



UNSEEN

VIRGINIA BLACK

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By Virginia Black

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1st Edition

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Acknowledgements

This story – indeed, most stories I write – would not exist without the guidance and encouragement of Quinn Clarkson. Thanks for talking me off each and every ledge.

Dedication

For those whose reading costs them sleep.

Synopsis

In the wake of a collapsed world terrorized by monsters, finding love has never been on Luc's mind. A brush with death brings her closer to the silent woman who has captivated her interest, but Mera's secrets may push them apart before they've had a chance to explore what's growing between them.

Chapter 1

Luc closed the lodge door behind her with a clunk, and her first breath of freezing cold air burned in her nose and chest. The clouds that had brought new snow overnight were gone now and the blinding sunlight was barely warm enough to feel on her skin, but it calmed the restless twitch of her limbs from the close quarters inside MacDougal Lodge.

Though the cold made her wince, it was better than the stifling warmth of the lodge's common room packed with the other residents. She'd left her gloves inside and could have gone back to get them, but it was quiet and peaceful out here. Since her grandfather's death the year before, Luc was the leader of what had once been the family lodge, and all eyes would be on her the moment she opened the door. Something somewhere always required her attention.

She balled her frozen hands into fists, tucked them under her arms, and closed her eyes against the welcome glare.

A low whine from the access road along the side of the two-story lodge grew louder as a vehicle approached. At the same time, the lodge door opened behind Luc, and she opened her eyes as the thump of boots reverberated through the floorboards. A brush against her arm made her turn her head.

Mera arched one eyebrow as she folded a pair of familiar gloves into Luc's hand, her touch warm against Luc's frozen skin. Her long dark brown hair streamed from under an old skullcap, one with the logo of a soccer team that didn't exist anymore. Like so many other pursuits, organized sports were a thing of the not-so-distant past.

Luc wondered how Mera had known about the gloves, as if Mera had a sixth sense attuned only to Luc. Then again, ever since Mera had arrived at the lodge a month ago, Luc herself always seemed to know where Mera was.

Mera had put on a few needed pounds since then and now had the build of a runner and not the emaciated refugee she'd appeared to be the week before Christmas. She wasn't dressed for the elements like Luc, and shivered in the cold, but her honey-brown eyes were as bright as her smile.

Her gaze didn't bother Luc as much as everyone else's did.

"Thanks," Luc said, fighting off a blush possibly caused by her own forgetfulness, but more likely from Mera's proximity.

An engine revved as something stopped in front of the main stairs, but instead of turning around, Luc watched Mera looking at the new arrival. The smile on Mera's face faded, then flared again as she nodded at Luc before heading back inside without a word.

Another lost opportunity to spend a moment with Mera, to learn more about the woman who captivated her attention. Mera never spoke. Not to anyone, not even Luc. Though her vocal chords worked, proved by the nights she'd screamed in her sleep, she hadn't spoken aloud during her entire stay at the lodge.

Luc turned away from the doors.

The driver was bundled in bulky layers of outdoor winter gear covering much of her exposed skin, but Luc knew who it was. Neko had taken the cover off the old black Jeep, and her red hair crept over her lean shoulders.

"Just the bitch I want to see," Neko said over the whine of the engine as she shifted into neutral. "You armed?"

"Of course," Luc said, almost snide as she walked the few snow-covered stairs down to the gravel drive. She went nowhere without her pistol, despite the safety of the lodge. At night, she slept with it under her pillow.

"Hop in." Neko shifted the Jeep into first gear. She wasn't wearing any of the harnesses or belts and danced a bit in her seat. "I want to make a quick run outside the gates."

"This late?" It wasn't yet noon, but it was a bad idea to head out too late in the day. Too much of a chance of getting caught outside the perimeter after dark. Still, Luc climbed into the Jeep. "What's the trouble?"

"Nothing like that. Just an out and back," Neko said, driving away from the lodge. "Two hours tops round trip. I found a new spot yesterday that I don't think Scott knows about yet. I want to see if there's any good shit left. That bastard always seems to get first choice."

Scott was the head of lodge security and had once been the sheriff of a nearby town that no longer existed. He did have a knack for finding the best gear.

Luc pulled the lap belt across her thighs, bolted herself in, and shifted her jacket into place. "This idea is both dumb and bad."

The thought of going back inside seemed worse. A two-hour round trip would return them before quiet hour, the time before sunset where everyone moved inside the lodge and kept sound to a minimum.

"Yeah, but you can't talk me out of it," Neko said in a singsong voice. "You'd better come and make sure I get back in time."

When Luc glanced back at the lodge, Mera was standing behind the thick inlaid glass of the doors.

Mera waved and it made Luc's heart jump, but she didn't wave back.

Neko and Luc rode the mile long drive to the perimeter's barrier without talking. The wind made conversation difficult, and the roar of the old engine echoed off the side walls of snow piled up next to the road. The snow was half again as high as the Jeep and blocked the view of all but the tops of the surrounding trees, leaving only the road ahead and the clear blue sky above visible.

When they reached the barrier, Luc said nothing at the harsh reminder of their circumstances. Welded metal stretching ten feet high marked the perimeter of the grounds of MacDougal Lodge, the last human outpost in this region. The snow was cleared away ten yards from the wall and then a trench six feet deep lay right inside the boundary. The top of the wall was guarded by razor wire and spikes made of any metal that had been scrounged together—iron or steel, sharpened to points and designed to stop anything larger than a squirrel.

Anything that got over that wall would fall into the trench to be shot in the head seconds after.

Neko pulled up next to the command post. The guard, one of the younger guys who Luc knew had a crush on Neko, tried to look commanding and official. Few people ventured beyond the gates without armed escort, and when they did, they were encouraged to leave early and return by mid-day. Leaving any later was strongly discouraged.

Luc gave him thirty seconds before he caved to Neko's whims. He lasted almost a minute, then waved the gatekeepers to let the Jeep through.

Once they passed the gates, Neko picked up speed. The back end of the Jeep fishtailed a moment in the snow before Neko got it under control. Luc glared at the harsh treatment—her elbow had been bashed into the door—but Neko's eager grin kept her from saying anything.

"I feel like I've been cooped up in that lodge all fucking winter," Neko shouted.

Luc agreed. During the summer months, many of the lodge residents camped outside in tents for more privacy, but winter's cold had driven almost everyone inside. The commons and barracks were crowded.

As nervous as she felt beyond the perimeter, Luc was glad to be outside. She did, however, wonder where the hell they were going.

Luc leaned toward Neko. "How did you even find this place?" Everything within a few hours of the lodge should have been stripped.

Neko didn't turn her head as she navigated the roads. The asphalt had held up well considering maintenance in the area was rare.

"I was walking the back ridge on patrol. Saw a falcon and pulled out the binoculars. It flew right over what looks like an old hunting cabin. Nowhere near the main roads."

That didn't sound good at all.

“So how the hell are we going to get there?” If Neko planned to drag her on some bullshit hike, Luc would make her pay.

Neko's crafty grin made her look like a movie villain as she patted one of the puffy pockets of her coat. “I found one of the old logging maps.”

The old highway weaved through the woods of firs and pines, and Luc tried to relax and enjoy the ride. On the other side of the ridge, some low clouds hadn't burned off yet and lay like cotton across the snow-covered trees. For a moment, it reminded her of the vacations of her childhood. No one took vacations anymore.

“What did the mute want?” Neko asked.

Luc frowned. “Don't call her that.”

“She never fucking says anything. It's creepy.”

“Maybe she can't.”

“I think she can but won't.”

Luc had wondered the same thing, though she'd yet to find the opportunity to ask Mera about it.

“And she's always staring at you,” Neko said.

Luc didn't want to talk about Mera, mostly because she felt the urge to defend her instead. Mera didn't speak, but she was hard-working and always offered her help without prompting. Neko was Luc's best friend, and in the years since they'd met, they'd been inseparable with few secrets between them. There were things they'd experienced together she could never share with anyone else.

Mera was different, and Luc didn't know how to explain it, but all the glances she'd shared with Mera didn't bother her as much as they seemed to bother Neko. Some days, when Luc was so exhausted she wanted to collapse despite the work left to be done, those gazes of Mera's were the only thing holding her upright.

Neko turned right onto an old logging side road, and potholes and branches tested the Jeep's shock absorbers.

“You sure you know where you're going?” Luc asked, wondering what would happen if they got stuck. The Jeep had a mounted winch, but it had been some time since she'd used it herself.

“Yes. Quit worrying.” When the road straightened out a bit, Neko reached forward and fumbled at the stereo with her gloved hands. Somebody had left an ancient compact disc in the player—how old was this thing?—and a classic rock song played. Neko shrieked with glee and cranked up the volume.

“That's stupid,” Luc yelled, though she had once loved the song.

“It's hours until we need to be quiet. One song on eleven won't kill us.”

After the next turn, the terrain sloped up, winding its way through the trees, and the ditch to the side of the road turned into a dense debris-thick ravine with an ever-increasing drop. The crisp pine-scented air didn't hide the scent of forest decay. Through the trees, Luc could see they'd switched back against the old two-lane highway, and the wider valley stretched beyond.

The Jeep wobbled over another obstacle. Neko navigated with skill, but Luc's nerves twitched with unease.

A large animal-brown blur sped across the road in front of the Jeep. Neko stomped on the brakes, and the Jeep skidded as Luc was knocked against the door and then slammed into the dash. Pain bloomed in her head while Neko screamed.

Darkness came with the pain.

Something moved, taking Luc with it and waking her up. Pounding through her head with every heartbeat, the song's verse blended into a chorus she'd sung countless times in days gone by. Then she remembered those days were over.

Luc opened her eyes.

The Jeep lurched again, and Luc gasped at her situation. The vehicle was sliding slowly down the ravine toward the jagged boulders below, hindered only by the thick brush of forest overgrowth. Neko wasn't in the Jeep, but Luc was held in place by her lap belt. Her door had been flung open.

When she shifted her weight to loosen the belt, the vehicle slipped again. She wasn't sure she'd survive the crash into the rocks below. Luc hastened to undo the belt latch.

