

BLOOD AND WATER

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*For my grandfather, who instilled in me a love
for telling stories.*



Chapter One

BLOOD IN THE SINK

There was blood in the sink. That wasn't unusual. But Jay hadn't been home all day, so it couldn't have been his. That was the furthest thing from usual.

He reached down to scratch behind Samson's ears. The fat, orange cat was purring. That meant there couldn't be an intruder in the apartment, right? Did cats even care if intruders broke in, like dogs, or were they apathetic about that, too?

Samson was apathetic about everything but food and ear scratches.

"Hello?" Jay ventured.

No response. Of course not. What had he expected, someone to jump out and go *boo*? Melanie would say he'd seen too many horror movies. Sean would argue maybe he hadn't seen enough. As much as they loved each other, they seldom agreed. Still, besides the homeless people, they were all he had.

He had just gotten home from his volunteer shift at the homeless shelter on the other side of the river. Although its numbers had dwindled, they were still in desperate need of volunteers. Many people had stopped volunteering, worried about catching the virus, but Jay still went as much as he could. Immunity had done wonders for his compassion.

Immunity. His mouth twitched.

Jay had been helping out there since moving to London three years before. He'd been thinking about how much things had changed and trying to fill a glass with water from the sink when he looked down and saw the blood. He'd been coughing up a lot of blood lately, but where had this stuff come from?

Samson meowed. Jay stooped to pet him. The cat purred as though nothing had happened while Jay was gone. Useless.

“Was someone here?” he asked Samson.

The cat blinked in response. Jay would have to investigate the apartment himself.

Samson rubbed against Jay’s jeans before venturing down the hallway.

Jay peered down at the blood in the kitchen sink. *Dark, thick, red.*

He went to the drawer in search of a knife.

In a world racked with disease, it was hard to imagine crime was still an issue. Ebola-II, as it had been dubbed, was an absolute nightmare virus—everyone agreed on that. Tragedy was supposed to band people together. Why kick one person when the whole world was down? Still, there were riots. People got murdered almost every day. The week before, he’d seen someone get stabbed right outside of Hyde Park. Jay wished he’d had a weapon to protect himself. Luckily, the killer hadn’t come after Jay—he took the man’s wallet and ran into a tunnel.

In the present, Jay’s reflection was a flash of brown skin on the blade of the knife. He had his mother’s skin, smoother and lighter than his father’s. On her, it had been beautiful. It made Jay look soft. His rounded jawline and warm brown eyes didn’t do much for his intimidation factor, either. The only part of his face that was sharp was his nose. In the context of his face, it almost made no sense. It was his father’s nose, and whenever he saw it, he was forced to remember his parents were dead.

Jay inhaled through his teeth. His close-cropped hair bristled as though it wanted to leave his scalp. It wasn’t the best feeling. After a minute, he wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs, and then he closed his fingers around the black rubber handle.

Time to search for the intruder.

He tried to think of all the reasons someone would break into his apartment. He didn’t live on the wealthy side of town, and there was nothing outside his door to suggest he had any money.

He didn't even have a television, for God's sake. In his wallet, which he couldn't be bothered to keep on his person, there was a ten-pound note and a couple of coins. Then again, money wasn't much good anymore. Commerce had been annihilated by the virus, and most people still working in the shops didn't care if you took something without paying. Theft was the least of their worries.

The wallet rested on his nightstand. If the intruder had made it into the bedroom and picked up the wallet, they were bound to have laughed.

Samson rubbed against Jay's legs again as he walked through the living room. If he listened, he couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary—just the stillness of the apartment and the sleeping city beyond it. He'd lived in London pre-plague—all commotion, no rest. It was impossible to believe now. He almost couldn't remember a life without a curfew, let alone one in which people swarmed the streets, even though he'd experienced London's busyness once himself.

Before the plague, it was impossible to get anywhere during rush hour. If you tried to ride the Underground, even to the South Bank, you were going to be delayed. Even if you weren't delayed, you'd be packed into a train car with a hundred other people. You could spend a whole ride with your nose in someone's armpit or your hand against the door, trapped there by someone's buttocks.

