

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Juliet

W e continue along Route 79, the two-lane rural interstate with little traffic, tucked into the hills of West Virginia. It takes us through Morgantown, across the western edge of the Mason-Dixon Line. Martin is mostly silent. Noemi, cradling Ana, shifts uncomfortably; even a light parcel on a long car ride can begin to chafe, no matter how precious.

I'm stuck on Billy's last text: *Heading away from the coast in a dinghy.*

Part of my brain shouts, Hooray! Get out while you can! But that thin ray of light is soon eclipsed by thoughts of the turbulent currents, the general peril of unknowns, a flimsy rubber boat up against a sinking abandoned city. I want to talk to Martin and spit out all my fears at his silence. But I can feel the steering wheel bobbling in my grip, joining in the fray of me against myself. I grip the hard plastic and floor the gas through cascades and outflows, past anywheresville, with Saxon names

like Wickersham, Rutledge, and Hastings that evoke bucolic Old World hamlets rather than residential districts surrounded by flooded generic shopping plazas constructed on farmland that rolls out to the tree line, the lower spots small lakes, the plateaus slick with mud and water.

Noemi grapples again with Ana and the white blanket. I'm about to turn around and ask if she wants me to pull over when I hear her sigh.

"Oh God. The hospital," she mutters.

I saw the blue H sign pass us by, like so many others, and thought nothing of it.

"Are you sure that's it?"

"Por Dios. It's right there!"

"Ok. Let's go."

"I need to talk to my brother. And Beto. Dónde estás, mi amor?" she mutters. "And I could use a smartphone."

"It's hardly helped," says Martin.

"If I could just find him." She shifts Ana in her arms and then reaches into her bag. "I've still got this pedazo de mierda," she says, pulling out her flip phone and holding it up so that I can see it in the mirror.

I hear her punching numbers halfheartedly.

"Nada," she says, placing it down somewhere.

"Old habits," mumbles Martin.

I slow the car in water that has receded to about half a foot or so as we glide along an incline. Better conditions mean more cars on the road. But the earlier surge,

combined with bursting lakes and streams, has left saturated fields, flipped cars, and disemboweled houses with their contents scattered everywhere. I imagine, for a moment, that it's the day after a bad hurricane, and soon, people will salvage and rebuild because that's what human beings are so good at. But it isn't just the physical world we've scrambled. The human psyche, with all its convolutions and insecurities, is now in uncharted waters that will require a whole new set of coordinates to adapt to whatever is sailing toward us in the coming years.

"Drop me at the front," she says. "I'll walk in. You can swing back to the highway."

"Nonsense. I'm going with you," I reply.

"You're wasting time. Aren't you close to home now?"

"No. Yes. Kind of. Around six hours under normal circumstances."

"We could be in Siberia," says Martin.

"Only we're not. We're in Pennsylvania, and we're going to find everyone. Including Stephanie."

Martin shakes his head, nods, and then shakes it again in a battle that I can't help him with right now. We've slowed in traffic under a twilight sky. The cars ahead of us sift themselves through the shadows of an intersection below unresponsive traffic lights hanging in black boxes.

"We're far from the coast," he continues. "From the onset of that flooding, whatever it was. Boston will be different. Roadblocks, sandbags, no way in."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

“Bridges wash out.”

“Right,” I mutter meaninglessly as we join a slow-moving line of cars heading toward a complex of boxy brick buildings covered in glass and silver panels. The faint orange glow of dusk, nearly extinguished, fringes the peaks of distant evergreens, bringing us another night on the road.

Traffic stops, and we sit for fifteen minutes. Just enough time for the ache at the nape of my neck to radiate into my skull, restlessness kindling in my arms and legs, the futility of everything smoldering around me.

I can hear the sucking sound of Ana gumming her own fist. What are we all doing here? How can doctors help her in this mess? I try to push back the questions spinning at me: Where are Tom and George? How high is the water on Dog Island? I picture Billy in a dinghy, floating into oblivion.

“I need some air,” I say, turning to Martin. “You drive. I’ll meet you up ahead at the hospital entrance.”

I unbuckle, open the door, and slip into near darkness, passing him silently on his way to the driver’s side, our forearms grazing, the sudden warmth of his skin. I know his touch, and it makes me hesitate. But he just keeps going, gets into the driver’s seat, shuts the door, and leaves me in the cool air, a moist, pungent stew of rotting leaves and logs, mud, moss, and fungus, seemingly just an ordinary forest in the northeast after nightfall. I walk

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onto the shoulder of the road, splashing alongside the line of cars, kicking my rain boots through the slurry.

Someone honks.

“Fuck you, too,” I say under my breath as I march alongside the stop-and-go traffic.

I keep my eyes on the rental, sometimes ahead of me, sometimes behind, until I lose track in the darkness and begin to reflect on all the difficulty. Getting to Billy and finding George and Tom is like clawing at a latch that just won't give. Perseverance has a purpose, but at some point, I fear, the effort will become aimless. I kick my rain boots as hard as I can at the channels of muddy floodwater that feel eternal now and bent on upending this journey for good.