

Blue Iris

Gia Hunter

STORYPDF

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Chapter 1

Iris

Silence.

THE WORLD had turned into a deafening silence of danger and uncertainty. And in the darkness where sadness and horror lingered.

The night fell. It was time for me to move.

The desolated pet shop had been my shelter for the past few days and the safest place so far as no one who would think of getting pets nowadays. A dog was probably a good idea, but the food was not easy to search in this world full of chaos.

After shoving my extra shirt and the only blanket into my backpack, I slipped my feet onto the old running shoes and ready to move out.

After a few steady breaths, I walked out, determined to find a new place where I could stay for a few days or longer. I had been running from places to places for two weeks now and I hadn't seen or met any living human being other than the littered dead bodies everywhere, burned or decomposed.

I couldn't remember the last time I talked—probably the day I escaped, and I missed my own voice. Talking to myself would make me crazy and singing would make me cry and hungry, so, I just kept my mouth shut.

The cold breeze smelled death. A ghost of pain rippled through my body. It had been like this since the unknown deadly virus wiped out the country. My labored breathing and my steps against the asphalt echoed through the darkness.

I picked my way to the intersection, hoping to find an apothecary. The weak light from the silver moon was the only guide I had to follow.

I knew for a fact that it had been raided, but by any luck, I could find a stash of painkillers or any medicine I could trade with food when I met survivors.

Passing by rusting vehicles lined at the sides of the deserted road, the Bowl of Hygieia printed in the white wall came to view. I sighed in hope, but it quickly crumbled down when I noticed the open tail lights of the SUV parked in front.

Hustling, I ducked down and hid behind the car. After everything I had been through, it taught me many, and one thing was to trust no one other than my own instinct.

Silhouettes of a man and a woman hopped out from the SUV. The short curvy woman walked toward the trunk, pushed up the hood, and took something, then left it unlocked.

A click of gun and murmurs were the only thing I could hear. They marched to the apothecary door in somewhat in rush. Alerted, the man's handgun was out and aimed at the glass door, and the woman cautiously tailed behind him.

A few minutes later, I slowly and carefully walked to the SUV, hoping to find something to fill my grumbling stomach. When I got into the trunk, it was empty, only a stinky blanket that smelled blood, and nothing else my eyes could find. It must be their first stop, and I could not find any food.

Shit!

Hurried footsteps crouched against the broken glass made me stiffen. It was too late for me to run, and when they spotted me, I was dead.

My instinct kicked in. I got into the trunk and covered myself with the blanket, then someone shut the door down.

A moment later, the engine revved.

"This isn't enough," said an angry male voice. It was almost a roar.

"We don't have time to search around, Frost. We need to go back right now." A soft voice came from a woman.

"I know," the man hissed, angrier.

"He'll be okay. He'll live."

Someone's life was in danger, I thought.

"Yeah, he needs to be."

I was counting how long the drive was. A silence loomed from the two people for a few minutes.

If my feeling was right, the car turned left in less than ten minutes. The gravelly road against the tires indicated that we were off the highway.

"We can go and search the nearest pharmacy once he has this," she suggested.

"No. You'll stay. I'll go with Colt. It's more dangerous out there than that area."

"I can take care of myself," she answered defensively.

"Do you think I don't know that? But Darick needs you, Heloisa."

"Fine."

My temples pounded as the car jumped from the bumpy road a couple of times—the driver seemed to be in a hurry, and my stomach also ached. I closed my eyes when my headache worsened. I was beyond hungry and thirsty. And weak.

Minutes passed, and I must have lost count of the time. My plan was to escape before they would notice someone was in their vehicle.

Nowadays, people would not accept excuses. People killed each other when they found them they were threats.

For months, no one really knew if the government still existed. They killed to survive. They killed for food. They were paranoid, and trust didn't come easily even to a girl like me that could barely harm a fly.

I was in my deep thoughts when the blanket was pulled away from me.

"I'll take— oh, my God!"

Shock rocked me in my place.

My arms flew to my face, not to protect myself from harm, but to shield my eyes from the light pointed directly at me. My heart pounded. My lips went dry.

"Who are you?" the angry man asked in a cold and deadly tone.

"I-I'm... I-I'm unarmed." I raised my hands to surrender.

I closed my eyes when silence surrounded us. I could only hear my breathing until several clicks echoed in my ears.

This is not good. This is the end. My end.

I forced the strength in my voice. "I'm just a survivor who wanted to live like you."

"Yeah, I get it, and shit like this and that," the same angry guy said.

"How did you get inside the car?" the soft voice asked—the same woman who talked earlier.

"You forgot to close the trunk, again, didn't you? Now, I need to kill her because she already knows our place. How could you be so reckless, Heloisa?"

I quickly moved to sit down. My world spun, but I managed to support my body with my hands to avoid falling. Squinting, I blinked until my eyes adjusted to the light.

Another silhouette stepped forward, his shadow alone vibrated deadly and intimidating as his muscles shifted against the illuminating light from the post. His overwhelming size reminded me that he was taller, bigger, and stronger than me—than any of the two.

“You’re running out of time. Talk!” No hint of humanity in his deep voice.

His lack of emotions twisted anxiety in my empty stomach. I’d been in this situation many times, but one thing I was sure of before, I knew they would not kill me, at least not yet, but these people didn’t know me at all. So, this is the end.

My chin trembled.

“Who the fuck are you?” Something more terrifying about his command that I’d never been encountered before.

I swallowed. My mouth ran dry. My throat clogged, and I had barely strength left to answer him.

“Don’t!” the woman screamed that shocked me through my core.

In a split second, the darkness claimed me.

What happened?

WHERE AM I? The smell of soap tickled my nose. I tried hard to tune in my other senses, but all I could hear was my own breathing. The comfy feeling against my head and my back made me want to fall asleep cocooned in this warm blanket.

I opened my eyes and wandered around the wooden-walled room. At least two bunk beds from my side and two from the opposite side. There were no windows, they must have blocked it for safety—just the kerosene lamp lighting up the entire room. Beds were empty. I could smell now the mud and the musty smell of cabins. This must be the campsite based on the bed style I was in.

The door swung open, revealing a woman—the same woman from the—Oh, my god!

I’m still alive.

“Of course, you are?” The sweet smile spread across the woman’s lips. If my memory served right, her name was Heloisa.

Did I actually say it out loud?

“You collapsed. You must be hungry. I brought something for you. This isn’t much, but it fills an empty stomach.”

The smell of mushrooms made my stomach grumble.

She chuckled. “I know you are.”

When I was about to sit down, I realized there was something hooked to my hand. My heart rate accelerated.

"It's alright." She must have seen my reaction. I was terrified. "Our doctor checked you up when you passed out and while you were sleeping. He said it could be due to hunger and dehydration. Well, just like everyone, right? And you look so pale and fragile. How long have you been alone out there? Good thing you found us before something bad happen to you." She continued talking while I stared in horror at the transparent tube attached to me.

"That's just fluid." She sat beside me in the bed. "I cleaned and changed you up into my clothes. Yours are already washed." But something was missing.

Shock, I searched for my neck. "Where's my necklace?"

The woman looked shocked as well. Her brown eyes widened. "Oh, the necklace? Um, it's with Gael."

"Who's Gael?" Hastily, I pulled out the IV and stood up, ignoring the pounding of my head, the grumbling of an empty stomach, and the spinning of my vision. "I need that necklace."

"It's safe. You can have it back once you've eaten something."

I walked to the door, squeezing my eyes shut. I open my eyes after a couple of breaths. I was right, we were in the middle of the forest, and guarded by walls from old metal roofs, but not safe enough to stand still with strong blows of weapons.

There were three old cabins aligned across the cabin where I was standing, with the same structural designs and disparate from where I came from. A large fire pit in the center with charred pieces of wood caught my eyes, reminding me of the summer camp back in high school.

I shoved my feet onto the first shoes came to my sight aligned beside the door and walked down to the muddy ground.

"You're still weak. You need some more rest."

"I'm fine. I need to take my necklace back," I insisted stubbornly.

"Okay, then. Follow me. This place is an old campsite in the middle of the forest. It's way safer from the looters. By the way, I'm Heloisa. You can call me, Lois. Where you from?"

I ignored her rambling question and followed her crossing the muddy ground. "What happened last night?"

"You mean two nights ago?"

"What?" I stared at her in shock. "H-how long did—?"

"You slept for almost thirty hours. You must be so exhausted."

She had no idea.

"I'm fine, thank you."

We stopped at the wooden ladders with muddy footprints leading to the door. She knocked while I stared at her again in disbelief.

She then yanked the door open and said, "Gael, she's awake and wanna talk to you. It's urgent."

"Has she eaten something?" The calm and concerned tone of a male voice came from the room.

Warily, I stepped inside. The room size was the same as where I slept in. Only there was no bed except for a desk and two chairs. Stacks of papers and a single pen atop of it. No guns and no decoration hanging on the wall, but there was a single open window from my right, probably for ventilation because I could smell cigarettes thickly hanging in the air.

He was a smoker. Gael was around my dad's age. He had short graying hair and bright blue eyes. A medium built, and from where he was sitting, he was probably around five feet and eleven inches tall.

I took a deep shaky breath. "Sir, I need my necklace back."

Gael strolled his gaze on me from head to toe. "That must be so important to you. A gift? Just Call me Gael."

"Gael it is. That's my mom's."

"You can go, Lois," he dismissed her. "Have a seat—"

"Iris. My name is Iris Clayton." Slowly, I took a seat at one of the two chairs across him.

"Were you separated from your family or group?"

"My group. We were attacked two weeks ago by dangerous and armed men while we were heading North. My group leader thought we could change the route and search for some supply on our way. We got separated from each other after the attack."

I doubted if Gael was convinced with my story, but he was listening.

"It happened so fast. It was all blurry, and all I could hear was the gunfire and screams from my group. I saw..." My eyes stung and my heart broke every time I remembered how my brother died. "I saw my brother collapsed to the ground."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Iris. We've also lost people we cared about from the outbreak and killed by dangerous people. Everyone here is like you who wants to live."

I nodded and wiped my tears dry.

“How did you get into that place?”

“I’ve been strolling from places to places almost every night, but I stayed for a couple of days at the pet shop since no one seemed to pass by that place anymore.”

“Quite clever.”

“You’d become clever when you only have one mission since the virus wiped out the country. To survive.”

“I want to be honest with you, Iris. We don’t recruit or take people in anymore. These past few months, we barely survive through scavenging. We don’t have enough food, medicines, and supply left. We have families and children here, and in a few days, some groups might find this place, and you know what they would do when you refused to give what they wanted. We’re also lacking ammunition and manpower to defend this place.”

“I understand. I’m leaving as soon as I get my necklace back. Thank you for your hospitality, Gael.”

Chapter 2

Colt

I BARELY slept after leaving the guard post. Now, I wanted booze, but nowadays you felt like a goddamn billionaire if you had a bottle of a cheap whiskey at your disposal.

Frost pissed me off. He could have put the group in danger by bringing a stranger to our camp. That woman could be dangerous no matter how weak she might look.

Darick was still recovering from his bullet wound—he'd been with us for months and proved his value, and being our supply runner, we could not afford to lose a resourceful person like him. What had gone wrong with the last run, I still didn't have the answer.

And then those eyes—taunted with terror.

Those terrified eyes. I've seen many, but there was something in the way she stared back at me—not just pleading for her life to spare—there was something more.

“Hey.”

“Cora.” I locked my cabin and faced her.

“Where did you sleep last night?” *Well, that's not what I expect to start a conversation in the morning.* She gave me a smile that men would be glad to take my place.

Cora was beautiful, and despite this world was dying, there was still a beauty left in it to ponder. She had this vibrant look with long wavy blonde hair and body that every man wanted to warm his bed, but her attitude was not quite pleasing. She was a pain in the ass to everyone in the camp and a little too overconfident. Cora was the type of girl that man never wished to bring her to his parents.

“In my room,” I answered politely. “Do you need anything?”

“But it was locked.” She moved closer and spread her hands on my chest.

“Of course it's locked because I was sleeping, and that's why we have this called knocking.”

She rolled her eyes. “But the last time I came, it's un—”

“Look, Cora. I told you what happened to us three nights ago shouldn't have happened, and will never happen again. That was good—the sex, and you're a good lay, but that's it.” I sounded like an asshole, but what she needed was the fact. “Look at us, we barely eat and protect ourselves from what's out there. Darick is still in his bed. I couldn't think of a relationship right now or a roll in

hay because I have to focus on protecting our people. Look what happened the last time.” I swallowed, remembering the scariest thing I never wanted to look back.

“So, is it true that Frost found a girl?” She changed the topic because she knew me—if I said no, it remained no.

“Yeah, and she’s leaving once she wakes up.”

“Good. Because if she’s sick, she can’t stay here and infect us all.”

“She’s not infected. She’s just... weak.”

“Then we don’t need a weak or another member, right?”

“That’s not up to me, Cora. If Gael wants her here, we have to respect his decision.”

She shrugged. “Of course.”

I walked past her. “Got to see Gael.”

“Are you sure— fine.” She was not pleased, but I didn’t give a damn shit. She was just a distraction and the least in my priorities.

I knocked on Lois’s cabin. When no one opened up, I pressed my ear against the door, but it was silent.

I strode towards Gael’s and almost bumped into her at the front door.

“Colt!” Her brown eyes lit up. Lois was one of the people I cared about. She had the kindest heart, and people thought she was weak, but the truth was, she was one of the strongest people I knew.

“Hey. I was in your cabin.”

She smiled. “Oh, I brought her to Gael.”

“She’s awake?” My brow cocked, surprised.

The blue-eyed.

She whispered, “Yes. She jumped out of her bed when she couldn’t find her necklace though.”

“Huh.” I saw that necklace—it was an ordinary silver chain, but the pendant was a vintage blue mini perfume bottle.

She shrugged. “She said it’s her mom’s.”

“I see. I have to see Gael.”

“Sure.” Lois nodded in resignation.

She was definitely awake. Her voice was soft as silk and melodious as the Oscines. There was a warmth in the way she spoke—it reminded me of how mom sang for me lullabies—it was just like hers.

I could hear their conversation, and it was a good decision that Gael told her we didn't recruit people in. With our lack of supplies, we couldn't afford another mouth to feed. And by the look of her, she needed lots of it to get her shape back.

She was so skinny and looked like a walking corpse. Her skin was so pale, and her bones were prominent. She was barely breathing when Frost and Lois found her two nights ago, and now she was talking with Gael.

No matter how ruthless we had become, we couldn't just throw her out of the camp, unconscious and defenseless. She could barely stand on her own feet, what more protecting herself. I knew the moment she walked out of the gate, she signed her death wish. It was odd how she survived all alone out there—that thought alone made me anxious and skeptical.

"But I wouldn't mind you staying here with us for as long as you want, Iris," said Gael.

For as long as she wants? What the fuck?

"You've got to be kidding me!" I bolted inside his office.

Gael's brows furrowed. "And do you have an idea where to send her?"

It was my mistake to question his decision. We respected and never doubted his ability to lead us because of his experience in the military that kept us all alive. He cared about this group, and I knew we were always his top priority before anything else. He must have seen something in this woman that made him decide to keep her.

"She survived for months out there. What made you think she won't survive again?" I said fiercely and watched the woman's reaction.

Despite my protest, she remained seated in front of Gael and stared down at her necklace, playing with the pendant. What was so important about it?

"Because she was still in shape that time, Colt, and now, look at her."

"Let me send her back to where she came from with food that will last a few days. By then, she gets her strength back and able to look after herself again."

"No. She stays, and that's final."

“Are you sure about that? She could be snooping or she came here on purpose; to scout this place. I couldn’t put our people at risk. Not again, Gael.” We’d been through hell, ambushed, lost the people we cared about, and everything. And now, he just decided to let her stay?

What the hell is wrong with him?

We could barely protect ourselves, and yet he took her in. *Just like that, because she’s fucking weak!*

And who is this woman that he’s willing to put his group at risk?

“I think about that, too.”

“And?”

“She will stay.” *Has he lost his mind?*

Unbelievable!

“Jesus, Gael. Did you check her arms? She has bruises and needle pricks.” I pointed at her. “This woman is a drug addict.”

“What?” The woman spoke, lifting her chin. Her gaze directly met mine. Her surreal blue eyes widened in shock.

I felt an odd sense down my spine. My heart started to beat faster the longer we stared, reading each others’ thoughts.

She’s dangerous as hell... and definitely pretty now that her face was clean.

I could see every tiny detail on her face—the dilatation of her pupils, her light brown soft angled eyebrows, to her small upturned nose, high cheekbones, and her pale droopy lips. She had this pixie cut bronze hair that looked like she did it by herself.

“We don’t have the luxury to do drugs here, twig. I wonder how did you maintain your supply, and where were you really come from? You must have a wide of resources, huh?” My sarcasm had her eyes flooded with pain and unshed tears.

Oddly, I felt guilty for calling her twig. And I hated that feeling, but I was just honest. Or should I have kept it to myself?

“This is not what you think it is.” She wiped her tears with bony trembling fingers.

“Explain then.”

“Colt, that won’t be necessary. Give her a break,” Gael interrupted.

“I’m just protecting our people.”

“So do I.”

“Fine.” I snatched the necklace from her hand, and that was what I was planning to do—to distract her and snatch it. I wanted to know how far she would fight for this. “Collateral.”

“Give that to me,” she ordered. Her voice was stronger than I thought she could—it was authoritative but calm.

“Not a chance. You can stay here, but this necklace.” I raised it up. “Will stay with me until you decide to leave the camp.”

“No. You won’t dare take that away from me!”

“Oh, I dare you.” I turned and walked away from her.

“Colt,” Gael called my name.

Then it happened so quickly and surely, I did not see it coming.

My adrenaline spiked. Swiftly pulling the knife from my right thigh strap, I aimed at her carotid artery. I could feel the strong pulse against my shining blade—she tensed against it.

“You slit my neck, your balls and junk will decorate this entire floor.” She pressed my handgun on my groin. Great!

“And your blood will spill all over, my dear.”

“Give me my necklace back, Colton, or your ticket gets punched!”

“It’s Colt.”

“Who cares when you’re dead?” *Oh, yeah, why do I give a damn?*

Was it because I called her twig? Funny for a woman so thin could throw sarcasm while being threatened with a knife.

“Give it back to her, and stop this shit between you two! From now on, you, Colt, and you, Iris should work on your differences,” Gael barked.

I kept my eyes pinned to the woman who still had a gun on my crotch. Her eyes where unbelievably wide and... expressive.

“She stole my gun and threatened me. Can’t you see it? This tiny little thing is dangerous and indomitable! You made a mistake, Gael.” If this woman had brought danger to this camp, she would pay it with her life.

"It's your fault your junk is threatened by a woman you called twig. Pull the thing away from her neck and give her back the necklace!"

My nose flared with anger, but this woman, Iris, or whatever her real name just stared back at me with devoid expression, increasing the pressure against my groin with a brow cocked in a challenge.

"Busted balls and your tiny dick or my necklace."

I almost wanted to smirk when she said tiny. *See for yourself, woman, then tell me if it's tiny or not.* But I held on to my expression.

Uncomfortable, I shifted my hips.

"Uh-uh, be careful, *dear*." Then two clicks followed—she pulled the hammer and unlocked the safety.

"Iris, don't do this. You can kill us both, but you can't get out of here alive." Gael's voice softened, but the tension in his tone didn't go unnoticed.

"I'm not gonna kill you, Gael. You have my word. You could shoot me to protect this asshole, but why haven't you done it yet?"

"Because I know you just want back what's yours," Gael answered.

She increased the pressure this time. "My necklace, Colton."

"Do you like my dick that much that you can't take your hand off of me?" I smirked.

Her closeness made me felt like I wanted to reach out and touch her. *Jesus Christ! What's wrong with me?*

"To blow off?" Her brow rose. "Anticipating."

I huffed to her threat. "How many people have you killed, Blue... Iris?"

Her eyes suddenly widened, lips parted, then she gulped, but the gun remained pressed against my groin. "H-how d-did you know?" Her question was hesitant and wary.

Huh! I could distract her. "My mom had a flower shop. Of all the flowers, she chose iris to bring home every day and placed it in my room. As annoying as it is, I liked the blue one. Your eyes are blue like an iris flower. They remind me of her."

Her lashes were lighter, almost blonde. It was possible she dyed her hair. She had tiny freckles scattered all over her nose and under her eyes.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Now, my deal. You can stay and pull that gun away from me or you die." I pressed a little harder against her neck. "One wrong move, your blood will splatter all over the floor. Since you're pale, you'll die in a matter of seconds, Iris."

"You'll die with me, Colton. That's a promise."

"Jesus, the two of you are starting to annoy me. Just shut it already and I have something to do here! And you Colt, you finally found your match."

"The hell I am."

"He's arrogant."

"And you're bitchy for a visitor."

"My necklace."

"My gun."

"I promise I won't tell anyone that a certain twig threatened your junk." She grinned, spreading a devilish smile at me. Then she whispered, "Your secret is safe with me, Colton."

My blood rushed through my head in anger that I could almost see red.

"Fascinating how I could make you blush easily."

"I'm not blushing." Absentmindedly, I wiped my cheek.

"I know you have a rep, Colton, but it would be worse if a twig blows off your balls and that would not be so great for them to tell that the almighty Colton—"

"Stop! Stop!" I pushed the necklace right into her chest. "Have it your way and stay away from me!" And I walked away, defeated.

"Just so you know I haven't killed anyone!" she yelled. "But you don't wanna be the first on my list, do you?"

"I don't give a damn. Just fu—back off!"

Chapter 3

Iris

IT HAD been a week since the incident at Gael's office, and I hadn't seen Colt around. Lois once mentioned of the guards and Colt happened to choose the night shift, so he'd been sleeping at day time.

I shared lunch with the group every day and been able to meet some of them; Darick, a wounded Asian guy. He questioned his value to the group when his skill as a computer geek was no longer needed. I heard that a group of hackers created a virus and that the entire technology especially the Internet collapsed with half of the world.

Then, I met the blonde named Cora who had an attitude problem, and damn, she hated me. I didn't know why, but she said something that I didn't deserve a place in this camp, and that I was not a part of their group or their family. Lois advised me ahead of time to ignore her because she thought everyone was a threat to her for Colt.

But the thing was, I envied her body even though she had an attitude to loathe for.

"Hey, Iris! How're you doing today?" Dr. Hull spotted me from his cabin. He was the doctor who treated me when I was out. He was on his late fifties who had a small clinic back in his small town.

Yesterday, I went to see him, and he gave me some multivitamins and did a brief check-up. He had pots of herbs and medicinal plants at the back of his own cabin where he spent most of his time.

"I'm great, Dr. Hull. Thanks!" I smiled and waved at him.

I was able to sleep without thinking of what would be my death wish. Months of being paranoid and cautious made me sleepless, but this place had been the safest I had been for a long time.

I poke the softened soil and tossed dry tomato seeds. I didn't have any idea about gardening, but I couldn't just sit there, watch them, and be useless, so I asked Anna, who cooked for them to teach me. For the past week, I took over the garden from her.

I plucked some decaying leaves off and cleaned the soil of carrots and white radishes when a shadow towered over me.

"Iris." And that voice made me stiffen. My heart thundered in my chest.

"Twig is fine," I grunted.

"Not a good time to be sarcastic."

“So, the sleeping beauty is finally awake? I wonder who kissed you from your deep slumber, Colton? Is it the princess Cora, or the evil witch Maleficent?” I lifted my chin, still, I couldn’t meet his gaze. He was just so tall.

“Will you just stop it?” He sounded annoyed, and that made me snort.

“Then what do I owe the pleasure of your visit to the garden, Mr. Colton?”

He clenched his jaw in irritation before he spoke again. “We’re going to scavenge some gasoline, I thought we might find shops or grocery store along the way. Do you need anything?”

Dusting my hands from the dirt, I stood up.

Colt was strikingly handsome despite his unshaven beard covering his sharp squared jaw. *He is the definition of gorgeous and raw.*

His stare alone was deadly, but I knew there was some humane deep inside him. I could feel it. Whatever made him like this—it was a part of his survival, or he might lose someone close to him.

I pushed that thought back to the recycle bin in my head. I could think of it later, but not when he was here in front of me.

He had an amazing physique, and I would bet he had ripped muscles underneath his dark shirt and jeans. He looked dark and broody with his midnight black hair, long lashes surrounded his sharp gray eyes that were always filled with doubt and anger.

Yeah, he definitely has trust and anger issues.

“Are you just gonna stare at me or tell me what you want?” I blinked at his irritated voice.

“Lois got it covered,” I replied shortly.

“You might want something other than what Lois had.”

I sat down again and plucked some dying leaves. “For someone who doesn’t belong to your group and or any family, I can’t be choosy, can I, Colton? So, I’m good.”

“You can’t be serious right now. Self-pity doesn’t suit you. They’re waiting for me in the car. How about for monthly thing?”

What did he just say?

I tried hard not to burst into laughter. “For monthly thing? You mean tampons?” My comment made him uncomfortable.

He shifted in front of me, shoving his hands to his pockets. “Yeah, something like that. We don’t have the luxury to bring for you the brand you like, but we might find something... like that.”

"I will share with Lois. Thanks though."

"Stubborn," he muttered, and I knew he intended to let me hear it. "Suit yourself." His thuds of footsteps faded as he walked away.

I couldn't help but feel grateful that somehow someone came to me and ask me what I needed despite survival became everything for humanity, or was it an order from Gael? Probably the latter.

Anyhow, I took a deep breath and continued working. The sun started to get prickly against my skin, but there was no way to be choosy and applied sunscreen lotion.

I missed the beach.

What mattered to me now was that I was still alive, had a roof above my head, food for my hungry stomach, and the people started to grow on me.

Before I could withdraw my hand from the cucumber vines, a boot stopped me, and I knew who owned it. I hissed in pain when I felt the heel dug into my skin. My thumb fidgeted as she crushed my fingers deeper into the dirt.

"Why the hell are you still here, bitch?" she hissed in anger.

"You know why."

"Gael feels pity for you. That's the only reason why you're here. Now, you can stand by your own two skinny feet, I want you gone before we came back. Did you understand me?"

"You don't decide if I stay or not, Cora. The last time I checked, you were just like me who were lost and pitied by Gael. So don't feel so comfy yourself because you never know you might be gone before me." I blinked, trying to hold the tears that stung my eyes as she increased the pressure of her boot against my hand.

"You'll regret this. Do you think you can fool everyone here with your damsel in distress drama? You'll be gone once I find out who you really are, Iris Clayton."

"Good luck then! I'm sure the corpses of CIA, FBI, and M-16 could help you dig into my past," I countered.

"You, bitch!"

"Shit!" Once she was gone, I shook my hand, and hissed as the broken skin on my fingers started to throb.

I went toward the cabin I shared with Lois. I just didn't know why where ever I go, I couldn't get rid of people who wanted to harm or threaten me. I cleaned my hands with the water from the bucket, then kicked off my shoes, lied down on my bed, and thought of the gray-eyed angry dude.

I MUST have fallen asleep until a soft hand nudged me on my shoulder. "Iris, wake up."

I stretched and instantly stilled, blinking as my pupils assaulted by the halogen lamp. "Oh, we have electricity?"

She laughed softly. "You sleep for the whole day. Again. And you missed your lunch and dinner."

"And you're back safe. How's the run?"

"Pretty good. That's why it took us a few hours. We're lucky today that we did not encounter looters."

"Thank, God. You're all safe."

"I talked to Gael earlier. Maybe next time you can come with us. I don't like going when Cora. The annoying and demanding bitch came with us today."

I chuckled. "Figured." I looked at the two plastic bags on her bed.

"Colt wanted to see you."

"Why?" I eyed her suspiciously.

"I don't know. I guess you have to go and find it out yourself. His cabin's the last on the left."

I stood up from the bed and took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Relax, Iris. He's a good guy. You still didn't tell me what happened at Gael's office last week though." She had been insisting that something happened back there, but I kept on denying just to honor my promise to keep Colt's secret.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I led my way to the lion's den.

I let out a sigh before knocking, and I could hear faint of voices from the inside. If I guessed it right, the other voice was Frost.

"It's open," Colt yelled from the inside.

I pushed it open only to find Frost was grinning at me. Blond was not really my thing in a guy, but it was hard to ignore how handsome Frost was. He had the same body and height as Colt, but he had this overconfident and cocky grin that amused me instead of getting turned off.

Lois told me that he was pretty popular and playboy and the only son of the billionaire. Frost was traveling around the country when the virus wreaked havoc.

"Hey, Iris. Wanna join me hunting tomorrow?"

"No, she won't. Now, out," Colt quickly interrupted before I could reply.

He smirked. "Man, she's safe with me. I promise to keep my hands on the hunting gun all the time."

"Even if you'll ask Gael, he won't allow her." His unwavering gaze bounced between me and Frost.

"I am here, you know. And I can decide for myself. I don't mind going, and I can ask Gael to join you."

"Good luck with that," Colt dismissed me.

"I got the message, man. Some other time, Iris. Oh, wait." He opened his plastic bag, pulled a shirt, and offered it to me. "This would be perfect for you."

"You're giving me that?" I asked in disbelief, smiling like I just received the best gift ever.

"This is a ladies' shirt. So, it's definitely for you."

I took it from him—a shirt with a strawberry print. "Thank you. That's so kind of you, Frost."

"You're welcome." He then asked Colt, "You're off tonight?"

"Yeah, and I badly need some sleep."

"Night, man. Bye, Iris."

"Bye." I watched him as he closed the door. I wandered my eyes around. The same style as ours, but he had a double-deck that served as a divider, and a six drawer dresser. I guessed Colt like his own privacy. His room smelled crisp of paper, deodorant, and manly.

My breathing suddenly turned shallow when I could feel his gaze on me. My heart started to pound in my chest when seconds stretched to a minute and none of us talked.

I cleared my throat. "Why am I summoned, Colton?"

"Come over here," he said softly, and I could tell that that was the less deadly voice I ever heard from him.

"Why?" I asked in wary.

"I did not ask you to come over to hurt you."

"Then why am I here exactly?" I walked closer to where his voice was coming from.

His bed was covered with a dark blue sheet, two pillows, and a small nightstand with his 9mm pistol, a holster, and a knife. Three plastic bags and a backpack on the floor.

He grabbed the first plastic bag and offered it to me. "I picked things that I thought you might need them so that you don't have to share with Lois."

"I don't think I can take that." I pushed back the plastic.

"But you accepted from Frost."

"Because I don't feel it was a charity case," I told him honestly.

"Jesus! A little gratitude would be nice," he said dryly. "And we brought for everyone if that makes you feel better."

I sat on the empty bed across his. "I just don't wanna be a burden to all of you."

"You would be if you keep on rejecting what we offer to you. You deserve a place, and as far as I know, you're a part of the group already. Just take it." He placed the two bags beside me, lied down on his bed, and crossed his legs.

"Why so many?"

"Just checked them out, and you're welcome," he answered harshly.

I watched him close his eyes. He must have been so tired from the run. I checked the first bag. There were two boxes of toothpaste, three toothbrushes, bars of soap, razor, a big bottle of shampoo, lotion, face cream, hair remover cream, a pack of tampons, and... condoms? My eyes widened. I took it out and threw it to him. "I think this is yours."

His jaw clenched upon seeing the box and pressed his lips in a thin line. He tossed it in his drawer. "Damn him!"

"This is too much, Colton." The other plastic were shirts, tights, shorts, and jeans, I pair of shoes. I burst into laughter when I pulled out the panties and brassieres. "Don't tell me this is Frost's idea?"

His dark brow rose. "What? Don't tell me that's not essential." *Why does he always have a say to everything?*

I sighed. "I missed my brother. He used to bring me things while we were on the run." I put everything back inside. "He was like you, never asked what I wanted, and just brought things to me. He tried to be strong for my sake, though deep inside, I knew the situation was killing him."

"What was he like?" Colt seemed to put an interest in my brother.

"He was three years older than I am, and he just came back from the Middle East. He came to pick me up from our apartment for a weekend camping— just like we used to do during summer. He used to be funny, but his job destroyed him mentally and emotionally. He laughed less, always awake in the middle of the night, and became overprotective of me. He was the reason why I'm still

alive though." I met his sympathetic eyes. "That's why when you took this necklace away, it felt like you stole my soul and my life away from me. I did not get a chance to meet my parents again, Colton. This is the only thing that connects me to my family."

"I'm sorry. I was just cautious. I thought of it as collateral since it means a lot to you."

"It's mom's gift. It was odd actually, but this is the only thing that reminds me of them."

Colt stood up and opened his drawer. He came back with shirts nicely folded on his hands. "I want you to have these."

"Why are you giving me your shirts?"

"These aren't mine. He liked long sleeves, and I think these will fit for you."

"Then whose these belong to, Colton?"

"They belong to Colton."

My brows furrowed. "W-what do you mean C-Colton?"

"My brother."

"Oh, my God! I've been calling you Colton where in fact there's actually a real Colton?" My breath caught in my throat. Silence overtook the atmosphere as we stared at each other.

He nodded. Strength seemed to withdraw from him. "Was." He took my wrist and placed the shirts on my hand.

Oh god! No wonder he hates me.

"Why didn't you ever stop me?"

"I don't know. That's what was bothering me actually because I like how you call me Colton. I corrected you once, but I thought it was your way of pissing me off."

"I'm sorry. I thought Colt was short for Colton or maybe your Surname. I'm so sorry." I stepped closer to him, meeting his magnetic gray eyes.

He shrugged. "Don't be."

"Are you sure you want me to have these?"

"You make me feel he's alive, and I see him in you."

"I don't mean to make you feel like that. I don't have any intention of bringing back the pain of losing someone. I know how it feels. It still hurts, like it all happened just yesterday."

“I know.”

“I promise to take care of these.” I ran my hand on the shirt, feeling I just took the responsibility of keeping the real Colton’s memory in me.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Huh?” I lifted my gaze, meeting his’.

Concern immediately filled his eyes. “The last time I saw, it didn’t look like that.”

“Oh, uh. I was cleaning and accidentally—”

“Don’t lie to me now, twig.”

Chapter 4

Colt

“WHAT’S GOING on?” I was the last one to enter since I was a watcher last night. Now, it made me scowl upon seeing the familiar faces at Gael’s office, and something didn’t add up.

“Morning, Colt.” Cora greeted.

“Morning.” I gestured to everyone to start telling me, and my scowl deepened when I couldn’t find Iris.

Darick shrugged. “No idea, man.”

I leaned against the wall since the chairs were already occupied by Cora and Lois, and a moment later, Gael entered with a steaming cup of coffee on his hand.

“What did I miss?” I asked.

“Wait for your turn,” Gael briefly said and sat on his chair.

It frustrated me that suddenly I became invisible around him, and as far as I knew, I hadn’t failed the duty he gave me. Right now, I questioned myself if he still needed my service, or I had to pack my things and move out.

“Let’s start with you, Darick.” Gael eyed him. There was something different about the way he asked.

“Um, okay. Look, um, we didn’t talk much, Gael.” He looked at me, then back to Gael. “She told me her name and said she just arrived a few days ago. She seemed kind though. She looked harmless and genuinely concerned that I was hurt,” Darick explained.

So, this was all about Iris. And here I thought he let that woman stay because his conscience would keep him stay awake at night while Iris was out there alone, fighting for her survival.

My jaw clenched when I realized he kept me in the dark. I hated being angry at him, and I wanted to erase this unwelcoming emotion because he was the only person I trusted with my life.

“Did you observe something strange?”

“I was drowsy, and I’m not good at picking up things like that. I just took the pill when she and Lois came to see me. I wasn’t able to observe her very well. As I said, she looked weak and pale, and I don’t think she could even harm a fly.” Darick shrugged.

“How about you, Templeton?”

The idiot, Frost smirked. “She’s pretty.”

I narrowed my eyes when he briefly eyed me, waiting to see my reaction.

“This is a serious matter, Templeton.”

“Sorry, Gael. I have nothing much to say other than she grows some weight and curves—”

“Jesus, Frost!” My voice got everyone’s attention. “Tell us something other than what you see.”

“I’m just telling the truth. That’s what I saw, man. If you didn’t stop me from inviting her to come hunting with me, I could have told you some details. I didn’t see anything off other than she’s friendly. She didn’t seem to have something up on her sleeves. I mean, she was shy at first, but later on, she adjusted pretty quick around us and worked her ass off in the garden.”

“And that’s the odd thing. She catches up everything pretty quickly like she used to do it without difficulty. Don’t you think it’s a little bit odd?” Cora interrupted.

“What made you say that, Cora?” Gael asked.

“She’s friendly to everyone to get their sympathy and after that, she’ll stab us behind our back,” she replied with confidence.

“Whoa! Hold up there,” I stopped her, and she met my gaze. “How many times did you talk to her?”

She shifted. “Twice?”

“And you had already come up with all that? What did you two talk about anyway?” I focused on her body language. When she swallowed and shifted uncomfortably, she didn’t have to say anything. “You don’t have to answer that.”

I started to dislike Cora. She didn’t have to prove her self-worth to the group by making a story out of it. I knew she wanted to get rid of Iris, but what she didn’t know was, what would be the consequences awaited for someone like Iris once Gael decided to let her out of this camp.

Gael nodded. “How about you, Lois?”

“I’m her roommate. She slept most of the night. I haven’t observed unusual things she did besides helping Anna at the kitchen, planting, and picking some vegetables. She also went to visit Dr. Hull. I checked her backpack, and all she had was her vitamins Dr. Hull gave her. I checked under her mattress, but there was nothing. We talked about our lives, and she told me about her brother and that they didn’t find her parents when the virus reached their home town. Her brother died weeks ago. Murdered actually.” Lois’s voice cracked. “You can’t blame someone to open-up just like that.

We're still strangers to her, you know. The scars on her arms, I think it's not from drugs. I don't know."

Her story was the same story she told me. Either it was true or she must have rehearsed it for days. Either way, there was only one way to find out.

"Did she tell you about her necklace?"

"A gift from her mom. Why is it so important, guys? She never took it off even when she used the bathroom." Lois looked at me as if she was telling me something.

"Okay, thank you for coming. Everyone, dismiss. Colt, stay."

I nodded absently and took a seat. The meeting was wrapped up, and there was a part of me that didn't want to say anything since it was obvious, but my emotion was clogging up in my throat that I had to voice it out.

"I couldn't believe you did not let me involved with this. And what am I still doing here if I don't have any more help to you?"

He leaned on his chair, studying me. "Don't be so dramatic. I just don't want your emotions will cloud your judgment."

I huffed. "Seriously? Since when I failed something you asked me to do?"

"Never, but I doubt if you would be able to judge fairly at this time?"

"Judge fairly? How so?" My nose flared with tension, and Gael noticed it.

"Let me tell you, Colt. One, you fought back, woman or not, if she was a threat. I knew you could easily handle the situation the first time you two encountered, but you chose to give her back the necklace, instead of twisting her wrist to let the gun fall off, or was I wrong about your self-defense expertise? Second, you asked me if you could take her with you for a supply run, and that never happened with anyone even Lois. Then someone saw you talked to her in the garden."

"I was just asking her if she wanted something. What's wrong with that?" My answer came out defensive, and Gael didn't miss it. I had to avert my gaze to the papers on the table.

"I also noticed how your jaw clenched when someone appreciated her. Should I go on?"

"Still, it's not fair that you did not tell me about it. You don't trust me anymore, Gael because I failed to protect my brother, and I was supposed to go instead of Darick."

"This has nothing to do with your brother, Colt. We were betrayed and ambushed that nobody saw it coming. Have you forgotten that he died protecting me? I should be the one who's dead not him. You should blame me, and not yourself."

"He made his choice," I replied shortly. Every time I remembered what happened, it still gave a sharp pain in my chest.

"I trust you, Colt. Don't ever question that. And honestly, I would never allow her to go out with others. It's not that they can't protect her, but she seems to trust you more than them."

"I doubt if she trusts me. She's distant."

"So as I observed. Don't worry she'll come around."

"I am not worried."

"And one more thing, the last time you and Templeton had a fight was about your brother's shirt he wore without your permission, and yesterday, Iris was wearing one of Colton's. And I heard it clear that she called you Colton, yet I never saw you gone ballistic to correct her."

Sometimes I wanted to punch him for being so damn right. I didn't know. All I wanted was to protect her no matter how annoying she was.

"You were the one who suggested to not let her stay, so what changed your mind? And don't give me shit it's because she'd grown on Lois."

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "You also don't seem to care about other people we encountered during the run, so what did you see in her that you want her to stay for as long as she wants? Your words, not mine."

Gael laughed. "Since when did you run out of opinion?"

"Since you planned on letting them spying on Iris. Why don't you spy on me, too? You're good at being tight-lipped nowadays."

"This is nothing personal, Colt Danger."

"The fuck it isn't."

"I wanted to protect this place. To protect you all. I don't want to compromise our location, Colt, and you are aware there are dangerous people out there. So, I want you to do your part—"

"By what? By playing the role of James Bond?" I shook my head. "No, thank you. Not gonna happen, Gael. Find someone else who is capable of doing because and I am not good at lying."

"She seems to like you."

"You misread it. She hates my gut. We can't be friends. We will fight every day because she's damn stubborn and tenacious, and so do I. You've seen it yourself."

"Fine. I'll let Templeton do your part."

“Damn it, Gael! What is your agenda exactly?” My gaze delved fiercely at him, but he ignored to acknowledge my point.

“I already told you.”

