

WILD

By Shiloh Day

“Mattie,” Sawyer says. I imagine him shaking his head. In disappointment, in shame, in sadness. Sawyer is always shaking his head at me.

The thing is I can hear everything. I can’t see anything right now; I haven’t been able to for a while now. But I can hear it all. I can hear all the tears, the whispered good-byes, the sadness. *Don’t cry now, Mattie, I tell myself, hold yourself together.* I can hear the constant beeping beside my head and the muffled sobs of people who sound like they’re far away.

It’s like I’m a sponge—a sponge absorbed in sadness. I hate it. I want to scream—to tell everyone that it’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m okay. *We’re going to be okay, I tell mama. We’ll be okay again soon.*

This time it’s a whisper when Sawyer chokes out, “Mattie.”

“Mattie,” mama calls from the front porch. I can see the light from the hall burning through the open door. It’s a soft glow against the pitch black of the sky. It’s a soft glow that I look away from. I don’t answer right away. I never answer right away. “Mattie! Get in here right now you wild child.”

I climb down the tree, trying to soak up as much of the wild as I could. Daddy always called me his wild child, so now I try to live up to it. I want to be the wild child.

Mama’s never liked that there’s wild in me; she likes it when things are put away and the house is clean and when she can sit in the living room. She doesn’t like camping or fishing or being outside. She definitely doesn’t understand why I like it. She never has. I don’t think she ever will.

Everything is bleeding together now.

I try to figure out how long it’s been since I’ve been awake. I try to count the minutes by the ticking of the clock. I lost track early on—during the first week, when Sawyer had come in and sobbed into the sheets that he couldn’t bear to lose me.

Everything is bleeding together now. Everything is one big, vast screen of darkness—pitch black darkness—with the echoes of the people I love cascading over and under and around it. There’s no way to distinguish between days and nights and the ticking of the clock serves more as a nuisance than a reminder of what time it is.

I try to figure out how long it's been since I heard daddy's voice last. It's been too long. Years and years probably. Or at least that is how it feels. I just wish I could hear it one more time.

I'm on a mission to get out. I throw a couple of sweaters into my backpack and climb out the window and down the tree at 2:03 in the morning. *There's a firm knock on the door.* I only make it two blocks before there are bright headlights piercing the darkness around me. *The day is dark and cold. Not a normal day for June. Not a normal day.* I don't have time to panic for too long, because the next thing I know mama is shouting at me out of the car window. *The hearse is driving so slow. The headlights pick up in the trees.* She's saying something about 'how dare you leave the house in the middle of the night, you better get in the car right now' and I just wish that she would stop shouting for two minutes. Maybe if she stopped I wouldn't feel like running away. But then again, maybe I would.

After all, I learned the art of running from the best.

The news comes in the form of a somber looking man dressed in uniform, standing at the front door. I can't hear what he's saying. I can't hear what mama's saying either. All I know is that when mama closes the door there are tears streaming down her face in fat drops, and there's a folded flag pressed in between the palms of her hands.

I don't figure it out. I'm only six.

I ask, over and over again, "what's wrong mama, what's wrong?" but she doesn't answer. Mama just lifts her palm up and shakes her hand at me, whispering, "not now, Mattie, not now" through her tears. She leaves the room without looking at me.

She leaves to go hide.

I let her go.

I let her go. Mama's storming out of the church, without looking back. *It was the best day of my life, Mattie Jane.* I'm standing in front of a large mirror, the white dress fitting tightly around my body. *I can't wait to see you have the best day of yours.* I don't cry when she leaves. I haven't cried in a long time.

Hush.

I don't cry when it happens.

I just feel numb.

I feel like I'm going to float away.

Sawyer's back again.

He's back and he's crying loudly in my ear. He keeps saying "please please please" in whispered sobs. I want to reach out and smooth his hair away like I always do when he's upset. I want to clutch onto his shirt and hold him and never let him go. I want to get out of this prison—away from the pitch black void I'm trapped in.

Just let me out, I think. Please God just let me out.

Mama's still not home. She's not been home for almost a week.

God just let me out, I want to scream. Get me away from this. I can't do it. I can't I can't I can't. I try to sleep but it takes a long time for it to come.

I stare at dark figures on the ceiling of old Elm trees and a dark scar.

I want to cry, but I don't.

I cry hard when I find out what the flag means.

Mama doesn't tell me; I find out on my way to school.