Every limb throbbed or ached, but she freed herself from the belt and climbed out of the Jeep. She fell to the snow-frosted ground, and the underbrush scraped through her clothes to her arms and legs. The Jeep picked up speed, bashing into several trees before it slammed nose-first into the rocks below. The disc player continued, but now the song had been aborted. Half a line from the chorus played on a loop.

She stared after it, trying to remember what she was supposed to do next. With a hiss, she tried to stand. She wanted to yell for Neko, but that would make a sound. She wasn't supposed to make noise in the woods. Sound would draw attention, and attention meant a bloody death.

Moving her head worsened the ringing in her ears and her eyeballs hurt, but she had to find Neko. Up the ravine she climbed, trying to test each step on the deceptively deep forest debris before putting weight on it, worried she'd roll an ankle or worse before she got to the top. The path the Jeep had made by falling was easier to climb.

By the time Luc crawled her way to the logging road, the headache was no longer her biggest problem. A large doe lay unmoving in the snow. A splash of navy blue on the far side of the road revealed where Neko lay sprawled and unmoving across a fallen pine.

Luc stumbled across the road, tears blurring her vision before she blinked them away.

Neko was unconscious, a branch thick as a thumb sticking through one thigh, and her blood spilled over her jeans and into the snow.

In seconds, Luc assessed the horror of the situation. They were stranded outside the perimeter. Their transportation was shot. Though they hadn't seen a bloodsucker in this part of the woods in months thanks to Luc's insistence on quiet hours, the sound of the loud music would attract monsters the minute the sun went down.

The scent of the doe's blood would bring them here, and nothing but a bullet to the skull would keep them from following the trail. Neko was wounded, but even if they ran...

Luc was too terrified to curse. She checked her watch, an old wind-up her grandfather had given her years before. Four hours until sundown.

Down in the ravine, the song skipped, echoing across the valley.

Chapter 2

After giving serious consideration to shooting Neko in the head before eating a bullet herself, Luc remembered the map.

Neko had stashed the logging map in her coat pocket. Luc tried not to jar the pinned leg as she crawled closer. She propped herself on her knees and reached for Neko's coat.

“Neko?” Luc fumbled at the breast pocket. Neko moaned but didn't move.

After two attempts, the worn-out folded paper was free. No breeze stirred as Luc stretched the map wide between her hands. Nothing made sense at first, but then she found the highway leading to the lodge and backtracked across the seam of the paper to follow what she remembered of their drive.

They had been away from the lodge for less than an hour, but even with the winding logging roads, they must have traveled about fifteen miles. No way in hell could they go back the way they'd come and make it to the highway by dark. Even if they did, all the patrols would have returned to the compound already. She and Neko would be stuck out in the open with no hope of rescue.

A wave of terrified nausea swept through her guts.

Based on the map, the linear distance from their estimated location to the lodge was no more than two miles, but it was all forest and sloped uphill.

The elevation gradations looked blurry no matter how much she squinted. She shook her head to clear it, then moaned against the new agony in her skull. All the details swam in her aching head—the isolation, the lack of supplies, Neko's wound, the trashed Jeep, the hike uphill, the time constraints, the goddamned monsters.

Fucked was an apt descriptor for the situation.

Panic swarmed before she remembered the rules. Rules that had saved her life and Neko's more times than she could count.

Breathe. Assess. Prioritize. Act.

She'd been in tighter situations than this, so it was time to choke down the terror and find a way to get moving.

Neko moaned for the third time but didn't wake. Her leg wasn't pouring blood, but even a little was dangerous.

Luc took another deep breath, and the ringing in her ears lessened.

Assess, prioritize, act. Rinse and repeat.

The first challenge was obvious. They couldn't do anything until Neko was freed.

“Neko, wake up. We're in trouble.”

Neko finally came to and instantly grasped the fuckery they faced. She spent the next few minutes apologizing until Luc made her stop.

Luc examined the overgrown root poking through the muscle of Neko's thigh. Blood seeped from the edges, painting the root and soaking the denim jeans. “I think I'm gonna have to roll you off it.”

Neko paled—no small feat considering her porcelain complexion. “Uh, Luc—”

“I don't think you can just lift yourself off, and I can't pick you up from that angle. If you lie back, I can push you off.” It was going to hurt like hell, but Luc didn't see any other option. Trying to find a big enough stick laying around to leverage Neko off the protruding branch would make things more complicated yet perform the exact same task. “If we don't, you're stuck and we die here, or we take too long, and maybe die later. We've gotta do this.”

Tears streamed from Neko's eyes, and Luc fought to hold back her own.

“Look, you could...you could leave me here and -”

“No.”

“Luc -”

“No.” How many times over the years had they had this conversation? “Either we both go, or we both stay.”

A sob wracked through Neko's body as she closed her eyes. Her face contorted in pain, but she took a few deep breaths and calmed herself.

“I want a vacation,” Neko said, wiping streams of tears and crusted mucus from her face. “This apocalyptic shit sucks and there's not one hot guy around to help.” After another shaky breath, she reached for Luc's hand and squeezed. “I might bleed out.”

“Don't think so. It looks bad, but if it had hit anything major, you'd be bleeding more heavily, I think.”

They would need to stanch the wound with something. The Jeep might have first aid supplies, but if Luc climbed down the ravine, she'd use time they didn't have by traveling in the wrong direction and might hurt herself in the process.

Mera would have known how to take care of the wound. She was the only doctor in the lodge, and might not speak, but her extensive skill had been a welcome addition to their small community. But she wasn't here now, no matter how much Luc might want her to be.

Luc almost shook her head again but stopped before she made the headache worse.

"I've got an idea." She tugged off her gloves with her teeth, took off her all-weather jacket, and started stripping off her flannel and long-sleeved shirt.

"Please explain to me how you getting naked in a crisis situation is going to help," Neko said.

Luc managed a chuckle despite their circumstances. "My thermals might make a good bandage." Now topless, she shivered in the cold air and clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering.

"I think you've always had the hots for me and now you're making your move." Though Neko was always one to crack jokes, her voice trembled.

Luc scrambled to get her clothes back on as the tips of her fingers stopped cooperating in the cold. "You've found me out."

"Lesbians. Shit, I'm not even drunk." Neko leaned back with a shaky laugh and patted Luc's arm to signal her readiness.

Luc pushed with all her strength and didn't stop when Neko screamed.

Neko vomited as Luc secured the bandage, and again when Luc helped her to her feet. The first few steps were more like hops for Neko, who cried out until they built a rhythm.

Slow going didn't begin to describe their progress as they started uphill. Luc wondered if they'd move faster by crawling. Each meter forward was a three-step process with Luc first testing the ground for stability, then shifting her weight forward as she pulled Neko alongside her. Finally, Neko brought her good leg forward.

Most of the time the ground was solid but each time it wasn't, Luc over-corrected to make sure they didn't fall flat on their faces. Neko bit back a moan whenever that happened.

Luc extended a foot forward to test the next step as Neko drew a deep breath to speak.

"You really think we can make it?"

Luc tried to sound convincing. “We've got hours before sunset. It's gonna suck, but it's not as bad as when we got stuck outside of Laramie.”

Once, they'd gotten a flat tire on a supply run and had raced the sunset. They'd had minutes to get to safety, but they'd made it.

Neko forced a laugh through her tears. “Can't say this is the best way to spend a sunny day, but I only have myself to blame.” If it weren't for the sniffing and tears, she might have sounded almost like her usual self.

Luc didn't want her to feel any worse. “Too crowded to stay indoors. Good idea to get outside.”

“It was fucking stupid, so let's talk about anything else,” Neko said, and bit back another groan. “How—how about you tell me what's going on with you and the mute.”

Luc frowned but didn't have the breath to protest. She grunted as she helped Neko walk. “Nothing going on.”

“Liar.” Neko wiped her face with the back of a glove. “I see the way you look at her and she's always gawking at you. What gives?”

With all the other challenges facing them, Luc didn't have the will to lie. “I don't know, Neko.”

“You've got your pick of every unattached person in that lodge, male or female. You're gonna have to do better than that.”

Luc was certain much of the attention had to do with the fact that she was a single, living, breathing, uncontaminated human. She could have been cross-eyed with horns and had the same appeal. “That's not true.”

“It is. And it ain't news.” Neko's tone turned serious. “I'd be careful around that one.”

Luc had never seen Mera act unkindly toward anyone. Neko's ever-present paranoia was unnecessary. “C'mon, Neko, she's harmless. She won't even carry a gun.”

Neko gasped when Luc shifted her weight. “Don't trust her. None of those people she came here with knew her before.”

Everyone measured time by the same scale—before the world changed, and after.

Their next step prompted a moan from Neko that turned into an angry grunt.

“The one guy who traveled with her the longest—the big guy with the locks? He says she showed up alone at the compound outside of Twin Falls a few weeks before Thanksgiving. Wouldn't speak to anyone, freaked out if anyone touched her. Woke the whole place up every night with her screams.”

Though Neko probably intended for that information to make Luc steer clear, it only made her want to soothe Mera's pain, whatever that pain might be. She'd heard those bloodcurdling screams and had been the one to recommend Mera take the private quarters near the lodge's medical area. Even Luc slept in the common bunks, but something about Mera's warm eyes and gentle manner had prompted her to bend her own rules.

“There's something weird about her,” Neko said. “And I don't mean the way she doesn't talk.”

Luc didn't want to talk about it anymore. Thankfully, she could now see the summit of the crest a few hundred feet up the slope of the mountain. She pointed until Neko looked up in resignation, and then kept them moving.

The crunch and squeak of the snow seemed loud to Luc as she trudged uphill. The sunlight's trajectory shifted the way it did every day, but to Luc, it seemed faster than usual. The snow wasn't as deep on this side of the mountain. Her boots were heavy, and she was tired, and Neko wasn't light.

Neither of them spoke of the blood dripping from Neko's wound.

They passed time swapping tales of all the harrowing situations they'd survived. The night in Salt Lake City where they'd been stuck under an overpass for the better part of a night, huddled without speaking in the dark, clutching their weapons until dawn. Or soon after the first time they'd met, when they'd been trapped in a diner for days while the world raged around them. Rough times—terrible times, but they'd survived. Luc assured Neko this time would be no different.

She almost believed it herself.

