



Some things there was just no getting used to. Mick felt that way about what the city had become. No matter how many times he went outside, the silence still got to him. It was the only home he'd ever known. The sounds in the air used to comfort him like a chaotic lullaby of honking horns and angry shouts. All that had been replaced by a tense, foreboding quiet that made his neck hairs stand on end. Now, only the faint whoosh of the wind wrapping around the skyscrapers filled the desolate urban valleys. Cars, long abandoned and overtaken by rust, blocked the streets. The sidewalks, once so crowded people could barely move without shoving, were littered with broken glass from smashed storefront windows. It was everything a post-apocalyptic world promised to be.

As they turned a corner down an avenue, Mick couldn't understand how Samantha felt so comfortable with it all. Then again, that was what he loved about the woman: her ability to survive not just in body but in spirit, as well.

It was hard for him to even consider survival an option anymore. He'd seen his crew slowly dwindle from a rough troupe of fighters watching each other's backs to a

small group of scavengers banded together solely by desperation. There were just four of them now, but Sam was the only reason Mick still got up in the morning.

The other two, Luis and Trevor, led the way a block in front of them. Trevor was a good man and always put the betterment of the group before himself. He spotted a grocery store the other day that hadn't been completely raided and planned this little supply run to re-stock their essentials. Luis, on the other hand, was starting to concern Mick, enough that he felt compelled to bring it up to Sam.

"I've been catching Luis looking at us recently," he said in a hushed voice so the two men they were following couldn't tell he broke the silence.

Mick kept his eyes in front, continuously scanning the still landscape for any sign of movement. Even still, he could sense Sam rolling her eyes beside him. "He's not looking at us. He's looking at me."

For a moment, Mick's focus homed in on the back of Luis's head and wondered what hidden thoughts swirled inside it. "What makes you say that?"

"You kidding?" Sam scoffed. "I'm the only woman he's seen in months. At some point a guy would be checking out a vacuum cleaner if it was turned on."

"What about Trevor?" Mick asked, shifting his gaze to the man walking beside Luis.

Sam stopped and turned to Mick, forcing him to do the same. Her face held an uncomfortable grimace, as if it pained her to state something so obvious. "Trevor's gay, Mick."

"Really?" Mick said, surprised. "Then how come he doesn't look at me like that?"

Sam stifled a chuckle, causing her expression to lift into a restrained grin.

"You're cute, honey," she said, running her hand gently down his face. "Just not that cute."

She slapped his cheek and walked away with perfect comedic timing, leaving Mick to wonder, as he often did, how she could keep such a sense of humor in this place of desolation. He didn't know, yet he admired her because of it.

Further ahead, Trevor and Luis were already in front of the store waiting for them. Trevor greeted them with focus while Luis's attention was on the store. The subtle slight fueled Mick's suspicions of him.

"You three go in and have a look," Trevor said. "I'll keep watch."

Luis walked forward and stepped through the store's broken window without saying a word. Again, Mick felt something off about the man's coldness. He looked to see if Sam picked up on it, too. She hadn't and grabbed ahold of Mick's hand with a smile, pulling him into the store like they were about to go shopping for a picnic.

"Grab as much as you can without slowing yourself down," Trevor called to them. "We're gone the first sign of trouble."

Sam peeked back over her shoulder with a salute. "You got it, boss."

Luis was nowhere to be seen. He'd disappeared somewhere in the store's dark aisles. Sam wasn't looking for him, though. She led Mick down an aisle of her own.

They'd never been in this store before, but it looked pretty much the same as everywhere else. The shelves and floor were a jumbled mess of items scattered about. During the first few days of the outbreak, panicked looters were in desperate need of non-perishables and survival essentials. Everything else was left behind or tossed aside.

Sometimes they got lucky, though, and spotted a can of food or bottle of soap that had been overlooked in the rush.

The search had become so routine Sam and Mick didn't need to say a word while doing it. They just trudged forward, occasionally grabbing a treasure from within the mess and shoving it in their satchels.

Sam was locked in on the task. They had barely made it down the first aisle, and her bag was already half full. Mick wasn't having the same luck. He was too distracted and couldn't regain his focus until speaking his mind. "About Luis..."

Sam let out a dramatic sigh, but that didn't stop Mick from going on. "The looks he's giving you doesn't seem like he's horny."

"What's he seem like then?" Sam asked while keeping her eyes buried in the piles at their feet.

Mick searched his mental database for emotions and came back with the best guesses he could. "Resentful? Angry?"

"You're reading too much into things."

"Am I really? You haven't noticed he's been getting a bit colder to us? A bit grumpier?"

Sam turned around to give Mick her undivided attention. "So he's jealous you got a girlfriend. Big deal. I'd be jealous too if the roles were reversed. Just cut the guy some slack. We're not exactly living in paradise here."

She stared at him with a subtle, hopeful smirk that always looked for the best in people. It was that kind of unbridled faith that made Mick so attracted to her. Ironically, it was also her naïve optimism that had him the most concerned.

"We've got company!"

Trevor's voice shot through the store, instantly flooding Mick's system with adrenaline. He and Sam ran back the way they came and found Trevor standing in the street, his body tense and his fear-stricken gaze fixed in one direction. The couple joined him, and it took a minute for Mick to spot what had Trevor so spooked. By all accounts, the road looked like the same old barren wasteland it did when they arrived. Only after locking his concentration on the horizon did Mick spot subtle movement in the distance. The road seemed to bounce up and down like a wave, perpetually rolling forward as it approached them.

None of them could see what it was exactly— they were still too far away to make out the threat— but none of them, not Trevor, not Sam, and certainly not Mick, had any doubt what was coming.

It was the infected.

"Come on, Luis!" Trevor screamed into the store.