"I heard Mattie's daddy died last week," one of the boys says to his seat mate. I stop what I'm doing and turn to look at them. They don't notice. "And now her mommy is really sad and won't come out of the house. So we have to be real nice to Mattie. That's what my mommy told me."

The second boy nods his head and says, "my mommy said the same thing." I stop listening then. I turn my head and lean it on the bus window, trying not to cry in front of everybody. All that's running through my head is that it can't be true. There's no way he's gone.

By the time the bus pulls up at school, all I'm thinking is that I can't believe he's gone.

I can't believe he's gone, I think, sitting in the hospital bed, staring numbly down at the little bracelet that was just wrapped around his tiny ankle. It's so small that it doesn't even fit around two of my fingers. Sawyer is sitting beside me, his head buried in the tiny blue blanket. I can hear the sobs rumbling in his throat. I can hear the ticking of the clock--counting every second of his life, counting every second we've been without him.

I reach for Sawyer's hand—so I don't float away. I feel like I'm going to float away.

He looks up at me with red rimmed eyes—hopeless. This is hopeless.

He grabs my hand and squeezes it tight. My lifeline.

My Sawyer.

My Sawyer. I hear him asking the doctor, “how much of a chance do we have now? It’s been three months.” My heart drops. Three months. I’ve been in this perpetual darkness for three months. *Everything hurts, Mattie, everything hurts. I just need a bit more to drink. Everything hurts.*

“There’s still hope,” the doctor replies. “Her brain seems to be more and more active every day. She’s fighting through it. I don’t think this accident’s the end of her.”

It’s raining. Bright headlights hit the trees.

There’s screeching.

Glass shatters.

It all fades into darkness in a second.

“But she’s not shown any sign of waking up. She hasn’t moved a muscle. There’s nothing.” Sawyer sounds so broken. *Broken beer bottles are strewn around the room. I start to clean them up. Mama’s still sleeping. I’m scared to peek in at her; I’m afraid of what I’ll find.* I tell my hand to move, but it doesn’t work. It stays right where it is, weighed down like an anchor on the bottom of the sea. *Don’t be afraid of the ocean, wild one, daddy said, putting me down on the sand. Just let the waves crash on your feet a bit.*

“Just try to keep your hope,” the doctor says. “She can be your miracle.”

Sawyer’s voice breaks as he says, “I need her to be my miracle.”

“You’re the best thing in my life,” I say to Sawyer after a fight. I’m still not pregnant. We just want a baby. “Thank you.”

“For what, Mattie? I haven’t done much good for you,” he says, tearing up again.

“You love me unconditionally, even through all of this. That’s more than I could have ever asked for.”

He grabs my hand and brings it to his mouth to kiss it.

“And I’ll never stop,” he whispers.

“You better not,” I joke, leaning up to kiss him.

“You better not be joking, Mattie,” Sawyer says, holding onto the doorframe with white knuckles. His curls are sticking up in every direction; there’s a soft blaze in his eyes, waiting for my answer—he looks wild.

“I wouldn’t joke about this,” I shake my head, “you know that I wouldn’t.”

“It’s happening then?”

“Yeah,” I whisper, staring down at the counter. Staring down at the two lines I’ve been waiting to see for over two years.

Sawyer pulls me to his chest—tight—and I start to shake. It’s finally time, I think. I can feel Sawyer’s tears on my cheek and I’m so happy. I’m so so happy.

“It’s finally time,” mama says, putting the last box into the big moving truck that’s been sitting in our driveway for what feels like weeks. “Are you ready to leave Mattie?”

I look back at the tree at the other end of the yard, but I don’t cry. I don’t let myself.

I don’t answer mama. I just stare at the tree and then I stare at the big scar across her forehead—the scar she got at the bar—and then I stare at the tree again.

I follow obediently to the car and climb in the backseat.

I watch the tree out the window all the way down the street. When we turn the corner, it’s gone.

I cry.

It’s the first time I’ve cried in years, but there’s something about getting a call that mama’s gone that makes me lose it. *There’s broken beer bottles everywhere. An empty bottle of pills on the counter. I don’t want to go check on mama. I’m too scared. I start to clean it up. I don’t even have the chance to tell her that she’s going to be a grandma. I don’t have a chance to tell her that I forgive her. She storms out of the church and doesn’t look back. She doesn’t watch me walk down the aisle. I don’t cry.*

I haven’t cried in years, but I cry now.

Hush.

Hush little baby, don’t you cry.

