



The Vault (A Farm Novel)

By Emily McKay

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In a world where vampires rule and teenaged humans are quarantined as a food source, there is only one choice—resist or die. But fighting the vampires comes at a terrible cost to twin sisters Mel and Lily and their best friend Carter . . .

With Lily exposed to the vampire virus and lying in a coma, it's up to Mel and Carter to search for the cure. Time is not on their side. With every passing heartbeat, Mel is becoming more and more purely vampire.

Desperate, Carter and Mel decide to split up. Carter will recruit human rebels from the Farm in San Angelo to infiltrate the guarded kingdom of the vampire Sabrina and steal the cure. Mel will go back to her mentor, her friend, her betrayer, Sebastian, who is the only one who can access an underground vault that may house the secret to the cure.

That is, if he's still alive after she staked him to the ground. Now her worst enemy may be their best hope for curing Lily—and saving the human race.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Farm*

“Equal parts *Resident Evil* and *Hunger Games*—and just as thrilling . . . A gripping dystopian tale . . . a web of vampires, love, sacrifice, and survival.”—Chloe Neill, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Biting Cold*

“A gritty, white-knuckle ride . . . fresh, fraught, and super scary.”—Veronica Wolff, national bestselling author of *Sierra Falls*

“An intense read . . . the kind of book you can’t put down.”—C. C. Hunter, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Taken at Dusk*

“Be prepared to stay up all night.”—Marie V. Snyder, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Touch of Power*

Praise for *The Lair*

“McKay’s dark fast-paced sequel to *The Farm* will appeal to both adult and YA fans of dystopian and vampire fiction... The sisters and their friends are well-developed characters caught up in situations that demand extreme measures to survive.”—*Library Journal*

“If you’re looking for gripping, action-packed, scary, and romantic dystopian--these books are definitely the right choice.”—*Sophistikatied.com*

“If you are a fan of brilliant dystopians definitely get yourself these books! I highly recommend!”—*RainyDayRamblings.com*

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About the Author

Emily McKay is the 2013 RITA © award winning author of *The Farm* and *The Lair*. She loves to read, shop, and geek out about movies. When she’s not writing, she reads on-line gossip and bakes luscious deserts. She pretends that her weekly yoga practice balances out both of those things. She lives in central Texas with her family and her crazy pets. She also cowrites young adult fiction as Ivy Adams.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CARTER

Texas hadn't fared well in the apocalypse.

Some parts of the country had fallen by inches. Places where the virus spread slowly and the human population held their own against the Ticks and against the fear for at least a little while. Those places lost their battles incrementally. Not Texas. In just a few short weeks, Texas went from being the second-most-populated state to being the least. Texas fell in a blaze of blood and gunfire.

It wasn't just the genetically mutated monsters that did Texas in. It was the Texans. We turned on one another.

I'd told myself over and over again that I wouldn't make the same mistake. That if it had been me, if I'd been the one with my finger on the trigger, staring down a friend or a relative, I would do things differently. I would have a little faith in humanity.

Turns out, I was wrong.

There in the basement of Genexome Corporation—the company that engineered EN371, the virus that created the Ticks—I finally got it. When the life of someone you love is on the line, trust is almost impossible. Under the right circumstances, anyone will crack. Yeah. I admit it. I cracked.

The deserted hallway with flickering lights and spooky cobwebs creeped me out. I got that hairs-up-on-the-back-of-the-neck sensation that I wasn't alone. And, oh yeah, the pile of dead bodies that I'd had to haul out of the way to clear a path down the hall? Those didn't help.

Which is why I pulled a gun on Mel when she crept up behind me. One second I was staring at the LCD panel for the storage facility's security system. Tech stuff, wasn't really my thing, but I was trying. That's when I heard it, the faintest scuff of a shoe behind me. Too subtle to be an animal or a Tick. Too soft to be someone who wasn't trying to sneak.

Somewhere down the hall, someone was coming up behind me and whoever it was didn't want to be heard. I deliberately kept my breathing steady as I slipped my hand into the coat pocket where I kept my Glock. I wrapped my hand around the grip and pulled it out, spinning as I thumbed off the safety.

My finger was already on the trigger when I realized it wasn't some unknown enemy sneaking up behind me. It was Mel.

My girlfriend's twin sister. My friend.

I pulled the gun up, finger off the trigger, and held up my other hand. But she was faster than I was. My aggression provoked something in her. The instant she saw the gun, she dashed down the hall and rammed into me. The force of the impact knocked me off my feet. I tried to roll into the fall, but ended up just getting slammed to the floor with her on top of me. My hand hit the floor again and I instinctively let go of the gun. It skittered away from me. Agony flared out through my back and chest. Damn, she moved *fast*.

Mel bounced back up and landed in a crouch maybe five feet away, hands curled into claws, fangs bared and gleaming in the fluorescent lights.

I got my hands under me and tried to sit, but my whole body pulsed with pain and it was all I could do not to

groan. My neck throbbed. When I brought my hand up to the spot, my fingers came away sticky and damp with blood.

Panicked adrenaline shot through me and I scampered back. Yeah. I know. Scampering isn't exactly manly, but trust me, when your neck is bleeding and a hungry vampire is crouching five feet away from you, you do anything you can to get away. Even when it probably won't make a difference.

Heart pounding, I pressed myself against a concrete support beam in the hallway. I didn't have any weapons. My gun—even if it wasn't closer to her than to me—would barely faze her. I didn't have anything handy that would actually stop her. No stake. No blade.

Besides, it was *Mel*.

There was no way I was going to hurt her, let alone stake her and chop off her head. Which was a moot point, anyway, because if she wanted to kill me she would have done it already.

Pressing one hand to my neck to stanch the flow of blood, I held my other out in supplication. "Mel," I said slowly, persuasively. "Calm down. It's me. Carter."

Jesus, I hoped this would work.

Theoretically, I was an *abductura*. Which meant I had the power to superimpose my own emotions over hers. Theoretically.

Problem was, I didn't know jack about how to actually use my powers. At least not consciously. So either this would work, or I'd end up as a midnight snack.

God, I just love the apocalypse.