An hour ago, Neko wouldn't stop complaining despite the wound, though Luc was certain it had been her attempt to shove her fear down deep. Now, she'd grown uncharacteristically quiet. A silent Neko wasn't a good sign.

When they crested the ridge, Luc blinked back tears of defeat.

They were nowhere near the section of the perimeter that brushed the ridge, the one with the guarded entrance to the ridge path. They had to pick a direction—sideways until they reached the gate entrance, or forward until they reached the wall. With still an hour before sundown, either way gave them a chance at surviving this cockup.

Luc hadn't taken a turn at border patrol on the back ridge since the summer, so she didn't recognize any of the terrain—and this part of the mountain path changed all the time. “Which way to the gate?”

Neko squinted in the dying light before shaking her head. She pointed to the left. “Maybe that way? But I can't be sure.”

“It's okay,” Luc said, though they both knew it wasn't. “Forward then.”

She shifted her weight to get a better hold around Neko's waist.

“I can't,” Neko said, crying. “I think you should -”

“No, Neko.” Leaving Neko to try to find help would be like cutting off an arm.

“Ok, but...” Neko's teeth chattered in the cold. “Promise me that if—if the shit hits the f-fan.” She clenched Luc's hand so tightly, Luc winced at the pain. “One to the head, Luc. Don't hesitate. Don't leave me to those things.”

More times than they could count, they'd heard the screams of people eaten alive—a fate far worse than death.

“I won't. I promise, but we're gonna make it—Neko!”

Neko's eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed.

Luc did everything short of punching the wound to try to rouse Neko, but nothing worked. Maybe it was the cold, maybe it was the blood loss, but Neko was unconscious, and needed help as soon as possible if she was going to live.

Luc tried to ignore the drops of blood falling in the snow. She wanted to quit. Tired, cold, and hungry, she wanted to sit down for five minutes at the base of one of the pine trees to rest.

Resting – quitting – meant they'd be dead by moonrise.

She bit back a soul-crushing, heartbreaking scream, then clenched her fists until the pain stopped her breath with a gasp.

This wasn't the end. It was far too soon to eat a bullet. It took three attempts, but Luc managed to get Neko across her shoulders in a fireman's carry. She stashed one of her gloves in a pocket, pulled out her gun and stumbled forward.

Four hundred eighty-four, four hundred eighty-five, four hundred eighty-six...

Counting steps kept her from screaming.

Luc rested one arm against Neko's wounded leg, trying to keep it from moving too much. Every step sent another ache through her legs and shoulders, sometimes hard enough to make her gasp, but she didn't stop. The sweat along the small of her back stung as it ran towards her waist under her clothes.

She couldn't feel her toes anymore, but nevertheless she tested each step before shifting her weight forward. If she fell now, she might not be able to get back up. The shadows lengthened as the weak sun sank towards sunset, and Luc limited herself to checking her watch every hundred steps.

They were running out of time but might have a chance, assuming the watch ignored Luc's rules about not opening the gate for anyone after sundown. As long as nothing got to them before they got to the wall – which had to be less than half a mile from their current position.

She stabilized Neko's leg with her gloved hand as she climbed over a fallen log. Neko moaned with the movement but didn't regain consciousness. Luc patted her hand against the leg, trying to reassure someone who was completely out of it, but maybe the reassurance wasn't for Neko.

In Luc's other hand, naked to the elements, she clenched her gun. With only seven bullets in the magazine, it might not be enough to save them once the sun went down. Worse, if she didn't hear the monsters when they came, she might not be able to save herself and Neko from the final horror of succumbing to a gruesome fate.

Every few steps she paused to listen and tried not to breathe so hard that she couldn't hear anything else. Nothing moved in the stillness of the late afternoon woods. No birds, not even a squirrel—she and Neko were the only living things here on the back ridge. And if she didn't keep moving, they wouldn't be alive for much longer.

Who would miss her if she didn't make it? Scott pressed his influence to counter hers on the lodge's more important decisions. Hell, he'd probably be glad she was gone. None of the others knew her as well as Neko did.

All of them, even Neko sometimes, wanted something from her. Protection. Leadership. Guidance. Consolation. Mera was the only one who didn't seem to want anything at all. In fact, Mera looked at her like she was offering something, if Luc could figure out how to take it.

The light changed from a watery yellow to the blue-grey of twilight as the sun passed beyond the mountains.

Almost there. Almost there.

Her steps were shakier now, slower, but no less determined. She pictured what would be waiting at the lodge, visualizing safety as she plowed forward—the large fire in the hearth, warm tea or better yet whiskey in a cup. Neko safe and healing, cursing in discomfort but entertaining the whole lodge with tales of their survival.

If Luc could get them there. Now the place she'd once hated was the only place in the world she wanted to be. The lodge—and the woman who might be waiting for her in it—was home.

Through the thick clump of trees in front of her, a dark pocket solidified, and she cried out in relief. The perimeter wall loomed ahead.

A few steps later the snow thinned out and she made it to a clearing. They were nowhere near the gate, and no one manned the wall above them. She risked calling out, but no one answered.

If she fired a signal shot, she might get lucky enough that someone nearby would find her, but if she was wrong, the monsters would find her first now that the sun had gone down. They'd made it, but it didn't matter.

Luc tried to lower Neko to the snow without dropping her, but her arms gave out, and she sank to one knee as Neko rolled to a stop in the snow.

And then the telltale grunt of something in pursuit cut through the silence.

Luc whirled around and raised her gun in defense. In the wan light, a human-shaped creature snarled and growled as it loped toward her at an inhuman speed, leaping closer on all fours like a gruesome ape. At that pace, it must have cleared the slope she took hours to climb in minutes.

Her heartbeat thundered through her chest and eardrums as she swallowed bile and fear, waiting for the bloodsucker to get closer so she didn't miss, hoping her fingers weren't too frozen to work. Only a shot to the head would stop it.

“Please,” she whispered, praying for a steady hand.

Luc waited as long as she could—waited until the thing was so close, she could see the black of blood in its teeth—and then squeezed the trigger.

The gunshot echoed across the quiet of the forest. The monster's head snapped back first and then its whole body fell and was still. Luc's breath steamed in front of her, panic driving her near to hyperventilation. Her gun wobbled in her shaking hand as she looked around wildly, searching for more, but nothing else moved.

She hadn't been this close to one of the monsters in over a year. It — *he*—lay dead not ten feet from her, limbs twisted on fallen branches and forest ferns. His clothes were a bloodied, tattered mess, somehow still attached to his frame though they were years old. He was long and lean, but his face, frozen in final death and covered in layers of grime and blood, looked young.

Once, he'd been a teenager, but now he was another dead monster.

Far off in the woods, something howled, and Luc cried out in despair as she scurried closer to Neko's unconscious body. Neko was oblivious to the horror that would be her final moments.

Inches from salvation, Luc would die alone.

She kissed Neko's cold forehead. "I'm sorry I couldn't get us out of this one."

Luc raised the gun to Neko's head, as promised, and closed her eyes.

The monsters' howls grew loud as they closed in, but the gunshot was louder.

Chapter 3

Luc had once hated the woods.

Both of her parents had died in a late-night car crash when Luc had been a high school freshman. Her beloved grandfather, mayor of a small Oregon town, had been her sole relative. Luc left Los Angeles, population millions, for a place with fewer than five thousand people.

She detested everything about high school under the magnifying glass of small-town opinions, where every detail of Luc's life was public knowledge and fuel for the gossip mills. The surrounding forest, dark green with mysteries, added to the feeling of being stuck.

Within weeks of graduation, Luc returned to Los Angeles and swore she would never go back to Sandy for longer than a holiday weekend.

Luc's love of music inspired a career that took her around the country and overseas. For years, she traveled with her band performing at clubs and festivals, building a following that kept her on the road where she felt she belonged.

The news had hit while Luc and her band on the stage of a small club on the east side of Atlanta, Georgia. The local authorities had placed a growing area on lockdown because of a security breach at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Though the CDC was a few miles away from the club where she was performing, Luc cut her set short and told her boys to start packing up their gear. The air smelled like panic, and she wanted to get back on the road before they ended up stuck. She knew what being stuck felt like.

Soon after, Atlanta was under martial law, but Luc was long gone.

The first time she saw a monster was the same day she met Neko.

After she left Atlanta, Luc spent the better part of that unseasonably hot, humid night navigating security checkpoints on the interstate highways. The authorities never revealed what they were searching for, but they asked everyone where they were coming from.

Luc's instincts screamed for her to lie, to say they'd driven from Tallahassee, Florida. The cops let her pass.

Her gut spoke again soon after sunrise and she navigated the band's customized tour bus off the main Alabama thoroughfares and onto the back roads. When the bus ran low on fuel south of Friendship, Mississippi, Luc pulled into a rundown two-pump gas station with an adjoining convenience market. Moments later, another car arrived—a man and woman in a tiny import coupe with New York plates.

Luc stood next to the diesel pump wishing it were faster. The woman from the other car climbed out and walked toward Luc while the man opened the coupe's tank, jacked in the gas nozzle and then headed for the market door.

In the bright light of morning on a remote rural road in the deep south, a person dressed for a nightclub stood out more than usual. The woman was rail thin and wore platform boots and makeup as black as her clothes.

She waved a greeting at Luc. “This shit is crazy, right?”

Strange conversation starter, Luc thought, but appropriate, all things considered.

“Yeah,” Luc said. “Where are you from?”

Neko kept one eye on Luc and the other on the market where her companion had disappeared.

“New York, but we just left New Orleans. Went for Mardi Gras last month, stuck around for the after party until it abruptly ended a few hours ago when the police cleared all the streets.”

“NOLA on lockdown?”

“Not yet,” the woman said, and Luc exhaled. “But things were def weird when we left. You?”

Luc wasn't one to share details in the best of times. “All over. Tried to get some news about what's going on, but there are no details other than the checkpoints.”

“Well, whatever it is has them mobilizing the National Guard in Georgia already.”

Every warning light in Luc's brain flared. Less than twelve hours had passed since the first news broadcast.

“I'm Neko.”

Luc introduced herself. They shook hands until the approach of racing engines caught their attention. Two local sheriff's cars, lights flashing but without sirens, flew down the two-lane highway at twice the speed limit.