He cries a lot.

His little face is beat red and his tiny hands are tucked into tight fists. He’s beautiful.

The little hat is falling off of his head.

I kiss his little cheek and try to get him to calm down. I fix the hat.

I try.

He’s so small. Too small. 4 pounds.

I want to wrap him up in warmth and help him get bigger.

I try.

Hush little baby.

The darkness doesn't go away all at once.

I come out of it slowly—the way the sun rises, giving the hope that there's another day to start again. *I forgive you, I cry into the casket. I forgive you.* Things are fuzzy at first—the only tangible thing the beeping next to my head. *Daddy's casket isn't open. Mama's casket isn't open. I didn't know it was the last time that I'd see them.* Then I see the bright, sterile white of the hospital wall. *The walls are so blank, so cold. I want someone to tell me why. To put my baby back in my arms and say that none of this is real.* And then I see the nurse in the corner. She turns when I cough.

Surprise lights up her eyes and she's out in the hall shouting “she's awake, she's awake” before she even says anything to me.

Sawyer isn't with the group when they rush into my room, and I try to ask where he is but I can't get the words out—my throat's too dry.

When the doctors finally stop running through their tests and the nurses clear out of the room a dark figure steps in. *You saved me from myself, thank you thank you thank you.* My breath catches because I know who it is. Of course I know.

Sawyer Sawyer Sawyer, I try to say. My throat won't let me. The doctor told me it probably wouldn't for a couple of days. *Broken beer bottles, a lonely elm tree, tiny hospital bracelets.* He walks towards the bed slowly. *The hearse is going so slow.* Like he's unsure that this could be real life.

I reach out my hand. It's so weak, I think, it burns. He tentatively grabs it, falling into the chair by the bed like he's let out all of the burden that was filling up his body. *We'll try again, we'll try again. Holding him tight, whispering, letting the soft blue blanket run along my fingers.* I try to smile and brush the hair out of his face and a tear off of his cheek.

We'll try again.

He covers my hand with his own, smiles, and whispers, “Mattie.”

The Eyes of the Infected

by Carey Juillerat

I got used to the smell about a month in, the piercing remnants of rotted burnt flesh and desecration. I used to think that I would never get used to it. The hairs in my nose would burn and my eyes would sting as soon as we tore down the doors of desolate houses, scavenging for food – anything really that we could bring back to what was left of society. It was a wonder that the food hadn't been tainted by that God-awful smell. But now it's nothing really, nothing compared to the smell of the burning flesh of your best friend with large gaping holes in his chest, tinged by crusted blood that had turned black, and one single hole, clean, in the center of his grey-white forehead. You see, we couldn't leave him like that. Wolf was, well, he was everything to me. He was everything to all of us.

Wolf found me in the back of the alley next to the corner of Norfolk and Kennedy. I was weak, helpless, and starving – literally starving to death. He gave me a can of creamed corn from his shoulder bag. He stuck his hand out, covered in black soot and cuts and said, "Come with me. We can help you." And that was it. I was sold. It wasn't just the fact that he gave me the food – his hands reminded me of my father's. My dad was a carpenter and a damn good one too. He smelled of sawdust and his hands were always covered in cuts, despite the thick leathery texture of his skin. He died nearly two weeks after the yellow virus hit the surface of the earth packed in shoots of metal tubes. You knew when they hit too. The whole world would shake for a moment and the air was a creeping yellow mist, like the lethal mustard gas of from World War II decades ago. The people panicked, some herding off like sheep from the opposite directions of the gas, some too late and tearing at the blisters forming and oozing on their flesh. But not my dad, he was always collected and knew what to do. He was trying to save my mother and me from a pack of the infected who were moaning and ravenous for our clean, blister-less flesh. When Wolf held out his hand, it was a second chance to live, but when I clasped my hand to his it was like feeling the metal hit and shake the earth. When I decided to join Wolf's community, I decided there

was no way I was ever going to let myself be helpless again – it had already gotten enough people killed.

