



Zombie Games

ORIGINS

KRISTEN MIDDLETON

ZOMBIE GAMES

(ORIGINS)

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CHAPTER ONE

“Cassie, take out the garbage.”

“Why can’t Allie do it?” I asked, closing the refrigerator door, pickle jar in hand.

“Because it’s your job,” replied my mother, who was sitting at the kitchen counter, leafing through the mail.

I pulled out the largest dill I could find and crunched down. “Mom,” I said between chews, “come on, she needs more chores. She’s twelve.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Sorry.”

She peered at me over her glasses. “Tell you what...you can do the dishes and I’ll have her take out the garbage.”

“Fine, I’ll take out the garbage.”

“I thought so,” she answered with a wry smile.

I rolled my eyes and swallowed the last of the juicy pickle. Before I could reach for another, she pointed to the trash can. “The pickles will still be here when you return.”

“I still can’t believe you’re making me do this in the middle of the night,” I pouted, glancing out the window into the darkness.

“That’s funny, coming from a seventeen-year-old who keeps begging me to extend her curfew.”

“Yes, but not to go wandering alone in the dark.”

Her eyes softened. “Honey, there’s nothing to be afraid of. We live on a quiet cul-de-sac in the suburbs.”

Even though my mother was trying to comfort me, I just couldn’t shake the feeling of dread or quiet the niggling voice inside, whispering of something wicked lurking in the darkness. But then again, it could just be the fact that I’d been watching a horror flick earlier and it’d totally freaked me out. “Ok, well, if I’m not back in two minutes, send dad out.”

“Right,” she snorted. “Little Ms. Black Belt.”

I couldn’t help but grin. Last week I’d received my Black Belt after four years of intense discipline and training. It took a lot of patience and commitment, but earning the Belt was worth it.

As I stepped outside, a warm breeze lifted my brown hair, blowing it across my face. I glanced up at the sky and shrugged off my anxiety; it really was a peaceful evening. The stars glimmered brightly and the moon was full.

As I rounded the corner of the garage, Charlie, one of the neighbor’s dogs, began to bark; which was a pretty common occurrence. As annoying as it typically was, tonight it was somewhat comforting to know I wasn’t alone.

“Hey, it’s just me, Charlie!” I called, my voice echoing across the dark cul-de-sac. A lone streetlight flickered on his side of the circle.

Charlie’s barking increased and he tossed in some obnoxious growls. As far as I was concerned, this

dog had some serious trust issues.

There was a sudden loud crash from behind the Hendrickson's rambler and the motion-detector light flickered out. Charlie growled angrily in the darkness for a few seconds and then, without warning, let out an ear-piercing yelp.

Oh crap, that can't be good, I thought.

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach as I began to panic. Really, I wanted nothing more than to take out the garbage and hurry back inside. I also knew that if I ignored Charlie, and he was hurt, I'd never forgive myself.

Dropping the garbage bag, I started walking towards his house when I heard a deep, strangled moan. I froze in my tracks; that wasn't Charlie.

I shivered. "Hello? Mr. Hendrickson?"

A tall shadow emerged from the darkness and my breath caught in my throat. I watched, motionless, as the figure shuffled through Charlie's yard, towards me. It was about a hundred yards away when the figure stopped directly under the streetlamp. I sighed with relief when I recognized Scott, a guy from my karate class, who I'd dated a few times. It certainly was creepy, though, that he was lurking around the neighbor's yard in the middle of the night.

"Scott, what are you doing out here?" I called out.

He just stared at me, swaying slightly.

"Is everything okay?" I tried again, wondering if he was drunk. He's my age, seventeen, and I've never known him to drink alcohol or use any kind of drugs, so his behavior was odd. I stepped closer and noticed that he held Charlie in his arms. An alarm went off in my head, and I froze. "Um, is Charlie hurt?"

Scott growled and then dropped his face down towards Charlie, who lay motionless. When he lifted his

head back up, there was a dark red stain covering his mouth. He smacked his lips and moaned in some kind of twisted pleasure. I shuddered in horror as my brain finally registered what was happening. Scott was feeding on Charlie!

“Oh...my...God!” I choked, backing away. Bile rose in the back of my throat as the guy I once kissed assaulted the dog again with that very same mouth.

I turned to run, stumbling over the garbage bag I’d dropped, my ankle twisting in pain. I cried out and struggled to stand when something grabbed my leg firmly. I looked back and froze in shock; it was Scott, only it wasn’t him. His green eyes were now black as death, cold and lifeless. His skin was gray and riddled with bloody sores. His mouth, which still dripped with Charlie’s blood, twisted into a grimace and he let out an unearthly screech.

“Scott?!” I screamed as his teeth tore into my skin.

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I opened my eyes and drew my comforter up to my chin. Reminding myself it was just a dream, I released a shaky sigh and forced myself to *chill out*. Yes, it was *definitely* time to stop watching horror flicks before bed. Forcing the last of the disturbing images from my mind, I turned over and let out a real bloodcurdling scream.

“Jed, what are you doing in my room!?” I gasped. It was the third time this week he’d snuck up on me. Apparently, it was now a special game.

Three-year-old Jed giggled with delight. “Hi, Cassie,” he said, licking a thick layer of green slime from his nose. Even in the dark I could tell the sleeves on his Spiderman shirt were crusty from dried-up snot. “Hey, want to see my new caw?” he said. Jed has

a hard time pronouncing his R's. He removed something from his jeans and lifted it proudly into the air; a small, blue convertible that had seen better days.

"Nice," I mumbled, plumping up the pillow. "Now...please, go find Kris. You need a tissue."

Instead of leaving, however, he opened his mouth and began coughing, hurling millions of invisible germs towards me.

I backed away in horror and yelled, "Mom!" Sure, he's adorable with his big blue eyes and dimpled cheeks, but I'll be the first to admit; I have a major phobia of germs. My room is off-limits and the daycare kids are *forbidden* to enter it; especially, the little "germy" ones.

My mother popped her head into my room and cringed. "I'm sorry, Cassie. I didn't know he snuck in. Come on, Jed, time to clean you up."

I snorted. "Clean him up? What about my blankets? He just infested my whole bed with his nasty cold germs."

Jed's lower lip began to tremble and his eyes welled up with tears. "Sowy, Cassie," he whispered.

My heart melted immediately. I reached over and ruffled his curly blond hair. "Hey, it's okay, Jed. Just cover your mouth when you cough."

His face lit up. "Huggies?" he asked, raising his crusty arms.

"Um, later, okay?" I replied as I beckoned my mom with my eyes.

She grabbed him and placed him on her hip. "Come on, Jedster. Let's go wipe your boogies and get something to eat."

"Thanks. Make sure nobody else waltzes in here."

She motioned towards my alarm clock. “Hey, *Wild One*, it is time for you to get up for school. Start going to bed earlier and you won’t be so grumpy every morning.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m not grumpy. And quit calling me that.”

My last name is “Wild” and my family thinks it’s amusing to call me *The Wild One*, because I was such a handful as a kid.

My mother frowned but left my room without another word. As she closed the door, I could hear the chaos taking place in other areas of the house; kids were chasing each other, someone was screaming about a lost toy, and a baby began to howl. We live in Wolf Creek, a small town in Minnesota, and my mom runs a daycare in our house. What was once a calm home, is now hectic zoo. It was only Monday and I already yearned for the weekend.

I dragged myself out of bed, grabbed my favorite white Henley T-shirt, and a pair of jean shorts, then snuck into the bathroom to take a shower. Unfortunately, I have to share it with the daycare kids, so I have to be stealthy about it. If they realize it’s me in the bathroom, they’ll do things to torture me, like wiggling their fingers under the door, jiggling the knob, or repeating “*Wild*” over and over, annoying the heck out of me. Today was no exception.

“Enough,” I warned, combing through my thick, dark hair. I pulled it into a ponytail and looked closely at my reflection in the mirror. Brown eyes, pug nose, and extremely dry lips. I rummaged through the medicine cabinet and found some of my sister’s “plumping” lip gloss. I applied it gingerly to my lips and then frowned. Now they looked swollen, like I’d been punched. I tried wiping it off, but it didn’t help.

My eyes widened in shock as they continued to puff out.

*Seriously*, I thought, *why would anyone intentionally do this to their lips?* It was embarrassing and my lips were starting to sting.

I threw my hands up in defeat and stomped into the kitchen. To my dismay, I noticed three other kids, sick with colds. They all smiled at me, matching snot dripping from their noses.

“You have got to be kidding. What is it with everyone dropping off their kids here when they’re sick? Shouldn’t *they* be home taking care of them?”

“I know, nothing I can do about it, unless they have fevers,” mom replied wearily as she grabbed several tissues and began wiping noses. “Everyone seems to be getting sick with this horrible cold. Some parents even dropped off their kids just so *they* could go back home and rest.”

“Figures,” I mumbled.

I pulled out my cell phone to check my messages when, Daniel, a five-year-old boy who pretends he’s my shadow, sneezed all over it. I turned to my mom in horror, who winced and quickly handed me an antibacterial wipe.

“Daniel, why don’t you go and draw Cassie a nice picture?” she said, guiding him away from me.

Frantic to escape, I grabbed a cereal bar and my truck keys. “I’ll eat this at school. I’ve got a karate class tonight.”

My mom nodded and then wrinkled her nose. “Megan? Do you have a poopy diaper?”

I turned and fled the kitchen before I could smell the answer. Just then my dad shuffled by in his robe on the way to his “*Man Cave*” in the lower level of our home. He calls it his sanctuary from “*Daycare Hell*.”

Right now he looked like he'd just stepped out of Hell himself, with the dark circles under his eyes and hair that stuck up in every direction.

"Hi, dad," I said. "Let me guess, you were up late again blasting zombies?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Heh. I actually finished the game."

My dad is addicted to video games. Before I was born, he once spent thirty-six hours straight, playing *Everguild*, a very addictive Internet game, surviving only on caffeine and buttery pretzels. When my mom became pregnant, she lost her patience with his *harmless* addiction and brought a group of his friends together for an "*Everguild Intervention*." Now he's only allowed to play games on his Wii or PlayStation, which he has only a slightly better handle on.

"Do you have to work today?" I asked him. My dad sells cars for a living, which isn't particularly his dream job. Unfortunately it's something he's really good at, so although he grumbles about it endlessly, he never changes it.

"Not until this afternoon. You ready to try out my new Beretta?" he asked, his face lighting up. His other addiction has to do with guns. Almost every Saturday since I turned sixteen, has been spent at the gun range with my father and grandfather. Both avid collectors, they own about thirty different guns between the two of them. When I began showing an interest last year, they were both delighted and started teaching me everything they could about guns. Now my aim is almost as good as my dad's.

"Sorry, dad, I can't make it to the gun range for the next couple of weeks. I have to study for final exams," I answered. "Plus, prom's coming up. I'm just too busy."

Folding his arms, he gave me a stern look. "That's right. You're going with that Scott kid, aren't you?" he asked. "Remember, no pre-prom parties, no hotels, and definitely no alcohol."

I snorted. "Hello? Does that really sound like me? And you do realize that Scott and I are just friends? I've told you this so many times."

His eyes softened. "Good, keep it that way."

"Well, I'm just lucky he's going with me. I didn't go last year and probably would have skipped the senior prom as well if he hadn't volunteered to take me."

"Are you kidding me? *He's* the lucky one!"

I bit back a smile. My dad's having a difficult time with the idea of me dating, *anyone*, which he shouldn't; my love life is as dead as the zombies in his games. Scott and I *are* only friends, but it always seems to slip his mind. The last time I went out with Scott, my dad had insisted on chatting with him before we left for the movie theater; all the while cleaning three of his guns. My dad found it amusing; I was horrified. But Scott thought my dad's guns were "*awesome*" and missed the entire point.

"Wait, Cassie!" hollered my mom from the top of the stairs. My stomach clenched when I saw she was holding a dirty diaper. I swear there was steam radiating from the putrid bundle.

"What?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What's wrong with your lips?"

I released a deep sigh. "Allie's plumping lip gloss."

She bit the side of her lip. "Oh. Well they'll probably shrink down soon. Anyway, could you please pick up Allie from her dance class tonight?"

I groaned.

“Please? You’re going to karate anyway, just swing by on your way home.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Thank you, honey.”

I nodded then sprinted out the front door before she tried to volunteer me for anything else. Allie’s my twelve-year-old sister, and since my parents pitched in to help me purchase my truck last year, I’m her personal chauffeur. I didn’t mind at first, but since she’s started middle school, her social life is busier than mine. Sometimes I have to fit my plans into *her* schedule.

Glancing across the cul-de-sac, I noticed Charlie following Mr. Hendrickson to his mailbox. We waved at each other and Charlie stared at me instead of blasting me with his usual obnoxious barking.

I hopped into my truck, a red ‘98 Chevy S10, which has seen much better days, and prayed silently that it wouldn’t give me problems; it’s been finicky about starting recently and I really don’t have time to get it checked out; especially with prom coming up. When it turned over right away, I sighed with relief and drove over to my friend Paige’s house.

“Hi. You’re early. Oh...my...God...what happened to your lips!?” Paige cried, covering her mouth.

“It looks that bad?”

“It just looks...painful.”

Paige, as always, looked perfect. With her long, blond hair and startling green eyes, half the guys at school are in awe of her. Some people at school call her Skipper, Barbie’s younger sister, because of her sun-kissed skin, high cheekbones, and carefree spirit.

“My lips were dry, so I tried using one of Allie’s lip gloss tubes. *Bad choice.*”

“I guess,” she replied, trying to hide a smile. “Do they hurt?”

I pursed my lips and nodded. “They burn a little.”

“Just use Vaseline next time. That’s all I use.”

“Oh.”

She pushed her hair behind her ears. “Did you watch the news this morning?”

“Are you kidding? In my house you won’t find anything but *Dora* or *Elmo’s World* on the television.”

“Well, the media is all over this flu virus. It’s amazing how fast it’s spreading. Many people are actually getting so sick they’re being quarantined in different countries. It’s like the *Black Plague*.”

“Most of the little kids in my house are sick. If this keeps up, I swear I’m moving out.”

“Hah, you wish. Anyway, it’s getting so bad, that in Europe, they’ve closed down a ton of schools. Wouldn’t it be awesome if ours was shut down? We could hang out at the mall and check out *hot* guys all day long.”

I laughed. “Yeah, fat chance of that happening. They won’t even close when we have ten feet of snow.”

“Well *I*, for one, am sick of school; sick of all the uptight bitches, juvenile jocks, and dumb-ass tests. Seriously, I wouldn’t mind if school shut down for the rest of the year!”

I raised my eyebrows. “Wow. Having a rough week?”

She shrugged and stared out the passenger window.

“Ok, spill it. What’s wrong, Paige?”

She looked at me, her eyes moist. “Eva King. She’s such a lying, two-faced bitch. You know, she pretended to be my friend just so she could get closer

to Kyle.”

Kyle used to be Paige’s boyfriend until he broke it off with her last month. I thought she’d gotten over it already since she seemed to have a crush on someone new every week.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw them kissing in the halls yesterday. She is *such* a conniving bitch!”

Eva is actually one of the most popular girls in school. Although Paige is much prettier and likeable, Eva’s mother is a famous news anchor and she gets treated like she’s some kind of a movie star herself. Eva’s also head-cheerleader and owns this super turbo-charged Mercedes convertible. Most of the guys at school are hot for her car.

“And he’s a prick...they deserve each other.”

She wiped away a tear and sniffled.

“Well...anyway...there *is* this new guy, Jeremy, who’s really cute. He sits next to me in Biology.”

I chuckled. “I can see you’re truly heartbroken.”

Paige placed her hands over her heart. “I’m sure Jeremy could help mend it.”

We both burst out laughing. Little did we know that in the next couple of days, our lives would turn into a living nightmare, and that we would have given *anything* to have such trivial problems.

# CHAPTER TWO

I spent most of the day at school trying to avoid those who were sick, which was almost everyone else. Many kids were absent, and the halls were unnaturally quiet, except for the consistent coughing and nose-blowing.

During last period, my math teacher, Mr. Hogan, a balding man in his fifties, blew his nose loudly and said, “Keep taking your vitamins, everyone. This flu takes no prisoners!”

In answer, many of the students wiped their own noses or coughed. I shrunk down in my desk and took out a small bottle of antibacterial gel, rubbing some on my hands. A girl next to me noticed and snorted.

I glared at her. “It’s called keeping your hands clean. You should try it sometime.”

She gave me the finger, muttering something obscene under her breath.

Towards the end of class, our principal, Mrs.

Davis, made an unexpected visit and handed Mr. Hogan some forms. They spoke quietly for several minutes and then she left, grabbing a tissue on the way out. I watched as Mr. Hogan removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose while examining the paperwork she'd dropped off.

Finally, he looked up and cleared his throat. "Listen up, people," he called. "This week, the school is giving free flu shots to all of the students. I am going to hand out all the information regarding the vaccination. Take it home, have your parents read it, sign it, and then bring it back as soon as possible."

A few of the students moaned in protest.

He smiled wryly and leaned back in his chair. "I understand your *enthusiasm*. You may not be excited about getting vaccinated, but it's for your own good. The school is urging everyone to have this flu shot. In fact, anyone who doesn't get permission will be required to stay home the following week, until we get this influenza epidemic under control. So, this vaccination is necessary if your parents want to keep you in school and out of the house. And...for those of you who don't get permission, we can email you your assignments."

*Great*, I thought. My mother will never agree to this flu shot, so I'll be stuck at home next week. My parents don't believe in messing with "*Mother Nature*." They feel that flu shots lower the immune system, making one more vulnerable to other illnesses. That could also explain why our family has avoided this particular flu. My mother's daily handful of vitamins and my green-peach tea addiction doesn't hurt, either.

The bell rang and I stopped into the bathroom to wash my hands. I glanced up into the mirror and found Eva King standing right next to me. She looked

miserable.

“Hey, Wild. God, I hate this frigging cold,” she mumbled and blew her nose, which looked painfully red.

Trying to forget the way she screwed over my best friend, I forced a smile. “Bummer you’re sick, too, huh?”

She nodded and smoothed down her long, red hair. “Yes. You know,” she said, turning to me, her blue eyes wide. “Sometimes I wish I were more like you. Your mom’s not famous and you get to blend in with everyone else at school. Nobody expects you to look perfect when you walk in every single day. It must be nice. I mean, I have to look *amazing* all the time. It’s a lot of work having my background and social status. Even this sick, I don’t get a day off.”

I bit back my laughter and replied, “Yes, I don’t think I could handle living in your world, Eva. It must be very stressful.”

Her eyes narrowed, but before she could respond, Nora Biggs slammed out of a bathroom stall, an unlit cigarette hanging from her mouth. Nora was fairly new in the school and most people shied away from her because of her unusual punk style, short temper, and rebellious attitude.

“Hi, Nora,” I said.

Nora nodded and then began washing her hands. We have karate class together and I’ve driven her home a few times. We weren’t exactly friends, but she was civil to me.

Eva stared at Nora’s nose. “Nora. Wow, I just love your nose ring! Is that a *real* Zirconia?”

Even sick, Eva was a complete bitch.

Nora’s eyes burned with fury and I waited for the explosion. Instead, she removed the cigarette from her

lips and smirked. “No, it’s a diamond. Your boyfriend gave it to me last night after we made out.”

Eva’s lips formed a tight line. “Classy,” she mumbled, grabbed her purse, and turned to walk away.

“Hey, Eva,” Nora said, grabbing a paper towel. She turned around and snapped, “What?”

Nora smiled coldly. “You do realize that this is only high school? Being popular here doesn’t matter in the real world.”

Eva scowled and stomped out of the bathroom. I giggled. “Nice.”

Nora shrugged. “Well, she deserves it. She thinks she’s so much better than everyone else. What she really deserves is to get knocked on her ass. I just wish I could be the one to do it. But hey, you know that code of honor thing-a-ma-jig.”

One of the principle rules of karate is that you can only use it for self-defense. Ever since Nora joined the class, she’s stopped getting into fights. I’m sure it’s been challenging for her.

I nodded in agreement and picked up my backpack.

“You sick?” she asked, running her fingers through her long, black hair. Streaks of bright blue framed her pale face. I imagined without the heavy Goth makeup, dyed hair, and various piercings, she might look like the girl next door.

“No. Not *yet*, anyway.”

Nora threw her head back and laughed. She knew about my phobia. “That must drive *you* insane; being around these germy bastards. I’m not sick yet either, but my old man is.”

Nora normally lives with her dad, Ivan Biggs, who’s a guitarist for Death Row, a popular rock band.

Unfortunately, he's on tour in Europe right now, so she sees very little of him. Instead she stays with her grandmother, Iris, who has some kind of dementia and is frightened of leaving her house. She can't even take a step outside; she's so scared of something awful happening to her.

"I heard almost everyone is sick in Europe."

"Yeah, he's in Germany right now. They've all been getting vaccinated. I don't know what the big deal is, it's just the flu. Tell you one thing; nobody's giving me a shot. My old man isn't around to sign the sheet and I would *rather* take a week off from this crap-hole. What about you?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, I won't be getting the shot, either. My family never gets flu shots."

Nora jaw dropped. "No shit? With you being so paranoid about germs and your mom being a *Daycare Lady*, I thought you'd have gotten your shots for *next* year's flu season by now."

I stared at her. "Um...I'm not *that* paranoid."

She snorted. "Whatever, Wild. Listen, I'll see you at karate class later."

I watched as she strutted out of the bathroom in her heavy black boots and then looked in the mirror. *I'm not paranoid*, I reminded myself, *just very cautious...*

# CHAPTER THREE

My stomach was growling by the end of the day, so on the way to karate class, I stopped by a McDonald's drive-thru and ordered a cheeseburger, extra pickles. As I handed the cashier the money, she sneezed all over the bag without apologizing. As horrified as I was, I held my tongue and choked down the food; I was *that* hungry.

It was just after four o'clock by the time I made it to the dojo. Nora and Scott were already there, joking around and stretching out. I thought back to my dream where Scott had turned into a zombie, killed my neighbor's dog, and viciously attacked me. Fortunately, his skin was clear and his green eyes were as lively as ever. He caught me staring at him and smiled curiously.

"Wow, small class today," stated our instructor, Master Jordan, as he entered the room. He's a sixth-degree Black Belt and has trained for over eighteen years.

"Everyone must be sick," replied Scott. I noticed

he'd gotten a crew cut, which didn't surprise me because I knew he had plans to join the military after graduation. We'd been really good friends for the last two years, and although we'd gone out on a few dates, both of us agreed that we were more comfortable in a platonic relationship.

Master Jordan sighed. "Well," he replied, rubbing his chin. "Since it's such a small class, why don't we just practice sparring?"

All three of us love to spar, so we naturally agreed. I quickly stretched out and then suited up in my dark gray sparring gear, which consists of a helmet as well as mouth, shin, foot, and chest guards.

"Nora, you and Scott will partner up. Cassie, you'll be sparring with Bryce De Luca. He should be arriving any minute."

I removed my mouth guard. "Who's Bryce *De Luca*?" I asked.

He smiled. "Bryce is a new instructor from our Hugo location. They've shut down because of the flu."

I glanced through the large window facing the parking lot just as a guy in a weathered leather jacket pulled up on a motorcycle. He removed his helmet, ran his fingers through his wavy black hair, then hurried inside carrying a sports bag.

Master Jordan patted him on the back. "De Luca! I was starting to get worried about you."

Bryce was tall with intense blue eyes. When he smiled, his dimples heated my insides.

"Sorry, the traffic was bad. If you'll excuse me for a minute, I just need to change," he replied.

"No problem," said Master Jordan.

I stole another glance as Bryce walked towards the bathroom. He was just as interesting to look at from behind.

Nora strolled by me casually, a smirk on her face. “Hey...wipe your mouth, there’s drool,” she teased.

My cheeks burned. “Whatever,” I mumbled turning away from her.

When Bryce stepped out of the bathroom, Master Jordan motioned him over to where I was warming up. He stood several inches taller than me, had broad shoulders, and lean, muscular arms. Intricate tattoos of dragons peeked out from under his black sleeves. He caught me staring and rolled up his sleeves to show more.

“Very cool,” I said, admiring the details of the dragon’s scales, face, and fiery breath.

“Listen, Bryce, after you warm up, I’m going to have you practice sparring with Cassandra Wild here. She just received her Black Belt last week.”

He nodded with approval. “Congratulations, Cassandra, you should be proud of yourself.”

“Um, thanks,” I replied, trying not to blush. His belt reflected that he was a third-degree Black Belt and I prayed that I wouldn’t embarrass myself by forgetting anything I’d learned up to that point.

Bryce looked at my instructor. “I can’t tell you how relieved I was when I found out you were open today. I have a tournament next weekend and *really* need to practice.”

“After this class, stick around and I’ll practice *atemi* with you.” replied Master Jordan. “I’ve heard you’ve pretty much mastered it.”

Bryce shrugged. “Yeah, I have to admit...I’ve got a pretty good grasp of it but could always use more practice. I’d appreciate it.”

*Atemi* is an advanced type of martial arts technique that involves blows to different areas of the

body; to break an opponent's concentration or balance. I had personally never used it, but Master Jordan promised to incorporate it into my training this summer, especially if I was interested in entering the more advanced tournaments.

"That's what I'm here for. Just remind me after class."

Bryce nodded and then turned back to me, studying my face. "Cassandra Wild, huh? You know, I don't recall seeing you at any of the tournaments."

I shook my head. "You probably haven't. It's been awhile since I've competed. Now that I'm a Black Belt, though, that'll probably change."

"Great. You'd be a good distraction for some of my opponents."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just smiled.

"Okay, you two. Better get going, *time's-a-wasting*," said Master Jordan. "Bryce, if you could work with Cassie on some of her kicks? She may need a little encouragement keeping those legs high up in the air."

I just wanted to fade away when I noticed Bryce's devilish grin.

"You know, I'm just going to let that one go," he replied softly. Unfortunately, it wasn't soft enough because Nora snorted from across the room, and oh how I wanted to punch her.

"Keep it clean, De Luca," said Master Jordan. "You don't want to mess with that one, her kicks are lethal."

He chuckled. "Sounds like an interesting challenge."

"Well, just never say I didn't warn you, buddy," replied Master Jordan. He then winked at me and

stepped into his office.

I think Bryce must have thought I was anxious about sparring with someone more advanced, which wasn't really the case. It was the way he looked at me that started my heart pounding madly in my chest.

"Hey, Cassandra, I was just kidding. I'll go easy on you," said Bryce.

"No, don't. I can handle it," I replied breathlessly.

