

## Chapter 1

I dragged the sack of corn from the shed. It was heavy, at least 50 pounds, and even after doing it for a few years, I still couldn't carry it all the way to the cattle. The cows watched me struggle, waiting patiently for their food.

"Could use a little help," I called to the cows as I reached the trough.

They gathered around me, eating as soon as the first kernel skidded down the trough. I let out a sigh once the bag was empty. At least the delivery got here early, I glanced at the old truck as it putted away with the sacks of corn, heading to the other farms. It's been almost four years since England's occupation of the US. After Covid-19 came Monkeypox, then Mad Deer Disease. And yes, it was as bad as it sounded. I'm sure you're thinking crazy episodes, losing touch with reality, etc., but you're wrong. It starts with a scab or two, and those scabs turn into sores that grow. They grow and grow until your entire arm, leg, neck, whatever is a sore and slowly, your flesh melts away until only your bones are left.

Yeah, it was horrible way to die. The infectious disease would rot your body and brain. First you lose your flesh, then motor functions. Next is your memory, then speech, and finally you lose touch with reality. It takes about four or five months in total, a slow agonizing death. By the time the vaccine was invented, most the world's population was wiped out, 57% to be exact. Things got so bad over here in the United States that England took over- again. Well- not a full take over, an occupation. Actually, they occupied most of the American continent, a few countries in the Middle East, and all of southeast Asia.

Things got really bad over here. Like really bad. Society pretty much fell apart. It started with small time crime, looting or whatever, but looting turned to killing, and once the government stopped doing anything about it, it became Lord of the Flies.

I left the cows to eat while I straightened up my home. It was a lot of space for just one person, 3000 square feet. But it wasn't always just me, rather is use to be my parents and my two older brothers. I grabbed my key before heading out, locking the door as I headed to market. My sandals kicked up the gravel as I walked, meeting my neighbor at the foot of my driveway.

"Hey, Arden," I said.

"Hi, May," she said politely.

We walked quietly. The market was only a twenty minute walk, the same route we took every day. May was a root farmer, growing root vegetables while I was a dairy farmer. Dairy was a lot more precious than potatoes, carrots, and onions, but we all received about the same amount of pay. England managed to restore a bit of normalcy, but it stopped at that. Now it feels more like a communist dictatorship. Everything was built around the schedule and there were soldiers *everywhere*, the market, the streets, your neighborhood. If you did something wrong, they would know, and you would pay.

"Ladies," a brute voice came behind us. Williams.

Neither of us said anything, instead continuing our walk-in silence.

"Hey," he stood in front of May, running a dirty finger through her blonde hair.

"Back off, Williams." I said, grabbing her arm and pulling her away from him. Arden was too timid and sweet to say anything, but I was just the opposite.

Williams looked me up and down his tongue hanging out his mouth like an animal. "Maybe I should try a different treat today?"

I scoffed, “you’d have better luck with a hive of bees.”

“May, let’s go.” She tugged on my arm as she spoke.

I held my ground for a moment longer before following her. I wasn’t scared of him, not in the slightest. But they say to pick and choose your battles, and I knew better than to pick a fight now. We arrived at the market, dull stands held together by the tarp and sheet metal. This was the time to buy what you might need for the week. The Market was open every day, but you could only go at your allotted times. My neighborhood time was Thursdays at 1:15pm. I went straight for the fruit, taking any bag of strawberries they had left and paying the vendor. Next was sugar. It last for a long time, but I was just running out. It was one of the cheaper things to buy at the market. The most expensive? Meat, especially pork. I peeked through the crowd at the meat stall.

There were a few paper-wrapped packages, but by the time I made my way to the front, there were no more left. You didn’t have to get everything from the market. They give out food rations Tuesday at noon. It was always a few cups of flour, some vegetables, and oil or lard. It wasn’t a great life, but it sure beat how things were before. I found May looking at the fruits.

“They look old already,” she said with a sigh, showing me her strawberries.

“It’s not season for strawberries.”