Back in the present, Jay opened the coat closet by the door, knife poised for action. With his right hand, he pushed the coats aside.

Nothing. A wave of relief broke over him.

Still, he had more of the apartment to explore. The two-bedroom rental had been Maia's when Jay first moved to London. They'd lived there together for a while. Then, Maia moved in with a boyfriend somewhere near Shepherd's Bush. The boyfriend had died, Jay couldn't remember how long ago. Maia still lived in the apartment they'd shared. Jay's place in Bexley was modest and far enough from the city proper to be fairly quiet. Then again, in the wake of the virus, *everywhere* was quiet.

It wasn't a large space—two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a meager living room—but it now felt cavernous. He crossed the linoleum of the kitchen and stopped at the edge of the carpeted hallway. Fears of the unknown swirled in his head, magnifying the apartment's interior. The more he thought about how much he still had to search, the worse he felt. Instead, he tried to focus on the feeling of the knife.

Jay drew in a shaky breath and started down the hallway. The charity-store furniture in the living room fell out of his sight. What he hadn't gotten cheap had been free—hand-me-down items and castoffs from his friends. Normally, the sight of the items comforted him. In the fading sunlight, it was difficult to see. Everything cast eerie shadows on the walls, obscuring corners of the apartment. But he didn't want to risk turning on the lights for fear of alerting the intruder.

Then again, hadn't he called out right after getting home?

Idiot.

Samson padded down the hallway past Jay, oblivious to the threat of danger. The cat was safe, Jay knew. Whoever had broken into his home meant to harm him, not his pet. With any luck, the intruder would adopt Samson after killing Jay. It was the least he could do, all things considered.

His life could be in danger, and he was worried about the cat. What was wrong with him?

Right after he'd moved to London, following in Maia's footsteps, she'd brought him the cat as a housewarming gift. Their father had been allergic to most animals, and Jay had always wanted a pet of his own. Maia chose a cat because they were low maintenance. If Jay couldn't remember to buy new milk before the old milk spoiled, there was no way in hell he could handle a dog. Then again, it wasn't as if he'd moved into an empty place—Maia would be there to take care of any pet they got, too, but she wouldn't hear another word. As much as he wanted to argue more, there hadn't been a need. Samson was everything he wanted in a pet—minus

the lack of protection, of course. Then again, he'd never been in a situation like this before. There had been no need for him to yearn for protection.

Jay tightened his grip on the knife. He pushed the thought away. *Focus.*

A noise in the bedroom at the end of the hall made him freeze in his tracks. The floorboards creaked. He flattened his back against the wall and stood still for a minute, straining to hear any sounds of life. The silence made his ears ring.

Then, somebody coughed.

Jay clapped a hand over his mouth, not wanting to give himself away, but his throat wasn't burning. He lowered his hand, examining his fingers. No blood. His chest felt loose, too. He hadn't coughed.

The intruder. He should have known—the virus wasn't picky.

The floorboards in the bedroom creaked again as the intruder moved.

Whoever had broken into the apartment was sick because half the world was sick. It made perfect, maddening sense.

Jay swallowed hard against a wave of nausea lined with fear. At one point, contracting the virus had scared him more than the thought of getting killed. Now that he had the virus, well, it wasn't the worst thing that could happen. Basic human instinct gave him several other options.

As Jay got closer to the bedroom, there was blood spattered on the carpet. It had dripped from the intruder. He'd lost a lot of blood, more than Jay had expected.

The bedroom door was ajar. Jay nudged it with his toe.

The knife glinted as he flipped on the lights. No one was there. Jay stood in the doorway for a minute, puzzled. He'd heard somebody moving around.

Light emanated from underneath the bathroom door. Jay took a step forward.

Squish. He froze.

What the hell had he stepped on?

Blood pooled dark and thick on the carpet at his feet. It was similar in texture to the blood in the sink. There was a trail leading from it to the bathroom. He raised the knife, stepped forward, and opened the bathroom door.