CHAPTER TWO

MEL

Blood lust—the uncontrollable need to consume the food before you—isn't my favorite thing ever.

In the Before—when I was a human girl—I clung to my control. Even though I was autistic, even though I sometimes spiraled out of control, I somehow always held on to the thread of myself. I was always able to pull myself out.

My vampire's blood lust is new to me. It's not only about hunger, but about need. The need to dominate. To protect myself. To feed. Its embrace is violent and jagged and I'm not myself when I'm in its grasp.

But this blood is all wrong.

Its sweetness sours my stomach. I nearly retch. Instead, I spit it out, then wipe off my mouth with hands clenched in feral claws. A false peace floods over me, washing away my fear and need. I stand, blinking away the blood lust.

That's when I see Carter crouched against the wall, like a scorpion backed into a corner. He's fierce and deadly, even though I could squash him like a bug.

“Calm down, Mel. Just . . . calm down.”

The words seem to echo in my brain. Like he’s been saying them over and over again and I’m only now hearing them.

Only then do I see the way he’s holding his neck.

I run my tongue over the fronts of my teeth, my mind racing.

I was walking up behind him, hungry, yes, but in control. Then I felt this burst of fear. He whirled around. I saw the gun and then . . .

What?

My mind was blank. Blood lust. That’s what.

Carter must sense that his efforts to calm me are working. That I’m more myself, because he changes the script.

“Are you are okay, Mel?” he asks, his eyebrows slightly raised. “You good?”

“Yes,” I say shortly. “I’m fine.”

I turn away from him. My mind still racing, because I know I’m not fine.

Carter is Lily’s boyfriend. Her love. Her *savior*. They are meant to be together.

And I almost *ate* him.

I swish my spit around in my mouth, using my tongue to scrub the last of the blood off my incisors, and then I spit out the mixture of blood and saliva.

I exhale a deep breath and try to bring my mind back into focus. My vision clears a little. I blink again and make myself look at the hall around me.

This is it. What we’re here for: the underground vault of Genexome Corporation. The storage facility where we will find the cure to the Tick virus. The cure we need to save my sister’s life.

But I’m still struggling to make sense of what I see.

There’s a door. Thick steel set straight into the concrete. An LCD panel in the wall beside it bigger than most people’s computer screens. Somehow our presence in the hall has triggered it, because it’s alive with swirling colors. There’s a digital keypad on one side and a rectangle about the size of a handprint on the other. Then to the left of the whole panel, there’s a retinal scanner.

And there, on the floor in a pile on either side of the door, are dead bodies. I do a quick head count—literally counting heads because the arms and legs and torsos are so jumbled I can’t count the bodies any other way. There are sixteen people. They all look similar, so I focus on one. He’s got the bulky look of hired muscle. He hasn’t been dead that long and it’s cool enough, here underground, that his body hasn’t started to rot, but my nose and stomach are more sensitive to that kind of thing than they used to be and their stench makes my stomach churn. It’s all I can do to focus my attention away from him.

Whatever's beyond this door is what we came for. Of course, whatever's beyond that door is being protected by a security system strong enough to kill the sixteen people who got here before us.

"This is it," I say softly. Sebastian—the vampire that made me and mentored Carter—told us that the cure to the Tick virus was here, at Genexome Corporation, in the company's underground storage facility.

"You think these are Sabrina's people?" Carter asks.

The corpse is dressed in full SWAT gear, but they aren't police or even military. I point to the emblem stitched on the front of the jacket. "That looks like the Smart Com logo to me."

"I don't suppose when Sebastian told you about the cure, he mentioned how to get past all this security."

"No, he didn't." Of course, I'd just staked him through the heart in a fit of vampire rage, so neither one of us was feeling super communicative at the time.

Carter walks up behind me. Slowly and loudly. Like he's waiting for me to freak again.

He studies the setup, shaking his head, his hand still pressed to his neck.

"This is a dead end."

That's when I see the seam in the wall about three feet back from the doorway. I run my fingers along the seam on one side and then the other. On the ceiling, the seam bulges out slightly. On the other three sides, the seam is indented. Guide tracks for a door. But it's the vents in the ceiling above the LCD display that make me nervous.

Carter clearly sees everything I do. Maybe more, since he knows a lot about this kind of thing. "I'm guessing if you trigger the security system, a door drops down, trapping you in." He points to the pair of vents. "And then you get gassed."

"I could probably live through it," I point out. There's not much that can kill me.

"You don't know that. Sabrina threw a lot of people at this and none of them made it."

"None of them were vampires." I glance at him, looking pointedly at his neck. "How bad is it?"

"Not bad." He pulls his hand away and glances at it. There's a smear of blood on his fingers, but it's already clotting and the smell of it is repulsive to me. He wipes his fingers on the sleeve of his coat and then presses the back of his other sleeve to his neck to wipe off the last of the blood there. Then, as if he hasn't just been cleaning up the wound I gave him, he says, "The point is, we need a plan B."

"No. Sebastian must have thought we could get in. He wouldn't have sent us here otherwise." I look at Carter's neck again. "I'm, um . . . sorry. About that, I mean."

"Don't worry about it." He shrugs, still studying the security system. He holds out his palm, maybe five inches from the LCD screen, like he's sizing it up. "What do you think? That look about the size of my palm?" Then he shakes his head, muttering a curse. "We need Sebastian."

My heart gives a strange little thud. "He could be dead by now."

Carter shoots me an odd look that I have no trouble interpreting.

Carter and I talked about this. When we left Sebastian with a stake through his heart, pinned to the ground on the green in the middle of El Corazon, we hadn't really killed him. The only way to be sure a vampire is dead is to chop off his head. No, Sebastian is most likely still alive. Either he is clinging to life or he's already freed himself. Somehow I know this. Sebastian is stronger than death.

He is the vampire who made me, who trained me, who manipulated and lied to me. He lied to everyone.

Suddenly a horrible thought occurs to me. "What if there is no cure?"

Carter doesn't even look at me this time, but I know he heard me because his entire body goes tense. "There is a cure."

"He lied about everything," I say. "What if he lied about this, too? What if—"

Carter whirls to face me. "There is a cure."