Neko didn't speak again until the sound of the engine had faded. "We just came from that way. There's a town six miles up the road. It was quiet when we passed though."

Luc wasn't the least bit interested in finding out what required the sheriff's attention this early in the day.

"Safe travels," Luc said as she pulled the hose from the bus.

"You, too, sister." Neko headed for the market.

Ten minutes later, the bus was restocked with what few essentials they could get out here in the sticks. Since New Orleans was out of the question, Luc considered their next possible destination. The drummer, Rex, had run back inside for some forgotten treat. Luc had already turned the bus around to face the highway and had a clear view of the road ahead.

What she saw confused her.

Two men shambled down the middle of the highway from the direction of the town Neko had mentioned. At first, Luc thought they were wearing some poorly crafted tie-dyed outfits, but as they got closer—much faster than normal human movement—the red pattern on their clothes turned to blood spatter.

The closer they came, the more details Luc noticed. One man was Black, built like a wrestler, and dressed like a mailman. The other was white or Latino, lean, and wore a sheriff's uniform. It wasn't just their clothes covered in blood. Their open, snarling mouths dripped with it. Blood covered their faces and hands and matted their hair.

The bells on the market door jingled. Rex and Neko's companion crossed the narrow lane between the market and the pumps, laughing together and oblivious to the new arrivals, who shifted toward the sound of the bells.

In seconds, the newcomers attacked. With their teeth and hands, they rent the two men apart, deflecting every defensive attempt to stop them.

Luc couldn't move. Not even in horror films had she seen anything like it.

Neko's scream from the market door snapped Luc out of her terrified stupor. One of the beasts—because no man who had eaten another man alive could still be considered human—stopped what it was doing and turned its focus toward the scream. It leapt over ten feet in a single bound towards Neko before two things happened at once.

A loud boom sounded, and the beast's head exploded.

The market proprietor, a middle-aged man with grey hair and an angry expression who now stood in front of Neko just outside the door, re-cocked a shotgun and aimed for the other... *thing* that was still enjoying its meal. He took two steps towards the grisly spectacle and leveled the shotgun.

A second boom, a second explosion, and they all stared at the aftermath.

“Jesus Christ.” In the bus, one of the musicians behind Luc spoke for all of them. “What in the ever fuck is going on?”

Neko needed little convincing to grab her bags and join them on the bus. Luc drove back the way they’d come until her first opportunity to turn north.

For the next five months, Luc zigzagged her way from one tenuous haven to another, but those places dwindled.

The contagion spread on contact, giving the infected superhuman strength and speed along with the drive to kill and the craving for flesh and blood. Hope took root when the authorities and scientists figured out that no human could survive long on an unnatural and unmentionable diet. Captured and quarantined subjects died after a week or two, but then an accidental withholding of ultraviolet light on a small test group exacerbated the effects. If a contaminated subject avoided UV light, somehow, they could sustain themselves indefinitely.

The monsters learned to avoid the sun. If uninfected humans couldn't find the monsters to kill them, the contagion never died out. Their numbers swelled, and civilization was forced back. A fraction of the population was immune, but they were unable to fight off the people who were infected.

Luc guarded those under her protection and acquired weapons and supplies to keep her growing caravan of uninfected humans moving, but after months of wandering, Luc faced the inevitable. Trying to make it with a ragtag crew out on the open road would end with all of them dead.

Her grandfather had built a defensible perimeter around the old family lodge, high in the mountains of central Oregon. His sanctuary protected the few humans left in the area, and though their numbers were small, their environment was sustainable.

Luc decided it was time to go home.

Now the woods, at least those within the perimeter wall, meant sanctuary, but it also meant work. Luc paid the price to keep her people alive. No distractions, no entanglements—she did the job and kept everyone at a distance except for Neko.

Until the day a woman more guarded than herself arrived at the compound. A woman who helped without being asked but never spoke a word.

A woman who only had eyes for Luc, and Luc couldn't look away.

Chapter 4

The pain woke Luc. When blinking revealed nothing but more darkness, then came heart-pounding terror.

At first, she wondered if she'd gone blind, but she took a deep breath, and the terror eased its grip. Old musty wool, varnish, and wood smoke—the smell of safety in the lodge.

She was alive, out of danger, and home.

It was far too quiet to be one of the bunkrooms, packed as they were with single beds built four high into the walls. Even in the dead of night, she'd hear snoring and the soft cries of bad dreams.

Only the private rooms near the infirmary contained such silence, or full-sized beds.

Her head throbbed, pulsing with each heartbeat.

She sank into the pain and closed her eyes.

Gunfire.

The deep boom of shotguns and the cold cracks and pops of smaller arms. Too many shots to be from her gun alone, so Luc opened her eyes.

With a small twinge of guilt, Luc raised the gun from Neko's head. Help from behind the wall was close now, and they had a new chance at survival.

She shivered, more from fright than the cold, when another shot exploded nearby. Shadows moved in the fading light, each one resolving itself into a new monster. Before she could take aim, someone else fired. More than one someone.

None of the monsters got near her. The horror released Luc's limbs. She wrapped herself around Neko, who didn't stir despite the din.

A snarling growl sounded to her left and she snapped her head in that direction in time to see a monster's head explode a dozen feet away. Human shouts, the words unclear, called from her right but she didn't dare look.

Neko. Protect Neko.

Luc squeezed tighter.

The next time she woke, the headache hurt less, but the muscles in her arms, legs and back screamed. The faint light of dawn slipped through the slats of the wooden blinds covering the window next to the bed.

Or was it twilight? The distant murmur of voices meant too many people in the common area of the lodge for it to be morning.

How long had she been here? Where was Neko?

Her body hurt too much. She reached for sleep.

Encroaching voices, shouting for both of them. Someone pulled Neko's body away from her, but she held on with desperation until she herself was lifted to her feet and assured of Neko's safety. More gunshots. She flinched with each one. Too close, they meant another monster closed in. Two people dragged—no, carried her for a time until the gate came into view. Bright light seared her vision, the giant search lights mounted near each compound entrance blinding her. Her head screamed in pain and the rest of her body hurt so much, she moaned.

The wind picked up and cut right through her wet clothes as the temperature dropped.

Now Neko would get the care she needed. Yet more than Luc wanted Neko's safety, more than she wanted refuge, she wanted what she hadn't allowed herself all these weeks—the comfort and solace only one person was welcome to provide. She wondered how long it would take to find Mera, who stayed close to the kitchens and the infirmary. She never joined the armed patrols, and never left the lodge.

“Mera,” she said, more a quavering whisper than anything else.

The arm wrapped around her body squeezed her waist. The person on her right leaned closer. “Here, Luc.” The scratchy voice was little more than a croak.

Though the effort sent a spike of pain through her skull, Luc turned toward that voice she'd never before heard. Inches from hers, Mera's face was taut with worry, and Luc wanted to cry. Mera focused on carrying Luc through the gates and waved away help from another lodge dweller. The lights of the lodge grew brighter. Luc surrendered and lowered her head.

They were inside the walls. Mera was here beside her, and Neko was no longer in danger from the monsters.

Relieved and safe, Luc stopped fighting the pull of darkness.

As she dozed, music called to her until she grew conscious of it. On Sundays at midday, the lodgers finished their chores early, and reached for guitars, handheld drums, fiddles—anything that made a sound. Music in all its recorded forms had been salvaged, and was a rare treat considering the quiet hours, but nothing warmed the lodge like live music.

Luc didn't join them often—singing felt wrong to her since the world had changed—but she loved music as deeply as always. The strains of an old bluegrass standard echoed in the hall outside Luc's room, and she let it lull her back to sleep.

The next time she woke, the room was dark, but a few shadows flickered. Luc drew in a shallow breath and noticed three things right away.

The pain had lessened to a full-body ache at a level she could endure. Since her head didn't hurt as much, the rich savory aroma of beef broth didn't nauseate her. Someone had left a thermos of it on the nightstand. Her condition must have been dire since beef broth was saved for the most severely ill. Still, more pressing information held her attention.

Someone slept beside her. The rise and fall of human breathing moved the bedcovers. Somehow, she knew it wasn't Neko.

A small candle on the headboard cast wan light over Mera. She lay under a spare blanket, but not under the rest of the bedcovers with Luc. Tendrils of tousled hair rested on her cheek and neck, and Luc stopped herself from smoothing it behind Mera's ear, from touching her delicate jawline.

Even in sleep, worry tensed Mera's brow. Curled into a fetal position with clenched fists tucked under her chin, Mera guarded herself against an attack.

Attack. Luc relived her ordeal in an instant. The accident. The painful stagger uphill. The monster she'd killed. The collapse near the wall.

This time, Luc and Neko had come closer to death—a paper-thin distance—than they ever had before.

With a start, she remembered her pistol. How she'd held it to Neko's head but not what happened to it after. Out of habit, she reached under her pillow—the place she put her pistol every night when she slept—and relaxed when her fingers met its cool grip.

Someone had thought to put it where she could find it. She wondered if it had been the woman sleeping beside her.

Mera whimpered and then quieted. The low candlelight reflected off tears that pooled and fell on her pillow. Luc reached out to soothe her but pulled back before making contact.

All of them, every person in the lodge, had been through hell before finding this sanctuary. Mera was probably no different, but the mystery of who this woman was and where she was from pulled at Luc.

She remembered Mera's face as she helped carry Luc into the lodge.

Neko was wrong. Mera was no danger to her. She was sure of it.

With a wince, Luc turned to lie on her side and burrowed deeper into the bedcovers, gazing at Mera until she couldn't keep her eyes open.

“...been over twenty-four hours. She has to have woken up by now.”

Scott's pissed-off voice was muffled by the door, but loud enough to wake Luc. She stretched her aching body, pleased when nothing hurt as much as her head, and even that was less painful than before. She hadn't had this much rest since...well, never.

Luc waited for a response but there wasn't one.

Scott spoke again, breaking the long silence. “I understand what concussion means, Mera, and it doesn't mean she can't talk to anyone.”

The one-sided conversation bothered Luc, but it took a few moments to pinpoint why.

“Fine,” Scott said, though he didn't sound fine. “How long until I can talk to her?”

Luc remembered what was odd. Mera had spoken to her while carrying her to the lodge. She wasn't mute after all.