We wandered to the stalls, selling various items. The Mad Deer Disease sent us back a few centuries. When the world broke out in the third world war, electricity was directly target everywhere. Think of mass EMPs but one hundred times worse. They were so destructive that the electrical grid was rendered completely useless. We still had the technology, but couldn’t be used without electricity, which was totally desolated. Sure, we still had the wires, grid, and towers, but they don’t work anymore. Like some hit a worldwide off switch. Instead, it went recycling plants who repurposed them into all sorts of things, tools, weapons, furniture, and what wasn’t used was put in landfills.

Some stands sold old tablets and computers. I guess it was a cute novelty. Stands that didn’t sell food sold clothes, shoes, household goods or trinkets. It was anything you could need, but only things that couldn’t be used against the government either. No guns, knives, batteries, copper wire, you know, the fun stuff.

“They say a new batch of soldiers will arrive Friday.” May continued telling me about the gossip she heard through the grapevine.

Another batch fresh out the oven, huh? They say this all the time. More soldiers are coming. So? Let them come. It made no difference at this point.

“I’ve heard rumors that-”

“Are your vegetables growing well?” I interrupted her. I couldn’t stand the hearsay. You could only talk about so little over and over again until it gets old. But honestly, I wasn’t in mood for a depressing conversation. More soldiers to keep us down, to crush our spirits, the usual- did we really need to discuss it?

“Huh?”

“With the cold front coming in,” I said.

It’s true, a cold front was moving in. It’ll be time to break out those winter coats and bring the cows in the barn soon. Not to mention, most the fruits and vegetables will die, and we’d be relegated to potatoes and rations.

“They’re okay,” she said as we exited the market.

Our hour to shop was almost up, and the next cohort would come in. A quick trip back, and we were headed to our respective homes. By now it was already 4pm, and that meant curfew was in 3 hours. Most my responsibilities were done, feeding the cows, laundry, shopping. I just had a few chores to take care of inside, which could be done later.

Once I put my things away, I grabbed my bible, ready to head out for my weekly meeting. We didn’t get to do much, especially during an occupation. There were a few restaurants, not that anyone could afford that; taverns, tea rooms, and community groups. Those weren’t so bad- the community groups. At least I could go to bible study, and meet like-minded individuals. But it was strenuous. Each group had to register with the local authorities and submit records from each meeting, some groups were supervised, especially if there was reason to believe they were working against the crown.

Dirt kicked around as Arden and I walked into town. It was a bit longer than the market, and definitely seedier. Once she reached her sewing group, we parted ways, and a few blocks down I ran into Donovan.

“How the flowers blooming,” he said solemnly.

“Full blossom,” I said politely.

That was just our greeting. We ambled a bit further before heading down some cellar stairs. The town was falling apart, but every space was used. Even in a small town like this, everything was stacked on top each other. Don followed behind me, weaving through the crowd to our room, knocking twice before entering.

“How the flowers blooming,” said Lucielle, the bible study leader.

“Full blossom,” we spoke almost in unison before taking our seats in the circle.

“Good, now that everyone is here, let’s start.”

## Chapter 2

My doorbell rang, catching me off guard. There's no way that could be who I thought it was, looking at him through the bay windows. He glanced at the house, triple checking the house number before walking off the porch. He walked around to the edge of the fence, glancing at the cows who ate their grain uninterestedly before climbing back onto the porch, knocking on the door.

It couldn't be who I thought it was. I begged it wasn't- but once he spoke, I was sure.

"Lieutenant Halloway," he said, knocking on the door again.

I sprinted to my kitchen and wrestled with the contraption I was working on, hurrying to put it away. It wasn't much of anything- not yet. But still, I couldn't have Brit knowing. I heard the doorknob click. He was coming. I was almost there, shoving the device under my kitchen sink, but it wouldn't let the door close. I bent the metal handle as much as I could before pushing it all the way back and under a bucket, slamming the cabinet doors when I heard his voice.

"Hi," he said in a soft, polite voice.

I caught my breath, my heart thumping as I stood up straight. It seemed like he didn't notice my project- good.

"Halloway. Oliver Halloway."

I glared at him, somehow hating him even more, though I didn't even know him. He was tall and pale, with a long, flat face. He was pretty handsome, so I guess that was a plus. But still, I hated his presence in my home- his shoes on my floor. I stirred the pot on the stove, standing over the stew as it simmered, doing my best to ignore him as he ambled around.