"You don't know—"

"Yes, I do know. You know how I know? Because if there is no cure, then that means Lily is lost. Maybe forever. I'm not willing to believe that."

"But what—"

"We just need a new plan. That's all." He takes in a breath and I sense him struggling with his own doubts and fears. "Here's what we're going to do. We'll split up. You go back to El Corazon and find Sebastian. If the cure is still here, he's the one who can get us in."

The idea of going back there sends panic skittering along my nerves. But I will do it. I have no choice, because it's like Carter said, the alternative is to give up hope. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to Sabrina's. If the cure isn't here, then she has it."

"We don't know that for sure," I tell him.

"What did you see in the rest of the lab? Did you see any sign of a cure? Any sign Sabrina got there first, too?"

"Yes."

Sebastian had brought me to meet her, just before he'd sent me to El Corazon. But vampires are territorial and it had been a risky move on his part. She could have killed us both. Instead, he'd bought our freedom with information about the location of the cure.

The same information he'd given Carter and me after the battle at El Corazon.

When we'd first arrived at Genexome, Carter and I had split up. He'd gone to search for the underground storage. I'd searched the rest of the industrial compound. I was faster than Carter and could cover more ground in less time, so it had made sense.

"I found the labs. It looked like someone or something came through there recently just like here." I reach into the pocket of my jeans and pull out a glass vial. I hold it out to him carefully. "I did find this."

He takes it and rolls it over to read the white label imprinted with the code EN371.

“Jesus, this is the virus?”

“Just like he said it would be,” I say. “But that only proves they created it here. It doesn’t mean—”

“What is it you want me to do? Just give up?” That’s when Carter turns to face me head-on. No longer cocky. Just determined. “Humans are losing this fight against the Ticks. If this cure doesn’t work, then Lily will finish her transformation. Maybe you’re right. Maybe the chance is slim that Sebastian is telling the truth. Maybe there is no cure. But the alternative is to just accept that Lily is going to be a Tick. Are you really ready to do that? Because I’m not.”

With Carter here, pinning me with his glare, coaxing me with his resolve, I realize that no, I’m not ready to give up.

But I still have doubts. Can Sebastian be trusted? Can Sabrina? Can *any* vampire be trusted? Even me?

I want to believe that there might be good in Sebastian. That maybe there is a reason he created the Tick virus. Something I don’t yet understand. Something beyond his seething need to exact revenge on Roberto. I want to believe there is goodness in him and that that goodness drove him to create a cure. Because if he might be redeemed, then there is hope for me, too.

I want to believe, but it’s hard.

“Any chance you have a plan C?”

He ignores my sarcasm. “Yeah. You and I go to the Farm, where your father took her. We bring her out of the medically induced coma and you bite her.”

“What?”

“Just like Sebastian did for you when you were dying, after you’d been attacked by that Tick. You bite Lily. You save her life.”

“If I bite Lily, she becomes a vampire. Like me.”

“Exactly.”

“No!” Every cell in my body, every functioning brain cell, recoils from this idea. “No! I’m not turning my sister into a vampire! You don’t know what you’re asking me to do!” Because the thought of turning my sister into a vampire—into a thing like me—it’s repulsive. It’s like a poison in my blood. “You’re asking me to do this to her—to turn her into a monster—without her consent.”

“If it saves her life, then yes.”

“No!” That’s what was done to me. In a darkened parking lot, after a horrible attack by Ticks, I sacrificed my life to save my sister, and she repaid me by begging Sebastian to turn me into a vampire. And Carter strong-armed him into it. I’d had zero say in the matter. I’d died a hero and woken up a monster.

“You don’t know what you’re asking me to do,” I say again. “She wouldn’t be Lily anymore. She’d be . . .” There are simply no words to describe the transformation she would go through. All I can come up with is “something else.”

“She would be alive.”

“She would want to eat you.”

“She would fight the urge,” he insists.

“It’s not an urge. The need to kill isn’t like a craving for Taco Bell. It’s not just something you fight.”

“You fought it,” he says, gesturing toward his neck. “You didn’t kill me just now.”

“It would be months, maybe years, before she could actually be with you. Longer before she could be comfortable around you.”

“You think I wouldn’t wait?” he asks. “You think I want Lily now and only now? You think I’m going to lose interest if this takes too long? I’m not,” he says fiercely. “I am in this for her. I don’t want her just when it’s easy or convenient. I love her. Forever. No matter what.”

My heart twists itself into a knot, because I almost believe him. What would it feel like to be loved like that? To love like that? Unconditionally. Forever.

My family loved me like that. When I was human. But no guy has ever felt that way about me. And now? Now that I’m this monster? I couldn’t even be with a guy without wanting to eat him. Not quite the all-consuming love of girlish fantasies.

I can’t contain the jealousy that slices through me. Lily always seemed to have it all compared to me. I hadn’t minded. I’d had order and music and power I didn’t even understand. I had never wanted what she had. And now I do.

It shouldn’t bother me. I don’t want it to bother me.

Carter is just looking at me. Waiting for a response.

I say the only thing I can think of. “I would *never* have chosen this for myself. This was forced on me. I won’t force it on her.”

“She’s been exposed to the Tick virus!” he yells, like I don’t understand. “Don’t you think she’d rather be a vampire than a Tick?”

“No,” I snarl back. “I think she’d rather be dead than a Tick.”

“Are you threatening to kill her?”

Suddenly Carter is right in my face, and now I have more to contend with than just his anger. The desperation. The fear. The love. It’s all right there, ready to shove my own will out of his way.

But what would it hurt, really? Would it be so bad? My sister as a vampire? As a murderer? My sister, who has always been so determined to do the right thing. To make the world a better place. To protect the weak.

It would kill my sister to become a vampire. To see humans as kine. To feed off the people she loves.

But maybe she’d be stronger than I am. And Carter would be with her. He could help her control herself. He could . . .

What he could actually do is force me to change my mind.

His determination is already swaying my will.

He is so dangerous and he doesn't even seem to realize it.

I back away, slowly, palms raised. "No. But I won't turn her. Not as long as we have any other options."