Our little town was called Verona because Wolf was a lover of Shakespeare. He always talked about how much he wanted to go to Italy – maybe I can still go for him one day. I think Wolf was an English teacher or a professor because he would often talk about Shakespeare’s plays, or just stories in general, like they were real. Plus, he always corrected me when I spoke wrong. I hated that, but that was just Wolf. We don’t like to talk about what we used to do before the virus, so nobody knows who Wolf used to be. But he couldn’t have been over thirty. His hair was still black, shoulder-length long and filthy, but black. He would look at me with those black eyes, those eyes that knew the real me, and I swear it was like he saw straight through me. It was terrifying at first but I quickly learned to gain comfort. When there’s nothing left of the world you leave behind it’s easy to want to start all over, to make something new of yourself. I couldn’t do that because of Wolf. I kept seeing that dirty hand with the cuts and me, the twenty year-old made of skin and bones and horrific memories. With just a look, he reminded me of who I once was and who I wanted to be.

My first food run was two weeks after I made myself a home within the walls of Verona. Before Wolf found me, it had been a year since I had slept safely in a warm bed, or been inside a house that wasn’t filled with infected pungent-smelling humans. Wolf had asked his friends Gerry and Cliff to take me with them on a two-day hunt. Even after my two weeks of combat training I still felt awkward with a gun or knife in my hand. I had never killed anything in my life and I was frightened to start. Before I left that morning, Wolf kissed me on the forehead and said, “They’re not human anymore.” I kept thinking of my dad fighting off the infected with the shadows clawing for me as I ran farther away, leaving my mother behind to fend for my father. A part of me wanted to think of the infected as unhuman, but another part of me just wanted to think that they were sick and some cure out there might help them get better. But Verona had been there and tried that. Instead of searching for medicine or chemicals, we started looking for weapons and ammunition.

Gerry broke open the door of the last house for the day and I nearly went down again as the smell of stale rotted flesh speared my nose. "You'll get used to it." Cliff said as he knocked the butt-end of his gun against the wall, his beady eyes searching every surface of the room. A creak from upstairs sent his eyes northward and he nodded to Gerry. "Stay on my six, Julie." I followed his orders, the tip of my pistol trembling as we slowly cleared the house. Upstairs, I heard the heavy trudging of Gerry's boots, a shuffle, and a loud thump.

"Clear!" Gerry shouted, his voice muffled by the distance.

"Clear!" Cliff returned after we had checked each room. "Julie, go upstairs and find as many pillowcases as you can. We'll use those to fill."

Again, I obeyed his command and rummaged seven pillow cases before I could enter the room with the freshly dead infected. My knuckles were white around my pistol as the door creaked open and there lay dead the body of the infected human. I had never actually looked at one in the face before. It was a woman, blonde, maybe in her mid-thirties. Her skin was an ashy-grey, covered in gaping holes and blistering wrinkles. Her mouth was covered in black and red splatters and her teeth had become yellowed and desecrated. On the side of her head was a large bleeding slit where Gerry had knifed her. Her ashy-green and blonde hair had turned red-black with blood. The most disturbing part of this woman was her eyes. I immediately thought back to my painting course in my junior year of high school when I would wash my brushes out in my clear plastic cup of milky-grey water. There was no color, nothing at all. All I saw were just the swirling remains of what was being flushed out, whether that be paints or that woman's humanity. My grandmother had always told me that the eyes were the window to the soul, but this thing had no soul to bare. That exact moment was when my fear of killing left me and my urge to destroy these things that destroyed my family – my dignity – became my very vow of existence.

Once Gerry, Cliff, and I had filled our pillowcases full, we barred up the door and windows and made up our sleeping places. I stared at the ceiling, the infected's dead eyes still staring back at me. "Hey, Julie." Gerry whispered, "You still up?"

I glanced over in his direction. "Yeah."

"You did good today. Wolf'll be proud."

"Thanks, Gerry."

I saw his head turn towards Cliff, who was snoring loudly. "You wanna come lay down with me? I'll keep you warm."

I paused, both revolted and unsure of what to say. "Uh – no thanks, Gerry. I'm good over here."

"Sure? Doesn't have to be weird."

He made it weird by just saying that. "No, Gerry. I'm good."

"Aw c'mon, Julie. I know you're younger but you ain't gotta be afraid of me."

"I don't think Wolf would like to hear about this."

He scoffed. "Just because Wolf found you he thinks he has dibs on you. Well he ain't here now."

I scoffed in return. "Wolf doesn't think anything like that. Just shut your mouth and go to sleep. If you leave me alone, I won't say anything tomorrow when we get back."

Gerry paused for a moment, Cliff's snoring filling the silence. "Fine." He fell back in a huff of annoyance.

"Fine." Funny that he would be the annoyed one.