“A week! That's ridiculous!”

His frustration was entertaining. Few people would stand up to him. Her estimation of Mera gained a few points.

“I'll be back tomorrow. If Luc's going to be out of commission, we need to talk about what happens around here.”

Of course he would use this as an opportunity to take more control around the lodge. With so many people and so many tasks that needed to be tracked, and rations that needed to be measured, and equipment and gear that needed to be procured or repaired or replaced, someone was always looking for Luc's guidance.

This was the first time she'd been left alone for longer than a few hours in years. She wondered why no one else had come to see her—and if Neko was even capable of checking in on anyone.

The sound of heavy booted steps rumbled through the floor then faded. After Scott was gone, the door opened, and Mera stepped inside. She wore tan winter cargo pants that hugged her hips, and a dark green v-neck sweater that drew attention to her eyes. Her shoulder-length hair fell free.

Mera shut the door and offered a small smile in greeting.

“Hi,” Luc said. Nerves stole her vocabulary. They hadn't been alone like this since Mera's first days at the lodge.

Mera waved.

Luc crooked an eyebrow. “I, uh...” She licked her lips. “I don't think that's gonna cut it anymore.”

The smile faded, and Mera sat in the old wooden chair next to the door.

Luc didn't want this to become a battle of wills. She tilted her head a bit to ease the pressure of her request until Mera relented.

“Hi.” Mera's voice was faint, barely more than a whisper.

“Hi,” Luc said again. So many questions. Why didn't Mera talk? Where had she come from? But most importantly... ”Neko?”

“I stitched what I could, but there'll be a significant scarring.” Mera cleared her throat, but her voice sounded scratchier. “She’s taking fluids well and has eaten a little. She’ll have to stay off the leg for a while.”

The news that Neko was alive and would heal soothed some of Luc’s anxiety. She focused on the messenger. Luc couldn't help but watch Mera's lips form every word spoken. Mera’s compelling contralto voice was rough from lack of use. After weeks of never hearing her speak a word, this was an odd gift.

“Did we lose anyone at the gate?” Luc fought to stay awake, but she had to know the lodge was safe.

“No, and the wall held through the attack. A few of the – the monsters appeared last night, too, but the watch...dispensed with them.”

Luc nodded, but the headache worsened, and the light hurt her eyes.

“You should rest, Luc.”

Resting sounded like the best thing in the world.

“I want to talk later,” Luc said as she stretched out, shifting to avoid the worst of the muscle pain.

Mera came closer and helped with the blankets. “Okay. We can talk later.”

Luc didn't have the strength to fight her.

As Luc fell back to sleep, cool fingers shifted her hair from her face, and brushed against her cheek.

Late afternoon sun slipped through the crafted wood blinds and woke Luc. This time, the light hurt less. Though she was alone, signs around the room pointed to other recent visitors. The thermos at her bedside had vegetable broth this time, which meant she was getting better. She drank all of it, though it wasn't as appealing.

On the chair by the door, someone had left a clean towel and a change of clothes. The sight of them reminded Luc that she needed a shower.

The lodge bathrooms were functional if not fancy, even the private ones. Above a small sink with separate hot and cold-water spigots, a two-foot-wide mirror reflected Luc's pale and bruised face. Her eyes looked black in the weak bathroom light.

On the other side of a basic porcelain toilet, a thick shower curtain hid the small fiberglass stall. Naked under the spray, Luc closed her eyes as the hot water eased the aches in her muscles, washed the fear and sweat from her body, and rinsed the blood from her hair. She must have hit her head on something in the Jeep during the accident. She pressed on the knot on the side of her head, and it ached, but she could bear it.

A bar of soap rested on a tiny ledge in the stall, but not shampoo. She leaned out of the shower to see if she'd missed some on the shelf above the sink.

A blast of cooler air was her only warning.

Mera opened the door and froze, a hair comb held loosely in her hand. Swirling steam escaped through the open door.

Luc wasn't a modest person, but if she had been, the pure, untempered want on Mera's face—the kind most people tried to hide—would be enough to make Luc reconsider.

Everything she'd thought about Mera while she'd carried Neko upslope came rushing into her head at once. She wanted Mera to know her, and she wanted to know all about Mera.

She wanted more than that.

Luc gazed back, pushing the curtain wide in open invitation before stepping back into the spray.

The clunk of the door and the jingle of a loosening belt were loud enough to hear over the water.

Luc hissed when Mera's cool skin pressed against her own, then gasped when Mera's hands gently clasped her waist. She turned around, expecting to see her own desire reflected on Mera's face as it had been before, but instead, Mera looked concerned.

Mera raised her fingers to Luc's temple, touching it with the barest of pressure, and raised an eyebrow in question.

"I'm fine," Luc said. "I'm not made of glass."

Now that Mera was here, pressed against her, Luc was impatient to get what she'd finally decided she wanted. She'd waited long enough.

Luc leaned forward and kissed Mera, her own shoulders sagging in relief at the contact. Mera smelled like smoke and honey and tasted like coffee, and the need in Luc's body tripled. The muscles in her thighs tightened in anticipation as the ache between them swelled.

Mera's kiss was gentle—too much so. She pulled away with worry clouding her face.

Her hesitation stirred Luc's frustration. Luc grabbed Mera at the waist and pulled her closer. She traced her tongue across Mera's lower lip and then bit down to get Mera's attention, felt the reaction in her palms where her hands pressed against Mera's tight abdominal muscles.

She kissed her way along Mera's jaw until she reached her ear. "Touch me."

It took a handful of heartbeats for Mera to act, but when she did, Luc moaned.

Luc's kiss became Mera's. With surprising strength, she pulled Luc tighter against her body, thigh to thigh, breast to breast.

Luc's back hit the cold wall of the shower stall and she flinched, but then Mera lifted one of her legs and wrapped it around her own waist. Luc moaned when Mera stroked between her legs, gasped when Mera buried her face in Luc's shoulder, cried out when Mera sucked at the curve of her neck.

She closed her eyes when Mera slid her fingers lower, not rough though not gentle either. Mera thrust her fingers in a steady rhythm, deep and constant, slowing down the closer Luc came to peaking until she stopped, curling her fingers in a delicious pressure that catapulted Luc into orgasm. Contractions seized Luc, heat washed over her body as her orgasm stretched long, sating her in a way she hadn't felt in a long time.

She opened her eyes to Mera's lidded gaze. Mera thrust again, rewarded with a new wave of contractions that made Luc gasp.

When Luc was spent, they both fell still. Mera kept her hand cupped against Luc, reluctant to leave.

Luc tried to catch her breath. "Wow."

Mera's satisfied sigh made Luc's heart swell.

After Mera checked Luc's vitals to make sure she hadn't made Luc's condition worse, after Luc swatted her hands away and dragged her to the bed to satisfy some urges of her own, after Mera had peaked without a sound at Luc's persistent stroking – though Luc wished she'd screamed her pleasure – after all that, *after*, the silence changed from ecstatic elation to a loaded heaviness. The space of things unspoken expanded to fill the room darkened by evening.

Mera seemed sad, afraid as if awaiting judgment. Luc hated it. Now that Mera had touched her, filled her, seen into the very core of her and given Luc something of herself back, she wanted to do the same.

“You can tell me,” Luc said. “Whatever it is.” She reached out to stroke strands of hair from Mera's temple to behind her ears, but Mera shrank away from her touch. Luc was surprised that her feelings for Mera had grown quickly enough to be stung by the rejection.

Mera curled onto her side, her back to Luc, and spoke in a ragged whisper.

“It's all my fault.”

Chapter 5

Mera shivered as she sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. Luc wrapped one of the blankets around her shoulders, but Mera froze as if expecting a blow.

Luc put the distance back between them, though a few feet felt like a mile. She didn't want to give the ache in her chest a name, but she hoped caring so much so soon would make things better and not worse.

"I'm originally from..." Mera frowned as she paused, quiet with whatever thoughts had stolen her speech.

The silence stretched on, but Luc waited her out, not saying anything. In a small, distant voice not much more than a hoarse whisper, Mera continued.

"It doesn't matter where I'm from. That's all gone now. What matters is what I've done." Silent tears tracked down her cheeks, but her voice didn't change. "The CDC had issued an unprecedented request for additional researchers."

At the mention of the CDC, every muscle in Luc's body fired though she didn't so much as cringe. Dread crept up her spine and kept her breathless and still.

Mera sniffled. "I received an invitation to a classified project. That should have been my first clue—they didn't just ask me to sign their non-disclosure agreement. They threatened me with prosecution and mandatory prison time if I revealed any details to anyone outside of the research team, even other CDC contractors."

The blanket slipped from one shoulder, but Mera didn't seem to notice.

"For weeks, I did mostly support work, but even that always required an armed guard. Her name was Jordan." Her voice cracked, but she swallowed and kept going. "She said I should be happy my job wasn't tougher."

Her eyes clouded with tears that wouldn't stop coming. "We were in the laboratory wing that day when the request came in from a nearby lab for all available security personnel and Jordan went to help out. But then the alarms started. Jordan and I spent so much time together by then, we were – were friends, so I went to find her."

Mera rocked back and forth now, eyes focused on the past.

"The lockdown would have trapped us all inside with...the.... There were only three of the—people, the one's who'd...changed...but they—they..."

The monsters were unstoppable, and Luc understood what must have happened.

“Dozens of researchers had been exposed. I was unarmed, and the guards were overrun. I told Jordan I was going to find a way out, and she – she wouldn’t let me go alone.” Mera wiped the tears from her cheeks, swallowing the anguish that accompanied her story.

“I got to the corridor that led to the shipping bay and made it to the door. The soldier guarding it was just a kid, and I—I told him that we’d all be ripped apart if he didn’t let me open it. He was so scared, he moved for just a moment, and I...I got through, and—and I reached back for Jordan’s hand, even though the guards outside threatened to shoot us. But then they were shooting behind us, and the screams— “

The screams of people being eaten alive. Luc trembled, the visceral response to her own experience with that sound.

Though nothing in the room had changed, the cold womb of darkness made Mera's tale that much more horrific, as if the monsters lurked in the unseen corners, waiting to pounce and tear them apart. For weeks, Luc had wanted Mera to speak, but now all she wanted was for Mera to be silent.