His piercing blue eyes met mine. "Look, I don't want to hurt you. I'm obviously twice your size and much farther along in my training. You don't have a chance against someone as formidable as me."

My fantasy of him being a total Adonis crumbled, and I stared at him in amazement, wondering if he was for real. I cleared my throat. "You're serious? You think I'm not going to be challenging enough for you?" I asked.

"Most women aren't," he stated confidently.

His arrogance irritated me. I'd worked hard on earning my Belt and prided myself on being just as good if not better than many of the guys in my class. Chauvinism was something I simply had no tolerance for. I stomped out the small fire he'd created in my stomach and ignored how cute his butt looked in his uniform. "Well, I think the only thing *you* should go easy on is your own ego."

He gave me a surprised look then chuckled. "Ouch. Man...you are a little *wild* one aren't you?"

*You're going to soon find out*, I thought as I put on my helmet and mouth guard.

Bryce took his time putting on his own gear, glancing at me occasionally with a wry smile. I refused to let him bother me, though. I couldn't wait to wipe the cocky grin from his face.

“Ready yet?” I snapped impatiently.

“Oh, I’m ready alright. The question is, are you ready for me, *Wild?*” he replied, jumping fluidly to his feet. I had to admit, with his height and combat gear in place, he *was* intimidating.

“I’ve *been* ready. And by the way, I prefer to be called *Cassie.*”

He laughed at that, adding more fuel to the fire. I pushed aside my anxiety and let his irritating personality feed my adrenaline. We tapped gloves and I charged after him before he had a chance to study my fighting style. I started with a burst of fast charges and strikes, which took him a little by surprise. I bit my lip to keep from smirking as I circled around Bryce, waiting for his move.

Bryce nodded his approval then came at me with a roundhouse kick, which I quickly blocked and countered with a couple of moves that would show him how challenging I could be. I jumped up and did a combination roundhouse with an ax-kick. I swiftly followed that move with a hard side thrust kick. This time I couldn’t hide my satisfied grin when I heard him grunt.

“Okay, not bad,” he said.

“Told you,” said Master Jordan, who was now standing outside of his office, watching us. “She may have just gotten her Black Belt, but she’s always been a natural martial artist. Her strikes are quick and solid.”

I opened my eyes innocently. “Bryce, next time don’t hold back. Give me all you’ve got. Or aren’t you *man* enough.”

He gave me a crooked smile and opened his mouth to respond when Master Jordan interrupted. “Like I said, keep it clean over there, Mr. De Luca.

She's a minor."

"I'll be eighteen next month," I countered.

Bryce stared at me for a moment, his face crestfallen. "Sorry," he said. "I thought you were older."

"So?" I shrugged. "What does *that* have to do with anything?"

He frowned and took a sip of water. "Forget about it," he said. "Let's just keep practicing."

We spent the rest of the time practicing front, roundhouse, and tornado kicks. I could tell that Bryce still wasn't being as aggressive as he could have been, but by the end of the class, both of us were sweating and out of breath. When we were finished, he removed his helmet and wiped his forehead with a towel.

"Wow, I'm really impressed," he said. "You snap those kicks quickly and your balance is right on. Plus, I haven't met that many other opponents with as much power in their roundhouse kicks as you."

"So I was a little bit of a challenge? Even for a girl?" I asked.

His smile fell away. "For anyone. Cassie, I'm sorry for sounding like a complete ass earlier. You obviously put me in line."

"You weren't a *complete* ass," I said dryly.

He bit back a smile. "Really, I'm not such a bad guy once you get to know me."

I shrugged. "If you say so..."

"Well, I'll be back tomorrow evening, if you want to stop in and practice again."

"I'm not sure if I'll be here tomorrow, but thanks." I replied, removing my chest plate.

"Okay, well maybe I'll see you around."

I nodded. "Sure. Good luck with your next tournament."

“Thanks.”

I grabbed my gym bag and started stuffing my sparring gear into it. Mae, Master Jordan’s girlfriend, walked over and congratulated me on getting my Black Belt.

“Thanks,” I said.

As usual her makeup was flawless and she was dressed like she’d just stepped out of a fashion magazine. Her exotic Asian eyes glinted with amusement.

She motioned towards Bryce. “So...you like that boy?”

“What?” I shook my head vehemently. “No...he’s just an instructor.”

I could tell by her expression that she didn’t totally believe me. Neither did I for that matter.

“Cassie, you...very pretty girl. You should let me shape your eyebrows and give you manicure. I will do it, no charge. Men like beautiful nails and tidy eyebrows.” Mae owns the nail shop in the same mini-mall as the karate studio.

“Oh, no...that’s okay, Mae,” I replied, now feeling self-conscious about my eyebrows. I realized my nails were a lost cause, but I thought I’d done a pretty decent job plucking my own eyebrows.

She unexpectedly grabbed my hand and looked at my nails. “No. You come and let me do this for you. Your nails are...ugly. This is my treat for earning your Black Belt. Tomorrow night?”

Embarrassed and defeated, I accepted her offer. “Um, okay. Thank you?”

Master Jordan joined us and put his arms around her. “Better listen to Mae. She won’t accept NO for an answer.”

“Either do you,” she replied firmly.

“What can I say, Mae? I didn’t want you to miss out on having such a great guy. Besides, you know you couldn’t resist me. You finally said yes.” He was actually pretty good looking for someone in their thirties. Blond hair, blue eyes, and kicking body, he kind of reminds me of Paul Walker, from the “Fast and The Furious.”

She chuckled. “I gave in so you’d stop embarrassing me at my shop. How many times a week did you ask for both pedicure and date?”

“I thought you liked massaging my feet?”

She looked down at his feet. “I got tired of looking at your corns.”

Master Jordan’s face fell, but I could tell he was amused. “Corns? Mae, you’re killing me!”

Mae and I burst out laughing. She then grabbed him around the waist and dragged him away while he pretended to pout.

I walked through the locker room and into the entryway, where Nora was standing. “So, that new instructor was smoking hot,” she said. “Did you get his number?”

I scowled. “No! Are you kidding? He’s an instructor. Besides, he’s kind of annoying.”

She smiled. “Well as annoying as he was, he certainly couldn’t keep his eyes off of you.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s because we were sparring, Nora.”

She shook her head. “No, it was more than that.”

Her words pleased me, though. I was a little intrigued with him; there was no denying that. But he was an instructor and too arrogant for my tastes.

“You need a ride home?” I asked her.

“No, Scott’s going to give me a lift.” This time *Nora’s* cheeks turned bright pink. “It’s no big deal. I

guess he doesn't live far from my grandma's. Anyway, I was wondering if you'd want to hang out this weekend? My dad sent a copy of his latest CD. We could listen to it and order a pizza or something. If you don't have anything else going on?"

That was surprising. "I might be able to Saturday night. I'll call you."

Just then Scott walked up and hip-checked me. "Hey, girl, you ready for prom?"

"Almost," I replied.

Nora's face fell. "You guys are going to the prom together?"

"Just as friends!" we both said at the same time.

Her face brightened immediately. "Oh, well that's cool! Have fun."

"You're not going?" Scott asked Nora.

She shook her head and began picking at lint on her karate uniform.

"Well, why not?" he asked.

Nora sighed and lifted her arms up. "Are you kidding me? Could you picture me at prom?"

"Actually, yes I could. I'm kind of shocked that nobody asked you," replied Scott.

Nora rolled her eyes. "Don't be. It really isn't my thing anyway. Look, we'd better get going. I have to check on Grams, make sure she's okay."

"No problem," said Scott. He turned to me. "I'll talk to you at school tomorrow."

"Bye, you guys," I said. "I'll catch you tomorrow, Nora."

She nodded and I watched as they left together. When he opened the passenger door for her, she appeared surprised, then flashed him one of her rare smiles. It suddenly all made sense to me; Nora was totally into Scott, and seeing the way Scott responded

to Nora, he probably felt the same way.

# CHAPTER FOUR

When I picked up Allie from her dance class, she was unusually quiet.

“Is everything okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she replied, laying her blond head back against the seat. Normally she was a chatterbox, so I knew something was bothering her.

I turned down my radio. “Spill it...what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

Allie and I didn’t always get along, but she’s still my little sister and I don’t like seeing her glum. “Okay. But if you need my advice on anything...”

She let out a dramatic sigh. “Well, if you really want to know...” Then she rambled on about some boy she had a crush on at school. Apparently he teased her in front of everyone, completely humiliating her. “He actually said I was high maintenance!”

It took all my will to hold back my smile. Obviously he knew Allie pretty well. “Listen, boys your

age are clueless. Forget about him and focus on something else, like getting good grades, or hanging out with your friends. In a couple of years, the guys will be following you around like puppy dogs.” It was true, with her blond hair, blue eyes, and radiant smile, she had absolutely nothing to worry about.

“You sound just like mom,” she pouted.

I cringed, although I agreed with my mother on this one. “Well this time she’s right.”

Allie fell silent again and took out her cell phone. A minute later she was on the phone with Kylie, Paige’s younger sister. They were close friends. They chatted for a few minutes, making plans for the weekend. When she hung up, she was her usual upbeat self.

“Kylie wants to see a movie this weekend and have a sleepover.”

“That sounds like fun,” I replied.

Allie’s eyes lit up. “Hey, you should come over, too. We could order a pizza and swim in the indoor pool at night. It’s so cool.”

Paige and Kylie’s mother, Kristie, just recently married this rich guy named Dan. He owns several restaurants in the area and they now live in a huge mansion with two swimming pools, a tennis court, and a shooting range. Allie spends more time there than she does at home.

I narrowed my eyes. “Kristie is going to be gone? That could lead to trouble.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking cross.

Kylie is a nice girl, but she tends to attract trouble, even when she isn’t looking for it. My mom says that Kylie reminds her exactly of Kristie when she was little. Our moms had played together as children, and I guess Kristie had been a real *hell-raiser* growing

up. Frankly, she's still pretty feisty and you never know what she'll say or do next. Kylie has the same fiery spirit as her mom and it's gotten both Allie and herself in trouble in the past.

"Forget about it. Well, it sounds interesting but I promised Nora I'd hang out with her Saturday night. She's depressed about her dad being away. She lost her driver's license a few months ago and doesn't have many friends."

"Nora? Awesome, invite her too! I'm sure Paige will be fine with that."

I snorted. "Unlikely. Nora scares the crap out of most people. I can't imagine Paige being thrilled about her coming over."

"Just check," Allie pleaded. "It would be so much fun! I haven't been to a real slumber-party in ages. It's usually just me and Kylie."

Shrugging, I said, "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"It's going to be so much fun!" my sister replied all giddy. She turned on the radio and started singing and bouncing around to the music. "Hey, it's your song!" Ironically it's called "*Wild Ones*" by Flo Rida, and she's always playing it for me on her iPod.

"Allie, don't forget to check with mom, too!" I yelled over the music

She nodded, then leaned over and gave me an unexpected kiss on the cheek. Unlike me, she wasn't shy about showing affection to anyone. "I get to hang out with my sister," she sang. "*The Wild One!*"

I smiled at her. Allie was growing up quickly, but to me, she'd always be the mischievous imp dancing around in her crooked tiara and Little Mermaid gown.

~~~

Later that night, when my mother read the information about the flu shot, she was furious. She crumpled up the permission sheet and tossed it into the garbage. “It’s ridiculous. They can’t enforce this. I’m calling the school.”

I rolled my eyes. “Mom there’s nothing you can do. Maybe we should just get the stupid shot.”

Mom put her hands on her hips. “Are you kidding me? Absolutely not! Did you notice how our family hasn’t come down with anything yet? It’s because *we* don’t get those stupid flu shots. If we did, we’d probably be as sick as everyone else.”

“Sorry...” I mumbled.

Allie pouted. “Mom, I *have* to go to school. There’s a *major* test next week.” I also knew she didn’t want to be away from her friends or the guy she was crushing on.

Mom put her arm around Allie’s shoulders. “Don’t worry about it, sweetie. I’ll make some calls and get this taken care of.”

I got up off the couch and stretched. “Well, if I can’t go to school, I’m definitely not hanging around Daycare Central,” I said.

“I’m sure you’ll find something to do. Otherwise you can run some errands for me, like picking up your prom dress.”

Although I wasn’t thrilled about wearing a dress, my mother had helped me choose one that I actually liked; a strapless, coral-colored chiffon gown that made my waist look smaller and my skin look tan.

After dinner, as my mom disinfected the daycare area of the house, I took a shower, then retreated to my bedroom and turned on the television. There were news reports on every channel covering the

flu epidemic. On channel eleven, Eva King's mother, Veronica, was interviewing a spokesperson from the Centers for Disease Control Prevention (C.D.C). I actually like Eva's mother, who I'd met back in grade school at a birthday party. Although she's somewhat of a celebrity, she never once acted snooty or cold. In fact she was really sweet to everyone, unlike her daughter.

Veronica definitely wasn't herself today; she looked sick and miserable. Her normally tan face was pale, her nose bright red, and her blue eyes watery. Usually she looked so professional, with no red curl out of place.

"This is Veronica King, and if you're just tuning in, I have Dr. William Blake from the Centers for Disease Control on satellite. We've been discussing this new flu virus that people are referring to as 'The Creeper', because it starts out slow and then hits its victim pretty hard. Does that about sum it up, Doctor?"

"Correct," replied Dr. Blake stiffly. He was over fifty, slim, with little round glasses and wispy grey hair that didn't quite cover the bald spot.

"Thank you again for joining us, Doctor. As I mentioned, this virus has been spreading at an alarming rate. It's affected the entire country," she croaked and then cleared her throat. "Excuse me. I mean the entire *world*. The big question tonight is, how do we control this growing epidemic?"

"That's easy, Ms. King, we control it by making wise decisions; like getting vaccinated. It's imperative, especially for our elderly and small children."

Veronica's eyes narrowed. "And you stand behind this vaccine one hundred percent? Earlier we heard from other medical experts stating that they don't feel the vaccine is having a significant enough

effect on this particular virus. Millions of people have still contracted severe flu symptoms even after getting vaccinated. Emergency rooms have been flooded and can't even care for their patients properly. They've had to turn people away. Let me ask you this, is the CDC working on improving the current vaccine?"

Dr. Blake cleared his throat. "Yes, well, our scientists are working around the clock to evaluate and improve the current vaccine. But, these things still take a considerable amount of time. I cannot stress enough, however, how important it is to get the current vaccine that is available right now."

Frowning, she replied, "What's the point if it doesn't seem to be working? What about those people who've been hospitalized? Countless numbers of patients who've slipped into comas; reports indicate they'd all received the vaccination."

Dr. Blake smiled smugly. "I can assure you that if they hadn't been vaccinated, they would have probably perished. We are quite confident that the vaccine has lessened the symptoms and has saved many lives thus far."

She released a heavy sigh. "Well, I hope you're right. One last thing...there have been accusations from certain leaders of the United Nations, claiming the virus was created by terrorists, specifically targeting countries the U.S. supports. What are your views on this?"

He laughed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Utter nonsense. Come on, a terrorist virus? It's just another strain of the seasonal flu. In a week or two we'll have a more powerful vaccine available to the public and this won't seem like such a crisis. It's just the flu, nothing more."

Veronica sniffled and grabbed a tissue. "Excuse

me.” She dabbed at her nose then smiled weakly. “A flu virus on...steroids?”

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“Okay. Thank you for joining us tonight, Dr. Blake. This is Veronica King with WCCL, reminding everyone to keep taking your vitamins and stock up on tissues.”

I sighed and turned off the television.

There was a soft knock on my door and then my mother peeked in. “Cassie, Paige is on the phone,” she said.

“Wow...nice look, mom,” I snorted. Pieces of brown hair stuck out of a plastic cap and her face was covered with thick, green slime.

She smiled and patted her head. “Oh, you like this?”

“It’s awesome. Dad’s going to love it, seriously.”

Her hazel eyes sparkled with amusement. “You think? Your dad and I are going to a party this weekend and I’d hate to embarrass him.”

“He’ll be the envy of all the other guys with you on his arm.”

She left and I could hear her giggling all the way down the hall.

I picked up the phone. “Hi.”

“Hi, Cassie.”

“So I heard about the slumber-party.”

“Yeah, but unfortunately I made plans with Nora for Saturday night.”

“Well, do you think she’d want to hang out with all of us? I don’t have any plans yet for this weekend and my folks are going out. As long as she behaves herself, we should have fun.”

I cracked up. “Honestly, Nora’s not *that* bad. She told Eva King off in the bathroom earlier today; it was

awesome! You both might have more in common than you think.”

“Really? Well, in that case, she’s definitely invited. Let me know what she says.”

After I hung up with Paige, I called Nora to find out if she’d be willing to go to Paige’s Saturday night. Fortunately, she liked the idea.

“So she has a swimming pool? That sounds cool. I’ll hang,” said Nora.

“Okay. I’ll let Paige know.”

“Sweet!”

I hung up the phone right as Allie rushed into my room.

“Excuse me? Knock before you enter,” I said.

Her eyes were large. “Oh, my God...you have to watch the news! Some hospital in France was attacked by a bunch of crazy patients. I guess they were acting like cannibals, eating each other’s flesh! Can you believe it? How gross is that?”

I made a face. “Really?”

We turned on the television. Sure enough, every channel was reporting about the incident. On one station, an anchorman stood outside of the French hospital where their local police surrounded the building.

“So far, there have been reports of at least fifty fatalities during this bizarre attack. The building has now been secured and everything seems to be under control. At least ten people have been arrested and detained; all were patients that were being treated in the hospital when this madness occurred. We’ll have more updates for you in just a minute.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” I said, turning off the television. “I don’t want to hear any more. This stuff gives me nightmares, so if you want to watch the

news, do it in your room.”

Allie blew on her freshly painted nails. “No, that’s okay. It’s too freaky for me to watch, too. Anyway ...did you talk to Nora yet about Saturday?”

“Yes, she’s interested,” I said, picking up my iPod.

“Cool. I like Nora and I really *love* her tattoo.”

Nora had several tattoos, but the one Allie was referring to was of a small fairy on the back of her neck. A blue fairy covered in chainmail that was scowling and stood ready to kick ass.

I looked at my sister in surprise, as far as I could remember, she’d always been a girly-girl. “Isn’t that a little dark for your tastes?”

She looked at me like I was an alien. “No. In fact I’m going to see if I can get my nose pierced for my birthday this year.”

I snorted. “Good luck with that. I’d like to see dad’s expression when you run it by him.”

She put her hands on her waist and scowled. “Mom will let me.”

“Right...”

Allie mumbled something and then left the room.

Tweens, I thought. *They think they know everything.*

CHAPTER FIVE

I woke up Tuesday morning without Jed sneaking up on me or any remnants of a nightmare where someone was trying to eat my brains. When I made it to the bathroom without any kids charging after me, I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. The house was so unnaturally quiet that it put me on edge and I just couldn't enjoy it.

When I made it to the kitchen, my dad was eating and reading the paper.

"Well, this is kind of a nice change," commented my dad as he finished a bowl of cereal. Normally he brought his breakfast downstairs to his *Man Cave*.

"Nice? It's *weird*. Megan is the only one here and it's too quiet," I answered.

"I'll take the *weird and quiet* any day," he said then glanced at his watch. "Shoot, I'm running late. Bye, sweetheart." He stood up and kissed the top of my head.

"See you later, dad."

Just then two-year-old Megan came barreling into the kitchen, giggling. “Hi, Cassie!” she shouted.

“Hi, Megan,” I answered as she flung herself at me, wrapping her arms tightly around my legs. We’d watched her since she was a baby and I had to admit, she held a special place in my heart.

I kneeled down and tugged her hair. “Oh...your hair looks so cute today!” Her short blond hair was pulled tightly into two little ponytails. She touched them proudly and smiled with her big doe eyes.

“Where Jed?” she asked.

I poked her playfully in the tummy. “Don’t know.”

She giggled and then asked, “Where Daniel?”

“Don’t know,” I said, this time tickling her.

She laughed hysterically as I continued to tickle her. When she’d had enough, I put her on my lap and she asked about the remaining daycare kids.

I sighed. “Sorry, I really don’t know. I think most of them are sick and stayed home with their mommies to get better.”

Just then my mom walked into the kitchen and informed me that everyone *was* sick with the flu. Except for Megan and her mother, Sara, who was six months pregnant.

“Thank God Sara’s not sick with this virus,” I replied.

“And she’s *not* getting that vaccination, either. I talked her out of it,” declared my mom proudly.

“Daddy sick,” Megan said, matter-of-factly. She then raced back into the toy area.

“Oh. Well hopefully he doesn’t get either of them sick,” I said.

“I heard that Kevin is just miserable and wants her to stay away from him. I told Sara she could stay

here if she wanted to, since her folks live a couple of hours away, and she still has to work. At least until after Megan's dad gets better. But she declined. She just doesn't want to impose. Plus, she really wants to take care of him."

"Oh," I said. I looked at my mom's hair. It looked pretty with the new highlights and colored gray. "Your hair looks nice, mom."

She smiled at me. "Thanks, honey."

"And have you lost some weight?" I asked.

"Maybe a little," she replied, looking down. "I haven't had time to eat much this week with all of the kids being sick. I'm actually relieved that most of them are gone today."

"So am I," I replied. When the kids were here, my germ phobia was on high alert. Lately, it's begun to recede.

My mom turned on the small television sitting on the kitchen counter. She poured herself a cup of coffee and began flipping through the channels.

"I'm going to karate class again tonight, mom," I told her.

"Um?" she replied, not really paying attention.

I raised my voice. "I said, I won't be home until after eight this evening. I'm getting a free manicure from Mae and then I'm going to karate."

She turned to me and put her arm around my shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey. I wasn't trying to ignore you. I was just trying to see if there are any updates about the crisis in Europe."

I grabbed a fresh blueberry muffin that was sitting on the stove. "Crisis? Are you talking about that attack at the French hospital?"

She took a sip of coffee. "Well, there's been a string of violence and rioting in other countries as well.

France, Germany, Italy, everywhere. It's kind of crazy."

"Are they terrorist attacks?"

"That's the thing... nobody is really sure who is doing it or why it keeps happening. The government isn't releasing any information and the media is bewildered. It's just really... *bizarre*."

"Well, I'm sure it will all blow over," I answered, dismissing it. To me it seemed that violence was pretty normal all over the world at any given moment.

She shrugged and then turned off the television. "Could you pick up Allie tonight at Kylie's? They are working on some science project. That way her mom won't have to drive her home."

"Fine, but it won't be until after eight o'clock."

"That's fine. I'll let them know. Thanks, honey."

~~~

My truck sputtered to life and then made some weird pattering noises as I drove over to Paige's house. When she got in to the truck, she looked at me nervously.

"Are you *sure* we're going to make it to school in this rig? It sounds pretty bad."

I raised my eyebrows and lied through my teeth. "Ye of little faith...of course I'm sure!"

"Well...okay."

"You worry too much, Paige."

She shrugged and then her eyes became really round. "I forgot to tell you! Guess what?"

"What?" I asked.

"My mom got a tattoo on her lower back! A butterfly tattoo."

I smiled. "Your mom got a '*tramp stamp*'?"

That's what some of the guys at school liked to

call lower back tattoos.

She nodded. “Oh, my God... yes! Dan made her do it.”

“I’m sure your mom had some say.”

Kristie isn’t exactly what I’d call a pushover. She has a sharp tongue and the body of an amazon to back it up.

“I don’t know, but if she starts getting piercings on odd places of her body, I’m not sticking around.”

I burst out laughing, trying to imagine Kristie with a tongue ring and a new lisp.

“It’s not funny,” said Paige, trying to stop the smile threatening her lips.

My eyes were watering I was laughing so hard. “Oh, come on. It’s funny!”

She folded her hands across her chest. “Okay, think about your mom getting her nose pierced or something further south.”

I grimaced. “Okay, that’s totally not funny.”

The truck made some weird snorting noise and we both looked worriedly at each other.

“Just please...get us to school,” begged Paige.

I nodded and we drove in a nervous silence. Miraculously, we made it with minutes to spare.

“Great, it’s Eva,” I muttered, watching as her red car pulled up next to ours. To make matters worse, my truck backfired as she was sliding out of her car.

Eva ignored us completely, which was a pleasant surprise to us both. The way she was blowing her nose made it obvious as to why.

The entire school day was pretty much uneventful, although there were even less students than yesterday. Many brought signed permission slips, and the line leading to the gymnasium, where the shots were being administered, was never-ending.

Because I wasn't getting any kind of vaccination, I did what I could to avoid getting sick by sucking on vitamin C lozenges throughout the day and drinking bottled green tea. When the final bell of the day rang, we were almost the last vehicle in the parking lot and someone had to give us a jump.

"See you tomorrow?" I asked her.

"I might get a ride from Jeremy," she answered. "Call me if you want one as well."

I nodded, hoping that my truck would hold up a few more days. It was probably time to talk to my dad about getting it fixed.

When I arrived at the nail shop, Mae greeted me with open arms then stared at my eyebrows with disapproval.

"Eyebrows first," she announced and then dragged me to the back of the shop where she pushed me into a high-backed leather reclining chair. She reclined it until I was looking straight up at her. Taking a small eyebrow comb, she brushed my eyebrows then carefully spread something warm above my eyelids.

"Wax," she murmured staring intently at my unruly eyebrows.

"Oh."

"Relax," she demanded, pressing firmly down on them. I closed my eyes and she ripped away a strip of eyebrow hair.

"Ahhh!" I gasped.

She gave me a wry smile. "Not that bad."

When Mae spread wax above my other eye, I grasped onto the arms of the chair and waited as she counted.

"One, two..." and then she tore it off.

I flinched and looked up at her. "Hey! What

happened to *three?*”

She patted my arm and laughed. “Better this way. Hair comes out easier when you don’t tense up.”

Mae then picked up the tweezers and began plucking away. When she appeared satisfied with the results, she applied some kind of gel that immediately soothed my irritated skin. She handed me a mirror; my skin was bright pink above my eyes, but I had to admit, my brows definitely looked more *sophisticated*. I grinned and nodded my approval.

“No more bushes,” she stated proudly.

“Yes, thank you.”

Next, Mae took me over to a nail technician.

“This Ming,” she said and turned to the young girl. “French nails. Sports length.”

Ming nodded and gave then me a sympathetic look as she examined my nails.

“Pretty bad, huh?” I asked.

She shrugged and then began transforming my stubby nails into something less pathetic. Forty-five minutes later, after thanking Mae profusely, I left the shop, unable to stop staring at my new French manicure. My fingertips had never looked so clean and white.