His older sister, Maia, was hunched over the white sink, retching. A string of saliva stretched from her mouth. When she turned to face Jay, she had blood on her chin. Her skin, normally a half shade darker than his, was paler than he'd ever seen it. Her hazel eyes were red rimmed and swollen, glistening with tears. Her natural hair was a disaster—she'd pulled it into a ponytail but several coils had fallen out to rest against her face.

He dropped the knife. "Maia? What's going on?"

"Jay," she said. "Thank God."

"How did you get in here?"

"You never changed the locks." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I didn't know where else to go."

"You walked here?"

"Does it matter?"

Jay's stomach lurched. "How long?"

"A week ago." She looked into the sink. "I'm sorry. I should have called you."

Jay leaned against the wall. His shoulders slumped. One week. Their parents had been dead in four. The less he thought about the time frame, the better.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know," she said. "I didn't want to scare you."

She hadn't wanted to scare him. That was typical Maia. Typical of both of them, really. Tears ran down her face, and her lower lip trembled. Her eyes were bloodshot with dark circles pillowed beneath them. Blood splattered her shirt.

"Jesus," Jay said. "You need help."

Maia coughed and spit something else into the sink. She wiped her mouth again. "No one here can help me."

"We'll go somewhere else, then. We'll find you a doctor."

Jay tried to think of some lead he hadn't followed yet. He'd been all over London in search of a cure. Nothing had turned up. He was running out of time.

"Doesn't matter," she said.

"Course it does," Jay answered.

Maia turned on the tap, cupped water in her hands, and splashed it on her face. Some of it dripped off her chin and landed on her chest. "I'm so glad you're immune to this."

"Yeah," Jay said, "me, too."

He'd been sick for three weeks. She would never find out.



Chapter Two

THREE IN THE MORNING

Maia cried herself to sleep that night.

Jay couldn't sleep at all.

He gave Maia his bed and lay down on the couch. He tossed and turned for two hours before giving up and going into the kitchen. After feeding Samson, he poured himself a glass of water. It tasted like metal.

Jay needed sleep. He hadn't slept in ages. Wasn't sleep supposed to strengthen your immune system? Not that it mattered. He was already sick.

Now, so was Maia. What were they going to do?

Jay had spent the past few weeks looking for a cure. It was like Maia said—there was no help in London. He wondered if they would've been safer if they'd stayed in Chicago. He couldn't spend time dwelling on the *what ifs*. It had been Maia's decision to move to London and his to follow her. The virus was everywhere, and it had spread fast. Perhaps they never would have been able to avoid it.

Jay needed to tell his sister he was sick, too. Every time he thought about it, he felt like throwing up—and not because of the virus. Maia thought he was immune. He worked with contaminated people and hadn't gotten sick—but that was before the virus hit London. Once it touched the island, no one was safe. It had taken a while to get to Jay, but the minute he sneezed, it was over. If he went to the doctor, he'd be quarantined. They'd separate him from everyone he loved, and they wouldn't be able to see him anymore. Even if he died, they wouldn't get

to see the body—every sick person ended up cremated, after all.

He couldn't risk it. There was no way they were going to take him away from Maia. They were all each other had. He refused to lose her, too.

At three in the morning, he called his friend Sean. Of course, there was no answer. Sean was fast asleep.

He didn't know Jay was sick, either. Jay was too afraid to tell Sean—he wanted to keep his friend around, even though there was a chance Sean would catch the virus. He avoided Sean as much as he could, but he didn't have the courage to sever the connection.

If anything happened to Sean, he'd never forgive himself.

Unable to reach Sean, Jay called Melanie McCartney, Sean's girlfriend. He'd been the one to introduce them. Sean's eyes had lit up when he shook Melanie's hand. They'd been inseparable since. Jay had known Melanie since moving to London. He adored her. It helped that he loved Sean, too. Whenever the three of them hung out, Jay was never a third wheel. They were a trio.

