noticed," he replied flippantly.

"I doubt that."

He pushed her chair nimbly in and sat beside her. She surveyed the restaurant, searching for a familiar face in the crowd, but she didn't see anyone she knew. There had to be others from town she would recognize, but none of them were in here. She picked half-heartedly at her food. She knew she should eat, but the knot in her stomach and the aching grief in her chest made it difficult. Apparently she wasn't the only one, as Bobby barely took a bite, and Xander and Lee seemed far more intent on watching the crowd than focusing on their meal.

Gradually, she began to tune into the buzz of conversation around her. She leaned over as a middle-aged man in a suit spoke in low tones to the two women across from him. "Aliens," he was saying as he waved his fork in the air. Riley stifled a snort as the women listened raptly to him. "I think it's an invasion."

Riley rolled her eyes, and though the conversation amused her, she turned away from it before she started to laugh at the man. Xander was staring at him with a raised eyebrow and a forkful of beans halfway to his mouth. "Do you believe that crap?" Bobby muttered.

"Not even a little bit," Riley answered as Xander finally shoved his food in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. Apparently he found the conversation a lot more interesting than she had as he continued to listen.

At the table behind Bobby there were two men in their thirties and another in what appeared to be his mid-forties. They were all wearing town uniforms with a patch for the water department on them. The three of them were silent, unmoving as they picked absently at their food.

"A super volcano."

She turned to her right as a man in his fifties with large bug glasses nodded enthusiastically at her. She didn't realize it was her he had been talking to, but there was no one else around him, and he was staring directly at her. "It would explain the earthquakes and the heat of the day. The animals going crazy. They say if one of those things goes, it's the end of the world."

"What about the eclipse?" she inquired.

He shrugged as he dropped his fork and leaned across the table toward her. Xander

stiffened beside her as the man grabbed hold of her hand. Riley leaned back as his sweaty hand clenched enthusiastically around hers. "Was it an eclipse?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

She glanced worriedly at Lee across from her. He was staring at the man as if he were an actual talking puppet. The man's eyes were a little crazed as he leaned closer. She could almost smell the eccentricity pouring off him. "Maybe it was a cloud of ash that blocked out the sun. 'Cause that eclipse lasted an *awfully* long time."

"Maybe a UFO blocked out the sun," Xander interjected. He was trying to sound casual, but he stretched around her and grabbed hold of the man's hand. The man stared at him as Xander tried to pry his hand away from hers. The stranger's gaze drifted to their joined hands before he released her and sat back.

"Now we both know that's a bunch of nonsense," the man continued. Xander pulled her hand away and enveloped it in both of his as he held it beneath the table. "But a super volcano, maybe the one in New Zealand or Indonesia, would explain it. I don't think it was any of the ones in this country, I don't think we'd still be alive if it was. But I don't know much about them, only what I've heard and briefly read, 'specially about Yellowstone. Can't exactly Google it right now."

Riley pondered his words as she studied him. "I've heard about them. He's right, it would explain a lot of it," Bobby said as he leaned closer. "Do you really think that's what it was?"

The man shrugged, some of his intensity had calmed now that he had a captive audience. "There's no way of knowing for sure. Not right now anyway, but I think it's far more likely an explanation than aliens." He snickered for a second. "That just sounds crazy."

"What about a simple apocalypse?" Riley inquired.

"You think it could be so simple?"

She didn't know what to think, not anymore. All she knew was she had to keep moving, keep surviving. It really didn't matter what had caused all of this. Knowing the cause wouldn't change anything, their lives would still be disrupted, their homes destroyed, and Carol would still be dead. Even if they knew, they would still be sitting in this restaurant, and everything she had ever known would still be gone. She was surprised she didn't really care what had caused the events of the day to unfold. The cause wouldn't change anything, and she might not like the answers she received. She simply wanted contact with the outside world, someone who could organize everyone, give them some sense of security and information about their loved ones.

"What about terrorists?" she hadn't realized the table behind Bobby and Lee had been listening to them too. "What if it was a bomb or something? A nuke? Maybe we're just inhaling radiation right now, and we're all going to be dead in a month."

Riley shifted uncomfortably as she tried not to focus on the image his words conjured.

"It *was* aliens," the other man insisted.

"I could see terrorists," a woman said.

Riley was suddenly struggling to breathe. Taking a deep breath, she tried to steady her pulse as she listened to the theories being bantered about. "Does it matter?" she asked.

"No, it doesn't," Xander answered. "Not unless there's something we can do to protect ourselves against it. I haven't seen a way for that yet, so it doesn't matter. Not

anymore."

Riley started to agree with him, but her mouth closed as a group of armed men filtered into the restaurant. The conversation around her died down as everyone's attention was drawn to the group of twelve circling together in the middle of the floor. The man that had yelled at her broke away from behind the food line to join the others.

Her unease grew as they talked rapidly, and with hand gestures that made it clear whatever they were discussing wasn't making them happy. Xander placed her hand down as he rose. "Xander," she hissed.

He waved her back as he took a few steps toward the group. The rest of the restaurant had fallen silent; everyone was focused upon the men. Riley watched anxiously as Xander moved closer, stopping at the top of the step leading to the main floor. Sweat beaded her brow, she was certain they wouldn't harm him, yet she couldn't shake the certainty they would do something to him if they caught him eavesdropping.

The man who had yelled at her nodded, gestured to three of the men, and left the building. Riley stared at the nine remaining men, too many as far as she was concerned. Xander came back to them, his eyes troubled as he slid into the seat beside her.

"Did you hear anything?" she whispered.

"No, but something has them pretty riled up."

She swallowed heavily. The remaining men watched the people still filtering through the line with far too much intensity for her liking. "Maybe we should leave," she whispered.

"We should give it another day. What's so bad here? They're trying to protect us, and we haven't seen them do anything wrong," Bobby said fervently.

She didn't know what was wrong here; she just knew it wasn't *right*. She would like to believe she was being paranoid, but she couldn't shake the feeling she wasn't. Something was wrong, and she was terrified that in another day they wouldn't have the opportunity to leave. Terrified they might not see tomorrow, she slid her hand back into Xander's and held firmly to him.

CHAPTER 22

Carl

Somewhere in Mass.

They were lost.

And truth be told? He didn't really care. What difference did it make if they were lost when they had nowhere to go? Not anymore anyway. All they had was this truck and the clothes on their backs. He thought they should try and find a store. Weren't people supposed to go to Costco or Walmart or a grocery store or something during the apocalypse? He didn't know if there were any of those things in this area. He was sure there had to be a grocery store, but he didn't know where, and he really didn't feel like stopping.

So instead he just drove. And drove... and drove. He thought they might be going in circles, but he didn't care as he passed over broken roadways, front yards, back yards, on sidewalks, and across more fields. It was mindless, something he hadn't been since this whole thing started, and it felt good. Rochelle stared ahead, her brow furrowed as her hands fiddled anxiously in her lap. Though John seemed more coherent and functional than he had been before, he also wasn't speaking. The map was in his lap, but he stared silently out the windshield.

Carl opened his mouth to tell him to try and figure out where they were, but he closed it again. He didn't really feel like speaking. He'd promised Rochelle they would help her find her parents, but that could wait a little bit longer. It was essential for him to try and gather his thoughts, as scattered and fractured as they were.

He glanced at John again. His heart ached for the kid; he couldn't imagine what he was going through. His own parents were gone, but their deaths hadn't given him the one-two punch John had just received. He didn't blame John for checking out for a good hour. He didn't know how he would have handled it, either, and truth be told, he was amazed John was doing as well as he was.

John hadn't asked what it was the woman at the college had told him. Carl hoped it would continue, that John would simply accept his mother was gone and try to move on with his life. He didn't have a clue what they were going to be moving on to. As far as he could tell it was nothing, and if they didn't find a goal soon, things were going to get real nasty. *People* were going to get real nasty.

He thought he might actually prefer the earthquakes to the imminent mess he felt looming on the horizon.

"Did that woman see my mother?"

Carl groaned inwardly. He should have known it was coming, *he* would have asked, but still he didn't want to be the one to answer. Rochelle opened her mouth, but only a small exhalation escaped her. Carl couldn't let her be the one to tell John either.

Carl longed to lie, to just say no, and be done with it. But if he lied, if he hid from this then John would retain hope, he would be haunted by the unknowing, hounded by the thought he may have left his mother behind. Carl felt that was far worse than the truth.

"She didn't, no," Carl hedged, cursing his cowardice.

"Someone else did though?"

"Yes," Carl reluctantly admitted.

"They saw her die?"

His hands twisted on the steering wheel. He glanced longingly at the pack of butts on the dash. "Yes," he admitted as he pulled to the side.

"Why are you stopping?" Rochelle asked.

"I need a cigarette." He grabbed the pack and hopped out of the truck. Closing the door, he leaned against the hood as he lit it and inhaled deeply. The countryside around him was in ruins. Wherever he glanced was a disaster area, one that wouldn't be inhabitable for a long time, if ever again. *At least there aren't any dead animals around here*, Carl thought as he surveyed the wreckage encompassing him.

He hadn't heard John open the door, but he was suddenly beside him, his eyes fevered as they pinned Carl to the spot. He tossed his cigarette aside and lit another one.

"What did that woman say?"

"She said your mom was gone, John. Nothing can change that."

John inhaled sharply. "Who saw it?"

"What?"

"Who saw it? Who saw her die?"

Carl paused. "One of her students."

John nodded as he bit on his upper lip and turned to survey the field. "It was bad, wasn't it?"

"I... don't know," Carl muttered.

"Was my mother crushed? Was it one of those holes?"

"John, I..."

"Tell me!"

"Does it matter?" Carl hadn't seen Rochelle hovering behind John. They both turned at the sound of her whispered question. "Does it really matter how she went, when she won't be coming back?"

John's eyes darted around, and for a second Carl thought they were going to roll up in his head, and John was going to pass out. Then, his shoulders slumped. He released his now slightly mangled lip and nodded. "Yes. I don't know why, I know it won't make me feel any better, but yes, it does make a difference. I *have* to know. It may not make any sense, but I can't *not* know."

Carl tossed his butt away and lit another one. He was starting to calm down a little now. The sudden influx of the stimulant wasn't pumping him up but settling him down. He welcomed it.

Before this he'd been thinking about quitting, he'd even bought the gum, but he didn't see the point of that anymore.

"Carl?" John prompted.

"Fire," he answered. "She died in a fire."

John winced; he huddled deeper within himself as tears formed in his eyes. Carl waited, breathless. He hoped John wouldn't start to cry again, prayed he wouldn't retreat behind the wall of silence and misery that had shielded him before. He didn't know what he'd do with the kid if he went catatonic again. He didn't know how he'd keep John alive, if he stopped fighting to keep himself alive.

John had been handed a double whammy, but he wouldn't survive long if he didn't start to develop a thicker shell. *Like I should talk*, Carl thought with a sigh. He'd barely had the courage to tell John what had happened to his mom, never mind actually having

to deal with the heartache such a revelation had caused him. He was going to have to form a thicker shell too, he realized. He just didn't know how any of them were going to go about doing that.

He glanced over at Rochelle. She was so young. It wasn't fair. He held out no hope they would find her parents. Not anymore. He didn't know where *he* was right now, never mind her family. But he supposed trying to locate them was a starting point, a mission, something to do other than drive around in circles.

"Newport?" he inquired.

She glanced at him, her hands twisted anxiously in front of her as she frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I want to know," she muttered.

"Yes, you do," John told her. "The answer may not be the one you want, but the not knowing was worse."

Carl sighed in relief as John continued to speak and react with them. "What will I do if I don't like the answer? Where will I go?" Her lower lip trembled as she stared across the broken landscape.

"With us. You'll go with us," Carl told her. She turned back to them and surveyed them with hooded eyes that were still distrustful. He didn't blame her. "If you'd like."

She managed a wan smile, her arms folded over her chest as she nodded. "That's nice of you, but why would you want to take care of me?"

"I didn't say we'd take care of you. I mean, you seem pretty capable of that yourself. You just won't have to be alone. It's always good to have friends, and it's really good to have them now."

She nodded as she smiled at them. "You're right."

"So, Newport?"

She frowned as her nose scrunched. "I don't know; That's where I live, but I don't think my Mom and Dad will still be there, if they're alive."

"Then where would they be?" John asked.

"Looking for me."

"Makes sense," Carl muttered. His throat was raw and his heart was pumping, but he lit another cigarette. He wasn't in the biggest rush to get back in the truck right now. "But your camp is gone. Do you have any relatives in the area?"

"No."

"That's a whole lotta no help," John muttered. "Where do we go, then?"

Rochelle frowned as she shook her head. Carl was impressed she wasn't crying as she stared over the broken land again. "Maybe we'll just try and find another fire station or police department, there has to be *one* still standing around here," he suggested.

"It's better than nothing," John agreed.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could use some food." Carl walked around to the back of the truck and threw the doors open. Some of their supplies had been jostled around but for the most part everything was still intact. He hefted himself into the back of the truck, grabbed three bottles of water and a bag of chips.

He studied their supplies. They were probably doing better than some people, but the supplies wouldn't last forever. His thoughts turned back to Costco or Walmart or whatever. One more try at a police station, and then he would suggest burglarizing a department store. He wasn't sure it was a good idea to go anywhere near something housing a bunch of food and clothes right now anyway. He imagined there was a lot of

mass looting going on in some places already.

Grabbing a strip of beef jerky, he headed to the back of the truck and hopped out. He tossed a bottle of water to John and handed the other to Rochelle. "I think we're going to have to find more supplies too." He bit off a piece of jerky and handed the bag to Rochelle.

"Walmart or Costco," she said.

"Why there?" John inquired.

"Everyone knows that's where you go during a zombie apocalypse."

John rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Of course they do. There better not be any damn zombies out there. That would be complete B.S."

"Oh, and this isn't?" Rochelle retorted.

"At least something isn't chasing me down trying to eat my brain right now."

"You'd be safe if there are zombies, then," Carl informed him.

"Oh, you're just a fuuhh... ah..." John glanced at Rochelle. "...a freaking riot," he amended. For the first time he actually managed a wan smile.

Rochelle grinned back at him. "I've heard it before."

John shrugged and shoved a handful of chips in his mouth. Carl closed the doors on the truck and leaned against them. He was purposely trying not to look at the burning red sun overhead as he chewed thoughtfully on a piece of jerky. The scenery certainly wasn't much to look at anymore, but it felt good not to be encased within the cab of the truck and to breathe fresh air for a few minutes.

In the distance he saw another vehicle moving over the broken terrain. The brief reprieve vanished as he straightened away from the truck. "We should get moving."

They followed his gaze to the vehicle on the distant horizon. John shoved the last bit of his beef jerky into his mouth and hurried toward the passenger side with Rochelle on his heels. Carl climbed behind the wheel and started the truck again. Rochelle was staring at the map and shaking her head. "I don't know where we are," she muttered.

They passed a road, but the first half of it was nothing but a colossal pit, the street sign was gone. He spotted people but it wasn't a relief; the sight of them only increased his anxiety. Driving past more homes, they came to a fork in the road where he made a right. Apartment buildings and small houses rolled by. There were more people here, some of whom turned to watch as the truck drove by, and others who didn't pay any attention to them at all.

Carl didn't know which was worse.

Rochelle leaned over John and locked the door. Carl stared at her for a minute as she gazed out the window with a parted mouth and a crease in her forehead. She glanced at Carl and he obligingly locked his door for her. Truth be told though, he found a large amount of relief once the lock was in place. Rochelle inhaled loudly as a gas station came into view. Carl almost pulled into it, until he realized that would have been a bad decision.

He couldn't stop his mouth from dropping or his foot from easing up on the gas as he gaped at the broken remains of the building. But this damage hadn't been caused by any earthquake. This was one hundred percent man made. The windows had been smashed out; the glass fronted door was pulled open and hanging ajar. As they passed he saw three people inside grabbing stuff and shoving it into bags.

Somewhere someone shouted and a shot was fired. Carl jumped, Rochelle let out a

little squeal as she ducked instinctively, and John threw his hands over his head. Screams rang out. Carl slammed on the brakes as two teenage girls ran in front of the truck. He suddenly felt as if he was in the middle of Iraq and not in some small town in Massachusetts.

His breath hissed out of him as more shots were fired, but this time it was coming from the gas station. Carl slammed on the gas as one of the men who had been looting the store jumped out of the broken window and started to run. The loud boom of a shotgun rang out. The man's arms flew outward; his face twisted in agony as a blood stain bloomed rapidly on his blue shirt. Coming to a stop, he pitched over onto the pavement.

Rochelle started to scream as the truck lurched forward with a loud squeal of tires. Another shot rang out; screams echoed through the air. A loud bang hit the side of the truck. It took him a moment to realize a bullet had just struck it. Rochelle's screams broke off abruptly, the color drained from her face as she leaned back against John, pressing herself firmly against him. Carl was white knuckling the steering wheel as the truck pitched and bucked over the broken road.

He wasn't ashamed to admit he'd run over anyone who tried to jump in front of them right now. He wasn't about to be gunned down during some piss poor robbery attempt. A man reeled back; scarcely avoiding the front right fender of the truck as he practically threw himself into the street. Carl's breathing was becoming labored; he could feel the hot pulse of blood in his eardrums as a ringing began in his ears, and a vein throbbed on his forehead. He could feel the sweat beading across his brow and slipping down his cheeks. He thought his heart was going to explode as more shots rang out.

"Jesus!" John gasped. "What the hell!"

"Don't start that again!" Carl snapped at him as he spun the wheel and plunged down a small side street.

The sounds of guns and screams faded as they drove straight into the heart of small town suburbia with its tree lined streets and quaint, well-manicured homes. It was all so surreal he half felt as if he'd just entered *The Twilight Zone*. A low curse escaped him as he slumped forward. His shoulders ached from the force with which he'd been holding himself upright. He was panting for breath as he fought to calm the frantic beat of his heart. He contemplated pulling over to regain some control of himself, but he was terrified of stopping in, what was apparently, a wild west shit show of a town.