“One of them scratched at Jordan’s ankle, but then a soldier shot him—it—in the face and it—it let go, but that scratch was enough to...” Mera sobbed. “An hour later, she was one of them. The same soldier shot her in the head, trying to stop the spread of the contagion, but...”

Mera's voice was barely a whisper. “But it was too late.”

She looked at Luc with bloodshot eyes, horror and shame shimmering behind the gloss of her endless tears. “I’m the reason they got out of lockdown. I let them out, Luc. You see? It’s *all my fault*.” The sobs shook her again, relentless until she fell over on her side with the force of them.

Luc sat unmoving on the bed, staring at Mera's collapse, at the torment ripping through Mera's body, but she couldn't reach out a hand to soothe her.

All the madness, the death, horror and hopelessness, all of it could have been stopped with a locked door, but one woman had released it on the world.

Mera cried herself to sleep.

Luc couldn't close her eyes.

The next morning, the creak of the door woke Luc with a start, and she bolted upright. She didn't remember falling asleep.

The other side of the bed was empty, the covers neatly arranged like no one had been there. Once again, a neat pile of clothes and a towel waited for her. Luc had slept so soundly, she hadn't felt or heard Mera leave the room. Then again, that might have been Mera's intention, since she'd disappeared without a word.

"Yo, sunshine." Neko shifted the door open with her crutches, and then hopped a dance to the nearby chair and closed the door. "I smuggled you some of the crap that passes for coffee in the kitchen." A thermos hung from one of her thumbs by its handle. "Couldn't sneak you any food, though. You're on your own."

After Neko got herself situated, she tossed the thermos in Luc's direction. Luc made no move to catch it and the thermos landed near her on the bed.

"How's your head?" Neko asked.

A full minute passed as Luc fought through the jumbled thoughts in her head before she answered.

"Uh, better, I guess." She sat up, propping herself against the pillows and the headboard, and looked for any lingering sign of Neko's condition. "How's the leg?"

Neko scoffed. "Hurts like a motherfucker, but I'm dealing. Anyway, I guess I need to give the mute -" She paused and watched her own hands worry a loose string on her sweats. "I mean, Mera. I need to give Mera some credit."

Shocked, Luc stared, until she remembered that Neko didn't know the truth, and not just about Mera's voice. All things considered, Mera's deliberate lack of speech paled in comparison to what else she was hiding.

Luc swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to focus. "You mean the wound?" Her voice sounded strange in her own ears. Was this what madness sounded like? She thought she might go insane keeping all these secrets inside her, but if she told Neko, the entire lodge would know by lunch.

"Yeah, that too, but..." The string came loose, so Neko dug at the seam. "She's the one who noticed we weren't back yet and went looking for Scott. When he wouldn't send a crew out, she insisted in her speechless way that morale would tank if something happened to you, and that he should at least man all the gates—even the one on the ridge. They were headed to the back gate when they heard a shot and came running. If it weren't for her, I guess we'd both be dead."

Neko raised her head and her eyes held a question, on the edge of accusing Luc of not keeping her promise. "I hear they got to us just in the nick of time."

“I was a finger twitch away from keeping my word,” Luc said.

Neko nodded, her faith in Luc restored, but Luc didn't share her relief. And now she had another thing to consider amid all the other information fighting for processing time in her still recovering head.

By confronting Scott, Mera had saved their lives.

After Neko left, thumping away on crutches while bitching about having to use them at all, echoes from commotion in the lodge pressed in on Luc. The urge to be on the other side of the door overcame her and she leapt from the bed.

A shower sounded great, but Mera might come back, and Luc didn't want to be naked in front of Mera right now—even though parts of her body were still sore from their lovemaking.

This new knowledge of Mera's past warred with the euphoria of what Luc had shared with her.

Irritated and confused, Luc dressed quickly and stashed her gun in the back of her pants. The moment she stepped into the commons, every eye was on her. A couple of days healing in bed had distracted her from her normal duties and the low-grade anxiety from constant observation. Several people called out in welcome, but their kind words couldn't keep the mantle of responsibility from descending across her shoulders. Luc didn't regret being in a position of leadership, but she carried around a lot of extra weight as a result.

Luc stood tall, ignoring the ache of overtaxed and still healing muscles.

The largest room in the lodge was decorated in a classic mountain motif, all hardwoods and woven natural fabrics. Dining tables were arranged at the far side near the entry to the kitchen, and mismatched couches and chairs filled the sunken common area in front of a huge fireplace. A roaring fire, its base six feet wide, completed the picture.

Across the great room full of people, Mera stood with a small group of one of the day crews, her back to Luc. Mera hadn't disappeared so much as she'd put a lodge of distance between them. At the sound of Luc's entry, Mera turned around.

The expression on her face—a combination of remorse, anguish and sheer naked want that anyone in the room could probably decipher—made Luc blush. She looked away, uncomfortable with such attention while everyone else could see them.

Halfway between them, a Black man in his thirties with neatly trimmed hair and beard stepped away from one of the dining tables. Ali made a beeline across the room and greeted Luc with a low voice.

“Hey, Luc. Got a sec?”

“Sure.” Luc followed him to the corner of the room that used to be the reservation desk. She turned her back to Mera's position, trying to get away from the need she could feel even at this distance. She needed some time to process before falling into the quagmire of their next conversation.

A large podium that used to hold the guest registry stood unused and covered with dust next to a short counter area. Ali lifted himself onto the counter and rested his elbows on his knees.

“Glad to see you healed up, boss.” Ali's trademark wry grin looked tired and forced today.

Luc could pretend right along with him that it hadn't been a close call for both her and Neko. “Anything to catch a day of sleep, right?” If she gave in to the truth, she'd scream until she couldn't make sound.

“Yeah, that's you. Total slacker.” The grin faded. “Listen. I've got a bit of a situation that needs your delicate touch.”

Luc arched an eyebrow at him. She was a lot of things, but delicate was nowhere near that list.

He conceded the point with a wave. “A message came in from that new group while you and Neko were out on your little adventure.”

Luc swallowed against the discomfort of the reminder. *Little adventure* didn't begin to cover what she'd been through.

“I know you're just getting back on your feet, and I'm sorry to put you to work so soon but we need you on this one. These guys have some skills that we're really lacking around here, so I want to treat them with velvet gloves. Scott's great at strategy, but my boy ain't so hot on tact. Can you take over the communication with them?”

Luc frowned but didn't disagree. For weeks, it'd been Luc who had communicated with this particular group of travelers, trying to convince them that the lodge held sanctuary and not forced labor, imprisonment or worse. A lot of places across the country offered safety, but at a steep price. Scott was a sledgehammer when sometimes a pair of needle-nose pliers would get the job done. He couldn't help his cop training and would no doubt complicate matters if he was the lead negotiator.

She nodded. Ali shared the details and left to follow-up with the potential newcomers.

When Luc turned around, she found several lodgers waiting. She steeled herself, remembering her duty to present a strong, capable hand. For the first time in a long time, as much as she wanted the role, her duty felt like a chore.

These people, her people—each of them wanted to speak with her, to tell her how happy they were to see her. They asked how she was healing and told her how glad they were that she was safe, but in each of them, she sensed a need for reassurance. They counted on her to lead them, and her close call had upset their tenuous sense of balance. A few offered to take on some of her usual tasks, and wouldn't take no for an answer, but their trepidation and servile attentiveness made her twitch.

For a few days, she'd had a respite from this constant obligation to everyone. To have it all descend on her at once jarred her.

Through it all, she felt a pull to Mera, but resisted.

Ali called out to her, pointing upstairs where the room with all their communication equipment was housed. Luc nodded that she was on her way.

Now that the crowd had thinned, she felt less on display and didn't want to leave without acknowledging Mera. This last trip with Neko made it clear to her that she should take every opportunity to connect with people who mattered, even if it was difficult. And Mera mattered.

At the bottom of the stairs, Luc looked back one last time, to at least signal that she would return to talk, but Mera stared at her own feet as she left the commons and headed for the infirmary.

The negotiations took hours, but in this dark new world, such deliberations were common. A small group approached a larger sanctuary, looking for security and supplies. The larger sanctuary needed additional skillsets to strengthen the greater good. If both sides were honest with good intentions, a mutually beneficial agreement could be negotiated.

There were, however, bands of criminals who wanted to scavenge from a larger compound to get access to a serious haul. And some of the larger sanctuaries exacted a high price for membership—slavery, sexual subservience, complete subjugation to a nefarious authority.

It took longer than it should have to appease the new group. Whatever they'd encountered on their journey to this part of the country had made them overly cautious, and Luc's patience was tested to its limit before their leader, Gene, finally agreed to her terms. She'd allow two of his people into the lodge. They'd be allowed access to everything except the food and weapons stores and could talk to any of the lodgers about the accommodations. If the emissaries were satisfied, the larger group would join the lodge.

Still, the accomplishment of bringing more people into the fold straightened her shoulders. Hell, finding a professional plumber was a goddamned treasure trove. Nothing sank morale like backed up toilets.

On the way back, she thought more about Mera, about how she'd saved Luc's life and Neko's.

Did the fact that Mera had alerted the watch mean that Luc owed her silence?

Luc considered whether or not she could let Mera stay. If word got out about what Mera had done, human nature would drive someone to seek retribution. No one would blame them, but it would no doubt throw the entire lodge into chaos.

Then again, who was going to tell them? Not Luc—she couldn't imagine telling that story to anyone—not even Neko. She doubted Mera would tell anyone else, unless she had a death wish.

And that look Mera had given her this morning, the one that stripped Luc bare from across the room, what did it mean?

In the end, it came down to Luc's need to ask Mera some hard questions. Luc couldn't keep her distance, not after what they'd shared.

Could one person be responsible for something so catastrophically enormous? How could Mera have released all this on the world? What kind of doctor didn't understand the stakes?

Then Luc pictured herself in the same situation, with someone she cared about on the verge of being eaten alive before her eyes. When her imagination served up the image of Neko in a room full of monsters, Luc suddenly understood all too well why Mera had made such an impossible choice.

She herself had promised to shoot Neko in the head if needed. She couldn't judge anyone.