# CHAPTER SIX

I was ravenous when I left Mae's shop, but there wasn't enough time to stop anywhere for food. I remembered a vending machine in the karate studio, so I scrounged around in my purse and found some loose change.

The studio is located in the same mini-mall, just two doors down from the nail shop. As I stopped by my truck to grab my sports bag, I noticed Bryce's motorcycle parked nearby, and the butterflies in my stomach began to flutter. I took a deep breath and walked through the door.

The front viewing room was unoccupied, the receptionist gone, but the vending machine was full, luckily, with one of my favorite snacks. I purchased a bag of dill pickle potato chips and washed it down with a bottle of water. Knowing I was alone, I released a silent burp but then panicked; *my breath was horrible!* I scrounged around in my jeans and found enough

money for a pack of mints. At least I wouldn't be attacking anyone with my rancid breath.

Slipping into the locker room, I brushed my hair back into a ponytail, applied some mascara, and put on some lip gloss that my sister had given me last night. With my new eyebrows, I had to admit I looked pretty darn good.

Glancing at the time, I noticed that I was running late, so I rushed to put on my uniform. I tied my belt quickly and then respectfully entered the dojo.

Bryce and Scott were off in a corner practicing with *Bokkens*, which are wooden Samurai training swords. I caught Bryce's eye briefly as he leaped over Scott's Bokken, and counter-attacked. My heart raced as I watched them swinging, jumping, and striking at each other so sinuously. Although I could see that both guys were extremely talented with their *Bokkens*, there was no denying that Bryce was the expert.

When they finished up, Scott greeted me with a warm smile while Bryce barely acknowledged my presence, offering only a curt nod as he put his equipment away. It was unnerving, especially after the way he'd teased me only the day before.

"Cassie," said Scott, kneeling next to me while I stretched my legs. "I've been meaning to ask you...what do *you* think of Nora?"

I'd completely forgotten about Nora. "Nora? Where is she? She was supposed to be here." Come to think about it, I hadn't remembered seeing her at school earlier in the day either.

He ran a hand over his face and sighed. "Well, I went to pick her up earlier and she was upset. She can't get in touch with her dad, doesn't know exactly which city he's in, and with the violence going on in Germany, she's really freaking out. She stayed home

with her grandmother to comfort her and find out what's going on."

I stood up quickly. "Oh, shoot! Maybe I should give her a call and see if I can help, somehow."

Scott shook his head and laughed wryly. "I doubt she'll be very receptive. I tried sticking around to see if I could help, but she basically told me to '*get lost*.'"

I sighed. "I'm sure she's just upset."

"Tell me about it. Anyway, that's why I wanted to ask you about her. I really don't know her aside from this class. It seems to me that she comes around as some kind of *tough ass* most of the time. She has this prickly wall around her. Then other times she throws me for a loop by acting normal, almost sweet. I think she actually *flirted* with me yesterday."

I smiled. "Maybe she likes you?"

He snorted. "Well, she has a strange way of showing it."

"Seriously, Scott, I know very little about her myself. She hasn't made many friends at school; she either scares people away or just blows them off. To tell you the truth, I was shocked when she asked me to hang out with her this weekend."

Just then Bryce stormed over, interrupting us. "Hey?"

"Yes?" I answered.

He studied my face for a minute. "You two going to sit here and waste time, or did you actually want to learn something today?"

His rudeness surprised and irritated me. I glared at him. "Sure, but who put you in charge?"

Bryce put his hands on his waist. "Excuse me? That's no way to talk to an instructor, Wild," he answered gruffly.

“Respect is earned,” I countered.

A muscle twitched in his jaw as we stared at each other. Before I had a chance to catch my breath, he stalked away.

I looked at Scott. “What crawled up his butt?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. He was fine earlier.”

I glanced towards Bryce, who was now on his cell phone. From the expression on his face, he was in the middle of a very heated discussion.

Master Jordan took that moment to step out of his office, up-beat as usual.

“Hi, guys! Listen, Bryce is going to assist you tonight with training. I promised Mae I’d take her to dinner tonight.”

I released a heavy sigh. “Great.”

Master Jordan took my arm and pulled me aside. “What is it? Is Bryce giving you any trouble?”

I shook my head. “Not really, he’s just...grouchy.”

He scratched his closely-cropped beard and said, “Well, I came down hard on him this afternoon for his performance yesterday. This is a respectable karate studio, not a dating service.”

I looked at him blankly. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, I heard the way he was flirting with you yesterday.”

Embarrassed, I lowered my eyes. “Oh.”

He touched my shoulder. “Cassie, if he gives you any trouble, let me know right away. Call me, text me, whatever you have to do. But sincerely, I don’t think you have to worry about him; he really is a decent guy. He just needed a little reminder of *whom* and *what* he’s representing here at the studio.”

“Well, don’t worry about me. I can certainly take care of myself.”

Secretly I hadn't minded the banter between us yesterday. In fact, his taunting blue eyes were all I'd thought about since then. It was one of the reasons I'd showed up today.

"By the way," Master Jordan said as he lifted my hands and examined my fingertips, "your nails look very lovely...for a *killing machine*."

I giggled. "Thank you, *Sensei*."

"Now, my dear Cassie, I think they're waiting for you," he said, releasing my hands and turning me around.

Bryce avoided eye contact, which made me even more irritated. I hadn't done anything to deserve his cruel attitude today.

"See you guys next week!" waved Master Jordan as he walked out of the studio.

As I waved, I caught Bryce staring at me again. He looked away and took a drink of water.

"Ready, guys?" he asked finally. Then he had us form a line to do several push-ups and sit-ups.

The next half hour we practiced several difficult kicks and punches which I normally enjoy. Today it was pure hell. Bryce was so intolerable that even Scott noticed and started getting frustrated.

"Dude, what is your problem? Ever since *The Wild One* got here, you've been riding our asses!"

I wanted to kick Scott for saying that. He liked to tease me about my nickname, too.

Bryce's face grew hot. "Look," he said, "you're both Black Belts now and I'm here to teach you, not make things easy or comfortable."

"Yeah, but you don't have to be a dick about it," replied Scott.

Bryce smiled coldly. "If you can't handle my way of teaching, then feel free to leave."

“Best thing you’ve come up with all night. I’m outta here,” said Scott, grabbing his gym bag. He muttered something under his breath and stomped out of the dojo. Deep down, I knew he’s wanted to leave earlier, to check on Nora. I could tell he was already falling for her.

Bryce turned to me with a stony expression. “What about you, *Wild One*?”

I stuck my chin out defiantly. “What *about* me?”

“You think I’m too demanding?”

“You’re a little...intense.”

Bryce’s mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. He ran a hand through his wavy hair then gazed candidly at me. “You know, there’s something different about you today. You’ve done something...to your hair or face.”

I shrugged. I certainly wasn’t going to tell him I had my eyebrows waxed. Instead I said, “Could it be the way my eyes are glaring at you? Oh, wait! They were doing the same thing yesterday.”

He looked away and chuckled.

His moods were so up and down, I wondered if he was even aware that he was slightly deranged. “Are we done here? Because I don’t think I want to spend another half hour with someone who’s obviously got an issue with me.”

Bryce gave me a confused look. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“You’ve been shooting daggers at me since I got here. I’m not even sure what I’ve done to offend you so much,” I said and started walking away.

He grabbed my arm. “You don’t offend me at all.”

“Well you have a strange way of showing it,” I said looking up at him.

His eyes searched mine and softened. “Your eyes

are so...fascinating,” he said, still holding onto my arm.

I’ve had compliments on my eyes before, which always puzzled me since I thought they looked like pretty average brown eyes. My mom says it’s because my lashes are so thick and long.

He stepped back and cleared his throat. “Well, listen it’s getting late and I’ve got to get home. We should call it a night.”

I nodded. “I have to pick up my sister anyway.”

Bryce started shutting off the lights in the dojo and I went into the locker room to wash up and run a brush through my hair. When I walked out of the locker room I found him waiting for me in the entryway, dressed in faded jeans and a tight blue T-shirt. He was on his cell phone, clearly frustrated with whomever he was talking to. I waved at him and he hung up the phone.

“Hold up, I’ll walk you out,” he said, throwing on a brown leather jacket.

“Okay,” I said.

He locked the front entrance door, set the alarm, and walked me outside. “Nice night,” he said, looking into the sky.

There was a soft breeze and the stars twinkled above us. “Yeah,” I replied.

He followed me to my truck and stood watching me fumble in my purse for my keys. “Listen,” he said, clearing his throat. “I’m sorry about earlier. I was being a little bit of a jerk I guess.”

“You guess?” I asked dryly.

He shrugged. “I just...there’s stuff going on at home,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

“And then there’s Master Jordan bawling you out.”

Bryce chuckled. "He told you, huh? Well, he *was* right. I was out of line and should have been more professional."

"It wasn't a big deal. It really didn't bother me."

"Good, because I wasn't trying to bother you," he said, looking away. "You just...intrigue me I guess."

I blushed. "Intrigue you?" I couldn't believe a guy found me intriguing. Especially one that *was* incredibly hot.

He turned to me again. "Yes...but I'm one of your karate instructors and probably too old for you."

I searched his face, trying to decipher how old he actually was. He had a strong jawline with a five o'clock shadow and thick, dark eyebrows that emphasized the blueness of his eyes. He was definitely good-looking, but not the type of perfection that you read about in sappy romance novels. Bryce's nose was slightly crooked and there was a white scar near his chin cleft. "So, how old *are* you?"

He smiled. "Twenty."

That wasn't so bad, although I knew my parents wouldn't be excited about me dating someone almost old enough to enter a bar.

His cell chirped and he frowned. "Well, I better let you get home. I've got to take this call; it's probably my mother, again."

"Ok. See you around," I said, getting into my truck.

He turned around and began walking towards his motorcycle.

I admired his derriere again as I stuck my key into the truck's ignition. There was a loud click when I turned the key, but unfortunately nothing else. After a couple more attempts to start the engine, Bryce noticed and jogged back over. I rolled my window

down.

“Pop the hood,” he said.

I obeyed and he began fiddling around with things in the engine.

“Try it again!” he called from under the hood.

Again, nothing happened.

He rubbed the back of his hand against his forehead and looked down again.

“Okay, now try it!” he yelled again.

This time it fired right up.

He smiled and gave me a thumbs-up. Closing the hood, he walked over to my open window. “I think you might need a new carburetor,” he said, wiping his fingers on his jeans. He had a smudge of grease on his forehead and I smiled, but didn’t tell him.

“Is it safe to drive?”

“You should be fine. But let me give you my cell phone number, just in case you have any problems. I’d follow you, but I really need to get home,” he replied just as his cell phone began to ring again. He checked his phone but didn’t answer.

“Thanks,” I said as he gave me his number.

“Good thing I was still here. This place is like a ghost town.”

I glanced around the dark shops and streets. It *was* totally deserted. “It’s the flu, I bet. Nobody is going anywhere.”

He nodded. “I know what that’s like. My mom has it, too. That’s why she keeps calling me, hounding me to get home.”

I smiled at him. “Well, then you better go. Thanks again, Bryce.”

He slowly leaned forward and brushed a strand of my hair away from my lips. The smell of leather and his aftershave was intoxicating. I held my breath as he

stared into my eyes. “Call me when you get home so I know you made it, okay?” he asked, his voice husky. I knew right then and there, that I’d never met anyone who’d taken my breath away as much as Bryce did. “Sure,” I replied softly.

“Okay, well goodbye again, ‘Wild One,’” he said, turning away.

I watched as Bryce jogged back over to his motorcycle. He put on his leather jacket and helmet then straddled the bike. He waited until I started moving then followed me for a couple of blocks. When his bike turned away and he was no longer in my rearview mirror, I was already missing him.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

My phone began vibrating as I headed to Kylie and Paige's to pick up Allie, which I'd almost forgotten about. I grabbed it out of my pocket and read a text from my mom telling me that school was cancelled for the rest of the week and I didn't have to pick up my sister since she was staying overnight.

*Nice*, I thought. That was one less thing I had to worry about.

I changed directions and started heading home. I noticed most of the roads were completely deserted, which wasn't as surprising as the fact that many of the fast food restaurants and gas stations I passed were also dark and closed. The flu was destroying profits for many businesses.

My mom was reading a book in the *Man Cave* when I got home. "Hi, honey," she said, setting it down on the end table.

“Hey,” I replied.

She smiled. “Your eyebrows look very...chic.”

“Thanks – and check out my nails,” I said, holding out my hands.

“Very nice,” she replied, lifting them up.

I sunk into the oversized couch next to her favorite chair. “So, school’s closed. That’s a first.”

“Yes, it’s on the news. All of the schools have been shut down temporarily, due to the flu.” She stretched her arms and stood up. “Are you hungry? I could make you a sandwich.”

“Yes, I’m starving! Thanks, mom.”

I got up and followed her into the kitchen where she began making me a tuna and pickle sandwich. I washed my hands and sat down.

Just then my dad walked into the kitchen.

“Hello, ladies,” he said, kissing us both on the cheek.

“Hi, dad,” I said.

My mom smiled. “Hi, honey, how was your day?”

He gave us a despairing look and sat down by the counter. “It was a complete waste of time, with absolutely no customers. It’s almost the end of the month and they still expect us to move cars. Everyone has the flu. How do I overcome that obstacle?”

“I’m sorry,” said my mom as she moved behind him and began rubbing his shoulders.

He closed his eyes and smiled. “Thanks, that feels good.”

“Maybe business will pick up tomorrow?” asked my mom.

“Doubtful. Damn, I just need to find a new job.”

My mom and I both looked at each other but didn’t say anything.

He grabbed my mom and hugged her. “Can we

switch jobs for a day? Let me corral the daycare kids and you can sell cars. Come on, hon.”

My mom smiled sympathetically. “You wouldn’t survive a day.”

“I could put them in kennels? Lock them up and feed them when they get hungry,” he said, smiling.

“Very funny,” my mom answered.

My cell phone began to ring. It was Bryce! I’d forgotten to call him back.

“I’m sorry!” I answered into the phone.

My parents stared curiously as I hurried out of the kitchen.

“You should be. I was getting worried about you,” Bryce said sternly.

I smiled with pleasure. Bryce was actually worried about me.

“I made it. I survived,” I said.

He chuckled. “So, did you notice the roads? How deserted they were? I thought maybe I was in one of those old episodes of the *Twilight Zone* or something. It was really weird.”

“It *was* totally odd. This flu virus must be really getting out of control,” I said.

“Tell me about it. My mother is so sick, I don’t know how she’s going to care for my brother tomorrow,” he muttered.

“I didn’t know you had a brother. How old is he?”

“Bobby? He’s six.”

“Well, my mother runs a daycare. She might be willing to watch him until your mom gets better.”

I could almost see the smile spreading across his face. “Wow, really? I have to work tomorrow, otherwise I’d just stay home with him,” he paused. “I work for a construction company and we have this major

deadline coming up. My boss already called me tonight to make sure I was still coming in. Most of the guys on this job are sick and he's frantic."

"If you promise to be nice to me, I might ask her to watch him."

Bryce laughed wickedly. "Really? Well, I can be extremely nice if it gets me what I want."

I groaned. "You're such a...man."

"You didn't notice before?"

"Believe me...*everyone* notices."

"Well, I wouldn't know about that."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I blurted. I'm not sure where it came from but I was dying to know.

He paused then said, "No, not at the moment."

I was glad he couldn't see my face, because it was burning. I couldn't believe I'd asked him like that, out of the blue. Like a little schoolgirl.

"You still there?" he asked softly.

I took a deep breath, "Um...yeah. So...your brother, does he have any allergies?"

"No...but I suppose I should mention that he has Down's Syndrome. He's a great kid; really friendly and gets along with everyone. But, obviously he needs special attention sometimes."

"My mom's great with children. She'll take really good care of him."

"Okay, if you could talk to her and let me know. I'd really appreciate it."

"I'll call you right back."

"Thanks, Cassie."

I hung up and talked it over with my mom, leaving out the fact that Bryce was gorgeous and my heart raced every time he came near me. She agreed to talk to him and work out the details. I called him back and told him the good news.

“Thanks, I’m so relieved,” he said. “You’re such a lifesaver! I was going crazy, trying to figure out what to do with my little brother. My mom’s so sick that I’m probably going to have to find time to bring her into the clinic tomorrow as well.”

“Well, maybe she’ll be better by tomorrow and you won’t have to. Listen, my mom’s going to be calling you soon, so I’d better let you go.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

“Glad I could help.”

It was the first time *ever* that I was happy that my mom was a daycare provider. Now I would definitely get to see Bryce again.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

I learned that Bryce would be dropping off his brother Bobby around seven o'clock, so I made sure to be up and dressed. I threw on a pair of jeans, a new coral tank top, and some lip gloss.

My mom looked at me curiously when I walked out of my bedroom. "Wow, you're up early. It's only seven o'clock, you know, *in the morning.*"

I shrugged. "I know."

There was a soft knock on the door and I rushed down the stairs to answer it. Bryce stood outside, holding the hand of a little boy with similar features. Both of them had damp hair, blue jeans, and matching white polo shirts. Bobby was grinning from ear to ear. He held his hand out to me.

"Hi, I'm Bobby!" he said. "I brought my backpack!"

"Hi," I answered, shaking his hand.

My mom kneeled next to Bobby. "Hi, Bobby! My name is Kris. Are you ready to have a super fun day?"

His eyes sparkled. "Yes. Bryce said I was going to have lots of fun today."

She smiled warmly. "Well, he was right!"

"Okay, Bryce, you can go now," Bobby waved to his big brother.

Bryce chuckled. "Hold on, Buddy. I have to talk to Kris and Cassie here before you kick me out just yet."

"Okay, Bryce," he answered.

Bryce held out his hand to my mother. "Hi, I'm Bryce."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kris," she answered, shaking it. "Do you have a few minutes to fill out some paperwork and go over a couple of things before you leave? Cassie can show Bobby around."

He flashed one of his dimpled smiles and I melted, again. "Certainly."

I showed Bobby around the house and then spent a few minutes in the toy area with him. He was giddy and jumped from toy to toy.

"Wow, I love your toys!" he announced.

I smiled. "They're pretty neat, aren't they?"

"Bobby," my mom said, entering the toy area with Bryce. "Your brother has to leave for work now."

Bobby jumped up from the floor, ran over to his brother, and threw his arms around him. "I love you, Bryce."

Bryce held him tightly. "I love you, too, big guy. Be a good boy today, okay?"

Bobby stood back and crossed his heart. "Cross my heart," he said solemnly.

"Thank you again, Mrs. Wild," Bryce said turning to my mother. "You're a lifesaver."

“No problem. I’m glad I could help out. It was very nice meeting you.”

“Nice meeting you as well. Well, I’d better go. You both have my number if you need anything,” he said.

I nodded and told my mom I’d walk Bryce to the door. When we approached the entryway and before I could react, he pulled me into his arms and hugged me. “Thanks, Cassie,” he whispered into my ear. The heat of his breath made me tremble all over.

“Um, you’re welcome,” I answered breathlessly. My heart convulsed in my chest as he released me and I longed to feel his arms wrapped around me again.

He cleared his throat. “Wow, I’m sorry...”

“Why?”

The next thing I knew he turned around and was gone. A trace of his cologne lingered in the air and I closed my eyes, thinking of how exhilarating it had felt to be in his arms.

“Ahem,” my mother said. She stood at the top of the stairs, her hands folded across her chest.

“What?”

She arched an eyebrow. “He’s certainly a very good-looking young man.”

I shrugged. “So?”

“He’s a little old for you, so forget about whatever it is you’re daydreaming about.”

I snorted. “Whatever, mom...we’re just friends.”

“Okay. I’m just saying...” she said, her eyes searching mine.

I was about to respond when Megan and her mother, Sara, walked through the door. Sara appeared disheveled and upset. My mother noticed it as well and asked me to show Megan our new guest.

Megan took off her shoes, hugged her mother,

and then followed me into the toy area. When she saw Bobby, she stopped and her eyes opened wide.

“Hi,” Bobby said, grinning broadly at Megan. He was sitting on the ground and playing with Legos.

She was bashful and held firmly onto my leg. “Hi,” she answered softly. I grabbed her hand and sat down on the floor with both of them. Soon they were building something with Legos together and I was able to break free to find out what was going on in the other room.

“You can lie down in the guest room,” my mother was murmuring in the hallway. “You must be exhausted.”

“Yes, I am a little, thank you,” she replied, following my mom to our extra bedroom, which was next to mine.

When my mother returned alone, she appeared troubled. “Sara and Megan will be staying with us for a few days,” she said.

“Why?”

Mom sighed. “Her husband is very sick and demanded that she take Megan and stay somewhere else until he gets better. He’s terrified of her getting the flu and having complications with the baby. I guess the last time she was pregnant, with Megan, she ended up in the hospital with pneumonia. Anyway, he was so upset about her being at home that she finally agreed to stay at a hotel for a few days. When she told me that, I suggested that she stay here instead.”

“And she agreed?”

“Well, no...not at first. She didn’t want to impose, but I finally talked her into it.”

“Wow. Okay.”

Just then my dad shuffled into the kitchen, yawning. He poured himself a large bowl of cereal.

“Good morning,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Okay, dad, you really need to quit with the late night video games. You look exhausted.”

He cleared his throat. “I couldn’t sleep last night and the cable wasn’t working. What else is there to do in the middle of the night?”

“Oh I don’t know...read a book? Rub the bunions on mom’s feet?”

Dad grimaced. “I don’t know which sounds scarier,” he answered.

“Ha ha...very funny, you guys. My bunions just might be too sore to make dinner tonight,” she said dryly.

My dad laughed and put his arm around her. “Just messing with you, honey. You know I’d rub your bunions or warts anytime.”

She elbowed him in the ribs playfully.

“By the way,” said my dad, “I won’t be home until late this evening. I’m working until close and then I’m taking one of the guys out for dinner after. He’s leaving the dealership and all of my coworkers were going to have a ‘going away party’ for him, but of course everyone’s got the damn flu. So, it’s just us two guys.” He looked at my mom. “Would you want to meet us at the restaurant? Or I can bring you back some wings tonight if you’d like?”

My mom craves Buffalo wings almost as much as I do pickles. This time she stunned us both. She shook her head.

“No thanks on both counts. I really should stay home tonight. I’ve got some laundry and cleaning to do. As far as the wings go,” she said, touching her stomach. “I’m really trying to be good. I’ve got to start changing my diet; those things are just loaded with cholesterol.”

My dad and I looked at each other. We both knew she'd change her mind before the end of the night. She'd be texting and reminding him to bring them home until he pulled into the driveway.

"Well, if you change your mind, just let me know and I'll bring you some tonight," he replied, biting back a smile.

She shrugged and then began telling him about our new houseguests. I wasn't sure how my dad was going to react to that little tidbit of news, so I left them and went to my room, where I collapsed onto my bed. It was still early, and there was no school, so I closed my eyes, counting the minutes until I'd get to see Bryce again. Eventually I fell into a dreamless asleep.

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It was just after ten when I finally crawled back out of bed. I was hungry, so I made a ham and pickle sandwich, turned on the television, and found that the cable still wasn't working. Frustrated and bored, I decided to rearrange my bedroom. After an hour of moving heavy furniture around, I stood back only to realize that everything had worked better in their original positions. Defeated, I gave up and sent a text to Nora, to see how she was doing. Unfortunately, she didn't respond, so then I sent one to Scott, who didn't get back to me either. I knew there wasn't much I could do to help find her father, but then I started wondering if I should just drive to her house and offer a little moral support.

"Cassie," my mother said, interrupting my thoughts. "Bryce called. He's going to try and bring his mother to the clinic tonight when he finishes work. So, Bobby might be spending the night with us."

“Oh,” I answered, a little disheartened that I probably wouldn’t be seeing Bryce tonight.

Looking pensive, she strolled over to the bay window in our kitchen and stared out. I knew that something else was bothering her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

She turned around and folded her arms across her chest. “Well, Bryce was kind of concerned when I spoke to him. He claimed that a buddy of his, who’s a radio dispatcher with the Wolf Creek Police Department, gave him some alarming information. I guess there’ve been several reports of violence in town and they’re urging people to stay inside; lock their doors.”

I frowned. “Wow, that’s...scary.”

She sat down by the kitchen counter. “Tell me about it,” she answered, tapping her fingernails against the counter, absently.

My stomach clenched; Allie! I grabbed my cell phone. “Mom, I’m going to call Allie and make sure she’s okay.”

She grew pale. “Oh, God, I forgot she wasn’t home! Good thinking, honey. I better call your father, too, and see if he’s heard anything.”

Allie was oblivious to everything going on in the outside world when I called her.

“We’re swimming and Kristie’s going to make us a pizza later. She said she’ll bring me home sometime tonight.”

I sighed. “Okay. The cable is out here so if you hear something about rioting or violence, let me know right away. Make sure you tell Kristie about it, too,” I told her.

“Yeah...well the cable’s not working here either. In fact, the radio stations are down as well. There’s

nothing but static.”

“Okay, now that’s really weird.”

“Tell me about it,” Allie replied and then began shrieking with laughter. “Kylie! Oh, my God...you are so bumming! She’s going to...hey, Cass, I have to go. Kylie just pushed her mom into the pool!” Click.

Leave it to Allie; nothing outside of her world bothers her.

“Great! I can’t get a hold of your father,” my mom announced shrilly. “I sent him a few texts and even left him a voicemail.”

“Calm down, mom! I’m sure he’s with a customer. You’re worrying too much.”

She sat down and rubbed her forehead. “You’re probably right.”

“Did you call the main business line?”

“Oh, I didn’t even think about that!” She picked up her phone again and dialed. I watched her frown and then leave a message.

“Mom, if everyone has the flu, there’s probably nobody available to answer the main lines either.”

She nodded in agreement, but I could tell her mind was still racing. She was one of the most paranoid people I knew.

Sara walked into the kitchen, looking bewildered. “You’re not going to believe this, but something seriously BIG is going on!” she exclaimed, then dramatically lowered her voice, as if somebody was listening in. “A friend of mine from the military just sent me a text. They’re issuing a nationwide emergency warning. He wouldn’t get into details, although I’m betting on some kind of terrorism. Anyway, everyone is supposed to stay indoors. They’re even sending out military forces everywhere to limit travel.”

My mom's mouth dropped open. "What? How can they keep everyone in the nation from leaving their homes or driving anywhere? That's ridiculous."

Just then someone rang the doorbell.

We all stared at each other.

"I suppose one of us should answer that. I'll be right back," said my mom.