The drive back home was awkward. At first light, we filled the car with our pillow cases and took off, the car silent for the entire ride. Wolf was waiting at the gates as the car pulled in, his long hair plopped on top of his head in a mess. He had on his usual jean button-up shirt and black undershirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, showing a hint of an arm tattoo that I had yet to see. The gatekeeper quickly closed off the path and Wolf embraced me as I stepped out of the car. "I couldn't sleep. Not a bit. How'd it go?"

"Fine. It was fine. Look," I pointed to our spoils, "we got a pretty good haul."

He smiled and kept an arm around me as he addressed us all. "This looks great guys." He gave me a side long glance, "You must be our good luck charm."

Cliff started for the bags, "I better get this to the pantry. Sheila will be happy to have some new inventory."

"How'd she do Ger'?"

Gerry flashed a look at me. "She did good. We had one, but she didn't get freaked out or nothin'. She keeps quiet. She'd be good for runs like that."

Wolf smiled at me again. "Thanks, Gerry. I'll keep that in mind. Here, let's help out Cliff." We grabbed the rest of the bags and trudged to the pantry with a smiling Sheila waiting. I was silent next to Wolf as we walked back to our homes. "What's going on, Juliet?"

Wolf liked to call me Juliet, like his own little pet. I didn't like it, but I would never tell him that. "Nothing serious. It's just...I—I saw one of them dead. And I kept thinking of what you said—that they're not human. It's been so hard for me to understand that until now. Her eyes...they were empty. Like all life was just sucked dry. I didn't kill her. Gerry did. I didn't see him kill her—but I'm glad I didn't. When I looked at her—at it—after everything was over, I finally realized that there's nothing left of their humanity to save, no more humanity to fight for anymore."

Wolf nodded as I explained what happened. "Except in Verona."

"Right. This is my family now. You're my family now."

We had reached the steps to my front porch. Wolf kissed my forehead again, like a father kissing his daughter goodnight. "You're my family now too." And he left me standing there alone, always wishing for more.

I became the best at food runs. Sometimes it was me and Cliff, or me and Wolf, and sometimes it was all three of us. Gerry didn't do food runs anymore, even though I kept my mouth shut as promised. After about a year, we had gotten ourselves accustomed to living inside the walls of Verona. We lost a few, picked up a few, and always hunted down the infected. I think my count is up to 256 now? It's hard to keep track. No matter how many we took out, it seemed like the number of the infected just kept getting worse and worse, as well as keeping up with food supply. They were like the serpent heads of the Hydra, as Wolf liked to joke, you take out one and two more

come back. There were times when we were gone for a week, sometimes close to two, just scrounging for a few cans of food. It was rough, I know especially for Wolf because so many of our people looked up to him—including me. Wolf was the very foundation of our society. Without him, we had no guidance, no purpose. I always remembered that first can of creamed corn and how willing he was to give it to me. I will never forget his kindness.

I was twenty-two years old when Wolf finally confessed his love for me and I was the same age when he died. We were on another two-week food run, this time venturing outside the fifty-mile radius that we had never crossed before. We passed what had to be hundreds of giant white X's spray painted on doors. That was where we had been before, sometimes twice to double check. Wolf was afraid to break the fifty, he had once told me, because it meant that we were losing reliability of our surroundings. I told him at least we didn't have to worry about the infected, but he kind of smirked at my comment. "It's not about the infected anymore, Julie." I don't know why his comment stuck with me. Maybe because it was so true. We had been living inside those walls for so long that we didn't have to think of being threatened by the infected. It was always about the food, the medicine, the weapons, and most of all the people; it was about taking care of our own. I just stared at him as he drove, wishing, wanting, as his dark eyes remained glued to the empty road.

"I can feel your eyes, Juliet."

I turned away and scoffed. "You know I hate when you call me that."

His voice was calm. "Why did you look away?"

"I—I don't know." I allowed myself to peek at him once more. Wolf was looking right at me, so I looked down and picked at the fringe of the hole in my jeans. He pulled the truck to the side of the road.

He pivoted his body so he was directly facing me. "Why won't you look me in the eyes?" I was uncomfortable, twiddling my fingers like a confused teenager. "Are you afraid of what I'll see?"

I didn't know what to say without sounding like an idiot so I kept my mouth shut. No—I knew what I wanted to say but I couldn't form the nerves to confess it. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him, how much I've always loved him, since he first offered me that can of food. I was afraid that he could see my truth in my eyes when he looked at me, so that's why I kept my gaze from his piercing one. "Yes." I confessed, and he prodded further.