"Okay then," he says firmly. "Let's go get those other options."

I take another step back and another, because I can still feel it, tugging at my mind. Biting Lily is the only solution. The only way to guarantee her safety. And I know I need to get out of there before he's convinced me.

"I get Sebastian, you go to Sabrina's." Suddenly, sending him far, far away from me doesn't seem like such a bad idea.

Before Carter can say anything else, I turn and run. Not just from him and this strange power he holds over me, but from myself as well.

Because I know, deep inside, that it wasn't my restraint that saved his life just now. It was something else. Not something within me, but something within him. I didn't stop because I got control over myself. I stopped because his blood tasted wrong. Horribly repugnant. Deadly.

The truth is I was dangerously close to killing one of the few people I've ever really considered a friend. And he is *Lily's*. He is her love. He may be the one person who can save her. Killing him would have risked her life and destroyed her happiness.

Those are things I didn't even consider when his throat was in my mouth. They wouldn't have stopped me. That is the kind of monster I am.

I can't do this to her. Not as long as there's another choice.

Out in the parking lot, far from Carter, I consider my options. There are plenty of cars, but I pick the one we came in. I only learned how to drive in the last three days. I need familiarity.

I don't even know how to hot-wire a car, but we took this one from El Corazon and we have the keys, so I slide into the driver's seat. Except—dang it—the dog is in the passenger seat. It's nearly as large as a wolf, but fluffier. Chuy, Carter had called him. The dog of a friend.

I reach past the dog and open the passenger-side door. "Get out," I tell him.

The dog just stares at me, his thick black tongue lolling out of his mouth.

"Get out," I say again. I move to give him a push, but he just nuzzles my arm. "I don't like dogs."

He looks up at me from under his eyebrows and makes a little whining noise—like he wants to stay with me. Like he's begging to do it. This is why I don't like dogs. I have trouble believing the truthfulness of anyone who claims to want my company.

But even when I give the dog a shove, he just shifts his weight and then settles back into the seat. Finally, I snarl, "Fine." I turn my attention back to the car. I start the engine and shift into drive before pushing my

foot on the gas hard enough that the car lurches forward, momentum shutting the door on Chuy's side of the car. Beside me, Chuy lowers his chin to his paws and lies down.

Carter has plenty of options left to choose from and I've seen him hot-wire cars before. He'll be fine. Worst-case scenario, he has to stay at Genexome until I can return with Sebastian. That wouldn't be a bad thing.

CHAPTER THREE

CARTER

Moving a lot slower than Mel's vampire sprint, I followed her out to the Genexome parking lot, only to realize she'd stolen my ride. Which shouldn't have surprised me. My suggestion that she bite Lily and turn her into a vampire had freaked her out. Hell, it freaked me out.

As plan C's went, it was crap, but it was all I had. I just hoped to God I wouldn't have to use it.

Maybe, just maybe, plan B would be enough to save our asses. Plan B started with me going back to San Angelo, where a large chunk of the rebellion was trying to wrestle control of one of the Farms.

Hopefully, from the Farm in San Angelo, I could figure out where Lily's dad had taken her. I knew they'd been headed to a nearby Farm, but I didn't know which one. But the Farms had ways to communicate, and hopefully, once I reached San Angelo, I'd be able to figure out where the helicopter had gone. Once I knew where Lily was, I'd need to go get the cure from Sabrina. As much as I didn't want to drag anyone else into this mess, I wasn't stupid. I couldn't take on Sabrina all by myself. Not when Lily's fate and the fate of all humanity rested on my success. I needed backup.

I looked around, cursing. In the Before, Genexome had been a sizable company—not huge, but certainly one of the major employers in this South Texas town. Unfortunately, it was one of the epicenters of the outbreak. The company, the grounds, the town, had all been hit hard by the Ticks. The upside was there were a lot of cars left in the lot.

Yeah, I know that sounds callous as hell, but once you've seen what I've seen, and done what I've done, you can't think about the people who are already gone. There's only enough room in your head to worry about the people who are still here. The people you can still save.

When I looked out at the parking lot, I didn't let myself think about the people who'd driven those cars. Instead it was: What can I hot-wire? What will have gas? What will get me to San Angelo? Fast.

At the far end of the parking lot was a long building so low to the ground I'd almost missed it. In this barren part of Texas, the featureless horizon and the dust have a way of messing with your perception. But that building, it almost looked like an airplane hangar. Or a private garage. Exactly the kind of place an eccentric vampire would store his collection of sports cars.

True, I didn't know whether or not Sebastian had a collection of sports cars, but if I was rich as hell and couldn't die, that's how I'd spend my money.

I took off at a jog toward the hangar, glancing at my watch as I did. Fifteen minutes and a couple of miles later, I stopped, panting, in front of the hangar. It was farther away than it had looked and a lot bigger, about as big as a football field. All four sets of bay doors on the structure were locked from the inside, but when I circled around back, I found an open window. Because Alpine was ground zero, there hadn't been enough

humans around to loot it and Ticks didn't care about anything they couldn't eat.

I jumped up, caught the edge of the window, pulled myself through, and dropped down on the other side. Light drifted in from the windows on the bay doors and from skylights. Dust motes filled the air, giving each beam of sunlight tangible weight as it fell on the line of cars. There were seven in all, each looking fast and sleek. A Lotus. A Pontiac GTO. An Aston Martin. A couple I didn't even recognize. Any one of them would get me to San Angelo a hell of a lot faster than the crossover SUV Mel had taken. Then, glancing into the shadows at the far end of the hangar, I saw something even better. A pair of planes.

I walked down to that end. I ignored the bigger plane—a passenger jet that was way out of my league—to focus on the smaller one. A little single-engine Cessna Skyhawk.

Strictly speaking, I hadn't ever flown a plane. But I had spent two years at Elite Military Academy, which was owned and managed by Sebastian. We'd learned all kinds of crazy shit at Elite that probably should have tipped us off that it wasn't just an ordinary school. We'd learned mixed martial arts and how to pick locks. We'd learned battle tactics and strategy. And, in our free time, we'd logged hours in the academy's flight simulator.