Sara and I followed her to the door.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," said the friendly young soldier standing outside. He was dressed in full military garb with a 9MM handgun holstered on his side.

"Um, hello," replied my mother, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "What can I do for you?"

He noticed me and Sara, with her pregnant belly and smiled apologetically. "My name is Lieutenant Austin Smith and I'm really sorry to bother y'all. I'm not sure if you've heard, but there have been some disturbance in town and we're securing all of the neighborhoods now to make sure there are no further issues."

"Oh, well we're fine here," my mother replied. Her eyes narrowed. "What sort of violence are we talking about?"

The soldier cleared his throat. "Nothing too major, I reckon, a few squabbles, some vandalism."

"Who was it?" I blurted out.

He shot a fleeting glance up and down my body, then his brown eyes met mine. His smile made me blush; I crossed my arms across my chest.

"I'm really not sure who they are or why, if that's your next question. My platoon's duties are to scout surrounding neighborhoods and advise everyone to stay indoors for the next twenty-four hours."

"What about people who are working or

traveling? My husband's at work and my youngest daughter isn't home from her girlfriend's yet," complained my mother.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "They'll certainly be allowed to return home, we're just advising folks from venturing out of the safety of their homes until we have everything under control. We have some roadblocks in place but will definitely allow people to go home if that's where they belong."

"Sounds a little extreme, doesn't it?" asked Sara.

"Believe me, Miss, it's for the safety of the public. We'll let y'all know when it's safe to leave your homes." His radio went off and he stepped away to respond to it.

"This is too weird," Sara whispered. "I don't like it. They're being vague but basically ordering us not to go anywhere. They can't expect people to just stop their lives and hide out at home without giving us more information."

My mom was about to respond when the soldier returned.

"Well," he said, this time looking rushed. "I've got to keep making my rounds. Just remember, ladies, stay in and lock your doors. If someone besides a military official visits your property, don't interact with them. We'll be monitoring the neighborhood pretty thoroughly, so there shouldn't be problems. Just heed the advice and everyone should be fine."

"Okay, thanks. Just let us know when the curfew you've forced upon us has been lifted," I said, unable to hide my sarcasm.

We stared at each other a minute, then he smiled. "Y'all have a nice day."

I let out an exasperated sigh when he left.

"You are such a smartass," my mom said.

“What?” I asked with a cocky grin.

“You know, I don’t like the way he was checking you out,” she stated. “Between him and Bryce, I’m going to have to watch you like a hawk.”

I snickered and shook my head.

Sara sighed. “I wonder if I should leave and check on Kevin.”

“You heard what the officer said, you can’t leave. It might not be safe,” replied my mom.

She shook her head. “That’s crap. They can’t keep me from seeing my husband.”

“Have you talked to him?” asked my mom.

“We spoke earlier. I better call him and see how he’s doing.” She grabbed her cell phone out of her pocket and walked away.

“I’d better check on the kids,” said mom.

I ran upstairs to my room and took out my cell phone. I hadn’t communicated with Bryce since this morning, so I decided to send him a text.

Hi Bryce-how are you?

Hello Wild, I was just thinking about you.

Oh? I smiled, laying my head against my pillow.

Yes-you guys doing okay?

I sighed and typed. *Yes, military stopped by to say we can’t leave.*

Yes, I heard about that, he typed. My aunt is caring for mom. She’s going to bring her to clinic. I’ll be at your house for Bobby ASAP.

They might not let you through!

They won’t have a choice.

Lol...okay, see you tonight!

Count on it.

CHAPTER NINE

Sara *was* able to reach Kevin and he was still feeling miserable. He'd also been approached by a military official and they promised to send out someone from their medical staff to check on him before nightfall.

Mom spent the rest of the afternoon calling our family and friends as well as trying to reach dad, who was still M.I.A. She also spoke with Kylie's mom, Kristie, and they both agreed that it was much safer for everyone to stay put. Allie would be sleeping over another night.

Around six o'clock, I volunteered to grill hamburgers on the deck. As I stepped onto the balcony, I noticed several soldiers stationed throughout the neighborhood, some carrying automatic rifles. One of the soldiers, presumably the cowboy at our door earlier, waved at me while I flipped the patties, but I played ignorant.

"I'm sorry, I just can't think about food right

now,” complained my mother, pushing away her dinner plate. She put her head in her hands and sighed wearily. “Your father still hasn’t responded to any of my calls or texts; I’m seriously getting worried. This is unusual, even for him.”

I stood up and started clearing away the dishes from the table. “I’m sure he’s fine, mom. There could be a dozen reasons that he hasn’t called back yet. Maybe his cell phone died, or he left it in the car? Just...quit worrying so much.”

She raised her head and let out a deep sigh. “I hope you’re right, honey.”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t you just go and lie down for a while? You’ve been pacing around all day, upsetting yourself. I’ll come and get you if there’s any news”.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, rising from the table. “Just for a little while. Keep an eye on Bobby, will you?”

I nodded. “In fact, I’ll go check on him right now. He was playing dolls with Megan just a little while ago.”

Mom went to her bedroom and I found Bobby with Sara and Megan. They were finishing a board game. I sat down and watched as Bobby won.

“I won!” yelled Bobby as he pumped his fist. “Yes!”

Sara smiled at him then looked up at the clock. “Megan, it’s time for a bath.”

“Sara, do you know where the towels are?” I asked, standing up.

She nodded. “Your mom showed me earlier.”

Megan was pretty excited to be taking a bath at “Daycare” and I could hear her chatting about it all the way up the stairs.

“I feel like watching a movie. Do you want to watch Peter Pan with me?” I asked, settling myself next to Bobby on the couch.

“That’s my favorite movie!” he announced.

“Hey, I thought you said your favorite movie was Beauty and the Beast?”

“That’s my favorite, too,” he replied.

I smiled at him and ruffled his soft brown hair.

“Where’s Bryce?” he asked.

I looked at my watch, it was almost eight o’clock. “I think he’s still working. He’ll be coming soon to take you home, don’t worry.”

Bobby’s face turned grim and he looked at his hands. “I don’t want to leave. I wish Bryce and I could stay here forever.”

“Oh, really? Don’t you want to go home and see your mom? You must miss her. I’m sure she misses you.”

He smiled sadly. “No. She only likes her juice.”

“Her...juice?” I asked, puzzled.

Bobby nodded. “Yes. Her brown juice. It smells yucky,” he said pinching his nose. “I don’t like it when she drinks it. She says mean things.”

I placed his hand in mine and took a deep breath. “Has she ever hurt you when she’s been drinking her juice?”

He shook his head firmly. “No, not anymore. Bryce made her stop. He loves me the most.”

I reached over and gave him a hug. When I finally let go, he gave me a lopsided grin. “You’re nice. I wish you were my mom.”

“I’m a little young to be your mom, but, you want to know a secret?”

He nodded.

I whispered into his ear. “If you were my son, I’d

love you the most.”

His face broke out in a huge grin and my heart ached at the thought of anyone being intentionally cruel to such a sweet kid.

I stood up to put the movie in the DVD player. “Bobby, do you want some popcorn?” I asked.

“Popcorn is my favorite!” he shouted.

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Bobby fell asleep during the movie, sometime after nine o’clock. I covered him up with a warm fleece blanket and went upstairs to find that I was the only one still awake. I also was having a hard time trying to keep my eyes open.

I yawned and shuffled into the kitchen for a drink of water. As I raised the glass to my lips, something in the window caught my eye. I leaned forward for a better glimpse and saw sporadic flashes lighting up the night. Puzzled, I flipped off the kitchen light and rushed over to the dining room balcony to step outside. Just as I slid the door open, I heard gunfire. Terrified, I slumped down on the ground.

“You hear that too?” whispered Sara next to my ear.

“Jesus,” I gasped. “Don’t ever sneak up on me again!”

“Sorry,” she said. “I was in the bedroom when I heard the shots.”

“I’m calling nine-one-one,” I stated, pulling out my phone. I quickly dialed and was put on hold for few minutes before the line went dead.

“Let me try,” said Sara, pulling out her phone. After a few seconds, she hung up. “This is crazy. The line is temporarily out of service. It’s nine-one-one!”

How does that even happen?”

There was more gunfire, this time followed by loud screams.

“Oh, my God!” gasped Sara, frantically closing and locking the door.

“Did...did someone just get shot?” I asked her in horror.

She touched my shoulder and nodded. “I think so. Your dad, he has guns, right?”

“Yes,” I said, trembling. “Yes, in the gun safe.”

“Show me,” she said.

We hurried downstairs to the cellar and I opened my dad’s gun safe.

“Wow, he doesn’t mess around, does he? There’s got to be over twenty guns in here.” She pulled out a Smith and Wesson ten millimeter gun and nodded with approval. “This will do.”

“You know how to fire a gun?” I asked as she loaded it.

“Sure, I own a couple guns myself. I’m in the Reserves; you didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t. Nobody ever told me.”

“Well, now you do. Your mom’s mentioned that you can shoot. Maybe you should be armed, too, just in case. Pick one out and follow me.”

I grabbed my dad’s ten millimeter Colt Delta and some ammunition.

“What’s going on?” asked my mom in a strangled voice. She stood on the stairs with terror in her eyes.

“Mom, we heard some gunfire and screaming outside.”

“What?” she cried and raced up the stairs.

I scrambled up the steps after her and crouched next to her by the family room window. She slid her

hand between the blinds and tugged the window open.

“It looks pretty deserted out there,” I whispered. “I wonder what happened to all of those soldiers who were supposed to be helping us?”

She held up her hand to silence me. “Do you hear that?” she whispered.

My heart stopped as I heard the faint sound of a man moaning for help.

# CHAPTER TEN

The front door slammed shut and we both jumped.

“Sara,” I pointed out the window as our pregnant houseguest bolted away from the safety of the house, her white maternity shirt a beacon in the darkness.

“What is she thinking? It’s not safe!” protested my mother.

I felt a sudden surge of fear and adrenaline. I stood up and raced after Sara, determined to keep Megan’s mom and her unborn child safe.

“Cassie!” my mother shrieked. She bolted down the stairs after me and grabbed my arm before I could make it out the door. “Where in the hell do you think you’re going?!”

I tried pulling away. “Mom, Sara may need help! You have to let me go.”

She shook her head vehemently. “I don’t think so! Give the gun to me, I’ll go after her.”

“You don’t know how to use this thing. You

won't be able to help her!" I hollered.

Her hazel eyes hardened. "Bull crap. You give it to me, young lady. Now!"

Frustrated, but unable to defy my mother, I reluctantly handed her the gun.

"Okay, now stay away from the door and windows. I don't want you to get shot if there are stray bullets."

I groaned. "Mom..."

"I'm serious," she said, shaking her index finger at me before she raced out the door.

*This is nuts*, I thought. I felt like pulling my hair out. I was not only terrified for my mom, but also for the kids sound asleep in the house; which, reminded me.

I ran back upstairs to the guestroom, where Megan was still sleeping peacefully. I checked the window to make sure it was secure, then hesitantly snuck back out.

Next, I scurried back downstairs to find Bobby still sleeping on the couch. He looked so peaceful. I sighed at his innocence and then thought of his brother, who should have arrived by now. I pulled out my phone and tried calling Bryce but he didn't answer. Neither did he respond to a text.

*Bryce, where are you?* I wondered, trying to stay calm. *And where in the heck was my dad?*

I went back down to the cellar and grabbed my dad's new Beretta, which he'd been so proud of. It was a nine millimeter and held seventeen rounds. *Perfect.*

"Cassie!" hollered my mom from the upstairs landing. "Grab the first-aid kit, quickly!"

I sighed with relief, then grabbed the kit from the laundry room and rushed back up the stairs. I skidded to a halt at the hellish nightmare before me;

Sara sat on the steps trying to use her phone, tears streaming down her cheeks, while my mother knelt on the floor, pressing a bloodied towel over a young soldier's shoulder. His face was pale and he was choking on some of his own blood.

"Just breathe slowly," murmured my mother.

The soldier looked up at me and I recognized him, it was Austin. He tried to say something, but his face contorted in agony and he clamped his eyes shut.

"What...what happened to him?" I whispered in horror.

She shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. He was like this when we found him. Hand me the first-aid kit."

"Where is everyone?!" sobbed Sara, throwing her phone down. "Nobody is answering the damn phones, all of those soldiers from earlier...just *disappeared?!?*"

"Okay, calm down, Sara. Everything's going to be okay. We'll get through this, somehow," said my mom as she opened a bottle of iodine. She poured some on her hands.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"It kills bacteria," she replied. She then put on some plastic gloves.

When my mom lifted up the towel from the soldier, I almost threw up. His flesh was mangled with blood oozing out of the wound.

"Oh, God," Sara whispered covering her mouth. The next thing I know she was running up the stairs gagging.

Mom examined the wound and shook her head. "This isn't working. It's too deep. We have to get him to the hospital. He'll never survive if we don't do it *right* now." She poured some iodine on the wound and the soldier moaned.

“Sorry,” she said.

“I’ll go,” I stated. “I’ll take him to the hospital.”

“No, I’ve already decided. I’m doing it,” argued my mother.

“Well, then I’m coming with,” I said defiantly.

“No. I’m going by myself, and that’s final. You stay here with Sara and the kids. Lock the doors, keep the guns loaded, and watch for your father or Bryce.”

It was pointless to argue with her. I sighed.

“Okay, fine, I’ll help you get him into the SUV.”

My mom had somehow managed to stop most of the bleeding with gauze and bandages. The weakened soldier had passed out while she was tending to his wound, which made it much more difficult for us to carry him through the garage and into the backseat of the SUV.

“Now,” my mom said, breathing heavily after getting him secured. “I’m going to find help for all of us. If you’re dad comes back, have him call me immediately.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

She stared at me with a terrified look in her eyes and then pulled me into her arms. “You be careful, Cassie. I don’t understand what’s going on. Just stay inside and be...strong.”

I swallowed back my tears and nodded.

Mom pulled away and brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. “And...check on Allie again. Make sure your little sister’s safe, too.”

“I promise. I’ll do it right away.”

She grabbed one of the guns and shoved it into her purse. Taking a deep breath she said, “Okay, I’ll be back.”

I tried to remain calm as I watched my mom open the garage and leave in the SUV, but I was

terrified. I had no idea what was going on outside or in town, whether it was random violence, terrorism, or something even worse. I felt like I was in a nightmare. I closed the garage door.

“Um, Cassie?”

“What?” I asked, turning around. I felt like throwing up.

Sara held up my mother’s cell phone, her face pale. “Isn’t this your mom’s?”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

I called my sister's cell phone, but she wasn't answering. It was after eleven and I figured she might have fallen asleep, but I didn't want to take any chances so I called Paige, too. When she didn't respond, my stomach contracted like a tight fist.

Sara squeezed my shoulder; she knew I was on the verge of losing it. "They might all be asleep by now."

"I hope so," I replied in a strained voice.

"Or it might be possible that they don't have their cell phones nearby. Does Paige's mom have a landline?"

I wasn't sure. I ran downstairs to find the phonebook, as I began flipping through the pages, the power went out in the house.

*Crap!*

“Cassie!” called Sara from upstairs. “Do you have a flashlight?”

I used the lights from my cell phone to find my way back up into the kitchen where I knew my mom kept a flashlight and candles.

“Thank God my mom is a candle *fanatic*,” I said, placing lit candles of all shapes and sizes throughout the house.

“Did you hear that?” Sara whispered.

I froze. “What?”

She grabbed her gun and hurried over to the balcony door. “I’m going to sneak on the deck, see if someone’s out there. I thought I heard voices.”

I felt a prickling sensation go up my spine. “Be careful.” We didn’t have steps leading from the deck, but that didn’t mean someone couldn’t somehow climb up from below. It was heavily wooded behind the house, a great place for someone to hide.

She crawled out on her hands and knees and peered through the slats.

“Do you hear or see anything?” I whispered loudly as she looked over the side of the wooden railing.

She held up her hand to silence me.

A loud scream ripped through the darkness, startling both of us. Sara gasped and scurried back inside. Her face was a mask of terror.

“Who was that?!”

“I don’t know,” she said in a strangled voice.

“Did you see anything at all?”

She shook her head. “It’s too dark out there.”

There was another terrifying scream, this time much closer to the house. It sounded female.

Sara took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m going to check it out. Stay here, I’ll be back.” Before I could

respond, she rushed down the steps to the front door.

I picked up the Beretta and hustled after her.

“What are you doing? Stay here,” she demanded, slipping on her shoes.

“No, I’m coming with you. You might need my help.”

Sara sighed. “Fine, but you do exactly what I tell you to do and stay close.”

I nodded and she opened the door. As we stepped outside, I could hear faint cries somewhere on the other side of the cul-de-sac, behind one of the houses. Strangely, Charlie wasn’t outside barking his head off.

“This way,” said Sara as she rushed across the street, heading towards the Hendrickson’s dark rambler.

I froze in my tracks; it was starting to feel a lot like *déjà vu*. My palms grew clammy as I tried to find the courage to keep moving.

Sara turned around and waved her hand frantically. “Come on,” she whispered loudly.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and hurried across as she started moving again. She was really fast for being pregnant, which I contributed to her military training. I thought I was in fairly good shape but I struggled to keep up with her.

We went around the Hendrickson’s fence to the next yard over and paused behind a small wooden shed.

Sara’s eyes widened with alarm. “Over there,” she pointed through the darkness.

I could barely make out the three figures, but it looked like a woman and two soldiers. The three were less than a hundred feet away. She was crying hysterically and appeared to be running from the men.

I turned to Sara in shock. “This seem wrong to you? They’re supposed to be the *good* guys.”

“Something’s definitely wrong,” muttered Sara, unconsciously rubbing a hand over swollen belly.

We slipped through the trees towards the men, who were focused fully on the desperate woman. The soldiers were staggering, as if they were wounded and the distance began to widen between the woman and her pursuers. As we inched our way closer to the soldiers, I gawked in disbelief.

“Oh, God,” I whispered.

The two soldiers looked like something out of a horror movie. Their clothing was torn, they were filthy, bloody, and missing some very important body parts; one man an arm, the other a hand and part of his face. But they were still moving, and fairly quickly for being so injured.

*How?* I wondered incredulously.

The taller of the two must have somehow sensed something, because he stopped and turned towards us. Then he opened what was left of his pitted face and made a screeching noise, one that chilled me to the bone.

I swallowed. “Um...Sara?”

The other one whipped its head around and growled.

“Get your gun ready,” demanded Sara.

Suddenly the two hideous men charged towards us and I gave a startled gasp.

Sara raised her pistol. “Stop, right there!” she yelled. “Don’t come any closer!”

They ignored her and kept stumbling towards us.

“Cassie, shoot them if you have to,” she said.

As they moved closer, I felt as if I was losing my

mind. Blood dripped from open wounds on the soldier's skin, their eyes were red and unfocused, and their mouths...they seemed to be almost salivating.

Sara's lips curled in disgust. "God, they stink."

The taller one lurched towards Sara and her gun went off. Blood and brain matter sprayed everywhere as he dropped to his knees, falling on what was left of his dreadful face.

"Watch out, Cassie!" yelled Sara.

The second man was almost upon me. I raised my trembling hand and fired, hitting him in the shoulder. He paused for only a second and then charged at me again. I fired a second bullet, this time taking out his ear.

"Damn it!" I cried. I'd never had to shoot anything but inanimate objects before.

Sara shot him in the leg. He grunted and then fell to the ground.

"Stay back, Cassie," she demanded, inching slowly towards him.

His face was grayish in color and mottled with weird patches. Something green bubbled out of his nose and I had this sudden urge to find him a tissue.

"What happened to him?" I asked, staring with fascinated horror.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before."

He growled and reached out towards Sara with his one good arm, the other one just a stump of flesh.

The sound of branches snapping made us jump and the woman the soldiers had been chasing stepped out of the darkness. Her eyes were filled with hate.

"Kill that bastard! He killed my Paul and he'll kill you both if you let him live! He's...he's not human, he's a monster!"

Before anyone could react, the man grabbed Sara's ankle. She screamed and shot him in the head.

The woman sighed in relief. "We've got to leave and go somewhere safe." Her voice quivered when she spoke and her eyes darted around the trees. She was about my mother's age, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, which were both ripped and dirty. There was some dried blood on the side of her face and matted into her short, brown hair.

"Are you hurt?" asked Sara, pointing to her face.

The lady shook her head and then touched the side of her face. Tears welled up in her eyes. "It's my husband's blood," she replied bitterly. "They attacked us and killed him."

Sara's eyes widened. "Okay, let's get back to the house. We've got to make sure the kids are okay, and try getting ahold of the police again."

I'd forgotten about Megan and Bobby! We'd left them all alone in the house.

I took one last glimpse of the dead men as we started walking back towards the house and felt a pang of shame. They were U.S. soldiers and they looked like they'd lost a war, only they'd been fighting for the wrong side.

"Those couldn't have been soldiers," Sara said, brushing a dark strand of hair away from her face. "It just doesn't make sense."

"They weren't soldiers...anymore, they weren't even human. They were some kind of...demons," replied the distraught woman.

"They certainly looked like something from hell," I said.

"Maybe they were criminals; dressed as soldiers," said Sara.

The woman shook her head. "No. They attacked

us, like violent animals. The taller soldier ripped...oh, God!" she cried, covering her face. "He ripped out Paul's neck, with his teeth!"

Sara put an arm around the woman's shoulders. "Don't worry. You're safe now. We'll help you."

She nodded and wiped the tears from her face. "We'd better hurry. There are more of those things around. It's not safe."

*There's more?* The thought of there being more insane soldiers wandering around in the dark chilled me to the bone. I tightened my grip on the gun.

As we hurried across the cul-de-sac, it was eerily quiet, no sounds but the echo of our feet across the pavement.

"How can anyone sleep through the commotion back there?" muttered Sara shaking her head in disbelief.

I looked around and noticed the power was still out in the entire neighborhood, finding it odd that not one person had stepped out of their homes to see what was going on. Not even with the gunfire.

We entered the house and checked on the children; thankfully they were both still sleeping soundly.

"Thank God they're safe," said Sara.

"I'll be right back," I said, going to the bathroom to wash my hands, which suddenly felt dirty. I stared in horror at my fingers; one of my new French tip nails was completely cracked!

*Are you kidding me?!*

I was so angry. The one and only time I get a professional manicure and I'm caught up in some crazy shit that ruins the beauty of my nails. I glared at the cracked nail and cut off the tip.

Still disgusted, I went down to the cellar where

Sara and the stranger were.

“What’s your name?” Sara asked the woman, who was staring off into space.

The woman released a shaky breath. “Hannah,” she replied thickly.

“So, do you mind starting from the beginning and tell us what happened? I think we need to know, especially since I’ve killed the two men who were after you.”

Hannah nodded and then sat down on the steps. She cleared her throat. “Well, we were busy at work, Paul and I. We own a liquor store on Main Street, *The Liquor Depot*? Anyway, that’s where we first encountered one of those...monsters.”

Sara frowned. “You saw more of them in town?”

“Yes, earlier in the evening. They weren’t soldiers, either. Just regular ol’ people,” she shrugged, “Or they *used* to be people. Anyway, the store is normally busy, no matter what hour it is, but the past couple of days, there haven’t been many customers. The flu, you know? It’s hurt our business too, if you can believe it.”

Her voice was getting hoarse, so I offered her a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” she said. “Anyway, I was leaving the backroom of the store when I heard Paul yelling at someone by the register, so I hurried to the front, to see what was going on. Well, it was one of those...freaks and it was making these weird garbled noises, and trying to grab on to Paul’s arm. From the back, I thought it was just some angry fellow, so I hollered at him to leave the store,” she sighed. “But instead of leaving, he turned around and tried attacking me! Thank goodness Paul was there...oh Paul!” she cried bitterly.

Sara handed her a tissue and squeezed her shoulder.

“I’m sorry. It’s just the thought of never seeing him again, you know?” she sniffled.

We both nodded. Sara handed her more tissues.

“Anyway, Paul grabbed the thing before it got too close, and it bit him in the shoulder!”

“You keep calling it a thing. What do you mean? Are you sure it wasn’t just some crazy lunatic?” asked Sara.

Hannah snorted. “I wish it was. No...this *thing’s* eyes weren’t...normal. Something was wrong with the pupils. And its skin looked grayish-white, almost like skin when it’s decomposing. In fact,” she said, sitting up straighter. “That’s what these things remind me of...dead people.”

“Dead people...like zombies?” I whispered.

“Exactly like that! You know, my father owned a funeral home back in the seventies. Once I snuck down to the basement and saw a couple dead bodies,” she shuddered. “Yep, that’s what those things reminded me of tonight; dead people walking around, without their souls.”

I’m not sure why, but I believed her. From Sara’s expression though, she wasn’t convinced.

“What happened after your husband was bit?” asked Sara.

Hannah sighed. “Well, Paul smacked it on its head, repeatedly, until it finally let go of his shoulder and fell to the ground. Then the damn thing got back up and rushed at Paul, growling at him.”

“Did you kill it?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“Hell yes. I grabbed the gun behind the register and shot the thing in the head,” she declared proudly.

Sara and I looked at each other, not sure what to say.

“Did you call the police?” Sara asked.

“Well, we tried calling the sheriff, but the lines were busy. So, Paul called a buddy of his on the police force, Jim Nielson. Jim was around, amazingly. He said these things were attacking people all over town.”

I shuddered. “All over the entire town?”

Hannah nodded. “Yes. And what’s even more disturbing is that the ones that turned into these...zombies, they were normal people just a few hours ago, people who live here in town.”

Sara rubbed her forehead. “So, what you’re saying is that normal people are turning into zombies?”

Hannah’s eyes narrowed and they darted back and forth, looking at both of us. “First, let me ask you something. Did either of you get the flu vaccine?”

We both shook our heads.

Hannah released a sigh of relief. “Good, then I don’t need to worry about either of you *turning*.”

Sara frowned. “Turning? Hold on. You’re saying that the people who are turning into...zombies...are doing so because they received the flu vaccine?” she shook her head. “You can’t be serious.”

Hannah laughed bitterly. “I am as serious as a heart attack. I wish it weren’t true, that Paul was still...alive. But Jim, he told us everything, the entire ugly truth. The truth the government is desperately trying to conceal and now fix. They’ve even shut down most of the power to try and contain these things.”

“They’re responsible for the power being shut off?” asked Sara.

Hannah nodded. “Personally, I think someone high-up was already losing their mind when they

approved ‘that call’.

“Nothing makes sense,” mumbled Sara.

“What exactly are they trying to hide?” I asked breathlessly.