The kitchen crew welcomed her as she walked into the common room, and a few of the other lodgers loitered nearby, but most people had jobs to do in the afternoons.

“Hey, how'd it go with the noobs?” Neko sat on an old worn-out couch in front of the fireplace, her leg resting high on a stack of cushions.

“Fine,” Luc said. “You ok?” She searched the room and what she could see of the halls and kitchen, but Mera wasn't there.

“Meh. It hurts, but I've had worse.” Neko wiggled in place but then settled. “Who are you looking for?”

Luc sat on the couch by Neko's feet. “Have you seen Mera?”

Neko squinted before answering. “What happened between you two?”

Luc's lack of response was answer enough.

“Seriously, Luc? You couldn't pick someone less—I don't know—fraught with fucking weird?”

“That's not fair.” Then again, considering what Luc now knew about Mera, maybe it was.

“I haven't seen her since she took off.”

“Took off? When?” Had Mera joined one of the grounds crews today? Several crews worked odd maintenance jobs inside the perimeter. Despite winter's chill, plenty of work sent people outside—clearing debris from the trench or fetching firewood among other things. “Which crew?”

“Hey, ease up on the Spanish Inquisition.”

Luc took a deep breath, though it did nothing to calm her. “Sorry, Neko. I just...”

No words came to mind to describe how she felt. She only knew that she needed to find Mera.

“Yeah, well, I can smell that something else is going on. Reeks of bullshit.” She lowered her voice and frowned. “What's her story anyway?”

Luc had no plans to share any part of Mera's story. “When did she leave?”

The way Neko looked at her made her feel like everything was written on her face. She tried not to squirm.

“Soon after you went upstairs. One of the waste crews had an out and back scheduled to the old reclamation center near Gresham.”

Luc tried not to let the shock show on her face. Mera never volunteered for any of the details outside the perimeter. As far as Luc knew, the only time Mera had been outside the wall had been to carry Luc back inside it.

Neko kept talking, oblivious to Luc's turmoil. “She hitched a ride after she checked on my bandages, though she did make sure I can take care of them myself. Which is awesome, by the way, because I'm sick of dropping my trousers for her and -”

“Are they back?”

Neko scoffed. “What's your deal?”

“Neko, please -” Luc got a hold of herself, but if what her gut was telling her was the truth...

Neko leaned back against the couch cushions in evident disapproval. “They came back about an hour ago, but I didn't see her with them. Maybe she's back in her lair.” She nodded in the direction of the small infirmary in the back of the lodge.

Luc patted Neko's good leg in thanks and rose with an absent promise to check on Neko later.

The infirmary was neat and organized as always, with two pieces of paper atop the otherwise clear desk. One listed items that needed to be restocked. The other detailed current treatments for all the people under Mera's care, including Neko. The cot against the wall was completely stripped. Mera's bag was nowhere to be seen, and neither were her few clothes and personal items.

Luc caught up with the waste crew to make sure, but it was a formality.

“She gave me a note saying she was going to grab a ride north.” A bear of a man, Bruce had a thick bushy beard but kept his head clean-shaven even in winter. He was soft-spoken and kind to a fault—and wouldn't have dragged Mera back to the lodge against her will. “I tried to get her to reconsider, because those guys in Kent are insane if you ask me, but she couldn't be swayed.”

The decision had been made in Luc's absence. Mera had left MacDougal Lodge and wasn't coming back.

Chapter 6

In the sleepless dark that night, the questions simplified, and the answers became binary. Did she want to let Mera go or didn't she?

While tossing and turning her still aching body in an old down sleeping bag, Luc listened to the deep rumbles of snores from other lodgers in the main bunkroom. Mera had solved one problem by leaving—Luc didn't have to make any decisions about what to do with the information she'd been given. Yet, it wasn't a matter of whether or not she'd tell anyone. Could she live with the knowledge of what Mera had done?

She tried to separate that knowledge from the woman she'd come to know. The kind and generous woman who had saved her life, nursed her back to health, offered her solace and tenderness and passion. The scent of her. The feel of her skin. The way she'd held Luc like she was precious, holding nothing back when they'd loved.

Luc pushed the suddenly confining sleeping bag down to her waist and rolled onto her back. No one had ever touched her like that, and Luc wanted more.

The one time she wanted something—someone—for herself, and it came with a price tag so expensive, she couldn't count that high.

Why had Mera told her?

But that part she understood. If what Mera had told her was true, and Luc believed that it was, Mera must have kept it to herself for years. Years of hiding who she was, and what she'd done, while trying to navigate the world full of constant reminders of what her choice had cost those around her.

So many unanswered questions remained. How had she survived this long? When had she stopped speaking?

And the one question Luc couldn't stop herself from asking, if only in her mind: did Mera expect to be absolved for what she'd done?

But Mera hadn't asked her for forgiveness. Mera hadn't asked for *anything* since she'd arrived. She'd lent a hand when it was required and never turned down a job, including the unpleasant ones other lodgers bartered to avoid. Her medical skills had been welcome, and no one ever needed to ask—Mera volunteered.

Mera hadn't asked Luc to keep her secret and seemed to expect that Luc wouldn't keep it to herself. Why else would she have left?

In the darkness, Luc hoped for answers and found none.

While the rest of the lodgers ate breakfast in the commons, Luc made a side trip upstairs to a small south-facing room packed to the ceiling with racks of radio equipment.

The room's only occupant, a Latina in her late twenties with pixie good looks and shoulder-length dark hair, looked at Luc in surprise. "Hi, Luc. What brings you to Central Command so early?"

It was a nickname given to the room by the amateur radio operators who spent time here, of which there were exactly two.

Luc sat in the spare office chair, a sleek top-of-the-line ergonomic model snagged from an abandoned insurance office on a scavenger run.

"Need a favor, Cassie."

Cassie leaned back and tapped her fingers against themselves. "Oh, do you?"

Luc rolled her eyes. Help would come at a price. "Yeah, start the hustle."

"I want kitchen work details for a month." This time of year, not a lot of people wanted to go outside in the cold, and no one wanted to be on waste detail.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask for."

Cassie crossed her arms. "Well, you're not holding a cup of coffee, which means you haven't had any yet, so this must be damned important."

Luc huffed in disgust. Cassie wasn't wrong.

"One week. I just need you to make a few calls."

Cassie cocked an eyebrow and tacked on a smirk. "Two weeks. And a shot of your stash."

Neko had been telling tales about Luc's hidden bottle of twice barreled rye. For what Luc wanted, Cassie's price wasn't too much to ask. "Deal."

"Ha!" Cassie rubbed her hands together in victory and wheeled her chair around toward her equipment. "Who am I calling?"

The lack of sleep the night before had helped Luc isolate the details. Mera wouldn't have headed north, despite what she'd told Bruce. The bastards in Kent treated women like chattel and safety there came at a steep price. Mera wasn't stupid. That left only a few places in the entire region that were safe enough for her to hole up overnight.

“Ping the camp in Gresham and see if Mera's still there. If not, check anything within two day's travel by armored car to see if she's come through.”

Cassie turned and gave her a long look, but whatever she saw on Luc's face kept her from asking any questions.

Luc stashed a few extra bullets from the lodge's precious supplies in her pockets. She tried not to think about the possibility of using them.

Scott stepped into the doorway of the supply closet, filling the space with his tall, muscular frame. He was a good-looking man, with short curly blond hair and a neat beard, but his terse manner was off-putting.

“Where do you think you're going?”

Luc pulled her skullcap from her jacket pocket and put it on. “I don't answer to you, Scott. Remember that.”

Cassie's network of ham operators had yielded results before the breakfast dishes had been cleared from the dining hall. Mera had caught a small convoy out of Gresham headed south that morning. If Luc left now, she could catch her within a day's drive.

“I'm aware. I do, however, think it's my duty to ask you a reasonable question since you just got out of bed yesterday. After lying unconscious for over a day, I might add.”

Scott stepped closer and leaned into her personal space. “You can't go off half-cocked again—you're still recovering from the last bullshit trip outside. One that trashed a crucial vehicle in our fleet.”

He squinted at her, his anger leaking through his usually reserved disposition, but it poorly masked his fear. “Why are you going after her? She's not one of us and has barely been here a month.”

“She's on her own out there.”

“Mera left of her own free will. If she doesn't want to be here, let her go.”

“The decision's made. Move.”

He waited too long. She stepped into him and pushed him aside.

Of course, he followed her into the hall. “Luc,” he said. “We need to ensure the survival of everyone else who actually wants to be here.”

And that was part of the problem.

She stopped on the edge of the common room, aware that she once again had the attention of everyone in it. This time, they mostly pretended to continue their business.

“Scott,” she said through clenched teeth. “It's not just about survival anymore.”

Confusion warred with the anger on his face.

She lowered her voice. “Look around. These people are safe. You've done your job. But now, we need to take care of people, not just keep them safe. That's *my* job. It's far too late to fix the world, but we have to find a better way to live in it, to rebuild what we can, or make something new so we can start living for tomorrow again.”

Luc hoped she was getting through to him. “We need to look out for the people who think they don't belong. Because if it's not about each other, it's not about anything.”

Scott looked around the lodge, and she knew he was trying to understand.

Then he sighed. “Who's going with you?”

A cargo van sat idling in the gravel driveway, waiting for Luc. She stopped with her hand on the lodge's front door when a familiar voice called her name.

Hurricane Neko navigated the common room's tables and chairs with surprising ease considering their haphazard placement and the size and maneuverability of her crutches.

“I'm coming with.”

Luc lowered her voice and stepped into swinging range. Hopefully, Neko wouldn't use the crutches as weapons, but she might.

“Not this time, Neko.”

“You can't go back out there alone.” Neko teared up and bit her lower lip before she spoke again. “Who's gonna watch your back?”

“A couple of the guys need to be trained on the route to the Medford outpost. I'm taking them with me. It'll be fine.”

She hoped that was true.

“Look,” Luc said as she gave Neko a hug. “Have Cassie check in if it makes you feel better, but not too often, okay?”

Neko blotted her face with her sleeve even though she wasn't wearing makeup. “You sure she's the one?”

She must think Luc was crazy.

“I don't know about that, but I do know that I can't let her go.”