"You have nothing to fear from me."

"I have *everything* to fear from you." If Wolf found out about my love for him and he rejected me, our friendship would be over. Nothing would be the same. I would rather live in the misery I was in at that moment than the worse misery of losing him.

"Why would you say something like that, Juliet? Have I not taken care of you since you have been with me?" I nodded, eyes glued to the dashboard. "Have I not treated you as an equal in our little town?" I nodded yet again. "Have I not loved you?" Only then did I dare lift my eyes to his. I believed that my ears had betrayed me, but one look into his dark eyes, his soul that I loved so dear, gave me all the truth I needed.

"You...love me? Truly?"

He wrapped a hand around mine, which had nearly severed the remaining material surrounding the hole of my jeans. He brought my hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "Of course, Julie. Haven't you known it all this time? I know you've loved me. You've never had to say it. I could sense it."

My heart beat wildly as I faced him and lifted my free hand to cup the side of his face. His trimmed beard tickled the palm of my hand. "You've known it this whole time?" He nodded, leaning into my hand. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want to rush you. You would come to me when you were ready."

I smiled and leaned forward to meet him for our first kiss. He left me breathless and still somewhat confused. All that time, he had treated me as a father would treat his daughter, yet he claimed to know my true feelings the entire time. It didn't make sense but I chose to save it for another time. We drove onward, hands still clasped together, and found the first unmarked house outside of the fifty.

We conquered what seemed like hundreds of houses with little to no problems. There were only several infected out of all of those houses, each of which were easy kills. Our bags were full, so we decided to call it a day and camp out for the night. Everything had gone smoothly until my eyes saw a faint glow in the horizon, one that looked like campfire. "Wolf. Straight ahead." His eyes followed my gaze. "We shouldn't stay here. They're too close."

"We can't head back either. It's getting darker. They'll see our headlights."

"What do we do then?"

He looked at the sky, the moon already ascending, and back to me. "What do you think?"

"We can't stay. If the headlights draw them out, we can park in a garage and they won't be able to find us. Or we could just truck it all the way back to town."

He brushed a strand of hair from my face. "My Juliet, always so smart." He kissed me chastely. "Let's go then, quickly."

Our plan had worked until we both got too tired to drive anymore. We had traveled almost four hours away from home and worked all the energy from our bodies. We found a house with a garage about two hours into backtracking and decided to camp there. We safely tucked away our car full of goods into the garage and crept our way into the darkness of the house, feet shuffling like those of the infected. We were near sleepwalking.

We had just laid in bed and Wolf wrapped his arms around me to pull me close to him. "If we both weren't near death with tiredness, I'm sure this would've been quite a night."

"Rain check." We both chuckled softly and soon after I could feel Wolf's breathing deepening with sleep. For some reason, I struggled to sleep that night. There was a constant tingling in my heart, like a lingering flash of adrenaline, but not from Wolf's close presence. No – something was wrong, terribly wrong.

That next morning, we both arose to pistols pointing in our faces. Wolf's face faltered with defeat; I wasn't prepared to give up so easily. Four men, all armed with

pistols, knives and rifles, made us get out of bed and kneel on the floor. A smug-grinned man wearing a black cargo vest stepped around the weapons to tower over us. "Name's Martin. Sorry to interrupt such a touching scene folks, but the boys and I are after a car we saw driving around last night. You wouldn't happen to know these folks would ya?" I assumed he was the leader, this Martin. He was smiling, confident, and arrogant. His rifle skipped from me to Wolf, and Wolf to me.

"I think you already know the answer to that question." Wolf answered Martin, looking him directly in the eyes.

"Awwh... no reason to be a smartass....mister?"

"Wolf. Just Wolf."

Martin scoffed. "What kind of name is that?" He spun on his heels to face the first guy behind him. Jason, get a load of this guy. He's a regular old hippie. This must be Sundance Child next to him." I scowled in his direction but Wolf shook his head. He was right, no reason to antagonize him farther. He squatted in front of Wolf, bringing his pistol under his chin. "Tell you what, Wolf, you let us have the car full of goods and we might let you live."

"Done. Take it."

He barked a sharp laugh. "Well that was easy." He turned to look at his crew. "Why can't they all be like this boys?" He gave us his full attention again, his eyes scanning me this time. He was quiet for a moment, thinking. "You're awfully quick to give up your goods. Must not be that desperate. Must have a bigger stash somewhere else. Maybe more people. More weapons and such."