She touched my shoulder. “Right now, anyone who’s been vaccinated is doomed. They’ve all been issued a death warrant. Only it’s their soul that dies, their bodies live on.”

I expected to hear a clap of thunder after her terrifying revelation. Instead, Sara laughed out loud.

“That’s ridiculous! There’s no way the government would release a vaccine that would create millions of...zombies!”

“Well, that was our reaction when we heard the story. But you see, the newest vaccine was never tested thoroughly before it was released. The FDA actually never even approved the vaccine, but it was still released.”

“How can that be? The FDA would have had to have been involved in order for the drug to have been released.”

“Well, I’m not sure the specifics of what happened, dear. That’s just the story I heard, and after seeing some of these walking dead things, I believe Jim.”

“How could a drug cause a person to make decisions without a conscious soul?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just hoping those lost souls are with their maker,” replied Hannah softly, drawing a cross upon her chest.

This was too much for me to fathom.

“How many more of these zombies did you run into tonight?” Sara asked.

“Well, after we got done talking to Jim, we closed up shop so we could high-tail it on home. We didn’t

really believe Jim at the time, not until we saw the horror of what was happening around town.”

“What did you see?” I asked.

“Innocent people were getting attacked by these...zombies. Right on the streets! I felt like I was in some sort of scary motion picture. My mind wanted to believe that all these people were actors, that the blood and gore wasn’t real. That it was just a scene they were shooting for a movie.” Hannah’s eyes filled with tears. “But it was real.”

“How did you guys make it out of there?” Sara asked.

“We own a Dodge Ram,” she sniffed, “with a Hemi! I tell you that thing just plowed through those zombies. They didn’t even know what hit ‘em.”

I looked at Sara in horror, picturing the bodies getting hit by the truck.

“If you made it out of town, what happened to Paul?”

Hannah shook her head sadly. “There was a little girl, about ten years old. Only a couple blocks away from here. Well, she was running and some soldiers were chasing her. We had to stop. We could see that the little girl wasn’t a zombie, but the soldiers...they’d already changed.”

“Why would the government allow soldiers who received the vaccines to monitor everything?”

“I don’t think they know exactly who’s been vaccinated, even with the military. You can walk up to the local drug store and receive a vaccine. Anyway, the soldiers you killed tonight were the two chasing the girl. We hit them with our truck, and they were pretty messed up, you saw their missing limbs. But that didn’t stop them from coming back at us. The taller of the two is the one who got Paul. He was fast and

strong. I couldn't help my husband," she said, the tears flooding all over again.

"What happened to the little girl?" I asked.

She shrugged, and wiped her eyes with the tissue. "I don't really know. Hopefully she made it somewhere safe."

"What do we do now?" I asked Sara.

Sara looked pale. She walked away, speechless.

I felt like throwing up. The idea that my mother, sister, and father were in this nightmare, probably trying to survive, was horrifying. I didn't know if I could believe this stranger. Were there real-live zombies combing the streets, looking for their next victim?

I turned to Hannah. "Um, what about the people who aren't zombies? What happens if they get bit or hurt by one?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't know, dear. I was too busy running for my life to find out."

# CHAPTER TWELVE

I was overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted from everything that had happened. Needing a burst of caffeine, I walked into the kitchen to grab a can of soda and noticed that there was a message on my phone.

*Bryce?* I hadn't allowed myself to think about him, it was just too painful to consider that he might be among the walking dead. I had no idea if he'd had the vaccine or his brother for that matter. It might be a good idea to keep a close eye on Bobby!

I picked up my phone and sighed with relief, it was Allie. I quickly dialed into my voicemail but my happiness was quickly shattered.

"Cassie," whispered Allie, I could tell she was in tears. "Oh, my God...we need help! Dan is trying to...kill us." Next, I heard her scream in terror and then the phone went dead.

Horrified, I tried calling her back but there was

no answer. Then I sent her several texts and waited. But she didn't respond. I threw my phone down and started crying; I couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to Allie. Dan must have turned into a zombie!

Then it hit me. I knew exactly what I had to do; *save my little sister.*

Wiping away my tears, I stood up and grabbed my truck keys. There was no way I was going to sit back and allow her to be a victim to Dan or any other zombies. If she was still alive, I was going to find her.

Suspecting that Sara wouldn't let me leave the safety of the house, I decided not to tell her of my plans. Instead, I grabbed a piece of paper and wrote her a note. I also asked her to keep a careful watch on Bobby. Finally, I added Paige's address, just in case my mom or dad came home.

I went back down to the cellar and nonchalantly grabbed more ammunition near the gun safe. Sara didn't even notice, she was too busy trying to console Hannah.

Yawning, I said, "I'm going to lie down for a little while."

She looked at me and nodded. "Okay, Hannah and I are going to figure out what in the heck we're going to do next."

I said goodnight, then ran upstairs to grab the Berretta and my sectional staff, which is something I'd never used away from my karate class. It could inflict a lot of pain; if there was ever a time to use it, I knew it was now.

My truck was parked on the other side of the garage. With my heart hammering in my chest, I took a fearful breath and snuck outside, locking the door behind me. It was deathly quiet except for the sound of

an old barn owl hooting somewhere in the distance. Thankfully, I was alone, nobody waiting for me in the shadows. I hopped into my truck and locked the doors.

“Please start,” I begged my persnickety truck. And just like that, it started.

With a renewed surge of hope, I put it in gear, backed out of the driveway, and took off down the street, not putting on my headlights until I was far enough away from the house.

As I drove through the neighboring streets, I’d half expected to see dead bodies, but instead was surprised by how calm everything was. No bodies, no walking dead, not even any neighbors coming or going, which really wasn’t that odd after midnight, although tonight, everything felt ominous.

I relaxed a little and turned on the radio, but there was still nothing but static.

*Should’ve brought my iPod*, I thought.

About four blocks away, I noticed Hannah’s truck parked recklessly in the middle of the street. It was yellow with streaks of blood splashed across the bumper and hood. I drove around it cautiously, expecting to see her dead husband jumping out of it and coming for me. But thankfully, it was empty.

As I neared the first major intersection, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I really didn’t think too much about it until I slowed down for the stop sign and a bushy-haired male zombie rushed my truck. It then crawled onto my hood while I watched, totally transfixed by its actions.

The zombie’s face contorted grotesquely and it let out a dreadful moan. I recoiled in horror as it stared hungrily at me with its insanely red eyes. He then pressed his mouth against the window and began licking the glass, as if it were trying to somehow taste

me through it. The slimy residue its blackened tongue left behind was enough to make me gag as well as get me moving. I stomped my foot on the gas, thinking I might be able to shake him off, but my truck had other ideas; it gasped, sputtered and then stalled.

I locked eyes with the zombie, who seemed aware of what just happened. Its grayish lips curled up into a sneer, as if mocking me, which made me furious. I raised my middle finger and flipped him off, hoping he'd understand what that meant, too.

When that obviously didn't get me anywhere, I restarted the engine, this time pressing much more gently on the gas. When the truck started moving I wanted to cheer, but the zombie was still holding onto the hood of my truck, putting a damper on my victory.

"Get off!" I screamed, but the zombie only stared at me with a cannibalistic yearning.

I gave the pedal more gas and watched the speedometer go up, but the zombie still held tight, its brown hair blowing wildly in the wind.

*Screw it.* I pressed the gas to the floorboard, not too worried about oncoming traffic. This time I felt a surge of exhilaration as the zombie tumbled off the side of the hood and onto the pavement. I held my breath until I couldn't see it in my rearview mirror and then let out a shaky sigh. I'd just survived round two against the zombies.

I calmed myself down and continued on towards Paige's, noting several abandoned vehicles on just about every road I took to get there. It was so surreal and I started feeling as if I was the lone survivor in a bad horror flick. Even though I was terrified, thoughts of my little sister kept pushing me forward.

When I finally arrived at Hillshire Commons, the posh gated community where Paige lives, I noticed the

security station was vacant and the entrance was open. I drove through it warily, searching the streets for zombies, not wanting any more leaping onto my truck. I held my breath for the entire four blocks, and heaved a sigh of relief when I made it up Paige's cobblestone driveway without any obstacles.

The house appeared dark and ominous. My hands began to shake uncontrollably, imagining what I might possibly find inside. As I grabbed my truck keys out of the ignition, they slipped out of my quivering hands and fell onto the floor mat, so I bent down and picked them. When I sat back up, two pairs of red, bloodshot eyes stared at me through the window. I screamed in holy terror.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When I finally stopped screaming my head off, I took a deep breath and assessed the situation. Two zombies were feeling around the outside of my truck, trying desperately to get to me. They were hideous and hungry; they were also out there and I was still somewhat safe in my truck.

“Scat! Go away!” I hollered, raising my gun.

One of them, an obese zombie wearing pajamas, cocked his head, staring at me like I was some kind of delectable appetizer. Blood coagulated from where his nose used to be and I shuddered in revulsion.

The other zombie was frothing at the mouth. She was a rail-thin, revolting creature who must have been taking a bath or something when she changed into a zombie. I could only presume this since she was stark naked, wearing only a plastic cap. This creature was

growling and clawing frantically at my driver's side window. She didn't appear to be wounded, but she had the tell-tale zombie eyes, and her skin was gray and mottled.

I knew my situation wasn't good, so I decided to wait a few minutes, to see if the two zombies would lose interest and eventually wander off. But then the skinny female started beating on the window with her hands and I became paranoid about the window shattering. So I decided to try a different approach; I screamed at them, to see if *they'd* get confused and possibly leave me alone. It was a shot in the dark...that totally missed.

Both zombies froze and stared at me as I screamed with all my might. I thought I was doing good and kept screaming until the female let out a high-pitched screech that made my cries sound like whispers. Then, in horror, I realized her screech caught the attention of other zombies in the area who were now coming to join the party.

Cursing, I moved to the passenger side of my truck and opened the door.

The male zombie began slobbering on himself as he staggered around the truck towards me. I aimed my trembling right hand and shot him in the head. Rancid zombie brains colored the pavement.

"Oh, God," I shuddered, resisting the urge to vomit. I looked towards the female, who was also moving towards me. "Listen, you're next if you come any further," I warned her.

She snarled and then leaped at me, but not before I shot her between the eyes.

Sensing the other zombies in the neighborhood getting closer, I grabbed the flashlight from my glove compartment and rushed towards the front door.

Unfortunately, it was locked.

*Ring the doorbell?* It was certainly worth a shot. I figured a zombie wouldn't have enough sense to open the door, let alone unlock it. Plus, if one of the girls were still alive, she'd open it for me.

A hairy chested, boxer short sporting grandpa zombie growled at me from the edge of the lawn and I knew I couldn't wait any longer. I ran to the side of the house and tried the tall wooden gate. Luckily it was unlocked. I entered the backyard and did a quick scan of the swimming pool, using my flashlight. There was no sign of blood, just wet towels, snacks, and a couple of floating chairs still drifting in the water. I decided to check out the house and went through the open patio door to the kitchen, where I found a cast-iron frying pan lying on the ground and a few missing knives from the butcher block. Then, I caught something dark and red splattered on the marbled kitchen island. As I moved closer to the stain with my flashlight, I let out a shaky sigh of relief; pizza sauce.

Wiping the perspiration from my forehead, I decided to move on. Their house is massive, over ten thousand square feet, and I knew I had a lot of ground to cover, so I started with the obvious: Kylie's bedroom. Right away, I found Allie's pink leather purse and overnight bag sitting on a futon, but no other signs of either girl.

Next, I made my way to Paige's room, which she likes to call her "*wing*." She has her own bathroom with a whirlpool tub, walk-in closet, and even her own personal reading room. By chance I found her new iPhone sticking out from under the bed, as if she'd carelessly dropped it. I put it in my pocket and continued searching the entire house with the flashlight. After I scoured every room in the house,

including the theater room and upper level where Kristie and Dan slept, my eyes began to fill with frustrated tears; the place appeared deserted and I had no idea what to do next. As I trudged back downstairs to the kitchen, my phone began to vibrate. I cringed when I saw who it was.

“Thank God! What in the hell were you thinking, girl?” yelled Sara.

I cleared my throat. “Look, I have to find my sister, she needs me. If it was your sister, you’d do the same. You know I’m right.”

She was silent for a minute then sighed. “Yes, you are. So... have you found her yet?”

“No,” I replied sadly.

“Well maybe they’ve all escaped?”

“God, I can only hope so. Listen, have you heard anything at all from my mom, dad, or Bryce?” I asked.

Another pause, then, “No, Cassie, I’m sorry.”

I closed my eyes and let out a shaky breath.

“Okay, well look, I’m going to keep searching. Call me if you hear from anyone in my family. Bye.” I hung up before she could start in on me again about returning home.

I put my head in my hands and tried thinking about where Allie and the others could have possibly went. I felt like I was missing something and it was driving me crazy. Then it hit me like a sledgehammer, the new *safe-room*! It was a family shelter that wasn’t supposed to be finished for a couple of months, but it would still be a good place to hide. Paige had mentioned that it was in the wine cellar, so I ran back downstairs to the lower level and began looking. It was supposed to be hidden at the very back of the wine cabinets.

“Yes,” I squealed when I located the entrance, it

looked like an ordinary panel wall with a keypad attached. As I raised my hand to pound on the wall, it opened.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Thank God!” I cried, standing face to face with my best friend. Although it was obvious that Paige was relieved to see me, the haunted expression in her eyes spoke volumes. She collapsed into my arms and sobbed.

“Paige, where’s Allie?” I asked, trying to look beyond her into the safe-room. Unfortunately, she appeared to be alone.

She shook her head as the tears streamed down her face. “I...I don’t know!” she cried.

I wanted to shake her but instead forced myself to remain calm; we’d all been through our own kind of hell the last few hours. “What do you mean?” I asked slowly.

“I don’t know! Allie and Kylie ran away. They were going to try and get help,” she cried through her

tears. "I don't even know where my mom is!"

"Okay, calm down and start from the beginning. What happened?"

Her light green eyes grew large. "It was my stepdad, Dan. He turned into some kind of freak! He tried to fucking *bite* me. Then my mom...she whacked him with a frying pan. But he...he kept coming towards me with these...horrible red eyes. Mom told me to run, so I did! I ran away and have been hiding here ever since. God, I'm so scared!" she sobbed.

"Paige, I didn't see anyone else in the house."

"Well, where's my mom? She just wouldn't leave me. They've just got to be here somewhere!"

"Paige, it's okay. We'll find them, somehow," I replied softly. "Listen, do you have anything to drink? I could really use some caffeine." I'd been up for almost twenty-four hours and was finally feeling the effects.

She pulled me inside. The hidden room was larger than my entire bedroom. It held a black leather sectional, an arsenal of electronic equipment, and a fully-stocked refrigerator. I grabbed a soda and walked over to the surveillance cameras.

"Do these things work?" I asked.

"No, I've already tried. They hadn't finished installing them yet.

I sighed. "Well, at least you've got the generator, and didn't have to sit in the dark."

She nodded and then stared vacantly. "What should we do?"

"Well, do you have any weapons?" I asked.

"What...what do you mean?"

I pulled out the Beretta I had tucked behind my back. "Well, I lost my sectional staff when I was searching your house, but I still have this. You're going to need something to defend yourself, too, just in

case.”

Her eyes narrowed. “From...Dan?”

*Crap.* She didn't know about the zombies.

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“Paige?” I'd just recounted my last few hours to her. The expression on her face was unreadable. “Are you okay?”

“You've got to be kidding,” she finally said.

“That's just plain nuts.”

“Believe me, I wish I was. Do you really think I'd make something like that up?”

Paige shook her head but I could tell she was still having major doubts. It was crazy for me to imagine and I'd lived through it.

I shrugged. “Well, you'll find out soon enough. Do you have a baseball bat or something you can hit zombies with?”

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

“In my room,” she muttered.

We grabbed a second flashlight and hurried to Paige's bedroom. She took out a metal baseball bat and two softball helmets, one pink and one black.

“*Great* idea!” I said, putting on the black helmet. “Okay, now stay close to me. I haven't seen any zombies in your house but there's a ton of walking dead on the streets.”

She put on the pink helmet and I handed her the bat.

“Wow, I love your nails,” she said suddenly, grabbing my left hand.

I looked down. “Yeah, they look really sexy when I'm shooting at a zombie,” I replied dryly.

Her jaw dropped. “Oh, my God...you really had

to use the gun?”

My cell phone started to ring. It was Sara again.

I sighed. “Hi, Sara.”

“It’s Bryce. Where are you at?” he demanded.

I was racked with so many emotions that my knees gave out. I sank to the ground. “Oh, thank God!” I gasped. “I...I didn’t know what happened to you.”

“I’m fine,” he replied sternly. “Stay where you are and I’ll come get you. Are you still at Paige’s?”

Before I had a chance to respond, Paige gasped in horror and backed into me.

“What?” I turned and dropped the phone.

Two zombies stood at the entrance of her bedroom. The smell emitting from them rose like a wave of rotting garbage.

“Holy crap,” said Paige in a strangled voice.

The moon was shining through her bedroom window, giving us a pretty good view of the zombies. One of them, a skinny half-naked man with white curly hair, made an ugly gurgling noise and then curled its lower lip, as if smiling. There was blood dripping from his rotting face and he held what looked the remains of someone’s arm. He tossed it to the ground and staggered towards us.

The next thing I knew, Paige let out some kind of ferocious battle cry, then lifted the metal bat and swung high, bashing the zombie smack in the middle of its skull. Before I could react, she raised it again, this time hitting a solid home run on the creature’s head. It dropped to the ground with a loud, sickening thud.

The other zombie, a muscular bald guy with skull tattoos all over his head, growled at us.

I raised my gun to shoot him, but the Berretta jammed. “For the love of God,” I mumbled trying

repeatedly to shoot it.

“Hold on!” Paige snapped as she tried to dislodge the bat from the other zombie.

But skull-head just couldn't wait; he staggered eagerly towards me, white froth foaming from his mouth. Fortunately for me he was terribly slow, with very little coordination. I stepped out of his line of attack and he fell to the ground. When he finally lifted himself back up, I jumped into the air and did a hard side kick; my foot catching him in the throat. He fell backward onto Paige's jewelry box and that's when all hell broke loose.

Paige's face turned red and she screamed in fury. “Get your ugly ass off of my grandmother's jewelry box, you piece of dead rotting meat!!!” Then she kicked the zombie onto the floor and stomped the sharp heel of her new *Jimmy Choo* boot onto its face until it was just a bloody mass of gore.

I stared at her in shock as she wiped the perspiration off of her forehead, then grabbed a towel and began cleaning off her boot.

When I finally found my voice, I said, “So, I guess you believe me now?”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. “You know, all I could think about when I saw them was that I wasn't ready to die. Not by their hands.”

I nodded. “I've felt the same way all night.”

She looked at me. “So, who was on the phone?”

“Bryce!” I groaned.

I knew before I picked up my cell phone that he was gone. I hit redial and waited but nobody answered, it went straight to voicemail. I left a message.

“Nothing?” asked Paige.

“No,” I stood up and sighed. “Let’s go.” I picked up my gun and sure enough, chipped another nail.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Paige and I went over every inch of the house again, but couldn't find signs of anyone. Not even Zombie Dan.

"Did you check in the back by the pool?" she asked.

I nodded. "That's where I entered. The patio door was open."

"Let me guess, you didn't close it after you entered and that's how dead and deader found their way in?" she asked with a wry smile.

"At least there were only two of them. You should have seen how many are prowling the streets outside."

Her smile faded. "Great."

We stepped cautiously through the kitchen and over to the sliding glass door. To our dismay we found the pool area climbing with zombies. There had to be a dozen walking aimlessly round the pool, some falling into the water and sinking to the bottom. Fortunately,

none of them took any notice of us.

I snorted. "This could almost be funny if it wasn't really happening to us."

"Holy crap," she mumbled. "I think I'm going to puke."

The smell of rotting skin *was* overwhelming. Resisting an urge to vomit myself, I slid the door closed and looked at Paige. "Wow, you didn't invite me to your pool party. That hurts."

Paige groaned. "All jokes aside, we're screwed."

"At least the sun's starting to come out, they're easier to see."

She shivered. "And how's that supposed to make it better for us?"

"Yeah, they aren't pretty, especially the ones who've been dead for a while."

Paige's eyes lit up. "Hey, did you ever check the cabana?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't even think about checking that place, I just wanted to get inside the house."

"We'd better check it out, now. How do we get past those things?" she asked.

"Well, maybe we can create some kind of distraction in the front of the yard to draw them away from the pool?"

Just then we heard the faint sounds of gunshots. The zombies must have overheard as well, because they began moving idly towards the gate. When the last of them were no longer in sight, I nudged Paige.

"Let's go," I said.

I slid the glass door open and we stepped outside. The cabana was on the other side of the pool and we could hear more gunshots as we made our way

to the entrance. Paige pulled open the door and we crept inside. It was empty.

Paige took off her softball helmet and sat down. “I thought for sure...Oh, God...where in the hell are they?” she moaned, putting her head in her hands.

I knew her pain. All I could think of about in that moment was my little sister. A memory flashed through my mind of when she was three or four years old, how she would follow me everywhere in her beat-up pink cowgirl boots, that were usually on the wrong feet, begging me to sleep in her room. I’d eventually relent, then grumble the entire night about having to watch her princess movies and the way she’d toss and turn as she slept, kicking me in the back. But right now, I would do anything to go back to that time.

I released a breath and squeezed her shoulder. “Let’s go and find out where that gunfire was coming from.”

Paige nodded, brushing away the tears from her face.

We opened the cabana door and stared in horror; the zombies were back and they brought dates. We were trapped and surrounded.

“Okay, now what?” she whispered.

Just as I opened my mouth, I saw a figure stepping through the sliding glass door. My heart leaped with joy when I recognized the loveable scowling face. Bryce! He’d actually come for me!

“It’s Bryce!” I shouted.

The shuffling and groaning of the zombies ceased; you couldn’t hear a bone drop. Everyone, including the zombies, turned towards us.

“Nice going,” said Paige dryly.

Bryce lifted his automatic rifle. “Get down!” he demanded.

Paige and I crouched down as he began shooting at the zombies. I pulled out my gun and aimed at the ones nearest to us. Blood, mucous, and body parts were flying everywhere as we watched all of the carnage in a twisted kind of glory. The dead got deader and we lived another hour in this hideous nightmare.

Paige shuddered. "Okay, this is totally disgusting."

"I can't believe he's actually here," I said, reloading the Beretta. The butterflies were going crazy in my stomach again. I didn't even care that I broke a third nail. I flicked it aside and decided the rest would come off immediately when I got home.

"Only you would fall in love during a zombie massacre," said Paige.

I shook my head. "I'm not in love with him. I hardly even know him."

"Face it! You've definitely got a thing for him."

I took off the softball helmet. "He's cute, sure, but he's also a little annoying."

She shrugged. "He's a guy."

When the last of the zombies lay twisted and broken on the ground, Bryce jogged over to us. He was still wearing what he'd had on the last time I'd seen him, but it was now covered with blood and gore. Part of me wanted Bryce to sweep me up into his arms and carry me to safety, while another part wanted him to burn the disgusting shirt first.

"Are you girls okay?" he asked in his deep voice. I'd almost forgotten how amazingly blue his eyes were.

"We're fine. Still haven't found Allie or Paige's mom and sister, though," I answered.

Bryce looked up at our helmets with the hint of a smile. "Nice touch."

Paige's eyes grew wide and she nodded. "It was

my idea, so they can't get to our brains."

He bit the side of his lip to keep from cracking up then looked at the house. "So, you've checked everywhere, the entire house; basement; garage?"

Paige and I looked at each other.

"Garage," we said in unison. Neither of us had even considered the garage.

"Missed the garage? Okay, stay behind me and do exactly what I tell you."

Bryce started walking towards the side door to the garage, which was next to the cabana.

Paige checked out his rear and gave me a "thumbs-up" approval.

I smiled and shoved her forward.

Bryce twisted the doorknob to the garage. "It's locked. Stand back," he said. He then lifted his rifle and blasted a hole into it.

"Sorry, I'll pay you back for that," he said with a cocky grin. He then kicked the door open and the smell of decay hit us like a sledgehammer. It was also dark, so he grabbed his flashlight and raised the gun.

"Oh, my God, it's Dan!" screamed Paige.

Zombie Dan was hovering around two Escalades, one a pearly white and the other black. His gray face was sunken and his skin was beginning to rot. He started shuffling slowly towards us, his dried-up lips pulled back in a deathly grin.

Bryce aimed the gun at Dan, wiping away the creepy smile. He toppled to the ground, hard.

"I never liked him," muttered Paige. "He was really a pompous jerk."

"Looks like he was alone," I said, looking around.

"No, someone's in the white SUV," Bryce replied, stepping towards the vehicle. "Yep, a couple of

females.”

Paige and I rushed over; it was Kristie and Kylie! The windows were up and they were lounging in the front seats. There wasn't any sign of Allie.

“Mom! Wake up!” Paige cried removing her helmet. She began pounding on the window but neither of them budged.

“Hold on,” said Bryce. He went to the back window and broke the glass. Unlocking the door, he climbed in and shook Kristie's shoulder.

Kristie's eyes flew open and she screamed at Bryce, who probably looked like a mad serial killer in his bloody shirt.

Bryce chuckled as he climbed back out of the SUV. “Wow, I've never had that reaction from a female before.”

Kristie's face lit up when she noticed Paige through the window. She removed the iPod earphones she wore and shook Kylie, who was also listening to music, until she was awake. Then she got out. Drawing her arms around Paige, she cried, “Oh, thank God you're okay!”

“Um, where's Allie?” I asked in a strangled voice.

“We don't know,” Kristie said, letting go of Paige. “Dan attacked us and she took off running.”

I heaved a sigh. “Alone?”

“Yeah, I don't know where she went. I ran after Kylie who ran towards the garage. That's when Paige disappeared, as well as your sister.”

I turned away and the dam broke. The pain of losing my sister was so great that I couldn't stop the tears. I knew it would be nearly impossible for Allie to survive on her own in this nightmare. There were so many zombies in the neighborhood and Allie was no match for them. She couldn't fire a gun or fight them

one on one. She definitely wasn't strong enough.

Bryce pulled me into his arms and held me while I cried. When I finally ran out of tears, I remembered that everyone standing before me had lost someone within the last few hours, maybe even Bryce. I'd never even asked about Bobby.

"I'm sorry," I hiccupped, pushing Bryce away. "I didn't even ask about your brother. We're all going through this, not just me. I'm really sorry."

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it gently. "Bobby's fine and so was everyone else when I left them at your house."