"Just a sec," Luis's voice shouted from the darkness.

Trevor moved his attention back to the street, where a mass of flailing arms had come into focus. "You don't have a sec!"

A series of clattering noises echoed out from the store followed by Luis lumbering his way through the clutter.

"Move! Move! Move!" Trevor pestered him.

Luis blew right past the three of them without saying anything and entered an all-out sprint away from the incoming mob. Trevor took off after him, followed by Sam.

Mick brought up the rear. He wanted to keep Sam in his sights the whole way home as the four of them weaved back and forth around the abandoned cars littering the street.

The still quiet they experienced on the way to the store was now gone, replaced by their heavy, labored breaths of panic and the rising rumble of the stampede behind them. A continuous crack of thunder pounded the pavement, growing louder and louder with every passing second.

When he heard the inhuman snarls and roars, Mick made the mistake of glancing over his shoulder. The ravenous horde was still a block away, but he could now make out the pale, sore-infested skin on their individual faces. Their mouths jerked and snapped like hungry piranhas in a feeding frenzy. They weren't eating anything yet, but Mick had seen them when they were and would give anything to burn those memories from his mind.

He returned his focus ahead where Trevor had overtaken Luis and was just now coming to the three-story industrial brownstone they called home. The building's thick sliding metal door was open, as it always was in case they needed to make a quick entrance in times like these. Trevor blasted through the opening with Luis trailing right behind him... except Luis didn't head deeper into the building. He stopped, turned around, and started sliding the massive door shut.

"No!" Sam yelled with an outstretched hand. "Wait!"

Luis scowled at them and slammed the door closed, locking with a loud, industrious clank.

Mick and Sam both barreled into the door at full speed, desperately and futilely trying to pull it open.

"You asshole!" Mick screamed while pounding into the metal. "Open the damn door!"

They received no response but could hear Trevor's muffled voice on the other side. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Screw those love birds," Luis shot back at him. "We're better off without them."

"You're crazy," Trevor replied. "They're our friends."

Mick and Sam went quiet, anxiously waiting to hear what Luis said next.

"I don't have any friends," he finally seethed, his voice low and detached.

Sam backed away from the door, her wide-eyed face frozen in disbelief. "You were right, Mick. He's actually going to let us die."

An "I told you so" never entered Mick's thoughts. All he could think about was the sudden and impending dread that in less than a minute he and the woman he loved would be overrun and come to a painful, gruesome end.

"We can't stay here," he muttered.

Sarah turned to him with a petrified stare. "What are we gonna do?"

Mick's thoughts tripped over one another, searching for an alternative to getting eaten alive. He imagined places close by, hideouts they could hold out in. There were several but none he could reach in a matter of seconds.

"Hey!" Trevor's voice boomed from above. "Up here!"

Mick looked up and found his friend standing on the roof of their building. Except Trevor wasn't looking back at him. Instead, Trevor's focus was farther up the road. More specifically, at the pack of maddened fiends charging down the street.

"That's right," Trevor taunted them. "Come and get me."

He immediately caught their attention, and the first line of infected veered off to storm the front of the building. The savage human-beasts slammed hard into the metal door and began frantically clawing at the bricks, pointlessly trying to scale them. A few of them managed to reach a ladder hanging off the fire escape. Trevor's face grew long, having realized his elevated position wasn't as safe as he thought it would be.

Several infected were half way up the building in a matter of seconds. Trevor took off running and leapt from the roof to the building next door. He kept on going, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, desperately trying to keep ahead of his pursuers.

"We have to help him," Sam said.

"How? He's the one helping us."

"I don't know," Sam groaned, stomping her foot in frustration. "Just... something!"

The immediate danger had been alleviated but not eliminated. A second wave of infected was still headed towards them, and Mick grabbed onto Sam's arm to pull her away. "He bought us a second to hide. Let's not waste it."

She reluctantly went along with him, but the couple only managed a few strides into the street before a loud bang caused them to stop. The noise was followed by an abrupt scream, and Mick turned just in time to catch sight of a balcony tearing off the side of a building with Trevor inside it.

"Trev—!"

Mick clapped a hand over Sam's mouth, holding her writhing body tight as the balcony crashed into the pavement.

A part of Mick hoped Trevor died upon impact. That hope was dispelled when a throng of infected rushed the area and Trevor's shrieks of agony accompanied the squishy chewing noises that came with their voracious eating.

Sam's body went limp in Mick's arms. She seemed lifeless, just staring off at the gruesome bloody feast on the other side of the street. There was nothing more for either of them to do but save themselves. It was a cruel truth that wrecked havoc on the hope-fueled light still shining inside Sam. Even now Mick admired that light and wish she held onto it. He just knew it was pointless in times like these. Looking on the bright side often helped them live, but it never helped them survive.

Sensing the ferocious crowd still barreling towards them, Mick tugged on Sam's arm and brought her to the rusty school bus parked behind them. Lying flat on his back, Mick shimmed himself under the bus with Sam following closely behind him. Once in the middle of the undercarriage, there wasn't anything left for them to do but wait.

It didn't take long. The infected horde had overtaken the area in a matter of seconds. The bus was completely surrounded as hundreds, maybe even thousands of feet pounded the ground all around them. But it seemed as if the mob was unaware of the couple hiding just a few inches away.

The swarm of infected seemed to be endless, and the infinite waiting for them to pass had become daunting. Mick could feel Sam's body tense beside him as a light cry whimpered through her lips. Mick shushed her softly. He could barely move in the cramped space but managed to blindly reach his hand out and clasp onto hers. They locked fingers, and she squeezed tighter than he expected.

It wasn't an ideal position, but then again, nothing in their life was. All they could hope for was to close their eyes and pray they were still alive tomorrow, when they get to wake up and do it all over again.