Knowing what I knew now—that Sebastian had founded Elite because he was looking for an *abductura* and because he was building his own army—it seemed obvious that everything at the academy—every lesson, every course, every pastime—had been designed to equip the people in Sebastian's empire with the skills to survive and to protect him during the apocalypse. And if need be, to fly him around.

Because the plane I'd learned to fly in that flight simulator was a Cessna Skyhawk. And now I'd get to fly one for real.

I did a quick run-through of the preflight maintenance, opened the bay doors, and climbed inside the Cessna. Despite my fears, my doubts, my anxiety—despite all that, adrenaline pumped through my body. First time in the cockpit of a real plane. The layout of the instrument panel was exactly what I expected. I could do this.

I'd spent less time getting this puppy ready than it would have taken me to hot-wire a working car and I'd get to San Angelo in a third of the time—assuming I remembered how to navigate, which I was pretty sure I did.

They say you never forget your first flight, but mine wasn't filled with exhilaration and joy, but with nerves and desperation. I will say this: if I didn't survive the apocalypse long enough to fly again—when I could actually enjoy it—I was going to be pissed.

* *

I landed the plane—badly but safely—in the deserted airstrip outside San Angelo. I didn't have any trouble finding a car. When civilization had collapsed, everyone with a plane or money for a ticket had booked it, which meant airports were the easiest place to find cars and gas.

That was a tip I'd learned from Ely Estaban. Ely had gone to Elite also, but he hadn't joined the rebellion. Not really. He'd spent his time searching for his family and he'd been better at surviving on his own, outside the Farm system, than anyone else I'd ever met. That was why I'd trusted him to keep Lily and McKenna alive when they'd left the safety of base camp to search for a hospital where McKenna could have her baby.

I didn't bother doing anything to secure the plane once I landed it at the small regional airport. I found an older Toyota that I was able to hot-wire easily enough. It only had a half a tank of gas, but that was more than enough to get me from the airstrip to the college. Even though I'd only been to San Angelo a couple of

times, it wasn't hard to find a midsize college in a town that small. It wasn't until I was almost there that I thought about what I was going to say.

There's no easy way to return in defeat.

I left the Farm in San Angelo just two days ago, determined to save Lily and bring her back safely. Instead, she'd been exposed to the Tick virus. She'd practically been kidnapped by her own father. Oh, and the vampire who we'd all thought we could trust—the person who had been our greatest source of information—turned out to be a lying bastard.

I had no good news to bring back to San Angelo. Zip.

Having a plan helped, but I couldn't sugarcoat things. Not to people I liked and trusted.

Of course, that was assuming the good guys—my people—were still even in control of the Farm in San Angelo. I'd left to go get Lily and baby Josie thinking that I'd only be gone for six or seven hours. That had been two days ago. We'd just taken over the Farm when I left. For all I knew, while I was gone it had fallen back into the hands of the Collabs we'd wrestled it away from. In a perfect world, I could have used the satellite phone to call Zeke or Tech Taylor for a sitrep when I'd landed in San Angelo. But—no phone.

Have I mentioned how much I hate this crap?

It was close to dusk when I parked a block away from the campus behind a fast-food place and went in on foot, keeping in the shadows of the building until I was close enough to scan the fence line.

The good news was, the gates were still standing, and secondly, there was a security detail up in the guard tower. Moreover, the security detail was made up of a single beefy guy in a Collab uniform with a rifle and three other people, all wearing hoodies and carrying tranq rifles. The three people in hoodies were obviously Greens. They were thinner and smaller than the Collab and they held their tranq rifles with caution rather than arrogance.

The fact that they were on the security detail and had rifles to hold meant that the takeover at the Farm hadn't collapsed after I'd left. The fact that the security detail included a Collab and Greens meant things were going well enough that the two groups were actually working together. Which seemed like a friggin' miracle given how bad things had been at this Farm before we'd taken over.

I walked out into the open, hands raised and clearly visible. I made it to within a hundred feet before the Collab swung the rifle around and got me in his sights. I'd spent a lot of time in Farms over the past year. I'd spent time pretending to be a Collab so that I could help people escape and I'd spent time around weapons. Even from this distance, I was pretty damn sure that the weapon that Collab had trained on me was not a standard Farm-issued tranq rifle, but something much more powerful.

I stopped and waited. There wasn't much I could do. The Collab looked trigger-happy, and if he was even a halfway decent shot, I was a dead man.

Then one of the Greens in a hoodie placed a hand on the arm of the Collab. There was a short exchange, and finally the Collab lowered the rifle. The Green who'd been arguing in my favor waved me forward before dashing down the stairs for the gate.

I blew out a relieved breath as I jogged the rest of the distance to the gate.

I made it just as the Green was pushing back her hood. It was Dawn, the nurse from Elderton who had come

down with me from Utah. Dawn wasn't actually a nurse. She'd been home on break from nurses' school when the Tick outbreak had happened. Still she knew a hell of a lot more about medicine than anyone else at Base Camp.

She threw open the gate to let me in. The second it closed behind me, she gave me a fast hug.

"Man, am I glad to see you!"

"Likewise."

I nodded in the direction of the guardhouse and the asshole Collab. "Things okay here?"

She pulled back. "Better than they were when we first arrived, but still . . . tense. As you can see. Everyone's been freaking out because we saw a plane."

"Oh. That was me." It hadn't occurred to me, but yeah, it would have been months since anyone had seen a plane. When martial law had been declared, all commercial air travel had been suspended. For a month or so after, you'd see a plane here and there, but since then, since things got really bad, there'd been nothing. I shrugged. "Sorry. I didn't think about it freaking people out."

"You're a pilot?"

"I am now."

She laughed at that, shaking her head. "Let's get you inside. I know Zeke and Joe want to talk to you."

I was sure they would. I just wish I had better news. Things here were tenuous. We obviously needed every good person we had to keep things stable, but now I would be asking them to send at least two people with me, quite possibly on a fool's errand. On the other hand, if we succeeded, we'd save Lily. And possibly the human race.