"What about my parents? Where they home?" Deep down, I already knew that answer. They were both lost somewhere in this nightmare.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Cassie; they weren't around when I got back there. But they're very capable people from what I've heard. Don't give up on them, okay?"

I nodded slowly.

Kristie walked over and wrapped her arms around me. "I'm so sorry, honey. Dan just went nuts and chased us into the garage. I had to lock him out of the SUV so he wouldn't hurt me or Kylie."

"It's not your fault," I sighed.

"Yes, it is," Kristie stated and threw up her hands. "You know, I just have the worst luck with men. The first one I married was a jerk and this one turned out to be a psychotic maniac. Anyway, we'll find her. She got away from Dan. He's been here the entire time so he couldn't have hurt her."

She looked so optimistic that it hit me; she had no idea what was happening in the outside world.

"Oh...you don't know," I said breathlessly.

Kristie shrugged. "Know what?"

“Show her,” said Paige.

Bryce grabbed his gun and walked back to where we’d come in. He opened the door and motioned for Kristie.

Kristie walked over and had her first glimpse of the carnage that was left from the zombie pool party massacre. She placed a hand over her mouth in horror. “Holy shit!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bryce and I locked the gate this time to keep any other new zombies from wandering in.

“I wonder how they happened to know we’re here?” I said to him as we watched more begin to navigate towards the house.

He shrugged. “Not sure, but I think we should get going soon. It’s too dangerous staying here.”

I nodded, trying not to breathe in the horrible smell. The smell of the rotting flesh was so pungent that I decided to ask Kristie for some Vicks to rub under my nose. I’d heard it was great for masking raunchy smells.

We returned to the house and closed the blinds so we wouldn’t have to view all the corpses outside. It was getting warmer outside and now the flies were beginning to hover around the dead.

“Nothing on television yet,” mumbled Paige,

throwing the remote control. Bryce had been able to locate the house's main generator, so there was power again.

"Anyone hungry?" asked Kristie as she opened up the fridge. "I'm starving. Even those nasty zombie bodies outside can't ruin this appetite."

I wasn't really hungry but needed the energy from the food. "Sure," I said.

"Well, the ham still looks good," she commented as she sniffed it. She placed it on the counter and took out some bread. "I can make sandwiches. Sorry, Wild, I'm out of pickles."

I smiled. "That's fine."

Kristie made sandwiches for everyone while I gave her a recap of what I understood about the zombies. They were insatiable cadavers who would do anything for a good meal. And we were definitely the main course. At least that was my version.

Bryce's reasoning was a little more scientific and straight from one of his military buddies. Those millions of people who received the flu vaccine were given a death sentence. The theory was that the vaccine caused some type of severe neurological damage; destroying what is the *humane* part of the brain. Eventually it begins to destroy tissue in other parts of the body including muscle and other major organs; basically, creating a walking vegetable. One with a ravenous appetite for protein, lots of it. He wasn't sure if they were really considered zombies, but they were definitely something out of a horror movie.

"Is the military going to be able to contain these things?" asked Kristie.

"Most of the military are zombies by now, they were pretty much required to have them. The few remaining soldiers who didn't get the vaccine have

their hands full as it is. The point is, we're pretty much on our own."

"How long does it take for someone to turn into a zombie?" whispered Kylie. It was the first time she'd spoken since we'd found them. Kristie put her arm around her.

"Not sure, although I think everyone is different, depending on their body mass. My aunt received the vaccine and it took only twenty-four hours for her to change, she's pretty small. I've heard that others took much longer."

"Wasn't your aunt caring for your mom?" I asked Bryce.

His lips grew thin and he nodded.

"Did you see your aunt when she was a zombie?" asked Kristie.

"Unfortunately, I did. After work, I went to check on my mother to see if she was doing any better. She'd refused any medication at the clinic, including the vaccine. She never believed in the flu vaccinations, that's why Bobby and I have never had shots either. Personally I think she just avoided any kind of medical attention because of her drinking problem. Anyway, when I got home, let's just say they were both gone, but for different reasons."

"I'm sorry," I replied softly.

He shrugged then got up from the table to grab a bottle of water. His eyes were misty and he gazed out the window while the rest of us finished our sandwiches.

"So, can the zombies infect others?" asked Paige, breaking the silence.

Bryce cleared his throat and looked over. "The military believes that they can infect others. So try not to get bitten."

“God, I’d give anything for a cigarette right now,” mumbled Kristie as she rubbed her chin.

Paige’s jaw dropped. “Mom, you quit two years ago. Control yourself.”

“Well, I think there’s a better chance of getting killed by a zombie right now than dying of lung cancer,” she replied dryly.

I pushed myself up from the table. “I need to use your bathroom. Do you have any Vicks vapor rub?”

Kristie looked at me strangely. “Go ahead. There’s some in the vanity.”

“What? It helps mask the smell of rotting dead people,” I explained.

She smiled with amusement. “Good thinking. How’d you come up with that?”

“CSI,” I said matter-of-factly.

“I see. Did you know that cigarette smoke can also mask different types of smells? Bryce...do you happen to smoke?”

“Mom!” groaned Paige.

I smiled as I went to the bathroom down the hall. When I closed the door, I noticed Allie’s favorite T-shirt was hanging on the back. It was bright pink with the words “*Dare to Dance*” scrolled on the front. She’d worn it constantly at home.

I sighed. *I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you*, I thought, grabbing the shirt. When I closed my eyes, I could still smell her favorite lotion, some type of strawberry scent. I slid to the ground and closed my eyes, trying not to cry. Before long, someone began knocking softly on the door.

“Cassie? Are you okay?” asked Bryce.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, sorry. I’ll be out in a minute.”

He paused. “Okay.”

I stood up and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair was in disarray, streaks of mascara lined my face, and my tank top was covered in something I didn't even want to consider. Sighing, I washed my face, neck, and hands, then removed my tank top. I slipped on my sister's shirt, wanting to be closer to her. Then, I combed out my hair, grabbed the jar of Vicks, and went back into the kitchen.

Kylie smiled sadly. "That's Allie's shirt."

I touched it and nodded.

Bryce looked down at his own shirt and frowned. "You wouldn't happen to have anything I can change into?"

Kristie snorted. "You could definitely use a new shirt. Let me find you something. I have some new T-shirts in the closet down the hall. Throw that nasty thing away and follow me."

"Thanks," he replied, removing his shirt, displaying perfectly defined muscles and a hard, flat stomach.

"Work out much, Bryce?" asked Kristie as she led him out of the kitchen.

I couldn't help staring as he walked away. The word "chiseled" didn't do him justice.

"Wow," whispered Paige. "That dude's got one *smokin'* body."

I shrugged. "Yeah, it's not bad."

Paige snorted and pushed me playfully. "You're such a horrible liar."

"Fine, okay, it was pretty...spectacular."

"You know, I think he's graduated from being your karate instructor. The rules have changed." She sighed and looked out the window. "The world's changed."

I pushed my hair behind my ears. "Well, a

relationship isn't really at the top of my 'to-do' list right now."

"I'm just saying..."

Bryce and Kristie walked back into the kitchen. This time he was covered in a new white T-shirt.

"Sorry, girls, I had to cover him up so he wouldn't distract the female zombies."

"Or the gay ones," replied Kylie.

Kristie's jaw dropped.

"You know, you ladies are starting to make me feel really uncomfortable," said Bryce with a straight face.

"Kylie? What do you know about being gay?" asked her mother.

"Mom, I learned about sex in fifth grade. Come on!" she replied.

"Okay, seriously...what do we do now?" asked Paige.

"Well, I want to check around the neighborhood," I stated. "I need to find out what happened to Allie. Find out if she's trapped out there, somewhere, and needs help."

Bryce nodded. "I'm coming with you."

"I think we should *all* stick together," said Kristie. "If there are zombies walking the streets, we need each other."

"That's a good idea," replied Bryce

Kristie grabbed her keys. "Let's all pack into Dan's Escalade and go for a drive then."

We found a large cooler and filled it with water, soda, chips, and granola bars. Bryce and I grabbed our guns while Paige grabbed her metal bat.

"This might come in handy," said Kristie, holding up a war hammer she'd found in the garage. It had a sharp spike in the back and hammer head. It looked

pretty deadly.

“Yeah, that could do some damage,” I agreed. “Where’d you find that thing?”

“From this renaissance convention that Dan visited last year. He collects medieval stuff like that. Or...he did, rather,” said Kristie. Her eyes became moist and she smiled sadly. “Poor Dan. He was a little bit of a dork, but I loved the man. He didn’t deserve to die this way.”

“Nobody deserves this,” I said.

Kristie cleared her throat. “I’ll let you drive,” she said to Bryce, handing him the keys. “I’m not sure how rational I’ll be if I see one of those things on the street.”

It turned out that the street was crawling with zombies, some of them walking around aimlessly in a state of confusion, while others were actually attacking their own kind. From what I could tell, the zombies that were at a farther stage of decomposing seemed to be the most vicious. They’d actually feed on zombies that looked like they’d just turned, somehow sensing that their victims still had some fresh protein available.

“How in the hell are we going to get out of here? I can’t imagine they’ll just move out of the way for us,” said Kristie.

“We’re not going around them,” said Bryce tightening his grip on the steering wheel. “We’re going through them. Sorry, Kristie, but you may need a little body repair after this.”

Kristie snorted. “Just get us out of here safely, screw the paint job. Dan’s not going to be around to complain about any scratches.”

“Okay, everyone, keep your windows up and lock your doors,” he said.

We started driving slowly onto the road towards the crowd of zombies who were beginning to take notice of us. As we approached, some actually did move out of the way while others decided to get a closer look.

“It’s odd how some are pretty docile while others are so violent,” Paige said.

“I think it depends on what stage there at,” I replied. “The ones who are crazy and more violent have probably been zombies longer. At least that’s my opinion.”

“Now we know why some of them are so bloody and torn apart. They’ve been attacking each other, too,” said Kristie, who looked rather ill.

When we reached a point where we couldn’t move the SUV anymore, zombies were standing all around the vehicle, running their hands all over it. Some stared with longing at us and eventually began climbing onto the hood.

Bryce sighed. “Okay, I’ve had enough of this. Close your eyes if you have a weak stomach, kids.”

The SUV barreled forward, jerking some of the zombies off of the hood. I covered my ears to block out the groans of the zombies and the sounds of their bones crunching under the tires.

“Oh, my God,” gasped Kristie, holding firmly onto the dashboard. “This is...I’m going to throw up!”

“No!” cried Kylie. “Don’t throw up or you’ll make me do it too.”

When we finally got past the mob of zombies, we drove down several streets to try and find my sister. Most of the neighborhoods were quiet, without any signs of life. Even the park was empty. It was frustrating and I knew there was no way we could search all of the homes, it was too dangerous. When

our gas tank started getting low and the zombies started getting even more zealous, we had to leave.

“Sorry, Cassie. I wish there was more we could do to find your sister,” said Bryce.

“Me too,” I sighed, looking out the window towards the community’s front entrance gate.

“Hey,” Kristie gasped, pointing ahead of us. “There’s someone trying to run over there. Oh, my God, it’s a girl and she needs some help!”

My heart began to pound and I opened my window to see if it was my sister. Unfortunately it wasn’t, but I did recognize the mass of vibrant red hair.

“Eva King,” I mumbled.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Is she a zombie?” asked Paige, lifting her bat.

I snorted. “No.”

Paige sighed and laid her head back against the seat. “Do we really have to stop?”

“Paige...” said Kristie, looking back at her.

“That’s not nice.”

Two zombies were edging closer to Eva, who looked annoyed more than anything. In one arm she held a pink dog carrier and in the other an oversized Louis Vuitton tote bag.

“Stay here,” Bryce said as we skidded to a halt. He jumped out of the SUV carrying his rifle, and in less than five seconds, both zombies lay motionless on the ground and Eva looked like she’d just found Jesus. She stared with adoration at Bryce as he lowered his gun and moved towards her.

“Would you look at Eva? She’s smiling at your man like he’s a bowl of cream and she’s a cat dying of thirst,” said Paige dryly.

“Paige, he’s *not* my man. Besides, she’s just thanking him,” I replied. I had to admit, though, I felt a twinge of jealousy when she threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

Paige raised her hands in exasperation. “There you go! She just left her nasty, smelly mark on him.”

Kristie chuckled. “Okay, enough, Paige.”

I watched as Bryce took the dog carrier and she leaned on him for support as they made their way back to the SUV.

“Hi, Eva,” said Paige with a smirk when Bryce opened the back door. “Did you hurt your ankle?”

Eva blinked in confusion. “Paige?” she said, biting her lower lip. “Yes, I think I sprained it back there.”

“You can sit in the third row seating,” Paige said as she adjusted the seat to let her in. “With your cat.”

“Oh, okay. This is Chi Chi, he’s actually a Chihuahua,” she replied, climbing in.

I turned around and faced Eva, who, as usual, was draped in expensive designer clothing and overpriced heels. She must have gotten up early to do her hair and makeup, because she looked the total opposite of me; fresh and feminine.

“Hi, Eva,” I said. “Poor little guy’s been through a lot I bet.” Chi Chi appeared to be trembling more than any animal I’d ever seen.

“Oh God, yes,” Eva said, rolling her eyes. “This has been *the* worst morning of my life! My mom’s chauffer was supposed to pick me up a half hour ago and take me to the airport. Obviously that incompetent idiot didn’t show up. My mom isn’t

answering any calls, which is so typical of her when something goes wrong and I need her. I was so frustrated that my eyes started watering and I lost both contact lenses. Then, finally, I almost get mugged by those two creeps! I was so scared. I don't know what would have happened if you all hadn't shown up."

"So you didn't get a good look at those two guys?" I asked incredulously.

She wrinkled her nose. "No but they smelled horrible and were making some really disgusting noises. Thank goodness your cute friend stopped in time. If you ask me, they deserved what they got." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You know, I think they were going to rape me."

I looked at Paige who was biting her lip to keep from laughing. I shot her a look and then turned to Eva. "Eva? What were you doing over in this area anyway?"

"We just moved into my mom's fiancé's house across the street over there," she said, motioning to a giant colonial. "I was on my way to speak with the security guard in the booth when those two hoodlums started racing towards me. I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life."

It was clear that Eva had no idea what had happened in the last twenty-four hours. I knew someone had to let her know, and Paige was having too much fun listening to her to set her straight. I took a deep breath and began telling her the truth.

She interrupted me right away. "Excuse me? Have you completely lost your mind, Cassie?"

"No, she's telling the truth," replied Bryce from the front seat.

Eva stared in alarm at Bryce and then closed

her eyes. She took a deep breath and then released it slowly.

“Okay...” she replied breathlessly, “well, I would be more inclined to believe you since you were carrying a gun and clearly saved my life. Plus, those freaks did smell absolutely horrible. What was your name again?”

“It’s Bryce,” I answered for him with clenched teeth. The fact that she thought I was lying really pissed me off.

Eva’s attention turned back to me. “Well, you may as well continue with your little story.”

“Story? It’s the facts, Eva,” snapped Paige.

“Okay, let’s just relax,” said Kristie. “It’s hard to accept what has happened and we’ve seen it with our own eyes. So imagine how difficult it is for Eva to believe.”

Paige shrugged.

Kristie’s eyes softened. “Honey,” she said. “Here are the facts; that new flu vaccine has created zombies, okay? You’re lucky we found you because you and Chi Chi...you were next on the menu. If not for the two zombies, then for the dead army coming up behind us. Holy crap! Bryce, step on it!!”

We all turned to the back window as Bryce peeled away. Hundreds of zombies were heading our way.

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We decided to drive back to my house to check on Bobby and the others.

“Well,” said Kristie, shutting off her phone. “Thankfully my brother was in town visiting my mom when the zombies struck because she would have been all alone. They’re at the cabin now and didn’t

have a clue as to what was going on. I told him the girls and I would head out there after we drop everyone off.”

“Are you sure you want to risk driving around by yourselves?” asked Bryce.

“You’re all free to join us if you’d like. It’s only about an hour north of here.”

I didn’t say anything. My mom, dad, and sister were all missing and that’s all I could think about at the moment.

“Eva? Are you okay?” asked Kristie.

Eva was staring out the window. After replacing her contacts and getting her first real glimpse of the zombies wandering the streets, she’d been horrified of how close she’d been to death.

I touched her shoulder gently. “Eva?”

She turned to me with tears in her eyes. “Um, sorry...I just don’t really know what to do at this point. I’m just so worried about my mom.”

“Do you have anyone else you can call? Your dad or a grandparent?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. My father is somewhere in Asia. I haven’t spoken to him in years. All my grandparents are dead. It’s just me and Chi Chi.”

“Did your mom get the vaccine?” I asked.

“No. Neither of us did.”

All of a sudden Bryce slammed on the brakes and we all lurched forward in our seats.

“What the heck?” I yelled at him.

“Stay here,” he said and jumped out of the SUV with his rifle.

“Oh, good God! Look at that poor puppy!” cried Kristie.

Several zombies were closing in on a young

golden retriever. The dog was on a leash that appeared to be tangled on a rickety fence in front of an old church. Its frantic barking must have temporarily confused the zombies because they were staying back, although I knew it wouldn't be long before their hunger drove them closer.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Bryce will save that poor little dog," said Eva.

Bryce raised his rifle and started shooting.

"Look!" pointed Kylie. "More zombies are coming from behind that trailer!"

A motorhome was parked in a neighboring driveway and Bryce was about to be attacked by a larger pack of zombies.

"I'm going to help. Lock the door behind me," I said.

Luckily Bryce had fixed my gun and it was ready to go again. I opened the door and jumped out. "Bryce, watch out behind you!" I yelled and started firing it at the new group of zombies. By the time I used all my bullets, however, I'd only hit two in the head. The others were getting back up.

Bryce hollered at me. "Just get back in the truck!"

I watched in horror as another wave of zombies approached Bryce from the other side of the church. I knew he didn't have enough ammunition for all of them. He started shooting again and it didn't take long to empty out his rifle.

"Shit!" he raged, tossing it to the ground. The next thing I knew he was striking out at the zombies with his feet and hands, sending them crashing to the pavement. Unfortunately, they were getting back up almost as quickly.

I ran to the SUV and grabbed the metal bat and

the war hammer.

“Here!” I screamed, throwing the bat towards him. He picked it up off the ground and began swinging. Decaying zombie brains began paving the sidewalk in front of the church; which seemed so immoral and sacrilegious. Then I remembered how badly these things wanted to eat us, and held firmly to the war hammer.

I took a deep breath and then moved in to help Bryce.

“Oh, God!” I groaned as I brought it down on the first zombie’s skull. Zombie blood sprayed everywhere and I gagged. Shooting them was by far a lot less gross.

“Get back into the SUV!” barked Bryce, bringing the bat down on a zombie who was dressed all in Goth and had jet-black hair.

I dislodged the hammer and swung it at a tall, skinny zombie woman who was missing half of her face. Now the other half matched.

“You need my help!” I screamed, raising the hammer again, this time I swung it at a dead cheerleader that I recognized from school; we never *had* gotten along.

“I’ve got this!” he replied angrily as he rushed towards another zombie closing in on the dog.

“Yeah, I can tell,” I mumbled, heading towards someone who was about to rush Bryce from behind. I stuck my tennis shoe out, tripping him. He then flopped face down onto the ground where I quickly finished him off.

“Cassie! Watch out!” screamed Kristie from the SUV.

Three new zombies were staggering hungrily towards me while I was attempting to dislodge the

hammer from the zombie's brain.

"Shit!" yelled Bryce when he noticed the stooges. He had his hands full with two others coming at him.

The next thing I knew, Kristie punched the gas on the SUV, crushing the three under her oversized Goodyear tires.

"Six points!" cheered Paige and Kylie from the open window.

Kristie backed up and smeared another small group wandering towards us.

"Ten points, mom! Woot! Woot!"

When we'd finally taken out all of the zombies, both Bryce and I were exhausted.

"Next time...do what I tell you. You could've...been killed," he said, trying to catch his breath.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my arm. "First of all, quit telling me what to do; secondly, 'you're welcome' would've sufficed."

Bryce stood up straight and gave me a lopsided grin. "Kind of reminds me of the first time we met. Both of us exhausted and doing hand-to-hand combat."

"I remember. You were just as humble then, too," I said.

His eyes met mine. "You know, something about the way you swung that hammer was incredibly sexy."

I burst out laughing. "You're extremely warped."

"I never said I wasn't," he replied. He took the war hammer from me and examined it. "This worked great. I've definitely got to get me one of these."

"Sure, if you can get past the real nasty part of dislodging it from the zombie's heads. I had to fight from throwing up each time I used it."

The dog started barking and we both rushed

towards it, almost forgetting why we'd risked our lives fighting zombies in the first place. It was a female and she had a tag with the name "Goldie" engraved on it. Goldie showed her appreciation by licking my face while Bryce worked to free her from the fence.

"What a beautiful dog," said Bryce, petting her soft, golden fur. She appeared to be smiling back at him with her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth.

"Yes, sweetie, you were worth the battle," I told her as she rolled around on her tummy.

"Looks like we have another soldier on our team," smiled Bryce.

Goldie barked in agreement.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We returned to the SUV with Goldie and she immediately jumped into Kylie's lap, who was delighted. The puppy must have been excited to see warm-blooded humans because she couldn't stop moving around to greet everyone.

"She's adorable!" giggled Paige, who received a hello slurp from Goldie.

"Those horrible zombies," said Kylie in a cooing voice to Goldie, "nobody's going to hurt you now, puppy."

Bryce opened the driver's side door.

"Wait, shirt first, Bryce," said Kristie, holding up another clean T-shirt. "I'm not sure how you manage to get so full of gore while Cassie hardly gets a spot of blood on her."

"Easy, I hit much harder," he replied, removing

his shirt.

“You were so awesome, Bryce,” declared Eva, who was staring at his pecks lustfully.

I rolled my eyes.

“Thanks, Eva,” he replied, pulling the new shirt on. He jumped back into the SUV and we began moving again.

“Sorry I couldn’t help you guys,” glowered Paige. “My *mother* forced me to stay put.”

Kristie turned to look at her. “Face it, Paige, you’re just not the fighting type. You probably would’ve gotten in the way more than anything.”

“Actually, Paige proved herself to be a pretty good zombie destroyer this morning, when we were cornered in her bedroom. She took care of both the dudes,” I replied.

Kristie turned to Paige in disbelief. “You had boys in your room?”

Paige rolled her eyes. “Yes, but they won’t be back.”

I smiled. “Yes, and let’s just say she’ll probably never quite get the cartilage out of the heel of her Jimmy Choos.”

“Oh, my God, that is so nasty!” squealed Kylie.

As we neared the middle of town, we noticed several abandoned cars along the side of the streets and were forced to slow down to maneuver around them. Fortunately, the zombies wobbling by ignored us.

“Bryce, do you have any more rounds left for the rifle?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. I used the last of my ammunition saving Goldie.”

I felt warm breath next to my ear. “Wow, I had no idea you had such cute relatives, Cassie,”

whispered Eva.

I stared at her. "He's my karate instructor."

Eva's eyes lit up. "Karate instructor? Oh wow. That's *hot*."

"Stay away from him, Eva," hissed Paige. "He's already taken."

"Paige," I warned. She just couldn't take a hint that Bryce and I were just friends.

Eva was silent as she sat back in her seat, a small smile settling on her lips.

"Check out the zombies hovering around McDonald's," said Kylie.

There had to be thirty or more wandering around the abandoned building, some of them actually going inside.

"At least they're not paying us any mind," said Kristie.

"Wonder if some of them are still having a *Big Mac attack*," I joked.

"I'll bet they can smell raw patties in the back. It might be drawing them here. They're probably spoiling by now with the electricity off," said Bryce.

"Hey, stop at the next gas station you see. We need to fill up," said Kristie.

Two blocks later, Bryce pulled into a small abandoned station and then hopped out to fill the tank. I followed him, clutching the war hammer tightly.

"Be right back!" yelled Kristie, as she jumped out of the truck holding the metal bat.

"Mom, are you nuts?" Paige hollered out the window. "What in the heck are you doing?!"

"Thirsty," she called back.

"We packed drinks," muttered Paige, crossing her hands across her chest.

I sighed. "I'll go follow her."

"Be careful," said Bryce. "It looks empty from out here, but you never know."

When I stepped into the filling station, I found Kristie behind the counter, opening a pack of cigarettes.

"I should have known," I said.

Kristie smiled and took a drag. She exhaled and a steady stream of white smoke curled out of her mouth. "Oh man, I needed that."

I smiled. "Paige is going to flip out."

"That's okay. Let her," she answered. "It's so worth it."

I stretched out my arms and yawned. "I'm so tired. I'm going to grab some energy drinks. Want anything?"

She nodded. "Grab me a diet soda, please."

I walked to the back of the station and grabbed a couple of energy drinks out of the cooler. When I turned around, one of the former employees stood two feet away from me, drooling.

"Crap," I groaned throwing the cans as hard as I could at her gray, mottled face.

The zombie growled and rushed towards me but not before I caught her stomach with a roundhouse kick. She flew backwards into a stack of cereal boxes.

As I raised the hammer to finish her off, something grabbed me by the back of the hair and pulled. I quickly smashed my head backwards with all my might, hitting a second zombie in the nose. It screeched as it released my hair and its horrible smell actually made it past the Vicks coated under my nose. I shuddered and then kicked back with my foot, hitting it hard in the shin.

"Back for more?" I snapped at the first zombie

who'd since gotten back up and was now staggering towards me. This time Kristie was behind her, swinging wildly at the zombie with the metal bat. She hit it in the skull with a loud "clunk", and the zombie dropped, this time for good.

She looked up at me, her face pale. She pointed behind me and gasped, "Zombie!"

The other zombie was coming at me with its mouth wide open. I slammed the hammer into its grotesque face and it dropped to the ground.

"Thanks, Kristie," I said, dislodging the hammer. I noticed that I was starting to become a little impervious to all of the zombie blood and gore. Whether it was a good thing or bad thing, I wasn't even sure anymore.

Bryce walked through the door at that moment. "What's taking so long?" When he noticed the two dead zombies and Kristie lighting up another cigarette, he sighed. "Next time let me do the shopping."

"Actually, I think we did a pretty fair job staying alive in here," I said, grabbing two bags of dog food.

He smiled as he grabbed some beef jerky. "I wouldn't want you on the other team, that's for sure."

I grabbed two more energy drinks and Kristie stuffed several packs of smokes inside of her shirt.