“No, you did not. You’re up to something, and I wish I could read your mind.”

“You will take the blame if something happens to this place and our group, and you know the price you must pay.”

“If you have proof. I’ll take it.”

FOR THE past few days, we’ve been eating the same mushroom soup, green salad, and a small portion of potato. Surprisingly, none of us complain, except for Cora, but the guys were used to her tantrums, and they ignored her annoying shits.

I was late to come to the kitchen since I had to cool down after my confrontation with Gael. Iris instantly caught my attention. The guys were already sitting on the long table, waiting for their lunch to be served. I knew she was just trying to help, but she missed the memo that her kindness was being abused by these fuckers.

Anna and her husband were scared to scavenge for their own food because they had kids to look after. Gael accepted their reasons since we were not capable of taking care of kids if something terrible would happen to them.

“Get your fucking asses up and get your damn own lunch or you won’t eat at all!” Now, being a server was not a part of Iris’ task. The last time I checked, everyone was capable of feeding themselves, and that pissed me off.

Everyone stilled, including Iris. I eyed her fiercely, and she was about to say something when I raised my hand to stop her.

“They used to feed themselves before you came. Don’t let them get used to it because I haven’t been sitting with them lately.”

“Right we are.” Frost whistled then smiled.

“I honestly don’t mind,” Iris said, shrugging.

“You have a new task, Iris. Now, go get your lunch and eat, and do what I tell you to do.” I walked past her. “And don’t question me. That’s an order.”

Iris frowned. Everyone stood up willingly except for Cora who rolled her eyes and sighed exasperatingly before leaving her chair.

After taking my share, I sat beside Frost like I used to. Cora was beside me and Darick. Lois and Iris were sitting across the table and the empty chair beside her was my brother's.

We ate silently for several minutes until Frost spoke, "What's Iris' assignment?"

"She'll take the night watch with me?"

"Seriously?" Cora reacted, mocking Iris. "Does she even know how to handle a toy gun?"

"She handled just right." And she threatened my dick. How could I forget that? That was enough to prove that she was capable of protecting what was belong to her.

My propriety idea made my dick harden. I inwardly groaned at that thought. As good as it sounded, but this was not the right time to think about pussies.

"Colt taught me how to shoot, and I'm sure you will learn faster than me." I expected how Lois would react. Cora treated her like shit and body-shamed her. When she was with Iris, I knew she slowly regained her self-esteem.

"I told you, man. She should come with me to hunt sometime. Iris could be my partner one day, right, Iris?" Frost grinned evilly. Who would have thought a damn billionaire's son adjusted to this kind of life pretty quick and became our shooter?

"That's absurd," Cora said. "Does Gael know about this?"

"Yes. His order," I answered bluntly.

"What's absurd if she comes with me." Darick rolled his eyes at her. He didn't talk much, but he always had a point when his words came out.

Cora snorted.

"What?" Darick asked her.

No one was surprised if the two of them didn't get along. I didn't ask him what really happened when they went out together for a run, but I had a feeling that what went wrong during that night was planned out.

It was all my fault. I should have been with Cora at that time, but I tried to stay away from her after we slept together, and Darick ended up going out with her and got shot.

I met Iris' gaze, I took a moment to admire the most fascinating shade of blue I'd ever seen. "Meet me at the armory at twenty hundred."

She nodded.

Cora took her plate and fled out to the kitchen without finishing her food. Frost snorted like a pig, making Lois laughed.

“Serves her right. Just be careful, Iris. She will do everything to get rid of you.” Lois’s warning made me realize something. Her hand.

“Yes. And she already did.”

Chapter 5

Iris

20:00

“YOU'RE LATE!”

“You're early,” I said as I wandered around the small armory room.

They had a good supply of guns for a small group; automatic guns like AK-47, two sniper rifles, handguns, knives, boxes of ammunition, had several explosives like hand grenades and putty.

I thanked my brother who introduced me to the different types of weapons back at their base. I learned how to shoot, some tricks, and self-defense.

“Just on time.” He picked up a 9mm just like he had and took two magazines.

“I don't have a watch, you know.” I grabbed a grenade.

“Whoa!” He stopped me and took it back from me with a groan. “That's not a toy, twig.”

“I know that. Once you take off the pin, you have less than five seconds to escape before it explodes. Then boom!” I did a hand sign, and he was not impressed. I picked a knife and if I recalled it right, it was a Bayonet.

His brow cocked. “Really? For a girl who hadn't killed a single living thing, I'm impressed.”

If I hadn't known he always had this sarcasm in him, I would be offended, and I would rather sleep tonight and take care of the garden in the morning, but on the other hand, this was a better idea. I wanted to be exposed to weapons and taught myself that surviving in a world we were living right now was always tough.

“And that girl who'd been through hell had a brother who protected the country for a living. So, yes, she knows shits.” I rolled my eyes.

Colt eyed me blankly. “Everyone here had been through hell, but still, you need to undergo a shooting practice before you get a permanent gun on your own. Just like everyone around here.” He had a point because guns and knives were not toys, and once you pointed at someone, you placed their lives in your hand.

“Boring,” I sang.

"A shooting practice." Colt was right. It had been a while since I held a gun. I may be a little rusty, but I could shoot when in time of emergency.

"It's just a waste of ammo."

"Gun is dangerous, Iris." One step at a time, Iris, but I was just flippant to accept the fact.

"I know because my brother died with a bullet hole on his head and not from the damn virus."

"Run, Iris!" he shouted, eyes filled with horror. He pushed me away, but I held tightly onto his arms.

"No, no. Not until you come with me. Remember what you said? We're in this together. We can get out of here alive, Nuke. We have to!" I cried and begged, hoping it would change his mind, but there was no luck as I watched with horror as those men came marching toward us.

Nuke looked at me in the eye and shook me hard. "We don't have much time to discuss this, Iris. Remember that I love you so much. I don't want you to live there alone, but you have to go and search for a group that you can trust. Trust your instinct and keep your head low so that they can't find you. Promise me, you will stay alive and survive. Promise me, Iris."

"Iris, are you okay?" I startled to Colt's concerned voice. He looked at me with furrowed brows.

"I'm good."

"You still have to practice before you get your own."

"If you say so, sir. So, I'm just gonna burn the midnight oil with you without a gun?"

"You'll have one, but only temporary. You keep the safety all the time." He offered the pistol he took earlier. "Always keep it pointed down when not in the holster. Point down when you rack a slide." He continued demonstrating, but he kept his finger off of the trigger. "Keep your finger out of the trigger when you don't shoot. When you're firing, make sure your fingers are away from the slide and the hammer. Get into your proper stance, aim, and pull the trigger. And most of all, don't threaten my crotch again."

"Yes, sir." A smile curved up my lips.

"Here." His gaze roamed all over my face, studying me before he released his hand. He looked deadly and... hot. Colt was like every girl's dream; dark, handsome, and mysterious, but sweet and thoughtful. He seemed to be possessive, overprotective, and bossy.

I wondered if he was also bossy in bed. Was he a type of guy who tied a girl up? Was he a kinky fan? Did he like vanilla kind of love or rough and hard? *I think I'll go for the latter.*

"What are you smiling at?" My face instantly heated. "Now who's blushing?"

"I'm not blushing." I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Whatever floats your boat."

"I won't threaten you unless you press a knife against my neck again. And don't get used to stealing something that doesn't belong to you."

"Good," he agreed despite it contrasted with the look on his face. "Let's go then. Have you checked the entire camp?"

"Just the garden, clinic—"

"Not the inside."

"Nope." I wanted to check the parameter, but I felt it would bother Gael if I asked him. I knew someone was watching me, and I couldn't let their suspicions grow. I badly wanted to stay in this camp, and by any means, I would do everything to gain their trust, especially Colt. I could see in his eyes that he would protect everyone, and I would do everything to protect them as well.

The light from the occupied cabins and the moonlight served us as our guide as we strolled at the back of the cabins. We swept the area to the west side toward the small lake. They placed booby traps and trap wires outside the camp that triggered when there were intruders.

"Hamid, the Egyptian, and Fischer, Anna's husband got the south and east covered. You and I will be on the north and west. The camp is not that big, but we can't allow anyone to slip inside."

"Copy that."

He looked over at me one more time before he stepped up the ladder. I couldn't read his expression if he was annoyed or impressed. This dude certainly did know how to mask his emotions.

I followed Colt to the watchtower—both were made of wood logs from pillar, wall, and flooring. Hamid already checked in on Colt's walkie-talkie about the status.

"About time you two showed up." Frost grinned wickedly to Colt.

"Shut that grin off and get the fuck down."

"Aye aye captain!" He saluted and set the rifle to stand on its bipod. "Take care of my baby, and good luck, Iris. And Colt, please, stay focused and pull your shit together. We don't want an intruder or a bore to slip inside, right?" He side-glanced me, then looked back at Colt with a half-smile playing across his lips.

"Just get down before I throw you off the tower, and hand her the nocs."

I took the binoculars from him.

“Damn!” Frost laughed and went down, leaving me with Colt alone.

My heart started to race. This was my first time to be with him for a long night. I honestly didn’t know how to act or react because something between me and Colt that was hard to explain. Every time we looked at each other, it took longer than necessary—it was like we saw our emotions, our fears, our deepest emotive shades. And there was something deep inside me stirred, and I got that he had the same feeling as I had.

Honestly, I was attracted to him. It was not hard not to when he was nice and thoughtful despite our first encounter. He was bossy, and sometimes it was difficult to understand his provocative nature, but that was made him even sexier if that even made sense.

I stood and used the nocs. I couldn’t see anything other than darkness and tress. And I hated darkness. The cool breeze wrapped all over my exposed skin despite Colton’s long sleeves shirt I was wearing.

The night seemed unpredictable and terrifying. The crickets were the only occasional sound that lessened the tension surrounding the area and around us.

The rest of the night was dead silent.

My vision blurred. I was profusely sweating. My lips were dry as a desert, but I was not there. I was here lying in an old hospital bed fighting for my life. The humming sounds of the machines and faint footsteps from the outside of the room were a terrifying reminder that I was still alive.

I could barely lick my lips. I was shivering. My heart was barely beating. My dad occasionally shared his passion for his job. He told me how he saved lives when their patients had massive blood loss—I remembered my life in those patients. The only difference was, there was no Dad here to save me while they had drawn my blood dry.

Fears were my constant companion.

They threatened me.

Pursued.

Now, I was being hunted.

“Iris. Iris!”

“H-huh?”

“Care to share what’s in that head of yours?” he asked in a low voice.

Colt was lying flat on his abdomen. The size of the watchtower was not enough for his legs to extend and he had to lift them up. There was a gap enough for the muzzle to stick out, but he seemed comfortable though.

“Nothing.”

He was looking through the scope, watching across the distance, then he spoke, “Seen anything unusual?”

“I got a good sight, but I couldn’t see anything other than leaves swaying in the wind.” I chuckled.

“Not the leaves, Iris. You’re not watching monkeys or bats.” That was I thought, he always had something to say—he never ran out of words. “Under the trees, the ground. The moon is bright tonight so you don’t need a night vision to see if there are unusual movements.”

“Nothing per se, sir.” I kept looking. When a silence stretched between us, I glanced down, and he was staring at me. “That’s creepy, Colton. Should you not stay focused on what’s under the trees, the ground,” I mimicked his words.

He must have observed my reactions—a little edgy.

“Something is bothering you.”

“I’m fine.”

I watched him as he shook his head, and so far the night remained calm.

“You don’t have to stand all night.”

“I will fall asleep watching.” I chuckled.

It was a weird task to be a watcher because military and guns scared the shit out of me. I knew how to shoot a hunting gun, but that was it. I was the first to disagree when my brother enlisted himself, but who was I to argue when that was what he wanted. Until the virus destroyed us, I forced myself to handle one of the most dangerous things humans had ever created because I didn’t have a choice. It quickly became a part of basic needs, just like Smartphones before everything had fallen apart.

“Frost will bring us coffee later before he sleeps.”

I slid my back down. “So, why did you choose me?” I tended to relax and started a conversation with him.

“To entertain me.”

“I’m a boring person.”

"I doubt that."

"Tell me who you were before the plague," he asked in a calm tone.

"Is this a part of a job interview?"

"Hmm."

"I was a wedding planner."

Colt half-turned. "Really?"

His curiosity made me smile. "Why it seems so hard for you to believe?"

"You must have planned many weddings."

"Yes. Have you planned your own?" I stiffened at my own question. "Sorry, don't answer that."

"Yes, I was. In Vegas. Seventy-two-hour married."

My interest piqued. I ignored a minuscule pang inside my chest. "Then what happened?"

What's wrong with me? Jesus, Iris, past tense. Was. Get that to the thick skull of yours! I inwardly shook my head.

"I was with Colton in Vegas to celebrate when he finished his short film."

"Was he an actor?"

"His directing debut."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Then we went to Vegas, played in Casino, got drunk, then the cliché thing happened. I married a woman I met in the bar. Before we left, I divorced her when she didn't want to come to LA with us."

"You're an Angeleno, huh?"

"Yep, to the core."

I couldn't help but laugh, making him groan. "Sorry. How did I not notice the accent?"

"What's with the guys with accents, Iris? A friend of mine had a thing with a guy with an accent; Brit, Aussie, Italian, French, and she didn't like an Angeleno dude."

"Ouch, really? I find them sexy, too?" I rose a brow.

He shook his head in amusement. "See that? You're a natural entertainer."

"I quite doubt my ability to entertain people, but I'm glad I could help."

"Honestly, I wanted you here to learn."

"I know. Can we exchange place?" I suggested.

"Of course." Colt got up, and I took his place.

The floor was still warm from his body, and it felt soothing somehow.

I focused my sight on the scope lens. "Great." I could see clearly from a distance—a large tree trunk was almost an arm's length.

"How about you?" he asked.

"What about me?"

"Married?"

"Nope. I had a boyfriend. He's a good guy, and we've been dating for five months before things fell apart. We didn't get a chance to see each other again after that. I and my brother went to his apartment, but he wasn't there anymore."

"I'm sorry." That was the softest tone I ever heard from him—it was genuine, and I could feel it.

"I guess we're not meant to be. Just like you and your wife." *Jesus Christ, Iris. Just shut up because you sound like a desperate woman!*

"Ex."

I frowned at something that caught my eye. "Colton, I think I see something. Three o'clock."

A click behind me made me stiff. When I did a half-turn, a gun was already pointed at me.

Chapter 6

Colt

I KNEW it!

I fucking know it!

In a flash, Iris raised her hands, eyes filled with fear. “Whoa! Colton, what are you doing?”

“It’s time to talk, woman. Who sent you?” I aimed at her head, and if she moved, I would not hesitate to pull the trigger.

She couldn’t take the rifle if she would ever think of shooting me. By the time she got a chance to grab the 9mm I gave her, she was already dead.

It had been months since the ambush, and until now we didn’t have any idea who they were, other than they were heavily armed and capable of killing as they wished.

As a law enforcer, it was killing me that I couldn’t even give my brother the justice he deserved.

“I told you I escaped,” she answered, trying to convince me as she showed the pain in her eyes. Still, I knew she was holding something.

I liked her, that was the fact, and she knew we were attracted to each other. There was something more than just attraction or sexual tension between us, and that scared me because I didn’t know shit about her, but if she was a threat, God knew I wouldn’t think twice of throwing her out of this camp if I couldn’t kill her.

It was not the first time people betrayed me, and I would not add to my list.

Gael said that cities were not the safest place for us. Just a few kilometers outside of the city, we were being ambushed, which led to the death of my brother and other members. Luckily, Gael survived. I knew someone sold us out because at that time, we were being recruited by a larger group, and they didn’t take well Gael’s refusal. And I was afraid Iris might be one of them, and she was here to finish the job.

Paranoia grew on us since the world crumbled down. This was the kind of living we were in now—we had to expect the inevitable.

“You know I will kill you without a second thought if you ever lie to me again.”

“I swear I’m telling the truth. What’s wrong with you?” She swallowed hard.

"Then why didn't you tell me how did you get the bruise on your hand?"

"Because it's not a big deal." She looked down.

"Cora hurt you, did she? And you chose not to fight back, why?" I said between clenched teeth. I was not convinced by her answer—I needed more than that.

She handled me pretty well, and why on earth she didn't do anything to Cora? Iris was never intimidated by me or scared of me, and I could feel that she was hiding something because she thought I was not going to hurt her. Then she's wrong!

"I didn't want trouble. I knew she hated me the first time we met. I couldn't hold a grudge on everyone because I wanted to stay here just like I wanted to breathe. That's all. It's been months since I met good people that I didn't have to look over my shoulder all the time. I like it here, and I felt safe."

"Then you better talk! Who were you running from?"

"Don't throw me out of here, please. I don't think I'll be able to survive once I step out of this camp. I'd rather pull the trigger to my head than to experience a slow death out there."

"Tell me who are you? The truth, Iris." My body heated and vibrated with anger. "Or I swear to God!"

"You know—" A high-pitched scream came from her before she could finish her words.

Gunfire echoed around us.

I meant not to shoot her, but that served her as a warning if she would lie to me again, and she knew what would come next.

"The next fire would be to your leg, Iris, and you know I won't miss it."

Her blue eyes widened. "I-I told you."

I settled myself into a killer mode. Without breaking eye contact, I started, "No. You never tell me the whole story. And let me tell you something, I'm good at interrogation, and trust me when I say I don't give a shit skinning you alive or pulling off your teeth or your nails one by one. Do you know why nobody checks us out here? Because they know me, and nobody dares to come to help you. You're on your own right now, so help yourself while you can. The way you talk, handle a gun, and moves, you seem to know many things more than I expected from you. Now, tell me, who do you work for?"

Her fingers trembled. Her face blanched when she noticed me I was dead serious about it. "I don't work for anyone."

I pointed to her leg.

“Please, Colt. How can I convince you I am telling the truth? Damn it!” The way she said my name and the way she looked at me, it was like the first time I pointed a gun at her before she passed out—her stare was pleading and she was terrified. Good!

“Talk!” I commanded.

“I swear!” she screamed, tears rolling down her face.

I began to realize how much I hurt her and scared her that she would probably remember for the rest of her life, but as Gael said, I couldn’t let my emotion cloud my judgment.

“My patience is running low.” Something told me that talking about what happened to Iris wasn’t easy for her, but I needed to find out if we could trust her.

She swallowed hard. “A few days after I and my brother visited my parents’ home, we traveled to his outpost in his car, but I’ve never seen people panicking like that. God, it was like in a zombie-apocalypse movie. People running here and there wanted to survive. You could hear crying, screaming, children searching for their parents, people pointing guns at each other. Infected were everywhere, then vehicles just stopped on the road because people died just like that. So quick and seemed painless. I watched them bled from their noses, ears, eyes, then that was it. They’re dead.” She looked down, staring blankly at the floor. “No matter how they cried, it wouldn’t stop. You wanted to help, but you couldn’t do anything. Their screams are still in my head every time I fall asleep, I close my eyes, in the dark, in silence...”

She leaned her back against the wall as if she lost her strength. She kept on wiping her tears, but they kept flowing. “We reached the outpost after we walked for the whole day. It was too late—everyone was dead except my brother’s friends; Donovan and Simmons who locked themselves inside the interrogation room. They had masks on and biohazard suits. I guessed they figured out or they’d been informed. The only thing that kept me alive was the scarf—that was how we survived, I guess.” She stole a glance at me.

“The computer just shut down when we tried hard to communicate through any frequencies, but no one responded. Then the people came and started raiding the place. They stole our guns, supplies, and food. We couldn’t fight back because they were too many compared to just the four of us. We left. Dead bodies were everywhere. The smell. God, the babies...”

A shiver rippled through me at the thought of it. As quickly as the image of horror appeared in my mind, I pushed it back. Though I understood her breakdown, I had to know her true intention, and I had this feeling that I had not reached the best part just yet.

“Flyers littered, saying there were two safe zones for survivors, then it was bullshit. When we arrived there, loads of trucks of men in uniform with guns, and they were taking people in and...”

“And what?”

It clearly took so much effort and strength for her to open herself up to me.

“There were hundreds of us there at the football stadium. They came every night picking us one by one, but none had returned. They didn’t let us starve though, and since my brother’s friends were outspoken, they beat them to death when they were questioned about the missing people. My brother went snooping. People started talking about a secret facility working for the cure or vaccine.” She paused.

“My brother made an escape plan, and it was successful, but we got caught by a group during our scavenging. You probably heard about the Colony from the West. They had high strong walls and building their armies, and the scars you saw on my arms, they were from needle pricks, but not from drugs. They drained my blood like everyone else there.”

“Why?” Our gazes collided, and she shrugged.

We had not encountered any group since we found this camp. There were no radio traces as well. This site must not have been located by survivors since there was nothing much to make a living here.

“I didn’t mean to cause everyone trouble, but after what I told you, and you still see me as a threat, as much as I want to stay here, I won’t. I’m leaving in the morning,” she chocked out.

There was only one thing I could think of, they hurt her. That was what I saw in her eyes, but she was not completely broken, and she was stronger more that she could give herself credit for. She survived out there, and it meant only one thing—she wanted to live.

“Do you know who are they?”

She shook her head. “I wanted to kill them, to pay for what they did to us, to my brother, but I know it was impossible. I only wanted to live to keep my promise to my brother. I can’t let them win and let my brother die for nothing. I need to live for him and for myself. If there is something I keep holding on is that there’s still hope. In a few years, we will rise again. The country will rise again.”

Silent ticked around us, so odd after the overwhelming revelation, I couldn’t form a word. My tongue was tied with my own shit.

I lost control. I thought that was the only way to find out the truth was by threatening her, and I may have succeeded, but my suspicions were wrong. I was an asshole, and I fucking hated myself that I had to look away.

The part that I'd drawn to her was her kind heart despite how she threatened me. When she said not to get used to stealing someone's property, it was her, who stole my breath away, and I knew for a fact that she already stole something from me.

I retreated my gun, and as sounded as it was right to say sorry, I stepped back and went down, unable to think about how I would be able to face her again.

I WAS pacing back in forth in the middle of the night at Colton's grave—just at the back of my cabin. He was the only one that I could tell my shit, but now he was dead, I had to rub my face in frustration.

I couldn't think straight.

I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, but her horrified blue eyes kept coming into my mind. It was so fucking unfair on her part. I shouldn't have done that.

Damn it!

I sat down, drew my knees closer to my body, and held them tightly. When I couldn't take my guilt, I went inside my cabin and stayed there for God knew how long until I realized the sun was already up.

Knocks then bangs from my door interrupted me. I raced to the door and found out it was Darick.

"I see, you're here. I was knocking on Gael's, but he might still sleeping.

My brows furrowed. "What is it, Darick?"

"I just wanna ask him about Iris—"

My pulse raced. "What about her?"

"She asked me to confirm from Gael that he knew she's leaving."

"Fuck, no! She's not going anywhere!"

Chapter 7

Iris

I STAYED at the watchtower when Colt left. I formed into a ball, crying my eyes out for as long as I could, hoping to ease away my pain. It was hard to recall the things I'd seen and experienced. I'd never expected I would survive, but I held on to the thought of my brother's last words, and that gave me hope somehow.

I never had a close friend after the outbreak. My brother always reminded me not to trust anyone and never let my guard down because that could put me in danger or hurt me—then, he said that I should trust my instinct before he died.

The friendship I had with Lois was something special—I found a sister figure in her—she took care of me, treated like everyone around, then it hurt to think that it was about to end.

Before the sunrise, I passed by the grave of Colton—just at the back of Colt's cabin. It was peaceful here—Colt must have gone to sleep, and that was a good thing.

After I placed the cucumber flower on his grave, I whispered, "Hi. You're probably asking who am I, aren't you? I'm Iris, by the way, and your brother told me so much about you that you're a great brother to him. He gave me some of your shirts like what I am wearing now. I hope you don't mind." I looked down at my maroon shirt had a printed quote 'Look up and you see the light.'

"I just wanna say thank you. Just look out for him where ever you are. Do you think you can do that for me, the real Colton?"

I was pretty shaken up about what happened. Colt just left me there. And here I thought we had something, and it speared my chest that it meant nothing to him.

I took a deep breath when tears filled my eyes. I wished I could tell Lois that I was leaving, but I didn't think I could leave when she stopped me.

When I reached the gate, Darick eyed me suspiciously. "Morning!"

"Morning." He then noticed the backpack. "Going somewhere?"

"My stay is over. So, I'm heading south." I tried to smile, but it was harder than I thought that I had to look down.

"Alone?"

"Yeah. Unless you wanna come with me."

“Does anyone know about this? How come no one tells me?” The way he looked at me, he was not satisfied, except I couldn’t let him figure out that I was lying.

“Well, here I am now to tell you. You can go and ask Gael. I’ll watch the gate until you come back.”

He studied me once again. “Okay. Wait right here.”

The moment he was gone, I pulled the gate opened and bolted out as fast as I could toward the trees. I couldn’t stay right on the muddy road as someone could easily track me and follow my trail.

When the camp’s view faded, I slowed my pace. I could hardly catch my breath in exhaustion. Breathing heavily, I placed my hands on my knees, then I realized I didn’t have any plan, no place to go, and worse I was alone.

I looked around and let tears pricked my eyes.

God, I was so damn stupid!

I let a sad smile curve up my lips as I reminisced happy memories with my brother. The things I liked about camping and hunting with him were the forest, the fresh smell of earth, the light dancing on the glittering morning dew against the leaves, the butterflies and bees fluttering closed to the wildflowers, the sounds of the insects, and the moss and mushrooms growing on the dead logs.

I had fun, so much fun that my chest constricted with those beautiful memories, and there was no chance I could do it again with him. It felt like yesterday that I could still feel the drench of dew on my clothes and on my fingertips.

Right now, I could appreciate every tiny detail of the forest if it happened to be not in circumstances like this.

“Don’t move!”

A gasp escaped from my lips, and I instantly halted. My heartbeat accelerated, making me even harder to breathe.

Shit!

Surrendering, I raised my hands. “I won’t tell a soul, I promise. Just let me go, p-please?” My tears fell, teeth tattering.

God, can’t he just let me go peacefully?

With weakened knees, I turned around slowly.

“Damn it, Iris! I told you. Not. A. Single. Move,” he commanded, gritting his teeth. His words almost vibrated into my bones—he was beyond pissed.

Damn it, Colton!

“I’m not gonna die with a hole at the back of my head.” A loud sob erupted from me.

“And you wanna die with booby trap instead?”

My world stopped.

Huh? Oh, shit!

He must be walking toward me because I could hear the crouching of twigs under his heavy footsteps.

“Colt, report. Did you find her?” Gael’s voice interrupted us over the walkie-talkie.

“Yes, she’s with me, but she’s gonna split in half by a booby trap you planted if she makes a single move right now. Under her feet.” His words were directed at me.

My breathing hitched. “Just go, Colton.”

“Huh! And you’re planning on leaving us without a word? That’s a very good idea, Iris.”

“I did my part last night, didn’t I? And you pointed a gun on me for the second time, and shot me.” I hiccuped, sobbed, and cried harder.

“I didn’t shoot you. I wouldn’t miss it if I wanted you dead.” He seemed found it hard to let out those words, but it didn’t change the fact that he fired a shot.

“So, by tormenting me was your best idea?”

Colt sighed deeply.

Seconds later, I found myself lifted by strong arms and held me against his hard chest.

“What are you doing?” My arm snaked around his thick neck as if nothing happened earlier, and my body and my stupid heart thought it was the right thing to do.

“Taking you out of the booby.” His breathing tickled the back of my ear, making my body aware of how close our faces with each other.

Heat radiated through me. I could feel his racing heartbeat against my arm. I could smell him; manly, sweaty, and earthy.

“You don’t have to come and save me, you know? That’s the purpose of exiling; sending to a death trap.”

My sarcasm made him huff.

“What?”

“You exiled yourself.”

“Put me down. I’ll follow the trail. I know now how to get back to the road.” It was a complete lie because I didn’t have a map and no idea where I was heading. Since I stayed with them, I didn’t get a chance to survey the area.

“You’re not going anywhere. Iris. Gael is waiting for you at the camp.” He put me down on my feet. “I’ll knock you out if you try to continue walking away from me again and lock you inside the cabin if you will try one more time escaping from the camp.”

“Are you holding me a prisoner now?”

“You’re not a prisoner, but it’s not safe for you to wander outside the camp.”

I faced him, meeting his gaze. “Have you not gotten the memo? I’m trying to walk away, duh! You told me last night, you have booby traps at the back of the camp and not on this area.”

He smiled. *Colt smiles.* And damn if it wasn’t quite a sight—like a sunrise in the morning. His full red lips spread wide. His unbelievably perfect white teeth were blinding. Aw!

“You’re smiling,” I said oddly in disbelief. “You are actually smiling. After Colton almost split me in half with a booby trap, he is now smiling at me. Wow!”

He stilled and blinked to my sarcasm. His smile faded, and I would lie if I didn’t miss it right away.

“Glad you paid attention to what I said last night.”

“But you lied!” I glared.

“You’re fast learner, twig, and I’m impressed.”

“Colt, come in.” It was Gael.

“Yeah.”

“Head back home right now.” What’s wrong with him? If he ordered as if we were at war.

“Copy.” He groaned affirmatively after he pulled the walkie-talkie away from his face. “Let’s go back.”

“Not coming. After what you did to me, do you think I’m still willing to come with you? Touché!”

“Don’t force me to hurt you.”

“You already did!” I stomped past him.

"Can you just stop for a moment." He held my wrist. His touch zinged through me, making a fluttery feeling settled in my stupid stomach.

I jerked my hand off of him. "Don't touch me."

"You didn't mind earlier."

"How couldn't I even remember anything when I was on the brink of death?" I sprinted, jumping over fallen tree trunks.

"You're heading the wrong direction!" He yelled behind me.

"Who cares? That's the plan."

"Damn it, Iris. You're gonna hurt yourself."

"Again! Who cares?"

"I do!"

And that stopped me. Silence echoed around us. I couldn't exactly say that I was happy or thrilled, but something deep inside me wanted to believe in those two words he said.

I turned around. "How in the hell caring someone by forcing me to talk about the things I don't wanna bring back those horrible memories? Do you know how odd you sound right now? And you tell me you care? You treated me pleasantly these past few days, you brought me something I badly needed, and you gave me your brother's shirts, then you pointed a gun at me and threatened me if I wouldn't talk. Is that how you show you care? That's outrageous!"

"I'm sorry." I almost didn't catch it.

"Oh, save your sorry for your ass!" I sprinted away and decided to go back to the camp.

I could sense Colt was following me, but he had not said a word anymore. The camp came to view. Gael and Frost were standing outside the gate, waiting for us.

When I couldn't take the silence, I stopped and faced Colt before Gael and Frost could hear something I needed to say.

Colt's jaw was locked hard, holding his anger.

"Why?"

He met my gaze, eyes filled with guilt. "I was just following an order."

My eyes grew big. "What order?"

"We all are," he confirmed. He stuffed his hands into his pockets as I watched him not meeting my gaze anymore.

"That's bullshit, Colton. You're kidding, aren't you?" I scoffed.

My shoulders drooped when he shook his head.

God, I'm so stupid!

I trusted them. I trusted Colt. I shouldn't have let my guard down. My brother was right because right now I was hurting.

"We suspected everyone we came across. You know it's hard to trust anyone you've just met, Iris. You have to understand Gael. We had history back then, and you can't blame us for being cautious."

I propped my hands on my waist, feeling the pain inside my chest. I blew a breath and looked up to hold the tears blurring my eyes again. I couldn't blame them, but it hurt so much when I thought what they did to me was out of their kindness.

"So, what you all showed to me were but full of shit? Because your order was to play the role of hosts and hostesses with me?"

Colt shook his head. "No. It's not like that."

"Then what it is?"

"Iris, please, let's talk inside. It's not safe to stay here longer."

"Fuck the not safe here! I'm not coming with you. You're all fake people, especially you, Colton. For God's sake, I trusted you!"

I watched his throat bobbed up and down as he looked at me in disbelief.

"Just hear Gael out first before you decide. Please?" His voice was unbelievably low.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, deciding if I should listen to Gael or not, but knowing I had nowhere to go and I didn't have a choice, I had to give it a try. I literally knocked on their door, and they opened for me and gave me a place to stay.

On the other hand, they were just cautious like everyone. I shouldn't blame them because I was an alien who just popped up and I could have taken something with me.

"Okay." I shrugged.

We followed Gael to his office and locked the door behind him. "Take a seat, Iris. I know you're exhausted from last night."

"I'm good, thank you."

"Colt might have crossed the line," Gael said.

"I just wanna say I'm sorry if you have to order around to watch over me. That must be difficult for them especially the nice part. And I'm sorry also for not spilling my gut immediately. Just like what Colton said, it's hard to trust anyone you've just met, right?" I stole a glance at Colt, and he dropped his gaze down. "How could I tell what happened when it was even hard to think about it? It won't just open the wound for me, it bleeds me out just to think how my brother died because he wanted to save me." My tears rolled down and kept rolling that I could hardly see them. "All of us believe we always have choices, well, shit me, I didn't find any that night other than to run away after I watched him die, and the worse part was, I couldn't even hug him or at least give him a proper burial that he deserved. He was my hero, Gael. So, forgive me, if it took all my strength for me to tell a tale about the girl who ran away."

"I'm not gonna apologize for giving that order because I believe that was the right call, but I'm truly sorry about your brother, Iris." Gael was sincere, and I knew no matter how it hurt me, he did the right thing every leader should do to his group—protecting his people.

His uneven and limply walk caught my gaze. Gael had a prosthetic leg, and I didn't notice it before.

"You're an amputee?"

"Left. Gunshots with Colt's brother, but he took most of the bullets. So he didn't make it, and here I am." He took a deep breath, pain plastered on his face.

"I'm sorry." I felt bad. Next time, I should have just kept the thought to myself.

Chapter 8

Colt

IRIS ARRIVED with her skinny jeans that fitted her sexy long legs perfectly. My brother's gray shirt layered over the top of dark blue long sleeves and a scarf snaked around her neck. She was also wearing a remarkable smile on her radiant face.

I didn't miss the curves she gained for over a couple of weeks. She got her shape back.

Gael admitted he ordered everyone, and Iris talked to them like nothing happened. She was still pissed at me, and that was damn frustrating!

"Are you sure, guys you want me in?" she asked, ignoring my presence at the passenger seat.

"Get in," I said since Frost and Lois didn't bother to reply, or they were waiting for me to have a gut to answer.

"Ready?" Lois asked her. The two seemed back to normal.

"Yup. It's been a while. I hope I don't get too rusty."

"Just stick with us, and you'll be fine." Frost looked at her and smiled over the rearview.

"Stay focused and alert. Take your mask with you in case we bump into infected." I offered the extra respirator mask I brought from my cabin. "Did you bring your gun?"

I felt relieved when Gael finally issued her one—I wanted her to learn how to protect herself even when we were not around to cover her ass.

"Yes, I had it with me," she said, averting her gaze outside the window.

Two days ago, she had her shooting practice with Gael, and all I could do was watched her from a distance because she chose Gael to train her over me.

I couldn't blame her though—if I were in her position, I would do the same—not trusting someone like me again.

At first, it was a little bit rocky, but it wasn't a surprise that she hit the bullseye on her second round, and with constant practice, she could be our second shooter if she stayed longer with us.

"That girl is a catch. Who'd have thought a tiny little twig is badass when it comes to handling guns?" Gael patted my back when Iris was out of sight after their shooting practice.

"I've no doubt on that matter. She snatched and pointed my gun on my groin, remember?" I cocked a brow, and Gael found it amusing.

"I told you she's gonna be our asset." He smiled proudly.

"How far are we going?" she asked.

"An hour trip or so, if we could find a good amount of gasoline and some supply. If not, it will take us a little bit longer," Frost said.

"Great."

"I missed cheeseburgers and fries," Lois blurted out.

"Damn, I missed Hawaiian pizza," Frost seconded.

"No way! With pineapple chunks?" Iris grimaced. "Are you serious?"

"You didn't like it?" I asked her.

"I might like it now." She laughed. "I missed watching movies though, chatting. God, I missed twitter."

"And Instagram," Lois added.

"Of course, girls missed them," Frost agreed.

"I know what app you missed the most, Templeton."

I shifted on my seat to look at Iris. "What?"

"Tinder?" Her brow rose.

"That's my girl!" They high-fived, and that made me want to punch Frost. "Don't tell me you don't have Tinder account, Officer Snow."

"Officer Snow?" she asked, seemingly surprised.

"You don't know he's a police officer or he's Snow?" Lois inquired, amusement flashing in her brown eyes.

"The first one, but based on his expertise, I was expecting him to be on that line of work," she admitted with a hint of sarcasm.

"Good judgment. He's in LAPD."

Iris whistled and nodded.

"You sound so surprised."

She shrugged, meeting my gaze. “Well, not anymore, Officer. And I admired your way of interrogating a suspect.” The steel in her voice was enough to send me a message, and it hurt a lot.

“Not an officer anymore. I broke the law many times, and this is not LA. So this is out of my jurisdiction as an enforcer.”

“I wonder if our President is still alive though, or perhaps Sam Heughan.” Lois looked at Iris.

“Who’s Sam fucking Heughan?” asked Frost.

“I bet him for the next Bond. If you don’t know him, Frost, just shut up. It’s just, he’s hot and oh, my God his ass.” Lois giggled.

“His what?” I chorused with Iris, making us stared at each other.

“Wow! Power couple. I ship you two. #TeamIrlt, that sounds terrible. Colir? Not so cool. #TeamColtis! Yay!” Lois laughed, then Frost joined her, fist-bumping one another.

I must say, I enjoyed being around them, and I couldn’t remember the last time I felt like this since my brother’s death.

“Just drive, dumbass,” I ordered.

“Lois, that’s probably his double,” Iris whispered.

“What are you two whispering about?”

“Because we are talking about Sam’s ass.” She widened her eyes at me which made me feel better that she started to talk to me.

“Let’s not talk about his ass anymore, shall we?”

“Ugh, you’re a spoilsport.” Displeased in about a hundred ways, she slid the window opened and looked outside.

At the high noon weather, the heat rose off the asphalt in waves. Rusting cars lessen down since there were no establishments ahead. It was almost silent other than the humming sounds of our car engine and the rustling of the wind against the open windows. Grass grew faster on the deserted road. It wasn’t like this before, and I wondered if we got the chance to get the life back we left.

“Chester. Two miles away,” Lois read.

“That’s where we’re heading,” I replied.

“Been there before?” Iris asked.

"Nope. Just in case we got into trouble. Don't fight, unless I say blue." *Okay, that's not exactly what I have in mind.*

"Why blue?" I liked how curious she was over everything. She reminded me of Colton when we were just kids.

"Just came out." Perhaps, I thought of a certain blue-eyed every night? I shook the thought out of my head and focused back on the road.

"Take everything you can. Just be careful with the infected. If you ever get into direct contact, just tell me immediately, okay?"

"Sure."

Our gazes collided—our connection spiked. Despite my desire to ogle her, my searing gaze made her frown. The fight, the desperation of talking to her to lessen her anger, and with the world that falling apart between us made me feel hopeless and weak.

My heart ached. Defeated, I shifted back and looked at the endless road ahead of us.

Frost tuned the radio in, finding an active frequency, but it was just a buzz and nothing it could grasp.

"Turn the shit off. It gives me a headache."

"You mean heartache?"

I glared at him. "Shut the fuck up, will you?" I couldn't argue with him because he was definitely right on that part.

Frost was maybe a manwhore and a spoiled son of a billionaire, but he was a good person. He always meant his words. Anyone could call him an asshole, but he'd better be one than a liar by giving women false hopes.

"What got your panties in a brunch?"

"Nothing."

"I got a few reasons."

"Just keep your mouth shut, Frost, and focus on the road."

"Sure thing, man. Sure thing." He smiled evilly.

We arrived at Chester gas station. The giant sign of prices was tearing down. It had a car wash, tire shop, and a convenience store.

"I don't think if there's anything left." Frost parked the car beside the road a few meters away from the vehicles, and an RV blocking the dingy gas pumps.

Wasps and flies were flying all over the deserted cars, and the smell was horrible—probably from corpses inside.

"You two wait here until I signal, and keep the door locked," I told Iris and Lois. "Let's go, Frost." I yanked out the rifle and climbed out of the car.

The routine was not new to me—scouting the area as quietly as we could to avoid trouble.

Our boots crouched against the litters and broken glasses on the ground. After passing a few cars and we caught no movements around, Frost signaled them to come.

Iris used her scarf to cover her face like Ninja. She shrugged when she caught me staring at her. Her blue eyes stood out, slight anger flashed in her eyes.

"Come with me, and stay by my side all the time." I took the other backpack from her since she had already her own.

"We'll take care of the gas. You two, check the convenience store and the shop." Frost walked away with Lois, not waiting for my protest.

We found a car with the engine was still humming. Iris and I shared a look. My pulse sped up as I stepped toward the store, ready for possible trouble.

"Stay behind my back," I whispered.

"I can take care of myself." She pulled her gun from her back in protest, loaded it, and now was on full alert.

"No doubt about that."

After sweeping the area, I peeped through the glass window and couldn't see any movement, we then entered the convenience store. It already raided by scavengers, but there were some food items left on the racks and scattered on the floor.

"I'll check the grocery aisle and coolers," Iris said.

"Just be careful."

She glared at me before she walked away. With uncertain feelings coiling in my stomach, I went to the counter for some products and tossed anything useful to the backpack.