Melanie picked up on the third ring, voice thick with sleep. "What's wrong?"

"Why do you think something's wrong?" Jay asked.

"The last time you called this late, Samson was choking."

Jay looked over at the cat. Still eating. "I just need somebody to talk to."

"I'll be over in ten. Could you put the kettle on?"

Jay smiled. "No problem."

He could always count on Melanie to cheer him up. She was the only other person who knew he was sick. He hadn't wanted her to know, but she'd walked in on him vomiting the previous week, and that was that. She knew.

The only good thing was that she didn't treat him differently. If anything, she spent more time around him than she had before, even knowing she could catch the virus. She cared that much about him.

Jay picked up the electric kettle and turned on the faucet.

As he set the kettle in the sink, a sharp pain knifed his ribs. He clutched at his sides and doubled over, swearing. The pain was new. His vision darkened.

What was happening to him?

He sank to his knees on the hard tile. Whatever was going on, it was terrifying. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped down his face. He was in agony. It was one thing to know the pain was coming, but it had come out of nowhere. His parents had been in so much pain. Was this what it had been like in the end? Had it gotten worse for them?

Saliva clogged his throat. He could *not* puke in the kitchen.

Closing his eyes, Jay rocked back on his heels and waited. If he didn't move, maybe he could will away the nausea. His eyelids were hot. Not a good sign. He swallowed what he hoped wasn't bile or blood. Something was going to have to come up at some point.

It took all his strength to stand. Once he was upright again, all the blood rushed out of his head and everything went dark. If he hadn't grabbed the counter, he would've collapsed. Since when had standing become an ordeal?

He got worse with each passing day. How much longer did he have?

Toward the end, his father hadn't recognized him, his only son, his *baby*. The forgetfulness scared Jay more than anything else. The bleeding and pain were to be expected. The memory loss was a slap in the face.

Jay shuddered hard. His eyes flew open. Had someone knocked on the door?

He held his breath, listening to the stillness in the air.

After a minute, the noise came again: *knock knock knock*.

Then, there was a voice.

"Jay," Melanie said, "it's me. Open up."

An immense relief flooded Jay's veins. Melanie fixed everything. She was the levelheaded one—all practical knowledge with

the right amount of heart to keep from seeming smug. He took a deep breath and headed toward the door. Every step spanned a century. Why was he so sluggish?

He needed Melanie. She would help him.

When he opened the door, she smiled. As she looked him over, though, the smile faded. "Arsehole. You never said you were having an episode. I would've come here straightaway."

"I'm not having an episode."

"Liar. Look at you."

Jay winced. The pain in his sides cut into his stomach. Something was wrong, no doubt about it. Something far beyond the normal level of awful. Fear etched lines in Melanie's face.

"I've felt better."

"Bet you have," she said. "Can I come inside or what?"

Melanie pushed past Jay without waiting for a response. She went straight to the kitchen, got out a glass, and filled it at the sink. Jay followed her.

After he sat at the table, she handed him the water. "Drink up. You're dehydrated."

"How can you tell?"

"You don't drink enough. Never have. I know you, Jaybird."

He flushed. "You haven't called me that in a long time."

A smile quirked her lips. "I'm sorry."

Jay wasn't sure whether she was apologizing for calling him that or for not calling him that in such a long time. Either way, she had nothing to be sorry for. His chest tightened.

"I need to tell you something. It's about my sister."

"Oh."

She poured herself a glass of water and sat in the chair next to Jay. She stared into the glass rather than meeting his eyes. Maybe she knew what he was going to say. She had gotten good at reading his mind.

"Drink," she said.

Jay looked at his glass. The thought of drinking it repulsed him.

He blamed the virus.

“I had some before you came.”

“For the love of God.”

He sighed, shoulders slumping, and downed the contents of the glass in a single gulp. When he set the empty cup down, Melanie was staring at him.

“Just say it,” she said.

“Maia is sick. She’s been sick for a week. She only just told me.”