"Get us out of here," he managed to grate through his teeth.

John and Rochelle were both opening and closing their mouths like goldfish, their unfocused eyes told him neither one of them were quite registering what he'd just said yet. "Now. Get us out, now," he told them.

John was the first to react as he grabbed hold of the map and smashed it down on the dashboard. Rochelle lurched awkwardly toward him; her hands shook as she pushed the map down with him. Carl made another right and pulled into an apartment complex, he drove behind the buildings and parked the truck in the nearly empty lot. Leaning back, he rested his head against the seat as he inhaled a shaky breath. He thought if he tried to stand his legs would give out, and he would make a fool of himself by sprawling flat out in the parking lot.

They were muttering together as Carl grabbed his cigarettes and hopped out to survey the damage done to the truck. He stared at the large bullet hole high up in the side board. It had pierced cleanly through the metal siding, leaving a quarter inch sized hole

he could see through if he stood on his tiptoes. He didn't particularly feel like doing that right now.

He knelt down to survey the underneath of the truck, and then took a quick walk around. To his great relief the only damage appeared to be the one hole. He hopped back into the driver's seat and leaned over to survey the map. Both Rochelle and John were staring helplessly at him. "We'll figure a way out of here," he muttered. "Or at least figure out where here is."

Slamming the door he pushed the lock button again, but he felt no sense of protection as he heard it click into place. He pulled out of the parking lot and took a convoluted route past homes, a small school, a couple of churches and more than a few cemeteries. He felt as if someone walked over his grave as he stared at the toppled headstones and gaping hollows marking one of the cemeteries. He shuddered, half afraid corpses actually would climb out of those holes and start to roam the earth again. He thought he might actually prefer it; at least then he would know who the bad guys were.

Though he supposed almost everyone could be considered the bad guys now. He glanced at John and Rochelle, feeling almost fatherly with the protective urge surging through him. Fatherly was never something he'd been, nor ever had any desire to be. But now, looking at the only two people he had to rely on in the world, he knew he would do anything to protect them. No matter what that might require.

He turned onto another road, a large rotary came into view. He'd always hated rotaries, but it had been amusing to try and watch the tourists navigate them in the summer. There was no one to make the navigating process difficult now as he merged with ease onto the empty expanse. There was a group of a few hundred people gathered within the grassy center of the rotary.

"Well, at least that answers one question," John muttered.

"What's that?" Carl inquired as he returned the wary stares of the people.

"Where we are."

Carl followed John's pointing finger. He'd been so focused on watching the people, he hadn't noticed the large wooden sign planted into the grass. "Guess so," Carl muttered as he read the sign. *Foxboro Incorporated seventeen seventy-eight.*

CHAPTER 23

Al

Foxboro, Mass.

It's a mess. *The whole thing is just one giant mess*, Al thought as he stared around the chaos reigning within the stadium area. There were far too many people for his liking, his skin was beginning to crawl, and all he craved was to break free of the confusion. Mary Ellen stayed close by his side as they prowled through the papers searching for her daughter's name.

"Leave her a note," he suggested when they came up empty.

"You read my mind," she muttered.

He waited impatiently, relentlessly studying the crowd as they milled past. Most people just appeared flat out dazed, although there were a few irate ones, and more than a couple who were weeping openly as they searched for their loved ones. Al was pleased Mary Ellen maintained her composure.

They moved away from the wall. He knew Mary Ellen would return to it, but he wouldn't come back this way again. There was no one there for him, and he didn't wish to see what was here anymore. A good chunk of the crowd was filtering into a restaurant, but they bypassed it and continued on with the throng still weaving its way through the stores. He didn't know exactly what was going on until they were almost to a large building with its doors propped open.

No AC, he realized as soon as he stepped into the sweltering interior. He felt as if he'd been slapped. The heat of the day had been bad enough, but within the shadowy interior... of what he now realized was a large hotel, it was oppressive. Soldiers stood within the building, water was being handed out, a few blankets and pillows sparsely given.

Al stared numbly at the pillow thrust into his hand. He was half tempted to throw it back at the woman, turn around, and leave. He remained where he stood, as Mary Ellen seized her pillow and studied the crowd. He unscrewed his bottle and took a small swallow of water before sticking it deep into his pillowcase.

A man standing by a set of stairs was staring at a clipboard as Mary Ellen stepped before him. He looked at her and then at his board. "Seventh floor, room seven ten."

Mary Ellen's jaw dropped. "Seventh floor?"

"Yes."

Mary Ellen turned toward Al. "Hope you own a Stairmaster."

Al managed a wan smile, but he already knew what she hadn't guessed at as the man was looking Al up and down. "Second floor, room two ten."

"Wait, we're together," Mary Ellen protested.

"Are you married?" She shook her head in response to his incredulous question.

"Does he require you to care for him?"

"Absolutely not," Al retorted defensively.

The man barely acknowledged him as he continued to stare Mary Ellen down. "Then you won't be roomed together, and since I don't want the old guy to have a heart attack, I think it's best if he stays on a lower floor."

Al bit back a nasty retort as his hands clenched on his pillow. He hadn't hit anyone

since he was a kid and gotten into a fight with his best friend, but he was sorely tempted to right now. Judging by the look in the man's eyes, he knew it too as he eyed Al with an almost challenging expression. This guy was spoiling for a fight, and apparently, he didn't care who he picked it with. Mary Ellen gawked at the man, looking horrified by what he'd just said.

Al grabbed hold of her arm as she jutted her jaw out and thrust the pillow at the man. "Think of your daughter," he quietly reminded her.

She looked torn as she glared at the man. The man handed them each a slip of paper when he realized he wouldn't be getting a fight from them. "Give this to the guy above," he instructed.

Al nudged Mary Ellen forward, pushing her toward the stairwell. There was a small group ahead of them. A mother was pulling her crying toddler behind her, while the father juggled a suitcase and a baby. Al was content to stay behind them as they made their way to the second floor.

There was another man at the top of the stairs, Al handed him his piece of paper. The man's eyes were glazed as he nodded down the hall. Al thought he was going to stop Mary Ellen from coming with him, but he just watched numbly as they walked away.

"Do you think we should stay here?" Mary Ellen inquired.

Al glanced up and down the hallway. There were a fair amount of doors open, but some had been closed off. He stopped before his own room, the door was ajar, the light on the keypad off. The hotel had to have generators, but apparently someone had decided not to use them. Al didn't blame them, even though he would have killed for some air conditioning right now or at least a piece of ice.

He pushed the door open and peered into the standard hotel room with its customary paintings, pastel colored blankets and walls, TV, and dresser. There were two double beds inside and a couch had already been pulled out. He hadn't expected to remain by himself in the room, but at least he would get first dibs on the bed and wouldn't have to endure the havoc that couch would wreak on his back.

He dropped his pillow on the bed closest to the window and pulled aside the curtain to peer out. There was still a vast crush of people filtering into the stadium and toward the hotel or restaurant. Things were going to get very cramped, very fast. He glanced at Mary Ellen as she stepped beside him.

"Do you think this building is safe after those quakes? I mean, there's no way they would have the equipment to judge that before letting all these people in."

Al glanced around the room, but he couldn't see any outward damage. It didn't make him feel any safer though. "I don't know," he admitted. "I'm actually amazed by the amount of people who have willingly entered it."

"*We* willingly entered it."

"Sheep," he muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"People are like sheep; they follow the herd and seek out security in insecure times. It's not a bad thing. It has aided our survival through thousands of years of evolution. But we didn't really think about the consequences of coming in here, we just followed the others and went for the familiar and the secure when we walked into this hotel. To us these walls, though possibly deadly, represent security. It's the outside that frightens us with its vast expanse, animals, and unknown risks. We didn't question it, but we probably

should have."

"Do you think we should go outside? What if more quakes happen?" she asked nervously.

Al stared at the ceiling above him; he really didn't feel like being pancaked by however many tons of concrete were above them, but he didn't feel like wandering back out there, either. It was unreasonable to feel frightened by the world out there far more than the world in here, but he couldn't shake it.

It felt exceedingly wonderful to sit on the bed, far more than any hotel bed should have felt. He longed to curl up on it, rest his aching muscles and simply sleep for the next week, because he knew he probably wouldn't get another opportunity.

"We probably should," he admitted, but he knew he wouldn't pull himself from this bed. *At least not at this minute, maybe in the next one.* He took a deep breath and forced himself to stand again. It would be a shame to be crushed to death simply because he didn't feel inclined to remove himself from a bed.

Mary Ellen was staring longingly at the other bed. "Maybe we can walk up to the seventh floor, check out the structure for ourselves and see if we should leave the building then."

He appreciated she didn't ask if he was up to it, but his knees screamed in protest at the thought. However she was right, it probably would be the best idea. He wasn't staying here if he saw cracks marking the walls.

He stared longingly at the bed and then the couch. He didn't think it was a good idea to leave his pillow and water behind for someone to steal. He knew people as a whole were good and kind, far more generous than they were given credit for, but these were extreme circumstances and the survival instinct was the strongest. Far stronger than their sense of right and wrong.

He grabbed the pillow knowing he was sacrificing his bed, but it was preferable to sacrificing his pillow and water. He followed Mary Ellen back out of the room and down the hall to a different staircase. He pushed open the door and peered into the stairwell, looking up and down he was relieved to find it deserted.

He held the heavy door open for Mary Ellen and followed her into the stairwell. He was glad no one else was around; he knew by the time they made it to the top his knees would be aching and he would appear weaker than he should. Grasping hold of the railing, he used it to help pull himself up the concrete stairs winding through the far side of the building. He studied the walls, warily surveying them as they passed the third floor, the fourth, and then the fifth.

"I have to take a break," Mary Ellen said.

He knew it was more for him, but she stopped and sat on the first step. He sat beside her, absently rubbing his knee as he dug out his water and took a small sip. She accepted it when he offered it to her. "I wonder if they'll hand everything out to us."

"I imagine they have the supplies under rigid lockdown." He took the bottle back from her and slipped it into the pillowcase.

"Who are they to decide?" she demanded.

"Military, police, but someone has to. Otherwise chaos would rule."

"What's to stop them from keeping it all for themselves?"

"Nothing but their moral code," he admitted.

"Frightening thought."

It was a terrifying thought, and one he didn't intend to linger on. "Rested enough?" he inquired.

She studied him before nodding. "Yeah."

He bit back a groan as he grabbed hold of the rail and pulled himself to his feet. She was worried enough about him without adding to it. He had a good ticker, or at least that's what his doctor had told him at his appointment last month, and he'd always eaten well and tried to take care of himself. He wasn't as worried he'd have a heart attack as the idiot downstairs had been, but his joints were most certainly not enjoying all the activity of the day.

Sixth floor, seventh... "Do you think we should go all the way to the top?" Mary Ellen asked worriedly.

Not one little bit, he thought.

"We probably should," he said instead.

She hesitated for a minute before trudging further onward. They arrived at the tenth floor and continued up the stairs to the door to the roof. A red sign announced that an alarm would go off, but he doubted that would happen with the power off and the generators not running. He pushed into the door and shoved it open, relieved with the silence.

The hot air hit him; he hadn't realized how much cooler the shadowed and concrete stairwell had been until he stepped onto the tar paper lined roof. It was littered with the remains of birds and feathers. He imagined by tomorrow they would start to smell hideously bad. He kicked the stopper down on the door and made sure it stayed propped open before leaving it.

"Ugh," Mary Ellen muttered as she stepped carefully around the broken remains.

He couldn't have said it any better himself as they made their way toward the edge of the building. This probably wasn't the safest place to be, but he didn't particularly care as curiosity drove him onward. He stopped at the edge, his mouth dropping as he gazed over land that had been greatly changed since this morning. There was more destruction than he'd thought there would be.

They were lucky to be alive, and he was determined to make sure they stayed that way no matter what the cost. He just didn't know how much the cost would be, or how either one of them would survive paying the toll.

Tears slid down Mary Ellen's face. She turned away from the carnage. Al took one last, lingering look. A canyon out there might rival The Grand Canyon, curling tendrils of smoke dotted the landscape as far as he could see. The rivers twining through the horizon most likely hadn't been there before. They were the color of blood. It was the eeriest thing he'd seen in his life, and though he didn't believe it was actually blood, he couldn't shake the thought it was. Couldn't shake the notion the life force of many humans now filled those rivers. He forced himself to turn away from a world no longer his, and one he no longer knew.

Mary Ellen was creeping back through the broken bird bodies, her attention riveted upon the roof. "Well, I don't see any breaks up here," she muttered.

He didn't see any either, but he didn't know what that meant. He still didn't trust the building beneath him, but visions of that bed danced through his head as he prowled the roof with Mary Ellen.

"We should take the other stairwell back down." Mary Ellen was already at the door.

He nodded as he followed her down the stairs and out of the stairwell. All of the doors on this floor were still open; apparently the hotel hadn't filled up enough to have people pushed this far up. They entered the other stairwell, and though there were more cracks running through the walls on this side of the building, it still appeared in relatively stable condition.

Reaching the seventh floor, Mary Ellen pushed the door open and stepped into chaos. People were crammed into the hall, searching through rooms, shouting for other people and weeping loudly. Mary Ellen took a startled step back, bumping briefly against a child of five or six who ran screaming down the hall past them with his mother scrambling to keep up.

Mary Ellen began to push through the crush of bodies in the hall. Al's nose wrinkled in response to the people around him, most were in desperate need of a shower, as was he. Mary Ellen's room was around a corner and almost at the end. She disappeared inside, and Al quickly followed.

Five women looked up as they entered; four of them were standing next to the two double beds while the other was sitting on the pull out couch. They were slouched and dirty, disheveled with an air of defeat that frightened him. "I'm supposed to be staying here," Mary Ellen informed them in a choked voice.

The woman on the couch shook her head and turned her attention back to her clasped hands. "Guess I'm sharing too," she muttered.

Mary Ellen looked like she'd just been socked in the stomach. Al's hand tightened on the pillow. He hoped they would let him take the pillow back when they left the hotel, and he hoped it didn't start to rain or hail or some other new thing Mother Nature may just be waiting to throw at them when they went out there. But he knew, without having to ask, Mary Ellen wasn't going to stay here. He had no intention of doing so either, if this was what his room was going to be like. He suspected by the end of the day, or at least by tomorrow night, there would be people sleeping on the floors. He'd take sleeping outside over that any day.

He grabbed hold of her forearm. "Why don't we just go," he suggested. She opened her mouth to protest but he quickly cut her off. "At least back to my room where it's a little calmer." He glanced at the women. "And private."

She nodded mutely but panic lingered in her eyes. He reluctantly reentered the turmoil enshrouding the hall and pulled her back toward the stairwell they had just left. They passed by others on their way down, but no one spoke and most just seemed content to remain oblivious to the two of them. On the second floor he returned to his room to find it as empty as it had been before, but more of the doors in the hall had now been closed off. He gratefully tossed his pillow onto the bed and released a relieved sigh as he sat down.

"They must be placing all older people on this floor," Mary Ellen muttered.

"It would make sense," he agreed.

"I can't stay in here."

"You can stay for now, and if someone has a problem with it, then we can leave the building. I think we should really consider finding somewhere else to go anyway. I'm not sure how safe this place is going to stay."

She sank down beside him and folded her hands before her as she leaned forward. "You're right," she relented. "I don't like it here anymore than you do. I can leave

Rochelle a note to follow us, but I don't know where to go or where to send her."

"I've been thinking we should head into the mountains."

"The mountains, why?"

"There will be less people, more animals. I used to go hunting; I own a cabin in upstate New York. There was plenty of wildlife, a lake, and it was secluded. I know it seems pretty drastic, but I think it's going to be awhile before things get back to normal, if they *ever* get back to normal. It's essential we're somewhere safe, and with a food supply, until then."

"You think the cabin is still standing?"

"The mountains would have absorbed the force of the tremors better than the low areas around here, and even if it's not still standing there were a lot of those cabins around. I'm sure we could find something else. It will take us a while to get there and we'll have to leave notes for Rochelle along the way, but I think it could work out."

"Why not go to New Hampshire?"

"I don't really know that state as well, and it's about the same distance from here. South would be another option, but again I'm not sure what we'd be getting into. I'm not sure with New York either, but at least it's a starting point, and I know it better."

She nodded as she tugged anxiously at her hair. "Yeah, ok. Yeah," she agreed. "Just give me a minute."

He squeezed her arm again. "Take the time you need. We don't have to rush out of here right now, but we should go as soon as you're ready."

She was still sitting mutely when he disappeared into the bathroom. He didn't think he'd be seeing bathrooms on a regular basis for a while so he meant to take advantage of it while he still could. He doubted there would be any hot water, but he turned the shower on and was pleasantly surprised by the heat shooting out of it.

It was the little things he realized as he stepped under the spray. It had always been the little things in life he'd taken for granted, and missed the most when they were gone. Like his wife's Sunday breakfasts, and his mother's gentle singing, or the security of his earth. He vowed he'd never take advantage of them again as the heat of the shower eased some of the aches in his body. He'd enjoy them from now on because he doubted there were many little things left to take for granted.

CHAPTER 24

Xander
Foxboro, Mass.

"Absolutely not. Nuh-uh. No *way* am I going in there." Riley dug in her heels, pulling Xander abruptly up as she jerked to a halt. It seemed she had realized where the crowd was going before the rest of them had.

Xander tiredly surveyed the sea of heads disappearing into the open doors a hundred feet away from them. He didn't understand what had caused Riley's abrupt halt and protest until he tilted his head back to peer up at the building.

He understood her hesitance to enter the hotel, but it had *beds*. It had to be safe if there were people going inside, it *had* to be. He felt the same as she did about staying here for long, but to continue to fight and run and hide when they were clearly exhausted might end up being the very thing that got them all killed.