A yelp from Iris made my heart beat a million times. I rushed toward her and met her halfway. I pulled her into me causing her to gasp against my chest.

A wave of protectiveness was overwhelming as I wrapped my arm around her body and aimed my gun forward, searching for any disturbance.

She gripped my arms and shifted her head. "She's infected."

From the corner of my eye, I saw a woman leaning against the wall—her face was covered by her own blood and so as her clothes. Based on the bleeding, she must have just died a few hours ago.

Nausea squeezed my stomach to see a kid lying beside her—already dead. *That explains the car outside.*

"Jesus." I took a breath and asked Iris, "Are you okay?"

She nodded against my chest, trembling, and barely able to speak. "The kid."

"Whoever spread this virus was fucking evil." That was all I could say.

"People do what's in their best interest regardless of who gets hurt to satisfy their hunger even if doing so would cause another suffering."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"It's Klaus Mikaelson."

"Oh. I'm sorry you have to see that." I didn't know why I said that to her, but it felt like it would comfort her as I squeezed her into a hug.

"I've seen worse," she murmured. Her breathing sent a warm sensation through my chest.

"Wear your mask."

"My scarp is thick enough. You should wear yours." Abruptly, she stepped out of our embrace and walked in the opposite direction.

Fucking great! She still hated me.

I ignored the pain squeezing my heart as I watched her grabbing supplies by herself as if nothing happened.

After a few minutes, my bag and Iris' were full. We were able to collect some soda, junk foods, can goods, energy drinks, candy bars, and cookies.

I took off my mask as soon as we got out of the store. "Are you done?"

She was reading an old newspaper. "Done. It said here the economy increased its growth. This was a week before the apocalypse but look at our country now. A world is a rather awful place," she said silently.

"Let me guess, another from Mikaelson guy. Your ex?"

"Yeah. My ex from The Originals." She rolled her eyes.

I pulled the magazine on the rack, snorting. "Ariana Grande. Is she still alive?"

"I'm surprised you know Ariana. She's probably sitting somewhere on the beach and sipping her cocktail."

"Quite bright imagination you have there, Iris. Let me carry that." I grabbed the backpack from her. She may gain a few pounds, but she didn't have to carry loads of weight when I was around.

"I carry just right. It's just bulky."

"Look, Iris. I know you hate me, but we have to work together and let our anger set aside."

"Water under the bridge." She strode faster in our car.

I walked toward Frost carrying two gas containers and Lois was following him.

"There's gasoline pump at the back. I guess, no one found it yet."

"Let me help," I suggested.

"We got it covered, man. I think it's time you and Iris should talk."

I nodded. "We're good."

"It doesn't look good to me, but suit yourself," he said before he left, leaving me puzzled.

I dropped the bag on the passenger side. Iris was sitting at the back and already pulled off her ninja mask.

I took the driver's seat. "Come. Sit in the passenger'. We'll fill the tank."

She hopped down silently after I grabbed the backpack and tossed it to the backseat. I started the engine and pulled over to find a way to the pump at the back.

Frost tapped the window. "Let me fill it from here, only a bike could get in there."

"Does Lois need a hand?" Iris asked.

"Nah. She's just guarding my ass around."

I turned to Iris who was watching the area like a hawk. "We should talk about what happened last week."

"Nothing to talk about, really. You were just following orders."

"But you kept on giving me the cold shoulder."

"I've no reason to talk to you."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She arched her brow.

"I know, I crossed the line. I should have approached you in a different way, but—"

"You cut the chase, right? I totally get it, and besides nobody brought me in. Of course, everyone had their suspicions."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged it off. "I'm over it."

"I didn't know until the day I gave you an assignment. You should know that, but it's unfair if you talk to everyone except me, don't you think?"

For the first time, she met my gaze, pain flickered in her eyes. "They did not point and fire a gun on me!" She snapped.

I could feel the anger radiated through her, and she deserved a proper apology. I fucking deserved her retaliation, and it fucking hurt. "I'm sorry."

"You already apologized."

"But I do care about you, Iris." My heart raced.

"You care about everyone inside the camp, and it's not a surprise to me anymore."

"It's true, and thanks for visiting my brother."

"How did you know?"

"No one put a flower on his grave." I chuckled. She even troubled herself to pick up a flower for my brother, and I found it damn sweet.

"Oh, okay," she said flatly.

"If I didn't find you, would you ever come back?"

"No." There was no lace of hesitation in her answer.

I nodded and couldn't form a word. I had to blink as the pain constricted my chest.

Seconds ticked by...

I gulped the agony clogging in my throat. “Then, I was thankful I found you before you left me for good.”

“Will you look for me?” she almost whispered.

My mouth gaped. I wasn’t expecting her to ask that question, and I was glad she did. Emotion flooded my stupid heart.

Drawing my strength, I answered, “I’m probably still searching for you right now.”

“Just so you know, I don’t hate you. After I talked to you and Gael, I felt a sudden lightness in my chest for the first time since my brother died. It felt good to share the pain who understood what losing meant for someone.”

“You know you’re not alone anymore. You have us, twig. You have Lois. You have me. You can always reach out anytime you wanna talk to someone. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She looked at me, and my worry vanished into thin air. “Thank you, Colton.”

Damn! I fucking missed that.

Chapter 9

Iris

“HOLY CRAP!” Lois gushed. “Look what you have there.”

“I did the same as Dr. Hull’s, by cutting empty bottled waters in half, poked tiny holes, and filled them with soil,” I said enthusiastically.

Not in a million years, I thought of cultivating flowers or plants, yet here I was. I felt it was a huge fulfillment on my part to see the tomato and cucumber sprouts grew in my care.

“This is amazing, Iris.”

“You never know until you try, right? Dr. Hull called this cute sprouts Vivipary in Latin. It means live birth.”

“I wish I’m good at something like you. Teaching history isn’t anything useful anymore. What you do is fulfilling.” She sat beside me, in front of around thirty sprouts.

“Yes, it is. Don’t worry you can teach again, Lois.”

“I hope so. What are they?”

“The hairy ones are tomatoes and those oval shapes are the cucumber. After a few days, I can transfer them to the ground like those ones.” I pointed at the fruiting tomatoes. “I need seeds though for carrots, lettuce, spinach, and maybe bush beans.”

“Let me check the map if we can find a shop near the camp. I’m pretty sure they’d already there to scavenge. After what happened, I don’t suggest much of going with them unless they ask me to. I can’t keep them watching my back every time I go with them, you know. Instead of searching for supply, they have to look after me.”

“Can we sneak out? If ever we find a shop,” I suggested.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. You know how important it is for Colt and Gael that we should stick to the rules. It’s for our own safety.”

“They won’t know unless you’ll tell.” I never thought of going out for the past few weeks, but it didn’t hurt to try for everyone’s benefits.

She hesitated, “We’ll see, but you know how dangerous it is out there.”

“Yeah. We can ask Darick to come with us. What do you think?” I insisted.

"I'll think about it."

"I know you're not a rule-breaker, Lois. I can't put your life at stake because of some seeds. That's why we'll ask Darick to come with us."

"I don't have a problem coming with you if they give us permission. Anyway, have you seen Cora?"

My brows furrowed. "No. Why?"

"Cora could also be sneaking out at night. She didn't join us anymore. She said she'd better spend in her room than with us."

"Typical Cora and she hates me."

"She hates everyone has a vagina." She rolled her eyes in disgust.

I couldn't help to not smile. "Seriously? Greedy much."

"Clingy."

"So, her and Colt, huh? So I heard."

"What?" She blinked. "A quick fuck maybe, but a relationship? I don't think Colt has time for that especially with her." *Ouch!*

I could feel my chest tightened that it came from Lois. I might have expected too much that maybe Colt thought the same way as I was. I wanted to berate myself for having a huge crush on him because Lois might be right that Colt was not interested in a relationship.

I'm such an idiot.

"How long have you known Colton? I mean Colt."

"You keep calling him that."

I wrinkled my nose. "Yeah, a bad habit."

"He doesn't seem to mind though. We're on the same flight back to LA. When we landed at the airport, it was under emergency shut down. That's how I met them. We sneaked out together, and since then, I'm stuck with them where ever they went. So bad you didn't get a chance to meet Colton. He was funny and clever just like Colt. Colt is a serious type though. His thing is to lead and protect while Colton was more of a plan type of guy. He was our brain until we bumped into Gael's group."

She let out a sigh and continued, "I've never seen anyone as close as them. They were so adorable, that's why Colt almost lost his mind when Colton died. We were all worried about him. He never came out of his cabin for days if not sitting on his brother's grave. Then one day, he just came out

of the blue and joined us for lunch. Everyone's jaw dropped, and the silence was overwhelming as we just stared at him in shock. And I swear that day was like the brightest day of our lives." Lois laughed, eyes filled with warmth. "We love that dude so much."

"Could imagine that," I agreed.

"But damn, they look hot."

I smiled, and Lois smiled wickedly.

"Girls!" Frost called out, making us freeze. He was walking toward us, wearing a huge grin on his face. Colt appeared, and my world seemed to slow down. They were geared up and seemed about to go somewhere.

"sup, Templeton?" I asked.

"Damn! You know what?" He smirked. "I kinda like my name on your tongue. It's sexy and better than oysters."

I knew he was just messing with me, so I rolled my eyes. "Seriously, Templeton? Is that your new pick up line?"

"You're full of shit. Get your head out of your ass." Colt hit him in the head.

My heart thundered just by hearing his voice.

Damn it! He always looked good and even better every day, but maybe it never crossed his mind on shaving his growing beard.

I thought of Tom Hardy, and he was also hot. It suited Colt though, but it wouldn't kill him to trim at least. *You just want to see how he looks without facial hair, Iris.* Damn right!

"Don't tell me you don't feel the same, Colt. I mean even just a teeny tiny changes of waves in your heartbeat when she calls you—"

"No!" Well, that was fast.

"Liar," Frost muttered, still grinning. "Now who's full of shit? Shove that to your ass because you can't fool me when it's clearer than the sky, Officer Snow," he snickered.

"Just shut up. You, yourself didn't come from a romance novel," Colt snickered back.

"Damn right," Frost admitted.

"What's up with the two of you?" Lois interjected.

"Hunting," Colt answered shortly.

"Well, there's nothing to hunt in my garden." I rolled my eyes.

Frost barked out a laugh and was even holding his stomach. "I'm so into you right now, Iris."

Lois snapped her fingers at him. "Hey, I hate to burst your bubble, but you're out of her league, dude."

"Ouch!" His face was still red, wiping his tears. "Do you think I'm not aware of that? But may I remind you, Heloisa, I was the first one to see her, remember? And she's supposed to be mine. I was just thinking, you know." He shrugged. "If it won't work out for them, then I'm always right here waiting for her, right, Iris?"

My eyes widened. "Supposed to be mine your ass, Templeton! And work out with who exactly?"

"Frost, time to go." Colt slapped Frost's back hard enough that knocked the air out of his lungs.

Frost winced. "That hurts, man."

"You two won't sneak out of this camp, understand?" He pointed his finger on us as a warning.

"What made you think we will?" Lois asked him innocently.

"Maybe you two are planning something." *Damn right, we are.*

"Can we join you instead?" I proposed.

"No. It's too dangerous out there."

I stood up and rolled my eyes. "We're aware of that, and we can protect ourselves."

"The answer is still no." Fire lit in his eyes—no hesitation—no regret.

"I'll talk to Gael because I and Lois are coming with you."

"I like a feisty woman, Iris," Frost interrupted us.

"Shut up, Frost!" we chided him, making him laughed again.

"Just focus on your garden, Iris."

"You're damn impossible! You're sexist!" I stomped out from them. *God, he's infuriating!*

My stomach quivered, feeling useless as Colt always had planned for everything before I could even suggest. *And when he says no, it means no unless it's an order from Gael.*

"Iris, wait!"

"Oh, you made a plan already. Go ahead and hunt a frigging gorilla!"

He swore behind my back while Frost was laughing his ass out. The thuds of his heavy footsteps signified he was following me. He then grabbed my arm.

In a swift motion, I was facing him, and my breathing caught under my throat as his sheer size made me small and powerless. Lifting my chin up, I met his steely eyes glaring back at me. For the first time, I realized I might have hurt his feelings as I could see now the pain flickering in those gray obs.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before I looked back at him. I explored every tiny detail in his irises—they darkened, and it amazed me how his pupils slowly dilated at my sight. His lashes were too good to be real—they were long and thick. His eyes roamed around my face, lingering on my lips, then meeting my gaze again. My heart pounded. His breathing quickened, locking his jaw tight.

“You, lucky bastard.” *Oh, my god!*

He blinked rapidly. “What?”

“I’m jealous.” I blinked. *Just stop it already, Iris. You sound like an idiot.*

“With whom?” There was a tiny confusion in his unbelievably low and soft voice.

“Your eyelashes.”

A small smile curved up his almost sinful lips. “Really?”

“Heck yeah.”

“You’re still beautiful with your light brown lashes, twig, and your eyes were the first thing I noticed when I first saw you. They’re blue, and I’ve never seen anything bluer than yours before.” I should be annoyed at him for calling me twig, but on the other hand, I found it cute.

“Just kiss and make up already. We’re leaving in a minute!” Frost yelled from a distance, causing us to pull apart.

“Asshole,” Colt groaned. *Oh yeah, he has his way of ruining our moments.*

“Not denying it, man, in fact, I’ve got a badge for that.”

“Look, it’s dangerous out there that’s why I decided not to take you and Lois with us.” Damn it! The way he said it, my anger just faded away. How could he affect me this much?

“Then, why do you have to go?”

“We’re not just hunting. Hamid went to scout a mile away from here and noticed a group of men, probably campers, but we don’t know yet until we go there to confirm.

“Fine.” Despite my worry, I managed to nod. “Just be careful.”

“I will.” For some reason, his assurance gave me comfort.

A gasp slipped from my lips. My body stilled when Colt pulled me into his chest and wrapped his strong arms around me. A warning would be nice, but it seemed that it didn’t exist in his vocabulary.

The strong thumping of my heart and the echoing of my pulse in my ears were giving me lightheadedness. Instinctively, I returned the favor and hugged him while resting my head against his chest. I listened to the strong beat of his heart, and definitely as strong as mine. My eyes flutter closed as I inhaled his manly scent into my lungs—so relaxing.

After several heart-pounding moments, he spoke, “Stay inside the camp, okay?”

“Okay.” I felt the touch of his lips on top of my head.

When we finally pulled apart, I met his gaze one more time before he walked away. I was left there alone standing, astounding, and wondering what was that all about. There was only one thing I was sure of, I cared about Colt more than I should.

“Well, that was cozy.” Lois came with a huge smile on her face.

“Not another word.” I walked back to the garden, feeling my cheeks burned.

“I noticed things, you know.”

“Lois, I’m already embarrassed. Please?”

“What’s there to embarrass when two people like each other? There was something more with what I just witnessed, Iris. For months I’ve known Colt, he never acted like that, and I’ve never seen him looking at anyone the way he looked at you.” She nudged me with her arm and giggled.

“I don’t know, Lois. I should not be attracted to him.”

“He’s attractive. So it’s not your fault.” She waggled her brows. “And the feeling seems mutual.”

“Cora warned me to stay away from him.”

“Colt isn’t hers in the first place, so why would you listen to her?”

“Do I look like I care what she said?” I raised a brow.

“Atta girl! And he collared Frost for wearing his brother’s shirt, yet he gave them to you. So there’s only one thing I can think about, it’s a message ‘to fuck everyone off because this girl is mine!’” she mimicked Colt’s voice.

“What?” My eyes grew big.

“Yep. That’s why Frost’s having fun messing with him because he knows how important you are to Colt. Just don’t break his heart, Iris, because if you do, I will make sure to crush yours?”

I smiled. “Noted.”

“Oh, my God!” Lois ran to Darick with a string of fish in his grasp. “I don’t know you can fish!”

“Nobody asks. I used to go fishing with my father when I was in Japan, but I wasn’t sure there’s any in the lake. I asked Frost for a hook if he could find one, then there it is.” He raised the stringer.

I didn’t know what type of fish was it, but it would definitely feed the whole camp.

“That’s amazing, Darick.”

“I don’t know you guys eat fish, but I was tired of sitting, so I thought how could I help Colt and Frost.”

“Right now we eat everything edible. Maybe next time we should come with you. What do you think, Iris?” Lois asked.

“Um, no thanks. I’m not a fan of the lake.”

“Uh, okay.” She laughed softly. “Well, let’s go to the kitchen then.”

THE FIRE pit was lit up.

Darick helped Hamid to take the table and chairs out. We never did this before since I arrived. It felt good to have this kind of simple get-together even though we were struggling to survive.

Anna and Lois grilled those fish with Dr. Hull’s herbs.

I managed to prepare some salad to occupy my mind among the other things. It was half successful because what happened between me and Colt earlier kept popping in my mind. The way he looked and talked to me, I knew there was something. The way he pulled me into his arms, twice, I could feel something overpowering between us, and it was almost embarrassing as I didn’t want it to end. His warm embrace gave me comfort and assured me safety.

For the first time, Ayesha, Hamid’s wife joined us. They were Egyptian Muslims who migrated to States and already American citizens. Ayesha didn’t cover her head like most Arabs, and Hamid didn’t pray like most Muslims. They were also very opinionated toward terrorists, and everyone respected that.

"This is aish balady. Whole wheat bread and almost the same as Greek Pita." She carried a basket of flatbread. "It's easy to make as long as you have wheat flour, wheat bran, and hot stone."

"Hot stone?" I asked.

"Yes, but tawa pan is fine."

"Similar to our tortilla bread," Lois agreed.

"Yes. Wait, where are Colt and Frost?" Ayesha looked around. "And Cora?"

I was getting antsier every tick of the clock. I let out a shaky breath. It was already dinner, yet there were no signs of any of them, and no matter how I dislike Cora, I never wished something bad would happen to her.

"I asked Gael, but all he said was Colt and Frost can take care of themselves. I've no idea about Cora though. Darick knocked on her door, but she must be sleeping," Lois said.

"Where's Gael?"

"Over here!"

"Did they contact you yet?" I asked once Gael got closer to our table.

"They're on their way."

"Thank God." I've been thinking of the worse scenario since the sun went down. I wasn't expecting they'd stayed this long out there.

"You okay?" Lois gripped my shoulder.

"I'm fine now, thanks. I was just worried about them." I sat on the long wooden bench, leaning my elbows against the table. I took a deep breath as I was about to have a flashback of how we got captured.

"Trust me, they're good at what they do. You don't have to worry about them. I'll go to the kitchen to help Anna."

"I'll take care of the dishes later."

A few minutes later Frost called my name breathlessly.

Excitedly, I stood up only to let my smile disappeared from my lips.

Frost was walking alone.

Chapter 10

Colt

FROST DUCKED and crawled down the moment we spotted the campers' location. He took off the nocs to scout the distance. The stream water in a slow current that separated us from them. A few trees hanging out over the water that blocked mostly the views of the other side.

Tension rode in me as I positioned myself and rested the muzzle of my rifle onto the log that hid us from the campers. I looked through the scope. One small tent was hidden under the vines, and they seemed to be there for a couple of days now based on the ashes of firewood, plastics, and cans littered on the ground, leaves fragments, and as well as the grass bank was already covered with mud.

"Affirmative. They're definitely just campers," Frost muttered. He was vigilant, I gave him that. He informed me that Iris was not what I thought she was and just needed shelter.

"Agree."

"They must be scouting for a safer place. By the look of it, in a few days, their group will follow them here."

"Have you seen anyone?"

"Nah. Hiding or away, or someone must have spotted us first?"

"If you're not a son of a billionaire you could be working your ass off at the CIA."

He chuckled, cocking his brow cockily. "When I was a kid, I wanted to be in a military, but I knew that's not gonna happen, and I like the perks of being undercover, you know."

My brows lifted. "Which perk exactly are you trying to tell me? Sleeping with women to gather Intel?"

He patted my shoulder. "Damn right."

I laid down on my back while Frost was waiting for someone to appear. "How long are we gonna stay here?"

"Just wanna spot one. I want to confirm if they're only campers."

"Hmm." I closed my eyes.

"Don't sleep, asshole. You should be the one spying out."

I opened an eye. "I'm not sleeping, just resting, and listening to the birds."

"Listening to the birds or thinking of Iris? You are the police officer here, remember? You swore an oath."

"That was pre-virus, and I trust your instinct. Just making your dream come true, man."

"Lately, you're not so helpful, Colt. Your Blue Iris is plaguing your brain."

I hit his side. "You're a dick."

"I'm just stating the fact, dickhead, and what was that hug all about?" He softly laughed.

"I don't know. I'm as surprised as you by my actions. Lately, I keep thinking about her."

"I know you like her. That's so obvious, by the way, and everyone knows it. The way you look at her?" He whistled. "And damn if she's not getting hotter every day."

I groaned and wanted to punch him if I didn't know he was just messing with me.

"I know you agree with me, but you better be in a hurry."

"For what?" I raised my head up, supporting my body with my elbows.

"Before we bleed out and die."

"We're not gonna die because of the damn virus."

"Maybe from a hard-on?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, inwardly amused because he was probably right. "Can you forget your dick for a moment?"

"Sure, when I am in your position. I mean apparently, you just solved your problem."

"And if you're not so dick yourself, you have a woman with a soft and warm body that prevents you from dying with a raging hard-on, but you choose life just to sway your dick to every woman in the fucking globe."

"That was months ago. I can't even remember the feeling of my cock balls deep in woman's pussy."

"Jesus," I muttered, shaking my head with amusement.

"So, do we have a deal?"

"What deal?"

"That you're willing to share Iris with me?"

I cocked my head and shook. "If I don't know you well, I already punch you till your eyes pop out from your head."

He smiled. "Thank you for the heads up, man. By the way, Heloisa is right, I'm out of Iris' league."

"Good. Now, keep her away from your shitty head." I took a deep breath. "It's been years since I like someone. It's weird how I wanted to see her eyes, her smile, and hear her voice. She's like my needs, my—"

"Okay, stop right there. Now, who sounds like a romance novel? You're in deep shit!" His face turned red, trying hard not to laugh out loud.

"Fuck you."

"Later, man. Seriously though, you become less scary. I even saw you smile. If I know the little thing you call twig can make you smile, I should've searched for her before you scare the hell out of our group."

"I don't have a reason to feel bad, asswipe."

"What I mean is, you're still the tough and broody who barks around, but I'm truly happy for you. You can't just focus on protecting everyone. I'm not complaining though because we care about you and trust you that you would do everything for us, but please, think also about yourself, your needs, Colt. Look at the world right now. It won't get back to the way it was if you die as a hero from keeping us alive."

"Your point?"

"Enjoy your life while protecting us. Make a move on Iris. If there are scientists out there creating a cure, I know they have time to jerk off, you know what I mean?"

"Jesus! This is not just about sex."

"I didn't say what's going on between you and Iris is just about sex, but orgasm is not a bad thing." He smirked. "You can't just love her or cocoon her without a couple of orgasms."

The word love was like a sucker-punch to my stomach. I lost the people I loved, but was I ready to love or for another heartache, if in case? I didn't know. On the other hand, life was too short not to enjoy each second of it.

"Enough talking about it," I said through gritted teeth.

It was normal for us to talk about sex, but talking about love, Iris, and orgasms at the same time was a bad combination. And I couldn't watch the campers with a raging hard-on, could I?

"Fine."

“So, is there anyone who broke your heart? I mean there must be a reason why you became a complete asshole?” *Now, it’s my turn.*

He shrugged. Frost’s expression suddenly changed into hard and sour. I must have initiated something very sensitive topic.

“Yeah, there was one, but she was too good for me.” His voice almost cracked.

“I’m sorry.”

Frost glanced at my side. “It doesn’t suit you, Colt. Don’t be softie on me now.”

“She must be something special,” I poked.

He shook his head in amusement. “You won’t let it go, will you?”

“Nah, I’m bored.”

“Not gonna tell you shit.” He paused. “It’s just... I hurt her.”

“You mean you broke her heart.”

“Worse than that.”

“Shit! Frost, what did you do?”

“I also broke my heart in the end, but she didn’t have any idea. Lately, I realized what I’ve lost. I wish I can go back to that time and make it up to her, but I think it’s too late. I don’t even know if she’s still alive. I was going to see her before I met you, guys, then things went out of control. It was harder to get back home, and besides, I doubt if she was still there. I don’t know if my dad is still alive either.”

“We’ll find her, Frost. When things are a little under control, I’ll help you find her and your dad.”

“What if she moves on? What if she doesn’t want me in her life anymore? What if—”

I squeezed his shoulder and shook my head. “Frost, no more what ifs. You know why we are still alive because we never lose hope, and you can’t just live with what ifs. How will you know if you won’t even try?”

“Look at you, man. You have all these shits in you.”

My chest constricted. “I’ve been there, so I knew shits. When Colton died, I thought I had no reason to live anymore. He was the only family I had left, besides Gael, but he made me promise that I wouldn’t mourn for him, that I was alive because I had a purpose, and I had to look for that purpose. If he was alive, and I was the one in his position, I would tell him the same thing.”

“Thanks, man.”

A few hours later, the camp had still no movements. We had to change our position to the west. We found two small tents behind the trees. Good distraction. And the moment we scouted, we looked at each other in shock. Frost groaned and shook his head.

“Fuck!”

“Sonofa—”

My shoulders stiffened. “What the fuck is she doing here?” I hissed in anger.

Cora got inside the tent, two white men about our age followed. They didn’t look like military, but they had handguns on their sides. Everyone had it nowadays, and it was not a shock anymore.

“Why do I feel like she’s using herself to trade some food?” Frost suspected.

“Alone? It’s more than that.” And it suddenly reminded me of something. I hesitated to tell Frost, but he needed to know. “I slept with her.” I grimaced the moment those words came out of my mouth.

“What?” His head jerked with eyes focused at me, reading me if I was just shitting him.

“I was...” I breathed through my nose. “I don’t know. She just knocked on my door, and I let her in. I didn’t even stop her.”

“You don’t have to explain. I also slept with her. I know it’s not surprising, but what’s this all about?”

“What if she’s selling info about our camp?” Blood rushed through my head. Heat shot across my face. “What if these people are looking for Iris?”

“Why they want Iris back? It’s not that she reported them to the authority for brutally murdering her brother.”

“I don’t know, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

Frost's expression showed he wasn't impressed with what we saw. “Let’s head back. It’s almost sunset,” he finally said after a deep breath.

Our way back to the camp was slower than we used to. We needed to take precautions that we were not being followed, though it was useless when Cora already traded our location to those men, or I was being too paranoid.

I still couldn't believe she was dealing with them without telling Gael. Gael would never allow her no matter how terrible her attitude was. I hoped they were not from the Colony Iris was talking about.

"Should we tell Gael?"

"He has to know," I said bluntly.

"He won't allow Cora to get back to the camp, Colt."

"Then let her stay with them."

Frost grabbed my arm. "This has nothing to do with Iris, has it?"

I shook my head. "No." Not entirely. "This is about our camp. We've been there for months and we're still safe until now because we used precautions. And if she told them where she came from, then they were others waiting out there and followed her the moment she left that tent, then what?"

"She's maybe a bitch, but she's not gonna put us in danger, especially you and Gael."

"You don't know that." I continued walking. "Maybe not on purpose, but the moment she told them about the camp we were all in danger. And I won't let them get into us without a fight. She should know that before she went out there. That's why I need to tell Gael."

"Look, I owe you all my life, and you don't have to question my loyalty because it's always been to our group, but I don't think those men are after the camp or Iris. They're just campers and just want her. I guess."

"You don't owe us anything. We're family. I just hope you're right."

"Don't do this, Colt."

"It's not your call, Frost. This is for everyone's safety."

"So you'll gonna let her die outside?"

"It's up to Gael. She fucked up, Frost. She chose her fate the moment she sneaked out and betrayed her own group. We don't even know if she still stays inside or out there. I haven't seen her in the kitchen or around the camp for days. That's why we are here, right? To scout," I pointed out.

"Well, there's only one way find out."

IT WAS already dark when we reached the camp. Frost used the exit gate from the back while I sneaked through the main gate.

I heard everyone's conversation around the fire which gave me easy access to get into Cora's cabin. I picked the lock and got inside.

Her bed was well made and clothes neatly folded above the bed. Her backpack was missing, and nothing suspicious in the nightstand drawer. I lifted the mattress—nothing was hidden under. It was almost perfectly set up as if she knew something was coming, or I was overthinking everything. But there must be something about why she was out there and not with us, and she hadn't come back until now.

"What she's doing out there?" I asked myself and carefully tucked her mattress back like how it was before. I walked out and locked the door behind me.

On my way to the dinner they prepared, Iris called out my name.

I froze on the spot.

"Hey." My voice came out a whisper. The moment our gaze met, a lot of thoughts scattered in my head.

"Hey, you." Her eyes lit up. *Fascinating.*

I pulled her tightly into a hug. This time I didn't hear a gasp from her. She wrapped her tiny arms around my body, and my heart instantly galloped. Warm hands rubbed my back, causing tingles of electricity to spread all over me.

I couldn't stop thinking about her even I was somewhere. It felt like we had some fucking cosmic connection that it was hard to explain, and there was no way this could be relieved by sex alone.

When I was with her, my brain didn't seem to work. Frost was right, Iris was like a plague to my brain in a damn good way.

All I knew was I deeply cared about her. I planted a soft kiss on top of her head.

When she loosened her arms around me, I felt the sudden emptiness the moment our body parted. The moonlight reflected in her blue eyes as she looked up and met my searing gaze. She smiled at me—it encouraged me to cup her small round face with my hands and caressed her dashing pretty pink soft cheeks.

Make a move, Colt. The voice of Frost echoed in my head.

My gaze dropped to her lips. Tension suddenly thickened around us. Electricity sparked. Heartbeat skyrocketed.

Her breathing caught, then she breathed out, almost like a sigh, and whispered, "I-I don't mind."

And it was my cue to lean down, brushes my lips against hers, and let my lids flutter close.

Desires blasted through me with just three simple words. I leaned in and kissed her, and tasted the sweet mouth I wanted to possess the moment she threatened my cock. Her lips parted, and I captured her mouth, and all the restrains I had vanished in the air. Her fingers gripped my front shirt, then released them to run through my hair.

I released my hands and I cupped the back of her head and the other at the small of her back. Our mouth moved in sync like we'd done it several times. Perfect.

My tongue licked the seam of her lips, and she opened up, meeting with hers in her mouth. Iris moaned, pressing herself against mine. The heat we created was racing down toward my dick.

Overwhelmed with the kiss, lust overtook me, finding me hard to stop kissing her. This was all I'd been wanting, but now it was not enough, I desperately wanted something more—I wanted Iris. I wanted her in my bed. In this cruel world. In my life.

Pain pierced through my heart. I kissed her hard one last time and freed my mouth from hers.

Her confused blue eyes met mine. "What's wrong?" she asked, still panting. She then looked down as disappointment laced all over her pretty face. "I get it. It's a mistake."

It took a moment for me to seemingly let those words sink in. Fear rushed through me when she started walking backward.

"Iris."

"Sorry if I kissed you. I guessed I was just a little bit overwhelmed, but I'm glad you're back. Safe. Everyone is waiting for you for dinner."

"Iris, just hold for a moment." I ran my fingers through my hair and stepped closer to her. "Um." I rubbed my beard. "Shit." I held her hand. "Look."

"We'll talk later." That was it, she then walked away.

What the fuck?

Chapter 11

Iris

What was that all about?

I COULDN'T look at him without thinking of that kiss. I could still feel the firmness and softness of his lips. I could still taste him and feel his touch that stirred something inside me.

How could I stop when all I could think was how good that kiss was? The synchronizing of our lips, the heat radiating between us, and the hardness of his bulge poking on his jeans were a constant reminder that we were on the same page. Suddenly, he seemed to regret it.

I ate silently while my mind was somewhere else—Colt clouded my brain, and I couldn't even think straight.

Everyone shared stories and laughed like on a normal family weekend. The dinner was pleasant, and we seemed to forget what was there outside for a while.

"You should join us for hunting, Darick. Your hook might catch a gazelle," Frost started to joke.

"I know because I feel like a useless piece of shit just waiting for a supply run."

"Language, Darick," Gael chided him.

"Sorry, Ayesha."

"No need to apologize. We do say khara, the same meaning to what you said," Hamid said, making his wife smiled. "And I disagree with you. We all help each other that's why we're still like one big family. Am I right, Gael?"

"You're right. We may all have different religious beliefs, but we all have one common ground, and that's to stay alive." He raised his soda.

"Shukran, everyone!" Hamid stood. "I have a camp to watch tonight."

"It's my turn," Gael said, rising up from his seat.

"Let me cover you tonight," I suggested.

"It's all right, Iris. It's been a while since I watch the post, and I need some fresh air." Gael smiled, but that didn't reach his eyes. Something was wrong. "Colt, Templeton, you two need to rest. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Yes, sir." Frost gave him a half nod.

"We should do this every weekend," Fischer suggested. "May I join for hunting this weekend."

Everyone snorted and laughed, even his wife, Anna. I gave them a dazed look.

"You know you suck at it, right?" Frost laughed.

"I only need a little practice." He shrugged, half-smiling.

"Just stick to your chore, Fischer. Put your math degree to good use." Colt gulped his drink. "The last time I checked, hunting a boar didn't require arithmetic."

"You're mean," I murmured.

He looked at me, making me frowned when there was something missing in his eyes. A spark?

I asked myself and thought through the reasons why he seemed down. Did something happen during their hunt? Or was it about the kiss?

"Here's a little advice, my friend. When you hunt, you stay quiet, sharp, have patience, and use your killer instinct, and not yelling the moment you see an animal, then the boar is gone in a blink." Frost laughed out loud. Fischer joined him instead of getting offended.

I liked this moment. Despite the hardship, we still found a way to laugh and enjoy something that was difficult to do these days.

"That was my first time, man," Fischer admitted. "I deserve a second chance though."

"You'll gonna have it, Fischer." Frost patted his back.

Everyone started clearing out the table, except for Frost and Colt who remained seated and in somewhat in a discreet conversation.

Lois brought the leftover back to the kitchen.

"Stand your ass up, asshole, and help Lois," Colt berated Frost but just raised a brow in return.

"I'll clean the dishes, now don't look at me like I am a lazy pig."

"That's actually my task, Colton. I didn't help in the kitchen earlier."

"Let me help you then."

"No, you won't. Gael was pretty clear with his order."

"I could get some sleep once we're done," he insisted and then checked Frost. When he was gone, Colt turned to me. "You said we'll talk later. Now it's about time to talk about it."

My heart raced. I couldn't get away with it, could I? "I still have loads of dishes to clean."

"And that's where I come. We can talk while I'm helping you." He held my hand. "You're not trying to ignore me again, are you?"

I met his gaze, studying him. "No, and besides, it was my fault. I was the one who rushed to see you. I was worried when Frost came alone, and I thought you were in trouble."

"That's good to hear that you're worried about me." A small smile curved up his amazing lips.

"I was just overwhelmed, I guess."

"Overwhelmed, that's it? What about our kiss?"

I rolled my eyes. "It was just a kiss, and I initiated it."

"Did you kiss Frost when he arrived?"

My eyes grew big. I didn't know if I should be insulted or not, but he had a point. "No. Why would I?"

"So you just don't like the kiss? You didn't feel anything? That moan was just—" I covered his mouth with my hand when his voice started to rise. I knew he did it on purpose.

"Can you keep it low?" I gritted and removed my hand when he nodded.

"What's wrong with moaning?" He seemed amused now—a wild glint in his gray eyes sparkled under the moonlight. "You don't get punished if you admit you enjoy a kiss, Iris. Just say you do."

"Don't make fun of me." I stood up, carrying the dishes left.

"We're not done talking, twig." As crazy as it sounded, the word twig made my heart skip a bit. I had to admit it was the cutest endearment someone had called me.

"We're done if you can't be serious with me."

"I'm serious. I'm just trying to lighten up the mood." He followed me to the kitchen.

I wasn't aware he had that in him when all I saw was he was so damn serious and scary most of the time. I started filling the basin with water and pouring the dishwashing liquid into the sponge.

"I'm a little rusty when it comes to dating."

"Who said we're dating?"

His head snapped at my side. Pain crossed his handsome face.

"Just kidding." I rolled my eyes. "And this is my version of trying to lighten up the mood. So?"

“So, I didn’t have the luxury for that when I joined the academy and became an officer. All I wanted was to prove something. My old man was in the army and died in a war when I and Colton were still in high school. I always idolized him, and I could say that he was our hero.” He slid a plate into my basin and took another one.

“I can do this, and you’re just making me slow. You should start from glasses or cups, then plates, and pots will be the last.” We did it in an old-fashioned way of cleaning.

“Got it.”

“You wanna be like your dad?”

“Yes, but I became an LAPD rookie instead. I had a dream of going to Quantico, but things happened.”

“You’ll gonna be a good agent, Officer snow.”

We worked in silence until we were done. I ignored the fact that his presence made my senses hyperaware—my skin buzzed every time our skin touched. But I must admit that it was good to have a light conversation with him regardless of what happened weeks ago.

“I’ll walk you to your cabin,” he said after washing his hands.

Protesting was not an option because I knew he would still insist, and our cabins were just on opposite sides. The camp was pretty quiet other than our footsteps and the crickets creating the sound, and it was a little bit colder than previous nights.

We took a seat on the muddy stair for a while, allowing the silence to stretch out between us. I could feel the hum of our closeness as he unexpectedly placed his large hand on my thigh and the searing gaze alone made me immobilize.

The tension was building up—I felt the flare of desire skittered inside me—I could smell him, feel the heat of his hand sipping through my jeans. I didn’t mind it though, in fact, I liked it. I couldn’t even remember the feeling of a sensual man’s touch until I met Colt.

I already missed it—the sweet embrace, his kiss, his skin, his taste, and everything that made me feel good. I wanted everything in him.

To not get too overwhelmed with our closeness, I looked up at the velvety black night sky with glinting stars, and the moon was hanging low. The gust of wind didn’t feel and smell like death for the first time in months.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I wrapped my hand over his huge one, intertwined them, and let the warmth engulfed us. “I like it.”

"Me too. I just freaked out a little. It happened so fast, but don't get me wrong, I've been thinking it for a while now."

"The kiss?" I looked at him.

His gaze met my eyes and stopped at my lips, with a smile, he nodded. "Yeah. And everything about you."

"I think about you, too." I squeezed his hand in assurance, then he brought it to his lips.

"I want more though," he asked, almost ashamed to admit.

"You want to...have...sex with me?" Oh, God! How the hell did I become so straightforward? My face heated.

"No!" His eyes grew big, mouth suddenly fell open.

"No?" I was shocked too.

"Shit." He laughed. "I should stop talking. I mean I would love to, but what I mean is, I don't want that that's the only thing we should share together. This world is falling piece by piece, Iris, and I don't wanna waste more time without you."

"Oh, I thought you don't do relationship," I chuckled.

"Who told you that?"

"Well, you slept with Cora, but I haven't seen the two of you together." I shrugged. "Unless you kept it secret."

"I don't wanna be a dickhead, but it was just sex, and she was fully aware of it. How did you know?" His curiosity made me smile.

"I figured when she threatened me."

"Huh! Awkward much." His brow rose.

"Wow!" I laughed. "You're full of surprises, Officer Snow."

"My brother used to say the much thing." He stood, pulling me up. "Let's get you inside before you froze to death, and it's getting late."

I dusted off my jeans from the mud as we walked to the door. "I'll see you tomorrow?" I lifted my chin, meeting his eyes.

"Can I hug you again?" Before I could reply, he pulled me into his arms. "I'm glad you stay." This man doesn't have a word warning in his vocabulary.

"I'm glad you didn't knock me off because you won't ever get a chance to get a hug from me again."

A rumble of silent laugh erupted in his chest. "I don't hurt women in general, unless they wanted me dead."

"Physically, yeah, but let me guess, you broke plenty of hearts, have you?"

"Not literally broke their hearts."

"Whatever floats your boat. Let me get inside so that you can take a rest."

This time I cupped his scruffy face. Before I could kiss him, his lids flutter closed and leaned down. Warm spread through me, feeling the softness of his lips against mine. It was quick and sweet, yet it ignited and awakened the feeling I hadn't been feeling for a long time, and I liked it even more.

"Night, twig."

"IRIS, WAKE up!"

"Lois, it's too early." I hid my head under my pillow. "Come back after an hour."

"Iris!" Her angry voice forced me to talk.

"What's wrong?" I rubbed my eyes and yawned. "What time is it?"

"I don't know, but you need to see something." She was crossing her arms over her chest with her lips pressed together. It must be so serious because I'd never seen her angry face before.

"A minute." I had to get up to wash my face and brush my teeth.

I grabbed my gun, put my shoes on, and followed her. We were heading to my garden. My pace slowed down in shock the moment I saw what she was trying to show me.

"Who did this?" I asked her vexedly. Tears filled my eyes, blurring my vision. "Seriously? Why not just me? Why it has to be the garden?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. When I got here, it already looked like this. I have no idea who did this, Iris. Everything is gone, even the sprouts."

It was all destroyed like it wrecked by a hurricane or someone used this place as a wrestling ring. Even the fruits were crushed into purees. Everything I worked for days was gone. All I could do was knelt down and cried.

"I'm so sorry, Iris. I wish I came earlier to prevent this from happening. We can still do it again, right?"