Melanie sucked in a shaky breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I should be saying that to you.”

They sat in solemn silence. Tears dripped down Melanie’s face. More than anything, Jay yearned to reassure her, but there was nothing he could tell her. Besides, he needed someone to reassure him, too.

All he could think to do was put his arms around Melanie. He leaned closer to her and did just that. She melted into him. There was nothing left to say.

“She doesn’t know, then.”

Maybe Melanie meant the sentence as a question, but it came out as a statement. Maybe she didn’t want an answer, but validation for what she suspected.

“She will never know,” he answered.

He wanted to spare Maia the pain of what he felt when he thought about losing her. They’d come through losing two parents, but barely. The less they thought about losing each other, the better off they’d be. Right? And surely Melanie understood that. Melanie *always* understood.

Melanie opened her mouth to speak.

Whatever she said was completely eclipsed by the pain in Jay’s abdomen. It flared up and stabbed him. He cried out.

“What’s wrong? Your stomach?”

Jay couldn’t speak. The pain was incredible.

“Should we go to hospital?”

"No," Jay said. "Never."

"You might be dying."

"I know."

He threw up on the tile. The vomit was dark and there was blood in it—*dark, thick, red*—so much like Maia's that he threw up again. Before he knew it, he was crying. His face was hot, his throat burned, and he was crying. When he looked up, so was Melanie.

"I'm scared," she said.

"Me, too."

"Do you want me to call Sean?"

"Tried that. He was sleeping."

Melanie put her feet on the chair and pulled her knees to her chest. "What are we going to do for you two? We need to find a doctor."

"I'm not going to the hospital. You know what they'll do."

"We might be out of options."

"There must be someone out there with some kind of cure. Billions of people have died already, and more people are dying every day. There are scientists trying to stop it." He shook his head. "Otherwise... what's the point?"

She wiped her face. "What?"

"If humanity is doomed, maybe I'll just shoot myself."

"Damn it. Don't say that."

"Why not?" His voice rose, bordering on furious. "I'm dying. Why can't I go on my terms?"

"You're breaking my heart." She was so pale he could almost see through her skin. Her pallor made the freckles stand out on her cheeks. Melanie was beautiful. Somehow, he'd forgotten. She was his friend. She was also Sean's girlfriend. And of course, she'd been crying. He shouldn't stare at her.

"Melanie," he said.

Water droplets hung suspended in her eyelashes. He reached out and brushed one out of the way. Melanie kept her eyes closed, even when he pulled away. His entire body ached

for her. He wanted to kiss her more than anything.

Her eyes flew open. "Thank you. Still hurting?"

"It's bearable."

Without asking for permission, he grabbed the glass in front of her and swallowed all the water. He was about to get up and get more when he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye.

Maia stood at the edge of the kitchen, eyes wide in horror as she looked at the vomit.

"Who's sick?" she asked.



Chapter Three

THE LIST

"I am," Melanie said. "Just found out this week."

Maia stood there, blinking, as though she didn't understand.

Panic registered in the back of Jay's mind. Melanie was dying. He mentally shook himself—no, she wasn't dying. She wasn't even sick. She was just doing everything she could to protect his sister from finding out what was happening to him.

But Maia didn't know that.

Jay expected his sister to burst into tears. He pictured her face crumpling and her shoulders shaking with sobs. None of those things happened. Maia went over to the pantry, took out the bag of flour, and poured it on the vomit. She dropped the empty bag in the trashcan.

"I'm going back to bed," she said.

"Maia," Melanie said, "do you—"

"Going back to sleep."

Melanie started after her, but Jay caught her wrist. "Let her go."

Once Maia was gone, the two of them settled back in their seats. Jay tapped his fingers on the table. He wasn't sure whether to thank Melanie. In one way, she'd saved him. In another, she'd made things worse. Now, Maia thought her friend was dying. How would she react once she learned that Jay was sick?

"I didn't know what else to do," Melanie said.

"I know," Jay said. "It's cool."