"Ri..." he began. She shook her head vehemently, causing her recently fixed ponytail to become loose again. "There will be beds."

She continued to shake her head as she took another step back.

"And there will probably be showers..." Lee sounded like he was tempting her with a biscuit.

Xander held his breath; he felt bad pushing her on this, but they had to rest, and she had to realize it. He could feel the longing rolling off of her as she stared at the tall building. Her gaze drifted over her dirty clothes and skin as she held her arms out before her.

Her shoulders sagged. "Fine. But only for a little bit," she amended quickly.

Xander thought he would feel relieved, but he didn't. He felt awful and more than a little distrustful of entering the building himself. They'd take a quick and most likely cold shower, get some sleep, and get out of there while the getting was good. He just required a couple hours to feel almost human again.

He enfolded her arm in the crook of his elbow as he pulled her toward the door. They were handed pillows and water and given rooms on two different floors. Riley opened her mouth to protest this arrangement, but Xander cut her swiftly off by thrusting his pillow at her. He didn't think she would get another chance if they threatened to kick her out again.

His shoulders slumped as he stared up the stairs. His feet ached far more than he would have thought possible. He'd been on the football, basketball, and baseball teams in high school and the baseball team in college. He'd run more laps than he cared to remember and had been training for the Boston Marathon next spring. Despite all this, he felt like he'd just run twenty miles up dreaded Heartbreak Hill, been kicked back down, rolled through garbage and dirt, and been told to do it all over again. This is what Sisyphus felt like, he realized.

The song, 'Who You Gonna Call,' from *Ghostbusters* ran briefly through his head. He decided he'd wait until level five before deciding if he was going to puke or not. The meager meal was not sitting well in his stomach, not in this heat.

He was grateful when they made it to Riley's assignment on the seventh floor. Lee threw the door open on complete chaos. "Not even a shower is worth that," Riley

declared.

Riley spun away from the open door and strode over to the steps. She folded her arms over her chest as she leaned against the wall to watch them. Xander glanced back at the packed and frenzied hall and had to agree with her. He turned to find a woman behind him, her mouth agape, and her eyes bulging as the door closed on the commotion. She turned and fled back down the stairs.

"She's got the right idea," Riley muttered.

"We'll try the next floor," Xander suggested though he doubted it would be any better.

He dreaded another flight, but he retained hope there would be some relief above, that it might be a little better. Grabbing hold of Riley's hand, he propelled her upward despite her rigid and awkward movements. He braced himself before he thrust the next door open.

He hadn't been expecting it, but he was greeted with relative tranquility. A few guys turned to look at them as a man stepped forward to block their entrance. Unlike the man on the first floor, this one didn't have a gun, but it was clear he thought he was the boss. "She doesn't belong here."

"We're not staying long," Xander informed him.

The man opened his mouth, but Riley jumped quickly in. "Please. I just want a shower, please. It's awful down there, and I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me stay for a bit."

Even filthy, her puppy dog eyes and gentle plea swayed the man as his shoulders slumped. He glanced around the hall and stepped closer to them. "One hour. But you can't stay longer than that, miss. This is the men's floor."

"I promise I won't," Riley replied with a flirtatious smile as she squeezed his arm and batted her lashes. "Thank you so much."

Xander rolled his eyes as he tried to keep his patience with her and the infatuated young guard. Apparently he wasn't the only one she could wrap around her delicate little finger. He kept his hand on her elbow as he hurried her down the hall to the open door of the room they'd been assigned. He closed the door after Lee and Bobby and slid the locks into place. He doubted they would be alone for long but the relative peace and quiet of the room was a piece of heaven.

"What is this, nineteen fifteen?" Riley immediately demanded. "'This is the men's floor.' Puh-lease! What absolute crap. What, do they think men and women can't be on the same floor, or coexist together?"

"Things are different now, Riley," Xander told her as he threw his pillow on the bed.

"What's that supposed to mean? I get stuck with the lunatic kids because I'm a woman while the manly men live in relative peace on the floor above? I call bullshit."

Bobby and Lee laughed as they dropped onto one of the beds. "No," Xander replied. "It means things are no longer the same, the old laws no longer apply, and it's only a matter of time before everyone begins to figure that out. I hate to tell you this Ri, but tomboy or not, you *are* a girl."

The look she shot him was not only reminiscent of the death stare laser beams she had tossed him many times before, but it made all the others pale in comparison. He expected some nasty comment, some clever retort; not the brief look of hurt that crossed her face before she stalked past him to the bathroom.

"Nice one, Romeo," Lee informed him as the shower turned on.

"She doesn't get it." Xander slumped down onto the blissful bed. "The sooner she gets it, the safer she'll be."

"She gets it, Xander. I think the guy in the hall can attest to that. That doesn't mean she has to like it. Two steps forward for you, my friend, and one *gigantic* leap back."

Xander flipped him the finger as he fell back on the bed. He stared at the ceiling, picking out the patterns upon it. It was a habit he'd had since he was a child, trying to find faces and patterns within the different swirls of paint. It felt strangely comforting as he discovered a brontosaurus and a human face.

"Where should we go from here?" Lee inquired.

Xander shook his head. "I don't know. I think one of the first things we have to do is find a vehicle. I can only imagine the amount of destruction Boston has sustained, and I don't think being around *more* people is a wise choice."

"I don't think it is, either."

"You plan on leaving?" Bobby asked anxiously.

Xander forced himself into a sitting position in order to face his friend. "You want to stay here?" Lee asked incredulously.

"This is where my family will come."

Lee was staring at Bobby like he was some strange specimen under a microscope. "Bobby, look around you. This place is going to be anarchy in a few days, if it takes *that* long."

"They'll keep control," Bobby retorted defensively. "We can't leave here, our families..."

"My family is dead."

It was the bluntness of Lee's words, the cold acceptance behind them that startled Xander more than the actual words themselves. "Lee..."

"It's ok, Xander, a lot of people are dead out there. I'm not an exception to the rule. I'll leave them a note when we have a destination in mind, but I'm not holding out hope I'll see them again. I think you two would be better off if you realized that kind of hope may be the worst kind right now."

Xander opened his mouth to protest and then closed it. Lee was right. That kind of hope could very well get them killed. It could keep them here, it could keep them in this town, and it could keep them in peril when they should be moving on. He focused on the closed bathroom door. How was he going to get her to agree that the best thing for them may be to leave their families behind when they might still be alive?

That was the worst part of it. That hope, that draining awful hope dragging them down. It had brought them into this stadium in the first place. A place where he didn't think they belonged at all. But to leave their loved ones behind would be to leave pieces of themselves behind, and he worried the small pieces would eventually add up to large chunks of their humanity.

How long would it be before they were willing to leave each other behind?

No, it wouldn't come to that. He wouldn't let it. But he wasn't entirely sure he could stop it either. This was only the beginning of what could be weeks or months or, shudder at the thought, *years*.

"I'm not leaving here until I know what happened to my family," Bobby insisted.

Would Bobby be the first one? Xander wondered. Would he be the first one they left

behind, the first one they sacrificed in order to try and ensure their own survival?

"Well, you can't stay here when we leave." Xander had been so engrossed in his own thoughts, he hadn't realized the shower had turned off. Riley was standing in the doorway with a towel in her hand. Her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders in wet spirals accentuating the delicate lines of her jaw and cheeks. The sight of her caused his heart to skip a beat. "That's crazy, Bobby." She stepped out of the bathroom, allowing a puff of steam to follow behind her. Like a wolf on the hunt, Xander scented the enticing soap drifting from the room.

"We're rocks, paper, scissors for *that*," Lee announced as he leapt off the bed with renewed vigor at the prospect of a hot shower.

"Go ahead," Bobby said.

Xander waved him away as Riley padded across the carpet and sank onto the bed next to him. Xander quirked an eyebrow as he stared at her. He'd expected some avoidance for a few hours, a lot more dirty looks, and perhaps another punch in the face. Instead her arm nearly brushed his as she ran her fingers through her tangled hair.

"We ought to find some clothes, and a hair brush," she muttered.

"The little things," Bobby said with a half smile.

"Yeah. You would really choose to stay here?"

"You would really choose to leave your family behind?"

Her hand dropped into her lap, Xander held his breath as he waited for her answer.

"It's not leaving them behind, it's moving on, trying to find somewhere better. If it exists."

"And if it doesn't?" Bobby pressed.

"It sure doesn't exist here, Bobby. This isn't right. I don't know why I feel like that, but I just can't shake the feeling this relative calm and peace isn't going to last. I feel like a refugee in this place, and not a well-liked one."

She turned toward Xander, her eyes pleading as she stared at him. She didn't have to convince him though; he was ready to leave here right now... Or at least as soon as he got his chance at a shower, too.

"I'm ready to go," he told her as Lee emerged from the bathroom. "Go ahead, Bobby."

Bobby stared at them, reluctant to leave, but he climbed to his feet and disappeared into the bathroom. "We can't leave Bobby," Riley muttered as she returned to trying to untangle her hair.

"If none of us want to be here, we may have to," Xander told her.

He was unable to resist the impulse to touch one of her lengthy curls. It was as silky as he'd always thought it would be as he wrapped it leisurely around his finger. She didn't tell him to stop as her eyes met and held his. He found himself wishing Lee and Bobby weren't here as she pulled her full bottom lip between her teeth and held her breath. He forced himself to unravel the curl, before he couldn't, as his pulse began to speed up.

Her shoulders slumped, she held out her hand to shake off the long strands of dark chocolate hair entangled around her fingers. They shimmered in the light as it floated toward the floor on the still air within the room. He watched until they landed upon the dull beige carpet. It was such a normal act, one he'd seen his sister do countless times; for one instant he was caught up in the swirl of grief the memory aroused in him.

"I'm not staying." He was jerked from the memory by Lee's heated words. "I don't like the idea of leaving Bobby behind, but it's his choice to make. He's an adult."

Riley snorted. "We're all supposed to be adults, but let's face it: we don't have a freaking *clue* right now. All we have is each other, and we can't just leave one of us behind."

"So we all stay because one of us is acting like a child and stubbornly clinging to his family?"

Riley was the queen of making someone squirm. That look wasn't directed at him, and he still felt uncomfortable for Lee, who actually tugged on the collar of his shirt. "You and Bobby have been friends since elementary school," she grated.

Lee released the collar of his shirt and focused on the wall behind Riley. "I know Ri," he muttered. "But you *know* we shouldn't stay here. You *know* it's dangerous. Do you want to die?"

"Of course not," she retorted. "But..."

"Shh," Xander said as the shower turned off.

He rose and stretched as he cracked his back. He doubted there was any hot water left, and he didn't care. It took everything Xander had not to run Bobby over as he emerged from the steam. The water was tepid, but it was still the best shower he'd ever had in his life, and it gave him some time to formulate a rudimentary plan. His nose wrinkled as he slipped his filthy, stinking clothes back on afterwards.

Yep, they definitely had to find some clothing. He reemerged into the bedroom to find Riley standing before the window staring silently out as Lee and Bobby sat hunched on the bed. "We'll leave notes for our parents telling them where we're going," he said.

"And where exactly is that?" Riley asked. She didn't look at him as she continued to focus outside.

"For now I think we should head toward my grandparents in Sturbridge. It's relatively rural there. Unless someone has a relative closer that they think might be a good start." Bobby and Riley shook their heads in response.

"My aunt's in Worcester, but that city's probably a disaster now, too," Lee said. "We have to go by Worcester anyway to get to Sturbridge."

"So western Mass it is. We should get going." Bobby wouldn't meet his gaze as he focused on the folded hands in his lap. Riley wouldn't turn around. "Does anyone have a better idea?" Xander demanded, growing frustrated by the stubborn silence. His patience frayed further when he got three head shakes in response. "Then let's go!"

Bobby finally looked at him; he opened his mouth to say something but Riley's words cut him off. "There's something happening out there."

A cold chill slid down Xander's spine. He couldn't shake the feeling they had run out of time, that their desperation to get clean may have cost them their lives. Riley's knuckles were white as her hand curled around the curtain she was holding back. Lee and Bobby jumped to their feet and rushed over to join her. Xander stood on his toes to peer over her shoulder.

It didn't take him long to see what had caught her attention as people split and flowed in different directions. Instead of coming toward the building they were flowing away from it, running as if the hounds of hell were on their heels and closing in fast.

"We have to go."

He grabbed hold of Riley's hand and pulled it away. Due to her death grip on the curtain his brusque tug caused her to pull it down, rod and all. They could send him the bill, he thought crazily as he spun on his heel and practically flew toward the door. All of

his tiredness and pain from earlier were distant memories as adrenaline spurred him on.

Eighth floor! They were on the freaking eighth floor, and they were out of time!

He didn't remember throwing the locks on the door, didn't remember opening it and fleeing into the hall, but he was suddenly in the stairwell, plummeting down steps, taking them two at a time. Riley was at his side, staying close to him as she somehow managed to keep up with his frantic and reckless plunge.

On the fourth floor the stairwell became congested with people pushing and shoving their way down. He should have listened to Riley; they never should have entered this building. He shoved his way through the fray, refusing to relinquish Riley's hand as people pushed and tore and pounded against them. Somewhere, someone began to scream. The long wail of agony caused him to halt abruptly as it echoed eerily within the stairwell.

He pushed back, shoving Riley into a corner as he stared helplessly at the sea of heads surrounding them. Continuing to try and force their way through the mob was pointless, and he refused to aid in crushing someone to death. No matter how badly he longed to live, his last moments would not be spent climbing over the top of someone else, and he couldn't shake the notion these were his last moments.

His heart hammered as he pinned Riley against the wall. He tried to keep her sheltered from the worst of the crushing impact as he searched for some solution to the problem. Then, over the top of the sea of heads he spotted another door. He nodded to Lee and Bobby and pointed over the top of the horde. He tried to be discreet so as not to alert everyone to the fact there was an escape from this mess.

Grabbing Riley's hand, he pulled her through the crowd. He elbowed people with little remorse as they tried to shove him toward the stairs. Lee appeared at his side as Bobby made it to the door and flung it open.

Xander practically fell into the hallway, but they had little reprieve as people rushed at them in an attempt to escape the hall. "Here!" Riley pulled him to the side and dragged him into another room. It wouldn't get them out of the building, but at least they were out of the treacherous stampede.

He rushed toward the window. They were on the other side of the building now, on the side people had been fleeing from. A dim hellish glow danced like a fairy in the garden over Riley's pale features before they reached the window. This was no fairy though; this was something straight from Satan's wildest fantasies. He was certain of that even before he looked out the glass.

His mouth dropped, the feeling that shot through his body was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. It seemed as if every fluid in his body rushed to his feet, leaving him empty and cold.

"Is that *lava*?" Lee exploded.

Xander could only stare at the mass moving and flowing toward them. A mass that did, impossibly, appear to be lava.

CHAPTER 25

John

Foxboro, Mass.

Carl pulled the truck over and parked in front of the post office. "What are you doing?" Rochelle asked worriedly.

"There are cops over there." Carl leaned across them and pulled the glove compartment open. Rochelle's breath hissed in as she spotted the gun stashed inside. "Maybe they have some answers."

"I don't think that gun is the best idea," John told him.

"I have no intention of going over there with it," Carl assured him. "But I'm not leaving this truck unprotected."

"Then what do you expect to happen?"

Carl's eyes met his briefly. "For you to go."

John pursed his mouth as he glanced at the expanse of undamaged lawn, and the crowd gathered upon it. A large number of the crowd was already staring distrustfully at the company name and locale emblazoned on the side of the truck. He would have bet an arm most of the time out-of-towners weren't looked at twice in this town, especially with the stadium on the outskirts.

And Carl was asking him to walk right into the middle of it. He thought he'd rather dress in tights and start dancing the Nutcracker.

"I'll go, but you'll have to stay here," Carl told him. "with the gun."

John cursed under his breath and threw the door open. Rochelle was smirking at him as she slid out of the middle. "Sorry for swearing," he apologized.

Rochelle shrugged. "Like I said, I've heard it before."

Yeah, he'd heard it at her age too, but he still didn't feel right swearing in front of her. "Lock the door," Carl instructed as he grabbed the keys and hopped out.

John scowled at him as he walked around the front of the truck. He felt like an ant under a magnifying glass as more distrustful stares were directed their way. He could almost feel the fire licking up his back, singing his skin, and sizzling him alive. He was truly beginning to dislike people, or at least distrust them greatly. Something apparently shared by the people turned toward them. He had to force himself not to look at the bullet hole in the truck. He didn't like the idea of being reminded of what people were capable of.

At least there were police over there. It had to be safe.

Even Carl seemed hesitant now as he returned the suspicious stares of the crowd. "Just see what you can find out. If it gets hairy in there, come right back."

"Did you really just say hairy?" John retorted.

Carl glowered at him as he turned toward the truck and surreptitiously slid the gun into the waistband of his jeans. "Just go and be careful."

John gave him a quick salute. "Yes, sir."

Rochelle rolled her eyes. "I'm going with you."

"Maybe you should stay," Carl suggested.

She shook her head as she surveyed the crowd. "They're already suspicious of us, it will look better if I go with him. You know since I'm a young weak girl and all, they'll

trust him more with me at his side."

John stared at her with a new appreciation as he realized that yes, she was young, but she was anything but weak. Carl grinned at her as he leaned against the hood of the truck and crossed his legs before him. "I think you might be able to give them more trouble than this guy." He thrust his thumb at John.

Rochelle released a small snort. "I bet I could too."

"I'm so glad you joined us. You just make this experience so much better," John told her, but he was glad to have her at his side as they crossed the road and entered the grassy center.

People stepped away from them so swiftly, John lifted his arm and took a quick sniff of his pit. Yeah, it wasn't the most pleasant aroma, but he was no worse than the people surrounding him. He wondered if he had a bulbous growth on his forehead or some other indicator he carried the bubonic plague. They were simply from a different town; they weren't from Mars for Christ's sake.