Yeah. No pressure there.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEL

The last time I was here, I felt only rage and purpose. I had come to kill Roberto. I was focused and determined. I was in the grip of a vampire berserker frenzy. Here, in the middle of Roberto's territory, I'd been unable to control my natural hatred for other vampires. It wasn't aimed only at Roberto, but at Sebastian as well. It was a thing beyond mere anger. A thing beyond and apart from me.

It that state, I'd stabbed Sebastian. I'd rejoiced in doing it.

Now I need him alive. Will I be able to control my rage? Even for the cure? Even for my sister? Or will my new nature win out?

It had been less than twenty-four hours since I'd left El Corazon, but the time had taken its toll on the tiny village. El Corazon looked like a Victorian-era Texas county seat, with one massive building in the center of a town square and other businesses flanking the building on all four sides. Though, of course, it hadn't been

the county seat, since it wasn't part of a county and wasn't on any maps. It was quaint and lovely if you could overlook the fact that it had been owned and run by a monster. And now it is overrun by the Ticks who flooded the town when the fences came down. They swarmed and they devoured all of Roberto's kine.

Here at El Corazon, the people who lived under the protection of Roberto and Jonathan Price had believed completely that they were safe from the Ticks. They had stood by—protected—while other towns were ravaged, while countless lives were lost, while the government fell and major cities had been blasted to dust. They had been safe and they had believed they always would be because my father promised them that.

When the fences around the city came down, when the Ticks swarmed in, the citizens of El Corazon had been slaughtered wholesale. By the hundreds.

I couldn't help feeling like they'd deserved it.

But that didn't make the carnage at El Corazon any more palatable.

Ticks—mindless pack animals that they are—are efficient killers, but inefficient eaters. It's like their prefrontal cortex is just gone—or maybe cut off from the rest of the brain. They are incapable of logic or reasoning. They are driven only by the need to consume and the contradictory fear that they can't consume it fast enough. They don't drain the blood from a human the way a vampire does. They crack open the human's chest. They drink right from the heart itself. Bones shatter. Viscera spew.

They are greedy and wasteful. They don't eat. They gorge.

They leave the dead still twitching where they killed them. They move on to their next kill, eating until they can hardly move. When they've eaten their fill, they satisfy other needs. And then they sleep, huddled like dogs in whatever dark, warm place they can find.

Nature would never make a killer like this. And I know nature will not allow this killer to reign for long. A vampire could have lived indefinitely on a population this large. But the Ticks ate their way through it in less than a day. Far less, based on how badly the bodies are already decomposing.

This is the scene that awaits me when I return to El Corazon. I don't want anything sneaking up on me, so I park a couple blocks away from the square and walk in. I hope to get a sense of where the Ticks are—something I would never be able to do from the moving car.

When I climb out of the car, Chuy hops out after me. I point back to the front seat. "Stay."

He just looks at me.

"Whatever." Maybe I would be able to make him obey, but I have bigger things to worry about. "I don't like dogs," I remind him. "And if you lag behind, I'll leave you here."

He must understand, because he falls in step beside me, close enough that his fur brushes against the backs of my fingers as I walk. It's weirdly comforting, as I face the scene before me, the senseless death. The waste of precious resources. I don't mourn the people. They were their own kind of monsters. But I'm disgusted nevertheless.

Beside me, Chuy stops, his fur bristling, in the same moment my own internal warning bells go off. We are not alone.

Sebastian is still alive. I can hear his buzz in the air. Faint, low. Weak. But still there.

And of course there are the Ticks, too. They have not traveled on, even though they are out of food. They are too sated to bother moving. I work my way through town, stopping every once in a while to triangulate their position. They're in a house. Outside the square. Maybe more than one. It's still day, so they are sleeping. I can't get a sense of how many there are, which probably means there are too many for me to easily take on.

Which means I will try to deal with Sebastian first. The devil I know before the monsters I don't.

The stench of day-old blood churns my gut. I would retch, but my stomach is empty. I haven't eaten since I killed the girl outside the Farm. Soon the air is thick with flies, and their buzzing drowns out the hum of the Ticks where they sleep. A block from the square and the buzz is like a roar in the air, overpowering even Sebastian's sounds.

I can only hope he is where I left him, pinned to the ground on the green by the gazebo. If he has managed to free himself and crawl away, I don't know how I'll find him.

I keep waiting for my vampire berserker rage to kick in. For the fury that dances along my nerves and lights my blood. I keep waiting for it to guide me to him, but it doesn't.

What if it's gone? What if he's gone?

I can't hear him anymore over the buzz of the flies. I can't feel his presence. No pulsing anger driving me to ferret him out. To stab him through the heart and rip him limb from limb. Not even a tingle of annoyance.

Is he dead?

In the time it's taken me to walk through El Corazon, has he died?

Something like grief hits me. How is that possible? How can I grieve for someone that I barely knew? How can I mourn him when I haven't even mourned the life I had before him?

My pace quickens. I run the last block, which is better anyway, because then I don't have to see the carnage and waste. I round a corner, nearly stumble on a body, but catch myself before I can fall and then I'm leaping over the patches of ground where the bodies are too thick to walk through. Did anyone in town make it? Anyone at all?

I slow down as I reach the center square, dread pulling at my feet. There on the green, beneath the sprawling live oak, I can see the two bodies. Roberto's petite and headless body is sprawled out. In life, he was as fragile and as lovely as an angel. Or maybe one of Tolkien's elves. Now he is headless and lifeless. I can't make myself look at him, knowing that when I die—someday in the distant future—this is how I will go.

It's Sebastian's body I've come to see or save if I can.

He is still there, as I somehow knew he would be, the stake I thrust through his heart pinning him to the ground. His eyes are closed, his always pale skin paler than pale, as white as the ghost I feel like I'm seeing.

This—apparently—is the limit of Chuy's friendliness. He stops maybe fifteen feet away, letting out a low, tense growl. "Stay," I tell him, and this time he listens. He lies down, submissive, but not relaxed, wiggling backward without taking his eyes from Sebastian's form.

Instinctively, I take a cue from Chuy, and move forward slowly, crouching down by his body, my eyes searching for that final proof that he is truly dead. I hear no music from him at all. No annoying buzz. He seems as lifeless as Roberto's headless corpse. And yet I can't believe that's true. How could Sebastian be

dead?