I lifted my gaze. “How about what are we gonna eat today, tomorrow, and next week? Are we gonna eat from the cans again? You know we’d looted most of the shop near our camp. We don’t have seeds, and it will take weeks to grow!” I wiped my tears dry, stood up, and took a few deep breaths, but my anger didn’t dissipate—it even got worse. “Where is everyone?”

“In the kitchen.”

“Good.” My instinct ruled.

There was only one person who was capable of doing a cruel thing like this. I strode toward the kitchen, rage rushing through me as my suspicions grew.

A shudder blitzed down my spine. My world spun and stopped in a momentum. Cora was sitting cozily beside Colt, and they seemed happy in each others’ company.

Great!

Heat flushed through my body. My anger vaporized, feeling I was about to burst into flame. My heart was pounding. Seconds ticked by, still, nobody noticed me, until I pulled my gun and slammed it against the table.

They uttered yelps in surprise and stilled. Pairs of eyes widened in shock, staring back at me.

“Funny, right?” My nose flared.

“What’s wrong, twig?” Colt innocently asked. His brows furrowed when he met my fury eyes.

“The last time I felt like this was when I watched people died right in front of me. How the hell a certain virus killed almost half of the world’s population in cold blood?” I stared directly at Cora who didn’t care a shit. “Until now, we don’t know who’s to blame, and I’m gladly volunteering myself to take the life whoever is responsible for almost human extinction. In. A. Heartbeat.”

“What is your point, Iris? You’re wasting our time.” Of course, Cora didn’t give a damn or wasn’t interested. She looked even annoyed.

“Iris, this is not what you think it is.” Colt was about to stand up, but I put my hand up to stop him.

“Oh, I know.”

“What happened to her, Heloisa?” Frost asked Lois who was already standing beside me.

“Who cares? You shouldn’t give a damn crap about her shit. She’s probably just PMSing, you know? It makes her bitchy,” Cora barked.

“Yeah, you’re probably right because sometimes it makes us bitchy when someone doesn’t give us the shit we want, right?” I just poked the bear—she shot me a glare.

Her hands locked into fists on top of the table. She quickly stood up and marched toward me if Frost did not stop her.

“Whoa! Cora, stay right where you are. Let’s talk whatever makes Iris mad. I am sure she has a reason.”

“Just sit the down, Frost! Yeah, someone made me bitchier if it’s even a word. It makes us also bitchy when someone doesn’t care how we feel, and that’s what pushes us to do something vengeful. Let me guess, from insecurities maybe? Envy? I know a lot of factors, and I can give you one.” I cocked my brow. “Rage, antagonism? Out of jealousy, maybe?”

“Jealous of you?” She laughed, mocking me, but no one seemed to find it funny. “Have you seen yourself in the mirror?” she ranted angrily.

“Have you?” I ranted back, causing Frost to chuckle. “Have you forgotten what you did to my fingers? How you threatened me? Or should I chant each word you tell me in front of them?”

“I’d love to hear that,” Darick said.

“Shut up, Darick!” Cora snapped.

“I just wanna know one thing from you, Cora, and if you will tell the truth in front of them, and I am satisfied with your answer, you can have Colt. Back.” I swallowed hard.

“You can’t be fucking serious.” Colt shifted in his seat, glaring at me. “What do you think of me? A fucking ball? That you can pass on to another player once you’re done?” *I am far from done with you.* His jaw clenched hard. He must have tried hard not to burst his anger toward me.

“That’s ridiculous,” Frost snorted.

“I don’t like him anyway.” I gave a quick glance at Colt. His face redder and breathed hard through his nose. I felt bad that I was hurting him because he had nothing to do with this.

“So, Cora, once you answered me with honesty, we’re done, and I’m leaving this camp.”

“Gael won’t let you,” Frost said.

“Let her go. She doesn’t belong here anyway,” Cora spluttered. “You’re already ruining my breakfast.”

“Enough!” Colt roared, face full of fury as he slammed his hand against the table, causing everyone to yelp, and everything on top shook. “And stop this nonsense, Iris because you are not going anywhere!”

Tension thickened.

No one moved. No one talked. I could sense everyone was holding their breath, including Cora.

“Now, Cora, did you ruin the garden to get into me?” I pinned my eyes at her. And in a flash, I got my answer—she was staring at me with a haunted look on her face.

Cora crossed her arms over her chest and shifted, then gave Colt an apologetic look.

“Jesus Christ, Cora! Seriously, the garden? What has it something to do with Iris?” Disappointed, Colt shook his head and stepped away from her. “I thought you’re better than that.”

The murmurs started, leaving Cora froze in her spot.

Colt grabbed my gun and snaked his hand around my waist. “I hope you’re not serious about leaving.”

“Of course not. I like this camp, but I like you a lot to do that.”

He laughed softly. “Let’s go then and fix whatever is left.”

Chapter 12

Colt

"I COULDN'T believe she did this?" Frost shook his head after seeing the aftermath of what Cora had done to the garden.

"Remind me again how old is she. A preschooler?" Darick started picking the remnants of the plants. "Tsk tsk. Pretty much nothing left to fix. I wonder how long did it take for her to destroy these."

Iris was pretty shaken. I totally understood her outburst earlier because the garden had been a big help to fill our empty stomach. Since she felt better, she spent most of her time in this garden, and only to be ruined by Cora in a fucking heartbeat.

I watched her disheartened and hadn't said a word as she just pulled off roots in frustration and continued the task at hand.

"Squeeze some of the ripe tomatoes, I need those seeds," she finally spoke.

"Yes, ma'am," I answered, and I wished she turned to look at me, but that didn't happen.

"I'll be right back, guys. I have an important thing to do." Frost strode away.

"What's so important, Frost?"

"To do the right thing!" he yelled.

"What was that all about?" Lois asked, placing the fruits she able to grasp beside me.

I knew Frost had a soft spot on Lois, and she was also concerned about him.

Darick yanked his shirt off. "Move to the side. I need to dig the soil while the sun is still not hot."

"I heard what happened. Here, use my mattock," Dr. Hull offered his tool to Darick. "I'm sorry to hear about your garden, Iris."

"Thanks, Dr. Hull. It's pretty bad."

"Maybe there are seeds next to the pet shop."

"Really?" Iris' blue eyes lit up. "I didn't get a chance to check it out. I guessed planting had not crossed my mind at that time."

"I think there is." Dr hull nodded.

"Great. Thank you, Dr. Hull. I'll go and check with Frost later." I gripped his shoulder.

"Guys, we have a problem."

Groaning, I stood as soon as I heard Frost at my back.

"What is it?" We still had an unsolved problem, and here came the other one. Just fucking brilliant!

"Cora is gone. She used the main gate this time and left it open." Of course, since there was no guard today.

Frost propped his hands on his hips, feeling confused and disappointed.

"What about her things?"

"Gone."

"That's good news!" Darick snickered.

"She'll die out there," Iris berated him.

"And we are all safe inside." Darick shrugged.

"You can't be serious," Iris said, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Well, I am. I can't believe you still want her back after what she did to this." Darick pointed down to the ground. He had a point, but we couldn't wish Cora dead because of what she did. She deserved to be grounded, but leaving her outside alone was too cruel.

"You know she won't survive out there alone, right?" she said.

"You did," Lois pointed out.

"Did you inform Gael?" I asked Frost.

"Yeah, I told him everything, but he didn't seem surprised though."

"How so?" My brow cocked. It didn't seem like Gael.

"Because of this." Darick showed the bullet on his hand he just fished out from his pocket.

"Where did you get this?" I picked up the 9mm bullet from his palm.

"My thigh."

"And?" Lois asked him.

"Cora shot you, and you didn't tell anyone?" I asked him annoyingly.

"I was not sure if it was an accident, or she did it on purpose. When she threatened me not to tell you or anyone especially Gael, that's how I figured out she was the shooter."

"You could have told me, Darick." My jaw clenched in anger. How could he keep this from me and Gael?

"Then what? You'll shoot her?"

"It depends on Gael or what's her reason. I'm sure she has one because we don't just shoot someone for fun, do we?"

"I was busy tossing supplies to my backpack. When I called her, she didn't answer. It was dark, then I heard footsteps and murmurs, so I hid behind the shelves, then a single shot echoed inside. A moment later, I realized I was shot, my blood was gushing through my jeans."

"I'm sorry, Darick." Tears filled Lois' eyes.

"Have you recognize the voice? Male or female?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I was sure we were not alone. I think she was talking to someone. Either she was asked to shoot me, or she gave her gun to someone instead. Then she rushed and cried, saying she came right away the moment she heard a gunshot."

"She could have killed us all in our sleep." We turned to Gael's voice who was walking limply toward us. "I think she was recruited by a group and needed to prove herself before they took her in."

"Well, damn. That's some kind of a next-level way of recruitment if you have to kill first before you're in," sneered Frost.

"You seem so surprise, playboy billionaire. Mafias and cabals did that," Lois replied, rolling her eyes.

"In your fiction book, Heloisa," Frost scoffed.

"Well, Templeton Gunner Frost III, may I remind you everyone wants power. Remember what they did to Iris?"

"She's right. Ever heard of human trafficking? Some cartel sells organs and not only drugs. Right now, they sell humans. I'm afraid Cora's life is in danger." Iris was damn admirable. Despite what Cora had done to her, she still didn't wish Cora would be dead.

"Gael, what's your plan?"

"You need to go to that campers and bring her back."

"Campers?" Iris inquired.

"Near our hunting zone."

"You didn't go hunting, Colton." Her tone was firm, eyeing me suspiciously.

"We're leaving in a minute," I informed Gael.

"I'm coming with you," Iris insisted.

"You can't. Those men could be your previous captors." Gael stopped her and left before Iris got a chance to reply.

"Good. Let me check out if it's them."

"Too risky. I had the training, Iris, and you just have to trust me on this."

"You can't be serious going out there just the two of you even you have training. You need my help, Colton."

"Why do you have to go and bring her back? She left because she's a terrible person. Do you think she's willing to come back?" Darick was on point, but if Gael ordered to bring her back, that was what we were going to do.

"Gael didn't point out dead or alive, right?" Lois asked.

"Alive, Lois."

"He can't be serious," Darick disagreed.

Frost cleared his throat. "I honestly don't feel like going back there even if it's Gael's order. If I know she already sold our soul to the devil."

"Let me come with you. I might be able to identify those men. I might know them." Iris's proposal was appealing, but I would not put her life in danger.

"Iris, no ID-ing, and you're not coming with us. That's Gael's order. You'll stay here inside the camp." I looked directly in her eyes. "You will not go out no matter what happens."

"You're scaring me." Horror filled her eyes all of a sudden, and I felt my stomach knotted.

"I can only do my job if I know you will keep your words, twig. Promise me."

She nodded despite her disagreement. "Okay, I promise."

"Good. I need to get ready." I grabbed her hand to the armory.

"Can I help?" Darick followed.

"Just look after my girlfriend while I'm away."

Frost whistled. "Now that's what I'm talking about."

"Got it, man!" Darick shouted.

Lois giggled. "Let's go clean up the garden, Darick."

Frost brought his backpack and put some ammo for him and mine. I yanked my gun, checked the magazine, and slipped two to my back pocket. I always had a boot knife, just in case, it was needed.

I could feel the worry in Iris' eyes. As much as I wanted to promise that I would be back alive, I didn't want to end up breaking it.

What happened today, I didn't see it coming—no one did. Cora came for breakfast as if nothing happened. She truly knew what to do—to lie and manipulate people.

"You two just be careful."

"Yes, ma'am. Don't worry about us. Just do what he asks you to do, and I'll watch his ass there." It was a relief that somehow Frost made her smile.

"We'll be back as soon as we spotted Cora." I kissed her forehead.

"My cue." Frost left the armory, leaving me and Iris alone.

"Be careful out there." Without hesitation, she kissed me. Hard.

My heart melted that she felt the same way as I did. I returned the favor; capturing her lips, kissing her hard, deep, and fierce, delving my tongue inside. If something happened to me today, I'd die happy with the sweet intoxicating taste of her on my tongue.

My heart almost combust with its strong beats, and I knew she could feel it against her palm spread on my chest. My hand dove at the back of her head as I unleashed the feelings I had for her through the kiss.

"Point taken," she whispered when our lips pulled apart.

"Good."

HALFWAY TO the stream, a dark smoke soared the sky. If my calculation was right, it came from the campers.

And I was damn right as we reached closer.

"They're gone, burned the tents down to clear their trail," Frost declared.

"Let's cross. We might find something to help us locate Cora."

We crossed path the water, just ankle-deep. Gael might be right—they were recruiting members. Based on the fire, it lit up pretty recently. If we were just quick enough to get here, we could still catch Cora.

"Son of a—!"

I turned to Frost. He was standing in front of a dead body. I walked closer with my heart hammering in my chest. The corpse was resting against the tree with a bullet hole on the forehead.

"Jesus!" Dread recoiled in my stomach. When I looked at Frost, we both felt the same.

Cora is dead.

I blinked the image off that started to replay in my head.

Gael was covering me as I ran toward the Humvee the moment those men were down. Blood spattered all over the windshield. Bullet holes everywhere, but I was aiming for the machine gun.

Gunfire continued. A loud crash shook the ground. The fire erupted in a distant truck, and the smell of charred metal and burning tires assaulted my nose. Smoke soared in the air pretty fast.

Keeping low, I quickly ducked to its side and succeeded to jump up at the back.

Automatic M16 fired against them, and I watched them fell to the ground. And so as the woman.

"Colt! Colt, are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good." I wiped off the sweat on my forehead.

Cora may be cruel to Iris and betrayed us, but she didn't deserve to die like this. I felt bad that they betrayed her despite she had proven something.

"What did they want from her?" Frost asked.

"I've no idea. We need to bury her."

"How? And they might come back for us."

"We can't just leave her here, or do you wanna carry her back to the camp?"

"Shit. Honestly, I feel bad. I'm afraid she might have shared some information with them."

After burying Cora, we left right away.

"I hope she kept her mouth shut and thought what Gael had done for her. If we only followed her the moment she ran away, we might be able to save her life."

Frost gripped my shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up, Colt. She'd been betraying us, and we were just protecting our group while she was busy on her own business."

We failed.

I failed to save Cora.

I FAILED Gael. And I was still trying to sink in the fact that she was dead. She may make a terrible decision by choosing to trust those people, but she could be still alive if she just had a little patience on us.

Bad for us, we didn't catch the people who did this to her.

That could be a message, or she might have done something that forced them to kill her. Or she might have failed them. Whatever it was, Cora was still gone, and nothing could bring her back.

"Did you find her?" Lois met me half-way to the armory.

"No," I answered shortly. I didn't want to tell her until I informed Gael and let him break the bad news to others.

"She might have gone far already before you arrived there."

I shrugged.

"It's alright, Colt. None of these is your fault. Gotta go."

"Hey." I stopped her.

"Yeah."

"Where's Iris?"

Her face lit up. "She's with Darick. It's been a while since I saw your eyes lit up."

I smiled. "Glad you two get along."

She laughed softly. She didn't like Cora and some girls back in our old camp. But with Iris, I felt their instant connection.

"She's genuinely kind. I warned her not to break your heart." She poked my chest. "And if you're planning on breaking hers, you better stop it right now, Colt Danger Snow because I will stab you in your sleep."

"Is that so? I think I can handle you just right." I ruffled her dark brown hair, causing her to punch me on my abdomen. "Even I'm in deep slumber." I taught her some basic self-defense months ago, and she gave up, saying she had no chance.

"I know, silly. And she likes you too."

"And I like her a lot." I laughed and shook my head. I couldn't believe I just voiced out my feelings toward Iris to her roommate.

"Not so obvious, lover boy," she sang. "Anyway, you better go. See you around, big bad wolf."

I felt my heart start thumping when I reached Darick and Frost's cabin. The door was ajar, and I peeped through it. Iris was on her yoga pants and a large shirt that she tied a knot at the back. I could see the round of her ass, and it was hard not to ogle when I already imagined how did it feel on my palm as she wrapped her legs around me.

I pushed the thought off in my head. *Damn it, Frost! You're such a bad influence when it comes to women.* He plagued my brain with dirty images of Iris.

"Keep on your stance, Iris. Remember to balance your weight otherwise your opponent will easily knock you down through your foot. And focus! Let Snow out of your mind for a while." Darick kicked her left leg to test if her body weight was balanced.

Huh! Seriously, Takaga?

"What makes you think I'm thinking of him?" she asked, annoyed, and seemingly embarrassed.

"You're smitten, and I can see it written all over your face."

Pretty much we're the same, twig.

I didn't even realize I was already grinning. Shit! I had it bad. Pretty bad. I badly needed a distraction, and somehow it was working and forgot what happened earlier.

Iris groaned stubbornly.

"Okay, remember to protect your head especially your face all the time. It's a semi-crouch." Darick fixed her fists vertically at her eye level and at least six inches away from her face.

Iris was wearing old gloves Darick had loaned her. "Okay, like this?"

"Yeah. Don't ever get distracted. Once you do, your opponent gets a chance to punch that pretty face, and then you're done. Keep your chin tucked to your chest. Remember you can't say wait, or hold up, break, or surrender. When you defend yourself from the opponent, treat him or her as a monster, a murderer who wanted to end your life."

Iris nodded.

“This world is full of bad people, Iris. Protect yourself, be sharp, and stay focus all the time. When I and Colt, or Frost are not around, at least you know how to fight back.”

“Got it.”

“Okay. Now lower your head, arms up, and don’t forget your stance.”

Iris did as he said—left foot forward and right at her back.

“Now, jab. Punch me,” Darick ordered.

“What?” She looked at him. Darick was a few inches shorter than me, but he was strong and knocked down a few guys.

“Punch me,” he repeated.

Iris did a straight punch with uncertainty.

“Hit my face as if you mean it, Iris! Remember I am the monster who wanted to take advantage of you! He wanted to hurt you, the people you care, who had Colt’s head, and Lois’ hair at his grip—”

Iris punched him stronger than the first one. I didn’t see that coming. I chuckled inwardly. She only needed a little motivation, but Darick was fast and able to block her blow. *Good start, twig.*

I heard a gasp from Iris when she hit Darick’s palm instead of his face.

He was fast, I gave him that.

“Yeah, just like that, but stronger, Iris. Give me your best shot. Remember you can’t run to me, or wear gloves, or wrap your knuckles to protect them. Make sure to keep your thumb out, and don’t bend your wrist otherwise you will end up with a sprain, or worse broken bones.”

“Again!” She did it again. “Again!” She did it faster and stronger repeatedly until Darick was satisfied with the outcome.

My heart swelled with pride.

“I didn’t expect that looking after my girlfriend is ending up teaching her how to punch.”

Chapter 13

Iris

Cora is dead.

Cora was killed.

I WAS still shivering. A sudden coldness hit my core upon hearing the news. I wrapped my arms around my body, berating if I should blame myself or not.

Its just...it was even harder to believe when she was just standing right in front of me as I made her admit her mistake, then all of a sudden, she was gone.

She died because of me. I confronted her. If I didn't let my anger affect me, she might be still alive until now.

"You okay?" I stopped pacing and stopped biting my lip, looking at worried Colt. "You can't blame yourself, Iris. She chose to trust them," he added.

"And she could still be alive right now if I didn't confront her."

"She's planning on leaving the camp. She once suggested a safe zone area. I asked her if how did she know about it, she said that she found leaflets. I ignored it—that could be a trap. We don't need a safe zone because we are safe here. What we need is a vaccine or a cure—that's all. We are totally in the oblivion about what happened to half of America. How about Europe, Asia, the Middle East? Have anyone finally figured out what kind of virus that wiped out the world? We still don't know." Gael rubbed his chin, frowning, not even meeting our gazes.

"We're not leaving this place for as long as we are safe inside," Colt said. "We will survive for as long as we stay together and stick to the rules. No more sneaking out. No more secrets. No more lies. We scavenge. We hunt. We plant. That's how we survive. We don't need luxury right now. What we need is safety from the virus, from the people who want to harm us out there. We can think of going back to our old life once we have the vaccine, but right now, we set aside those things, we set aside the future. Focus and think about today, this way, we won't die bleeding, or from hunger, or with a bullet hole on our head."

Everyone stayed silent and listened to Colt. I even saw the admiration in Gael's eyes, and I, myself, my heart swelled with pride.

Colt continued, "You are all free to speak and share your opinion with Gael, but we should think if it's good for everyone. If you want to leave the camp, I won't stop you, and I'm sure Gael won't stop you as well, but if something happens to you outside, we won't come to rescue you anymore."

"What happened to Cora was awful, and you should take it as a lesson, and it could happen to anyone if you won't take my advice seriously," said Gael.

"From now on, I demand transparency. You know what happened to our old place and what happened during the ambush. So, we should keep our location in discreet to the people outside this camp. We meet them outside but never bring anyone inside, unless with Gael's approval," Colt added.

I heard about their old place was taken away from them by a larger group, and that they were ambushed on the road. They lost members, and Colt's brother was killed while Gael was seriously wounded, causing his left leg to be amputated.

"Iris shared something about the leaflets of a safe zone. The place may exist and the offer may sound appealing, but that's not how it is—that they will provide you with anything for free. They controlled everything; they have powerful weapons and manpower. They have strong infrastructures; heavily guarded walls, but it only looks appealing from the outside. You don't wanna know what's in there. Iris won't run away if she feels safe, will she? You've seen her when she arrived at our camp. What they care is to be powerful so that they can conquer this country while they took people in as their slaves or kill everyone that they see as threats." Gael stood up, looking at us one by one. "Starting tonight, we should stay alert. We don't know if those people who were with Cora would come to us. They could be following her discreetly whenever she came back. Just be careful. If you notice anything unusual, knock on my door immediately."

"Is there anyone of you who wants to speak?" Colt asked, but everyone seemed still pretty shaken.

"Templeton, Colt. Thank you!" Gael said.

"No need to thank us, Gael," Frost replied.

"Colton, I'm glad you're back. I'll talk to you tomorrow." I grabbed Colt's hand and squeezed it.

"Tomorrow." He nodded and met my gaze. There was a concern there, but there was also a fire that promised something. "Don't think too much about it, okay? Good night, twig."

I smiled at him despite the guilt was forming in my throat. "Night."

"WHAT ARE you still doing here?" Lois was already lying in her bed with a book on her grip.

"Just came back from the shower. Where would I be?" I wore my shirt and cotton shorts.

"You call that shower?" She laughed. Her rich voice echoed in the entire cabin.

"Well, that place is a shower room, so I call it a shower." I laughed with her.

"Please, get out of this cabin. And take your gun with you. I need to be alone for a night." She turned her back on me, opening the book. Lois was an English teacher, major in 20th-century literature. And yes, she loved books, and one thing she had in common with Colt was reading.

"Is this your way of telling me to go to Colton's cabin and seduce him?" I felt my face and neck impossibly hot.

"You can't call it seducing when you both are on the same page."

I lied and rested my head against the wall, thinking of her advice. It was appealing, but what would I answer if he said to go back to my cabin and get some sleep.

"Life is too short," she sang.

I sat straight and grabbed my gun under my pillow. "If he rejects me, you'll work in the garden for the whole day."

"Not a problem. As long as you will tell me how does his beard feel like between your thighs." She laughed out loud.

"Shh! Lois, keep your voice low. Everyone can hear you."

"Who cares?"

"Wish me luck."

"You don't need one, Iris."

The walk to Colt's cabin was faster than a flash. I didn't want someone would notice me sneaking out to be with my boyfriend. My stomach had a fluttery feeling when I heard him telling Darick I was his girlfriend for the first time. I thought I had weakened knees.

I knocked softly when I reached his front door and suddenly wanted to flee when there was no response.

What if he's sleeping? I thought of self-loathing after this, and how on earth would I face him tomorrow? *Oh, my God!* I bit my lip.

In an instant, the door swung open, revealing a half-naked Colt. My eyes grew wide. I was right, after all, there was definitely a treasure beneath that shirt. A few tiny dark hairs sprinkled over his broad golden bare chest. I could feel his fiery gaze on me that made my pulse thunder in my veins. My skin tingled. My nipples hardened beneath my shirt.

Like a predator to its prey, I strolled my gaze down to the well-defined muscles of his abdomen down to the dark hair trailing down and disappeared beneath his waistband. And that exposed V where his jeans hang low was beyond sexy. *Does he even know his presence melts something inside me?*

Damn it, Colton!

I raked my eyes back to his golden strong arms and corded neck until I saw a sexy grin spread across his face.

“Done?”

“Would you mind if I come in?” Did I just say that? I blinked rapidly, feeling my face heated some more.

“Please.” He gestured like a gentleman.

The moment the door shut behind us, my breathing quickened. My muscle quivered. Gooseflesh erupted all over my skin when I felt his breath warming the skin of my neck.

In a split second, I was pressed against the wall as he drilled me with his blazing gaze.

“Why are you here sneaking out in the middle of the night, twig?”

“Um, Lois threw me out of the cabin. She said she wants some time alone.” I grinned sheepishly.

“Really? That doesn’t seem like her.”

“I know right?” I shrugged.

“Are you trying to break the rules or drive me crazy?” His voice turned deep and raspy. Eyes till pinned at me.

“Maybe both?” My brow rose.

“I should probably punish you for that?”

“What would be my punishment if I may ask, officer? Are you going to cuff me?” I leaned in—just an inch closer, and our lips would touch.

“Hmm, let me think.” His eyes darkened as he squinted them on me—it was almost predatory, yet I found it sexy.

I settled my hands on his chest. Heat rushed through my body like I was on fire as I felt his skin against my fingertips. Ached settled up in my sex. Biting my lips to stifle my moan, I traced my fingers down to his abs, to the hair, and I abruptly stopped on his waistband.

His breathing caught. “Don’t tease me, Iris. Patience is not my strong suit.” His hands moved on my waist, then slowly slid up my back under my shirt.

I gasped. “What is your strong suit, Officer Snow?”

“You’ll find it out soon, twig.” He smiled lazily. His touch was gentle yet it burned and stirred pleasure in my body that I was hungered for.

I caught my lip between my teeth stronger as the moan that I’d been holding long enough was almost slipping out.

“Iris, tell me to stop.”

I shook my head. Even if I wanted to, I didn’t want to. I came here with one purpose, and I made a move, so why would I let him stop now? *There’s no going back—it’s a one-way trip.*

My head threw back as his hands found my breasts, cupping them, tweaking my nipples that made me cry out with intense pleasure that I craved from him.

“Damn if I don’t love how your body reacts to my touch,” he whispered before capturing my lips—kissing me hard and deep, then the kiss ended only for me to find him staring at me with eyes blazing with lust and hunger.

He kissed me again—this time it was slow, taking his time to explore—biting, nipping until he fully invaded my mouth with his hot tongue. His beard tickled my face, making my skin more sensitive. He tasted minty, and everything I like about Colt.

My hands snaked around his neck. My legs wrapped around his waist as he gripped my thighs enough to leave his fingerprints on my skin.

His hard and unbelievably huge bulge was pressing against my sex—he just lit me on fire more than I imagined. I almost lost my sanity when it hit something already aching and so sensitive.

I rubbed myself shamelessly and gasped when he sucked my lip hard and tugged it between his teeth—a mix of pleasure and pain merged all together, banking the throbbing sensation in my core.

He broke his mouth free, breathing hard as he leaned his forehead against mine.

“I want you so bad. Tell me to stop now and I will. But once you say yes, I won’t be able to stop until we both have no more energy left and barely able to catch our breath,” He rushed his words out.

“To your bed now.”

A low rumble erupted from his chest in agreement.

He leaned down and laid me carefully on his bed as if I was fragile. He then took my shoes off one by one and carefully placed down beside his bed. I sat on the edge, yanked my shirt off above my head, and pushed down my shorts with the panties he gave me. I was not a virgin anymore, and I didn't have the luxury to play demure.

I watched his throat bobbed up and down a few times.

"Need help?"

"Can't a man take a few moments admiring his woman?"

"I find it hard to believe you don't have a single ink in your body." Leisurely, I admired every inch of his skin until he unbuttoned his jeans and pushed down to his knees that left me breathless. His thick erection sprang from the thick black hair. *Sweet Baby Jesus, he's monstrous.*

"Disappointed?"

Are you kidding me?

"You're perfect with or without ink." I gulped to see him completely naked. He was magnificent, better than any male model I'd seen in the magazines. And this one in front of me was real. No makeup. No Photoshop. No lights. In raw and flesh—a living male model in a post-apocalyptic world.

Colt was ripped in every angle my eyes could see.

Kneeling down between my thighs, he spread them. "You're beautiful, twig. So beautiful that I had to stand there for a minute and watched you naked in my bed and at the same thinking why did I deserve you." He caressed my cheeks with his callous thumbs.

I took his thumb and pressed it against my lips. "You are handsome and hot as hell. Your eyes are just as gorgeous as you are—whether you're happy or angry, sad, or confuse. I like you not only because you are strong, badass, and tough, but because you have a heart of gold."

Then I pressed my lips into his, and he opened his mouth for me as I slowly kissed him with passion.

His hand was cupping my neck while the other was started exploring around. Colt's mouth traveled down my neck—sucking and licking my earlobe that held my breath. He then captured my breast with his hot mouth—tugging, nipping, and licking my nipple.

My back arched from the pain and pleasure, almost driving me off the edge. His hand slid between my thighs, finding me wet and ready—my folds slicked under his finger.

I moaned and slid closer to him, begging for more.

I gasped, tightening my hands on his hair as he slid his finger inside me. I threw myself back to the bed and bit back the scream of pleasure as the sensation intensified, and it lost my self-control.

His hand was gone. Panic shot through me despite that I almost reached the temporary bliss. Then foil torn with his teeth, sheathing his impressive length. He then spread my thighs, positioning himself. I gasped as his shaft grazed my bundle of nerves.

Colt leaned down, biceps taut as he supported his weight. He then kissed me on my lips. "Twig."
"Colton." The anticipation was killing me.

I spread my thighs wider to welcome him as he slid his hot and throbbing length slowly in. Tremors seized my entire body. *I'm quivering*. I could feel as it got deeper and deeper, and how it stretched me, feeling completely full.

Pain blazed inside me, but it was too pleasurable than pain.

He hissed, and I gasped. He groaned, and I moaned.

"Twig?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want it slow?" His jaw clenched.

"Do what you thought of me while you were alone in your bed."

"Hmm." He brushed his lips on me. "Hard and fast." Then he slid out and shoved back inside. Hard. It caught my breath.

My hands found his arms, gripping the hard muscles as my anchor while my legs wrapped around his waist, wanting for more.

He growled against my neck. "Is it too much?"

"No. I want more." I squeezed my eyes shut and ground into him.

With full determination, he thrust again and again. Fast and hard. The slaps of our skin, the growls and moans, and the squeaking of the bed, and pounding against the wall echoed in the entire cabin.

Each hard thrust brought me higher and higher. My fingers dug at his back. Tremors surged through my legs. My teeth sunk on his shoulder, and at the same time, a guttural roar erupted in his throat. My heart pounded. My muscles contracted as the orgasm spiraled into me so wild and uncontrollable.

My eyes rolled back. The pleasure was so absolute that I couldn't breathe. My walls clamped around him as I exploded, calling his name in high pitch cry.

He hammered me harder with a slow growl, shuddered, and emptied his release—breathing hard and collapsing on top of me.

For a brief moment, Colt stilled. "Twig?" The genuine concern in his voice made me wanting for more.

I ran my hands on his back. "Should I leave?"

His head lifted. His gaze was intense. "Why?"

"Just checking."

"Silly." He took my mouth in a long hot kiss, and he was hard again.

Chapter 14

Colt

Of course, she left!

SHE COULDN'T just wait until I woke up, could she?

How dumbass of me to believe she enjoyed what we shared last night? I thought it was amazing—like brain-plaguing-mind-blowing amazing.

Iris' warm body sprawled around me, her hair spread all over my pillow with her breath tickling my neck, and my arm wrapped over the curve of her waist—that was what I imagined waking up this morning—not a cold and an empty space beside me.

Her gun on my nightstand was gone. Nothing was left aside from the smell of post-sex on my bed and condom wrappers on the floor to remind me that last night was real, and I could still feel being inside her—how good she felt, how sweet she tasted, how her moan sounded like, the stung and bruises she left on my shoulders and back.

Frustratingly, I put my jeans on and sat back on the edge of the bed, picking up wrappers and tossing them onto the bin by the foot of my bed. I rubbed my beard, feeling the emptiness in my chest once again.

I thought we were on the same page. What changed her mind?

I was about to grab my gun when a knock came at the door. It was still early for anyone to come unless it was an emergency, then the knock turned to pound.

Groaning, I grabbed my gun and slid it to the waistband at my back. I was half-way when the door swung open, then, Iris appeared, carrying a plate of breakfast and a steaming tumbler on the other hand.

My heart started to pound. She then got in and kicked the door shut with her foot.

I let out a deep sigh of relief, and a small smile curved up my lips.

Iris paused, she must have noticed me. She looked at me with her wide blue eyes and glowing cheeks. "Hey! You're up?"

"And you left." It came out with a little bit of sarcasm.

Thankfully, she didn't give a shit. "To get us breakfast. I helped Anna prepare then I left once we were done."

“Hmm.” I went back to bed, and Iris followed me.

“Baked beans, mushrooms, and pancakes without egg and milk.” She placed the plate and the coffee down the nightstand.

“And you call it a pancake?” I inwardly chuckled to my idiocy.

“You okay?” she asked.

I felt the concern in her voice, so I lifted my chin. “I thought you left me.”

“I didn’t wanna wake you up, and I was just planning on bringing breakfast for us.” She paused.

“Wait a sec. What do you mean I left you? Like I left you, left you? Why would I do that?”

I held her hand and allowed her to sit on my lap. “I care about our group. They’re like a family to me. I’m afraid of disappointing them or putting their lives in danger. I failed to protect my brother, and it made me helpless, weak, and hopeless at the same time. After his death, I was torn between staying and running away, but I held onto his last wish. And I couldn’t leave Gael with his condition, and he still believed in me after what happened. Then I promised myself to focus on keeping them safe because I couldn’t afford to fail twice. It was hard to see the sadness on their faces, Iris. Then the blue-eyed came along. There was something inside me stirred and told me to protect her, but my heart said I wanted to care about her too, and I care... more than I was supposed to do. I know it doesn’t make any sense—”

“It does.” Iris lifted my chin, then cupped my face. “I care about you, too, Colton.” She smiled.

“More than I wanted to, and I didn’t regret any of it. I like you, I like kissing you and everything about you. Can’t you see it? I made a move last night.” She leaned down, pressing her lips against mine.

I kissed her back, grabbing the back of her neck in a firm and possessive way—it was a kiss of comfort and reassurance.

She pulled her lips, kissing my forehead, my nose, and back to my lips again. “Does that kiss prove something to you?”

Nodding, I met her gaze. “Yes, but don’t leave me again, please? I don’t like the feeling of being left by someone without a proper goodbye. I don’t wanna wake up alone again, twig. It scares me.”

“You don’t have to be scared anymore, Colton, because I’m not going anywhere.” I could feel the sincerity in those words, and I felt relieved.

I grabbed the plate. “Let’s have breakfast.”

We ate, sharing with a light conversation.

"I wish we met before the plague. I want to take you to dinner with me."

The tumbler stopped midway to her lips. "What made you think I like to have dinner with you?"

"You seemed to be a type of woman who loved wine and candlelight." It was hard to think clearly when she was grinning and her eyes were gleaming wickedly. "Oh, is it because there were still a lot of men out there for you to choose from?" I chuckled and ran my thumb on her bottom lip.

Her tongue darted out to graze my skin, and by that—it sent ripples of pleasure right to my other head. I gripped her hips to press on my hardening cock. Her eyes quickly darkened. I took the tumbler from her hand and placed it down while keeping my gaze on her.

She hastily unbuttoned my jeans, slipping her hand inside—I was already damn hard, it hurt. I kissed her hungrily, possessively, and wet. She tasted like coffee, and I love coffee.

She mewled.

Iris freed my cock, palmed, and pumped a few strokes while I slipped my hand through the waistband of her cotton shorts.

Fuck! She was already soaking wet. I plunged my finger inside her hot sex, and her head fell back with her mouth dropped open. She looked beautiful as she rocked into my finger, stroked my length, and rubbed the pre-cum with her thumb. I thought I'd lost my mind. My tongue thrust into her mouth in tandem with my finger and her hand. I released my hand, wrapped my arms around her body, and pulled her on top of me.

"Condom, twig." My brain was in midway to euphoric lust, and thankfully, I still remembered to sheath my cock.

I heard an opening and closing of the drawer while I was busy fumbling to unhook her bra. "You have time to wear a bra when I'm just gonna throw it to the floor."

"I went to see Lois, and I can't just walk around with my nipples hard poking against my shirt."

I chuckled and tossed her shirt and bra on the floor, and she rolled a condom down to my cock. Then she took her shorts off. In a split second, Iris was straddling me, burying my length inside her hot and slick pussy.

"Fuck!" It nearly sent me to the edge.

And she cried out.

"Are you okay?" My facial muscles were taut.

"Got a little excited." She winced.

“Take your time to adjust.” I cupped her breasts and massaged them. “Lean in, I want to taste that sweet tit.”

She leaned down, offering it to me. I captured it with my mouth and sucked it. Hard.

She moaned and started rocking me in and out. I trailed my hands at her back. Goosebumps erupted her skin while I continued sucking her tits alternately. I tugged her nipple between my teeth and lightly bit it.

“God!”

Tingles banked at the base of my spine, shooting right to my balls, and she clamped around me, building her own orgasm—to soar higher and higher.

“I’m right behind you, twig.” I gripped her sweet ass, lifted my hips to meet her rhythm, and thrust into her. Faster. Harder.

“Colton, I’m close.” Her chest was heaving. Her eyes were dark and wide as she bit her lip.

She was rocking me hard, grinding, and finding her own release. My thumb found her swollen clit, and she gasped in shock, shuddered, and slumped down against my chest in a matter of seconds.

I grunted and pushed deep into her, spurting my seed so powerful that I saw lights.

IRIS TURNED the page again, and that annoyed me. Her head rested on my arm. Our legs tangled together, and my free arm draped around her tiny naked body. She completely forgot my existence and was hooked with the book of Elizabeth Hand. I read it and I knew it was good. It was a story of a guy named James Cole who used a time machine to stop the virus from releasing.

“I need to go and see Gael.”

She closed the book and turned to face me. “Are we going somewhere?”

“Me, and if he asks me to.” I wore my jeans and put a shirt on, and she did the same.

“I need to change into jeans. I’ll see you at Gael’s.”

“You’re not coming with me if I need to go out for a run, Iris.” I put my boots on and slipped my knife.

“I want to have just like that, too.”

I lifted my head. “What do you want?”

“A knife.”

"You need to learn how to use it. This is not for peeling some apple, twig." I smiled, pulling her into a hug. "I have to go. See you later, okay? Don't forget to lock the door behind you. There's a spare key inside the drawer and some protein bars. Help yourself, and use anything you want." I kissed the top of her head.

"I'm serious, Colton."

"I know." I closed the door behind me, and for the first time in months, I left smiling.

Gael had a map spread on his desk when I got in. "What do you have in mind?"

He lifted his gaze to me. "About time you showed up. I sent Templeton and Darick to get Iris' seeds, and I'm running out of dose."

"Why does nobody come knocking to my cabin? I could go with them." I looked down at the map he was encircled in red—the locations where we already went for scavenging.

"They said you were busy." He rubbed his chin.

"Busy?" My tone came out defensive.

"We have to go farther than these places. We need more gas, that's why I asked them to go, and it will take a day or two before we can come back." He tapped the location where he was planning for the next run.

"We? You're not coming with us, Gael." I knew he was already in good shape and the prosthetic helped him restore his normal gait, but it could kill him if he got another gunshot. Dr. Hull found out he was also suffering from Type II diabetes, and he was dependent on Insulin.

"It's not your call to make a decision, Colt." His voice was gone firm.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean it like that."

"I won't put you all at risk if I'm not even capable of protecting myself. I may have lost my leg, but I did not lose my sight and hands."

"Okay. So, where are we heading?"

"Greenebach."

"West?"

"And Iris is coming with us."

Shit! *This is not going to be easy for me.*

"Really?"

I half-turned to see Iris was already inside the office with a smile on her face. I locked my jaw to prevent overreacting in front of Gael. One thing I knew about him was not to question his decisions because I knew he'd been planning about this all night. My stomach recoiled, thinking of Iris coming with us.

"Sorry, the door is open. I'm here for Gael, but he seemed to have a plan for me already, so I'm in." She was so in. I could feel the excitement in her voice, but she might change her mind once she knew where we were heading.

"I was about to tell Gael that you can go hunting with Frost. We're taking Hamid and Darick with us instead." I couldn't put her life in danger. Not again. What if someone would recognize her and took her with them or put a bullet in her head?

The Greenebach surely was hostile territory, and I didn't have any idea what was in there.

"She's coming with us. That's my final decision." Gael stood up and holstered his gun. *Of course, but we are talking about Iris, and I have a say over this.* "We're leaving in an hour. You two, gather your weapons and bring enough ammo and some food for us. This trip would last a day or two."

"Gael, you know that place is near to where she escaped, right? What if—"

"What? That territory is safe. People come in and out to trade every Friday that's why we will bring something we don't need to trade with food."

I wasn't entirely convinced about the safety of that place, and there was something that Gael was not telling me. I swallowed and looked down, feeling defeated.

"Where are we going?" Iris finally asked.

"Greenebach." I watched her mouth gaped.