He could barely suppress a grin as he caught Rochelle sneaking a sniff of her armpit too. She really was growing on him, and he wasn't a fan of kids, especially not pre-teen girls. They tended to get a little carried away and screamed too much for his liking, but this girl was watching the world crumble around her, and she was keeping it together far better than he'd ever thought possible for someone her age.

Better than him, he thought with chagrin. But then, perhaps her age actually helped in this situation. Maybe she didn't grasp the full ramifications of everything going on, but he doubted that.

The crowd parting around them made it far easier to get toward the front of the mob than he'd anticipated. There was a group of policemen, firefighters, and a couple of EMTs gathered there. A table had been setup and the injured were being treated as names were taken down. Behind the table makeshift tents and shelters were hastily being erected. John hadn't expected people to actually stay within the grassy area, but apparently that was their purpose as a flap pulled back to reveal a few people lying down.

"Next!" a middle-aged, potbellied man in a firefighter uniform called out.

A sobbing man and woman stepped forward. John turned away before he could hear their story. There was something so broken about them, he became certain they were looking for their child. He weaved his way back through the crowd, keeping Rochelle near his side as he homed in on a group of police officers he'd seen by the sign when they'd driven past.

The officers were still there when he and Rochelle broke free of the crowd again. Two men and one woman were huddled together, talking softly as their eyes constantly darted about. They stiffened as John and Rochelle approached. He was acutely aware all of their hands went to the guns at their sides, and their eyes narrowed. How bad had it gotten around here? John wondered as they both came to an abrupt halt.

"Can we help you with something?" the woman demanded.

He wasn't entirely sure if they could help them at all; they didn't look as if they could help themselves right now. "We, uh... we were wondering if you had any information? Do you know what's going on?"

"No one knows what's going on," the older cop retorted.

"Have you heard anything from anyone outside of this town?" Rochelle inquired shakily. John shot her a look; she was anything but shaky. This must be the "weak" girl

she had referred to. He had to admire it as all three of the cops relaxed, and the woman offered a small smile.

The woman held up her hand to silence the older man when he started to speak again. "No sweetie, I'm sorry, but we haven't heard anything yet. We're starting a list, perhaps your family or friends are on it."

"We're not from around here, and I was wondering if you had an idea of where we could go to try and get a hold of our families?"

They exchanged a look as they shook their heads. "There appears to be another, probably larger shelter at the stadium. We've been seeing flares go up, but it's not safe to travel through the area. The roads leading to the stadium have sustained a lot of damage. There is no way to know the extent of it right now. I would suggest you stay here until things have stabilized, and we know more about the situation."

The sweat beading down his spine had nothing to do with the hazy heat of the day, and everything to do with the fact they might be stopped from leaving. That was their job after all, public safety, and if these had been normal circumstances, John knew the police wouldn't have allowed them to travel those roads. These were not normal circumstances though, and these officers had a lot more on their hands than worrying if three people left this area or remained behind as requested.

How long would it be before they decided to blockade the roads to ensure the safety of the survivors though? What would happen when they tried to restore some semblance of order and normalcy? He doubted there would be any search and rescue crews going out anytime soon. There may *never* be any search and rescue missions, and they would probably only end up being recovery missions. Even those would likely be few and far between and conducted mostly by loved ones looking for some closure by having bodies to bury.

I'll never know such closure. He shot the thought down before he found himself unable to function again.

John glanced back over the crowd, but he couldn't see the truck and Carl from here. He hadn't heard any gunfire, and he knew Carl wouldn't let the truck go without a fight. "Thank you," John muttered.

He grabbed hold of Rochelle's shoulder and turned her away. She stared questioningly up at him as he hurried her back toward the mob. "I think it's best if we get out of here while we still can," he informed her.

She nodded and swallowed heavily as she surveyed the people gathered around them. "You're right."

It was harder to maneuver through the crowd on the way back; apparently their out of town status had already been forgotten. He found he actually preferred being a stinking pariah to the crush pressing against them.

"John!"

He turned back, his heart leapt into his throat as he realized he had lost Rochelle within the crowd. Barreling back through, he elbowed and pushed people out of the way. He ignored the looks and muttered grunts he received from them. "Rochelle!" he shouted.

A small hand shot up, waving briefly in between two heads. He started to run, crashing haphazardly through people. There was no way he was going to lose the kid. She may be tough, but there were plenty of sickos in the world who would take this opportunity to let their freak flag fly.

"Rochelle!"

"Here!" The hand shot up again, drawing the attention of a large man.

The guy's hand swallowed Rochelle's arm as he pulled her forward. The man scowled at John as he arrived breathlessly by the man's side. Rochelle was gaping up at the man, her eyes wide as she stared at him, and then the massive hand covering her upper arm. "You should take better care of your sister, if you don't want something bad to happen to her," the man grumbled.

John didn't bother to correct the man's statement as he grabbed hold of Rochelle's arm and pulled her away. "I will," he promised.

He held firmly to her, unwilling to let her go as he pushed his way back through the mob. It startled him to realize he'd been shaken by the experience. He barely knew the kid, yet he had been terrified of losing her. He inhaled his first easy breath when they broke free of the crowd.

"Don't get separated from me again."

"I won't." He was more surprised by the tremor in her voice. Something had finally rattled her calm exterior. "I was lucky to find the two of you."

He almost half felt like crying himself as tears began to swarm in her eyes. "A wildfire you can handle, but you get lost in a crowd, and you fall apart on me?"

Her lip trembled slightly. "I have no one else, not anymore. I don't think."

"We have each other." God, he was turning into a mush. He wanted to gag himself.

"Yeah, and I'd like to keep it that way!" she retorted with a grin far preferable to tears.

"Me too," he admitted.

She looked both ways before skipping across the street toward Carl. John shook his head but promptly followed behind her. "What did you learn?" Carl inquired, staring questioningly at Rochelle as she hopped onto the hood of the truck without placing her hands down. "Hey, paint job!"

"Seriously?" she inquired with a quirk of her head. "It *has* a bullet hole in it."

She wasn't the least bit bothered by Carl's glower. "It was a new truck."

"*Was* being the operative word."

Carl's forehead furrowed as he studied her. "What grade are you in?"

"Seventh. But I test high and read on a college level."

"I'll bet," he muttered before turning his attention back to John. "Did you learn anything?"

John filled him in on what they had learned from the police officers. Carl was thoughtful as he leaned against the hood. "So I guess we head toward the stadium. The least we can do is check it out and see what's going on over there. Do you know how to get there?" Carl asked.

"Not from here, I've only taken the highway and Route One to games and concerts," John told him.

"We can always follow those."

They both turned in the direction Rochelle pointed. The crowd within the grassy knoll became silent as a green flare soared high before dropping back down. Another red flare flew into the sky followed by two more reds and another green. "Is that normal?"

"Is anything normal anymore?" John asked but a feeling of unease began to grow in his stomach as another green blaze lit up the sky. The frantic firing of the flares made it

seem as if the people at the stadium were looking for help instead of trying to draw people in. He held his breath, counting silently to himself as he waited for another fiery green ball to emerge. He was near a hundred when he realized everything had become still.

The silence following was thick, hushed. The heat of the day seemed more oppressive in the shroud encompassing the crowd. The button on the pocket of Rochelle's shorts made a small screeching noise that caused him to flinch when she slid from the hood of the truck. "We should go," Carl said.

"Where?" John demanded.

"Anywhere but here."

"The stadium?"

Carl's gaze drifted back toward the muddled sky. "I don't know, just get us somewhere John. We've already been shot at in this town; I think it's best if we get out of here as soon as we can."

John nodded as he hurried around the hood of the truck. Rochelle was already opening the passenger side door when he stopped her. "You know, you wouldn't be such a bad little sister if I ever had one."

She turned back to him and grinned as she tossed her hair back. "Please. If I had an older brother he would be *way* cooler than you."

A short burst of laughter escaped him as she hopped into the truck. Yeah, she was a keeper; he might even let her out of the middle of the truck later. *Might*.

She was already studying the map when he slid in beside her. Carl's finger trailed over the map as he tried to decipher the roadways. "We can try and go this way. It will get us to Route One at least, and then to the stadium if we decide to go. If we run into a problem we can go this way." Carl leaned back over them, placed the gun in the glove box and took out a pen. He made a few marks on the map and released it to Rochelle.

Rochelle pulled the map into the middle and dropped it in between them as Carl resumed driving. John followed Carl's markings but the route was anything but familiar to him. It didn't matter anyway; they didn't make it far before their path came to an abrupt end, blocked by a giant crater in the earth. Carl stopped the truck and placed it in park as they sat and stared across the enormous cavern sprawling before them. It wasn't nearly as big as the one that had claimed his father, but there was something ominous about the glow filtering up from inside. A glow that hadn't been present from the crater in Bridgewater.

"Do we want to look?" Rochelle inquired.

"No."

Even as John said the word, he and Carl were simultaneously opening their doors. John's heart hammered as he crept closer. He was half-convinced it was going to collapse beneath him, but he found himself irresistibly drawn forward, unable to stop his feet from dropping one in front of the other as they inched forward. He could see broken buildings lining some of the upper shelves of rock. Most of them were burned, broken skeletons of their former selves, but a couple still held their brick façade.

He was sweating profusely, and half convinced his skin was starting to blister before they made it to the edge. Dirt and rocks kicked out under his feet. They clattered against the side as they tumbled into the hole. He took a step back as Carl pressed his arm into Rochelle's chest and pushed her back. Sparks of fire and ash danced before them, the

faint pop of bubbling air sounded in his ears as he stood on his tiptoes and leaned outward to peer down.

From the corner of his eye he caught Carl doing the same thing as they both stared into the pit. "It's Hell," Rochelle whispered.

John tried to deny her words, tried to tell her it couldn't possibly be Hell, but the words stuck in his throat. What else could it be? If the heat blasting from it was any indication, then it couldn't be anything other than where the devil resided. Sweat beaded across his brow; he leaned back as a wave of heat blasted him in the face. For a split second he thought his skin had melted off as his hands flew to his cheeks. Though it was hot, his skin seemed to be firmly intact beneath the crushing grip of his palms. He didn't feel any blisters, and yep, his eyebrows were thankfully still there.

"Is that lava?" Rochelle demanded.

"It can't possibly be," Carl muttered. "This is the freaking northeast!"

"You said it couldn't possibly have been a tremor earlier either, and look at how that turned out for us," John reminded him.

Carl shot him a dark look. "Yeah well, ok but at least we know the New Madrid could affect us, but *this*..." Carl broke off as he waved his hands helplessly toward the gorge.

"There's magma beneath the earth. No one knows for sure how much, but it is there. The quakes may have ripped something open; they may have caused some shift in the earth that has opened it up, and allowed lava to flow forth." Rochelle shook her head as she glanced back toward the glowing canyon. "There's also the New England Seamount chain."

"The *what*?" John demanded.

"The New England Seamount chain. It's off the coast of Massachusetts in the Atlantic Ocean and consists of extinct volcanoes. It formed some of the mountains in New Hampshire and Canada. It is possible the volcanoes are more active than anyone knew. It's pretty far off shore, but it might still affect us. It's still crazy though."

"I'm glad we found Mr. Wizard," John told her as he glanced back toward the awful crater.

"I like Geology, it's interesting. Though, I found it much more interesting when it wasn't trying to kill us."

"I have to agree. It might not be lava, but since none of us are going any closer to find out for sure, let's just accept we're not going to get to the stadium this way," Carl told them.

John wasn't going to argue with him. He practically shoved Rochelle back into the truck in his rush to escape the frightening substance simmering within the immense hole. Was Rochelle right, had something been torn open? Had the plates shifted so much the interior of the earth had risen up to the surface? Had something within the earth actually ruptured?

He thought back to when this had all started. To the feeling that had encompassed him during the first big quake, and the shattering he'd felt deep within his soul. Had that shattering been the actual rending of the earth? He shuddered, suddenly cold despite the fact the temperature gauge on the truck was reading one hundred and two degrees.

What a mess, what a hideous, hideous mess. As he thought it, five flares shot simultaneously into the air. They may have had to reroute, but they were still heading

toward the stadium.

CHAPTER 26

*Mary Ellen
Foxboro, Mass.*

Mary Ellen jolted upright and nearly toppled out of the bed as loud screams pierced the air. She blinked in confusion as she strived to shake the sleep still clinging to her. She hadn't meant to fall asleep, hadn't meant to let her guard down, but apparently she wasn't alone as Al gazed around the room in confusion from the other bed.

More screams ripped through the air. An icy chill crept down her spine as an empty pit opened in her stomach. The unreasonable urge to cry seized hold of her as her heart heaved a mighty da thump. Never in a million years would she have guessed falling asleep would be her downfall, but that's exactly what it seemed to have been.

She launched to her feet as a shrill scream echoed eerily throughout the hall and room. "Al..."

He was beside her faster than she had thought possible as he gazed warily at the door. She was unwilling to open it, to go out there and see what was going on. A loud crash whipped her head around as a rapid barrage of gunshots pierced the air and a volley of flares shot into the sky.

Mary Ellen raced toward the window. She didn't like the idea of looking, but she couldn't stop herself. Her hands pressed against the glass as she gazed out at the chaos the stadium had become. She watched in horror as people flocked like geese away from the hotel. They didn't stop, didn't hesitate as they shoved and trampled each other in their desperate attempt to escape whatever was coming at them.

She strained to see what it was they were fleeing from, but she couldn't see anything past the hotel.

"We have to go." Al grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her toward the door.

She nearly fell as she tripped over her own feet in her rush to get to the door. A group of people ran by as Al opened the door. Mary Ellen's jaw dropped as the group threw the door of the stairwell open on a massive crush of people pushing and shoving at each other. She took a step back from the insanity as the group forced their way into the chaos.

Whatever it was everyone was fleeing from, it had to be bad if it was driving them into what appeared to be almost certain death as shouts of pain and anarchy erupted from the stairwell. Mary Ellen turned in the opposite direction and raced toward the other stairwell. She opened the door to find it was just as packed and hectic as the other one.

Death, she could feel its cold hand sliding over her skin as its breath seemed to lick against the nape of her neck.

Dying trapped like a sardine in a stairwell was not the way she was going to go though. She slammed the door closed and spun on her heel as she helplessly looked around the hallway.

"There might be another one." Al's face was paler than normal; the lines more visible around his clamped mouth.

Mary Ellen followed him through the convoluted hallways until they came to another door at the far back of the building. She was reaching for the handle when the door burst open. She jumped back, stifling a small squeak as four wide eyed people plunged into the

hall. Behind them she could see another crush of people trying to make it to the lobby.

"There's no way out through there," the young man in the lead abruptly informed her.

Mary Ellen glanced behind him again as the door shut on the screams. "What's going on?" she demanded, but they were already running down the hall. "Wait!"

Al grabbed hold of her arm and rapidly propelled her after the small group. "The other stairways are clogged even worse!" Al yelled after them.

"We know." The brown haired boy at the back of the group informed them.

They ran down the hall toward the room Mary Ellen and Al had been in. The man at the front of the group threw the door open on a room close to the stairwell. The four of them split up as the man with sun bleached hair ran into a room across the hall while the other three entered the first room. The young girl, and the brunette guy, started stripping the bed as the other one lifted the desk chair and heaved it at the window.

Mary Ellen gaped as the chair crashed into the window with a loud bang and bounced uselessly back off. He lifted the chair again, this time keeping hold of it as he spun around and smashed it off the glass. A loud curse escaped him; the chair tumbled from his grasp as the glass splintered but held firm.

Al hurried to gather the stripped sheets and began rapidly tying the ends of them into a knot. The man lifted the chair and smashed it off the glass again. Spider-web fractures spiraled out from the impact area and spread rapidly across the thick glass to the corners of the window. He lifted the chair again, stepped back and once more heaved it forward.

Relief filled her as glass shattered outward. The chair flew out behind it, and for one disconcerting second it seemed to hang in the air before plummeting out of sight.

"Sheets!" he commanded.

"Almost there," Al informed him as he jerked a knot taut and tugged fiercely at the line.

The boy who had gone into the other room reappeared with an armload of sheets. Mary Ellen leapt forward to help untangle the pile he dropped it in a heap upon the floor. A loud crash jerked Mary Ellen's head around as a scream spiraled through the air. "What was that?"

The girl's eyes were haunted as they met hers. "People are jumping," she whispered.

Her stomach rolled as bile surged up her throat. Mary Ellen turned her attention back to the window as a loud thwack and more screams echoed throughout. "What is out there?" she demanded.

"Lava, or we think its lava. Whatever it is, it isn't good, and it's coming this way." The brown haired boy said as he knelt at their side and helped to knot the sheets.

"Are you serious?" Mary Ellen demanded.

"As a heart attack."

The girl's fingers shook, but she tied a swift knot and tossed the sheets to the boy who had smashed out the window. He grabbed hold of them as another loud crash echoed throughout the building. Glass rained past their window. No one within the room moved, Mary Ellen didn't think they breathed as someone plummeted past.

The man who had shattered the glass grabbed the sheets and tossed them out the window. "Find something to tie the end to." The brunette guy jumped over the top of the bed and to the side. He tied the end of the sheets to the heavy wooden leg of the bed.

"Riley!" the guy who had broken the window barked. The girl was deathly pale as she mutely stared back at him. "Riley, come on."

"Xander," she whispered.

He thrust the sheets at the surfer looking guy and hurried toward Riley. Grabbing hold of her arm, he propelled her toward the window. "You have to go."

"The others," she protested.

"Will all follow soon; you're going first."

"But..."

"There isn't time to argue. Go Riley, just go."

"Come on Ri." The brown haired boy held his hand out to her as the surfer looking one kept a firm hold on the sheets.

Xander seized the sheet and thrust it into Riley's trembling hands. "You'll be fine; you can do this."