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We took off again as I sipped from my can. I stared out the window at the houses and businesses we passed and it was hard to imagine the kinds of nightmares that were hidden inside. Everything seemed so...normal. But I knew without a doubt it was a lie. "Normal" was gone forever and we were now only left with zombies and broken hearts.

When we finally made the turn onto my street, I felt a gnawing fear about what we'd find in my house. My cell phone was completely dead and we hadn't been in contact with Sara since Bryce left them early this morning.

"You okay, Cassie?" asked Bryce.

"I'm okay," I said, although my palms were sweating and I had to wipe them onto my jeans.

"I'm sure they're fine," Bryce said, knowing my fears. "Sara knows how to use a gun and Hannah seems like a pretty strong woman. They were going to lock themselves in the basement with the kids until I returned."

"And...what if you hadn't returned?" I asked.

He sighed heavily. "Have a little more faith, Cassie."

My faith was pretty brittle at this point. I'd basically lost hope in ever finding my sister, and both of my parents were still missing. Then there was my grandparents, I didn't even want to consider what kind of hell they were going through.

"Uh oh, looks like we missed out on your spring neighborhood block party," mused Kristie.

We stopped at the end of the block. Several of my neighbors were wandering around the cul-de-sac, some attacking each other while others just looked confused. We'd never been very close to any of them when they were alive, but it was still horrifying to view them now as zombies.

I shuddered. "I wonder if they smell the others."

Bryce nodded. "It wouldn't surprise me if that was the case."

"Well, they are starting to congregate towards us, so you'd better get us out of here," demanded Eva.

"We're not leaving; there are women and

children in that house who need us. Kind of like you needed us awhile back!” snapped Paige.

There were about five zombies approaching the SUV. “Listen, we should go through the garage. There’s a keypad by the side of the house that I can probably get to. Once I enter it, pull in immediately.”

“I’ll cover you,” said Bryce.

“Seriously, that’s all you’ve got for a plan?” asked Paige as the zombies closed in around the SUV.

“You have a better plan?” I asked.

She shrugged and then sighed deeply. “Nah, I’ve got nothing’.”

Bryce grabbed the metal bat from Kristie. “When the garage door opens, get this thing in quick. Plow right through any zombies you have to.”

Kristie’s face grew pale. She nodded and took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m ready, *Freddy*.”

“Got your hammer?” he turned and asked me.

I held it up.

“Okay, let’s do this,” he said.

I pushed my door open and quickly kicked one of my neighbors in the stomach. I hurried out of the truck and slammed the door shut, wielding my hammer. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bleechman. No offense.”

He growled and rushed towards me but I sidestepped him. He slammed into the truck face-first.

“You things aren’t very graceful, are you?” I said.

“Cassie! Quit playing and get over to the keypad!” hollered Bryce who was busy holding off two other zombies.

I took a deep breath and ended Mr. Bleechman’s short life as a zombie with a solid strike to his head with my hammer. As he fell to the ground, I heard an unearthly screech.

Mrs. Bleechman!

She seemed to have appeared out of nowhere and was now moving towards me with her mouth open and long, red, acrylic fingernails, raised.

“Wait, Lois, he was cheating on you, I actually just did you a favor!” I yelled, still trying to dislodge the hammer from her husband’s dead skull.

She snarled and kept barreling towards me.

“You’re wasting time,” grumbled Bryce as he grabbed her by the back of the hair and swung her to the ground. She twisted around to attack but his bat split her rotted skull in two.

I shuddered. “Now that...that...was really gross.”

He motioned towards the house. “Keypad. Now.”

I ran to the side of the house and punched in the numbers for the garage. Unfortunately, nothing happened.

“Crap,” I groaned, forgetting about the electricity, being out. Feeling foolish, I ran over to the small door on the side of the garage and squealed with joy when I found that it was unlocked. I pushed it open and manually opened the large garage doors, the way my dad had showed me last summer.

I could hear the sound of Bryce’s metal bat striking more zombies as it lifted, and cringed. Even though they were now monsters, it still felt wrong to be killing my neighbors.

The SUV made it inside with only one zombie who managed to follow us, and Bryce took care of him quickly.

“Can you bag him or something? He’s going to stink up the garage,” I said.

“Maybe later if there’s time,” said Bryce. “You’re not planning on staying here, are you?”

“I don’t know what my plans are yet,” I replied.

“How about this...stick with me, we’re a pretty

good team,” he said and slapped me playfully on the butt.

My jaw dropped but I didn't say anything.

Just then everyone else piled out of the SUV. Goldie barked with excitement then began sniffing around the garage.

Eva got out with Chi Chi still in her dog carrier. “Little Chi Chi needs to make a little wee wee,” she said in her cutesy voice. The dog barked.

“Are you kidding me?” snorted Paige.

Kristie rolled her eyes and I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

Chi Chi, who was shaking violently again, moved to a corner of the garage and peed. Goldie peed on the zombie.

“Good girl,” I said, bending down to pet Goldie's head.

Eva flipped her hair and then batted her eyelashes at Bryce. “By the way, Bryce, you were so incredible out there. I don't know what we'd do without you.”

Bryce, who I've learned thrives on gushing females, beamed her one of his dimpled smiles. “Someone's got to take care of all you women.”

“Oh, puke,” muttered Paige as she slammed the door to the SUV.

“Is it safe to go in there?” asked Kristie as she grabbed the doorknob leading into my house.

“Better let me go in first,” replied Bryce, “just in case there are surprises waiting inside.”

Kristie looked at Bryce with amusement. “Fine by me, *Bruce Lee*.”

Bryce grabbed the bat, then opened the door and stepped inside. After about a minute he stuck his head back into the garage. “It's clear.”

I walked in with Goldie, who took off immediately to wander throughout the house. “Looks like Goldie’s giving the ‘all clear’ sign, too.” Although, it seemed much too quiet in the house. “Hello? Anyone home?” I yelled.

Goldie bolted downstairs and I could hear the squeal of Megan’s laughter.

Sara raced upstairs, her face full of relief. “Oh, God!” she cried, wrapping her arms around me. “I’m so glad to see you guys!”

Bobby ran upstairs and flung himself at Bryce. “Yay, Bryce is home!”

Bryce picked up Bobby and held him tightly in his arms. “Told you I’d be back, Champ,” he said softly.

“Hi,” Megan said to me as she peeked around the corner of the basement door, “whose puppy?”

“Ours now,” I replied with a smile. “Her name’s Goldie,”

Eva was holding Chi Chi who whimpered to get down. She finally released her and Chi Chi trotted after Goldie.

“Two dogs?!” screamed Megan in delight.

“Err...well, the Chihuahua is mine,” said Eva. “But he’s a nice doggy and loves kids. You can play with him.”

I was surprised to see Eva acting like a civilized human being, especially after the way she treated most people at school. Then of course we’d just saved her life and she didn’t have anywhere else to go.

Kristie’s mouth dropped when she saw Hannah. “Oh, my God! I didn’t know you were here, Han. Where’s Paul?”

Hannah started crying and Kristie went over right away to console her. Then both women went

downstairs to catch up and talk about the loss of their husbands. Apparently Kristie and Hannah knew each other well.

“Have you heard from my parents?” I asked Sara.

Sara looked at me sadly. “No, neither of them. I take it you didn’t find Allie either?”

I shook my head and sighed. “Look, I’m really tired. The energy drink didn’t do anything for me. Think I’m going to have a shower and then maybe take a nap,” I said. “We still have water, don’t we?”

“For now,” replied Sara.

I still wasn’t sure why the government had shut down the power so quickly. I couldn’t imagine that it would be easier to contain the zombies in the dark.

My hair was sticky in some places and I fought an urge to puke as I washed it away with shampoo. I’d never felt so incredibly dirty in my life. Although I had to admit, I hadn’t even thought about germs in the last couple of days. Being exposed to so much blood and guts had made me numb to everything, including my phobia.

When I got out of the shower, I cut the tips off the rest of my fingernails and sighed, wondering if Mae was safe. Then I pushed it away from my mind. It was too horrifying to think about all the victims caught up in this nightmare.

Where are you, mom? I wondered as I laid my head on my pillow and closed my eyes. It was bad enough not finding my sister and not knowing where my father was. But my mother...she’d promised to come back quickly, and hadn’t. I knew exactly what that meant, I wasn’t naïve or stupid. I just couldn’t allow myself to accept the fact that she was probably gone forever.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Mom, where’ve you been? I was so worried about you,” I cried as she walked into the kitchen. I ran up to her and threw my arms around her.

Smiling, she stroked my cheek fondly. “I told you I had to take care of that soldier,” she replied. Her hair was a mess and there was blood splattered on her shirt.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pulling away. She looked pale and tired.

“I’m fine, honey,” she replied and took me into her arms again. “You know how much I love you, don’t you, my little Wild One?”

I closed my eyes and laid my head on her shoulder. “I love you, too, mom. God, I missed you so much.”

She squeezed me harder. “I need you, honey.” I could hardly breathe she was squeezing me so

tightly in her arms. “Sure, mom. Just don’t hold me so tight. I can...barely breathe.”

“I really do need you. You understand, don’t you, baby?” she whispered into my ear.

I gasped for breath, trying to free myself. When I finally pushed her away, our eyes met and my heart screamed out in anguish.

“Come back to mommy,” she rasped, holding her gray, mottled arms towards me. “I need you so. I love you, Cassie.”

I nodded. “I love you, too.”

Then I closed my eyes and sobbed as I let her have me.

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I woke up to someone gently shaking me.

“Cassie?” whispered Bryce softly.

Sighing, I opened my eyes and found Bryce staring down at me. His dark wavy hair was damp and he wore nothing but a pair of soft, gray lounge pants. I stared at the dragon tattoos on his forearms. They blazed with fire as did something inside of me.

“I just stepped out of the shower across the hall, and heard you crying. I was a little worried.”

“Oh,” I said, sitting up. Remembering that all I had on was a thin tank and boxer shorts, I pulled my blanket up higher.

He smiled and sat down on the edge of my bed. “Listen, you were really fantastic earlier. It took a lot of courage to do what you did.”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t so bad once I reminded myself that they were already dead.”

Bryce chuckled. “Still, it was pretty impressive.”

“Thanks.”

He brushed a strand of hair away from my cheek. "I think we make a pretty good team."

I stopped breathing when I gazed into his smoldering blue eyes. Bryce slowly leaned towards me and I felt the heat of his breath on my lips.

"Bryce! Where are you?" hollered Bobby from somewhere else in the house.

Bryce shut his eyes and swore under his breath. "Hold on, Bobby!" he called.

With my heart pounding frantically, I released a shaky breath.

Bryce opened his eyes and licked his lips. "You know, you're pretty amazing," he whispered, staring at my mouth.

"Bryce!" yelled Bobby again.

Bryce groaned with frustration and then stood up. "Coming, buddy!"

When he left my bedroom, I felt a mixture of disappointment and relief. I wasn't sure how I would've reacted if he would have kissed me passionately right here, in my bed. Normally I would have been paranoid about my parents walking in. But things had changed, and at this moment, I didn't have anyone to answer to.

I got up, slipped a hoodie over my tank top, and pulled on a pair of shorts. I'd slept for almost eight hours; it was well after midnight, and I was starving.

Sara was feeding Megan dry cereal when I entered the kitchen. "Hi," I said. Goldie sat at their feet waiting for bits of food to drop.

She looked up and smiled wearily. "Hi."

"Where's everybody?"

"Kristie and Hannah are on watch duty, to make sure none of the zombies make it into the house. Kylie, Paige, and Eva are sleeping, I believe."

I nodded and then sat down next to her at the

table. "I'm sorry, Sara; I haven't even asked if you'd gotten a hold of Kevin."

She paused for a moment and her eyes filled with tears. "No, my cell phone doesn't work."

I covered her hand with mine. "It's possible he's getting the medical attention he was promised by the military."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she replied looking away.

"If you want, we can go look for him later," I said.

She wiped her eyes. "You'd come with me?"

"Of course I would."

"Mommy, I want to play with Bobby," Megan demanded.

I tickled Megan's tummy. "Isn't it a little late for you to be up playing?"

Megan giggled and shook her head "no."

"Her schedule is totally messed up," said Sara.

"I'm sure. Mine is too," I replied. "I can watch her if you want to get some sleep. You're pregnant and need it more than anyone."

She released a deep sigh. "Would you? I could use some sleep. I'm so exhausted."

"It's settled. Go to bed and get some sleep," I replied with a smile.

Sara gave Megan and I both a hug, then left the kitchen.

I had a peanut butter sandwich, gave Goldie some fresh water and dog food, then took Megan downstairs so she could play with Bobby, who I figured was probably still awake. What I actually found stopped me cold. Eva was dressed in a skimpy nightgown with her arms around Bryce's neck and her lips pressed firmly against his.

“Hi, Megan!” cried Bobby who was on the floor playing with Legos.

Bryce turned towards me and sighed.

“Um, I’m sorry,” I said, backing away.

“Cassie,” said Bryce, pushing Eva away. “It’s not what it looks like. She was just thanking me for getting a painful kink out of her neck.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Oh, really?”

Eva’s smile was smug. “Yes,” she said, putting her arm through his possessively. “He has such an amazing touch.”

Shame and humiliation twisted inside of me as I saw them standing together, both of them so damn good-looking. I turned around and left quickly.

“Cassie,” said Bryce, following me up the stairs. “Can you just wait a moment?”

“Listen,” I said turning to him. “You don’t have to explain anything to me, okay? Even if she *was* coming on to you, there’s nothing going on between us. You’re free to do whatever you want.”

Bryce grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him. His eyes searched mine. “Really? If I’m free to do whatever I want, then this is it.” His lips came down on mine before I could protest and then the world stopped moving. I felt myself go limp in his arms and as he pulled me in closer, I couldn’t help but kiss him back. A rush of desire swept through me as he held me against the hardness of his body. He moved his tongue into my mouth, caressing and exploring with an urgency that made my head spin. I slid my hands up behind his neck, into his hair and he groaned against my mouth, lighting flames inside of me that I hadn’t known even existed.

“Excuse me?!”

Kristie and Hannah stood at the top of the stairs

scowling at us. We were in the entryway of the split-level, our hands all over each other. I'd never been so embarrassed in my life.

"Um, sorry," I replied as we broke away from each other. My heart was still pounding madly in my chest.

"You don't look very sorry," Kristie said with her hands on her hips. "And you," she pointed to Bryce, "You definitely don't look sorry. And please put on a damn T-shirt!"

Bryce smiled and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Since your parents aren't around, I'm appointing myself as your personal watchdog, young lady. You *both* better behave yourselves and control your...raging hormones," she said with a smirk. I knew Kristie though, she wasn't being totally serious. Although, if she caught us doing anything more than this, she'd have a conniption.

"Whew!" she said, turning towards Hannah and fanning herself with her hand. "After witnessing part of that little interlude, I think *I* need a cigarette!"

Hannah chuckled and they both walked into the kitchen.

I glanced at Bryce and the look in his eyes made me blush.

He grabbed my arm. "Hey, this thing between us, it isn't over," he said softly.

"Um...I have to...get something to drink," I said, turning away.

He smiled then released my arm. "I'll go check on Bobby.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Eva strolled into the kitchen as I finished drinking my water. I tried to ignore her but she started talking.

“So, I spoke to my mom,” she said, twirling her hair around her finger.

I turned to her, genuinely happy for her. “That’s great! Where is she?”

“She’s at a Crisis Unit that’s been set up at the St. James Hospital. She’s going to send someone for me as soon as they have things under control.”

St. James is the closest hospital to our home. My mom would’ve taken the injured soldier to that hospital.

“Did she mention if there are there many survivors there?” I asked.

“She said there were less than a hundred right now, but more keep arriving. They’ve set up a security force to hold off all the zombies, but they keep coming as well.”

I grabbed her arm. “Can you call her back?” I had to find out if my mother was there.

Eva sighed. “No, she called me using someone else’s phone. I didn’t even get a chance to talk to her very long.”

“I have to get ahold of someone at St. James. Can you hit redial, and then we can call whoever’s phone she used last? They might be able to tell me if my mom ever made it to the hospital.”

Eva shook her head. “Sorry, it’s not working anymore. I tried texting one of my friends after talking to my mom, and the battery completely died.”

The fact that there were living people at the hospital rekindled my hope. It was possible that my mother was still alive at the hospital.

“Okay, once Sara wakes up, we’re leaving to check on Kevin. Then I’m going to St. James to find my mother.”

Eva shook her head. “Listen, my mom said there are hundreds of zombies surrounding the hospital. They believe the zombies are drawn to the Crisis Unit because the scent of blood is so strong. It’s going to be next to impossible to get through.”

“It’s only going to get worse; it’s now or never. If the zombies are running out of food on the streets, many more will show up at the hospital.”

“I’m with you,” said Bryce, walking into the kitchen, followed by Kristie. “We overheard and I agree; if we wait too long, then we’ll miss our chance to find out if your mom’s alive.”

“I’m coming, too,” replied Kristie, putting her

arm around me. “If it wasn’t for you rescuing me and my children from ‘Zombie Dan’, we might’ve never made it out of there. Besides, I want to help you find your mother because she’s also a good friend.”

“What about the others? I don’t want to risk them getting injured. Do you think they’ll be safe here without us?”

“Hannah, Paige, and Kylie can stay here and watch the kids until we get back,” replied Kristie. “They’ll be fine. The zombies haven’t been very aggressive. They’re not even very smart. Unless someone opens the door and invites them in, I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

Eva touched Bryce’s arm. “I should come, too. My mom’s at the hospital and I’m not spending another night in a daycare.”

I gave her a scathing look. “It beats being alone on the streets where we found you.”

Eva had the decency to look embarrassed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I’m just worried about my mom. I’m coming, if that’s okay?”

“Just stay out of trouble,” I muttered.

“Is it okay if I leave Chi Chi here, for now? She seems so happy with Goldie and I can pick her up when it’s not so dangerous out there.”

“Yeah, she can stay,” I said.

Kristie tapped her nails on the counter. “It’s settled then. As soon Sara wakes up, we’ll leave.”

I nodded. “Okay. Let’s go look through my dad’s guns and ammunition. Kristie, can you shoot a gun?”

She sighed. “Well, let me tell you; I can pull a trigger, I just don’t know if I can hit anything with the bullet.”

I bit the side of my lip. “Okay. How about you wait until a zombie gets close enough for you to hit it,

but not close enough for it to bite you. Aim right between the eyes and pull the trigger,” I replied.

Bryce rubbed his forehead and sighed. “Maybe we should just let her use the bat.”

“What about me?” pouted Eva as she traced circles on Bryce’s bicep using a perfectly non-chipped fingertip. “What should I do?”

“Just stay out of the way, so you don’t get hurt,” I snapped. I really wanted to hurt her myself right now. It irritated me how Bryce just let her touch him so casually. He was so clueless.

Eva scowled at me then looked at Bryce. “Fine, I’ll just stay close to Bryce. I don’t think I’ve ever been in such capable hands.”

He shrugged. “Considering what we’re up against, I think it’s wise if we all stay close together and be prepared for anything. Every one of us should have some kind of weapon, too, whether it’s a bat, a shovel, or a gun. Which reminds me; Cassie, let’s go look at your dad’s and figure out which ones to bring with.”

“Eva, why don’t you get dressed,” said Kristie, putting an arm around her and guiding her out of the kitchen. “I don’t think your little nightie is appropriate for where we’re going.”

Eva was still wearing her slinky baby-doll nightgown that barely covered her rear. She smiled coyly at Bryce and licked her lips. “Sorry, I didn’t have anything else to wear. I wasn’t planning on doing a slumber party when I packed it. I’ll change it so I’m not a distraction.”

*For the love of God, I thought. Why did we have to save her irritating life?*

Bryce looked amused but didn’t say anything as he followed me downstairs to my dad’s gun safe; he

almost fell over when he saw all the guns.

“Wow. Lucky for us your dad loves firepower,” he said.

“Yes, he’s obsessed with guns,” I replied, pulling out a semi-automatic rifle. I’d never fired the gun but it seemed pretty impressive.

“Have you tried all of these?” Bryce asked picking up different guns.

“Almost; not this one, though,” I said, opening the chamber. “My dad and I go to the shooting range every weekend so I’ve had a chance to try many of them.”

He took the rifle from me and examined it. “I’ve been around guns all my life, my dad was a cop. Wow, this is an SKS. It’s good for long-range shooting. It will definitely come in handy. Let’s bring it with.”

“So, where’s your dad now?” I asked.

Bryce sighed. “He died about five years ago, trying to stop some asshole from butchering his wife.” I felt terrible for bringing his dad up. “Wow, I’m sorry. That must have been horrible.”

He nodded. “It was. Good news is that the wife survived a gunshot wound to her chest. It barely missed her heart. They both had little kids at the time.”

“What happened to your dad and the shooter?”

He looked me in the eyes. “My dad made a bad decision that cost him his life. He thought he could stop the husband from killing his wife, all by himself. The negotiator had pissed the shooter off and would no longer answer any phone calls. So my dad snuck into the backyard to try and get in. What he didn’t realize was that the man had hidden surveillance cameras and he was shot before he even made it through the window.”

“I’m so sorry,” I replied softly.

He smiled sadly. “It’s okay. It’s been awhile and I’ve learned to accept it.”

“What happened to the husband?”

“Well, he thought he’d killed his wife and blew his own brains out.”

I shuddered. “How...tragic.”

“Yeah it was pretty tough to handle back then, especially for a fifteen-year-old kid. That’s about the time I really got into the martial arts, to help me focus on something other than my old man’s death.”

“And now you also have a passion for guns like he did?” I asked.

“They’re impressive, what can I say? I still have my dad’s collection, but nothing compared to this assortment. But I still go to the firing range a couple times a month, have friends in the military who keep me up-to-date on the latest gadgets, and I have a magazine subscription to Gun Digest.”

I laughed. “So you’re an expert on both firearms and the martial arts. Kind of a deadly weapon yourself, aren’t you?”

Bryce smiled wickedly. “I’m an expert on other things as well. Let’s just say I’m not *just* a fighter, Ms. Wild.”

“Okay, *lover boy*,” said Kristie, walking down the stairs, an unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth.

“Keep your mind on the weapons.”

He saluted her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Pick out a gun, Kristie,” I said, attempting to change the subject.

Kristie walked over and grabbed a Smith and Wesson handgun. “I’ve shot one of these before at the gun range with Dan. This will do; just load it for me and show me how to remove the safety.”

“Wow, that was easy,” I said.

She nodded and smiled “I’m a no-nonsense kind of gal, Cassie. I just need a gun to shoot and a target that’s less than twelve inches away.”

I shook my head and giggled.

We loaded Kristie’s SUV with the guns and ammunition. She yawned and stretched her arms. “I’m bushed and it’s still pretty early. I’m going to lie down for a while if that’s okay?”

“Go ahead. You’re driving and we need you alert,” I said.

Kristie left and it was just me and Bryce staring at each other.

He yawned. “I’d better get some rest, too,” said Bryce. “So...care to join me, Wild?”

It was tempting but I knew it probably meant trouble. “No, I’ve got to watch Megan. You *can* sleep in my room though. There won’t be any distractions there,” I replied, thinking of Eva.

“Thanks. How about tucking me in?” he asked with a little smile.

I blushed. “Maybe...next time.”

“I’ll remember that,” he said, yawning again. He then brushed my lips quickly with his own and both of us parted, smiling.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“This is going to be tricky,” said Bryce as we stood in the garage several hours later. There were still a number of zombies stumbling around the driveway and we didn’t want to let them in. “I’m going to have Kristie drive and then I’ll take out any zombies that try to get into the house through the garage.”

“Don’t forget to toss that rotting one out with them too. The horrible smell is starting to get into the basement,” I said.

Bryce sighed. “Fine, I’ll drag it out...if you cover me.”

I nodded my head. “Sure.”

“Okay, are you feeling all right, Sara?” asked Bryce.

Sara looked both frightened and determined at the same time. It had been almost two days since she’d spoken to Kevin and we all knew the chance that he was still alive was pretty slim.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Let’s just do this before I change my mind.” She’d been nervous about leaving Megan but Kristie had reassured her that the zombies would never figure out how to get inside.

“My hair looks so dull,” complained Eva looking at herself in a mirror she’d pulled out of her tote bag. I couldn’t believe she was worried about her hair while we were worried about making it out of the garage alive. Although, truthfully her red hair looked so shiny it was grating.

“Your hair does not look dull,” replied Kristie.

“It’s so shiny that I’m sure you’ll draw all types of unwanted attention,” I muttered.

Bryce chuckled. “Okay, everyone’s hair in place? Everyone use the bathroom? Noses powdered?”

“Wait, I need my cigarettes!” Kristie said, running back into the house. Seconds later she returned with two packs. “Now, I’m ready for anything.”

“Good thing you volunteered Paige to stay behind,” I remarked.

She shrugged but I didn’t miss the gleam in her eyes.

Everyone got back into the SUV but Bryce and me.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded. I had the gun out and my hammer in a utility type of belt that I’d concocted from an old leather belt and holster.

“Wait,” he said, coming towards me. He grabbed the back of my head and pulled me towards him, stealing a quick kiss. He released me and looked into my eyes. “Just in case I don’t get a chance to do that again.”

His words were like a splash of cold water as the

reality of our situation set in. We were heading right into serious danger again and it was more than feasible that any of us could be killed by a zombie.

“Hey, Bryce,” sighed Kristie from the truck. “They don’t have any more like you at home, do they? Cause I got to tell you...”

I chuckled. I knew Kristie was a hopeless romantic and it wouldn’t be long before husband number three would be in the mist. If there was anyone left.

Kristie turned towards the back of the SUV and snapped, “Oh, Eva, would you just chill the hell out.” I knew then that Eva must not have enjoyed the kiss as much as I did.

“Okay,” Bryce said, raising his gun and walking towards the garage door opener. “Get ready, everyone.”

Kristie started the engine and rolled up her window.

Bryce pressed the garage door opener, grabbed the dead zombie by its clothing, and started dragging him towards the opening. When the garage door was all the way up, Kristie pressed firmly on the gas and backed out, crushing two zombies who were staring stupidly at the SUV. I ignored the now-familiar bone crunching and moaning of the zombies and began firing my gun at the new ones coming toward us.

“Behind you, Bryce!” I yelled as dead and rotted Mr. Hendrickson appeared behind Bryce.

Bryce snapped his head back, hitting the zombie in the forehead. He turned around, kicked it in the stomach, then blew off Mr. Hendrickson’s slackened zombie face. Bryce scowled and brushed off the back of his head, trying to remove zombie brain particles.

I shuddered. “That was...so nasty.”

“To your left!” hollered Bryce.