But Iris managed to nod. "Okay."

I moved closer to Iris and whispered, "If something will happen to you out there, I'll make sure to put a bullet in my head as well." Grinding my teeth, I walked out of his office as heat flushed through my body with so much anger. I wanted to scream and punch Gael at the same time, but instead, I kicked the bucket—water splashed all over the ground, sending it in distant.

Chapter 15

Iris

FOR HOURS, the tension rose thicker and thicker in the air.

Colt's knuckles remained white as he gripped the steering wheel throughout the ride, glaring toward the road, and his jaw muscles were clenching most of the time.

They were both tensed.

Silence lingered on Gael—if he was not to check his watch, he tapped his fingers against his knees.

Silence.

Silence.

Plainly, the humming of the engine or a rumble when the tires hit the gravelly road and the alarm when the car turned left or right or passed its speed limit.

I groaned. "Okay. Guys, this is not the trip that I was expecting, and so far the most boring I've ever had. I should have brought a book with me if you two would just keep your mouth shut throughout the ride."

Still scowling, I slid the window open—the hot air rushed in. "Anyone need a cold drink? It's burning hot!" It was appealing, but they knew it was a lie because there were no cold drinks, and I was just craving for one.

Silence.

"Oh, my God! I hate you both right now!"

Silence.

"Unbelievable!"

Giving up, I folded my arms over the window frame and tucked my chin as I silently watched the wide and open country road as we passed by. The white lineage posts were nearly lost in the weeds. I slipped my head out, meeting the hot striking sun. The blue sky with a few streaks of clouds above with zero planes flying overhead. The smell of hot pavement mixed with dust and dry grass was the only thing I could breathe in.

This is my real life now.

The thought of it made me regret something that I wished I did—to be more adventurous and tried skydiving in Dubai, or I could have joined the climbing expedition to Mount Everest in Nepal for the greater cause. But no one had ever predicted this to happen.

“Nada plane. Zilch.”

“Anything digital won’t work. Technology crushed down with the plague. The agricultural aircraft might still work though. We are back to the stone age, but one thing different is that the world is full of industrial junks and bullshit.” Gael spread the map on his lap and tapped the encircled location. “We’re halfway through. We’ll stop at sunset to rest for the whole night.”

“I can still drive. And the car has enough gas to get us there,” Colt said through gritted teeth, still glaring.

“It’s dangerous to get in and out of there during the night. So we trade in the morning and quickly leave discreetly. We don’t want to catch attention that we drove all the way there just to trade. It’s too suspicious,” Gael explained.

“Don’t keep me in the dark, Gael. I want to know what is your plan so that I’m prepared when things go south.”

Good point.

“I killed Cora.”

“What?” Shocked, I and Colt asked in unison.

The car halted to stop—tires screeched against the pavement. My body crashed against the driver seat.

With wide eyes, I stared at Gael in disbelief. My breathing held, trying to rethink if I heard him right, or this whole situation was mind-playing with me.

In one swift move, Colt was already pointing his gun to Gael, aiming to his head. His finger was ready to pull the trigger with his nose was flaring in anger.

I was beyond shocked, scared, and horrified to stop them, and I was shivering with fear that everything would change in a blink of an eye.

I let out a deep breath and spoke, “Put that gun down, Colton.”

He ignored me.

“You and Gael, get out of the car!” I opened the door, jumped out, and slammed it shut. Gael was the first to hop down, then Colt vigilantly followed, still, the gun was pointing at Gael.

“Put that goddamn down!” I yelled, then faced Gael, but Colt grabbed me in the arm.

“Stay away from him, Iris,” he hissed. “He brought us here to kill us just like what he did to Cora. He planned this all along—to lure us out for trade, then when he gets back to the camp, he tells them that we died in an ambush. Am I right so far, Gael?”

The tension between them thickened.

Calmly, Gael raised his hand slowly, then he spoke, “I don’t have to lure you out to kill both of you. I could have done it in the camp if I wanted to. Take my gun, Iris. If you think I will shoot you and Colt.”

“Stay beside me, Iris,” Colt ordered. “You better start talking, old man!”

“You know she shot Darick. When he came and told me what happened, I didn’t want to believe it, but when Hamid spotted her sneaking out, I told him to let her in and out of the camp, and I’ll handle the rest. She did that for a couple of nights. The moment she left, I walked into her cabin, and she had supplies that didn’t come from scavenging. It was in packs; water, protein bars, tuna, can chicken, etc., like a care package. So last week, I followed her.”

“Go on,” said Colt, seemingly convinced.

“I ordered you and Templeton to go hunting and watch out the campers to make sure they’re still there. That day, before I killed her, she was already planning on leaving and took a few of her things with her. I let her go for a couple of minutes, then Templeton came to inform me. It took an hour for you both to go after her while it only took thirty minutes for me. I crossed through the lake, and that was when I saw the two armed men with her.”

“Why did you have to keep it from us?”

“I don’t want you getting involved. She crossed me and betrayed us. She told them everything—about our camp, about us, everyone, and about Iris.”

“What?” My back stiffened—mentioning my name gave chills down my spine.

“Cora told me everything. Those men are from the same group, but not the same men who were with her the night she shot Darick. The previous ones were ruthless and refused to tell her the name of the leader. She described them to me though.”

“Then why did you have to kill her?” I asked and watched them as I was afraid that the two of them might slit each others’ throat in front of me. If one of them started, I had my gun at my back.

“I killed the two men and burned them.”

“So, it was you, huh?” Colt grunted.

"Yes. Burying her was a mistake, Colt. You shouldn't have done—"

"If you only trust us with your plans, none of these things have happened. Or I would be aware of what to do."

"Now it looked like someone came there to kill those men and buried a woman. The men who were with Cora that night would recognize her once they dug the grave. Anyway, we're all already at risk that's why I had to kill her."

"Then why are we going there? I am sure we are not going to trade, am I right?" I asked Gael.

"Part of it was to trade, but yeah, I want to kill the other two men who knew Cora."

Colt snorted, "You're out of your fucking mind! As if killing them is as easy as eating a banana."

"You'll help me."

"I won't! You lied to us, to everyone. And I don't know what else you did behind our backs," Colt said harshly while shaking with anger. "You don't trust me enough. That's all because I failed you once, and you thought I would fail you again!"

I totally got it why he was angry at Gael. He felt betrayed by the person he respected and trusted most. And I couldn't do anything to help solve this problem. And one thing I was scared of was that I could possibly put their lives in danger.

"I trust you, Colt. You know that. One day you will understand why I am doing this. That's why I want us to make a stop because I want to tell you everything about my plan. You shouldn't have found out this way, but whether you like it or not you will eventually have to help me."

Colt snickered, "After what you did to us, you're still so sure about that?" He shook his head. "Here's my plan, Gael. I'll drive you there because you lead the group, but you will be on your own or whatever you are planning to do. I'm not gonna risk Iris' life."

"If it involves Iris I know you won't think twice."

Colt rushed to Gael and pressed his gun against his forehead. "I swear to God!" he hissed.

"Colton, don't!" I grabbed him on his shoulder, but he didn't even budge. His arm contracted and his veins protruded against his forehead. "Please, it doesn't have to be this way."

"You will thank me later—"

Colt cut him off. "Fuck you! Goddamn it, Gael! I trusted you with my fucking life!"

"Colton, please?" I begged. "For my sake. I want to know why I'm involved."

“Apparently, they’ve been looking for Iris since she escaped. That’s why I believed in what Iris had been saying to us. Iris seems so important to them than she thinks she is. We will find the two men because they will be there tomorrow to deliver their recruits to their leader.”

“I’ll only help you on my own terms. I’m doing this for her, and not for you. But don’t you dare plan of double-crossing me, do you understand me?” Colt pressed his gun one more time on Gael’s head before he retreated, still glaring with eyes awash with anger and pain.

I let out a deep sigh of relief. My body was still shaking when Colt faced me.

“Did you have any mutual relationship with any of them?” His vain filled voice seared my heart that made me swallow and grimace.

“You mean if I fucked them? You don’t have to sugarcoat it. And my answer is no. Never.” I wrapped my arms around my body as I felt that he thought so low of me.

“Did they...” He swallowed. “Did they violate you?”

My brow arched. “If they raped me?” I shook my head. “No. They just dragged us and let us fill in line, then drained our blood every day. They believed that it slowed down the effect of the virus for a few hours.”

Colt averted his gaze, harshly breathing through his nose. He then walked away, kicking everything he came across with.

“I’m sorry, Iris.”

“Sorry for your dumbass, Gael! You can’t protect everyone without his help. You should know that.” I left him and followed Colt. “Colton!”

He stopped and propped his hands on his hips, still breathing heavily. His head, neck, and his arms glistened with sweat. I could feel the prick of the sun burning my skin as well, but he was not sweating from the heat of it—it was from his self-control as he tried hard to not kill Gael.

I licked my dry lips before I spoke. “We need to get back to the car.”

He nodded, meeting my gaze with an intensity that almost gave me shiver. “I’m sorry that I lost control. I promise I will protect you with my life, and I will never let them get into you, Iris. I swear.” He cupped the back of my head, then crushed his mouth against mine with a forceful and opened-mouth kiss that almost brought me down on my knees. Every part of me tingles, hyper-aware of how his kiss intoxicating me.

My body tightened, my arms clamped around his sweaty neck as I pressed my body against his. He intruded his tongue, and I sucked it before it slipped it into my mouth. Colt groaned, breaking the hot kiss with suction, and ended with a loud smack.

"How did you learn how to kiss like that?" He smiled with amusement.

"What I learned better today is you are damn hot when you're angry. It was a hell of a kiss in the middle of the deserted road under the blazing sun while we are sweaty and coated with dust." I laughed. "Quite romantic, isn't it?" We intertwined our fingers as we walked back to the car waiting for us.

"I remember my old days," Gael said as he walked to the passenger side. "A month later, I married my wife."

"How did you two meet?" I asked when the tension seemed to dissipate inside the car.

Colt was back on driving. He was still tensed, but I was glad he made the right decision of not shooting Gael because he couldn't forgive himself and would regret it for the rest of his life if he let his anger consume him.

Gael smiled. "I met her at my best friend's wedding."

"You mean my parents' wedding," Colt interjected, still scowling.

My eyes grew wide. "Hold on. You two knew each other before the plague?"

"Yeah. That's why I would never betray my best friend's son. I did not regret even a little of killing Cora, and I would do it in a heartbeat to anyone who dares to harm him. His brother, Colton saved my life, and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't because of him. I owe Colt my life."

Now it was all clear to me. Gael did all of these to protect the remaining son of his best friend.

"Anyway, so I slept with my wife at her parents' room."

"My grandparents' room," Colt corrected.

"Your wife is Colton's aunt. His mom's sister?"

"Yes," he said proudly.

"Wow." I blinked. "How come you never mentioned this to me, Colton?"

"I did not get a chance to talk about this, but now you know." He looked at the rearview mirror with a small smile on his lips.

"So after that, Collin, his dad threatened me if I break his sister-in-law's heart, he will let me die alone in the desert."

"You broke the bro-code." I chuckled.

"Yeah. It was love at first sight. I mean on my part because she was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen— a tiny little thing. But she hated my gut after we slept together, and said I was a lousy lay."

Colt laughed. "That might be true, Gael."

"Do you have children?"

"She had a miscarriage, and it almost took her life. So we decided not to have a baby anymore. I didn't push her when she disagreed about adoption." His answer made me look away, feeling a sudden twist in my stomach.

WE STOPPED at sunset, ten miles away from the Greenebach. I spread the blanket beside the small fire Gael had lit up.

Colt scouted around while Gael went hunting for rabbits. The warm air smelled decay and dried leaves—not the smell of dead bodies like everywhere; decomposed or burnt. Everything seemed quiet and sullen. Even the dark sky had shimmering stars tonight.

A few hours later, Gael came back, carrying a white-tailed deer.

"What the hell?" Colt spat. His voice was full of admiration. "You still have that in you, huh?"

"Old-time never dies." He tossed the deer down. "We can trade or eat this, your choice?" He was looking at me.

"I'm not hungry anymore," I said. We ate the food we bought with us before he went for a hunt.

"Fine by me," Colt seconded.

"Good. Get some sleep, Iris. We have a big day tomorrow."

"You haven't told me about the plan." I lay back down, using my backpack as my pillow.

Colt sat down beside me, rubbing my jeans covered leg. "We'll tell you early morning. Get some sleep."

"You both need some sleep," I told them lazily.

"I used to stay awake for three days since the plague." Gael poured water to the small kettle and might have planned on making coffee.

"And you two are not gonna sleep tonight?"

“Don’t worry about us, twig. We’ll be fine. I need you to save your strength for tomorrow. We can’t predict what will happen once we reach Greenebach. I need you to stay focused.”

“Aye, captain. Big day tomorrow,” I said before I closed my eyes, feeling his lips pressed against my forehead for a good night kiss.

Chapter 16

Colt

AROUND HUNDREDS of vehicle, including bikes, four-wheeler trucks parked in the area of Greenebach, and probably thousands of people inside the parameter.

It reminded me of a 90's Woodstock Concert my dad used to tell me about.

"Wow! I never thought Greenebach would be like this." Iris got her head out of the car window.

"This is unbelievable. A lot like a Katy Perry Concert."

I jumped out of the car, opening a door for Iris. I fixed her clothes and hid her necklace under her shirt. I didn't want those people to recognize her since her true hair color started to show off. I let her wear an extra shirt—my plaid, to make her look bigger than her size.

"Just act like we're going for a grocery shopping, okay? And stay beside me all the time, can you do that?" I looked right into her eyes.

She smiled and nodded. "I can."

I kissed her on her lips. "All right."

Gael was already out, on alert mode, carrying the deer he took from the back of the car.

I checked my gun and grabbed the duffel bag for our trade.

"Twig, your gun?" I gave her the backpack.

"Here." She pointed at her back and grinned. "Chill out. You're a lot more nervous than me, Colton."

"I just feel anxious," I admitted. "I don't know what's in there."

"We're gonna be fine." Her assurance didn't shake the unsettling feeling in my stomach, but we had to do this.

"Colton!" Iris called out, looking at Gael's direction who was now in the middle of the commotion.

"Shit! What happened?" I grabbed Iris and dragged her with me toward the crowd. "Don't ever let go of my hand." My pulse raced as we hurried closer.

"Attention! No trading outside the gate!" A man's voice echoed from the megaphone repeatedly, making us stopped.

"We should go back," I told her as we turned around to walk away.

"What about Gael? We can't just leave him there." Her worried voice made me stop.

"He'll be fine. We stick to the plan no matter what." When I turned my head, the commotion started to scatter away, and Gael with his deer was fine. He then signaled, heading first just as part of our plan.

We followed Gael by a few meters apart, just in case someone would recognize him, or he would recognize the men we were looking for.

I just hoped Cora's descriptions were accurate, otherwise, we would be looking for faceless men.

The place had barbed wire fencing about ten feet tall from the outside and containers from the inside. From my vantage point, there were concrete barriers and guards on the checkpoint.

The gate had two ways—the entrance and an exist separated by barriers. Two heavily armed guards were in fancy dark blue military uniforms. Another three guards were inside the fence at the top of the containers and one each on the two towers.

The line was about ten yards long, but it moved quickly. Aside from that, piles of people were waiting at the front yard.

After a couple of minutes, I squeezed Iris' hand as Gael lifted his left wrist to the man and got it stamped.

"Definitely a cheap concert. Follow my lead," Iris said.

"Iris, don't," I whispered firmly.

"Trust me."

"Iris," I groaned, squeezing her hand to resist.

Damn it! *Can't she ever follow a simple order?*

"It's getting hot in here, sir." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand while the other was on her hip. "Thank you, Lord! I thought I have to stand here for another hour."

Iris got the attention of the first guard. "Ma'am, your name?" His named was Martinez on the name tape.

"Hope Danger, sir. And this is my husband, Colton Danger. And we're having our first baby!" she said gleefully in Southerner accent.

He scribbled on the clipboard. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Danger! Ma'am, you may show your wrist for a stamp, then you're good to go." He patted the man's shoulder who stamped Gael and mentioned that Iris was pregnant.

"Left wrist." The man quickly pressed a stamp on Iris' wrist, and then on mine.

The stamp was somewhat like a globe, a key or looked like a spacecraft held at the center. At least three dots on both sides, or seemingly stars that connected to the tip of the key. The black ink was smeared, and it was hard to recognize.

"Come here, wife." I gripped her arm to walk faster away from the guards. With my chest heaving, I stared at her. "What was that for? I told you not to pull any stunt, yet you still defied me."

I was holding my breath when she pulled that stunt in front of those men. The good thing was, they didn't confiscate our belongings especially our weapons, and if they ever did, I might force myself to back out, and it would look suspicious in their eyes and our cover would be blown.

Iris was just staring at her stamped wrist with furrowed brows. Her pale face had twisted my stomach.

"What is it, Iris?"

Her eyes narrowed at my mine. "I had to do that so that they won't check me!" she snapped. "Turn around if they're not checking everyone especially their eyes."

"Why the eyes?" I turned around, and she was right.

Iris shrugged, still wearing her sunglasses. "I don't know, but I noticed only on women. You're the police officer, why don't you tell me?" I could feel her eyes rolling behind the dark shades—she was pissed at me.

"And we're having a baby, huh?" I joked to lighten her mood. Finally, I was able to breathe.

Having a child in a world like this had never crossed my mind, and it would be an awful idea. If she ever had it right now, I would never put her life at risk of taking her with me—the thought alone was dreadful. I would rather keep her in a small farm somewhere far from the harm brought by this new world.

"Yeah, Mr. Danger. And don't ever use your real name around here."

"That thought had crossed my mind, but I was pretty caught up in inspecting the guards and those people surrounding us." My hand was still holding hers as I was reluctant to let it go.

"Is everything okay?" Gael came closer, still had the deer over his shoulder.

"Yeah. My wife is pregnant, can you believe that?" I laughed softly, still terrified.

"Very well then. Let's go, pregnant wife. I can't believe the Greenebach is actually huge. How are we going to find those bastards?" he said as he wandered his gaze around.

Gael was right. This place reminded me of the county fair. The presence of many survivors seemed overwhelming that I had not seen anything like this lately.

"I wanna trade this damn animal right now."

"Good idea because you smell like a corpse right now. That side looks like the farmer's market." I pointed to the left.

"Man, anything to trade with my moonshine?" A greasy man with bloodshot eyes and rumpled appearance approached with a liter bottle of colorless liquid. He looked like he didn't blink too often.

"With what?" Iris asked.

"Five revolver bullets."

Iris stared at me with a dazed look on her face.

"Sorry, but we don't have what you're looking for," I dismissed, and the greasy man left hurriedly.

"Really? A moonshine for bullets?"

"This is an open black market, twig. He probably stole it from a stall around here. Don't ever mention what we have to anyone. I already think twice if we should trade our bullets. We could still scavenge for food, but I bullets are hard to find."

"I'm sorry about earlier," she muttered and squeezed my hand. The warmth of her words and our hands was a comfort that I could not still believe it filled the empty and ache inside my chest.

"It's alright. I think what you did back there is your instinctive decision, and it was brave. You saved us both from trouble." The moment she pulled that stunt, my emotions in total shambled. Right now, the urge of pulling her into my arms and let her stayed there until I realized she was mine was stronger than anything I ever felt before.

We checked around—instead of the food trailer trucks selling the common food like corn dogs, pretzels, and candies, what they had were used clothes, used textiles, shoes, furniture, and kitchen utensils.

"I'm afraid these are stolen," Iris mumbled.

From the other side were the farm market stalls, selling almost rotten fruits and vegetables surrounded by bugs and flies. There were jars of jam and jellies, packs of flour, small sacks of rice, sugar, and different kinds of can goods.

"Afraid so, and probably most of them were expired. Let's go there." That place at the corner was more crowded, it suddenly piqued my interest.

"Oh, God!" Iris let go of my hand and ran back to the corner.

"Jesus Christ!" I strode to follow her who just thrown up. "Are you okay?" I rubbed her back as she wiped her mouth clean.

She grabbed a bottle of water I offered, emptying it. She then held up. "A roasted dog, seriously? And lizards."

"A few people from the Middle East eat Uromastyx lizards."

"Really? How about rats, and what was that the other one?"

Before I could answer, Gael appeared with hands full of plastic bags. "Guys, I got seeds for Iris, a box of protein bars, a few packs of dried eggs, and three cans of chicken soup. How about you?"

"We got a roasted fucking dog," I answered.

"A what?" He gave me a confused look and eyed Iris.

"That crowd over there? They're selling dogs. As in woof woof kind of dog," Iris answered, still looking pale.

"Is that why I got a lot for one deer?" He snorted.

"You'll probably get one RPG for a deer," I sighed deeply. "I'm not trading the ammo, probably just guns. I'll check if we can exchange these with gasoline or your medicine."

"What medicine? Are you okay?" Iris asked Gael.

"For my Diabetes, Iris. Good idea, Colt, but I don't know if we can find anything here. We have to look around." He looked at Iris one more time. "You okay, Mrs. Danger? You seem pale."

"Yeah. This is just from the furious hormones and morning sickness." She took a deep breath, then grinned at Gael. "You should check that out, old man." Iris pointed at the lines of containers painted in fuchsia pink with a woman silhouette logo in black.

"Tempting, but we stick to our plan. I don't want distractions right now," Gael said.

"Come on, Gael. And I can check out a few things around while we're waiting for you. Unless Colton wanna join you," Iris insisted.

"That sounds pleasing, pregnant woman, but I am faithful and loyal to my hand." Gael's answer made us look at each other, then burst into laughter.

"You didn't just say that to me, Gael," I shook my head, amused.

"I just did, and my answer remains the same. Our plan comes first." He tipped his head to the other old trailer van with bar signage.

I almost trembled at the thought of a cold beer running through my throat. I fucking missed the taste of it. Whatever kind of booze they were serving there, I didn't give a shit, and I was going to have a taste of it no matter what.

"I would love to have a bottle, Gael."

"Fine by me," Gael agreed. "Let's go."

"Oh, my God," Iris muttered. Before I could ask, she was sprinting toward the crowd of people, leaving us perplexed and unsettled.

"Twig! Hope, wait!" Damn it!

We raced toward the crowd and followed her, but she was gone so fast, and judging by her size, she could easily slip through the packed crowd of people.

I was furious to even think of a plan. My chest was heaving as I thought of something worse outcome if we could not find her faster.

We had to press against the stinky crowd to move past them.

Abruptly, a violent array of emotions flooded through me. "Gael, let's separate. If you find her, wait for me at the roasted dog stall! If not, meet me in fifteen minutes!" I yelled at him.

"Okay, I'm going right!"

I spun around, but I couldn't see someone that matched what she was wearing.

Where did she go?

Who was she following?

I checked people one by one on the crowd, but I couldn't still find Iris. With all the fierce emotions raging inside me made unable to concentrate—unable to think straight.

What if she was already taken by them?

What if they'd been watching her since we got inside?

What if this was a death trap?

God, no!

Breathing hard, I walked forward and heaved a sigh when I spotted her. “Thank, God!” There she was. I slipped my hand through the bunch of people and pulled her to me.

When she turned, it surprised me. “Sorry.” I released her hand quickly. They had the same hair, but it was not my Iris.

My next move was to ask the traders. I spotted a female vendor who looked kind.

“Ma’am, have you seen a woman who ran over here? She has short brown hair, wearing a plaid shirt, and sunglasses. I got separated from my wife, and she’s pregnant.” I smiled sadly.

The woman gave back a sad smile and shook her head. “I did not notice someone by those descriptions, young man. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, ma’am.” I walked away, defeated.

I asked a couple of traders, but none of them had seen her. My hope had gotten thinner.

I found a lot of flyers on the wooden post; pictures of wanted people from stealing, murders, rapist, and lost and found children. I pulled one black and white flyer with a picture of a woman that looked very familiar. My pulse raced as I took a closer look at the picture.

WANTED ALIVE

Name: Blue Iris Clayton

Age: 24 years old

Hair color: Natural blonde

Eye color: Rare Blue

Height: 163 cm

Body type: Slender

OFFENSE: Stealing West Colony’s property

REWARD: Ten cartons of goods. Protection and be a citizen of West Colony.

CONTACT US IMMEDIATELY

“Fuck!” Dread bolted through me.

“Have you seen that woman?” I stiffened and my hand tightened the hold on the poster.

“Excuse me?” I eyed the man beside me.

He had thick dark blond hair. Shorter than me in a few inches, but had a few pounds and had deep brown eyes, and there was something in those orbs that gave me unsettling chills. He was wearing a clean shirt for someone who came to trade.

"The woman on the flyer."

"Oh, this one? Nope." I shook my head and played cool though I was burning with rage inside. "But I am up for the reward. Not the reward from the West. How can I contact them?"

I balled my free hand into a fist and fought hard the urge not to break this asshole's face. I mentally prayed Iris or Gael would not come and find me because this man did not come here alone, and someone was watching me right now from a distance. I could feel it as the hair rose at the back of my neck.

And there was only one thing I was sure of, they didn't have Iris. Yet.

"What reward do you want?"

"Who are you?" Hyper-vigilant, I asked, pinning my gaze to his.

"Ah, you're in a military."

"What made you say that?"

"Your posture, cautious, and interrogative. And you wanted another reward instead." He looked down at my fingers. "Not married and no family."

"Damn right." *But that's where you're wrong, motherfucker!*

"She must have stolen something very valuable to the West."

"You could say that." He shoved his hands in his pockets.

"I want weapons."

His brow rose. "Weapons? How many?"

"Five AK-47 with two magazines each, ten grenades, and one crossbow."

He laughed. The fucking asshole laughed at me. "What made you sure you know how to find that bitch?"

Fuck you!

I kept my expression stoic. I didn't want this asshole to see that I wanted to splatter his brain to the ground.

I squinted. "I won't ask if I don't know what to do. I'm an ex-military and a bounty hunter."

"You'll get the prize once you bring the bitch to me. I'll be here every day. You tell the security guard you want to talk to Otis Wise, and he will bring you to me."

"How can I assure that you won't double-cross me and put a bullet on my head once you have the girl?"

"I only want that woman. Alive."

Motherfucker, I will skin you alive before you have a hand on her. That's a promise.

"We have the deal then."

"Untouched." He stared at me intently. "And unharmed, Mister?"

"Rule number one: No name. I'll deliver the package, get my reward, then our business is over."
Yeah, that's Frank Martin, asshole.

I left before I could kill him. I folded the flyer and slipped it into my pocket.

An odd feeling rippled down my spine. My gut never lied to me, when I looked around, two thugs from three o'clock averted their gazes, and on the left, a man lifted his chin as recognition.

Shit!

It was time to meet Gael. I was hoping he found Iris before they could. The crowd thickened, despite that, I found Gael, then he quickly squatted down, probably his signal. Striding toward him, I sat down and played along to tie my shoelace.

"We're being watched. The flower is safe somewhere. Meet me at the car. We're leaving now."

"Copy that." I stood up, straightened my spine.

In a fast-paced, I headed toward the gate.

"Sir!"

Fuck!

"Mr. Danger."

Chapter 17

Iris

“WHY THE fuck did you just run away without telling me? How many times did I tell you to stay with me all the time? But you couldn’t just do it, could you? You’re hard-headed and stubborn, and you have to defy me!” Colt’s voice roared like thunder.

I stayed still, guilty, and unable to say a word because I forgot everything the moment I saw James. He was one of the people with me at the West Colony.

“Jesus, Blue! What the hell are you doing here?” He dragged me inside the textile stall and pushed me against the used clothes. The place smelled mothballs, dust, and old.

I pulled him to a hug. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“We don’t have much time for this, Blue. Have you not seen the wanted posters?” He fidgeted and looked pale. He lost weight, sure, and his eyes were sunken, but it was good to know someone was still alive after what they did to us out there.

“What poster?”

“You are wanted for stealing their property. That was bullshit and I didn’t believe. But you know how powerful they are. You need to get out of here now and never come back. This place is a fucking death trap for you.” He was gripping my arms with wide eyes, forcing me to believe that he was telling the truth.

“I did not steal anything,” I protested.

“Do you think I don’t know that? But you need to leave now.”

“I can’t. I am with friends.”

“I saw them.” He grabbed some clothes and threw them to me. “Just get out of here and find a dark blue sedan. You don’t wanna end up in that fucking place again, Blue. The second time might not be good for you. You might not be able to survive once they catch you again.”

I shivered. “You’re scaring me.”

“You should. Hide there until your friend will come to you. Don’t look back. I will give Alonzo a plastic bag to give to your friend. My boyfriend—he’s one of the securities on duty, and the reason why I am still alive until now, but I still have to donate my blood every month as payment of my stay.”

I was already wearing the ridiculous white dress that looked like from Cuba. “Stay alive, James. Thank you for this. And please, look for my friend and tell them I’m okay.”

He threw the straw hut to me. "I think I saw them at the meat stall. Leave now." He hugged me one last time. "Take care."

"Iris!"

I yelped in my seat. "What?"

He hit the steering wheel out of anger and cursed about a hundred times, and that made me feel guilty for just running away, afraid I might lose James in the crowd.

Colt briefed me every now and then, and for a split second, I threw it out of the window. I could have put their lives in danger, and if that happened, I could not forgive myself for the rest of my life.

We used the blue sedan James owned. Colt was wearing the uniform Martinez had offered and said that we might encounter checkpoint or patrol within two miles radius, so Colt had to pretend like he was one of them.

"Just calm down, Colt. We found what's we've been looking for in the Greenbach and why Iris is wanted. They wanted her alive, and that's a good thing."

Colt huffed. "They want her back, and that's a good thing?" He shook his head in disbelief.

"I didn't steal anything. They already killed my brother. What else they want from me?" I yelled in anger. I'd been thinking many times since we left Greenbach an hour ago on why they wanted me badly. But I still couldn't find the answer.

They were willing to offer a reward and gave what Colt had asked from them, and that idea alone was driving me insane.

"What about their secret facility or top-secret dossiers something like that. What do you know about it?" Gael asked.

"I don't know. And I already told you everything I know. I haven't seen papers or files since they had us. James said he's still donating his blood every month as his payment of stay, and the reason he's still alive because of Alonzo Martinez."

"I'm glad you're okay." Colt calm down a little bit, but the scowl on his face was still deep.

"We need to go back to the camp. I'm afraid they're all in danger."

"That's where we're heading. We don't have time to spend a night to rest," said Gael, biting the protein bar. He threw a bar for me, but Colt refused to take his.

"I can't believe my life is worth five guns and grenades." I rolled my eyes, still furious when I found out my worth.

Colt met my gaze through the rearview. "I wanted to kill him ten times the moment he." He paused, breathing through his nose. "He said if I saw the woman on the flyer. I swear to God I don't like to have blood on my hands, but I wanted to give him a slow death."

After his descriptions, I realized who he was telling us.

"That's Otis Wise. He leads the army or maybe he hired mercenaries, but he doesn't lead the West. He just follows orders from the top. I don't know who's behind this though. There's this geek guy he treats as his brother, I think his name is Zephyr or probably just a code name. I don't know. If someone touches Zephyr, Otis will not think twice to kill. That's the only thing Nuke told me."

"We'll talk about this shit later. Take a nap, Iris. I need you to drive once you wake up. I have a lot in my mind right now, but I need to focus on driving."

"Let me drive. You've been up for almost two days. You need to sleep, Colton," I insisted.

"No. We need to get out at least a few miles away."

"Of course, you just boss around." I crossed my arms over my chest.

"What's that supposed to mean?" His face turned red.

"Nothing. Go ahead and drive." I shrugged.

"Do you think I can sleep or rest when my brain is running a mile and my rage still pumping in my blood?" he roared with anger.

I could sense the anger coursing through his veins, and I didn't have to provoke him, so I reached out to grip his shoulder. "I didn't mean to run just like that. I almost put you and Gael in danger, and I am truly sorry."

He nodded.

"Just do what he says, Iris. He needs to calm down," Gael agreed.

I leaned my head against the window and watched the green scenery passed by in a blur. My lids fluttered closed.

A hard impact plowed straight from my right side, sending the car flying in slow motion. A loud noise erupted like an immense explosion, but we were not on fire. And I could still feel my body, reminding me that I was alive. The collision flipped the car up and tossed us right into the air.

My breathing held.

My heart was pounding.

My body ached everywhere. My head. Oh, my god! It felt like it split in half or cracked into tiny pieces, and my brain was crashing and bled out. Warm liquid rolled down my eyebrow into my eye, blurring my sight. Then the car descended with a loud splash. Into the water.

I watched the car submerge deep, and I couldn't move. I didn't know how to swim. I watched bubbles blew out from my nose and rose above while my body was slowly sinking down.

Oh, my God! I'm gonna die. I'm drowning.

The gunfire erupted around me, echoing in my ears. I wanted to run, to escape, but I couldn't move my legs—they weighed tons and painful.

Swearing followed.

The gunfire stopped, but the horrendous noise still remained in the air.

I felt like floating. I felt weightless. It was so peaceful around here. No plague. No corpse. No smell of decaying human body. It was free of terror. I looked at the distance—it was endless.

Everything seemed perfect. So unreal.

I could feel the water blurring my eyes, entering my nose and my mouth. I gurgled and coughed. And coughed.

My body and bones were aching as if I'd been in a train wreck. My head throbbed like it cracked open. My chest. Why did it hurt so bad? Like someone was intentionally crushing my heart and squeezing my lungs. My breathing stopped.

"Damn it! Wake up!" A familiar voice seemed worried than angry. I wasn't sure if it was a dream or real, but I definitely recognized that voice.

"Please, Iris, wake up!" I heard that voice again. This time it was hoarse, shaky, and seemed in pain.

Then something heavy and solid pressed against my aching forehead. A liquid dropped into my eyes, down my face and warm breathing against my lips. Warm soft lips pressed against my own. I wanted to move and kissed back, but I felt like I was paralyzed.

"Twig, please, open those damn blue eyes for me or I swear to God! Come on, please?" he said that over and over again. His voice was cracking. "Goddamnit! Please, don't give up on me now."

Another pressure hit my ribcage, and I wanted to whine in pain.

"Fuuuck!"

I cough. I coughed out, struggling to throw the water inside my mouth. My throat ached as if it was swollen.

"Jesus." I felt the soft lips pressed against my forehead. "Iris. Thank, God. I thought I lost you. Damn it. You scare me. Can you sit?"

"World's spinning." I swallowed. "Everything aches."

When I opened my eyes, the flickering light of the sun blinded my vision, then the face of the man who tried to revive me appeared right in front of my eyes. I was wrong to think that there was no humanity left in this world anymore. Here was the living proof in front of me.

Have I been dead?

"Colton?"

"Yeah. I'm here." He was still devastatingly handsome despite the blood running down from his hairline. His eyes were red and tired, but he managed to give me a smile. "You make me so fucking worried." His thumb caressed my cheek.

"What happened? Gael. Where's Gael?" I croaked in question.

"Right here." I heard his voice.

I tried to sit down, but the smell of mud and a peaty smell of algae hanging thickly in the air made me want to throw up.

"You okay, Gael?"

"I'll live. How about you?"

"I can't remember what happened, and I feel pretty beaten up here." I grimaced.

"We're on a car crash," Colt answered, carrying me bridal style to Gael.

"A pick-up truck threw us off the bridge, then they followed by shooting us. I got out first since the window was broken. I managed to swim to lure them out toward me. I was able to fire back and down three men. Colt dragged you out of the car, and I covered his ass as he was trying to revive you. Their aim was to me and Colt alone." Gael had small cuts on his face and on his arms, probably from the broken glass, but I bet he looked better than me.

A good amount of guilt twisted inside my stomach while Gael explained what happened earlier. It just hit me how much they wanted to protect me. I couldn't say that anyone besides my brother had ever shown me so much care through their actions, and it was killing that I couldn't even pay them back.

"I'm sorry. It was all my fault why you two are in danger."

Gael tasked, "You are part of our group now, Iris. And our group is our family. We protect our family. We protect each other."

I felt better knowing that Gael did not blame me for what happened, and they were not severely wounded in the car crash and from the shooting. But how long could we run? How long our luck would last?

"We should go before reinforcement arrive. Let me carry you." Colt took my soak backpack from the ground aligned with his.

I patted my neck to find my necklace still with me. Thankfully, it didn't fall into the lake. "I think I can walk."

"Are you sure?" he asked, wearing a worry in his eyes.

I didn't want him to worry about me. If I survived in the hands of those people, I tried my best to survive again for Colt and everyone's sake.

"Yeah. Let me check your head first."

"I'm okay, twig. It's just a scratch. I had worse than this. Head wound is pretty bloody," he joked.

He managed to make me smile despite the circumstances. And I wanted to hug him tight, thank him, and make him feel how grateful I was for saving my life today.

"You're lucky you don't have broken bone." Gael started placing the guns back inside to the duffel bag and slung it around his shoulder.

"Do they still work?"

"Yeah. Depending on how long it's underwater."

"Where's my gun?" I asked Colt.

"Here," Gael offered. "I used it, but you still have a few bullets left."

"Thank you." I looked at him and smiled.

"No need to thank me, Iris. This is why you have me and Colt."

"Our map is gone. We don't have a guide anymore, but we can't stroll beside the river. They can follow our trail easily. We need to get access to the road, and it's the easiest way to get back to the camp once we find a car," Colt said.

SO FAR the forest seemed quiet. After an hour of hiking, we couldn't find any kind of transportation. No house, no cattle, no horse, no bikes, or anything that my eyes could catch, and I felt my strength was wearing off.

"How long did I pass out?"

Colt glanced down at me. "I think you passed out before the crash."

"I remember closing my eyes, then a loud crash followed. I felt like I was thrown up then we sunk into the water," I told him what I remembered and what seemed vague.

"I can't believe you can't swim." He laughed softly.

"I almost drowned when I was eight, and I was afraid of the sea or pool since then. I can sit on the beach, but I won't dare go deep. Why do you think I didn't wanna join Darick fishing?"

"So, you never tried skinny-dipping?" A broad smile of understanding broke out from his face. His eyes were bright as the clear sky.

My heartbeat spiked up than it had in a long time. *I'm already falling for him.*

"Nah."

We reached the road, and I felt beyond exhausted. Gael sat down, breathing heavily, and our clothes started to dry on our skin.

He peeled his bag open and grabbed a can of soda. "To my diabetes!"

Colt shook his head, amused. "And that's how we're going home!"

Chapter 18

Colt

“YOU OKAY in there?” I checked them since they suddenly went silent.

Earlier, Iris gulped when I pointed at the dirtbike. She said she rode a bicycle when she was a kid, but never on a motorcycle. We didn’t have a choice—either we walk or ride using this thing—and this was a matter of life and death. The longer we stayed here, the closer those bastards of finding us.

I was still suppressing my pent-up emotions, and I couldn’t afford to put their lives in danger. I used to handle physical pain, but not from the heartache.

Tears already dried in my eyes, but the pain in my chest was still fresh—it was unbearable, and I didn’t want to go through that over and over again. It felt like someone knifed my heart and left me slowly bleeding. *It fucking hurts!*

That moment she floated inside the car crash, I thought I’d died there, but the excruciating pain I felt was a constant reminder that I was still alive, bearing the excruciating pain. That moment, I knew that I was in love with Iris.

“Hell yeah! Better than walking.” Gael yelled. I was thankful despite him losing a leg, he was able to fight back and saved our lives while I was trying to resuscitate Iris.

Laughing out loud, she said, “My thighs are numb. It’s noisy, but I like the feeling of the wind blowing my face.” Her voice vibrated through me as her body pressed against my back, and her arms wrapped tightly around my waist. She was sandwiched between me and Gael, and the warmth of her skin reminded me she was still with me and very much alive.

“Just hang on tight. We can take a rest once we get a little bit far. We might need a gas along the way.” I checked the fuel gauge. “This doesn’t take us back to our camp.”

“I don’t mind. The bike is a running dryer!” And that made Gael laugh. It was true—our clothes dried on our skin, and even my eyeballs—they itched.

As we ventured through the endless road for hours, we had not passed by any kind of vehicle. We had no choice but to hang on into this for the time being until Iris sighed behind me.

“What is it, twig?”

“I’m worried about them.”

"They'll be fine. They can take care—" Before Gael could finish his words, he shouted, "A car is coming!"

I quickly turned off the road. The dirtbike jumped against the bumpy weeds, and I almost lost my balance as the weight lessened on my back, causing it to get rougher—Gael perhaps fell or jumped off the bike because I could feel Iris was still with me.

I instantly turned the engine off and kicked the stand. Iris hopped off hurriedly.

"It's them!" Gael shouted, limply running back to the road.

Shit!

As I turned the bike around, he was waving toward the passing car while Iris stood-still in her place.

"Stay here and keep your head down. I'll be right back." I pulled out my pistol and off the safety.

Tires screeched from a distance, and I realized what Gael was saying was Darick's SUV. My heart was pounding wildly when it stopped in front of us. Something was off. Something happened back at the camp. I hoped it was not bad, or so God helped us.

I gulped, feeling my throat clogged. Watching Gael's shoulders sagged told me only one thing—this was not good. Darick jumped off the car and Lois followed, running toward Iris. Frost stayed on the driver's seat, acknowledging us with a short nod.

"What happened?" Gael asked, face masked with worries. He knew exactly that something was wrong, and it was showing crystal clear on their faces.

"You all look like shit," Darick blurted out as he shook hands with Gael.