"Are you going to give me a feather and tell me I can fly too?" Riley inquired.

Mary Ellen frowned at the odd statement, but Xander grinned at Riley. "If it will help."

"Wait!" Al commanded. He turned away, grabbed hold of a blanket and tossed it toward Xander. "There's probably still glass in the frame."

"Thanks." Xander spread the blanket over the frame before helping to adjust Riley onto the windowsill.

"Wait." Riley grabbed hold of his cheeks and kissed him soundly. The other two guys grinned as they elbowed each other. "I'll see you soon."

Xander's face reddened; he swallowed heavily as he nodded. "You will."

He kept a hold on Riley until she moved beyond his grasp. Mary Ellen leaned out to watch as she scurried down the side of the building and moved with rapid speed toward the ground. "You're next."

She took a startled step back as Xander turned toward her and held out his hand. Amazement filtered through as she gazed at his outstretched hand. She didn't know this guy; she didn't know any of them. She most certainly hadn't expected them to put her life ahead of theirs. No one had *ever* put her ahead of them before. "Go on Mary Ellen," Al encouraged.

"Hurry ma'am that stuff was moving fast," the surfer looking guy told her.

Xander helped her over the windowsill and held onto her until she was stable. "I'm ok," she told him.

"Be careful."

She felt a flash of panic as his hand slid free of her arm. Clinging to the sheets, she struggled to keep her thoughts off of the open air behind her as she fought to keep her feet braced against the side of the building. She'd snuck out more than a few times as a teenager, but her room had been on the first floor. That had been a *big* mistake on her parent's part, but she'd never had to find creative ways to climb out of her house, and wasn't experienced with it at all.

'Only two floors, only two floors,' she chanted silently in an attempt to distract herself from the possibility of someone leaping out of a window above her, or the sheets giving way.

Her arms began to ache, and her hands were sore from their death grip, but she steadily slid downward until she was relieved to feel her feet hit the ground.

"Are you ok?" Riley demanded.

Mary Ellen nodded at the young girl as she forced herself to relax her hold on the

sheets. She couldn't bring herself to look at the body sprawled nearby, but blood splattered the ground beneath her feet. "Don't look, you won't believe what you see anyway," Riley muttered.

Mary Ellen turned her attention back to the building as the brown haired boy swung his leg over and shimmied down the rope far faster than Mary Ellen had. The surfer guy wasn't far behind him. Mary Ellen glanced nervously away as some bleeding stragglers ran around the corner of the building. Urgency seized her; she shifted from foot to foot as the loud splintering of a tree caught her attention.

"Hurry, hurry," Riley whispered.

Mary Ellen couldn't look away from the corner of the building as another loud snap reverberated through the air. Sparks flew high as a telephone pole toppled. She took an abrupt step back and bumped roughly into Riley. The girl grabbed her arm, her fingers dug in as she leaned around Mary Ellen to see what was happening.

Another loud bang echoed through the air. The building shifted with a loud crunch as bricks and mortar groaned and heaved. Riley spun away from her. "Xander hurry!" she screamed.

Mary Ellen took a step back as more sparks shot into the air. The side of the building began to sink as the earth started to crumble. Mary Ellen tilted her head back to watch as Xander helped Al out the window. They said something quickly to each other and then Al was moving down the rope of sheets. Xander swung his leg out when Al was almost halfway down.

Mary Ellen's breath froze as she prayed the sheets would hold up beneath the weight of both men, and that they remained securely tied to the bed. Al swiftly moved down as he used his legs against the building and rapidly rappelled off it.

He dropped to the ground and bent over to rub his knees as he grimaced. Mary Ellen hurried to his side. "Are you ok?" she demanded.

Al nodded as he stumbled away from Xander's rapid descent. The building gave another groan as the back of it slid further into the ground. A startled cry escaped Xander as he lost his purchase on the building and spun around. He crashed loudly against the glass. His hands slipped on the sheet. He fell five feet before catching himself and jerking to an abrupt halt.

Riley let out a frightened cry. The brunette and the surfer guy lurched forward in an attempt to catch him if he should fall. Mary Ellen's gaze drifted to the back of the building as half of it collapsed into what unbelievably did appear to be lava. She stumbled back, dragging Al with her as she fought the inclination to bolt. Every instinct she'd ever had, every desire she'd ever experienced to live, screamed at her to run and to run fast.

Every ounce of human decency she had, told her she had to stay.

They'd let her go second; they'd put her life and Al's ahead of their own. She couldn't abandon them now, but what was she supposed to do?

Xander grappled to right himself; he managed to get his legs back around and braced against the building just as it gave another heaving groan and tilted further. Xander was still ten feet up when he released the sheets and plummeted to the ground. Riley screamed as she lurched forward, Brunette and Surfer collapsed underneath him as they tried to break his freefall to the best of their ability. Surfer cursed loudly as he pulled himself from the bottom of the heap.

"Are you ok?" Riley demanded as she ran to them.

"Fine, we're fine." Xander accepted Surfer's hand and pulled himself to his feet. "We have to go!"

The building heaved and bent again, the back half toppled away, falling into the growing trench of reddish liquid coursing toward them. Bits of dust and brick began to rain down from above; screams echoed loudly from within the building as another loud thwack of a body sounded from somewhere near the front.

Xander seized Riley's hand and started running away from the building. Mary Ellen held onto Al, unwilling to let her friend go as they followed behind. She went to follow the crowd heading toward the gates but the four kids split off in a different direction.

"They're from town," Al panted. "They know this area, and they can get us out of here."

"How can you be so sure?" she demanded.

"That's what Xander told me. We'd be dead if it wasn't for them, so I'm willing to take my chances."

Mary Ellen wasn't going to argue with that. They pushed and shoved their way forward as the four kids weaved in and out of traffic. They burst free of the horde of people and fled in the opposite direction of seventy-five percent of the crush.

More gunshots blasted as flares lit the sky again. Behind them the sound of twisting and crashing metal reverberated throughout the day. Mary Ellen chanced a glance over her shoulder in time to see the hotel collapse in a brutalized heap. The muted screams from within the building grew higher in intensity before being eerily silenced by the unrelenting river of fire consuming the area.

Xander shoved through a gate and held it open as he waited for the others to go through. "Are you ok?" he demanded as he fell back beside them.

"Don't fret about me," Al informed him. "I'm a lot tougher than I look."

Xander grinned at him as he ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "I can tell."

He jogged back to Riley and took hold of her hand as they maneuvered through the ramps with the notes for loved ones. Mary Ellen refused to look at the notes again; she wasn't willing to think about the can of worms that might open up. It had all been pointless. There would be no one coming here again. There would be no Rochelle.

Instead of going back the way they had come, they took a right that zigzagged through a cluster of stores. There were other people going this way too. Mary Ellen assumed most of them were also from the town, and knew their way around the maze of buildings.

They burst free of the stores only to find more wire fencing running the length of the parking lot. There were some people already climbing over top of the fence, while others were running down the length of it.

"This way." Xander led them back in and around through the buildings. The crush of people eased further, and what was left of them looked like they had survived a war, which she was beginning to feel like she had. Xander and the others stopped at the corner of a building with movie posters hanging across the side of it. "There's a break in the fence over there. It's how we used to sneak into the parking lot once in a while. We didn't come in that way just in case someone spotted us. It will be easier to get out that way instead of climbing over."

Mary Ellen was up for anything easy right about now. "Xander, wait." Riley jerked him to a halt as he went to step away from the corner of the building. She wordlessly

pointed across the parking lot. Mary Ellen watched in dismay as a group of men with guns ran past them with their weapons at the ready.

"That can't be a good sign," surfer guy muttered.

"They won't hurt us," the brunette said.

"I'm not willing to take the chance."

"What could they possibly have to gain from harming us Lee?"

"Wake up Bobby. There is nothing, and *no* one we can trust anymore. They probably consider us as much of a menace as I consider them."

Mary Ellen frowned at them as they glanced distrustfully at her and Al. "Yeah, because we're a threat," she retorted. "I agree with being cautious around people, but you can't shut everyone out. You'll never survive then."

"You want to trust *those* guys?" Lee demanded as he pointed after the group that was no longer in sight.

"Not even a little bit," she admitted. "But you can trust us."

"That's what everyone would say."

"Enough," Xander inserted briskly. "It's pointless to argue about it. We're going to need each other to get out of here so just stop. Riley and Lee stay here. Ah... you..."

"Mary Ellen," she informed him.

"Come with us. We'll circle around to the other side and see if there are any more of them around."

"Wait, we can't separate!" Riley protested instantly.

Xander seized hold of her arms. "We have to go check out the other side of the building. You and Lee have to stay here to keep an eye out in case they come back. You know this place well, and you know where we kept our supplies. In case we can't find each other again we'll meet there."

Riley looked about to protest, but instead she nodded her head. "Ok," she muttered reluctantly.

"I don't know about this," Al said as he glanced nervously between Mary Ellen and Xander.

"If it makes you feel better she can stay also, but another set of eyes would be useful," Xander told him.

"I would like to go," Mary Ellen inserted. Xander was right; they would need another set of eyes. Al was stubborn and would insist he didn't need a break, but he was also limping more than he had been. "I meant what I said about the trust. I'll be fine Al."

She squeezed Al's hand and turned away from him to follow Xander and Bobby back into the maze of buildings. They jogged through the stores and over the brick pathways as the echoing collapse of another building resonated through the stores.

CHAPTER 27

Riley

Foxboro, Mass.

Riley pressed herself against the side of the building as another group of armed men ran past with their weapons at the ready. She didn't know much about guns, but she was amazed most of them appeared to be hunting rifles and not something she would associate with the military.

"Did these guys just find some guns and slap on some camo?" she wondered, though they weren't all wearing camouflage.

Al ran a hand through his disordered gray hair as he stepped beside her. "I think that is a very good possibility."

"Why?"

"I didn't pretend to understand people before all of this happened," he informed her. "There was little they could do to surprise me then. Now that society is crumbling, I don't think we'll ever know what they're completely capable of, or why they do the things they do."

"It's only been seven hours."

Al shrugged. "The human species as a whole isn't exactly known for their sensibilities."

"Glad you have so much faith," Lee said.

"You don't seem overly trusting either," Al pointed out. "And I'm not saying I have no faith. In fact, I have a lot of faith most of us will do the right thing, under normal conditions. These aren't normal conditions, and there is no way to know how someone will react when you take everything they know away from them. We are just animals after all, and even the best of us are capable of things we never thought possible in order to survive, or when our loved ones are threatened. We have no idea what a person might do anymore."

"That's a more terrifying thought than clowns," Riley muttered. "How did they get all those weapons and clothing so quickly?"

Lee slapped his forehead as he groaned in frustration. "We are such *idiots!* The Bass Pro Shop."

"What?" Al asked as Riley released a low groan also.

"The Bass Pro Shop, it's on the other side of the compound. It has all kinds of hunting equipment and gear," Lee explained.

"So the ass back at the hotel wasn't a soldier!" Riley grated through her teeth. "I knew I should have told him where to put that gun."

"It was still a real gun Ri, and there's no way to know for sure he wasn't. There are definitely real police and military mixed in with the wannabe's. I imagine the ones in charge of the hotel, and the gates, were real. There is no way we're going to be able to tell one from the other though."

"This is worse than I thought." Al took a step further into the shadows as another group ran past. "If it is mostly just untrained civilians running around with weapons and trying to take charge..."

"We're screwed," Riley finished when his voice trailed off.

"They're frightened, and they're volatile and jumpy."

"We have to get out of here," Lee stated.

"We are not leaving without Xander, Bobby and..."

"Mary Ellen," Al supplied when Riley questioningly looked toward him.

"We're not leaving without them," she insisted.

Lee glanced anxiously behind them. Riley refused to look; she could already feel the increasing heat and hear the approaching crash of buildings and crackling inferno. It was necessary to get away from the encroaching flames, but she was terrified to step out of the shadows of the building. Trained professionals with guns were one thing, but untrained, frightened humans were something entirely different. She thought she might prefer to face the fire, it was probably more predictable.

Another, larger, weaponless group ran by. A woman tripped and fell, only to be plowed over by the four people behind her. Nausea rolled through her; she turned away as the woman struggled back to her feet and limped away bloody. "Where are they going? It's nothing but woods and fencing back there," Riley pondered.

"There's something else coming," Al said with dawning realization. "Something we can't see."

She knew the minute he said it, he was right. Yeah, she was going to vomit.

They were cornered, trapped between one hideous possibility and another. "Shit!" Lee exploded. "We have to go."

Lee grabbed hold of her arm as she spun toward where Xander and the others had disappeared. "Let go of me!" she snarled.

"Riley we can't stay here."

"We're not leaving without them."

The words were just leaving her mouth when Xander, Bobby and Mary Ellen reappeared about three hundred feet away. "Run!" Xander bellowed as he frantically waved at them.

Lee pulled her out of the shelter of the building as he jerked her into the parking lot. Riley almost fell as she staggered to keep up with his frantic flight. Al pressed close to her side as he ran with them. In her peripheral vision she spotted something enormous and unstoppable crashing over the parking lot toward them.

Some people were running towards them, while others were heading back toward the main road as the strange new intrusion cascaded over the parking lot in a wave of red and blue. She could only gawk as she tried to figure out what it was as it caught hold of people, lifted them up, and spun them around before burying them within its depths.

A frightened cry escaped her, she almost fell, but Lee managed to keep her up as he roughly jerked her arm upward. She didn't know what it was, but it was coming at them far faster than she had thought possible. Dimly, she became aware the earth was shaking again. She didn't know if it was from another quake, or if this onrushing tidal wave of death was rocking the ground.

Not now, not now, she prayed frantically. She wasn't ready to die now. She was too young; there was so much she hadn't done yet, so much more she wanted to do still. The world may suck royally right now, but she wasn't ready to let it go.

Everything in her ached, her legs trembled, she couldn't seem to get enough air into her brutalized lungs, but still she relentlessly pushed herself faster. The fence was just before them, but Lee scurried to the right, pulling her behind him for another twenty feet

before he grasped hold of the metal wiring and pulled it back. Riley was startled by the gaping hole his actions revealed, but she didn't hesitate before scrambling through it with Al hot on her heels.

For an old guy he was fast, and in surprisingly good shape. She turned back to try and find Xander, but Lee grabbed hold of her arm, spun her around, and started pushing her up the hill. "Run Riley, don't look back."

"Wait..."

"They're right behind us, go."

She didn't care though; she wasn't going anywhere until she knew for certain. Turning back she spotted the others halfway to the fence. Relief filled her as she spun away and followed Lee. They clawed and tore at the ground as they pulled their way up the ragged hill. She didn't have much for nails, but they tore and broke as she fought for leverage. A savage hiss escaped as her middle nail broke off far below the quick. Blood spilled forth, mixing with the dirt spewing up around her in her haste to get up a hill that had been much easier to navigate on the way down.

Al tripped and fell. She snagged hold of his arm a split second before he tumbled backward. His wide eyes met hers, and he gave a brief nod of thanks as she helped to steady him on the hill. Lee tugged on her arm, drawing her forward as dirt and rocks tumbled and skittered away beneath them.

A loud, rushing noise reached her. She didn't look back; she couldn't look back for fear of what she would see. If Xander and Bobby weren't back there...

She shut that thought down; it wouldn't lead to anything good. She'd already lost almost everything today; she couldn't lose them too.

After what seemed like an eternity they finally breeched the top of the hill. She stumbled and fell to her knees as she gasped for air. She strained to stand up, but her exhausted legs simply wouldn't hold her, and she limply fell back to the earth again.

Looking like a well used horse, Lee collapsed beside her as he struggled for breath and his nostrils flared. She turned back to Al, but though he was sitting beside her, his attention wasn't on her.

She followed his gaze back down the hill and where seconds before she'd been unable to find her feet, she launched to them now. She was running again, stumbling, tripping, and nearly plummeting all the way to the bottom. She managed to catch herself on the lower limb of an oak tree before she tumbled to her death.

A scream rose in her throat and strangled there as tears choked it out. It must have been another quake she felt; one that had opened up a jagged tear across the land. It zigzagged through the parking lot, had toppled the fence, and swallowed the asphalt and gating within its depths.

Xander shoved Mary Ellen back as Bobby scrambled to get away from the vicious tear. Riley dimly realized it was a reddish color, but it was only just water rapidly following the newly formed gulch. It must have flowed in from some nearby lake or river that had been opened up and released by this new gulf in the earth. The reddish color was due to the reflection being cast from the ever increasing inferno spreading throughout the stadium parking lot.

Water crashed as it tumbled over the earth in endless waves that pounded against the asphalt. A rising crescendo blocked out all other sound. The newly created river consumed everything it encountered within its deadly clutches. Bodies tumbled and

flipped through the water. They still screamed in horror and pain as they were swept toward near certain death.

Riley released the branch and crept closer. Tears burned in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. Her chest ached with the desire to slip to her knees and wail out her misery and sorrow. Instead, she simply crept steadily closer to the new waterway dividing the parking lot in half. She was still a quarter of the way up the hill when she stopped to stare across the vast abyss.

The water was a gushing torrent, an unrelenting force to be reckoned with. It splashed up against the shore, nearly at her feet as Al arrived at her side. Xander stepped forward, his toes much closer to the edge than she liked as he lifted a hand and waved.

From the opposite shoreline.

From the shoreline with the growing blaze, civilian soldiers, and lava. Even if they somehow found the end of the river, even if there was a place where they could cross, there was no guarantee they would be able to find each other again. She stared down the length of the river. Perhaps they could stay parallel, following each other until they found some way to cross it.

She knew it would never be possible. There was far too much out there right now; it would be far too risky to stay out in the open, so exposed and vulnerable to every horrible thing now creeping over the earth. They would never be able to stay with each other, especially as the fire encroached upon them.