When the perimeter gate came into view, Luc felt cold sweat and goosebumps across her whole body. In the front passenger seat of a monstrous tactically modified cargo van, she squeezed the door handle and took deep breaths in an attempt to lower her skyrocketing heart rate.

As they pulled away from the perimeter, Luc moved her gun to her coat's side pocket and touched it like a talisman.

Pale morning sunlight danced through the snow-laden evergreens, but Luc watched the shadows for any movement that might warn of a threat. Ali drove confidently along the two-lane highway, trading stories with the two men in the back. He tried to engage her in the conversation, but her one-word answers must have given him a clue and he quit trying.

Twice, they stopped to clear fallen trees from the highway. Such maintenance was one of the reasons the van was so heavily outfitted. Since civil transportation work crews no longer existed, they had to do that work themselves. Neither stop took long, but Luc was conscious of every moment of daylight slipping away.

They passed through the remains of a small town east of Mt. Hood, not much more than a village built around a four-way stop with a non-functioning street signal. Half the buildings were burnt out, the others boarded up or stripped. All of them were empty.

No one lived in places like this anymore. People had either died here or left within the first six months. Any bloodstains had long since been washed away, but she had seen so many places like this, she knew that not everyone had escaped the monsters.

The shattered world lay outside the van's windows. Abandoned houses, burned out businesses, bodies long dead and scavenged to the bone strewn across lawns and streets and highways. The collapse of civilization.

It wasn't Luc's story to tell, but even if she told someone, it might result in Mera's immediate exile. They'd been tested once before when one of the lodgers turned out to be a convicted felon of the worst kind. No one had wanted to kill him, but they didn't want him to stay either. By Luc's order, they gave the man some supplies and passage to one of the waystations along an old-world freeway. He'd never come back, and Luc didn't know if he'd survived or not.

That would be the best that Mera could hope for, which she obviously knew since she'd made that choice herself.

Another option was a public trial, which were common in areas where humans had grouped together. Most of the time, they were less jury-by-peer and more mob justice. Luc had conducted a few at the lodge and hated that they were necessary.

The worst would be cold-blooded murder if anyone took their vengeance, but to what end? It would accomplish nothing but temporary satisfaction for anyone angry enough to kill Mera. It wouldn't change anything, or bring anyone back, and would instead only rid the lodge of its best medic.

Thinking of all possible outcomes hurt Luc's still-healing head. Gods, why did everything have to be so hard?

Then again, since when had she taken the easy way out?

The miles flew by once they hit one of the open back roads where there were fewer obstacles. She looked out at the winter landscape, the lack of movement or human presence making it more desolate.

What did or didn't matter changed nothing in reality. The world was still forever broken.

On the other hand, Luc could choose not to be alone.

Two hours of daylight remained when Luc and her fellow travelers arrived at their destination. On a small hill outside of what had been Medford, Oregon, inside a double-fenced perimeter topped with razor wire, the rundown buildings of the outpost stood in the wan afternoon light.

It was more of a waystation than a complete compound. Though it featured a large carport and an unadorned two-story cabin made of wood, cement and stone with a three-hundred-sixty-degree crow's nest at its peak, it had no permanent residents. Few if any supplies were stored here.

For people passing through, it was a safe place to stay overnight. The doors were barricaded before sundown, and the vantage point at the top made it simple to keep watch. Luc sent her crew to secure the vehicle and lodging, then went in search of Mera.

Minimally furnished bunkrooms were on the second floor. The first floor was a windowless musty mess hall lit by an old oil lantern that cast wan light over a handful of tables. Most were empty, but the occupant of a table in the far corner caught Luc's attention.

Mera sat staring at the steam rising from a chipped mug. Bundled in an old army coat against the cold with her hair tucked into her skullcap, hunched over against the world, she looked lost and bereft.

When Luc drew near the corner, Mera looked up in question and then in shock. She twitched like she wanted to run.

Luc slowed as if approaching a cornered animal. She kept her hands out in the open until she reached the table, then sat across from Mera.

"Luc." The fact that Mera spoke aloud demonstrated her surprise, though her voice was low enough that it didn't carry far. "What are you—"

She swallowed her next words, and then looked toward the door. "Where's Scott?"

Luc put her hands flat on the table. She matched Mera's low tone. "He's not here. It's just me."

"You came here alone?" Now Mera hissed in an angry whisper. "After what you just went through?"

"No." With a tilt of her head, Luc clarified. "I mean, I'm here with a couple of guys from the lodge."

Mera's face steeled in resolve. Eyes Luc remembered to be a warm brown were now black and cold in the low light. "I won't stand trial. You can't make me." She reached toward the large backpack next to her, and Luc wondered if she had a gun.

"I'm not going to...that's not why I'm..." Luc huffed in frustration. "Look, I just want to talk to you."

Mera stayed her hand on the bag but pulled it closer. "You should go."

It was a stupid thing to say. Mera knew Luc couldn't go anywhere until morning.

Luc started to speak again but glanced sideways at the room's other occupants. Two men ate a meager dinner at another table and ignored them. The doors opened and Luc's companions walked in, stomping mud from their boots. They waved at her and Mera, then headed upstairs, oblivious to the tension.

When Luc looked back at Mera, she saw surprise.

"Really. I'm only here to talk." And hopefully, persuade Mera to return to the lodge with her.

"I've told you everything," Mera said.

That couldn't be true. Years had passed since the events Mera had described. So much must have happened, but maybe Mera didn't want to talk about it. Luc could understand that. She certainly had plenty of things in her own past she didn't want to talk about either.

"Well, maybe I've got a few things I want to say."

This time, Mera looked at the other people in the room. Luc nodded at Mera's drink, inviting her to consume it while it was still hot. It took Mera a moment to give in, but eventually she went back to drinking her tea.

Her hand stayed on her bag.

When the occupants of the other table left them alone in the dark room, Luc relaxed. She reached into the inside chest pocket of her coat and pulled out a matte black flask containing a sample of the latest batch from the lodge's distillery.

"I think this conversation calls for...well, whatever this is." She took a swig herself. Spicy and young, the whiskey made her cough. Then she offered to pour some into Mera's cup.

Mera looked like she was going to decline, but then she nodded, and Luc poured a tiny bit into her tea.

The tightness around Mera's eyes was back, and Luc could tell she hadn't slept.

She could set Mera at ease about one thing at least. “I didn't tell anyone else.”

Incredulity made Mera set down her mug. “What?”

“Frankly, Mera, it's not my story to tell. And I'm not *going* to tell anyone else.”

Luc was surprised to discover that she could live without talking about it ever again. The number of things she could shove into an emotional drawer, never to be opened, should have surprised her, but if it meant she could keep moving forward, she'd do it. Therapy didn't exist anymore. “If you're looking for forgiveness, I can't help you.” The words that came tumbling out of her mouth weren't as gentle as she'd hoped, but they were true.

Her words landed and Mera's eyes widened.

Luc shook her head as she spoke. “It's too big for me. Too much, and I can't even begin to process it. I've tried. What I can offer is acceptance.”

She lived in a world where she'd promised to kill her best friend if needed. She could live with this.

“We're here now. We can't change how we got here. I don't want to think about what happened before. Maybe you need to, so you can live with yourself, but I can't. All I know is that I—I -”

Luc was surprised to feel tears. “All I know is...of all those people looking at me in the lodge, you're the only one who sees me. I want you to stay. With me.” As long as Mera was willing to stay. Luc couldn't think past a few days into the future, but she envisioned Mera at her side.

Mera wasn't good at hiding her emotions, and hope warred with disbelief.

Encouraged, Luc continued. “Maybe it matters to you that I can accept what you told me, and that I don't want anything else from you. Maybe you think less of me because I can put all that behind me, but I have enough to worry about here and now without trying to rationalize how we got here. The what-ifs, the maybes, none of that matters. Not really. This is our world, and I have to live in it -”

Mera's shock turned to disdain, though it was directed at herself and not Luc. “You wouldn't have to if I hadn't -

“Stop.”

The chasm between them stretched wide, but Luc was tired of it. She reached across the table and took Mera's hand. Mera tried to pull away, but Luc wouldn't let her go. “Stop, Mera. Just— “

She softened her voice. “Please.” It was too soon to say the other words she knew were true, the ones that conveyed the depth of her feeling. She wasn't ready to say them, and she was sure Mera wouldn't believe them. They'd be suspect if spoken here and now, their truth wasted.

She squeezed Mera's hand tightly, trying to convey her sincerity—with pain if necessary. “You don't have to run anymore.”

The shine of tears in Mera's eyes proved Luc's words had been received as intended. So did the easing of tension in Mera's shoulders.

Luc leaned closer. “And you don't have to hide. Not from me.”

Winter dragged long on the mountain, extending into early April. Luc walked into the lodge infirmary as she tucked gloves in her pockets. Mera sat at the small desk outside a room she and Luc now shared, making notes on a clipboard.

“Another group hit the lower watch,” Luc said by way of greeting.

Mera looked up in alarm.

Luc shook her head to stave off Mera's worry. “We've been expecting these folks. I'm headed out to meet them. It's only a short run. Shouldn't take long.”

Everyone said “a short run” like it couldn't end in catastrophe, but whenever someone went outside the perimeter, they ran the risk of never returning.

Luc didn't like to make a point of acknowledging what they all knew. She knew better than most that she might not come back, as did Mera.

Still, the more people brought to safety inside the sanctuary, the better for everyone. A day trip was worth the risk.

As uneasy as she was, Mera was calmer now, more centered. Sharing the darkest pieces of herself with Luc had settled something in her and brought some peace to her eyes.

Mera stood to embrace Luc. “I'll be waiting,” she said in her quiet whisper, and leaned in for a kiss.

Luc let it warm her from the inside out, then licked her lips when she pulled away. “I'll be back.”

- FIN -

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia Black writes women-loving-women fiction with angsty protagonists. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her wife and teenaged daughter. Her works include the short stories “Season Finale” and “Love Undaunted” in Sapphire Books’ FANDOM TO FANTASY series, “Constant” in the GCLS Writing Academy anthology WRITING FREEDOM, and “Reclamation” in Bold Strokes Books’ anthology “IN OUR WORDS—Queer Stories from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Writers”.

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