"I'm glad you're all okay. I was worried. We all are." Lois squeezed Iris in a hug. The moment she pulled herself away, tears were running down her face. She then came to me, her brown eyes inspected my face. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine." I gave her a subtle nod. I couldn't even think of what to ask first, and this definitely didn't look like a search or either a welcome home party.

Lois wiped off her tears, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Guys, get in the car. Let's get out of here!" Frost popped his head out, waving at us.

"Glad you made it." Darick shook my hand and gripped it tightly as if he was sending me a message. He was already carrying our duffel bag he took from Gael. "We'll talk in there." He gestured to the car, not anymore meeting my gaze.

Darick and Gael settled at the back while Lois and Iris were in the middle. I chose the passenger seat and let Frost continue driving.

The silence stretched out inside the car, and none of us wanted to break it—that was what I thought. We needed to process. We needed a moment.

We headed forward—obviously without destinations. From silence to the tension, and dragged into the sadness, and the only emotion filling the car, and it was harder to breathe and to even think. One thing I knew for sure, that what we left behind, we couldn't go back there anymore.

Darick cleared his throat. "We can't go back to the camp," he started. "Uh, Frost, would you like to tell them?"

Frost shook his head with a single flat no.

Darick gulped, finding himself hard to start. And I wished I didn't have to hear this, either of us, but I knew none of us could run away, and we had to face it eventually. "Okay. There was a group of men who came knocking to our camp. Lois, the Fischers, and the Hamids were the only people there. Frost and I were still looting when they arrived. Lois said those men offered some goods and sweet talks to Anna and Fischer, pretending they were Iris' brother's comrades and wanted to meet her." He then ran his fingers through his hair and glanced at Frost. "Come on, man. Do the talking."

Frost remained stoic, staring at the road ahead of us. I knew there were a lot of things going on in his mind, and I could feel it—he took all the blame to himself.

"I was in the garden when I saw them walked in. I watched them, maybe six or seven men discreetly. The Fischers were ecstatic with the offer and said, Iris would be glad to see her brother's friends. God, how could they easily believe them?" Lois cried in dismay. "They asked where Iris was, and Anna told them without hesitation that you went to trade."

"I shouldn't have told Fischer about the trade, but I swore transparency among us. He was the one who listed the things I took for the trade," Gael said with regret, blaming himself.

"Anna was overwhelmed with the offer. They came in carrying a lot of boxes to the camp, then suddenly, I heard a gunshot. I watched Anna fell to the ground." Lois shook to sob. Iris gasped and froze for a moment with the guilt glinted in her eyes.

Iris wrapped her arms around Lois as she cried with her. "Oh, my God! I'm so sorry." I watched her tears rolled down her face, and so as Lois.

“A-And I couldn’t help her. T-Them. I just watched her, Iris, then the kids ran toward their mom and cried there then, t-they shot them, too. They’re just kids. My God, they’re evil.” Lois hiccuped, and I imagined what they did to Ashley and Ashton in horror.

“They burned the camp down,” Darick added.

Jesus Christ!

I was beyond shock. Like the puzzle with missing pieces, I could see it now the whole picture as everything was clicking back together—that was their message that they would kill as many as they wanted just to get to Iris. They didn’t care how many lives they took, and I felt the sick in my stomach at that thought.

I gritted out curses, but it didn’t help out lessen the anger deep inside me. My rage surged me for revenge.

Since I learned about what they did to Iris, all I wanted was to hunt them down, but it was damn frustrating that I didn’t have the power to do that.

Before Iris, all I wanted was to survive. I’d be a hypocrite if I said I wanted to protect the group with my life before my brother died. Yeah, I wanted that, but because we protected each other. When Colt died and Iris crashed into my life, everything changed. For the first time in my life, I found my purpose; I wanted to give her a safe shelter, I wanted to see the smile on her face every day, I wanted to protect her from the people who wanted to harm her. And I wanted her in my life, and in order to that, I had to eliminate each and everyone who was after her.

“This is all because of me. I need to surrender.”

“What?” We exclaimed in a chorus and turned to Iris.

The car stopped to a halt.

Lois’ eyes widened with pure shock, freeing herself from Iris. Darick and Gael glanced at her as if she’d gone insane.

With eyes bulged out in anger, Frost turned to face Iris. “I will knock you unconscious and tie your limbs tight, gag you, and place you somewhere where no one can find you if you will ever say that again, do you fucking hear me?”

Iris looked taken aback, certainly not expecting she would see that kind of reaction from Frost.

“Did you not get it? They hurt people, they killed our group, they burned down the camp. I didn’t know if the Hamid family survived or not. I’m glad you’re all safe, but Colton and Gael almost died because of me. They threw us into the river for God’s sake! And you still want to protect me? It’s just one life versus many!”

Helpless, I just leaned my arm against the window and rubbed my temples. For the first time in my life, I didn't know what to do. So many scenarios were swimming in my head, but none of them was a help. I felt weak. My heart ached including my body and my bones, and I felt like wax under the fire, slowly melting down helplessly.

I failed.

Again, I failed them.

With all my strength left, I pushed the door open and practically crawled down. My hands and legs were trembling of fear—of fear of something out of my control—of losing Iris—of losing the only family I had left.

Iris and Frost followed.

I just watched Iris and Frost engaged in an intense argument, and I couldn't fucking talk like I lost my tongue, my voice.

"And then what? You wanna be a hero, huh, twig? Well, let me spell it out for you, Iris. Heroes die. Look at the fucking world around you, no one remembers heroes anymore. No one cares! You don't get a goddamn statue at the museum, or you won't even be remembered, and no one appreciates shits anymore. This is not a fucking fantasy that you'll get a chance to live again. Just open up your goddamn mind for a fucking second, for God's sake! This is our lives now that we have to face!"

"I don't want to be a hero. At least let me save you, guys. I just want to do the right thing here. They will leave you alone once they got me, and they wanted me alive, so we might—"

"Jesus! Listen to yourself for once. Do you really think that's the right thing to do? Saving our asses? How about you? And what makes you think they will hold at the end of the bargain once they have you? They're fucking murderers, and murderers don't care! They're liars and manipulative, and a bunch of psychopaths!" Frost's eyes protruded as he launched into Iris, gripped her little arms, and shook her to make his point.

"If that's the only thing to do to save you all."

I gulped, feeling the bile rising in my throat as I met her pleading gaze. She looked broken and lost just like we all were. I had to lean on the hood to keep myself from standing still.

"For fuck's sake, Snow, say something! Grow some balls, man, and tell her that her suicide plan is insane!" Frost threw his hands in the air out of frustrations.

My arms were vibrating with anger as I stood in heavy silence. My ragged breathing was the only sound I could hear as I pushed out their voices out of my head. I needed to think, but even I thought of that, I knew it was much easier said than done.

Brother, promise me you'll stay alive and find your purpose.

"What can I say? She doesn't care about us like we thought she did." I caught my lip between my teeth harder to stop trembling. Tears stung my eyes. I wanted to scream, but it seemed that I lost my fucking guts, and I couldn't grasp a strength if ever I had left to voice out my emotions into words.

"That's not true. Do you think I want to go back there? I am doing this for all of you," Iris pointed out.

"If she cares as she told me then she should think about how we feel if she turns herself in. How would we feel if they hurt her and if we would ever get a chance to see her again." I shrugged. "I think what she said to me was bullshit, and I shouldn't have believed in her in the first place." I got back inside the car and slammed the door with an overwhelming sense of dread.

Jesus Christ, it fucking hurts like hell!

I could see her standing still there wearing a pure shock on her face. She was still crying—her tears kept falling like streams. I couldn't take my eyes off of her as I was afraid that if I blinked I would not see her again.

I was scared that despite our protest, I couldn't change her stubborn mind and still chose what she believed was right.

And I'd never been so fucking scared in my entire life until today.

Chapter 19

Iris

IT'S SELFISH. But if I had to turn myself in for their own good, I would do it.

I knew Colt was angry that I had to decide on my own without asking his opinion, but I would not think twice for as long as he and my friends were safe out there.

It was also hard for me. I cared about them, and it broke my heart that I had to leave them this way—at least I didn't have to watch them die while trying to save me.

If those people were capable of killing the Fischers, and God knew maybe the Hamids and Dr. Hull were also dead, then they would not hesitate to kill my friends to get what they wanted. What they did to the camp was their way of sending their message to me, and they would do it again if they would win in the end.

Darick and Gael had not said a word, but I could see the look in their eyes that they were not pleased with my decision. Lois stayed silent at the corner after she cried in my arms, and I knew how would she felt when one of these guys died in front of her. I could not let that happen. And how was I supposed to handle it as I watch them die because of me?

I'd been there, and I knew exactly how it felt—every time I closed my eyes, the face of my brother was a constant reminder of their heinous crime.

"Think about it." Frost pointed at me before he went back to the car.

I was left to think alone again, struggling to stand at my own feet without anything to grasp on, without someone to lean on/

I met Colt's gaze, and we stared at each other, silently begging for understanding. I knew he was hurting, and so was I—I was scared of losing him—of losing them. If this chaos would be over, I might still get a chance to see him again, and they would all live. Not like this.

Still speechless, my tears kept falling. And that was all. It was over the moment he looked away. My world just began crumbling down on me.

I ran toward his side to beg and bang against the window, but he didn't seem to care anymore. He was determined to stand to what he believed, and what he thought about what I was about to do was not right. And I admired him for that. He was tough, strong, badass, stubborn, and the most wonderful person I'd ever met. But I was a stubborn as well. Despite him being controlling and

hot-blooded, I was lucky I met someone like him. I hoped one day, he would be able to understand and forgive me.

“Colton!” I banged my fists against the window. “I’m doing this for all of you.”

The sound of hissing that seemed took years for the window to completely slid down.

Without looking at me, he spoke, “Nobody asked you to do that.”

“You don’t get it.” Every word I spoke seemed like a beg. I gripped and nudged his arm for him to understand me, to give my idea a chance, but he was hard to convince and determined on his own.

His head snapped at me. His intense stare gave me shiver—hatred and pain were glowing in his eyes. “Oh, I get it. You want to leave, just go, but don’t tell me about your bullshit idea that what you’re about to do is because of us. You want it, and you choose to decide alone, and you think your plan is fucking brilliant. Just leave!”

The last two words hit me hard. “You have to trust me on this, Colton.”

“Trust you? How about you trust me? How about you hear me out first? You will just leave me like this? And how about what happened between us, doesn’t mean anything to you? It was just two people who wanted to forget the world for a while. And we’re over it, that’s it?”

“Colton, just hear me out, please?”

“What? We just used each other, and now we’re done scratching our itches, it’s time to part ways. I fucking get it. It’s crystal clear!”

“You are not listening to me.”

“You are the one who doesn’t want to fucking listen to me! How about Gael, Darick, Frost, and Lois? How about the one who died back there? Think about your brother for fuck’s sake! He died protecting you. He died because he wanted you to stay away from those people, and yet you want to go back? You choose to go back. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Don’t do this to me, please?” I couldn’t breathe. All I did was beg for him to agree, but the more I begged, the more he got angrier and would never accept my opinion.

“You don’t do this to me. To us. We don’t leave our group behind for as long as we live. We don’t decide on our own that’s why we have Gael. We’ve been through a lot, but we are still here because we are not selfish. We think about how we feel. And for the last time, think about what you said when you came to us. Have you forgotten what was your mission? Should I remind you? Your mission is to survive. To live. How about Lois? Did you ever consider her feelings? Does she mean nothing to you?”

"That's why I am doing this because I can't think straight. Right now, all I can think about is what would they possibly do to all of you once they catch us, and I know you won't just watch them as they drag me away from you. Eventually, you would resist them. I've seen them killed people, Colton. Frost was right, they're murderers."

"Then come inside and let's plan it out!" Darick shouted from the back of the car.

"I'm sorry, Darick, but I can't. My conscience is eating me, thinking there are people who are looking for me, and here I am doing nothing but putting your lives at stake. Those people back at the camp—thinking that they died because of me, do you know how it feels? So, call it selfish, but I'd rather die, trying to save the remaining lives than saving my own ass!"

"Just get in the car, Iris. We'll talk about this once we find a safe place to stay," For the first time, Gael spoke. He may be our leader, and I respected him, but I couldn't watch them die while I still had a choice to save theirs.

"No." I shook my head. "If I know, they're on their way here. I can't risk your life again, all of you, you deserve better than just running and looking over your shoulders every day. You know for a fact that they won't stop looking for me until they have my head." I looked at Colt who was glaring with a clenched jaw. "I'm sorry, Colton."

Colt blinked repeatedly and threw out curses. He then looked at me and swallowed hard. "How about my feelings, Blue Iris?" he bellowed. His deadly and sharp voice made me jump and shake me to the core. His words cut deep into my skin and rang through my ears like a blast of an explosion. He'd never been angry like this—it was a matter of desperation, and he meant every word he said.

And everything seemed to sink in now. *He cares a lot about me more than I know.*

My body trembled in fear.

My chin dropped in shock.

"Do we mean anything to you?" He winced, slightly shaking his head. "And damn it! Do I mean anything to you? You almost died earlier, and do you know how it feels to watch you die? You don't fucking know until you feel it!" Colt gulped. "Now decide, Iris, either you get in the car, or you go on own," he demanded.

The window rolled up slowly, and I watched my arms being lifted, and I couldn't do anything but pulled back helplessly and pressed my palms against the only thing that separated us.

I stepped back, shivering, and shaking as I sobbed to cry. Alone.

God, why do I have to choose between my life and theirs?

I wiped my tears away to clear my vision and took a deep breath. I turned around and walked away, nothing but myself.

As I looked at the endless road, I realized something—I meant more than anything to them than I ever thought, and they were willing to sacrifice their lives because that was what family should do. Selfishness was not the answer—what mattered most was that we were together.

“Iris, please!” It was Lois, who was running toward my direction.

Instead of stopping, I ran faster away from her. If I stopped, the chance of changing my mind was huge, and I would definitely go back with her.

I loved Lois. She was like my sister, and she was one of my weaknesses. She saw what they did, and watching her getting hurt in the hands of those murderers would kill me.

“Iris, please, stop? I just want to hug you goodbye!” Her pleading voice made me stop.

With my chest heaving, I turned around, and she was crying.

I launched into her and pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Lois. Forgive me if I have to do this on my own.”

“I know. I’m sorry, too.”

We cried for I didn’t know how long until we pulled away from each other, and I was so shocked that Lois was pointing my gun at me. I lost focus and she managed to snatch my gun from my back.

I didn’t see it coming, and the sudden turn of events caught me by surprise.

Would she ever pull the trigger and shoot me? Was she doing this on her own, or she was ordered by Gael to do this drastic measure?

“I know you won’t shoot—” I jumped and screamed at the gunfire. My heart was beating a mile. My chin was trembling. “L-Lois, what are you doing?”

“I would rather shoot you than surrendering yourself to them. How could I sleep at night knowing you are dying because of me. Because of us. Now, walk back slowly to the car, or I will shoot your right foot.”

“Just let me go, Lois, please?”

“Or what? You will threaten me back just like what you did to Colt? Jesus, Iris! Have you seen the look on his face? I told you I will crush your heart if you will ever break his. And you just did the moment you walked away. Now, do me a favor and walk toward the car.” She gestured the gun toward the car.

I raised my hands and shook my head. "I can't."

I was trembling—not because I was planning to snatch my gun back, but because there was a minuscule of chance that I could take it back from her, but the accident of shooting ourselves, in the end, made me think twice of doing so.

"Walk!" she ordered.

"How about no," I said firmly.

"Fine."

"Don't!" I stopped her before she could fire again. "I can't believe you. Of all the people, Lois, I treated you like my sister."

"Oh, really?" She laughed sarcastically. "Well, let me remind you. No sister would ever leave her sister alone just like what you did! You're gonna leave me, huh?"

"Lois, don't do this," I begged.

"I can't let you go on your suicide mission, Iris. Cora thought I was the weakest of the group. Now, I wanted to prove her wrong where ever the hell she is right now. If it's not because of her, our lives won't be in danger, and those guys back at the camp are still alive. This is all her fault, and none of this is yours. Stop blaming yourself." She gestured my gun. "Now, move!"

"Damn it, Lois!"

Chapter 20

Iris

MY HEART hammered in my chest a mile in a minute. I was a few yards away from running away to save them and at the same time a few yards closer.

The car was still parked at the same spot, patiently waiting for me.

"I mean it, Iris! Start walking back," Lois said firmly.

My mind wanted to protest, but my heart said the opposite. Maybe working together would solve our problems, but if in case something went wrong, I would be forever carrying this affliction and regret inside me.

"I hope you won't regret doing this, Lois." Defeated, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before I started walking back toward the car.

Lois was still aiming the gun at me despite I already agreed with her demand.

Feeling the burden was gone, I stopped in front of them. "So, what's the plan?"

Everyone sighed in relief.

"Find a safe place," Gael answered. "From now, we stick together. No one will decide alone. No one will leave any of us behind. As soon as we find a safe place in the meantime, we will plan our next move once we get our strength back. We're all exhausted physically, emotionally, and mentally. And Iris, you should take a nap while we're on the road."

I nodded.

"Can you still drive?" Gael asked.

"Yeah," Frost replied.

"Darick?"

"I'm fine."

"Good, stay beside me. Lois, sit on the passenger seat, and be the lookout. If you see anything unusual or any car approaching, just yell out."

"Why should I sit there?" Lois protested, and I didn't miss the glare she threw to Frost.

"I don't bite, Heloisa. Come over here," Frost seethed and glared back.

“Don’t start! Just do what I say, Lois,” Gael ordered. “And good job back there.”

“So, it’s you, huh?” I watched Lois slammed the passenger door shut.

“No one asked her to—she did it by herself,” he answered. “Colt, stay beside Iris and sort things out between you two.”

The moment Gael finished talking, everyone moved to their places except for me and Colt.

“Gael, can we take the back seat instead?”

“No. No making out in the car when we are around.” Gael was amused.

“We are not gonna make out, and do you think anyone of you can stop us if we want to?” Colt stared blankly at them. Everyone shrugged. “That’s what I thought. I just want her to lie down for a while, please?”

“Fine. I want you two on the same page before the sunrise.”

I looked at Colt who was still wearing the blank expression on his face. I couldn’t help but felt guilty for making him felt this way, but what I did earlier was I thought was right.

I broke his trust and probably his heart. I sighed helplessly, knowing from today onward, this was going to be the rough days between me and Colt.

The car moved smoothly. Colt held my shoulders, and I tried hard to stay still, but the car crash did a number on me. I relaxed and laid my head down against his abs as he wrapped his strong arms around me possessively and protectively.

After all the emotions swirling inside me, they had been replaced with something else that I couldn’t put my finger on, and it had me confusing the most.

“It’s okay, twig. We’ll figure things out,” he whispered and planted a kiss on top of my head.

My lids flutter closed as Colt snuggled me in his arms. I sighed, and my muscles relaxed against the large hand stroking against my skin. I could feel his muscles relaxing as well, his heartbeat lowered down, and he even leaned his head back and stretched out his long legs in a relaxed manner.

And for the briefest moment, I felt safe.

STRETCHING OUT, I winced at the contraction of my sore muscles. The smell of dust and burning candles hit my nostrils. I squinted to the light from the nightstand assaulting my pupils.

I realized I was comfortably lying in a soft bed—this must be made of cotton—it was a queen-sized, and I was actually tucked under the multi-layered quilt.

My breathing caught in my throat at the Sika deer's head nailed on something like a stone wall—the thing was staring back at me. I must be in a hunting cabin. Hurriedly, I sat on the bed.

Where is everyone?

I reached my feet down the floor—it was damn cold that seeped through my bones. Colt must have removed my socks.

Colton? *Where is he?*

My heart raced against my ribcage.

Tiptoeing, I slowly opened the door and sneaked my head out.

“Going somewhere?”

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply. “Thank, God.” I let my shoulders relax. “I was alone in the room, and the damn deer scared the shit out of me.”

“You must be starving. Come with me. I cooked something for everyone.” I followed Lois, and she may be headed toward the kitchen.

It had a lit kerosene lamp, a dented aluminum pot on the wooden chipped table, a small stainless sink, a couple of dusty cupboards, and a single gas burner stove.

I pulled a chair out and sat down. “Where are they?”

Lois scooped a soup from the pot that smelled burnt tomato. Still, it made my stomach grumble. I couldn't remember the last time I had a proper meal—two nights ago?

“Checking the parameters. There's no fence surrounding the area.” She placed a still steaming bowl in front of me.

I scooped and slurped the sticky liquid quickly. “I'm hungry. How about you?”

“I joined the guys earlier. Colt stopped me from waking you up.” She sat beside me. “How are you feeling?”

I took a deep breath. “I'll be fine as long as you all are.” I put the spoon down, slurped the bowl empty, and licked my lips clean.

“Want more?”

I shook my head. “I'm good. It's even hard to eat, but I'm hungry, and I don't want you guys to worry about me.”

Silently, Lois stood up and took the empty bowl. She started washing until she spoke. "I'm sorry for what I did earlier. I thought it was the right thing to do—to save you from killing yourself."

"You don't have to apologize. I would do the same thing if I was in your position. Knowing that they died because of me, I felt the guilt is eating me up every second and I couldn't help to not blame myself. It kills me if something bad will happen to all of you, you know. That's why I wanted to turn myself in."

"You don't have to shoulder it alone anymore, Iris. You have us, and we'll figure this out together."

"I wish I know what you all are fighting for." I glanced down at my hand, feeling useless.

"We already know, Iris. It's you, the woman we met weeks ago. Our friend, our family."

"I would have been dead if not because of you. All of you. I owe you all my life."

"Let me ask you one thing. If something goes wrong, are you gonna leave me alone?"

I stared at her, scowling. "Why would I do that?"

She shrugged. "Then you got the answer. We care about you, and so as Colt."

"I didn't know you care so much about Colton. Until earlier."

"He saved me more than I could count. He and Frost."

"It just... I don't know what they want from me. I've been asking myself many times, but I couldn't still figure it out. I'm nothing important to them, believe me." I nonchalantly rubbed the pendant on my chest.

"You are important enough for us. That's what matters."

I scanned the cabin and found a halogen lamp hanging at the ceiling. "Why are we not using the light? There's a generator, right?"

"Those motherfuckers might see the light from a distance." I stilled to the voice at my back, and as thuds of footsteps got closer. My heart raced in anticipation to see him again.

I turned to face Colt, studying him—he was wearing Camo gear. "Where did you get that?" He discarded the uniform back at the lake when it got soaked.

"I'm a very resourceful man." He smirked, and that smirk alone made my blood pump so fast against my veins—I could feel the sudden rush that shot straight to my chest and neck.

"I can see that now." I smiled. "Where are they?"

Colton leaned down to kiss my forehead. "Outside. Have you eaten something?"

"Now you're here, I got to go and take a nap. Wake me up if you need anything," Lois said.

"We got it from here, Lois. Thanks."

Colton took a seat beside me, gripping my thigh. "How are you feeling?"

"I got a lot that kind of question lately, but I'm good as new aside from having some sore muscles. Thank you for asking. And don't worry, I'll live." I covered his hand with mine, letting the warmth feeling seep through my palm. I leaned my shoulder on his arm.

"Do you need painkillers? I think Frost has some."

"I'm good." I lifted my gaze, meeting his. "Did you go and scavenge while I'm out?"

"No. They went to scavenge, remember?" he answered softly. His breathing was warming my face. The softness of his voice alone had a ripple effect down my spine. He studied me, from my eyes, nose, down to my lips, then he gulped—pain gleaming in his eyes.

"What is it, Colton?"

"I thought you chose to leave us. To— to leave me."

I flinched, but I managed to smile lightly. "I want you all to live. Maybe when all these will be over, and I'll live, I might still get a chance to see you again even you might have already moved on with someone else."

"That easy, huh?" He smiled—there was no laced of joy on his face.

"I would do it in a heartbeat. I mean turning myself in."

"Don't be selfish, twig."

"I'm sorry if I had to decide it on my own," I whispered, reaching for his face.

"Apology accepted. I almost lost you once, and the feeling was hard to bear. I don't wanna be in the same position again, twig. I can't let that happen." He leaned closer—our noses touched.

God, this man will be the death of me.

I angled to get access to press my lips on his, but he was a damn teased and eased back. I watched his eyes darken, but he seemed to have it under control.

We stared at each other for a while and let the sexual tension bank in until the atmosphere around us suddenly changed. I wished the time would slow down and gave us a few moments together before things would crumble down again.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I groaned, grabbed the back of his head, and crashed my mouth on his. My body felt alive, and I let it burn. My nipples hardened and felt sensitive against my bra. A dull ache set on my sex—almost painful.

Colt groaned, taking my mouth with a fierce and rough claim. His hand slid south, cupping my jeans covered mound.

I gasped, and it gave him access to slip his tongue inside my mouth as he palmed my sex at the same time. Then his mouth and hand were gone, leaving me hot and bothered. My face flushed with arousal and embarrassment, still shocked and aching.

He abruptly stood up without excuse, checking the small dirty window covered with cobwebs.

“Hold still. Don’t move.” With his unexpected action, it caught me off guard.

Chapter 21

Colt

I HAD to take deep breaths and not to think of Iris' moan just to calm my aching and raging hard-on when I made my way outside.

Frost, Darick, and Gael were still there watching out the parameters. We were all exhausted and wanted to get some rest, but I could take a nap later, so I planned something that would work out for all of us.

"Iris is awake. We'll take the guard duty for tonight."

Gael yawned, giving me back my gun. "I could use some sleep."

"You, two also go ahead." I walked out of the cabin heading to the back and made another round when they went inside.

We were done checking the structure earlier—it was stronger than we thought—the interior was made of slab stone and hard logs from the outside.

When I got back to the main door, Iris was already leaning against the doorframe with an AK-47 slung around her shoulder.

"Templeton Frost said it's our turn." She seemed pissed, what she didn't know was how much I wanted to feel her sweet pussy clamping around my cock again. And I was already vibrating with anticipation just the thought of it.

"Hmm. And I told you to hold still."

"I didn't run away, did I?" She closed the door behind her, wearing a scowl on her face, then she looked around.

The cabin was way smaller than the one I had back at the camp, but we couldn't be fussy right now. Once we had our strength back, we needed to move to a safer place in a few days.

"You can be pissed later."

"I am not."

I moved closer, towering her. "Are you sure?" I grabbed her hand and pressed it against my still hard cock, making her stilled and gasped. "I achingly want you and it fucking hurts. Sadly, we don't have a luxury of space, twig. Just give me a few more minutes until they fall asleep, and I promise

to give you the best orgasms I've given you that you might forget how to breathe. But you have to stifle your moan, do you think you can do that?"

Iris had not able to move a muscle or blink.

I chuckled. "You can breathe now and sit down for a while. Let me check something in the car."

We have a little supply inside—food enough to last for at least three days. The only problem for us was, the gasoline if we kept on moving and the clothes that we were wearing needed to wash and change to something clean.

As soon as I got back to her, I wrapped my arms around her, making her yelp. My left hand was between her thighs and the other was on her tit. I pinched them both altogether, causing her to suck more air.

"Don't you ever think that I would leave you aching like that. Your safety, needs, and pleasure are always my top priority." Her head fell back, allowing her body to lean against mine for support. "Remember that, Iris."

"Uh, we don't have to do it right now." She swallowed again. "We're on guard remember?"

"Okay, but on one condition." I loosened my arms around her and allowed her to stand.

"What's the condition?" she asked, confused.

I slipped my hand inside the waistband of her jeans.

"C-Colton." She stifled the moan, shaking.

"If you're not turned on right now we'll guard silently together, but if you are..." I slid my finger inside her warm folds. "Soaking wet, and ready, I will give you orgasms."

Pain shot through my cock. Desires lit up my body enough for me to burn the moment I felt her wet, hot, and slick.

I slipped out my hand and shoved it into my mouth, licking it clean. "I love to taste you, Iris, since the first time I saw you, but we haven't talked about what happened today." She tasted sweet like a nectarine. I pressed my face against hers. She was turned on—burning just like me. "Do you still wanna be with me?"

"Do you really have to ask me that?" Her voice was low and husky.

"Yes."

"You are the primary reason why I chose to stay."

"Why?"

She turned around, meeting my gaze with furrowed brows. “Why? Because I care about you. I want you. I need you. It’s not just about sex anymore, Colton. What we have is more than that, and why did you think I chose to save you? All of you? Because I care about you so much it hurts.”

“Huh.” Grin transformed on my face, amazed.

Her eyes narrowed into slits. Lips tilted like a snarl. “Huh? Is that all?”

I leaned down to kiss her briefly. “Yeah. That’s all I wanted to hear.”

I grabbed her hand and walked right to the SUV that I already removed some branches away from what we used to cover earlier, and it was enough for us to get inside.

I got in first, rested my weapons on the front seat and hers as well.

“Colton.” There was a worry in her voice as she got in and closed the door behind her.

I adjusted the seat to give us some space. Hastily, I unbuttoned her jeans, unzipped, and pulled it down including her soaked panties, and boots then joined her shirt and bra on the car floor mat. Her pink nipples puckered. Goosebumps erupted her flesh.

I yanked off my shirt. “Straddle on me.”

Certainly, she did as I told her with a blush, and I lowered my head, sucked the dark pink pebble, making her shake.

Tugging between my teeth, I cupped the other and pinched between my fingers. I put enough pressure that she couldn’t help but squirm and had my hair on her grip.

“Colton.”

“Shh. You have to be very quiet, twig.”

I moved to the other tit and gave the same attention. I licked the valley between her breasts and slid my body down enough for my face closer between her thighs. I could smell the nectarine scent of her arousal—it was intoxicating that almost made me come.

“Hold on tight against the headrest.” I gripped her hips to steady, ready to make her forget the cruel world we lived in for a while.

“Fuck, twig. You smell good.” Lust roared over me and sent right through my cock. She shuddered, already panting as my breathing warming her wet flesh. “Beautiful.”

I darted my tongue out and ran against the glistening wet folds. She jerked and sent her spiraling. I could feel Iris was biting her lip to hold her moan.

I sucked, licked, and drove her into euphoric bliss.

The sound of her muffled erotic moan sent a jolt right into my cock once again and wanted to escape out of its cage.

“Colton, I want you now,” she begged.

“You have me.” With my tongue, I slid into her wetness, and she welcomed me with a warm and delicious taste.

She began to rock me as her body quivered, her hips pushing against my face. She flew higher and higher, and it ignited every fiber in my body as she erupted into beautiful bliss.

I sat straight and pulled her into an embrace. Her juices were still slicked on my beard. “Are you okay?”

“I think I can’t feel my thighs,” she said between soft giggles. She pulled away to look at me, then licked my lips, tasting herself.

“That’s hot.”

Rosiness crept on her cheeks, still wearing the post-orgasmic bliss. She then gave me a full-blown smile as she unbuttoned my jeans hurriedly, and I helped her to drag them down to my ankle.

Iris palmed my length, paid attention to the small spot of wetness on my small slit, and rubbed circles with her thumb. She slid my pulsing cock inside her slowly and smoothly, pushing into her so deep. So fucking deep that I saw stars!

My breathing caught for a moment.

Fuck!

My eyes rolled, and my head threw back with a huge blow of breath—I reached home.

“Sweet baby Jesus.” Her slick hot inner walls were gripping me tightly.

Iris took control, and I let her—I knew she had my balls since our first encounter. She grabbed me at the back of my neck and slammed her mouth on me, kissing me hard enough that made me moan in our mouths.

She rocked me, drove me crazy, and my promise to blow her mind, instead, she was returning the favor.

I met her in between, hitting the right spot, and she gasped. Her back stretched, head threw back, and she was magnificent. She just blew my mind. *So fucking Beautiful*. She was climbing high and reaching a peak of ecstasy.

“Colton!”

“Come around me, twig.”

“Come with me.”

“Open your eyes and look at me. I wanna see you.”

“It feels so damn good that I can’t help it.”

“You feel good, too that I feel like flying. Lose with me, Iris.”

We meet in between, and I altered the thrust. We panted—our body slicked with sweat—our heartbeats were at the same rhythm. We spasmed and came hard together and cried out our names.

OUR BREAKFAST consisted of protein bars and coffee. I didn’t know if we could call it coffee because it didn’t taste like even the worse coffee I tasted.

“I think the owner doesn’t drink coffee.” Lois grimaced.

We found the corpse of the old man at the back of the cabin, but he didn’t die from the virus. Someone might have come and raided this place, and he fought back.

“We can’t be choosy, can we? We don’t have teabags either.” Darick rubbed his eyes lazily as he walked in.

“As if you drink tea.” Frost sipped the hot liquid. “Who’s Japanese doesn’t drink tea?”

“Some Brits don’t drink English tea, Templeton,” Gael pointed out.

“I started drinking coffee when I was already in college,” Iris said.

All our attention pinned to her with surprise.

“What?” Her brows furrowed in a query.

“Really?”

“Yeah. My adopted parents forbid coffee at home.”

“Adopted parents?” Gael asked, seemingly surprised.

“Yep. My parents died when I was seven from an epidemic in a small village—they were ID specialists. So my parents’ co-worker which my adopted mom adopted me, but my older brother, Nuke grew up with the other family,” she explained.

“That’s a little complicated,” Frost said. “So your adopted parents were also doctors?”

“Yup, but my dad was an ER resident. My real parents had a double Ph.D. in ID.”

"ID?" Gael asked.

"Infectious disease."

Gael and I shared an odd look. Why just now she shared all of these with us? Why did I feel there was still a story behind it? And I could feel she wasn't going to spill the best part.

"We did not have a coffee machine or grinder at home," she added.

"Ouch. Thank, God you're not my sister," Lois joked with somewhat a relief. "What do you have at home then?"

"Tea, milk, juice, something like that."

"I'll die from lack of caffeine, but right now, I have to survive without coffee." Lois wrinkled her nose.

"Of course." Frost rolled his eyes, causing Lois to scowl at him.

Iris shrugged. "I tried a cup of coffee when I started college. I didn't like it at first, then I tried a French coffee. Later on, I could drink and eat anything with coffee flavor."

"So, what's the plan?" Frost switched the topic, petting the Greyhound he found wandering around. "I'm gonna take you with me, little boy."

"We need to relocate to a place far from here." Gael stood up.

I emptied my cup and got into my feet. "Get your things ready. We're leaving in an hour."

"Is it really necessary to wear this thing?" Darick complained, lifting his vest.

"Consider yourself lucky, Darick. The bullet doesn't say hello or yell stay out of my way, Takaga. I'm on my way!" Lois rolled her eyes, grabbed the empty cups, and stomped away.

"Tell me why she suddenly turns bitchy? What have you done to her, Frost?"

Frost snickered, "I didn't do anything."

"Are you sure?" Darick asserted.

"Stop asking me and just wear that fucking vest." He picked up one and offered it to Iris. "You can wear mine."

Frost ignored the piercing stare I shot him. *Did he and Lois get into a fight? I will break his face if he ever hurts her. Friend or not, I don't give a fuck.*

"FYI they wanted me alive."

"You may be valuable to them, but you are not invincible, woman. Just take it," Frost insisted.

"Take it, twig. I'll go and start the car." I gripped Iris' shoulder.

Frost called me before I could reach the door.

"What is it?"

"I don't wanna find them. The last thing I want is to keep my hopes high. Besides, I already found what I've been looking for."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of answering me, he shrugged and left me puzzled.

Gael helped to clear out tree leaves while I checked the engine. If the plan went well, we could reach South and far from Otis' army before noon. We were not sure how many men he had left, but for sure, he could easily recruit an Army, and perhaps he deployed another group to tail us as of this moment.

"Did you get some sleep?"

"A few hours. Iris had sharp eyes like a hawk last night. Let me drive today."

"Hmm. Did she mention what those assholes are after?"

I shook my head. "I wish I know, but she'd been thinking something to connect the dots. I don't know, Gael. Why don't you ask her yourself."

"I know you care about her, but I just want to know the reason why Otis risked his men just to find Iris, and I don't like another surprise."

"So do I. I am sure after what we'd been through, she won't keep any secret from us anymore."

"How about the necklace?"

"What about it?" I asked, sounding offensive.

"That might be what they are after if her offense is stealing their property."

"I trust Iris that the necklace is her mother's, Gael. Don't dare accuse her with that stupid idea. There is nothing special about it, trust me. It's an ordinary pendant and not made from a fucking diamond."

"If you say so." Gael sauntered back to the cabin in a limping gait.

Fucking necklace!

Now, I'm beyond pissed.

Why couldn't he just shut off that fucking idea? I was sure Iris would not risk her life if Otis was after her necklace. She would be glad to deliver it to him in a fucking heartbeat if it meant to save all of us.

"Don't move." I stiffened, resisting not to curse. A chill raced up my spine as I recognized the voice. "Or you'll die slowly and painfully in less than twelve hours, Colt Snow." A bee stung-like pricked against my neck, and I knew exactly what the thing was.

They find us.

At this moment, I had only two options; One, to fight back, but I didn't have any clue if he came alone or brought a battalion of minions with him. *Of course, he comes prepared.*

And my last option was to deal with him, but I already knew what he wanted, and I wouldn't just hand Iris to him. No fucking way! Either way, I would die today.

The sting worsened as I was about to swirl to face the fucking asshole.

"Uh-uh. This syringe contains blood infected with the virus."

"Is it Zypher's blood?" My body suddenly stiffened, and my urge to swing around and slash his throat was raging inside me as I heard the hum of an engine approaching.

"Yes, and there's no cure or vaccine, yet. One more move, it hits your bloodstream, and you'll develop a high fever. You will bleed from nose, mouth, ears, eyes, and even from your fucking asshole. You also bleed internally, and delirium comes next, then you're dead. Bye-bye world."

"Then bye-bye world also for Zypher. Is he dead or still bleeding from his ass?"

"You don't do the talking, Snow!" he roared.

"Then what do you want?" I asked. Fury scorching up my spine.

"All this time, you have what I've been looking for for months, and yet, you lied to me." Otis was also raging with anger, and I could feel it through his tone.

Thuds of heavy footsteps approached, and I was sure guns were already pointing at my head.

"And the last time I checked, I haven't sworn honestly to you."

"Save your sarcasm, Snow. Either way, I'll get what I want. Now call your bitch to come out alone or your brain will splatter on the ground." The word bitch echoed in my head, and it boiled my blood enough to create violence. "Tie him."

“Yes, sir.” A muffled voice responded from my back. Strong hands grabbed my arms and forcefully zip-tied my wrists tightly, then kicked the back of my knee causing me to fall on my knees.

I stayed still because there was no worth wasting my effort to struggle.

“Call Blue Iris to come out,” he ordered.

“Call her yourself—” I hissed in pain. “Fuck you!”

He forced the needle into my neck. “I will, but later once I have her back. Now, be a good boy, and do as I say, or I will push this plunger and let the virus disperse directly to your heart.”

“Just fucking kill me already, motherfucker because I would never do what you ask, and there’s no way I would let you have her!” My chest heaved in anger and desperation to fight back. The fact that I was aware of losing this battle even with all the effort of my group, I was still completely hopeless and helpless, unless some fucking miracle would happen right now.

“Or let me just do the easiest way and just kill you right now. Either way, I still get what I want. But where's the fun in that?”

I shut my eyes close, ready to accept my fate.

“Don’t hurt him!”

Fuck!

Chapter 22

Colt

“DON’T HURT him!”

Fuck!

The tension on my shoulders worsened the knots.

“There she is,” Otis sang proudly and mockingly.

“If you lay a hand on him, you have to kill us all. And if you’re intelligent enough like you said you were, you wouldn’t dare hurt him because you know I am not alone. You may survive, but some of your men will die with me!” Iris yelled from the inside.

“Then just come out now so that I can pull out the needle stuck in his neck. We need to leave now, Blue,” Otis said calmly.

“Iris, don’t go with him!” I yelled.

Otis gripped my hair and pushed the gun into my head. “I said shut up or—”

“Or what? You’ll blow my brain? Go ahead, and they will kill her inside that cabin, trust me.” I smirked, though I was beyond terrified that Iris would turn herself in and did as she planned.

I knew she would do anything to save us, and whatever took her to come out, I was sure Gael and everyone was trying everything to convince her not to work on her stupid idea. Besides, I knew they would still kill me once Otis got what he wanted.

“Let me tell you a story, dear, Blue Iris—”

“Don’t listen to him. He’s trying to manipulate you.”

“Just fucking shut up!”

“Just go and save everyone, Iris. I’ll be fine here. I promise I can take care of myself!” I rushed my words out, and I felt like my hair was about to rip off of my scalp.

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I know you care about them, and saving them is your best idea, right, Blue? Now, let me tell you about Colt.” He cleared his throat mockingly.

“I swear—” And all I wanted was to rip his tongue out of his fucking mouth, but I was about to implode.

“About his twin brother, Colton Rebel. Do you know how he died? This man you try to save is a worthless piece of shit who couldn’t even protect his own brother. So, one of my men was so happy to put Colton's miserable life to an end. It's better than a slow death, right?”

My damn hands shook. In a split second, rage boiled in my blood. Before I could blink, I pivoted and launched into him. A gun pointed at my head made me halt, but I was vibrating with anger that I wanted to end his life to give justice to my brother. My breathing was hard, heavy, and painful that at this moment I couldn’t do anything.

I was a work of failure.

“I will fucking kill you!” I said through gritted teeth, but this motherfucker just laughed at my weakest point.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Iris revealed herself.

I froze at the sight of her. I took a moment to look at her. Maybe this was the last time I would ever see Iris.