Mary Ellen and Bobby stood behind Xander; the looks on their faces echoed the despair rapidly spreading through Riley. Dirt skidded out from beneath Lee as he arrived at her side. A low curse escaped him.

"There's got to be some way for them to get across," Riley said frantically. "We can cut down a tree or some wood or..."

"What, are you Paul Bunyan all of a sudden?" Lee demanded. "And do you happen to have an ax handy?"

"Lee." She was ashamed by the whimper that escaped her, ashamed by the almost childlike plea radiating within it, but she couldn't help it. She'd lost her family today, she'd lost Carol, and now... Now she'd lost someone she'd punched just seven short hours ago, but he'd somehow become her rock.

She felt broken, hollow, she didn't know what to do, and she simply couldn't just stand here and watch them burn alive. The firelight played over Xander's dark blond hair, turning it strangely red in the hideous illumination. She couldn't lose him too, she simply couldn't.

She took a few steps forward, halting at the edge of the river as he turned back to her. More tears sprang into her eyes as a smile played over his face. "Xander." His name left her on a bare whisper she knew didn't carry across the water.

"Go Riley!" Though she knew he shouted, she barely heard the words. He pointed up the hill. "Go!"

Bobby grabbed his arm and said something; Xander nodded briskly before turning back to her. "Sturbridge! I'll find you in Sturbridge!" She said the words, and labored to believe them, no matter how improbable they were.

Though he smiled at her, she sensed the sadness and grief just beneath it. "You bet you will!" He turned briefly away before spinning back to her. "I love you Dumbo!"

A short burst of laughter escaped Riley, she didn't know what he meant by it, and she

didn't care as she shouted back, "I love you too you ass!"

Mary Ellen waved to Al who gave her a brief wave. "I'll see you soon, in Sturbridge!" Al shouted to her.

Mary Ellen nodded; she lingered briefly before she turned and started to jog away. Xander gave one last wave before turning and running with Mary Ellen and Bobby. They followed the direction of the newly created river as they fled the flames and lava. Riley clung to the tree as she watched them until she couldn't see them anymore. Her chest hurt, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to stand.

"Riley come on, we have to go," Lee said gently. She blinked back the tears she didn't know she was still shedding as she tried to focus on him. "We can't stay here; we have to get the supplies and get moving."

Riley glanced up the hill; taking a deep breath she braced herself for the climb back up the awful thing. She refused to think about what was over that hill, what was beyond the stadium, and what else lurked within the town she no longer knew. She had no idea what hazards and new threats waited for them on this side of the river, or what other dangers awaited them on their long journey to Sturbridge. She'd been to Xander's grandparent's house twice before, but she wasn't entirely certain she'd be able to find it again, or if it still existed after today.

It took everything she had not to sit down and cry, not to give up like she longed to do. *Not ready to die*, she reminded herself firmly. And sitting down and caving was almost certain death.

She wouldn't mind a chance to sit down and throw a pity party for an hour or two though, she felt she deserved one. But then, so did Lee and Al, and just about every other person who had somehow managed to survive for this long.

"I'm sorry we were separated from Mary Ellen, was she a relative?" she inquired as a way to distract herself.

"A neighbor. We'll find them again, apparently in Sturbridge." Al smiled as he grasped hold of her arm. "I know we will."

Riley managed a wan smile as she nodded. "You're right, we will." She hoped she sounded as positive as he looked right now.

"Was that young man your boyfriend?"

"Just a friend," she mumbled. "I think." Lee rolled his eyes but refrained from commenting as they swiftly made their way through the woods toward where they had hidden their supplies. "His sister was my best friend. She ah... she died today."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Riley couldn't meet his kind eyes as she shrugged. She had to fight against the tears threatening to fall again. She felt like a broken spigot as she couldn't seem to turn them off. "It seems there's been a lot of death today."

"That there has," Al agreed as he squeezed her arm reassuringly. "But it hasn't been us."

"And it won't be," Lee said firmly.

"What do you have for supplies?" Al inquired.

"Some guns and food, but not much," Riley told him. "We'll have to find transportation somehow."

She met Lee's stern frown with a defiant glare. She knew it was stupid to trust people, but Al wasn't one of those people. She believed Al was trustworthy, and he

wouldn't hurt them. The circumstances of this day had thrust them together for at least the journey to Sturbridge, and if they were going to survive, they were going to have to work together.

"I have a car. It's not much of one, but with any luck it will get us there. It will at least get us out of this town."

Riley perked up at Al's words. "As long as it has wheels, I don't care if I have to pedal it with my feet."

"That could end up being a real possibility!" he retorted with a laugh.

Though she still felt on the verge of tears, the pressure in her chest was easing as they arrived at the supplies they'd stashed away. Lee handed her the revolvers and belt. "I can handle a rifle," Al told him. "I used to do some hunting."

Lee hesitated before finally handing Al the gun. "Where is this car?"

"About a mile away, we hid it in a driveway, underneath a fallen pine."

Lee nodded and was rising to his feet when the loud fracture of a twig caused them all to jump and spin in the direction of the noise. Riley's breath froze in her lungs, her hand fell to the gun as another loud snap, followed by a muffled curse, drifted through the woods. Lee placed his finger against his mouth and nodded in the opposite direction.

Riley nodded agreement, the last thing she wanted to do was encounter anyone in these woods. Especially armed, terrified civilians much like herself.

She barely breathed as they crept through the woods, heading away from the pathway leading them to the stadium. They moved away from the people who had been on their right hand side, but she could hear other people creeping through the forest around them. She never spotted any of them, but she knew they were out there. She had never desired to be out of anywhere so badly in her life as she did these woods, and they had weapons.

Xander and the others were out there alone, vulnerable to the whims of humans and the brutality of the ever changing earth. She could only pray they would somehow make it, that they would be able to find something to defend themselves and more food. She didn't pretend to know or understand what was going on, but she did know Mother Nature was one royally pissed off bitch right now, and she was letting them know with everything she had.

The only thing Riley knew for certain was she was going to get in Al's car and do everything possible to find Xander again. All she longed to do was hug him, and savor his solid presence. All she craved was the person she'd hated this morning, come to rely on sometime during the day, and kind of thought she might actually be starting to fall in love with now.

It was insanity, she knew, but it was an insane world right now.

But then, if she thought about it, perhaps there had been feelings there all along. She'd always watched him, and been unreasonably angrier when Xander teased her than when others did. She'd always been excited to see him at Carol's, even if she'd never admitted it to herself, and would have denied it vehemently to anyone who asked. She'd been so intent upon being mad at him, upon not ruining her friendship with Carol, that she hadn't realized she actually had feelings for him.

She would find him again, and she didn't care what she had to do to make sure it happened. She focused on the goal of seeing him again, of escaping this town, as they stepped clear of the woods and onto the paved road of North Street.

CHAPTER 28

*Carl,
Foxboro, Mass.*

"What the..." John's voice trailed off as he leaned forward to peer out the window.

Carl eased up on the gas, unable to believe his eyes as trees bent and splintered like toothpicks beneath the crushing force of whatever was rocketing toward the truck. Rochelle's mouth dropped as she pressed her fingers against the dashboard.

Carl stomped on the gas pedal as he realized the ground was shaking again. "What is that?" Rochelle demanded.

"I don't want to find out," Carl muttered, but he knew they were going to.

The truck bounced over the uneven road as the increasing crash of trees and echoing rumble barreled through the woods toward the road. They were out of the way of impact, but Carl couldn't shake the feeling they weren't going fast enough.

Rochelle turned around to look, but the bed of the truck made it impossible to see anything through the window behind them. She craned around John to peer into the side mirror as a wave of water burst free of the woods behind them. Carl gawked as trees, road, and people rocketed past within the newly created river effectively blocking off the roadway behind them.

Carl eased off the gas, the truck idled as the water eased in its initial torrent. "It's never going to stop," John said.

"It has to, eventually. Doesn't it?" Rochelle asked. "I mean how much more can the earth take before it just implodes? How much more can *we* take?"

"As much as we have to," Carl informed her as he pressed on the accelerator again. "We don't have any other options."

"Not any good ones anyway," John agreed.

"Do you know where we are now?"

"No, but I know we're not going back."

Carl snorted as he shook his head. "That's for sure."

There was no turning around, and there was no way to know what lay ahead of them. Uneasiness grew in his stomach, his hands tightened on the wheel as he tried not to think about the possibility they may be trapped in between one horror and another now. There were no side roads, or at least not any they had come across yet. All he could do was pray the road remained clear of any obstacles, or they would at least come across another road.

Some of the houses around them were toppled and broken. Others were just the burnt remains that had ignited the trees around them. He saw no flames now, but that didn't mean they weren't just ahead of them, or in the woods enclosing them on both sides. Then there was the lava, that hideous lava creeping through the town and more than likely running beneath it.

Over the years, he'd thought about the many ways he would probably go, lung cancer being number one, but never once had he entertained the idea of being consumed by lava. It had never occurred to him it was a possibility, and now that it had, he realized it might quite possibly be one of the worst ways to go. In fact, he really couldn't think of anything worse. Well, perhaps being eaten by a shark, but no matter how crazy this day had been, he was pretty certain he could still cross out the possibility of Jaws chomping down on

him.

At least the lava would be quick. He hoped. However, he had no way of knowing, and he really didn't intend to find out the answer.

The truck bounced as he eased it over a pothole dividing the road. Shocks and struts groaned, but the vehicle took the jarring well enough. Rochelle's hands were fisted on her lap; she was barely breathing. They made it another quarter of a mile before his worst nightmare was confirmed. He slid the truck to a stop as he stared in disbelief at the oak tree that had fallen across the road.

John's breath hissed out of him as he braced his hand against the dash. "What do we do?" Rochelle asked.

Carl turned to John. "Do you have your handsaw with you?"

"Are you out of your mind?" John demanded. "Do you know how *long* that will take?"

"Yes, but do you have a better idea?"

"Drive over it, it's not that big."

"And take the risk of puncturing the oil pan or radiator? We can't do it. Do you have your handsaw or not?"

"Yeah I think so. I have to check my bag." John jumped out of the truck and gestured for Rochelle to lean forward so he could pull the seat forward. She slid up as Carl jumped out to pull his own work bag from behind the seat. As mowers, they both had little use for their handsaws on a regular basis. Every once in a while though, when the mowing season was winding down, they would find themselves on a tree crew or doing a Vista prune. Thankfully, they'd both been issued handsaws for those occasions.

Carl pushed aside ear plugs, weedwacker string, and assorted tools as he dug through his bag in search of the saw at the bottom of it. He pulled it out and inspected the blade, it was dull, but it would have to do. John held up his saw, the tip of it was broken off, but at least it was still useable.

"What would you like me to do?" Rochelle asked.

"Stay with the truck for now," Carl told her. He turned the truck off, closed the door and turned to John. "We'll just cut it up enough so we can move it."

"Sounds good to me."

Sweat was already beading down his forehead and trickling down his back before they made it to the tree. John was right, it was fairly small, but it was still going to be a bitch to chop up with their crappy handsaws. Sighing reluctantly, Carl lit a cigarette and knelt down next to the tree. His arms started to ache before he was half way through the first cut. The increasing sweat coating him trickled into his eyes and made it difficult to keep hold of the saw. Sawdust bits annoyingly stuck to his skin. John let out a string of muffled curses and held up a bloody hand.

"Blade slipped," he muttered.

"Use the first aid kit in the truck."

The saw clattered to the ground as John rose and walked away. He left a trail of blood drops behind him as he went. Carl shook his head; he was amazed the kid hadn't managed to run his foot over with the lawn mower if he couldn't use a handsaw without maiming himself. He glanced up as Rochelle knelt beside him and picked up the saw.

"You know how to use that?"

She turned it over in her hand. "It can't be that tough to figure out."

"Yeah well, tell that to John."

She grinned at him as she chuckled. "True. What do I do?"

He left his blade in the middle of his cut and slid hers into the groove John had managed to create. "Just pull back and forth, and try not to cut yourself."

"Tell that to John."

He laughed as he returned to his saw. Grasping the tree, he pushed down on it as he tried to keep it from pinching at the blade. After another ten minutes the tree finally gave way with a satisfying crack. He moved five feet down and began to cut into another section. Though his arms were killing him, Rochelle was still persistently trying to cut through the tree with a fierce scowl of determination.

"Want me to do that?" John asked when he returned.

Rochelle's sweat dampened hair stuck to her face as she shook her head. "No, I got this."

John quirked an eyebrow as he snorted with laughter. "Good to know."

"Kneel on this," Carl instructed him.

Grasping hold of the tree, John put his weight on it as he bent it downward for Carl. The blade was almost through when a loud noise from the woods froze them all in place. Carl's hands clenched around the blade, he wiped the sweat from his brow as he searched for the source of the sound. Another harsh snap from the shadowed forest caused him to release the blade.

He glanced back at the truck. He'd been an idiot, a moron. He'd believed they were alone out here, and no one else would be coming across them. He hadn't thought there would actually be people in the *woods*. But as another branch broke, he knew he'd been wrong. There were people there, and they were heading this way.

"Stay here."

He jumped to his feet and ran back toward the vehicle before John could respond. He was panting, barely able to breathe in the humid air when he threw open the passenger side door and dropped open the glove box. He grabbed hold of the gun and snagged the keys out of the ignition just as three men emerged from the forest and onto the road. They stood on the other side of the tree just five feet away from Rochelle and John.

Carl's mouth went dry as he focused on the rifles they held. He subtly closed the glove box, slid the gun into his waistband and grabbed the bandages John had left on the front seat. He stepped away from the truck, pretending to wrap his hand as he watched them from behind the open passenger door. They were wearing camouflage, but there was something about them that didn't feel right. Their postures were slouched, their shirts weren't tucked in, and though one of them sported a buzz cut, the hair on the other two was unruly.

Carl supposed he could be wrong, but he had a feeling these men weren't soldiers. Though he had the gun, he wasn't going to pull it out and start waving it at them. The last thing he needed was a standoff in the middle of the road, especially since they only had the one gun. He was terrified these people may just shoot first and ask questions later. Or they may just run screaming in the opposite direction.

Carl wasn't going to take the chance they would start firing, not with John and Rochelle so close to them. Carl's heart hammered; a sickness started in the hollow of his belly as one of the men turned his attention to Rochelle. Carl's fingers twitched, fury boiled through him as the repulsive man began to grin creepily. He eyed her from head to

toe and back again.

John leapt to his feet, his eyes narrowed, his hands fisted at his sides as he moved closer to Rochelle. The man, the Creeper, continued to watch Rochelle as she released the handsaw and rose to her feet. Carl's hand dropped to the gun; he stayed behind the door of the truck to keep the direction of his hand hidden from view. Rochelle edged back as John moved further in front of her.

"Hey," John greeted awkwardly.

Carl grasped hold of the butt of the gun as the three men turned their attention to him and then the truck. A speculative gleam lit their eyes as they surveyed him. "Is that your truck?" Buzz cut inquired.

Carl thought it was pretty obvious it was their truck, but he refrained from telling them so. John took another step back, pushing against Rochelle as he maneuvered her further away from the tree. The one who had been leering at Rochelle slid the rifle off his back and brought it around before him. He didn't aim at them, not yet, but the threat was implicit as he held it against his chest.

Carl knew they didn't have a chance at keeping this truck if these men decided to take it. He hoped to escape here with their lives, but judging by the actions of these men he wasn't overly convinced that would happen. He released the gun, knowing if he pulled it out now, Rochelle and John were as good as dead. He'd sworn he'd somehow get them through all of this; he was *not* going to be the cause of their deaths. They could find another truck, and other supplies, later.

"Is it?" the guy demanded again.

"Yeah," John muttered as he glanced nervously back at Carl.

"Does it run?"

Buzz cut may be the dumbest individual Carl had ever come across. "Nope, we pushed it here."

Carl groaned inwardly at John's retort; he'd had the urge to say the same thing, but he'd managed to keep it back. Buzz cut's eyes narrowed as he lifted the rifle. From the looks of it, it was a twenty-two, and definitely not military issue. It didn't even have a scope.

Carl's fingers twitched toward his gun again. There was a very good possibility these guys didn't have a clue what they were doing with those weapons. There may be a chance he could defend them after all. Then the Creeper leveled the rifle at John's chest, and Carl knew it didn't matter if they knew how to use the rifles or not. They were close enough to kill John and Rochelle before Carl could draw his gun.

John's hands rose cautiously into the air; Rochelle went deathly pale as her hands hesitatingly went up behind him. "You think you're funny?" Creeper demanded.

"No... Not at all," John stammered. "I didn't mean any harm."

"Does it have gas?" Buzz demanded.

John swallowed heavily and nodded. "It does."

"You, get away from it."

Carl lifted his hands in the air at the command and stepped away from the door. He wasn't about to tell Buzz there was no way out in the other direction. They apparently weren't smart enough to figure that out, and Carl planned on being long gone before they did. Buzz stepped over the tree, his gun still focused on John, as he moved toward the truck.

John took another step back, pushing Rochelle with him as they were herded toward Carl. Creeper and the other guy stepped over the tree with their guns raised. They didn't know how to hold the freaking things, Carl realized. They weren't the most powerful of rifles, but with the way they were holding them, there was still a decent possibility of dislocating their shoulder, or at least wrenching and bruising it pretty good.

Again he entertained thoughts of firing on them. It had been a while, but he had to be a better shot than them. If there just weren't three of them...

Buzz reached the driver's side of the truck and leaned in. "Where are the keys?" he demanded.

"My pocket," Carl told him. Buzz leaned back out the window and came around the hood of the truck as Creeper and the other guy moved closer. "I'll get them."

He moved gingerly, certain they were going to shoot him as he slid his hand into his pocket. His fingers brushed over the solid muzzle of the gun. He ground his teeth together, *so close and so far away*, he thought in frustration.

Our lives are more important, he reminded himself as he tugged the keys free with a small jingle. "Toss them over."