The crazy old lady from up the street was snarling and coming right at me. She'd always been a cruel and hateful woman, screaming at anyone who'd ever gotten too close to her yard, and *God forbid* if you should accidentally kick a ball onto her lawn. She wouldn't just keep it; she'd destroy it while you watched, smiling smugly and daring you to say anything. Needless to say, my mom had weathered many heated arguments with the old broad and I still couldn't stand her, dead or alive.

"Sorry, Hazel," I said, raising my gun, "but your days of being a *bitter old bitch* are now over."

Hazel growled angrily and then fell backwards as the bullet entered her rotting skull.

We killed the last two zombies trying to get into the garage, then closed it and jumped into the SUV.

"Those things smell awful! God, I could smell them from inside the truck," complained Eva.

"That reminds me," I said, pulling out the small jar from my pocket. "Vicks, anyone?"

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Zombies must have been waking up all over the city because even the rural areas were plagued with them.

"I had no idea," whispered Sara, staring out the window in horror.

The streets were like obstacle courses and it was difficult to navigate the SUV around both the abandoned cars and zombies. Fortunately, most of the zombies ignored us, staggering aimlessly with no real apparent destination.

"Watch out!" said Bryce as a zombie stepped in front of our moving vehicle.

Kristie cringed in revulsion as the zombie bounced off the front grill and over the hood. "That was...unpleasant," she muttered, grasping the steering wheel a little tighter.

We drove past the karate studio and noticed the large plate-glass window in the front was smashed. Zombies wandered around the entire mini-mall, shuffling through broken glass...paper debris...and other dead zombies.

"I hope Master Jordan survived," I said.

"Well, I know he didn't get the vaccine," replied Bryce. "Neither did Mae; both of them are into natural herbal remedies. I'd bet anything that he's alive somewhere. He's definitely one guy who's not going down easily."

"He's a great guy. I hope you're right," I said.

Sara's place is located in a newer development where many of the homes are still under construction and thankfully, we didn't run into any zombies.

"Listen, Kristie and Eva; honk if you see any zombies approaching."

"Okay," replied Kristie. She picked up the Smith and Wesson and placed it on her lap.

"Can't I come with?" asked Eva.

"No, it's too dangerous. You're much safer in here," he replied.

It wasn't the answer she was looking for. "Fine," she sniffed.

"Let's go, I can't wait anymore," said Sara. She opened the door and jumped out of the SUV. Bryce and I got out and followed her to the front door.

Sara pulled out her keys, but the door was unlocked. "Kevin?" she called, opening it. "Kevin, it's me, Sara!"

The house was eerily quiet when we entered.

Like my house, it was a split-level, but much larger and newer.

Sara tossed her keys onto a new granite counter and turned to us. “The bedroom is upstairs. He’s probably sleeping,” she said.

We followed Sara upstairs where there were three bedrooms and a bathroom. One of the doors was shut and that’s where she headed.

Bryce grabbed my arm. “Be ready,” he said into my ear.

I nodded as we followed her into the master bedroom. The room was huge with a built-in fireplace and cozy chenille chaise off to one side of the room, a private bathroom with a built-in whirlpool bath on the other. It was the nicest bedroom I’d ever been in considering its current state. Discarded clothing, used tissues, and empty food containers lay scattered all over plush carpeting.

“Oh, God,” moaned Sara, staring at the bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We followed Sara to the large maple sleigh bed where Kevin lay. As we gathered around the bed, she let out a sigh of relief.

“He’s just sleeping,” she said quietly, brushing the sandy brown hair from his eyes.

I turned to look at Bryce, who was frowning. He pulled me aside.

“Do you smell that?” he whispered.

I nodded; it was a smell I was getting all too familiar with.

Sara sat on the bed. “Kevin? Sweetheart, wake up. It’s me, Sara,” she said softly. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

I took a step closer to the bed and noticed that Kevin’s face was gaunt, his lips pale and dry. There was movement under his eyelids, as if he was dreaming.

“You’re so cold,” Sara mumbled, touching his

forehead. She stood up and lifted a goose down comforter from the floor that must have fallen. She spread it around him on the bed and tucked the edges under the mattress.

My heart was hammering in my chest. To me, he didn't look like he was sleeping; he looked stiff and white, like a corpse. I cleared my throat. "Sara, maybe you should step back."

She shook her head vehemently. "No, I know what you're thinking. He's just sleeping, Cassie. He...he's...fine." She glanced at me and I could see that her eyes were brimming with tears.

"What's that?" I asked, grabbing a piece of paper from the nightstand. At the top of the page were the words *Vaccination Side Effects*. It listed the typical side effects of a regular flu shot. I showed it to Sara, who turned very pale.

"No...he didn't get the vaccination. I don't understand," she said, scanning the flyer. She looked up and shook her head. "This just doesn't make sense."

Bryce took it from her and examined it. "Didn't you mention the military was sending someone from their medical staff to check on him? They could have given it to him then."

A deep moan escaped Kevin's lips and his eyes slowly opened.

"Oh, God," I whispered, putting my hand over my mouth. Kevin's eyes were blood-rimmed and cold as death. They stared emotionlessly at Sara, who appeared oblivious to the truth.

"Hi," she whispered, smiling down at him. She stroked his hand.

"Sara, don't touch him," demanded Bryce, pulling her away.

Kevin sat up and began making deep guttural noises. He started flailing his arms around and greenish-red foam bubbled from his mouth.

“No, Kevin,” she moaned, trying to reach out for him. “I’m here for you, honey.”

Bryce grabbed Sara and pulled her away just as Kevin lurched towards her, making hideous smacking noises with his mouth. When he noticed that he’d missed her, he let out an alarming screech that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

“Leave me be, Bryce!” Sara screamed as he tried to push her out of the bedroom. She eventually broke free and then rushed back towards Kevin, who was beginning to growl at her like rabid animal. She took a step back and stared at him in horror.

“He’s a zombie now, not Kevin,” I said.

Tears streamed down her face as Sara stood staring at the man she’d fallen in love with. He was now just an animated corpse, devoid of any human emotion. Shaking her head in sorrow, she raised her gun and pointed it at his face. “Oh, God,” she cried, her hands trembling. “I...I...can’t do it.” I watched in horror as she dropped the gun, leaving herself vulnerable to the zombie, who was prepared to leap at her.

“Watch out, Sara!” I yelled, raising my gun.

Kevin lunged towards her, his mouth open and arms outstretched. Before he reached Sara, there was a loud explosion and he was blown backwards by the impact of Bryce’s bullet.

“No!” screamed Sara as he fell to the ground, blood streaming out of the large hole in his skull. She rushed over to him and lifted his hand to her cheek.

I knelt down next to her. “Sara, it wasn’t Kevin anymore,” I said softly. “His soul wasn’t there. He was

gone before we even got here.”

She looked at me, her eyes full of misery. “Do you think that makes it easier? Two days ago, I left him here to die, alone. If I would have listened to my heart and stayed with him, he’d still be alive.”

Bryce stepped towards her and touched her shoulder. “No, if you would have stayed here with Megan, both of *you* would have been killed. You didn’t even know about the side effects of the vaccine until it was too late. Kevin would have probably still received it and you’d be dead, along with Megan and your unborn child.”

Sara touched her belly and lowered her eyes. “Maybe, but he’s still gone and I don’t know if I will ever forgive myself,” she said huskily. Sara stood up and took one last look at Kevin before she hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The ride to the St. James Hospital was very solemn. Kristie didn't ask any questions and even Eva had the sense to keep her mouth shut.

Zombies were everywhere and they were getting more violent. Older and newer ones wrestled each other, trying to feed. It was maddening to watch. I closed my eyes to block out as much horror as I could as we drove. I'd seen enough in the last couple of days to give me nightmares for the rest of my life.

As we neared the hospital, I prayed silently that my mother was alive. She'd been armed with a gun but I still didn't know if she'd been attacked by the soldier she'd been trying to save or someone else. I was tearing my hair out to know the truth, and soon I'd be closer to it.

When we finally approached the hospital's parking lot, it was crawling with zombies. Most of them wandered around in a muddled state, not doing

much of anything. Others, who appeared more grotesque and rancid from decomposing, acted like rabid dogs. I watched in horror as they also attacked each other.

“This is totally revolting,” whispered Eva, turning green.

I couldn’t agree with her more; it was worse than any horror flick I’d ever watched on television, and it was real. Blood and body parts covered most of the pavement of the hospital parking lot. It was like a bloody aftermath of an explosion, only this devastation was much more than any of us could have ever imagined.

“Careful on the left,” pointed Bryce. A group of zombies were snarling and tearing each other apart. Thankfully, they hadn’t quite taken notice of us yet.

“Jesus,” mumbled Kristie as the SUV struck a zombie who’d stepped into our path. The sound of the zombie’s corpse crumbling under the tire made me gag. “Sorry, this isn’t easy, driving through this shit.”

“Kristie, you’re doing fine,” reassured Bryce.

He was right. There really was no way to avoid driving over the gore in the parking lot. The sound of bones crunching and loud thuds was enough to drive me mad. “Do you have any music? CDs?” I asked Kristie.

“Hey, great idea! In the back, under the seat,” she said.

I pulled out her CD collection, which consisted of a lot of older bands. I pulled out a CD of Metallica, which seemed appropriate for the moment.

“Haven’t heard this one forever,” she said. She stuck it in and the sound of heavy metal blared through speakers.

Eva scowled. “Don’t you have anything else?”

“It beats the sound of bones smashing under the tires,” I said.

Eva scowled and looked out the window.

We were going very slowly towards the hospital entrance and some of the zombies were starting to take notice. Before I could say anything, two zombies rushed the side of the SUV and started scratching at the darkened windows.

“Can’t you go faster?” cried Eva as one of them stared at her through the window. It let out a horrendous screech and Eva practically jumped out of her seat.

“Sorry, I wish I could,” said Kristie, her hands tight on the wheel.

We were going very slowly, in fact some of the zombies were staggering faster than we were driving.

“Shit,” muttered Kristie as more zombies began surrounding the truck.

“Can’t you shoot them?” whined Eva.

“No, we aren’t wasting our bullets on hundreds of zombies too stupid to even find a way in here. We need ammunition for when we’re on foot,” I said.

“Bryce, how in the world are we going to get into the hospital when they’re following us this close?” asked Sara.

“Look,” I said, pointing to the emergency entrance. “There are some people with guns getting ready to do something.”

As we got closer, about five military soldiers ran outside of the emergency doors and started picking off the zombies that were following us. As we got closer, one of the men motioned us over to a separate ambulance entrance, big enough to drive the SUV into. Once inside, they closed the door and approached us cautiously.

“Have any of you been vaccinated lately?” asked a tall, humorless-looking soldier holding a gun.

“No, sir,” replied Bryce, raising his hands in the air. “None of us have.”

The soldier nodded and then introduced himself. “I’m Captain Brent Lufkin. Does anyone here need medical attention?” he asked, looking specifically at Sara who’d stepped out of the truck holding a hand over her protruding belly.

“No, not yet anyway,” said Bryce. “We’re here to try and locate a couple of people.”

“Really, who?” asked the Captain.

I spoke up. “Veronica King, the news anchor, and my mother, Kristen Wild.”

“Well Veronica King left a couple of hours ago to help pick up some survivors who’d radioed in. She should be back within a few hours. Got to say, that woman surprised the hell out of me. She’s as tough as nails.”

“What about Kris Wild? Have you seen her?” interrupted Bryce. “She’s fairly tall, light brown hair, somewhere in her forties. She would have arrived with a wounded soldier.”

He shook his head. “Kris Wild? Sorry, it just doesn’t sound familiar but you’re welcome to take a look around,” he said. “We have over one hundred survivors. Most of them are staying close to each other in the children’s wing of the hospital. Come on, I’ll show you.”

The hospital had generators, so luckily there was electricity. As we neared the children’s wing, I noticed many of them eating warm meals and talking quietly to one another. Surprisingly, there weren’t many children around.

“I wonder what happened to the children that

were in this wing of the hospital,” I said softly

He shrugged his shoulders. “Not sure.”

The captain turned to me. “Most of the children that were already staying in the hospital received the vaccines. We had to place them in special holding cells so they wouldn’t harm anyone.”

“They’re still here?” asked Kristie.

He nodded. “Yes, they are. Unfortunately some of them are getting so violent that we can’t get near them without the risk of getting bitten.”

I shuddered. “You’re just keeping them locked up until they die?”

“On the contrary, we’re studying them to find out if we can halt the process or find an antidote. We’ve had some communication from the CDC in Atlanta,” he replied.

“There are still researchers left from the CDC?” I asked in shock. “I would have thought they’d all gotten the vaccine.”

“Not all of them agreed with vaccinations either,” he replied, “lucky for us.”

“Do you mind if I take a look around?” I asked him. “I need to find out if my mother ever arrived. Maybe someone else saw her.”

“Go ahead, I’ll ask around for you, too. Don’t forget to check some of the private patient rooms,” he replied.

We all split up and began asking around. Bryce said he’d check some of the patient rooms in Urgent Care. Curiously enough, Eva volunteered to tag along with him and he reluctantly agreed. I trusted him but there was no way in hell I was going to allow her back home with us later. I crossed my fingers that Veronica would come back soon and take her daughter off our hands.

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I started checking the rooms in the children's units, hoping beyond hope that maybe my mom was there, resting. Unfortunately most of them were unoccupied and the few that had people in them hadn't heard anything about my mother, so I decided to venture farther away from the children's unit. As I approached the birthing wing, I heard a man talking in one of the rooms. The tone of his voice sounded familiar and my heart skipped a beat. I rushed towards the sound of his voice.

"Ever hear of knocking first?" drawled the soldier, who was on his cell phone. He wore only a pair of army pants and a bandage around his shoulder.

"Austin!" I cried. "Thank God! I'm so glad to see you."

A huge smile lit up his face. It was the soldier my mother had rescued! Words couldn't express the joy I was suddenly feeling. If he wasn't a zombie, she had to be still alive, somewhere.

"How in the world did you make it here?" he asked, hanging up his phone.

"I got a ride," I said, looking around. "Where's my mother?"

The smile on his face fell away and he sighed. "She's not here."

"I see that. Where is she?"

"Your mom went for help," he said.

"Went for help? What do you mean?" I asked, stepping closer to him.

"She went to find special help for your sister."

My heart soared. "My sister? She's here, somewhere? I don't understand. Where are they?"

He shook his head. “Not anymore, they’re both gone. You’re mom picked up your sister from her girlfriend’s house yesterday, and they ran into some trouble coming back; zombie trouble. Here,” he said, walking over to the counter where he lifted a piece of paper. “She wrote you this letter. I was going to try and get it to you.”

I snatched it from his hands. My own began to tremble as I read the letter.

*Dearest Cassie,*

*I pray that you get this letter and you are okay. I’ve tried calling you but I realize the power is out everywhere and your cell phone is more than likely dead. I have Allie; I picked her up as soon as I found out about the zombies. When I finally found her, she’d been attacked and wasn’t doing very well. She had a high fever and her body was racked with seizures, it was very frightening. I quickly brought her back to the hospital where they were able to finally lower her fever, but there was nothing more they could do for her. They suspect she is turning into one of those creatures now and suggested that I bring her to Atlanta, where scientists are working on an antidote. They even let us catch a lift with their medevac helicopter unit. And that’s where we’re heading now.*

*I hope that you’re safe and that you get this letter. I love you so much and I wish I could be with you right now. But your sister is very sick, and I have to do everything I can to find help for her. I have to try and save her. I know you’ll understand, my Wild One.*

*All my love,*

*Mom*

*P.S. I will try and contact you when I’m in Atlanta.*

*Try and get your cell phone charged if you can. I have been given one to use by the Army and will keep trying to call you.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I closed my eyes and released a heavy sigh. Although I was relieved that both my sister and mother were alive, I held no illusions of there being a happy ending in all of this, especially if we were still separated and my sister was turning into a zombie.

“Now what?” I mumbled to myself. I sat down on a stool and put my head in my hands.

“I reckon you could just stay here and wait for your mother to call,” he replied.

I lifted my head and faced him. “No, I have to get back home with my friends. Besides, there are so many zombies attracted to this place, seriously, I don’t feel all that safe here.”

Austin nodded his head. “Okay. Well then I’m coming with you.”

I stood up. “What do you mean...you’re coming

with me?”

He knelt down next to me and placed his hands upon my shoulders. His eyes reminded me of warm caramel. “Your mother saved my life. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t know what would have happened. I made a promise to her that I’d find you and help protect you. I’m not breaking that promise.”

I pulled away. “Thanks, Austin, but I can take care of myself. I made it here, didn’t I?”

He shrugged. “Well, yeah you did. But you haven’t made it out of here alive just yet. Come on, Cassie, let me help you. If anything, I can help you get in touch with your mom. I know where they’ve taken her.”

My eyes narrowed. “What about your family? Don’t you have anyone at home that might need you?”

Austin smiled and folded his arms across his chest. “Well, darlin’, my family lives in Texas and it doesn’t look like I’ll be traveling there anytime soon. In fact, I just radioed my brother and they’re together and holding up okay, so far. So, the answer is no, there’s nobody who needs me at this moment as much as you do.”

I pointed. “What about your shoulder?”

“It’s doing better. They stitched it up and it’s tender, but I’ll survive.”

“I thought for sure you were bitten by a zombie.”

He shook his head. “I was shot; a woman. I don’t know, she may have thought I was a zombie.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Well, if you want to tag along, I guess that would be okay. We could always use an extra shooter.”

Austin smiled and I found myself returning it.

With his southern drawl, blond hair, and rugged good looks, he actually reminded me of some cowboy

I'd watched on television as a child. One I'd had a small crush on.

"Excellent. I'll just find the rest of my clothing and we can shoot out of here."

"Austin?" I said, trying to swallow the lump forming in my throat. "How was my sister when you last saw her?"

His eyes clouded over and he took my hand. "She was struggling, I can tell you that."

I looked down so he wouldn't see the tears in my eyes. "I hope they can help her. I don't know what I'll do if I lose either of them."

He lifted my chin up and stared into my eyes. "Your mom's a fighter, you're obviously one, too. If Allie takes after either of you, then the odds are in her favor."

I nodded but the tears still escaped, the enormity of my family's situation was overwhelming.

Austin wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. "Shh...it'll be okay. We'll find a way to contact your mom. Shit, if I have to take you to her myself, I will."

"Cassie?" interrupted Bryce as he walked in the door with Eva trailing close behind.

I moved away from Austin and brushed away my tears. "Um, this is Austin. He's the soldier my mother had rescued."

Bryce frowned. "Okay? So, where is she?"

I explained everything that Austin had told me. When I told Bryce that he'd be joining us, he shook his head.

"No, he should stay here. The zombies are getting pretty out of hand out there. They need soldiers to protect the crisis unit."

"Sorry, but I'm coming with y'all. I made a

promise to Kris that I'd find a way to keep Cassie safe, and I'm not going back on my word."

Bryce and Austin stared at each other and you could cut the tension in the air with a knife.

"Well, I think that's a great idea," said Eva as she stepped next to Bryce. She looped her arm through his. "We need all the help we can get fighting off those zombies."

I scowled at Eva. "We? You'll be staying here. You don't have to worry about fighting zombies, not like you helped much anyway."

Eva glared at me. "You don't have to be such a bitch."

My mouth dropped open and before I could show her how much of a bitch I could really be, Bryce interrupted. "Eva's coming with us. Her mother's been bitten and they're flying her to Atlanta, too. She has nowhere else to go, Cassie."

A wave of guilt rushed through me. "Oh, I'm sorry, Eva. I didn't know."

Eva shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

"Well, why doesn't she just go to Atlanta to be with her mom?" I asked Bryce.

"They said she couldn't. They are quarantining all bite victims," he replied. "They won't even allow her near Veronica to say goodbye."

"Oh, well she should stay here so they can keep her updated on her mom's condition."

Bryce shook his head. "The zombies are getting too out of hand for this small group. It's not safe to stay here anymore. In fact, we'd better get moving now before we end up getting stuck here."

Just then Kristie and Sara walked in. "Oh, thank God you guys are here. Look, we have to get out of here...now," said Kristie. "The zombies are either

getting smarter or their just plain lucky. They've broken through the entrance now and the soldiers won't be able to hold them off too much longer."

Austin pulled on a T-shirt. "Let's get going," he said. "I've got some grenades, we might need them."

Kristie smiled at Austin. "Well hey there, soldier. I take it you're the newest member of our team?"

He shrugged. "I'm just coming along to protect Cassie. I made a promise her mother."

Bryce scowled. "That's very noble but she doesn't need your protection, she has me."

Austin nodded towards Eva. "Looks like you already have your hands full with that one."

Bryce took a step away from Eva and folded his arms across his chest. "We've done fine without you."

"Hello? Guys, I can protect myself," I said, walking towards the door.

The two men stood glaring at each other, neither of them saying anything.

Kristie snorted. "Okay, *everyone*, time to leave. The testosterone in this room is going to either make me go nuts or grow a pair; frankly I don't want to do either."

I walked out the door and started towards the location of our SUV. Sara and Kristie caught up with me quickly.

"Men, you can't kill 'em...unless they try and eat your brains," said Kristie with a wry grin.

I stopped walking and turned to Sara and Kristie. "I just wanted to say thanks to both of you. I know each of you lost your husbands and yet you've still found the strength to help me try to find my mom. I don't know what I'd do without you."

We were still hugging each other when Eva, Bryce, and Austin caught up.

“You boys work it out?” asked Kristie, pulling away.

Bryce shrugged and Austin smiled. “Nothing to work out, darlin’. I’m coming with whether Billy likes it or not.”

“It’s Bryce,” he muttered, walking ahead of him.

“Southern boys,” said Kristie as we started walking. “I once had me a cowboy. Oh, the things he could do with that rope...”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

There were several dead zombies lying around as we neared the parked SUV. Three of the soldiers were repairing the glass on the door where the zombies had broken through.

“You guys leaving?” asked one of them.

“Through *this* mob?”

“Yes,” replied Bryce.

“Well, they are getting pretty damn restless out there,” said the soldier. “Be careful.”

We got into the SUV and the soldiers reluctantly opened the garage door. Kristie was in the driver’s seat again so that Bryce would have his hands free to shoot, if needed. Bryce sat next to her with his gun ready.

“Damn, those zombies stink,” muttered Austin sitting close to me.

“Vicks works wonders,” I said, handing out my jar.

He nodded in approval and rubbed some under his nose.

“Look! Sweet Jesus, they’re getting in,” said Eva as two zombies barreled through the garage door before it was closed all the way. The soldiers shot them in the head and they dropped.

Bryce opened his window and shot two more that tried sneaking in.

“You have a gun, cowboy?” Kristie asked Austin.

“Lost it a couple days ago. I found a couple of grenades, though,” he said, holding them up in the air.

“Careful driving,” mumbled Bryce.

Zombies were definitely getting more ferocious as we drove through the parking lot. The smell of blood was drawing more of them towards the hospital and now there were hundreds attacking each other.

“How in the hell do we get out of here?” growled Kristie.

“I guess now is as good of time as any,” said Austin as he opened up his window and leaned out. “Get ready.”

He launched the grenade at a crowd of zombies blocking our path. Less than ten seconds later, body parts were falling from the sky and landing on the SUV.

“Drive!” yelled Bryce.

Kristie hit the gas and we drove over the remaining mutilated zombies, all of us bouncing around in the SUV.

Eva closed her eyes. “Lord help us,” she said softly.

Another group of zombies were coming straight for us and Austin threw another one, clearing the path

yet again with a loud explosion.

“Yes! Well, thank God Austin decided to come with us. Otherwise we’d of had a hell of a time getting through these bastards,” said Kristie.

Bryce looked out the window and mumbled something expletive.

When we finally made it out of the zombie-infested parking lot, I wanted to scream for joy. But I knew we weren’t out of danger yet. Zombies were still wandering the streets, looking more aggravated and alert than ever.

“What’s going on with these guys?” asked Kristie. “They seem like they’re in some kind of frenzy or something.”

“They are,” said Austin. “They need blood to sustain, and if they don’t get it, they actually become more violent and ferocious. Once they start to lose more of their body mass, though, they’ll eventually slow down.

“Great,” I sighed.

“What makes you an expert on these things?” asked Bryce.

Austin shrugged. “Bits and pieces of things I’d heard from other soldiers. They’ve been studying their behaviors.”

“Do they know for sure if you’ll turn into one if you’re bitten?” asked Eva.

He nodded. “They believe you will. Some of the people who’ve been bitten are showing signs of very erratic behavior, similar to the zombies. Some have just...died,” he said, his voice getting quieter as he glanced at me.

I looked out the window and sighed heavily. It sounded pretty hopeless for my sister. I was thankful that my mom was with her, but I could only imagine

the agony she was going through in Atlanta. I only wished I could get out there somehow so she wouldn't have to face it alone.

When we'd finally made it back to my house, everything seemed surreal. There weren't any zombies wandering in the neighborhood or even the yard, just a shiny black GMC Sierra parked in our driveway.

"Were you expecting company?" asked Bryce, getting out.

I shook my head and ran up the steps. As I put my hand on the doorknob, it burst open and I gasped in surprise.

"Daddy!" I screamed, jumping into his arms.

"Oh, thank God," he replied, holding me tightly.

"Where've you been?" I cried.

He put me down and grimaced. "It's a long story. Let's just say the traffic was bad coming home."

I smiled and wiped the tears from my face.

"Did you...did you find anything out about your mom or sister?" he asked sadly.

We went inside and I told him everything I knew while he sat in silence. When I was finished he didn't say a word, he just stood up and went downstairs.

"He needs some time," said Kristie softly.

I nodded. "If you don't mind, I'm going to my room to be alone for a while."

Bryce squeezed my hand as I stood up. "Let me know if you need me, Wild."

On my way to my bedroom I stopped in the kitchen for some water. Eva was sitting alone at the counter, staring at her clasped hands. She looked up. "Oh, it's you. Tell me, what...what do we do now?" she asked, her face a mess of tears and make-up.

I was about to respond when my dad stepped into the kitchen. He was dressed in military

camouflage and carrying two very impressive rifles that I'd never seen before. The determined look in his eyes gave me the chills.

“What next?” he asked, setting the guns down.  
“We go find them, all of them.”

“But is it safe?” I breathed.

He looked at me. “Cassie, we’re a family and I won’t be apart from any of you, ever again. We’re going to Atlanta as soon as possible.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” he said, a half-crazed look in his eyes. He lifted one of the guns back up and smiled humorlessly. “Let the games begin...”

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END OF BOOK ONE