I lay a palm on his motionless chest. It doesn't rise and fall with breath, but when I rock back onto my heels, his eyes are open. The gleam of life in them is dulled by pain and blood loss, but somehow he still lives.

Relief surges through me.

I didn't kill him. As much as I wanted to, I didn't. Somehow, through some miracle—if vampires can be granted miracles—he has survived.

I keep my hands on his chest and lean over to study him. It's almost as if I'm seeing him for the first time, not with the eyes of the autistic girl or the angry fledgling vampire, but with eyes made new. His pale skin is smeared with grime and blood and too hot to touch. The spark of his eyes is faded. And despite all that, the sight of him fills me up with something unfamiliar and so big it is almost uncomfortable, like it is squeezing out all the soft tissue of my body, making me both harder and more vulnerable.

"You're still here," I say softly. "You haven't taken out the stake."

He draws in a deep breath and I can almost hear the wheezing in his chest. "I was just getting around to it," he says. "But you see, it's ever so comfortable."

His gaze stays on mine long enough that I start to feel shaky. I don't know what to say. How to excuse what I've done. I don't know if he's glad to see me or angry at me and simply too weak to kick my ass. With his normal strength, he could easily dominate me. I would never have been able to stab him at all if he hadn't been distracted and drained by his fight with Roberto.

Not sure what to do, I lean closer and say the only thing that comes to mind. "I don't want to kill you."

His lips twist in that familiar sardonic smile. "Then you probably shouldn't have stabbed me through the heart."

I frown as it takes me a second to get his point. "No," I say. "I mean I don't want to kill you now."

"I know. I was"—he pauses and sucks in a pain-laced breath—"just teasing you, Melly."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you're fun to tease."

I nearly smile at that and can't help wondering when the last time was that I did smile. Certainly not since I've turned. And only rarely before. Music made me smile, back when I was Mel, but since then? Nothing until now.

"No," I say gently. "I should want to kill you, shouldn't I?"

He quirks an eyebrow. "Because I lied to you about Roberto?"

"Because of the vampire berserker rage. I wanted to kill Roberto. I wanted to kill you before. Why don't I want to kill you now?"

His shoulder twitches, almost like he's thinking about shrugging, but it must send a bolt of pain through his body, because he writhes with it. After sucking in several deep breaths, he says, "Well, off the top of my

head, I'd say it might be because I'm an inch from death."

I lean a little closer. "Does it work that way?"

"I don't know. First time I've been staked." His lips twist again, but it looks more like a grimace than a smirk. "Let's take the stake out and we'll see, shall we?"

I look then at his hands. His fingertips are scratched and bloody from trying to get the stake out. I realize now that the stake did not just go through his heart, it went deep into the ground. How much force must I have used when I did that? How much hatred had fueled that single action? How much anger?

I have many reasons to free Sebastian now. He's the only one who can get us into the underground storage where the cure is stockpiled. He is the only living expert on the Tick virus. He may have been the one to engineer humanity's downfall, but he is also the one who could save it. He has it in his power to save Lily. To keep her from turning into a monster even more horrible than I.

Yet despite all those very good reasons, I fear the real reason I want to save him is more personal. In the end, it doesn't matter why I save him. All that matters is that I do. That I succeed.

But first, we have to get out of here. Fast. I'll worry about his wound later. For now, I need to get him off the ground. I can't bandage him here, not when there are Ticks sleeping nearby.

I crouch back down beside him. "I'm going to try to move you."

He meets my gaze, but his eyes are foggy. "You know, it would be much easier, my dear, if you would just finish the job you started and kill me. I understand Roberto had quite the weapons collection. I'm sure he won't mind now if you borrow a nice katana."

"Shut up," I mutter, trying to think of options.

"Do it quickly," he murmurs, his voice almost seductive. "This can all be over soon."

"Too bad. I need you alive. To help me get the cure for the Tick virus."

He almost smiles. "Ah, it's good to be wanted."

I lean over him again and wrap my hands around the head of the stake. I hadn't looked at it before, but I do now. It has a rounded top and intricate carvings on the sides that bite sharply into my hand when I grasp it. I remember the anger. The blunt-edged fury that drove me to it. More importantly, I remember the reasons.

Sebastian carefully molded me into the perfect assassin. He trained me to kill. He fed my need to seek revenge. He convinced me that I was the only one—the only person in the world—who could kill Roberto.

And I had bought it all. I had believed completely that killing Roberto was my destiny. That it was my gift.

However, when I'd arrived at El Corazon, nothing had been as I'd expected. By the time Sebastian had showed up to stage his own assassination, I'd realized the depths of his betrayal.

I know the truth now. I had only been a decoy. A distraction. There's nothing unique about me. I have no special destiny.

There's another truth I know. Sebastian will do anything to get what he wants. He will tell any lie. He will

trick any fool.

I have no interest in being his fool again and I don't know which of his lies to believe. I can't trust him, but I need him. Alive and conscious.

I grab the stake and give a sharp tug, wrenching it free from his chest and from the blood-soaked ground beneath him.

He lets out a sound that starts as a gasp and ends as a scream. A sound that makes the hairs on the back of my neck spike with fear and makes Chuy whimper in distress. It's the sound of death and agony. It's the sound of torture. His whole body bucks off the ground.

His scream fades into echoes, yet there I stand, leaning over him, watching him draw in shuddering painful breaths. Watching what's left of his blood pulse out of his body.

I reach out a hand and he takes it in his own. His hand barely has the strength to grasp mine. His skin is so cold he might as well be a corpse. He's visibly shaking as he struggles to stand and I feel a burst of regret. He's wounded and now that I've pulled out the stake, he's dying more quickly. And I'm about to stab him in the back. Literally.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Still holding his hand in mine, I plunge the stake back into the hole I'd pulled it out of.

CHAPTER FIVE

CARTER

"Is Josie okay?" I asked as Dawn led me across campus to the Dean's office.

"She's fine." Dawn's expression went all gooey as she said it. "We found infant formula in the storage center. Lily was right. The Farms were well equipped to care for babies."