Anger sizzled through him, but he threw the keys across the asphalt to the guy. Buzz didn't take his eyes off of them as he knelt and grabbed the keys. He nodded toward his two friends as he swung the rifle back over his shoulder and hurried toward the truck. "We're just going to let them take it?" John murmured.

"Do you have a better plan?" A muscle twitched in John's cheek, but he shook his head as he turned helplessly toward Carl. "We'll find another truck, more supplies."

"Yeah," John muttered. Carl helplessly watched the other two men approach the truck.

"What about the girl?" Carl and John both stiffened at Creeper's question.

"What about her?" Buzz inquired.

"We should take her with us."

Carl's breath froze in his lungs as Buzz and the other guy eyed Rochelle with new interest. Rochelle's eyes rolled toward Carl as his hand slid to his waistband. They could take the truck, but he was not going to let them walk out of here with her. "No," he grated. "Just take the truck and go."

"What are you going to do to stop me?" Creeper demanded as he stepped closer.

John knocked Creeper's hand aside when he grasped for Rochelle. She whimpered low in her throat as she staggered backwards. "You are *not* taking her," John said forcefully.

John went deathly white as Creeper lifted the rifle and pointed the barrel at his chest. To his credit though, John didn't back down, and he didn't step aside. "I *will* shoot you."

"No!" Rochelle cried as she lurched forward. "No, don't hurt him! I'll go with you!"

"No, you won't!" John retorted.

Creeper shoved John out of the way as Rochelle tried to get past him. Carl used the distraction to pull the gun out of his waistband just as Creeper got his hands on Rochelle. He slammed the muzzle of it against the guy's temple, fighting the urge to just pull the trigger and just kill the sick son of a bitch.

"Let her go. You can take the truck, we won't fight you on it, but you're not taking her," Carl told him.

Creeper didn't move, but his eyes slid to Carl and crossed as he tried to see the gun

pressed against his temple. "I can shoot your friend."

"You can, but I'll still shoot you, and unlike you I know how to use my weapon."

Out of the corner of his eye Carl saw the other two raise their rifles and aim at them. There was a good possibility they were about to be shot, but there was no way he was going to let them take Rochelle out of here without a fight. He'd rather be dead than live with himself if he allowed that to happen.

"She's just a child. Just let her go and leave. We're not looking for any problems. Please, just go." For a second Carl thought the guy would see reason and let Rochelle go, but then his hand tensed around her, and he pulled her another step forward. "Don't," Carl warned.

"It's ok. I'll... I'll go with him," Rochelle stammered out. "I don't want anyone to get shot."

"That's not an option," John said firmly. "You don't know what they'll do to you."

"I know what they'll do to *you*," she whispered.

"Listen to the girl," Creeper muttered.

Carl pressed the gun harder against his temple, hard enough to make his head tilt to the side. Rochelle pushed against them as Creeper reached for her again. An echoing shot pierced the air. Carl shouted as he tumbled backward with John and Rochelle. Blood splattered over them as Creeper howled and reeled backward. His gun fell to the ground with a metallic clatter that made Carl wince and shy away from the bouncing weapon.

What remained of the hand Creeper had been using to hold the rifle was bloody and brutalized as he held it up before him. Buzz lifted his rifle, spun in the direction the shot had come from, and fired crazily. Buzz's head snapped back as another gunshot exploded. He toppled to the ground with a bullet hole dead center in his forehead.

Their remaining friend stood before the truck. The front of his pants was wet, and strange noises issued from him. Carl knew exactly how the guy felt and was grateful his bladder hadn't released itself also. The guy threw his rifle down, spun on his heel, and fled down the road. Creeper was still screaming at the ruined remains of his hand as he staggered toward the tree.

It was one of the most repulsive things Carl had ever seen, but he didn't feel one ounce of sympathy for the man. Creeper finally regained enough sense to turn around and run. He stumbled over the tree, fell in the road, and then got up and fled into the woods, screaming like a banshee the entire way.

Carl adjusted his hold on the gun as he turned to face the new threat that had arrived. A threat just as well armed, and much more adept with firearms than the one that had just fled. He lifted the small revolver and aimed it at the three people who already had their weapons aimed back at him.

CHAPTER 29

Al

Foxboro, Mass.

"Put your weapon down," Al said far more calmly than he felt.

"You put your weapon down," the guy sporting the Red Sox cap and holding the gun retorted.

Al shifted his hold on the rifle. He didn't relish the idea of firing the weapon again, but he would if he had to. Thankfully, he appeared to have a sharp shooter standing beside him, one fully capable of taking care of herself. If something happened, he would have someone to cover him at least. Riley's hand shook on the gun; she lowered it briefly before jerking it back up to point at the guy.

"We don't mean you any harm," Al assured him.

"You have three guns pointed at us, we have one. If you mean that then lower your rifle."

There was a shuffling amongst the group, and then a head popped out from between the two men. The younger guy tried to push the girl back, but she shrugged him off as she stepped forward. "Mr. Shandling?"

The shock of hearing his name tore his attention from Red Sox to the young girl staring questioningly at him. Al was momentarily confused. Dirt, sweat, and splatters of blood obscured her features as she took another step toward him. "Rochelle?" he gasped.

She broke into a brilliant smile that lit her dark eyes. "Yeah, yeah, it's me." Baseball tried to grab her back again. "It's ok. I know him."

She broke free of Baseball and the younger guy and barreled toward him. Al lowered the rifle seconds before she flung herself at him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He'd never really known the girl, had exchanged only a few words with her over the years, but he had to fight back tears as he wrapped his arms around her slender frame.

Something had finally gone right today; something finally made sense; something *good* had finally happened. He'd wanted to find her, almost as badly as Mary Ellen, but he hadn't really thought it would happen. Now, he was holding her, looking at her, and her mother was somewhere else entirely. It hadn't been the perfect reunion, but it would be, he was determined of that much.

"What are you doing here?" Rochelle demanded.

"Looking for you actually," he replied with a laugh.

She pulled her head from his chest and pushed back the straggling strands of hair from her face. "For me?"

"Your mom and I, we've been looking for you all day."

Hope sprang into her eyes as they began to flit frantically around. She focused on Riley and Lee briefly before looking toward him again. "We were just separated," he reluctantly informed her.

"But she's ok?" she croaked.

"She's ok," he confirmed.

"And my dad? Is he with her?"

Al shifted uncomfortably. He couldn't lie to the girl, but it wasn't his place to tell her that her father had died. Something in his expression must have said what he couldn't

though. Her face fell and tears began to slide down her cheeks, leaving a trail through the dirt and blood.

"Oh," she breathed.

"I'm sorry." She shook her head as she buried it against his chest. Al's heart broke for her as he hugged her against his chest; the man had been a bastard, but he was still her father. Baseball lowered his gun and began to approach with the younger guy right behind him. Al watched them, but he wasn't overly worried about them anymore, and Riley and Lee still had their guns ready if the necessity should arise.

"Your mom is going to be so happy to see you," Al told her. Rochelle nodded, but didn't pull her head from his shirt.

"Is he dead?" Riley croaked.

For the first time Al noticed she'd started to rival Casper in color. He longed to connect with her, to steady her as her hand shook on the gun, but Rochelle was clinging to him like a monkey to a tree. "Riley?" he asked worriedly.

"Is he dead? Is the guy *dead*?" she demanded, her voice tinged with hysteria.

"You shot him in the head, Ri," Lee retorted. "Even zombies don't come back from that. Nice shot."

A low moan escaped her. Al recoiled, and the two new guys jumped back as the gun she held slid from her limp fingers and clattered to the road. She spun away from them and vomited in the middle of the road. The younger of the two guys made a gagging noise as he turned away from the sight. Baseball cocked an eyebrow as Riley took a stumbling step back and collapsed onto her knees.

Lee forgot all about watching the new guys as he dropped to her side. He wrapped his arm around her as he awkwardly attempted to soothe her. "I was aiming for his leg!" she wailed.

"Oh," Lee said dully.

Al heaved a sigh as he glanced at her discarded gun and then back at Riley. She was young, not as young as Rochelle, but far too young to have been handed the burden she would now have to carry. It wasn't a burden he would want either. He'd thought her more experienced with weapons and the responsibilities that came with them. Instead, she was just a lucky shot.

Baseball walked over and snatched Riley's discarded gun off the ground. Al took a step forward as his heart lurched in his chest. The amazement over reuniting with Rochelle had caused him to lower his guard, but Baseball only knelt before Riley and handed the butt of the gun out to her.

"This may not be what you would like to hear Miss, but what you just did wasn't wrong. Not in this world, not anymore." He thrust a finger toward Rochelle. "What those men were doing *was* wrong. They were trying to take her, and I don't have to tell you what they would have done to her if they'd succeeded. They would have killed us if you hadn't come along."

Tears streamed down Riley's face, but she seemed to be regaining control of herself as she managed a small nod. The man held the gun more incessantly toward her, but she continued to eye it as if it were a nasty spider. He took hold of her hand and gently wrapped it around the butt of the gun. "You saved our lives, and I thank you. You *are* going to need this though. With this world the way it is right now, and until you learn how to use it, I suggest you continue to aim at their legs."

Riley blinked at him in disbelief, and then a harsh bark of laughter escaped her as she seized the gun. Though she didn't seem entirely in control yet, she didn't look as if she was going to require a straitjacket anytime soon either. "I will."

Baseball continued to study her before rising to his feet and turning to Al. "I'm Carl."

Al shifted his hold on Rochelle in order to accept the lined and calloused hand Carl extended to him. "Al."

"It seems we owe you a thanks also Al. You didn't know she was with us," Carl said with a nod at Rochelle.

It wasn't a question, but Al answered anyway. "No, I didn't. We simply saw you trying to keep a young girl from being taken." Al didn't tell him they'd almost walked past, that they had almost decided it wasn't their place to get involved, until they realized what was going on. He didn't think he'd take the chance of ever just walking by something again. "How do you know Rochelle?"

"We ran into her, almost literally, in Middleboro." The other guy stepped forward and offered his hand. "John."

Al shook it briefly. "Nice to meet you both."

"How do you know each other?" Carl inquired.

"We were neighbors."

Carl nodded as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Al had quit smoking over twenty years ago, but he felt a flash of envy as Carl lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Small world."

"So I've been told," Al agreed. "and getting smaller."

Carl snorted. "Appears to be."

"Where were you heading?"

"Looking for her parents actually," John answered. "You know where her mother is?"

"Not anymore, a newly formed river separated me and Mary Ellen, and them from their friends." He nodded toward Riley and Lee. "We know where they'll be heading though."

"We saw the river," Carl told him as he stomped on his butt. "Crazy f'd up world right now."

"That's putting it mildly," Lee retorted.

"Is she ok, my mom?" Rochelle inquired anxiously.

"She was the last time I saw her," Al assured her.

"Xander will keep her safe." Though Riley was still ashen, sweating, and a sickly shade of green, she seemed to be piecing herself together as Lee helped her to her feet.

"Are you sure?" Rochelle whispered.

Riley nodded and swallowed heavily. She made a face as she wiped at her mouth. "I know he will."

Rochelle brushed the tears from her eyes and straightened her shoulders. "I want to see her."

"You will." Al didn't like making promises he didn't know if he could keep, but he *would* keep this one. "I'll get you there."

"Ah." Carl looked to John who stared back at him before shrugging. "Mind if we tag along? I'd like to make sure she finds her mom, or at the very least gets somewhere safe."

"As would I," John interjected. "And we have nowhere better to be, nothing better to

do."

"What about your family?" Lee inquired.

"My family has been gone for a while," Carl answered.

"John found out his parents were gone earlier today," Rochelle said in a choked voice. John glanced at her before turning his attention to the woods. He swallowed repeatedly as he blinked rapidly. "I didn't plan on going anywhere without you two."

Carl smiled at her, but John couldn't tear his gaze from the woods. Al wasn't going to argue with them, or protest Rochelle's words. There was safety in numbers, and it was becoming abundantly clear they all needed more allies and protection. Besides, they barely knew Rochelle, yet they'd been willing to die to keep those men from taking her. He didn't think they would find many better men out there.

Plus the truck looked a lot more reliable, and would be far more of an asset, than the car.

"Safety in numbers," Al said.

Lee snickered but didn't protest; Riley stepped forward to introduce herself in a tremulous voice. "I'm Riley, and this is Lee."

John regained control of himself enough to turn and shake her hand. Rochelle stepped away from Al; he didn't know what she had in mind until she threw her arms around Riley's waist and hugged her. Riley's eyes widened as she was rocked by the force of Rochelle's slender frame.

"Thank you," Rochelle whispered.

Tears shimmered in Riley's eyes; her head bowed as she hugged the smaller girl back. Al had to turn away as the strange urge to cry seized hold of him. They'd all lost everything they'd ever known today, homes, friends, family. However, looking at the hodgepodge group gathered around him, he began to feel a bond with mankind he hadn't felt in years, at least not since Nellie died. There was a growing trust here, a need, a love for others simply because they were also human. They were all somehow weathering the anarchy with some sort of decency, and a respect for others who were suffering lost, and frightened.

For the first time in so very long, he was reminded of the simple, honest good that resided in most of mankind, even on the worst of days.

"You're welcome," Riley whispered.

"Where are you supposed to meet up?" John asked.

"Sturbridge," Lee answered. "At Xander's grandparents, if their house is still there."

"What if it's not?"

"We'll figure it out then, but first we have to get there," Riley answered. "It's normally only about an hour from here..."

"But nothing's normal anymore," Carl finished when she trailed off.

"Exactly. If they beat us there, Xander *will* wait for us, as I'm sure your mom will wait for Al, and if we beat them we'll wait also," Riley said forcefully.

"No complaints here," Carl assured her. "Like John said we have nothing better to do, and I'd like to have something to focus on other than the possible apocalypse."

"Possible?" Lee inquired.

Carl shrugged. "It's not completely official yet."

"After what we saw at the stadium, I'd say it's pretty official."

"You were at the stadium?" John inquired.

Riley's lip curled in a sneer as she shook her head. "Big mistake, and between the lava and the river, there's nothing left."

"There's *more* lava?" Rochelle gasped.

"Unfortunately," Lee told her. "You also saw some?"

"We traveled through the town to get here. Past the center of town, heading toward the stadium we were blocked by a giant crater filled with the stuff," Carl informed them.

"Sounds like where the state hospital was," Riley murmured.

"You know the town well?" Carl asked.

She managed a feeble smile as she nodded. "It's our town, or it *was* anyway. Doesn't seem like there's much left of it."

"I'm sorry, but if it makes you feel any better, there were a number of survivors gathered in the center."

"It does actually," Lee said. "Hopefully they stay that way."

"You can get us out of here then?" John asked enthusiastically.

"We can try, but it's not exactly the same town we grew up in," Riley told him.

"There's a tree blocking our way. We were in the process of cutting it up to move it when those guys appeared." Carl lit another cigarette as he nodded toward the front of the truck.

For the first time Al noticed the small oak blocking the way. "We'll give you a hand with it. Do you know how to use that gun?"

"I do."

"Anyone else?" They all shook their heads in response. "Ok, we'll keep watch while they work on the tree."

Carl nodded in agreement as he turned and walked back toward the front of the truck. John and Rochelle followed close behind, but Al hung back for Riley as Lee joined John by the tree. "He was right you know." Riley was still exceedingly pale, and there was a hollowness to her that hadn't been there after she'd been separated from Xander. "You did what had to be done; you didn't hesitate to pull the trigger when it was necessary. That doesn't make you a bad person; it makes you a person who keeps your head and does what's necessary when it's required."

"I've never killed a man before, so I'm not going to pretend to know how you feel, but you saved three lives today. Keep that in mind when the guilt starts to eat at you." Her lashes were coated with tears as she blinked them back. "You're not a bad person Riley, even if you're afraid you might be."

"How did you know?" she breathed.

"I've been around a while," he replied with a small smile. She swallowed heavily and nodded. "Now, since you're obviously capable of firing a gun, and at least hitting something with it, are you going to help Carl and I, or are you going to help with the tree?"

Riley didn't blink as she stared at him. Al knew it was an important decision for her to make. Was she going to continue to fight, or was she going to allow others to do it for her from here on out? The others didn't have to make that choice yet, they may never have to make it, but she did.

"I'll watch with you and Carl."

Al couldn't stop the grin splitting his face as relief filled him. He didn't know if she'd ever pull the trigger again, but at least she wasn't going to completely slink away and

hide. "Good."

Al kept his attention focused on the back of the truck, while Riley watched the other direction, and Carl suspiciously studied the woods. "You're from Cape Cod?" Al inquired as he spotted the Sandwich address on the side of the vehicle.

"Yeah," Carl answered.

"How bad was it there?"

"Let's just say not many made it off after us. Thankfully, we were at work so we took the truck."

"That bad?"

"There was a tsunami. A freaking tsunami," Carl answered with a shake of his head.

Al nodded as he continued to study the land. "Yeah, there was one in Newport too."

Rochelle glanced at him questioningly, he shook his head at her, and she returned to helping John with the tree. Relief filled him when Lee and John tossed the last log into the woods and wiped their hands on their dirty shirts. "I'll have John ride in the back so you can ride up front," Carl told him as he reappeared at Al's side.

Al shook his head. "I appreciate it, but I've got a car stashed not far from here with some supplies."

Carl grinned at him as he lit another cigarette. "Great. Two vehicles are far better than one."

"Until we need gas."

Carl thrust a thumb at the truck. "She's got enough to get us to Sturbridge and we have a little extra in the back. Plus some food and water." It took everything Al had not to hug the guy. "Would you like to ride in the truck till we get to the car?"

Al would have loved a minute to just sit and relax, but now was not the time, and the last time he'd relaxed he'd fallen asleep and nearly been eaten by lava. "I'll walk; thanks."