Then I realized Gael was holding her hostage. He had even a gun pointed at her. Was this a part of the plan? Or Gael was doing it to save my ass. Either way, I felt weak and useless in this situation.

The urge to kill Otis was making me dizzy, but Iris was already out. Otis had men with him, and the worse was, I didn’t have any idea how many. I thought this was the right time to take lives to my own hands. They initiated it, and I would be glad to give them that.

I cursed every word I knew in my entire life, but the pain, the anger, and the fear of getting my group hurt especially Iris terrified me, and it worsened that I couldn’t even think straight of what should I do next.

This fucking asshole had a grasp of my weakness, and it was a fucking nightmare that I couldn’t kill him without killing my friends in the end.

“There you go. Just a little motivation would do the trick. I know you very well, my little sister.”

“Little sister?” I found myself whispering in shock. My throat closed up. That was the revelation I wasn’t expecting. And here I thought her brother was dead.

What the fuck?

There was a frightening silence as if everyone and everything was processing what he just shared.

I felt disappointed and betrayed, and how could she forget not to mention this? Or she meant to hide it from us.

They fucking killed my brother, and I couldn't take my revenge, and the woman I cared about had kept this secret from us. Now, it was clear why they wanted her alive because blood was thicker than the water.

The pain was everywhere—in my chest as I lifted my gaze, and I met hers. She nodded slightly at me, and I didn't know what role she was playing right now. I couldn't care less. I didn't know if I had to trust her anymore, and I lost my concentration a few moments until she seemed to give me a signal.

Then a single gunshot fired.

My eyes widened in shock. My breathing held, and even my heart stopped beating in a momentum. A pain in my neck burned.

"Iris!" I couldn't even recognize my own scream, but I was sure it come from me as my throat hurt like hell.

Gael shot Iris from her back, and I just stared at them in disbelief until I watched her fell to the ground.

Jesus Christ!

Then a loud explosion blew, echoing the entire place. The fire burst in a millisecond, and the impact of the blast had us flying and threw us a few feet away. I watched the burning Jeep flew up together with Otis' men as another explosion blasted, making the fire in full blaze.

I squinted and shielded my eyes to the thick and fiery flame rolled up in the air. The smell of burning flesh and metal was taunting and gagging.

That was Frost's amazing handiwork.

I couldn't say I was happy that they got what they deserve right now and they had gone way too fucking far. If they didn't listen to Otis they could probably be alive until now, but they chose to be controlled by that asshole.

It took a moment to let reality hit me hard. I pulled the knife from my boot and quickly cut the zip tie on my wrists while Otis was still staring at his burned men. I didn't waste any time while Otis was still shocked, I pulled the needle off of my neck.

Fuck! *It hurts.*

I swallowed as fear gripped in my chest. He injected me.

Gunfire erupted all around me, spraying the cars and the cabin to and fro, and glass windows shattered to the ground.

I launched into him and aimed the knife into his chest, but Otis was fast—he rolled over and able to block me with his arm. I winced in pain as he kicked me on my chest, sending me and had me falling on my ass to the ground.

I got to stand and settle my stance. Otis ran and aimed at his gun. I managed to kick it before he had a chance to grab his weapon.

“Fuck you! You killed my men!” He launched a square punch to my face.

“You should have thought twice before coming over here, asshole.” I blocked it with my arm and ducked to punch him on his abdomen. I gave him two blows. Before I could punch him again, Otis dodged me forward causing us to land both on the ground.

The air was knocked out of my lungs. Otis got his chance to punch me on my face harder enough that I thought the blow hit right into my brain. Before I could blink, two punches on my mouth and my eye that blurred my vision, and I could now taste my own blood.

With all my strength left, I balled my fist and aimed right into his throat that I heard a crack. His head snapped back with its strong blow, giving me a chance to free myself. He struggled with everything he had. I grabbed his arm, lifted my legs, and swung them around his neck.

“I-I d-did not. W-we d-did not.” At that moment I didn’t care whatever he said—all I wanted was to end him for putting our lives in hell. In one quick move, I cranked his arm and snapped it. His neck broke with an audible click.

He laid unconscious, but that was not enough for me. I searched for my knife, grabbed it, and quickly crouched back into him. I hissed as I shoved the knife right into his jugular. Blood spurted against the sharp blade.

That’s for my brother.

Frightened, bile rose in my stomach. Iris. She was shot.

I turned to face her. My body shivered as I watched her blood-soaked shirt. Panic rippled through me.

She’s not dead, is she?

Jesus Christ!

“No, no, no! Iris!” I screamed as I rolled her over and wiped the dust off her face. “Iris?”

She didn’t respond. Her face was pale.

Shadows towered around us. Lifting my chin with teary eyes, I looked at them; Gael, Darick, Lois, and Frost were staring down at me and seemed relaxed after what had just happened.

“Why the fuck did you shoot her?” I yelled at Gael.

“Twig. Twig, please? Look at me.” A chill ran through me when she was still unconscious. I couldn’t lose her, not when we won from Otis. “Don’t die! Don’t fucking die! Please?”

I pulled her into my arms tightly and rocked her. My tears fell. My chin quivered. I could still remember the pain of losing my brother, the same pain I felt right now. I realized I didn’t only care for Iris, but I loved her. I loved her so much that the pain I felt was excruciating and unbearable.

I kissed her. “I didn’t even get a chance to tell you how I feel. Goddamn it! Wake up, please? Don’t fucking die!”

“Colt, we have to go before the other men arrive. Come on, man,” Frost cooed.

“We have to take her to the hospital now!” My voice echoed in the entire forest, but no one moved a muscle.

Are they losing their minds?

I swallowed hard as the dark and pain of realization hit me. I was injected—I was infected. It was maybe the best and the worse part because Iris would not die alone. I would be with her as I promised to keep her safe for as long as I was breathing. But I still failed her. Miserably.

“She’s not dead, Colt. Did Otis knock your head so hard? Check her pulse.” Shocked, I lifted my gaze at Gael, and his words cut sharper than anything I’d ever endured.

I pressed my fingers against her jugular, and she had a pulse.

Iris is not dead, but I’m infected.

Chapter 23

Iris

“IRIS, STAY focus.” Gael cupped my head, forcing me to look at him.

I stared at the pools of sadness and frightened eyes as I gulped and nodded repeatedly as if I understood everything.

Chills ran down my spine in horror. I was trembling, but Gael kept squeezing my hands, saying we could do this.

No matter how hard he tried to hide his emotions, I knew he was frightened. We were all beyond terrified for Colt.

Tears rolled down my eyes, but I tried harder not to break down for their sake. This was not the right time—I told myself many times, and I have no plan on losing him today.

“Our plan will work, Iris. Colt can handle himself. Just trust me and remember what I told you.” Gael’s encouragements were just a buzz to my ears. They weren’t sinking in.

I couldn’t think. My brain was freezing, and I had more adrenaline flooding in my system to think of anything right now.

My bones were chilling with fear. I was willing to sacrifice and go with them peacefully, but Gael believed they would still kill Colt no matter what, so he wanted to fight instead of watching Colt would die in cold blood.

“There are seven men out there with guns, Gael,” I urged. Three men from the Jeep with powerful weapons while Colt had no chance against them. His gun was left in the car, and he was zip-tied.

We’re hopeless.

“You only have five minutes left, my dear Blue.” Otis’ vile voice sang outside the cabin. “Or this man will die!”

I peeped through the gap of the door. Colt was already kneeling while Otis was pointing a gun on his head. He had also a syringe stuck on his neck that made him look uncomfortable. He remained steady, and I couldn’t exactly read what was on his mind right now, but one thing I was sure was he was in a fury. His mouth was tight shut since the last time I yelled not to hurt him.

“Should I show you a little demonstration of what I’m about to do to your boy Colt Snow here, dear?” He stepped back from Colt, gun still pointed at him.

I couldn't believe Otis was eviler than I thought he was. For sure, he had nothing humane left in him.

"Now let me tell you about Colt."

"I swear—" Colt was cut off.

"His twin brother, Colton Rebel. Do you know how he died?"

I gasped in shock. *Twin brother?*

Colt launched himself to Otis, but he halted when Otis pointed the gun right to his forehead.

"I will fucking kill you!" Colt gritted with rage, vibrated with the urge to revenge his brother—his twin brother.

I swung the door open and finally revealed myself. My knees were weak, but I held all my strength to save Colt and everyone's life.

"There you go. Just a little motivation will do the trick. I know you very well, my little sister."

"Little sister?" Colt met my gaze in shock.

I had to bite my lip and blink to push back my emotions.

"Sister?" Shocked, Gael asked behind me who was now pointing a gun to my head.

"Long story."

"I am not your sister and never will be! You're a monster!" I screamed at him.

Otis wasn't affected though. Of course, he never cared. He treated me like shit when his parents adopted me. He said I was weak, and he bullied me with his friends in grades school, but I never thought he would hurt me like this.

"It doesn't matter now, little sis," he snickered devilishly that always gave me shiver, but right now, all I could see was the fake monster who tried to scare me in my sleep. This was a reality. He could not hurt me anymore.

"We can still be a family. It's not too late to start over, right? Since our parents are all dead. Come here." He gestured his hand.

"Not until you let him go," I asserted.

"Trust me, little sister. This man has no value to me—"

"Then why suddenly I get your interest?"

"Family always comes first, Blue. You shouldn't have escaped. I got a house for us inside the Colony after I've proven my loyalty to them."

"And by means proving your loyalty to them by killing my only brother?" My chest heaved in anger.

He shrugged. "That's the only way."

"Then you have to kill me too." I stole a glance at Colt, hoping he got my signal.

"You know I would not do that, but I would not hesitate to kill this man." He pointed his gun back to Colt, and every time he did that, it held my breath, feared that he would just pull the trigger.

"If you do that I also have to kill her," Gael spoke, holding me hostage.

"Tsk ts. I know you would not shoot her."

"Oh, I will. I won't hesitate. She's just a roll in the hay to Colt. Trust me, I will blow her brain in a heartbeat. So, either you let him go or Iris dies!" Gael roared with rage.

"It's not your place to demand! I have his head, and you will all die if you will not give me what I want in ten seconds. One. Two. Three. Four. Walk forward now, Blue Iris, because I'm losing my fucking patience, or I swear to God."

"It's okay," I said to Gael. I walked slowly and raised my hands.

I glanced at Colt and gave him a short nod.

My breathing caught in my thought. I closed my eyes as I shivered and scared for what about to happen.

God helped me.

I grasped my palm close.

Single gunfire echoed. An excruciating pain seared through my back with a strong impact that hit me to the ground with a thud. My head bounced against the ground. Dust sifted on my face. My name roared against my ears before I saw the last light reflected upon me.

"WHY THE fuck did you shoot her?" Colt's angry voice irritated my ears.

"Twig. Twig, please? Look at me. Don't die. Don't fucking die! Please." I was held tighter into his arms. His body was shaking. He was sobbing, kissing my head, my face, then he pressed his head against mine.

He was rocking me back and forth in his arms. "I didn't even get a chance to tell you how I feel. Goddamn it!" he roared.

"Colt we have to go before the other men arrive." It was Frost's voice. He was alive. Colt was alive. *I am alive.* "Come on, man."

"We have to take her to the hospital now!" he yelled.

"She's not dead, Colt. Did Otis knock your head so hard? Check her pulse," Gael said.

Colt just froze, and I could tell he was damn shocked and realized that I was still alive, or was he shocked by something else?

I wanted to open my eyes and wake up, but my back hurt like hell. I winced in pain and smelled the stinky blood everywhere.

"I can't. I can't. Can't you see? I am infected. Just go, just leave me alone," Colt's voice was gravelly low and cracked as if in pain and had accepted his fate.

"Infected?" My voice came out as a whisper and hoarse.

Colt's body stilled. His breathing caught. He pushed me away from him as if I had an infectious disease and looked at me in horror. "Iris?"

I grimaced. "I-I might have crack bones. Oh, my God! Are you okay?" My eyes widened in shock because his face was busted. His right eye was swollen. He might have a broken nose as well. A bruise at the corner of his mouth, a split eyebrow, blood all over his face, and he had busted knuckles. In a split second, he backed away, leaving me confused.

I crawled back into him, but he raised his hand to stop me.

"He injected me with blood and it was infected with the virus, Iris. Stay away from me." He looked broken as he stared down, not meeting my gaze anymore.

I huffed. "Too late for that, dude. You already kissed and hugged me."

"God, I'm sorry." Tears rolled down his eyes, mixing with his own blood. "I was...I was just shocked and horrified that Gael shot you in front of me. I'm sorry, Iris. It happened so fast, and the last time I remembered was an explosion, and he managed to push the plunger and ended up injecting me with blood. Then I was stubbing that asshole, we fought, and I killed him."

I looked around and squinted to what left of Otis' men and the aftermath of the explosion. I didn't feel any guilt or sympathy toward the dead body of Otis lying on the ground. Then I turned back—Lois, Gael, Darick, and Frost were looking at me with empathy. I smiled tightly at them—I was glad they were all safe after what Otis did to them, and I would accept it if they hated me for

putting their lives in danger and for keeping a secret that I and Otis were somehow had known each other back then.

"I told you the plan would work, Iris," Gael told me.

I nodded, unable to meet his gaze—I was beyond guilty for being a terrible person.

"What plan?" Colt's gaze sharpened and narrowed at Gael.

"We had to kill the dog to drain the blood into the plastic bag and place it under Iris' shirt outside her vest to make it look real. She might have burnt her back though. Then Gael had to shoot her to distract Otis. I was already aware before Otis' men got closer to us, so I found a spot to shoot them from a distance. There." Frost pointed to the old log. "His men had grenades on their gear, so I shot one at the same time Gael shot Iris.

"Thank you," I said to them. "I'm sorry for not telling you that Otis was the only son of my adopted parents. He didn't treat me as his sister though, and I thought I had no reason why I should mention him to all of you."

"It doesn't matter. He's dead, and you're safe now," Darick said.

"She's not. I just infected her." Colt's voice was laced with so much regret, but we couldn't undo it anymore.

"I am sorry, Colton. You won't be infected if not because of me. It was all my fault. I should have told you who he was, but when I arrived at the camp, all I wanted was to live. You all are still alive in the camp if it was not because of me. I brought danger to your group, and now look at what happened."

Frost snickered, "I thought we're done with this already."

"I know, but look at what I have done, Frost."

"None of these are your fault, Iris. It was all his. Have you forgotten he killed your brother to prove his loyalty to the Colony? I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry he's dead."

"Guys, you can all go. Take the SUV and find a safe place for all of you," Colt finally told them.

"Take care of Gael for me, Frost."

"We're not leaving you two, Colt," Lois finally talked, still crying.

"Colt is right. Gael, take them somewhere safe. This is my last wish, please?" I begged as tears rolled down my face. I couldn't believe in a few hours I was going to die with Colt. This was not how I expected to end after winning a fight with Otis. We didn't win, in fact, we just lost. This was freaking disappointing.

"We'll stay with you." Darick sat down on the ground.

"No. You don't have to watch us bleed." I watched Colt's throat bobbed up and down.

"Please?" he croaked out. "At least grant my wish since I don't have my last will, Gael."

I felt what Gael was feeling right now. I knew it was hard for him that he was counting every hour for Colt's death. I tried hard to smile and shove down my fear, but it was hard when all I could see was the heartache on their faces.

A virus is airborne and mutated fast like we've never seen before. Once you are infected, you only have twelve hours left.

"Please, guys, don't make it hard for us," I cried. "We don't want to infect you." I wanted to hug them one more time, but I knew it was impossible. I couldn't infect them as well.

"Colt!" Gael called out when Colt stood up and walked away. "I'm not saying goodbye, boy! Not to the both of you. I failed you..." His voice cracked. No matter how hard he tried to be strong, I know he was breaking inside. "I failed your brother."

"You did not fail us, Gael! You just gave him justice. We killed Otis and his men."

"Colton, wait!" I ran towards him.

"I guess, it's till death do us part then, huh?" Frost snorted bitterly and sadly. "Well, I love you, brother. You and your twig."

"We can still do something, right?" Lois cried and begged to Frost.

"We can't do anything, Heloisa," Frost said, hugging her tightly.

"No! That's not true! We can still do something. We have to find Dr. Hull. Maybe he's still alive. He can help them. We can't just let them die, Templeton, please? We have to do something!"

"We can't do anything. It's a freaking virus, Heloisa."

"Take care of yourself!" I was numbed with pain as I watched them from afar, and Lois dropped on her knees crying, and none of us could do anything to stop this virus from killing me and Colt in a matter of hours.

I wasn't expecting this to happen, and I had never imagined parting this way. Not even in a million years.

"Go and find someplace to spend time together. Take the SUV, and you know where to find us." Darick shrugged. "Just in case, you know."

"That's the plan," Colt agreed, but there was no energy in his voice.

I looked at Gael who was standing beside Darick and Frost with so much melancholy in his eyes.

“I’m so sorry.”

Chapter 24

Iris

I PARKED the car at the top of the hill—a park and a perfect place for a short hike for couples. Right now the beautiful scenic landscape decayed and abandoned. The twinkling city lights that supposed to be breathtaking were gone and nothing but a gray and dusty dead city from the top.

The chains of the tree swing set creaked and sounded like in a horror movie, but we were not here to be horrified. This would be the last view we wanted to see—the sunset—to watch the sun as it disappeared from the horizon.

“Wanna go out?” I asked Colt, who was blankly and silently staring through the windshield. “You haven’t said a word since we left. Blame me, please? We still have a gun. You can shoot me—” And that, he made a snap at me.

“I don’t want you to die with me.” He gulped, eyes filled with regret and grief. I knew he was frightened, just like I was.

“Well, I don’t want you to die either,” I made a point.

“I’m not ready. I’m scared, Iris.” I saw the truth in his eyes, and it was killing me that no one could stop death.

“So do I.” I squeezed his hand—it alarmed me when it was surprisingly hot. “Are you okay?”

He sniffed. “No point of lying. So, no. I am not.” He swallowed hard. “I feel hot. I mean, I feel like I’m burning and melting inside. I think it’s already started, twig.” The word twig made my heart flutter as it already stuck as his endearment for me, but right now all I felt was despair.

I cupped his face and looked at him in the eyes. “God knows I’m scared as well, Colton, but we’re in this together.”

Colt was right he was burning up and sweating. His eyelids were swollen and red. The bruises had gone worse and started to bleed when it stopped earlier.

He laughed, trying to be amused. “You sound like we are going into a heist.” He then squeezed my hand and pressed it to his lips. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Iris. I’m glad I met you and made a move, otherwise, I would have regretted not doing before I die. I had the best experience with you, Twig, and I will forever cherish what we shared together till the day after. You let me feel something that was only in my imagination. For these couple of weeks, you shared

the life with me that I thought would be impossible with the world is falling apart around us. You made me whole again.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as they started to water. My heart was bleeding that I couldn't do anything to stop it. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me too, Colton.” I pressed my lips into his. “I'm glad to be there with you.”

His breathing suddenly shallow. “I'm tired,” he whispered and let his heavy lids flutter closed. “But I want to watch the sunset one last time.” He licked his dry and swollen lips, then leaned his back against the seat.

My eyes burned with tears as I watched him slowly taken away from me by the virus, and I couldn't help him. I was useless.

I sniffed and cried helplessly.

It was tearing my heart apart. I shook there, silently crying as Colt started to draw a deep breath.

“I know you're crying, twig. Please, don't do this to me. It's already hard for me to go knowing I am hurting you. Don't make it harder.” He tried hard to speak. “My throat feels like I swallowed shards of glass. It hurts, but I wanna hear your voice.” He took a long deep breath. “Talk to me, Blue Iris. Tell me something.”

“I'm here. Let me tell you a story.” I blinked back the tears and took all my strength I had left into words. “When I first met you, you scared the living shit out of me.” I sniffed. “But I was also surprised to see the most beautiful eyes staring back at me. Your stare alone gave a shiver.” I looked at him. “In a damn good way though. Anyway, I thought you're a tough, badass, and hot guy I've ever met. You made me feel special, Colton. You made me whole—” The blood flowed from his nose.

He wiped it unconsciously, making him stilled upon seeing it. “Shit. You know what your name means, twig?” he murmured sleepily.

“No. Tell me what my name means, please?” I begged just to hear his voice. I wished I could hear it over and over again until I let go of my last breath.

“Hmm. The flower, blue iris. It symbolizes faith and hope.” He coughed out. It was fresh blood.

God, don't, please!

Don't take him away from me. I need him. God, I want him more than the air I breathe. I was not ready to let him go.

I shook and hiccuped to cry, slamming my fists against the steering wheel until I couldn't breathe.

When everything seemed to be alright, we were tearing apart, and it was going to be a quick death, and I was not close to being ready for this. I felt hopeless, helpless, and useless. I'd rather die first because I couldn't take it as I watched him bleeding beside me.

"God, please..." I pressed my head against the steering wheel helplessly as I didn't have the guts to look at barely breathing Colt.

God, I'm not ready for this. I am not ready to let go of what we have.

But I didn't have a choice. I wished I could trade my life and save him instead, but this was not some fantasy stories. *This is real, and I am losing Colton in a heartbeat. And I was also dying.*

Damn it!

Then it suddenly hit me hard. My world spun and stop momentarily.

I quickly turned the rearview mirror toward my face and checked myself. I looked okay. My eyes were still blue. I patted my neck with the back of my hand, then to my forehead—I was not sweating. *I'm not feverish.* I was not bleeding. *My breathing is okay.* I felt good. Really good.

I am good. I am really really good.

What the— Colt did not infect me. I am not infected.

Oh, my god!

"Colton?" I shook him, but he barely responded. "Colton!"

"Ohmygod! Ohmygod!" Shaking, I started the car, quickly revved the engine, and drove down the hill. "Colton, please, hang in there?"

As soon as we reached the road, I buckled his seat belt to secure him. I was thankful when he stirred.

I had to drive faster to reach any nearest hospital or clinic, and I wasn't sure where to find since there was no GPS to guide me.

Everything was clear to me right now, but I pushed that thought out of my head. I needed proof.

The sun was down, and we didn't get a chance to watch it set as we planned.

I could barely see the road other than the headlights that helped me track down the deserted road. The surrounding was like a blur as I drove beyond the speed limit. Luckily, if I could call it luck, there was no police patrol like before. In our new world—people didn't follow rules anymore—they follow their instincts.

Now, time was not on my side, and I was about to run out of gas, and here we were, still in the middle of nowhere while Colt was fighting for his life.

"Colton!" I checked him up again. My heart was hammering in my chest.

He was shaking—it only had been a few hours since we left the cabin, but he was already bleeding to death.

I had never felt so much pain that hurt through my bones to watch him on the brink of his death.

As time stretched by, all I could do and hope was for him to hang in there tight, and for me to find a clinic that had the supplies I needed.

I hung on to the tiny hope I had left that what I was about to do would help him live at least a few hours. And I would do anything and trade everything to have a few seconds with him.

My eyes widened, and my heart skipped its beat when a small light from a distance came to life. My hope soared high. I thanked God. "Oh, my god!" I laughed like crazy.

The name Johnson Delivery Clinic was barely visible. I parked the car to halt and jumped out, didn't bother turning off the engine. I took my gun and scouted the one-story building from the outside—it was quiet, and only an old sedan was parked outside.

Cautiously, I slowly pushed the glass door open. It was dark, and I let my eyes adjusted before I walked inside. Aside from a room to my left—it had at least eight doors on both sides of the hallway. My steps echoed on the entire floor no matter how hard I tried to keep it discreet.

"Who are you?" the frightened man's voice asked, pointing a flashlight right into my eyes, making me squint.

Adrenaline rushed through me. My heart pounded wildly in my chest as I pointed my gun at him. "I mean no harm, but you have to step back and stay away from me. Now!"

The man startled and paled. "Don't hurt me." He was tall and slim with curly ginger hair.

"I need to know where to find a stretcher? My boyfriend is sick, and I need him in one of these rooms." I waited, and he was still rooted in his place, speechless. "Stretcher!"

"Max!" a woman's voice called from a close distance.

"Stay right there!" I yelled. "Don't come out. I might have contact with an infected person."

"U-um, t-that's my pregnant girlfriend. She's about to give birth at any moment," the guy named Max explained. "I'm sort of a nurse. I want her to deliver our baby here." *Sort of?*

"I'm running out of time, Max," I roared. "Where is the fucking stretcher?"

"Oh, t-the first one from the left." He pointed.

"I need an airtight room. Can you tell me where it is?"

Max looked confused. "An operating room?"

"Is there anything I can use for transferring blood?"

"You mean a blood transfusion set?" Confusion made his eyebrows squished together.

"Yes." I nodded. "Yes."

"Yeah. It's pretty complete I think, but the medicine—"

"I don't need medicine. Can you help me open the door?"

He nodded quickly. "Sure."

"Thanks."

I quickly went to the first room marked as an emergency room with two small beds. I found the stretcher I was looking for. Without wasting time, I pushed it outside where I parked the car.

When I opened the passenger door, I stilled. My heart almost stopped beating. Colt was gargling with blood all over his mouth.

"Oh god." With shaky hands, I turned his head to the side. "It's okay, Colton. You'll be alright." It was a complete lie, but I needed the strength and hoped this would work. My last hope.

I had faith in him that he would give me a few seconds or minutes or if we would be lucky, a few hours of his life. I still had a lot of things to tell him, and I wished it didn't have to reach this point that I might not get another chance.

"Stay with me, Colton. We're almost there."

I couldn't breathe—I didn't have any strength to fill my lungs as regret swirled in the pit of my belly. I grabbed him and swung his arm around my shoulder after I unfastened his seat belt. Colt was huge and slicked with sweat mixing with his own blood. We fell to the ground in a thud, causing me to wince in pain.

I was running out of time.

After a few adjustments of the stretcher, I able to roll Colt over and place him on.

With all my strength left, I ignored my ragged breathing, exhaustion, and pain from the fall. I pushed him inside the clinic.

"Max!" I called out as I placed the gun between Colt's feet. Just in case. Whether they were having a baby, I would not hesitate to shoot him if he would do something stupid.

"I'm here." He was inside the room with his mask on.

"I'm getting inside the room, and I want you to come outside that door once it's locked. I need your help."

"Okay."

A single light in the hallway illuminated around in a white glow. Max must have flicked it on.

At the operating room, a surgical bed at the center, lamp, medical equipment, machines, stainless tables covered with green sheets, drawers, cabinets, and a stroller. Great!

I gulped. My brain suddenly shut down, and I didn't know what to do. What should I do next? I berated myself for not following my parents' path.

Jesus! *Breathe, Iris. Breathe.*

He did not bleed from a gunshot wound, and I wasn't even sure if my idea would work on him. Just great!

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

"Max?" I banged the door.

He rushed toward me and peeped through the small glass window right away.

"How can I transfuse blood to another person?"

His mouth gaped, then swallowed. "Transfuse blood?" He blinked and stared at me as if I was insane, and I was actually insane with this idea in my head, but it was worth a try. Otherwise, I would regret it for not trying.

"Yes. I want to give him my blood."

"You need to check your blood type and your recipient."

"I don't have time for that."

"If your blood doesn't match with his, the antigen in his body will reject it, and it will cause a reaction that might lead to death."

"I need it right now or else..." I gulped. "He will die, and I can't let that happen."

"Is he..." He gulped, horror flashed his already pale face. "...infected?"

"Yes. And in an hour or less, he will die. He's already deteriorating, Max." My eyes were burning with tears, and I felt like someone stabbed my chest again and again. "Now you have to tell me how to transfer my blood to him. Directly."

“Jesus! I don’t know if it works. First, you need an empty bag to fill it with your blood, and once you’re done you need to hook it to him. I don’t think you can do it alone.”

“I need to do it, Max. Is it possible that I will hose my blood directly to him?”

His dark eyes widened. “It’s not the 18th century, miss—”

“Iris. Call me Iris.”

“Iris, if you want to save his life, you have to do as I say. Wait here, and let me go to the lab to find an empty bag. I’ll show you how to do it.”

“Thank you! Please, be quick.”

I dragged myself down against the door and rubbed my bloody hands against my face. I started to shake to cry as I watched Colt shaking. He was getting worse, but still breathing. Quickly, I stood up and found a clean cloth and IV fluid. I wiped the blood away from his face, but it still continued bleeding.

“Hang on tight, Colton.” My tears wouldn’t stop streaming down my face. “We’re almost done.” I placed the sheet on his forehead just like how my mom used to do when I had a fever.

“I’m so sorry, but I can’t give up on you. Not now. Forgive me if this won’t work, but I have to try it otherwise, I will forever regret if I didn’t even do my best to save you.”

Max came back quickly. He explained to me what to do and after I got the blood into the bag. “But you can’t give the blood if he has a fever. How does a blood transfusion even work? A plasma could stop the bleeding, but for a case like this, you know there’s no cure, right?”

“I have faith and hope in him, Max. Thanks for the help.”

A half-hour later or maybe less, my vision blurred. I was sweating profusely. I was totally exhausted.

That was not the right time, but everything came flashing back to me—why Otis wanted me alive and what they did to me back in the colony. Still, it didn’t make any sense.

If it wasn’t from that experience though, I might give up and watch Colt as he died in vain.

I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed deeply.

“Iris, are you okay?” A loud banged from the door echoed, but I could barely stand on my own feet to continue giving Colton my blood.

Use a tourniquet to spot the vein, then insert the needle. When there’s a backflow you’re in, remove the tourniquet. Apply adhesive to secure it, but the bag should be ready; connect the set to the bag then let the

blood flow until it reaches the end of the set. Use the regulator to adjust the blood drip, then connect it to him. Good luck!

I could barely see the needle—it was blurry, but this time I didn't have the luxury to wait until I would be okay.

"Iris, I have something here for you to drink. I'll open the door and throw inside, okay? You need to drink this or else you will collapse!" Max was still telling me something, and somehow I managed to block his voice out of my head.

I need to focus on the matter at hand.

My fingers were trembling. My sweat was dripping down my eyes, making me not able to see clearly.

I can do this.

I need to do this.

Colt. *I need to do this for him.*

I saw the blood flow. *Untie the tourniquet and pull out the needle.* I shook to cry and laugh like an insane person. I realized I should have done that for him before I drew my blood, but I successfully did it anyway. I grabbed the tip of the tube, pulled the cover with my teeth, and blindly connected it to the cannula. *Adjust the drip and look at the flow, when the drop continues it means you did it right.*

I lifted my gaze to the bag of blood hanging above my head.

My world spun and blurred, and I lost my strength to fight as the blackness was falling over my vision. Completely.

Chapter 25

Iris

THE YOUNG girl was trapped inside the glass-walled room. When her body began to tremor. She wrapped her arms around herself as she spun around looking for an exit, but there wasn't any that her unique blue eyes could find.

"M-mom?" Her voice was shaking. "Mom, I'm s-scared. Can you please come and get me out of here?" she pleaded and cried. Her chin and lips trembled, but no one seemed to hear her pleas.

With wobbly knees, she slowly and cautiously walked toward the glass wall, wiped the mist with her slim fingers to see what was outside. What she saw behind that glass made her gasp. Her horrified eyes were awfully wide to see who were there watching her all this time.

The white-haired old woman in a white coat spoke to the microphone. "Third day—July eighteen, Monday, Ten-thirty-seven hours, fifteen seconds. Serum 7-V034 had been administered to Patient-7-028..."

The faint voice of the old woman seemed to fade from her range. She was young to understand everything, but she'd seen it on TV many times she could count, and she definitely knew that that woman behind the glass was an evil witch.

The microphone rang. Her sudden increase sensitivity to the sound made her jump. In a few seconds, the aerosol released from the ceiling, and she screamed the moment she lost into the dense room.

Before a primal scream escaped from her, the siren alarmed, echoing in the entire facility. She jumped in surprise, then retreated herself into a fetal position. She covered her ears with both hands and rocked herself to cry. Alone.

"Blue Iris?" A rumble of thunder from a distance had rolled forcing my lids to flutter open.

I froze and realized something was different. What was that dream all about?

The air was heavy with a strong smell of rain that gave me chills. Hell, I was shivering. Lightning streaked from the open window, and heavy rain was pouring down. I could tell by the weather that it was a new day. Or rather a night.

A single fluorescent lamp above my head cast a soft light all over the room. I was inside of a light pink room and tucked securely under a white sheet of a single-sized bed, and it looked clean.

I looked down and still had the cotton swab plastered on my left forearm.

My heart instantly raced. Where am I?

Colt! *Wait. Where's Colton?*

Ignoring the flare of pain at my back, I untucked myself and hurriedly got out of the bed. I was wearing a pink hospital gown. I slipped into a pair of slippers beside the bed.

The first thing that came into my mind was my gun. I grabbed the pillow where I usually slipped under—it was empty.

My stomach did a nosedive. I pulled the drawer open and sighed. It was there. I took it and checked the magazine—the number of bullets was still the same.

The room seemed calm though. The door was unlocked when I reached there.

Peeking my head out, I sensed no violence and danger, but I remained fully alert.

Once I was outside, I aimed my gun and followed the empty hallway. It was silent—almost serene.

The place somewhat had the same layout of a clinic where I was before I passed out.

Who transferred me to that room? Was it Max?

Suddenly, the door swung open. Adrenaline spiked through me. An old man with glasses appeared and stiffened as I was already aiming my gun in his direction.

My brows furrowed when I realized I knew him. My hope rose higher. “D-Dr. Hull?”

“Oh, dear. You’re finally awake,” he said with enthusiasm and marched closer to me.

“Where is Colton?” Tears were already welling in my eyes causing my sight to blur, but I kept my gun pointed at him. It was my instinct because I thought he was dead.

“He’s in that room,” he said so casually.

My head snapped to my left. In a matter of seconds, I pushed the door wide. A loud bang echoed inside, causing someone to whine in pain.

“Whoa!” Frost had his hands raised.

“Frost?” I asked in an ultimate shock.

“Who else is handsome you knew, huh? Missed me already?” He grinned—the same grin he used to do back at the camp. “Gun down now, Iris.” He pushed the gun down slowly, then took it from me and pulled me into his arms. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Once we pulled apart, he gestured his head to his left with a tight smile.

My stomach twisted, scared of what I was about to see, but my heart did a little leap of excitement to see Colt again.

With all my strength left, I turned to face him. So slow that I could count my heartbeat in my fingers. And there was Colt with an oxygen cannula attached to his nose. He was lying flat on the bed with her head slightly hoisted.

My steps seemed like a thousand years to reach him. I wiped my eyes clear to see the man that I thought I lost.

I stilled in disbelief.

Then I busted up laughing like crazy, ignoring what would they possibly think about me. My voice was ringing around the room, probably the entire clinic. I thought I was losing my mind, but it was definitely Colt.

“He’s alive!” I covered my face with my trembling hands. I had hoped, but I wasn’t able to finish what I started before I passed out, yet here he was—breathing.

Oh, thank god! There was a light feeling sat inside my chest.

“Indeed he is,” Dr. Hull cheerfully replied.

“Oh, my god.” I did a slow disbelieving shake of my head. “How did it happen?”

“I have no idea,” said the old doctor.

“How did you find us?”

“Frost and the group went back to the camp. Luckily, I went back there after the fire. They told me that Colt was infected. Lois thought you might be spending with him in the nearest town or someplace close to that cabin. We searched for the nearest building and glad we found your car parked outside, then we met Max next. He told us that you gave your blood to Colt.”

“If it was not because of Max, I had zero ideas of what to do. I panicked. God—” I pursed my lips to stop from bubbling.

“It’s been a day and Colt had not moved a muscle. We transferred you to another room, away from him just in case, you know, and here he is. His fever drops down a little bit.”

“I’ve never been scared like that. He started deteriorating, and I couldn’t think of anything when I was seemed fine.” I sat beside him on the bed, feeling drained. “Are you all safe to get closer? I guess, after what I did yesterday, I passed through that, right?”

“We did extra precaution. It’s airborne, but I think we are safe now since he had no bleeding, and he seemed to cure himself.”

“I didn’t get a chance to attach the blood.”

"Max did. The transfusion was done when we arrived."

"Oh, God. I should thank him." I rubbed my hand against my face, feeling guilty for how I treated him.

"We already did," Frost answered.

I looked at them. "Where's Max?"

"They left after I helped his girlfriend gave birth. They said to relay his message of thank you, and they named their baby girl after you, Iris," Dr. Hull said.

I smiled. "Really? I wish I get a chance to see the baby before they left."

"They said you're a hero," Frost said, grinning.

"I am far from a hero. Colton would be dead if it wasn't because of him. Max is my hero." I smiled bitterly, remembering how I frightened him, but he still helped me save Colt despite what I did.

"Oh, come on. You're our little heroine."

"Stop it. Anyway, how's he?" I looked back at Colt lying unconscious in the bed. "Did he open his eyes?"

"Not yet. We're not so sure of what to expect, Iris. I was able to draw a sample, and there's a little abnormality in his blood."

"What do you mean?" My chest tightened.

"Given that he lost a lot of blood, it's normal his blood count would drop."

"But?"

"I never heard anyone survived from the virus, Iris."

I nodded. "Me either. And?"

"We don't know if the blood you donated will only slow down the bleeding, but we should get ready ourselves for something inevitable," he sighed.

"Does he need another blood? I will give again," I rushed my words out. If it would help him, I would do it in a heartbeat.

"We will see if it drops, but for the meantime, he only needs close observation. His vitals are acceptable except for his temperature and his heart rate is a little too fast," he explained.

Colt's face was still pale, but his skin was warm. It would mean there was still a good circulation.

"Is it possible he's been cured?"

I exchanged looks with Dr. Hull when Frost asked.

I stared at him. "I don't know, but I'm glad he's getting better." *Is he though?* "He had all the symptoms I've seen in the infected people."

"So I've noticed." He nodded, seemingly dazed.

"What is your blood type?"

"O positive?"

Dr. Hull nodded subtly.

"Why?"

"No wonder he didn't get any reaction during transfusion. You're a universal donor."

Oh, I haven't thought about it.

"And sometimes, the body doesn't react even receiving blood while febrile."

"I'll tell everyone that you're awake," Frost said.

"Thank you." I smiled at him before he walked out.

"Dr. Hull, can we keep it between us. Between you, me, and the group?"

He nodded and smiled. "Of course, my dear. It's for the better."

"Thank you." I sighed and gripped his hands, feeling grateful.

"I'll leave you two alone, and you might wanna spend time with him. And you must be starving, I'll tell Lois to bring you something to eat."

Lois must be so relieved that Colt might be able to get through this. I couldn't fathom how she felt after we left because I knew Colt meant a lot to her, and she meant a lot to me too. The fact that we left without a proper goodbye made her fall on her knees, and I was also hurt that we had to separate that way.

When Dr. Hull left the room, I examined Colt by myself. A perk of having parents in the medical field, I knew a few things when I was not panicking.

I checked his skin—it was warm, dry, no lesions, and had cracked lips, but he had no bleeding from his nose and gums. I opened his eyes—swollen lids, still blotchy, but the bleeding definitely stopped. I pinched him, and he reacted to pain. That was good—he had a pain threshold.

“Aren’t you hot in pink?” Dr. Hull changed him into a pink hospital gown just like mine. I giggled like a schoolgirl as I laid down beside him because I thought it was cute. But deep inside, I was still terrified. He was not safe.

“You should open those damn eyes, Colton Snow because I already missed you so much. Please, stay strong for us, and don’t ever leave me,” I whispered, hoping he could hear me.

I placed my hand over his chest just on top of his heart, and I watched as it rose and fell. “You’re definitely alive.” I kissed his shoulder. “I know you can hear me. If you won’t wake up in a few days, I have to go away, far away from here. Far from everyone. I can’t face them with all the guilt inside my chest, Colton. So you better wake up if I still matter to you.” I let my tears fall as I wrapped my arm around him before I closed my eyes.

Chapter 26

Iris

IT HAD been four days—Four. Damn. Days!

It was hard to wait for the inevitable, and my hope was slowly wearing thin. Colt had not wakened up. Not even moved a finger.

Dr. Hull had hope and never gave up, and so as everyone. But what if he would never wake up? My heart and every fiber in my body ached no matter how I tried to hold onto that hope.

I suggested to donate another blood, but Dr. Hull refused since Colt's white blood cell was decreasing, and his red blood cell didn't drop low.

Every time I checked him, it made me guiltier because I failed him. I was a work of failure. Everyone around me was leaving me one by one, and I was scared if Colt would be the next to walk out of my life.

For God's sake, he saved my life, and it was killing me that I couldn't do the same. And he wouldn't be in this situation in the first place if it was not because of me.

God! I'm such an awful person.

I couldn't even stomach myself to join them during the meal as I was drowning with my own guilt. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. And it was even harder to breathe thinking Colt was still in his bed unconscious.

I did my best to stay away from Gael because every time I heard his voice, he reminded me of Colt, and of my failure.

I released a deep breath and leaned against the SUV. I had no clue what to do next, and I was definitely losing my mind every time I thought of him bleeding out.

There must be something I missed, something I could do if there was a slight chance of him waking up. I closed my eyes and sucked the cold air into my constricted lungs.

Everything is driving me insane.

Until now, I didn't get the answer as to why Colt seemingly healed by my blood. I was grateful though. Well, he was not completely healed, but my blood somehow stopped the bleeding, and he was still alive.

It's impossible. This had nothing to do with my—

“Are you okay?”

“Jesus!” I jumped.

Gael stopped in front of me, wearing a worried look on his face.

Shit!

“I-I’m fine.” I swallowed. “How are you?”