He got up from the table and got the broom from the closet. Although his movements were shaky, he swept the flour into a pile. Melanie grabbed the dustpan and knelt down

in front of Jay.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Helping,” she said.

“With Maia or the flour?”

“Yes. I said I’m helping.”

No matter what happened, Melanie was on his side. Loyal, that one. To a *fault*. It would be her undoing. Guilt twisted his gut. She deserved his gratitude, nothing else. Despite how he felt about her methods, she had kept his secret so far—more than most people would do for him.

“Sorry if I don’t sound thankful.” He swept the pile of flour into the dustpan. Swirls of white flew up in the air.

She wiped a smear of flour from her cheek. “It’s all right, Jaybird. I know you.”

“I should thank you more often.”

Melanie’s face flushed. The reaction startled Jay. Had he said something wrong? He ran through the words in his head, trying to figure out what had happened. But when he looked back at Melanie, he saw she was smiling. Maybe what he said had been the furthest thing from wrong.

“Thank you,” she said.

Jay picked up the dustpan and the broom and carried them over to the trashcan. He dumped the flour and set the broom and dustpan in the closet. The faint scent of vomit still hung in the air. Jay was surprised he’d noticed since he’d grown accustomed to it. He grabbed the mop and bucket from the closet and went over to the sink.

Melanie stood in front of him. “Don’t worry about it. You’re not feeling well.”

“I’m never feeling well.”

“Put the mop down.”

Jay sighed. He handed the mop and bucket to Melanie.

She leaned them against the counter. “If it’s the smell you’re worried about, it doesn’t bother me. I had some training to be a

nurse, remember? I've dealt with worse."

Still, his cheeks heated. "Every time you come over, I throw up or faint. It's getting ridiculous."

Melanie shrugged. "It's worth it if I get to see you."

Jay crossed his arms. "What if you get sick?"

"I won't."

"You don't know that."

"I haven't caught it yet."

"So what?" he asked. "It can strike without warning. Look what happened to me."

"You were volunteering at the soup kitchen in spite of the warnings."

"I thought I was immune to it."

"We all thought you were," she murmured.

Jay shook his head. When he spoke again, his voice was close to a whisper. "I just don't want to lose you, too."

Melanie grabbed his hands. "You will never lose me."

She was right—not because she was always right, but because she'd proved her loyalty several times over. While he and Maia spread their parents' ashes in the Thames, Melanie waited at the end of the bridge. When it was all over, he went to her and let her put her arms around him. She'd held his hand as the three of them walked to a cafe. Sean had met them there, and it was before he and Melanie were dating. Melanie kept her fingers intertwined with Jay's even while they were eating.

The last good day after his parents died, before the virus struck again, the four of them had gone to the National Gallery to look around before the government shut the whole place down for the sake of quarantine. Melanie, whose mother had been an artist, flitted from one hall to the next in breathless ecstasy. Jay, Maia, and Sean tried to keep up, but it was difficult.

After Sean got tired of chasing his new girlfriend around, the group decided it might be best for them to separate. Melanie and Jay went one way; Sean and Maia, the other. Melanie led him

to the part of the museum that focused on impressionism. They blazed past Cézanne, Renoir, and Turner. She stopped in front of a painting of sunflowers.

“Van Gogh,” she said. “My favorite.”

They stood in front of the painting, saying nothing. One minute, they were separate spectators. The next, their hands and souls entwined. She turned and looked at him and he got caught up in her eyes.

It had been almost impossible to keep from kissing her.

For Sean’s sake, he had managed.

Now, Jay felt guilty for regretting that he hadn’t kissed her there. He couldn’t kiss her now because of the virus. Even just being with her put her at risk.

“What if you get sick?” he asked.

“Stop worrying about me.” She kissed his cheek. “You’re the one with the virus. Let’s get back to you.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He wanted to crack a joke in an attempt to break the tension, but nothing was funny anymore. Melanie stood there, looking at him. Maybe if he looked at her long enough, she would want to change the subject.

“Did you do what I suggested last week?” she asked.