Before I could ask any more questions, Dawn showed me into the office, giving me one last worried look as she shut the door behind her.

Joe and Zeke were both waiting for me in what had once been the Dean's office. Joe had always seemed like an old soul. Even though he was about my age, he'd always seemed wise. And I trusted him. That was important. I'd only known Zeke a handful of days, but we'd traveled across the country together to pull off a risky as hell coup at this Farm. So even though I didn't know him well, I knew he was as determined as I was to stay in the fight. And that counted for a lot, too.

Since neither was much for bullshit and we didn't have time for that anyway, as soon as the greetings were out of the way, I launched right into sharing the bad news about Sebastian's betrayal. "I'm not going to sugarcoat this. We're up shit creek. This betrayal didn't help, but—"

Before I could continue, Zeke held out his hands. "Look, I know it sucks, but I didn't know what else to do with him. Joe wanted to just leave him outside."

"Yeah," Joe said belligerently. "After what he did—"

“Wait.” Now I held out my hand. “What are you talking about?”

For a second we all just stood there, staring at one another as it sank in that we were having two different conversations.

“What are you talking about?” Joe asked. “Why are we up shit creek?”

“Sebastian lied to us. Roberto didn’t have the cure. In fact, Roberto didn’t create the Tick virus. Sebastian did.”

Zeke just sort of shrugged. He’d never met Sebastian, but Joe had known him, had fought side by side with him. He ducked his head, shaking it slowly. “Dude, I’m sorry. And Lily?”

“She’s with—” I hesitated before mentioning her father. Yeah, my own dad was no prize, what with the general disinterest interrupted by the occasional beatings, but at least he’d never helped launch the apocalypse. If Jonathan Price was my dad, I wasn’t sure I’d want my friends knowing. So instead of mentioning him, I said, “The doctors at El Corazon induced a coma to slow the progression of the disease. Then the doctor took her and some of the other patients to one of the nearby Farms. It bought us some time to find a cure.”

“But there is a cure?” Zeke asked, a note of awe in his voice.

I nodded. It wasn’t that I wanted to lie to them, I just still wasn’t ready to consider any other possibility.

“What were *you* talking about?” I asked.

Zeke and Joe exchanged a look. Finally Zeke cleared his throat and admitted, “Ely showed up yesterday afternoon. Joe wanted to leave him outside the fence. I had him brought in and locked up.”

For a second, I couldn’t even think. My vision tunneled as my blood pressure spiked. Ely was here?

How the hell had that happened? Ely had kidnapped Lily. He’d tried to abandon baby Josie in the desert and turn Lily over to Roberto. Lily—being Lily—had fought back and had won. The last anyone had heard from him, he’d been left in the desert with a gun and a single bullet. So how the hell had he survived?

But, of course, I knew the answer to that question. When it came to staying alive on his own, Ely was the best there was. Besides, he was too much of an asshole to die.

“Where’s he being kept?”

“Now wait a second,” Zeke said, palms out again, in a placating gesture.

I turned to Joe. “Where is he being kept?”

“In a copier room, just down the hall.”

I didn’t need Zeke to tell me which room Ely was in. There was only one room with two guards standing outside of it. They were guys I didn’t know and had never seen before, but either they knew who I was or they were too scared to get in my way, because they stepped aside and let me pass.

The mammoth copier sat silent in one corner. Cabinets lined three walls. Boxes of paper reams lined the other. There was no furniture, but Ely had stacked a couple of boxes near the copier and he was sitting on

them, legs sprawled in front of him, head tipped back.

Some tiny part of me knew that I had to be logical about this, but when I saw him—in that split second that I first laid eyes on him—there was nothing in my brain except Lily. The fear in her voice when she'd first called to tell me he was working for Roberto, that he'd tranqed her and left baby Josie to die. The quiet desperation after she'd been exposed to the virus. The way her voice quavered when she asked me to kill her. To make it quick. Because she didn't want to become a monster.

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

My girl, asking me to kill her quickly, because of this guy. How was I supposed to be logical?

Ely barely opened an eye in the time it took me to get across the room and haul his ass to his feet. I whirled him around and slammed his back into the wall and held him there.

In that instant, logic didn't matter. None of it mattered. Because Lily was sick. Lily was dying. Maybe lost forever. Because of this guy. This worthless sack of shit. This traitor who was supposed to keep her safe and didn't.

I hauled back and punched him square in the jaw just once, then dragged him back up. There was nothing I couldn't do to this guy that wouldn't be fair. That wouldn't be reasonable. I wanted to take him apart. Every instinct I had yelled at me to destroy him.

Instead, I just held him there, seething for a moment before I could even speak.

“I am going to kill you,” I said slowly. He made a strangled choking sound, but didn't struggle to get free. He was shorter than I was, stockier, and I held him dangling several inches off the floor. “I am going to tear you apart with my bare hands. Whatever Roberto threatened you with to coerce you into betraying us, I will do worse.” Then I let go of him and he crumpled. “But I'm not going to do it today.”

He sat sprawled on the ground and brought his thumb up to wipe away a single drop of blood. “Why not just kill me now?”

“Because I'm going to go save Lily's life and I don't have time for you.”

And with that, I turned and walked away. I would make him pay, but not right now. Now I had more important things to do.

CHAPTER SIX

MEL

Sebastian writhes in agony as I thrust the stake back into his heart. I've killed him again, in hopes of saving him.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper once more. He's deadweight against me and I struggle to get my arms around him. I heft him up so he's leaning on me and his face is inches from mine. “You're bleeding too much.”

“So you stabbed me again?” he gasps out.

“We have to get out of here. I don’t have time to bandage your wounds here. We have to get out of here before the Ticks wake up and—”

I break off when I hear a desperate howl rend the air. From behind me, Chuy lets out a panicked yelp. I glance over my shoulder. He has stayed precisely where I told him to, but he’s standing now, tense and poised to attack, staring off into the distance.

Sebastian nods toward the town. “Those Ticks?”

I turn and look out across the green. In the half-light of dusk, dark shapes loom at the edge of the square. Hulking, clumsy shapes. And they’re moving toward us.

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