"You have a beautiful home," he said.

"That's right-" I glared at him again, "it's my home."

"Yes," he nodded, "it is."

The room was quiet tension growing immensely. He sat on the edge of the couch, holding an envelope in his hand.

I couldn't help but be curious what was in it. Probably nothing interesting- but still.

"What's your name?" He spoke.

I hesitated to tell him. What would he do with that information- was the first thing to run through my head. But the Brits already had that information- not that anyone could do much with it. I just didn't trust him- Oliver Halloway. How could you trust a guy with a name like that? And now he wanted to know mine. That was suspicious to say the least.

He held the envelope out to me after a few moments of silence, politely smiling. I felt a hint of guilt as I snatched it. He really was trying to be nice, and I'm sure he wanted to be here as much I wanted him here. I glanced at the letter, 'Stipulations of Soldier Housing and Care.' At that, the guilt instantly faded back to anger. They were giving me stipulations to house someone in my home, seriously? Besides I already got the first three memos.

They had to have their own room with a bed, three meals per day, and nursing when they're sick or injured. Simple really. Besides, it shouldn't last forever. From what I heard, soldiers were in and out of this

situation in a matter of weeks. Still, I couldn't help but feel a bit of guilt as I crumbled the letter and tossed it on the floor. I could tell he was anxious and didn't want to cause any trouble. Yet, he was here, and all he seemed to do was piss me off. Nonetheless, I had to be proper and cordial.

"This way," I said shortly, waving him upstairs.

He tromped behind me as I pushed through the door. It was a big room, with a fullsize bed, rocking chair, dresser, and closet space.

He dropped his bag with a quiet sigh, "this is perfect. Thank you."

"Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes." I left him to settle him, stomping down the stairs. Perfect? I definitely wasn't going for that. Just okay would've been better than perfect.

I stirred the stew, tossing in some leftover vegetables and whatever spices I had. It was a big house with three bedrooms, but there was only one actual bedroom. That's to say only one bedroom had a bed. One was more of storage while the other was just a sitting room. So, I had to figure out where to sleep.

"It smells nice," his voice suddenly interjected my thoughts.

"Just sit," I snapped.

He obliged, sitting at the dining table, patiently waiting as I scooped his bowl. I watched him eat, hardly touching my bowl. I wasn't even hungry at the sight of him. I was too filled with anger. "How long will you be here anyway?"

"At least a year."

"A year," I echoed in disbelief.

He nodded over his stew, "it's what the letter said. You know," he paused, "the one your crumbled up."

I glared at him. It was all I could do really, anything else would earn me some kind of punishment. On top of everything else I do, I had to take care of another person. I glanced at him- a dumb Brit like him.

He sipped at his soup politely, "this is delicious. Thank you."

Delicious? Why was he so nice and polite? Could it be there were Brits who were actually decent people? No- no way. There was no way he could be a decent person. In fact- he's worse for pretending. That's when I realized, glancing at his polite smile. That's when I knew- this was going to be a long year.

### Chapter 3

I roasted the pumpkin seeds in the oven, checking them occasionally before starting on the laundry. The afternoon was nearing its end and I rushed to get the rest of the chores done. Not only because I didn't want to do it, but because I need to work on my project. And I couldn't do that with Oliver around. I pinned the clothes on the line, hurrying through the basket.

"Afternoon, May," Arden said with a wave.

"Hey, Arden," I said, wrestling with a shirt that wouldn't untwist.

"How are you?"

"Fine," I said, a clothes pin now hanging from my lip.

"Lovely weather lately."

"Yeah."

"How is your soldier?"

"Fine."

She paused, "no troubles?"

"It's fine," I said more sternly. I wasn't interested in talking about it. It wasn't anything to write home about, just a British bastard living off me. Besides, you know how I felt about small talk.

"Alex Fischer," she said with a sigh. "That's the name of the one staying with me."

I didn't respond. Instead- I finished hanging the laundry up, giving up on the twisted shirts and pants.

"It's been nice."

I finally sighed. I guess she really wanted to chat about it. "Has it?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "She's nice," she paused, a faint smile on her face, "nice."