Carl and John retreated to the truck while Rochelle walked down the bumpy road with them. Al tiredly made his way up the driveway to where he'd stashed the car. Carl pulled the truck into the driveway behind them. "There's a pool you can use to clean up a little," Al informed them as he opened the gate to the pool area.

Carl, Rochelle, and John practically trampled each other in their rush to get at the water. Instead of simply washing off, John and Rochelle threw their arms out and dove into the water. Carl shook his head at them as he knelt at the side and began to wash his face and arms. "You're going to get the truck wet."

"Worth it," John told him as he shook back his shaggy wet hair.

Al retrieved the keys from the flipper and reemerged to find Rochelle and John already climbing out of the pool. They both jumped and danced as they wrung out their shirts in an attempt to get dry. "We'll be dry in no time in this heat," Rochelle informed Carl.

They followed him back to the car and waited as he maneuvered it out from under the tree. "You weren't kidding about this not being much of a car," Riley muttered.

"Stealers can't be choosers," Al informed her.

Riley, Lee, Carl, and John laughed in response, Rochelle looked horrified. "You stole a car!" she blurted.

"Your mother helped."

"Wow," she breathed as she nodded approvingly. "Go mom."

Lee shook his head as he opened the door and shoved the garbage to the other side.

Al opened the trunk and pulled out the handgun he'd taken back from Rita, an event that seemed like a lifetime ago now. He handed it out to John. "Even if you don't know how to use it you should probably have it."

"I'd like to stay with Carl and John. John can't read a map," Rochelle said. Al almost protested, but what could he really say? She wasn't his child, and it was obvious these two weren't going to harm her.

John scowled at her as he folded his arms over his chest. "That comment just earned you more time in the middle," he informed her.

She grinned at him. "That's ok."

"We'll lead," Riley said as she walked around to the passenger side. "Route One was a mess, but we know some back roads that will hopefully get us to Wrentham and maybe, fingers crossed, Franklin."

Carl and John nodded as they retreated back to the truck. John held the door open for Rochelle and waited for her to climb in before following her. Riley rested her arm on the roof of the car as she leaned across it to study him. "Are you ready for an adventure Al?"

"What's the rest of this day been?" he asked in surprise.

"An experience. It's been an experience, but I have a feeling this is when the real fun begins. This is when the shit hits the fan so to speak."

Al stared at where she'd stood even after she disappeared into the car. He yearned to believe she was wrong, that it wasn't going to get worse; it simply *had* to get easier. But Al had never been one to lie to himself, and he wasn't going to start now. She was right. Things were going to get a lot more grueling before they got easier. He just hoped they were all up for the challenge as he drove back onto the road.

CHAPTER 30

Xander

Foxboro, Mass.

They kept close to the river as they jogged across the parking lot toward the highway. Staying to the river wouldn't have been his first choice, but he'd far prefer to jump into it and take his chances with the water, rather than try and fight the lava. The current was still strong, but there was a chance they could survive it now.

He didn't like the idea of being in the crowd, didn't trust most of the people around him, but there was no escaping it. Not anymore.

His lungs and legs were already burning; the heat of the day was dragging him down faster than he had anticipated. "We have to get a car," he panted to Bobby.

"No kidding," Bobby muttered.

Mary Ellen placed a hand against her side as she winced. "Al and I had one, but it's on the other side of the river now." Relief filled him as he realized at least Riley and Lee would have a vehicle. "We stole it."

Mary Ellen stared forcefully at him with assessing eyes. He knew she was trying to judge his reaction, trying to see how far he was willing to go. There wasn't much he wasn't willing to do to stay alive, and to find Riley and Lee again though. "I guess we're stealing a car," he said.

She smiled wanly at him as she nodded her approval. The crowd jostled and bumped against him as it bottlenecked toward what remained of the gates they had entered through. Xander grabbed Mary Ellen's arm, pulling her closer to him as Bobby pressed against her other side and elbowed the people pushing and shoving at him. Xander turned sideways to maneuver through the crush. It wouldn't be the lava, or the river that killed them he realized, it would be the stupidity of the people who wouldn't stop shoving and trampling each other long enough to escape the hazards coming their way.

"Xander!" He glanced at Bobby over the top of Mary Ellen's head. He was pointing to the left where a group of people were pushing against the fencing. He nodded to Bobby and began to shove his way through the crowd to join the growing mob trying to take the fence down.

His fingers curled through the holes of the metal fence as he thrust his weight against it. A loud groan went through the crowd as one of the poles twisted and bent but didn't quite give way. He could almost feel the sand slipping through the hourglass as his lifespan seemed to be shortening by the second. He refused to look back the way they had come.

"Now!" someone shouted.

He thrust his weight forward again. Something snapped somewhere; a startled cry ran through the crowd as the fencing gave way without warning. He tripped, nearly fell, but managed to catch himself before he was flattened beneath the rush of people shoving against his back. Other people weren't as lucky as they were thrown forward and instantly trampled.

He turned away as someone screamed from beneath the horde. He caught only a brief glimpse of a woman in her fifties before she was buried. His stomach somersaulted, but he grasped Mary Ellen's arm again and fled as fast as he possibly could. Bobby met

his gaze briefly, looking sick as he shook his head and turned away.

They pounded over the pavement, running toward the highway and away from the screams of misery and anguish howling endlessly over the open expanse. He shuddered as more screams filled the air.

"Don't look back!" he hissed at Mary Ellen when she turned sideways. "There's nothing any of us want to see back there. Not anymore."

Though tears shimmered in her eyes, she turned back around and focused on the land ahead of them. They climbed up a steep embankment before arriving at the ruined expanse of road that had once been the highway. Cars were scattered everywhere, most were broken down, but a few looked like viable options. Unfortunately, they were also viable options for the entire crowd spilling onto the road with them.

His breath hissed out of him. Glass began to shatter around them, shouts and cries went up. He was pulling Mary Ellen toward a newer looking Chevy when two men reached it first. One of the men eyed him warily, but Xander wasn't going to fight them for it. Five other men began to fight over a Jeep sitting half in a ditch. Xander took a step back as it dissolved into a physical altercation he knew none of them were going to win.

"We should get off this road. We're never going to find anything here," he said as he turned away from the increasing brawl.

"You're right," Bobby agreed.

They jogged across the median, and the other side of the road, before entering the woods. They wound their way through the trees before coming across a side road far quieter than the pandemonium they had left behind. They cautiously moved down the tranquil street, catching their breaths as they searched for another vehicle, but there were far less options here than there had been on the highway.

"There's a car down there." Bobby pointed down a long, tree lined drive to where the back end of a car was clearly visible.

"I don't think it's a great idea to go strolling up someone's drive right now," Xander told him.

"I *know* it's not a great idea to walk all the way to Sturbridge, and we might as well check it out."

Mary Ellen bit her lip as she turned to him. "It can't hurt."

It could hurt if the wrong person lived here, and that was what he was fearful of, but he nodded his agreement. Bobby was right, walking wasn't going to accomplish much, and there weren't many other options available to them right now. "We'll go through the woods."

"Wasn't going any other way," Bobby replied with a weak smile.

They slid back into the woods as they cautiously approached the house. Gathering at the edge of the tree line, they stopped to inspect the small ranch nestled within the clearing. No lights were on, but he hadn't expected any. This close he was able to tell it was a new Cadillac parked in the drive; the black paint gleamed in the sun over his left shoulder. It would be a good car to have, if they could get their hands on it. He didn't see anyone moving within the home and didn't hear any sounds as they waited for over ten minutes before he finally broke the silence.

"Maybe I should knock."

"It's not going to kill you," Bobby told him with a tight smile.

Xander shot him a dark look as he stepped cautiously from the tree line. "A Smith

and Wesson will though," he muttered. He felt like a cartoon character as he approached the house one awkwardly creeping step at a time. He kept waiting for a boom, kept waiting for someone to shout at him to stop where he was. Eerie silence continued to engulf him.

He winced as the screen door creaked open beneath his hand. He'd make for one crappy burglar he decided as another loud creak filled the air. He stood breathlessly, but everything remained still. Bracing himself, he raised his hand and knocked quickly on the door. He almost ducked down and covered his head just in case, but somehow managed to keep himself from looking like a complete idiot as he stood on the stoop.

When nothing but silence continued to greet him, he knocked again and rang the bell. "That might have been a better first choice."

He nearly jumped out of his skin as Bobby's voice sounded over his right shoulder. "You finally decided to stop hiding in the woods?" he demanded.

Bobby shrugged as he grinned at him and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Thought you might like a little help, you're horrible at this stuff."

"And you're a pro?"

"Far from. I don't think anyone's home though."

"Why would they leave *that* car behind?" Mary Ellen inquired. "It's brand new."

"Maybe they had a better option, maybe it doesn't have any gas; maybe they just panicked and went to the stadium or something. Who knows what they were thinking, but maybe they left the keys," Xander replied.

Bobby stepped away from the house and hurried over to the car. He tried the door, but it was locked. "Not very trusting!" he called over to them.

Xander turned back to the door and grabbed hold of the knob. If they locked their car, in their own driveway, he highly doubted the house would be open, and he wasn't disappointed. Mary Ellen handed him a broken piece of cobble from the garden edging next to the door. Xander held his breath as he used the cobble to break out the bottom pane in the window. He slid his arm through and fumbled with the locks before swinging the door slowly open.

He stood awkwardly in the doorway as he peered into the shadowed interior of the home. He felt like he was trapped in a bad horror movie as he called out, "Hello."

The distant tick of a clock in another room broke the silence. He hesitated in the threshold, feeling extremely uncomfortable with just walking into someone's house, even if he had just busted out their window. He put all morals aside though and stepped inside. "Hello!" he called again.

He nodded to Mary Ellen and Bobby before making his way into the kitchen. He searched the table and countertops for the keys but found nothing. The grandfather clock, steadily ticking away the time, was in the corner of the living room. Bobby was already there, staring at a family portrait of a middle aged couple and their two children, a girl and boy who appeared to be about ten and twelve in age.

"They were the perfect all American family," Bobby said.

"They could still be alive. There's two of them, I'm sure they had two vehicles."

Bobby's eyes were haunted as they met his. "Yeah, maybe."

"Come on, help me find the keys."

Mary Ellen was coming out of the bathroom when they entered the hallway. Xander assumed the door at the end was most likely the parent's room as he made his way toward

it. He thrust the door open and instantly recoiled as he was slapped in the face by the atrocity within the room. The scent of decay and something more, something worse, washed over him. Two bodies lay in the center of the bed. Pink, raw flesh clung to bones almost clearly visible through the remaining blood and sinew enfolding their frames. Clumps of skin and muscle had fallen onto the bed around the skeletal remains. It looked as if someone, or something, had dumped boiling water all over them. Except there was no puddle of water on the floor around them, and other than bodily fluids, there appeared to be *no* other liquids.

Mary Ellen turned away and wretched. "What happened to them?" Bobby's voice was ragged and broken.

Xander didn't have the first freaking idea what had happened to them. He couldn't begin to fathom what had caused this hideous, foul smelling, goopy mess to form in the center of a perfectly normal bedroom in what used to be America.

"Cover your mouths!" Mary Ellen commanded.

"What?" Xander inquired.

He turned to find her covering her mouth and nose with her shirt. "Cover your mouths! It might be something in the air! Some kind of gas, or something emitted with one of the quakes."

Xander pulled his shirt over his mouth, but he doubted it would do him any good. If some kind of gas had caused this it was already too late. He'd already breathed it in; they all had. The stench of it was seared into his nostrils, and he thought it would forever be engrained in his memory.

"We should leave," Bobby grumbled.

The crappy cosmetic jokes kept on coming, as Xander spotted the keys on the nightstand next to one of the leaking messes that had once been a human being. They'd come this far, they'd witnessed *this*, they may have inhaled only God knew what, he wasn't leaving without those keys.

"I'll be right back."

"Xander!" Bobby hissed. He thrust a finger at the nightstand. Bobby had been flushed, but his face paled visibly as he saw the keys. He closed his eyes, shook his head, and then nodded. "Yeah, ok, yeah."

Straightening his shoulders and steeling his resolve, Xander held his breath as he stepped into the room. He made his way across the room much faster than he had across their front yard. He didn't mean to look at the bodies again, but he found his eyes inexplicably drawn toward them as his hand curled around the keys. He tried to wrap his mind around what he was seeing; tried to somehow assimilate this scene into the mind that had been eating a bowl of oatmeal, and reading the comics at seven o'clock this morning. The two worlds didn't belong together. One was a world of far more simplicity and safety than he had realized. The other was a world he wasn't certain would be around for much longer.

He pulled the keys from the nightstand and turned back to find Bobby and Mary Ellen hovering uncertainly in the doorway. Mary Ellen was still covering her mouth and nose, but Bobby seemed to have come to the same conclusion as Xander as he'd released his shirt. Xander was halfway back across the room when he spotted the six inch wide gap in the floor. It started by the door to the closet, and ran for about a foot before disappearing under the bureau, and into the room behind the wall. Whatever had come

into this house, and caused this mess, had come in through that gap.

He hurried from the room and closed the door behind him. He glanced at the other two closed doors. The last thing in the world he would choose to do was look in there, but he knew he couldn't leave here without knowing. He'd never stop wondering if he'd left the children behind. "Mary Ellen why don't you go into the kitchen," he suggested.

She frowned at him. "Aren't we leaving?"

"In a minute. They had children, I..." his voice trailed off; he found he couldn't look at her as he focused on the school pictures behind her shoulder. The little girl was adorable with her pigtails and missing front tooth. He shuddered as a chill slid down his spine. "I can't leave here until I'm sure."

Her shoulders slumped as she glanced at the pictures. Without a word she turned and disappeared from the hall. "I'll understand if you go too." Bobby stood uncertainly, his eyes broken and distant as he glanced between the two rooms. "Go," Xander urged.

Bobby was a good guy, his best friend, but he'd always been the gentler soul in the group, the most easily wounded and the kindest. This was something that may break him, and though Xander absolutely did *not* want to do this alone, he could handle it. He didn't think Bobby could.

"It's ok, Bobby, go. I'll be fine."

"I'm sorry," he whispered before turning and hurrying from the hallway.

Xander tried to gather his courage. He felt so unbelievably alone right now. He was terrified for Riley, worried about her safety, but he was grateful she hadn't been here for this. He hoped they didn't decide to enter any residences, but he thought the chances of that were slim. Even if they didn't enter a home, they would probably wander into stores or restaurants in search of supplies. He imagined if this had happened here, it had happened at other places too.

Taking a deep breath, Xander grasped hold of the knob and opened the door. He closed it quickly, unwilling to dwell on the scene of the little pink bed and what lay within. The son, in his school picture, was older than the girl with darker hair and a red bowtie Xander was certain his parents had forced him to wear. He swallowed heavily and thrust the door open.

He closed it again and strode swiftly from the hall. He felt empty and numb as he forced himself not to look at the family pictures on his way back to the kitchen. Mary Ellen was in the doorway; she wiped her eyes quickly when he entered.

Bobby was standing by the fridge, his gaze on his feet. "I was going to see if they had some food we could take, but I don't trust anything from here," he muttered.

"Neither do I," Xander agreed.

He closed the door quietly behind him as they left. He was unwilling to linger as he hurried down the steps and toward the Cadi. Unlocking the door he slid into the leather seats. His hands shook as he tried to slide the key into the ignition; he couldn't get them to work right for him. He couldn't get anything to work right for him today.

He didn't know what came over him, didn't know what happened, but something inside of him snapped as fury surged to the forefront and a bellow of rage tore from him. He smashed his hands against the steering wheel as he continued to shout and yell and beat on the car in frustration and anger. Grasping hold of the steering wheel, he yelled again and jerked on the wheel.

He screamed for the unfairness of it all. For the children in the pictures, and the

countless other children who would never have a chance to grow up. He screamed for Carol and his parents and everyone else who had been lost today.

He didn't know how long he bellowed and carried on like a madman, but when he was done his throat was sore, he dripped sweat, and he shook from the violence shimmering beneath his surface.

Still alive, he reminded himself. You're still alive, Bobby is still alive, Lee is still alive, and *Riley* is still alive.

His head bowed, and he took a shuddery breath as he regained control of himself. They had to get out of here, they had to get to Sturbridge; he had to find Lee and Riley. He needed to hold her, and he had to know they were safe. He would feel better then.

"Get in," he ground out.

Bobby hesitated before sliding into the passenger seat. "You ok?" he inquired.

Xander managed a nod as Mary Ellen closed her door. He'd expected to see fear or uncertainty in her gaze as she met his eyes in the rearview mirror; instead she gave him a brief nod. "Thank you."

He couldn't look at her anymore as he managed to slide the key into the ignition on his first try. "Please have gas," he pleaded as he twisted the key.

The Cadi started with a melodious hum of the engine. Relief filled him; he actually released a harsh laugh when he spotted the nearly full tank of gas. "Almost full," he announced as he put the car into reverse and backed out of the drive. "Finally something has gone right today."

Bobby patted him on the shoulder. "Two things for you man, you got the girl. Finally."

He glanced at Bobby out of the corner of his eye. "I guess, but I don't know where she is right now."

"What else is new? Riley's always gone out of her way to avoid you."

He managed a small laugh and smile for his friend. He should feel relieved; he should feel elated to finally have something go right. All he felt was sick though. All he felt was a growing sense of despair as they broke over a hill, and the devastated wreckage of what had once been his hometown came into view. Bobby shook his head as he turned away; Mary Ellen bowed her head.

As they made the descent down the hill, he couldn't shake the feeling they may be driving into worse, especially after that house. They couldn't fight the earthquakes; they couldn't fight the lava, but at least they could feel and see that stuff. What had happened in that house had been something just as deadly, and something they wouldn't know to run from until it was too late.

Those people had never known what hit them, and as he crested another hill, he couldn't help but wonder when one of them would get their knockout punch. He was determined to get to Sturbridge before that happened.

The End

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