“Really, Iris?” He narrowed his eyes on me.

“Sorry, it’s just—”

“You haven’t talked to me since the incident, and I can guess why are you avoiding me.”

I looked down and shrugged. My gut twisted painfully for what I did. Who else to be blamed if it was not me?

“I don’t blame you, Iris. No one is. I was only giving you some space because I know how traumatic it must be for you to watch Colt fighting for his life.” He just read my thought. “I just wanna thank you for saving his life.”

I met his gaze. “I did not save him, Gael. He’s not opening his eyes for days nor moved a little. I don’t wanna give up, but every time I went to see him, I felt like I’m losing hope, draining all my strength, and everything that I’ve been fighting to survive is slowly slipping through my fingers. He’s in there because of me.” I pointed to the Clinic door. “And yes. I’ve been avoiding you because I didn’t know what to say, and I know an apology won’t fix the mess I made that put him in a coma.”

I wanted him to hate me, but I couldn’t see any sign on his face, and I hated myself, even more, when all I saw was his compassion.

“He could have been dead days ago if it’s not because of you.”

“Just stop. Stop being nice to me! Think about your nephew for God’s sake!” I raised my hand. “I don’t deserve it! Any of these. Can you just hate me? Or tell me to leave?”

“Just stay strong, okay? All he needs right now is you.” He was still calm.

“He needs me? Are you sure about that? You’re unbelievable! Or he might hate me when he wakes up and doesn’t wanna see me again.”

“Just stop blaming yourself. This is not the right time to sulk.”

"I can't help it. I hate myself for not being able to do something and just watch him while he's fighting for his life. Do you know how it feels? It feels like I am ripping apart, knowing that no one knows when he's gonna wake up or if he's ever gonna wake up."

"Iris, please?"

"I wish I am a doctor and could do something."

He stared at me for the longest time before he spoke. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe check what is going on?" I wrapped my arms around my body as I turned away, unable to face him.

"Have you forgotten that even scientists haven't figured out the cure. We should consider ourselves lucky that Colt is still alive, and it's all because of you."

"It's not because of me!" I stubbornly refused. "He must be immune, you know."

"Then he shouldn't bleed out like you. Keep denying that you're the reason why he's still breathing."

"I still don't understand."

"You don't have to. I know he can sense you, Iris, that you're still alive, and that's why he keeps fighting. He wants to live for you. Now, do me a favor and be strong for him." His words made me stop.

My heart pounded in my chest. I haven't thought of that. I haven't thought of that reason, but I was sure that I wanted to live because of him and I wanted him to wake up because he meant more than anything to me.

"I get it, you feel guilty for what happened, but you haven't thought of his feelings toward you. He cares about you, Iris. He would choose to save you if he happened to be in your position. I bet that he would trade his life just to let you live."

I wiped my face. "Maybe you're right."

"Do you think I can stop Colt from going after Otis? No. Worse things might happen, we could end up being captured, and you would blame yourself more if any of us ended up dead."

"I just want him to wake up." My voice finally broke. Since I woke up, I tried hard not to break down and cry, until tonight, in front of Gael.

"All of us, and he will. Colt is a tough guy, and you know that. He wouldn't be in the bed breathing after the virus almost took his life if he's not. Now come here and give me a hug." Gael opened his arms and smiled. Finally, the sadness clouded in his eyes.

I closed the gap and let him wrap his arms around me. I needed this. “It’s been hard awful days, and I barely slept. I didn’t want to because he might wake up alone, and I didn’t wanna fall asleep and wake up then I might receive bad news.”

“Trust me, you will be the first person he’ll ask the moment he opens his eyes.”

I shook to cry in his arms. I felt better now knowing that someone still cared for me after the trouble I caused. Gael was like a father to Colt and to everyone, and I was glad that he still considered me a part of his family.

I may lose my family twice, but I found another who treated me like one of them.

“I knew from the start that there’s something in you that could change our lives, Blue Iris. Thank you for staying with us and for making Colt whole again. You made him happy, and trust me, he will be happier when he wakes up.”

“I can’t wait for that moment, Gael. It’s been days.” I wiped my tears when I broke the hug.

“He will.”

“How did it happen?”

“I don’t know. I never believe in a miracle, but maybe I do now. Maybe Otis knew something about your blood or maybe you were once exposed, then get immunity. I really don’t know anything about it, and Dr. Hull couldn’t find answers as well. Let’s forget about how and just be grateful.”

WARM BREATHS were caressing my face. I felt like I was sleeping in my old bed—so comfortable with a warm arm draping around my waist.

“Hmm, it’s good to be in your arms again, twig,” a sleepy and hoarse voice said. Then warm cracked lips were kissing my nose. “God, I missed you. Can you open those blue eyes for me now, please? And I also want to kiss these lips pretty bad.”

Tears filled my eyes and fell at the corner. Everything seemed like in a dreamy state. So blissful—that was how good it felt, and I didn’t want to ever wake up.

He wrapped his arm around me tightly, securely. His legs over mine, and let my face buried at the crook of his neck. He then planted a kiss at the top of my head.

I took his smell into my lungs, into my system as he snuggled me in his arms.

“Thank God, he gave me another chance. That’s the last thing I asked from Him, Twig, because I regretted that I didn’t tell you sooner about how much I feel for you. And He granted it. He gave

me to you. Starting today, I will show you and tell you how much you mean to me. Every. Fucking. Day. For the rest of our lives.” He stuck his chin above my head. His body seemingly shaking.

I held him tight, afraid that he would disappear if I let him loose.

Colt took a deep breath and slowly released it. “I wish you could hear me, Twig. I love you. So much it fucking hurts.”

Chapter 27

Colt

I HAD never been terrified in my entire life knowing that I was going to die—of what to come after death. Was there really an afterlife? Like Heaven or hell?

I believed in God, but I was not a religious person. I remembered God during the happiest and toughest moments, but that was all.

Before I bled out, I begged for forgiveness. I begged Him to give me another chance. I even begged Him to give me a little time to tell everyone how much they meant to me. Then, I did not get the answer. I watched myself bled and felt the blood oozing out of my system—that was the scariest thing I'd ever experienced.

Then I woke up in the arms of the woman I loved. Iris cried again, and I couldn't stop her regardless of how I cooed her. I knew she blamed herself for what happened to me, yet I, myself couldn't blame her for that, and I was even guilty for letting her go through that pain again.

Inside the bathroom, she tried to give me a bath. I was still eyeing her when her brows squished together as she took off the pink gown I was wearing. She inspected my body—from my back, probably to my naked ass. Then she checked my chest down to my abdomen, paid extra attention to my dick.

I chuckled. "I am sure it still works well. Want me to demonstrate?"

She lifted her chin and looked at me. I could see the amusement in those beautiful blue eyes.

"I was just checking if you have lesions or bleeding. It's like magic how it just stopped," she said in disbelief.

"Aren't you glad I survived?" I shouldn't have asked her because right now, her eyes quickly reddened, welled with tears, and clouded with so many emotions. I had no doubt how much I meant to her, and she already knew how much she meant a fucking world to me.

"Are you kidding me?" She sniffed. "I wish I could switch place with you. I'd rather die with you, Colton than watching you die alone."

"I would wish the same thing." I turned on the water and moved under the showerhead. It felt like I was under the falls—the water was so refreshing. It had been like ages since the last time I remembered to get inside the real shower room.

"How does this place still have water?"

"I couldn't believe it as well, but this place was abandoned before we and Max have found this," she said as she lathered the soap on my back. "Everything seemed untouched aside from looters who came, took mostly medicines, then left.

"I couldn't imagine how terrified you were driving alone to get in here with a dying man beside you, twig. I am so sorry."

"I blamed myself. Now that you're okay, I am glad I did that."

"You're a little stubborn and never gave up on me. That's one of the so many things I love about you."

"That's what love does, Colton—do the impossible." For the first time since shit happened, I felt relieved and satisfied. And loved.

"I do believe you. And I wanna press you against this wall," I said half-jokingly, causing her to laugh. "What's so funny?"

"As much as I missed us together, I need to make sure you're a hundred percent recovered. You need to piss and poop to check if there's no fresh blood from your discharges."

"Whatever you say, doc. I missed you though."

"You have no idea how much I missed you, too." She pressed herself against mine. This time, she was already naked. I held her hands in my chest to let her feel my frantic heartbeat.

"I told you, it works perfectly." When I looked down, my cock was already half-mast.

Iris just laughed at me.

After our uneventful shower, I checked myself in the mirror. I might have lost a few pounds, but I was definitely alive. When I took a closer look, something had changed in me.

"Holy shit!" My eyes widened in shock as I inspected myself. "Twig, can you come over here, please?"

"What's wrong?" She rushed in, looked alarmed. She had already changed into a blue denim shirt, rolled the sleeves up to her elbows. She paired it with jeans that I haven't seen before.

I felt my heart ached inside my chest. She looked beautiful though and was even glowing. Had she been—Jesus! Iris would never do that. What the hell was wrong with me?

"Colton, what's wrong?"

I blinked. "Sorry. Can you check my eyes?"

She moved closer. Her mouth gaped, and I was tempted to capture it with mine. *Did being in a coma make someone this horny?*

"Do you feel something different?" She cupped my face and examined me particularly at my eyes.

"I feel lively. I don't know."

"Your pupils are not dilated, but the color of your irises turned darker. Like you were turned on." She guessed it right.

"I am." I snaked my hands around her waist and pressed myself against her to let her feel my hard-on.

"Not a chance, Colton. I am serious."

"I am hungry. That's all."

"Lois is preparing a soup for you." She already filled me up about everyone, and that Dr. Hull was alive.

A lot of things happened as if I had been away for a long time. I knew Gael would take care of Iris if I was gone for good, and I never doubted that he would protect her just like how he protected me.

"I am hungry for something as well," I added and smirked.

She rolled her eyes, and I missed that. "Hold your horses, dude. They are waiting for you."

"Dude, huh? Did they organize a welcome party for me?"

"I wish we have that luxury."

"Where did you get these?" I changed into the clothes she offered to me. Suddenly, I felt useless. And for the first time, I had no plan in my life.

"There's a shop a few blocks from here. That's where I got this." She showed me her shirt that I thought it was from another man. "Unfortunately, it's a men's clothing boutique."

"Don't worry, I'm gonna get you clothes now I'm back on my feet. You look like a cowgirl. A hot and sexy cowgirl." I kissed her lips.

Once we were done, I followed Iris toward the room, and I stopped mid-way to see them all standing with wide eyes.

"Looks like you've all seen a ghost." I smiled. "Glad everyone is okay. That's actually the reason why I had to wake up from this death bed because I missed you all."

Nobody moved a muscle.

"What? No hug? I can't infect you all, can I?"

"I thought you're dead, man. And finally, I can have Iris all to myself." Frost wiggled his brows.

Iris and Lois stared at him in disgust.

I snorted and gave him a brotherly hug. "I hate to break it to you, man, but you're not her type. So, don't let your hopes high."

"Burn," Darick reacted.

"Ah, Darick. You don't understand, eh because you don't have a sex life."

"Does it matter? I have a hand."

We burst out laughing.

"That's another burn," I countered.

"You okay, Gael?" Iris asked.

For the first time, he smiled, relaxed, then pulled me into a hug. "I couldn't be any happier, son."

"Thank you for taking care of her."

"That's what family does, Colt. You're welcome, and welcome back."

"Thank God! I thought we lost you." Lois squeezed me hard and cried. "I'm so happy right now you're awake."

"You're not gonna get rid of me easily, Lois. You and Iris are my girls, and you're stuck with us for a long time."

"Thank you, Dr. Hull. For not giving up on me." I gave the old man a hug.

They let me catch up with what I missed while I ate something after four days of lying like a dead.

"How does it feel?" Frost asked.

"Of knowing you were about to die?"

"Nope. If I finally have Iris," he joked. "Of course of waking up, man." He slapped my back playfully.

"Great. Like I loosened up. How am I even going to describe the feelings, especially seeing you all here? Still, nobody wants to give up on me. Thank you, guys."

"So, are we gonna miss the scary and tough look on you?"

"Probably." I laughed. "You haven't changed, asshole."

“Okay. Let’s talk about something more serious matter since Colt is back. Do you think Otis knew something about you, Iris?”

“About a cure?” Dr. Hull asked.

“I don’t know. I just thought, maybe I am immune,” Iris replied cautiously.

“Have you been ill?”

“Like critically sick?” Iris thought for a moment. “My parents had been, yeah, but not me. I received all the vaccines when I grew up.”

“Who gave you that necklace?” Darick asked.

“Again. We’re back to the necklace,” I snorted.

“My mom. My real mom.”

“Just curious, man. Do you mind?” Darick lay his hand. “Maybe Iris developed quadruple helix.”

Iris gave it to him and leaned her head against my shoulder. I was dead if it was not because of her. She made the biggest decision of her life alone, and I owed her big time. I always knew she was strong with or without me. That was who she was.

“Is that even possible?” I asked.

“What’s quadruple helix?” Lois gave me a confused look.

“I don’t know either. Humans like us have double helix strands in our DNA. Don’t listen to Darick. He probably watched too many sci-fi movies.”

“I honestly don’t know. I’ve been treating patients and haven’t encountered a case like this, so forgive me if I haven’t been much of a help,” Dr. Hull answered, scratching his white growing scruff.

“Did you forget you helped me pulled through this shit?”

“It was my duty, son.”

“You could just give up, Doc.”

“As a part of this family. And may I remind you how many times you saved our lives. The least I could do was to do something—”

“That was not something,” Iris said. “We owed you our lives.”

“Okay, let get back to the necklace,” Gael interjected.

“Let us say or consider Darick’s idea that you developed quadruple helices or triple or whatever. So, the other strand could be,” he hesitated. “The virus. I read an article about it, but that had not proven anything, and they had been studying it for years. Until now, nobody knows what were those two helices. Could be cancer or a new disease or genetic disorder or Neurodegenerative disease.”

“Let us think something less complicated,” Gael suggested.

“Through your gene, the scientist could possibly create a cure out of it or a vaccine. We don’t have any news about the breakthrough though. It is possible that they haven’t figure out about the virus. Because it’s hard to work when you’re used with the digital age. It’s like back to basic using the old version of the microscope. If you have an immunity to this virus, I had a feeling that this is genetically modified.”

“Genetically modified? You mean my parents created the virus that killed millions or billions of people because I am sure I don’t even know how to use a microscope?” she bellowed defensively.

“We don’t know, Iris. It’s just my theory,” Dr. Hull answered respectfully. “Because if you are immune you can’t treat an infected patient, can you? Unless—”

“I am carrying the virus and the cure itself?”

“Possibly a cure. Your blood has a cure. We can take your blood sample if you will allow me while we are in the clinic.”

“You said yourself you’ve never encountered a case like this,” she refused.

“Hey. Calm down, twig.” I gripped Iris’ shoulder. “We are just sharing ideas, okay?”

“My parents were not killers, in fact, they died treating people. And they’re just doctors and not bioengineers capable of creating the virus.” She studied the old doctor and everyone’s reaction.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean like that. I’m truly happy that Colt is alive, and whatever cured him, it doesn’t matter anymore.” Dr. Hull squeezed Iris’ hand and smiled sadly.

“Have you tried to open it?” Darick was still inspecting the pendant.

“A sweater chain necklace with personalized pendant—it’s not a perfume bottle.”

“No. It has no scent, and it’s empty?” She wasn’t sure about her answer anymore. This conversation affected, and again, it was because of me.

“It looks like a Lapis lazuli.”

“A Lapis what?” Gael asked.

"A deep blue rock. A long time ago, this rock is expensive than gold. A Tsarevich egg is made of this stone for Empress Alexandra."

"And who the fuck is Empress Alexandra?" Frost asked, mocking Darick.

"Let him finish," Gael groaned in displeased.

"She let someone made it as a tribute to her son Alexie, and now is displayed at the Museum of Virginia or maybe someone had destroyed it." Darick shrugged. "Whatever."

"And?" Iris asked.

"This." Darick opened the silverwork and showed the rectangular-shaped blue stone in his palm.

"That's it?" I asked.

"There is something more." The excitement in his voice was palpable.

"Cut the crap. Tell us what's so important in that pendant, small D," Frost snickered.

Darick took the gum he'd been chewing since we sat down and dried up with his shirt. He wrapped it to the stone, making us all grimace.

"Ew." Lois wrinkled her nose.

Then he carefully unwrapped and placed it on the table. Our heads bowed simultaneously to see the result.

"What's that? A quote?" asked Lois.

"Numbers," Gael said.

"Maybe a combination, a code, or password," Darick answered.

"Of what?" Iris asked.

"Maybe your mom's locker or a safe-deposit box."

"Everything will be okay, twig." I kissed the top of her head.

She sighed. "I feel like a hoax. Before I woke up, I had this vivid dream. I was like nine or ten years old in that dream. I know it doesn't have connections to what's happening to me, but I was in that air-pressurized room while those doctors were watching me. I can't remember something happened to me in real life though. That was probably because I was under stress, but I saw my mom there though."

The silence stretched around for a few seconds until she broke again. "The truth is, Mom didn't die, just my dad because she was apparently immune to the virus. Her team made us believe that

my parents died in that village. Months later, I received a call from an unknown number. I recognized her voice. I was terrified that I received a call from my dead mom, but I wanted to see her because I haven't been able to adjust to the new family I had. I was still grieving. It was a difficult time—my brother and I were separated, then Otis was treating me like shit. So, she asked me to trust her. I went to see her after the class, then my mom injected me with something and said sorry that she had to do that." She wiped her face dry. "She said she only wanted to protect me. I never told anyone about that because she made me promise not to."

"It's all right. You don't have to tell us anything." Frost gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I don't want to keep any secrets from everyone anymore. The last time I did, I put Colton's life in danger." She paused. "I was so young at that time to even ask. I can still remember the horror in her eyes. She seemed paranoid and vigilant. She hurriedly walked away as if someone was watching her. Two days later, she was dead with bullet wounds on her chest."

None of us able to talk, even Dr. Hull, but I couldn't see the anger, blame, or pity in their eyes. It was not her parents' fault. It was their employer. I would say bullshit if they said it was to protect the people of this country.

How the virus spread again? We still didn't know.

I scratched my beard, waiting for someone to break the unwavering silence, but it remained as it was, until Iris spoke again.

"You can decide if I should surrender myself to the CDC. Maybe it's not too late to save this country."

They shared look as if Iris was losing her sanity.

"You're kidding right?" Frost reacted.

"Now we have the answer why Otis was after you. Do you have to do that?" Lois asked.

"I doubt if he knew, but there's something isn't adding up here," I said.

"He was following orders," Gael said.

"No. Zyper was infected, and he was in that car that blew-up. That was why they were wearing masks," Iris explained. "Because he needed my blood."

"You know what they did to you back at that colony, and you're still willing to be their lab rat? I don't think it's a good idea. Fuck humanity! Fuck the government and the people!" Darick stood up, glaring at Iris. "Those scientists studied years and spent billions from our taxes, and for just one job to contain the virus, yet they failed. They failed us! And look at what happened? If you go there, you'll die." He pointed her. "They won't take a bullet to protect you, Iris. This is bullshit!"

Iris' mouth gaped for Darick's outburst.

"You don't owe them shits. Your parents gave their lives to save those victims. They were also victims, Iris. The people behind this shit stole their lives from the world, from you, their future, their family. Aren't all of these too much if you will do this to save the fucking humanity?"

"I told you this guy is something. He's a piece of work. When he talks, he's always on point," I broke the tension even though Iris' idea started to piss me off. "So, Gael, what do you have in mind?"

"I don't like it. What she's about to do is suicide. Forget about it, Iris." Gael was already on his feet. "Let's move to find Templeton's dad."

Iris raised her hand to stop us. "I'm not going with you. I need to make things right."

Chapter 28

Colt

Sixteen hours later...

“ARE YOU sure you wanna do this?” For the umpteenth times, Frost asked Iris behind the wheels. “Just so you know, I don’t like your idea, but I respect everyone’s decision that’s why I am here.”

“Yes. And I understand. This is the only way I can sleep at night and probably the only way to get answers on why I am still alive,” Iris said as she stared blankly outside the window.

None of us could change her mind regardless of how hard we tried to convince her. I held her hand and squeezed it to ensure that we were here to support her decision.

Gael fiddled with the ham radio. Thankfully, Darick found some scraps, wires, and batteries from the abandoned outpost we passed by earlier, and he managed to fix the dead one we had.

We failed to grasp radio frequencies on our way. We might still far from camps, shelters with radios or towers to pick up signals—nothing came but the buzzes just like hours ago.

“Are you sure it works just right, Darick?” Frost glanced at him through the rearview mirror.

“Then better fix it, dude. Daddy dear might have taught you how to DIY a fucking radio.” Darick rolled his sharp eyes, then leaned his head against Lois’s shoulder, causing Frost to groan.

“I’m not questioning your expertise, Takaga,” Frost replied.

“This works just fine. We’ll see once we get closer. Unless someone wants to climb up the tree,” Gael joked.

“No thank you.” I chuckled. “You okay, Doc?” I side glanced at Dr. Hull who seemed to start snoring beside me.

He answered me with a hum. I couldn’t be more grateful to everyone for not leaving me behind while I was in a coma. All I could feel was like I was melting deep inside, and all my flesh and bones were hurting as fuck until I lost my consciousness.

My heart warmed as I looked at Iris one more time. She gave me another reason to live. She was my hero. If it wasn’t her courage and determination, I was already buried six feet under, rotting. That must be the reason why she stumbled upon Lois and Frost because she was destined to save my life.

The little thing I called twig and the woman who threatened my cock was the same person why I was still breathing right now. This time, I felt whole. I had a family and a woman that I loved so much more than the second chance I got.

I pulled her into my arms and kissed the top of her head. I felt my emotions swirling again with love, gratitude, and hope.

"I love you." I kept my promise to show her and tell her how much she meant to me before it was too late.

"Love you back." She took my hand and kissed my knuckles.

"Frost, I need to pee," I excused.

"Okay. Hang in there." Frost slowed down the car, then moved to the right side of the road to park.

"Iris, go with Colt and check if he's okay," Gael ordered. Even if he didn't tell her, I was sure to take Iris with me.

"Sure."

I hopped out of the SUV. The way the wild grass swayed against the wind was something that I wasn't supposed to see it anymore. I closed my eyes and listened to the wind feathering through the wild grass and the bird crying in the sky, and breathed in the clean air into my lungs.

"Where do you want to pee?"

I opened my eyes and smiled at her. "There." I pointed to the grass field. "Behind that tree."

"Seriously? Can't you just pee here?" She pointed at the shoulder of the road almost covered with growing grass. "You don't have to sit down like me to pee, you know."

"I can't if someone is watching me, twig." I grinned. "I bet they want to know about my pee as well."

"Just go, pee, and come back," Gael interrupted us. "We need to find a place to stay before sunset."

I marched first toward the tall grass that almost reached my knees. "Careful, there could be snakes underneath."

Iris shrieked, jumped, and ran closer to me. "Not funny!"

"Just warning you, twig. We may be invincible to the virus, but not to the venom. Come here." Before she could reach me, I scooped her and threw her over my shoulder.

"Put me down, Colton!" She wiggled her legs, hit my back, and screamed, then laughed freely when I spanked her sweet ass. Her voice echoed in the wide-open space, and it was like music to my ears.

If she only had any idea what my plan was, she was going to run back to the car.

“You’re gonna pay for this!” Iris was still laughing while slapping my ass.

“I’m willing to pay it back. Right now.” I also laughed with her.

Once we reached behind the tree, I let her stand on her feet to see a wide smile on her face, then she closed the gap between us and grabbed the back of the head. She slammed her mouth against mine and kissed me hungrily.

My hands were already unbuttoning her shirt, pulling her bra up, and cupping the sweet tits I missed for days.

My cock was already hardened and jerked inside my jeans. I leaned over to capture her tit with my mouth as I massaged the other.

“Oh god!” Iris gripped my hair, throwing her head back as I unbuttoned her jeans and pushed with her panties down her knees. “Colton, do we really have to do this?”

I pulled my shirt above my head and spread it to the ground. “Lie down, twig. Hurry up before Gael will send a search party.”

She was turned on, her eyes were filled with lust. She then lied down without hesitation, and I pulled the jeans off of her legs.

I stood up and looked at her up and down, admiring her nakedness. My heart was beating so fast as it was too much for me to bear that I was still alive and got a chance to feel her again.

My body was burning and vibrating with so much anticipation as I saw her wet entrance. I hovered down to her, and she welcomed me and spread her thighs wide.

I kissed her passionately. I missed her taste, her soft lips, her skin, and the way she touched me, her sounds when she was about to come around my cock and my tongue.

I freed my cock from my jeans and rubbed the shaft against her wet slit and sensitive clit. She jerked her hips up impatiently and moaned. That was exactly how I remembered.

“God, how much I missed that voice. I thought I won’t get a chance to hear it again.” I pushed slowly inside her, and she relaxed underneath me.

I moaned into her mouth when I felt how good it was. She felt so good. Her warm inner walls hugged tightly around my cock as I thrust inside her slowly with precision.

Her touch, her kiss, and her skin created a burning sensation on my back, down my spine, sending thrills toward my cock.

“Wrap your legs around me.” I thrust slowly and as deep as I could get as if it was too good to speed up. “I’m sorry if we don’t have a place where I can make you feel good. I promise I will make it up to you, twig. I am overwhelmed and feel so blessed that I have you again.”

“This is just the first of so many hot sex, Colton. I knew you were planning something back there.” She smiled against my lips.

“Oops, sorry.” I laughed and kissed her again. “Can’t let them wait.” I thrust faster, and Iris arched her back up, squeezed her eyes shut, and gripped my arms as she was almost on the verge of her ecstasy.

I moaned louder. The sensation was too much to bear. It was blissful.

“Come for me, twig,” I whispered to her ear as my cock started to twitch inside her. I was trying hard to hold my pending orgasm, and I was losing control of the way she moaned at every thrust I did.

“I’m there. Just follow me.”

My spine tingled. My muscles contracted. I bent her knees and held her legs against my chest, putting her at the right angle to make her feel so good.

My thrust picked up as I rocked into her faster that hit her in the right spot.

Our eyes remained lock together as we were sharing the same thoughts and feelings.

“I love you.” My cock thickened inside her as I forced into her deeper.

“Colt—” Iris clawed at my arms as she shuddered and enjoyed the orgasm and the aftershock of her pleasure.

The sight of her had every fiber in my body vibrated with so much power. The climax hit me unexpectedly with a louder grunt while I pulled out my length and spurted my seeds above her abdomen.

“God!” I groaned and shuddered. I couldn’t catch my breath as I let my hands leaned against the ground and cherished this moment.

“SO, HOW was the pee, Colt?” There was amusement in Darick’s voice. “Thought you two were swallowed by the python hanging at the branch.” Darick tilted his head against the back of his seat, grinning.

I bit my lip to hold my laugh. They probably knew what happened behind the tree, aside from Frost who got my message when I excused.

"You shoulda went there to grab that python, Darick. Everyone needs a little mate to play, don't you think?" Frost teased him.

"How's the color, Iris?" Dr. Hull asked.

"Clear as... normal urine." Iris smiled with a rosy face. I could sense what she was thinking while she was telling Dr. Hull. Iris wiped my come with her panties, and now she went commando.

"I bet it is," Gael muttered.

Jesus! *We're busted!*

"Never heard of clear urine," Dr. Hull chortled, clearly everyone knew, and now they were teasing us. "Clear as amber? Red or pink, or orange? It could be like cola or blue, green."

"There's blue urine?" I asked and thought the old doctor was messing with us.

"Yes. From food dyes and medical conditions like benign Hypercalcemia. Green is when you have Pseudomonas."

I hissed, "Offt!"

"That must be painful." Frost laughed.

"Just be thankful you haven't had Pseudomonas or worse HIV, Frost," Darick commented.

"When was the last time you had sex, Darick?"

Iris stiffened beside me. I wrapped my arm around her and squeezed her. "Relax. They're just messing with us."

"I told you I'm good with my hand, man. Besides, I am not the one who was recently turned down by a woman."

"Really? How come I don't know about it?" I laughed. Gael turned his head toward Darick, amused.

"Enough of this, Darick," Lois snapped and glared at him.

"That's what I heard." He shrugged innocently.

"Okay. Darick, go to the front, take the wheels, and drive. Let Templeton rest."

"Fine."

The car moved smoothly toward the road ahead of us.

Suddenly, the radio buzzed. "Hello?" this time a sharp voice of a man crackled causing me to still and meet everyone's gaze.

“...citizens...” another crackled.

Chapter 29

Colt

“DARICK, STOP the car,” Gael ordered as he raised the radio. He hopped down from the passenger seat as soon as the car halted, and we followed suit.

“If anyone out there can hear me, please, spread this message by posting flyers, writing on every wall you see, or tell everyone to come to us. On behalf of the Center for Disease Control, I am Dr. Warren Leveroque. We are at the CDC, or you can go to the nearest port to get the vaccine. We have a breakthrough and successfully created and manufactured the cure and the vaccine for the virus. Let us save humanity and help build our beloved nation again...”

WE ARRIVED at the CDC complex. Military, commercial, and personal vehicles were everywhere, even with the government and CDC seal. It was a good sign that mankind had not completely wiped out its existence.

Guards and from the military were present, and it was incredible as well as overwhelming.

After several hours, we moved closer to the gate. Inside, where we were going to receive the vaccine.

Gael and Dr. Hull marched toward the security at the guard post. The back gate was the exit once we received the vaccines, and from where we were standing served as the entrance.

“Are you okay?” I asked Iris beside me when she breathed deeply.

“Never been better. Do we need to receive though?”

“I think so. Nothing will happen if we will be injected, I guess.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“Name, ma’am,” the guard asked, wearing a U.S combat Army uniform.

“Blue Iris Clayton.”

The guard froze and looked at Iris intensely for a couple of seconds, making my body stiffen. I couldn’t smell violence, but my instinct said something was going to happen today.

“Got a problem, 1Lt. Dunnam?” I asked, eyes focused on him after I checked his name and his rank insignia.

His hand went to the walkie-talkie on his chest. "Dr. Warren? Please, come in."

"We're leaving." I gripped Iris' hand. My stomach suddenly felt rock hard.

"Wait," Iris stopped me, making me groan in annoyance. I completely forgot the reason for this long trip. To save the fucking humanity, but things had changed when they already discovered the cure.

I didn't care if I wouldn't receive the vaccine, as long as Iris wouldn't be harmed.

"Yes?" A voice from the radio echoed, probably Dr. Warren. He seemed to have the same voice from the radio back in the car.

The radio message was probably legit, but why the guard suddenly froze when he heard Iris' name?

"There was a woman here claiming she's Blue Iris Clayton, Dr. Warren," the guard answered almost quickly.

"Is she has bluer eyes?"

Iris' face ashen and swallowed.

Fuck!

"What's going on?" Gael came back and asked with already armed men following at his back.

"What do they want from me?" Iris finally found her voice, shaking.

Isn't it what you want? I wanted to roll my eyes, but I loved her so much that I couldn't just resist her plan.

"You're not in trouble, ma'am. We are just going to escort you inside to meet Dr. Warren."

"She's not coming with you," I said firmly.

"You can come with us," 1Lt. Dunnam replied.

"Not without me," Gael interjected.

"And me!" Frost moved to us.

The crowd and lines started to grow and murmur as we got their attention and already marched toward us. Nosy people. After what they had been through, they never changed.

A male voice from the megaphone spoke to not break the line as they would all receive the vaccine.

"Or if you want, or whoever wanted to talk to her, why don't you tell him to come over here instead."

"Your name, sir?"

"Colt Snow."

He extended his hand, but I ignored it.

"Mr. Snow, we've been looking for Ms. Clayton for a long time. If you just radioed us, we would definitely send a team to escort her here."

"What's this all about?" Dr. Hull also walked in to join the conversation.

"Dr. Warren will explain everything. You must be all exhausted from a long trip. So, shall we?" He gestured us to the opened gate.

"Fine. I'll go if my family will come with me," Iris agreed. Since she wanted to make things right and to find answers, this was the best time, and hopefully, she would be satisfied with the answers she would get.

After a few minutes, we were all sitting in the room with white concrete, glass walls, and sliding door with food and refreshments. They way they treated us, we felt like we just landed from another planet. Doctors and staff waved and smiled at us outside this room.

"Don't you think it's a little bit weird?" Darick asked.

"It is," This time, I agreed with him.

The door whooshed and slid. An old man with a white shirt and loosened red necktie walked in. His aura seemed calm and friendly. Almost trustworthy.

"You must be Blue Iris." He smiled tearfully.

Iris stood up. "Yes."

"I can see it from your eyes, my dear. I'm Dr. Warren Leveroque, but everyone calls me Dr. Warren. You're probably asking why I asked Dunnam to escort you inside. Well, we are glad you made it here." He held and gripped Iris' hand as he talked like she was some kind of a Queen or just saved the world from an alien invasion.

"I still don't understand."

"Let's have a seat then. This might take a while."

I listened attentively as he explained how he met Iris' real parents and how they ended up with the breakthrough.

"So, my parents were forced to work with the pharmaceutical company owned by a Russian billionaire?"

"Let me guess, it has something to do with a biological weapon."

"Yes. That's what we thought. They found a primordial virus and had an ambitious bioengineer on their payroll who would create it for a bioweapon. After the epidemic in the small village, your parents were kidnapped to help create the virus."

"So, why faked their deaths?"

"The team who were tasked to investigate found cremated bodies and thought your parents were in there. It was difficult to trace the DNA, and they received a call from the high-ranking official to keep it off the record as they were afraid of the media leaks. But your parents, especially your mom was intelligent, so she must have altered the virus with her DNA and created a cure."

"So, what happened then?"

"When the van carrying the virus with the bioengineer was ambushed, the container was broken, and it leaked. The bioengineer was infected, but before he died, he was able to run away, probably asked for help."

"So, he infected other people?"

"No. Animals carried the virus. They must have close contact with his body. About a year ago, a few miles from that village—"

"Wait a sec. The same village?" Iris asked in disbelief.

"Yes. It was a quarantine zone since that epidemic. But there were people who caught wild animals and sold them. Though it was illegal, no one would want to stop them since they were living in the wilderness. When they caught a wild monkey, in just a few minutes, all of them got infected, but the monkey got away, and that was how the spread of the virus started."

"Oh, my God." Iris shivered, wrapping herself as she turned white.

Still speechless, I swallowed hard, feeling my throat dried in an instant.

"The same virus altered by your mom. I thought that was her message to us to develop a cure. And she must have injected you. And now, it is running through your veins."

"We've been looking for you, Ms. Clayton. We even posted a reward just to find you. Everyone thought you might be dead, and obviously not from the virus."

"And it caused my brother's life." She looked down. "That was because they wanted to give me to you."

"I'm so sorry. You don't have to worry about the Colony from the West. They won't bother you anymore," he assured her. "About Otis Wise, he was supposed to bring you to us unharmed. That was what we agreed upon, but instead, he became greedy—"

"And I killed him," I said proudly. I didn't care if this would have caused my life. I nearly died once, but I would do it over again in a fucking heartbeat. After what he did to Iris, he deserved it.

"We heard about the encounter at the bridge. Our men from the military planned a mission to intercept the colony for coming after you. When our men got to the scene, you were all gone."

"So, Otis knew that I had the cure in my blood?" Iris asked.

"Not entirely, but he believed that your blood could slow down the effect. You have probably tested it." Dr. Warren looked at me, particularly to my eyes. "How do you feel, Mr. Snow?"

I shrugged. "Good?"

"Your irises darkened, aren't they?"

"I think so. It was smokey gray now they looked like ash gray."

"You looked like you're wearing cheap contacts," Iris commented.

"Is that so?" I smirked. The 'behind the tree encounter' came flashing back in my head.

She rolled her eyes, clearly read my thought. "How did you figure out about the cure, Dr. Warren?"

"Through your mom's DNA. We had to check your parents' old house, but it was wiped out. We track down your heritage, none of them exist. That's why we forced to put that reward. We knew the possibility that it would place you in danger, but we had no choice. Until we got Intel about your brother. Too late, Nuke Clayton was already dead. After we got a sample from him, we gave them a proper burial, Miss Clayton."

Iris shook to cry. "Thank you."

I remembered how much she wanted to give him that. Without her knowledge, someone had already done for her.

"That's the least we could do. I'm sorry for your loss," the doctor said sincerely. "Do you want to ask something? Or you might want something?"

"Everything seems clear to me now." She paused. "Oh, I want something. I hope you could help me."

"Of course, anything."

"Can you check up Gael, or ask someone to fix his leg." She looked at Gael who gave her a slight nod. "He is diabetic and an amputee."

"We have all types of doctors here. This place is huge. You can all stay as much as you want while we are building our nation again."

"Thank you. I think we could stay for a while. It's been almost a year since I feel the air condition on my skin. Can you please check Colton. You know, he just woke up—"

"From the dead," Frost interrupted.

Dr. Warren softly laughed. "Of course, we owed you and your parents, Miss Clayton."

"Just, Iris."

"Iris. And I have something for you." Dr. Warren signaled to the black man outside. He came carrying a box.

"When we raided that old lab, we found this. It belonged to your mother. We thought this meant something to her." He offered it to Iris before he rose from his seat. "Let me know if you need anything. Rowan will help you to your quarters. Mr. Snow, let us know whenever you're ready, and so as Mr. Gael."

"Glad you made that decision, twig."

Chapter Epilogue

Colt

Three months later...

I LAZILY draped my arm around Iris' shoulder as our group drove through the endless wide road.

It was a beautiful day. We thought we could have a little adventure as we were headed to one of the Frost mansions.

The sky was clear and the sun was striking hot, yet nobody cared.

"How much longer to your place?" Lois asked.

"A few more hours." He looked and smiled tightly at her at the passenger seat.

Frost finally found peace when we found his father's group last month and we got information that Mr. Hugo Frost did not make it.

Yesterday, he admitted that he was falling for Lois, and I threw him an odd look because I knew it since before he even realized, but Lois didn't fall for his charm, and now he was scowling to the road ahead of us. I told him to be patient, but that word seemed not to exist in his vocabulary and said we almost died because of patience.

Iris and I were great. She figured out that her pendant was actually a key to her mother's unique and tricky safe box where she kept her jewelry including their wedding bands and engagement ring, old photos, and some documents.

We still had hot sex anywhere we got a chance—what I meant when I said we got a chance; one time Gael caught us at the back of the gas station, humping. When we excused ourselves for a bathroom break and refilled our tank after long hours of drive, we ended up fucking each other. We laughed our ass out when Gael left.

"I need a room on my own, Templeton." Gael was on a diet, and I thought it worked perfectly on him without insulin. He got a supply from the CDC clinic, but he managed to not inject himself anymore, and he seemed to be fine with his new Prosthetic.

"Got plenty. I can give you a whole house if you want. I hope they weren't charred down, but we could still go to our other properties, if you want a view of the beach, there's in Malibu. The Hamptons is the best though."

"I need to find a job," Darick mumbled. I understood why he was eager to get a life on his own. "Now computers are back to life, gotta do something better."

Most cities were starting to build again with the new government, now they didn't have to be afraid of the virus anymore.

We were hoping New York was a good place for us to start our new lives.

"I already missed Doc." Dr. Hull stayed with the CDC to help since they needed more doctors and medical staff.

"Me too," Iris seconded.

"I bet no one wants an extravagant wedding, right? I can work in agriculture, I guess." Iris was able to get a goodnight's sleep. She was ecstatic these past months and helped out giving vaccines to everyone. I also went to different areas out of States to distribute vaccines.

"We'll figure it out."

Iris tilted her head and smiled. "Yup. We're in this together." She fist-bumped into mine.

"How about you plan a wedding for us first?" I ran my thumb on her pink cheek.

Iris was getting more beautiful every day. She had her curves in all the right places and even her tits were more luscious than ever, that was why I couldn't keep my hands off of her. Who could blame me? I was just a man who was madly in love with her, and I couldn't wait to marry her.

"That's the best thing you ever said for these past few days, son," Gael agreed, almost like a snort.

"Oh, my god! It's been years since I attended a wedding!" Lois gushed, shifting from her seat to join us.

As if on cue, Frost stopped the car.

I got out and took Iris' hand with me. Her blue eyes widened, remained speechless as I knelt down on bended knee.

"What do you say, twig?" Asking her about marriage was not random. "I have been meaning to ask you this, Iris. I just didn't want you to freak out because we'd just been together for a few months, but I couldn't wait any longer for you to be my wife, besides, we almost lost each other in the freaking virus. And life was too short to wait for the right time when the right time was just always been there all along." I fished out the ring from my pocket. I couldn't find even find a box. I took the ring off from the dead woman during our scavenging. I knew one day, I could put it to good use. "The first time our eyes met, you just blew me away. It always reminds me of my hope and faith. The moment you threatened my junk, I knew that time that either you would be stuck with

me or I'd die alone because there's nothing I would want to be than to be with you. Blue Iris Clayton, will you marry me?"

"I love you, Colton!" She launched into me, and we ended up both on the hot asphalt.

"Is that a yes?" I laughed as I wrapped my arms around her. "I should change my name to Colton Danger when we get married."

A single tear fell down from her eye. She bit her lip and nodded. "I'd love to be your wife, Colton Danger."

The moment the word wife came out from her lips, I captured them and kissed her with all my wildly beating heart.

"Glad that I threatened you that night. I love you, Blue Iris."

The End