Jay frowned. “I don’t remember. What was it?”

“The list,” she said. “I said you should come up with a list of things you want to see or do before you die. We both wanted to do it ages ago, but now... well, it seems like it could, uh, come in handy.” She bit her lip. She was afraid she’d hurt his feelings.

He smiled to reassure her. “Yeah, I remember now. I made one.”

“Can I see it?”

Jay blushed. “Um, sure. Let me go find it.”

“I don’t have to,” she said.

“No,” he said. “I want you to.”

Melanie sat down at the table, folded her arms, and rested her head on them.

Jay walked to his bedroom and tiptoed around the bed. Maia

was fast asleep and snoring. Moonlight lit her face through the thin blinds.

Her cheeks were full; the bones in her face nowhere close to protruding. Her color was good. Her skin was bright.

She looked healthy.

It was torture to see her looking so peaceful while the virus destroyed her inside.

Jay's stomach clenched. He looked away.

The list sat at the back of his nightstand drawer. He eased the drawer out, supporting it from underneath with his free hand to keep it from squealing. His fingers found the folded paper without trying too hard. He pulled the list out and closed his hand around it. As he passed the bed again, Maia was still asleep. He shut the door on his way out and didn't relax until he heard the soft click behind him.

Back in the kitchen, Melanie's head was still down. Her eyes were closed.

Was she sleeping?

Without saying a word, Jay sat down in the chair next to her and laid the note down in front of him. He put his face in his hands. No one else had seen the list besides him. Although Melanie had suggested he make it, he had never intended to show it to her. Still, he couldn't say she couldn't read it, not after everything she'd done for him. She was even sacrificing her health to see him, for God's sake. How the hell could he say no?

In that moment, Jay remembered—he'd never put the kettle on. He'd meant to before he felt the sharp pain earlier. Then Melanie had come, and neither of them tried again. If Melanie was sleeping, she was dozing. She would wake up in a little bit. He'd have a cup of tea for her as soon as she woke up.

Jay thought about Maia as he waited for the water to boil. She wasn't having trouble sleeping, which was a good sign. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a full night's sleep. The virus had him puking at regular intervals and waking up

coughing during the night.

Melanie might not have been sleeping much, either, but it had nothing to do with her health. She was exhausted from worrying about Jay and Maia's parents and then Jay and now Maia. If she had to worry about anyone else, she might collapse.

Jay leaned back against the counter and put his face in his hands. He didn't want her to worry about him. He didn't want anyone to worry about him. He didn't know why, but he wasn't afraid of dying. He was more afraid of how his loved ones would react to him in his later days. How would they cope after he had passed on?

"What are you doing? Are you thinking about death?"

Jay lowered his hands.

Melanie scowled. "I just felt like you were, and it disturbed me awake. You should apologize."

Was there the hint of a smirk on her face?

"I'm making you some tea, so you should be nice to me."

"I'm risking my life. It better be some damn good tea."

She meant it as a joke, but it still stung. He turned his back on her, in part to pour water in mugs and in part to hide his face. He didn't want her thinking she'd upset him.

"I'm ready to hear your list once I've had my tea," she said. "Were you able to find it?"

"It was never lost," Jay said.

He dunked the tea bags up and down in the hot water until it turned brown. Melanie got annoyed with him when he did that—she said it didn't make a difference—but that time, she said nothing. Now that their time together was limited, she must have found it easier not to sweat the small stuff. If only Jay could adopt the same approach to the rest of his life.

When he set Melanie's cup of tea in front of her, she put her hand on top of his. Her fingers chilled his skin.

Jay didn't pull away. He put his other hand on top of hers.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," he said. "Always have and always will."

Melanie winked. "Unless I tease you about what's on this list, of course. Come on, then. Let's hear it."

Jay set his cup down. He unfolded the paper and smoothed out the creases.

"Okay," he said, "promise me you won't laugh."

"I won't laugh," she said.

"You're lying."

"Just read."

Jay sighed, took a deep breath, and read.