I couldn't help but feel an inkling of suspicion at her. What was that supposed to mean- nice? Suddenly, my interest was piqued. Sure—I don't like small talk, but I *do* like secrets.

But trouble came before I could ask her about it. Instead- a pounding at my front door grabbed my attention. I took my time getting to it, setting the basket down inside when another pounding came- then, another. I hurried to it, hoping they wouldn't break the glass before I got there.

"Mandatory home check," said a man with a cockney accent- Marks.

"Come on," I groaned. I just had one a few days ago, and everything passed. Why would they come back so soon?

He held up a paper with my name and house address as well as a judge's signature. I couldn't argue with legal papers- not that I could argue at all, unless I wanted some kind of beating. I sighed, pushing my door open for him to come in. Hopefully it wouldn't take long.

He stalked around carefully, looking under furniture and in every crack and crevasse. "How many times have you been out of your home in the last week?"

I shrugged, "I don't know, a few."

That wasn't the answer he was looking for, needless to say. It was against the law to not answer his question with a number, but I really wasn't in the mood to deal with it today. I didn't do anything wrong- not really. There was no reason they should be here, and I couldn't be amenable all the time. Instead- I was suddenly feeling fed up.

"How many times have you been out of your home in the last week?" He said sternly, standing inches from me.

"I don't know," I said again, glancing away from his piercing gaze, "three or four." The longer I stood there under his eye, the more I felt afraid of him. In my moment of rebellion, I'd forgotten the hurt and pain they caused to those who opposed them. But his close presence suddenly reminded me.

He grabbed a hand full of my hair, pulling curly tufts as he spoke. "How many times have you been out of your home in the last week?"

My neck bent uncomfortably, his breath falling on me like hot sludge rolling down iron. "Three or four days," I emphasized as I spoke, hoping that'd clear the air. But I already knew I messed up the first time I shrugged.

"Is it three or is it four," he said through gritted teeth.

"Three, three," I said, my heart speeding up as he smacked me in the mouth.

He held my hair tight, hitting my face over and over, until my lip bled and my cheek bruised. He pushed me down with a final slap, and at that moment Oliver pushed through the door, seeing Marks standing over me.

Of course, it was what I deserved. Even I knew that. I misbehaved, even after having a clean few weeks, and when you misbehaved, you were punished.

"What's going on," said Oliver in a stiffly polite tone.

"Just a house check," he said.

I sat on my knees, hiding my cuts and bruises so Oliver wouldn't see, begging Marks to leave. I was really trying to behave better, to keep my head low and under the radar, but it was hard, especially under such scrutiny.

"Have you finished?"

Marks glanced down at me, a vile smile splashing on his face. "Yeah, we're finished."

I didn't really pay attention when Oliver saw him out. Instead, my mind wandered as shame suddenly took me over. I did bad. After a long time of doing alright, I did bad. I don't know why I felt guilty, but Oliver's presence seemed to amplify that. I felt embarrassed with him walking in on that.

Oliver opened his mouth to speak before closing it, but I wished he would disappear. It felt even worse when he squatted on the floor next to me, the shame making me cower.

"You've got a cut," he said kindly.

"Really intuitive," I snapped, standing up and hurrying to get clean towel.

That made me hate him more- that concerned look on his face as I cleaned my face up over the kitchen sink.

“Did he do that to you?”

He leaned on the door, waiting quietly for a reply. But all I did was glare at him. What did he care for? It was none of his business, and even if it was, it was his own ally. What would he do if I told him the truth? “It doesn’t matter,” I waved him away. “Just clean yourself up and eat.”

The concern didn’t fade from face, even when I started ignoring him. He just stood in the doorway with this dumb, concerned look on his face. He had other things to do- like cleaning himself up and eating dinner. Why was he still interested in me?

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

I glared at him again. Help me- why the hell would he do that? I didn’t want his help- nor did I need it. “Of course not, what good would you be?”

“I am not your enemy, May.” He spoke so seriously, so seriously that it scared me a bit.

He felt like my enemy, like an aggressor. How could he see it any other way? I looked at him carefully as he spoke.

“We have more in common than you might think.”