"We only have each other, douchewad." I spat in his direction, willing to do anything to keep them from our Verona. Wolf's eyes widened with fear, but mine narrowed.

He only laughed and rose from his stance. "I'll let that one slide, Sundance, since it was pathetically funny. Try it again, and I'll slap the pretty right off of your face." He whispered something to the man he had called Jason and turned back around. "Alright folks, here's what we're gonna do. First we're gonna take all your shit. Second, you're

gonna get in our car and show us where the rest of you are. And lastly, we're going to take everything you own." He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "We'll work out the details as we go along."

"And if we refuse?" Wolf dared to ask.

Martin chuckled again, pacing in front of us. "You two are something else. Almost worth keeping around. But we'll see about that. If you refuse, or try any funny business, you die. Then we'll hunt down your people just like we hunted you down overnight and kill every last one of them too. You play along and we might let all of you live."

Wolf and I exchanged glances. He nodded. "It's okay, Juliet. We can manage."

"What if he kills us all anyways? There's nothing we can do about it."

Martin interrupted. "She has a point you know." He picked at a thread from his shirt sleeve. "However, I would like to add that we may choose to keep you alive so we can pay you a visit whenever we like. Might have some goods to share with us."

"There's no other choice, is there?" I asked this man, the bastard.

He smiled. "Ah, now we're getting somewhere. There's always a choice. Live or die. That's my motto." He rested his hand over his heart, if he had one anyways. In just a flash, his lips turned down at the corners and his gun pointed right at Wolf's forehead. "It's time for business. I'm tired of this game. Get on your feet and get outside. Now!"

We did as Martin commanded, our hands raised defenselessly in the air. They had already moved our bags of canned goods to their SUV's. Outside, four more guys were waiting. Martin's men shoved us into the backseat of the first parked vehicle. They slammed the door leaving us alone for a split moment. "We have to do something, Wolf. Or everyone will die."

"He said he'd keep us alive."

"We can't live like that!"

Jason opened the door and settled in the driver's seat. Martin took the passenger's. He turned and pointed the gun at us again. "Where to, folks?"

Wolf kept his gaze lowered, defeated. "Just follow the white X's on the doors. I'll tell you where to turn. We're about two hours out."

I was ashamed to look at him. Never had I seen him behave so cowardly. I glared in his direction but he wouldn't look me in the eyes. "I can feel your eyes, Juliet."

"Good."

Martin chuckled, a sound I was really starting to despise. "Got the old lady all riled up, didn't ya pal? Don't worry, she'll be thankful later."

We had followed the X's for about an hour when suddenly we came to a full and abrupt stop. I looked up from my downward gaze to see a herd of the infected blocking the street. Jason cursed and put the SUV in reverse. The herd had seen us coming, and already they were surrounding us. Shots fired from the vehicle behind. Wolf and I both looked to see rifles firing at the herd from cracked windows. A few of the infected grasped the rear window of our SUV, shocking both Wolf and me.

"Where the hell did all of these come from?" Wolf asked and I wondered the same thing. We had just passed through this area yesterday.

"What do we do, boss?" Jason asked Martin with a frantic look.

He turned around and cracked his window to point his pistol out. "Kill them, you coward. Kill as many as you can!"

I exchanged glances with Wolf, hoping he saw the same opportunity as I did. He nodded, affirming the plan. The careless bastards chose not to bind us, so we loosened our belts and held loops, ready to strike at the right moment. Wolf looked at me one last time, mouthing "I love you." I returned the gesture and looked to Jason in front of me.

Once his pistol ran out of bullets, he was forced to refill. As he was looking down and fumbling, I reached forward and wrapped my belt around his neck, pulling tight backwards. I used the strength of my legs to brace myself against the back of the seat. In my peripherals, I saw Wolf doing the same to Martin. I could hear the snarls coming from their closed-off throats overtop of the moans outside of the vehicle. Martin tried to swing his gun behind him to point at Wolf, but Wolf was too fast. He held both ends of the belt in one hand and grabbed Martin's wrist with the other. I desperately wanted to

help him, but Jason was putting up a good fight. I pulled tighter and tighter, trying to speed up his suffocation. I could see his face turning red, then blue, then purple. His hands grasped the belt slicing through his Adam's apple. Only when his hands dropped, I knew he was done for. I released my grip and he fell forward onto the steering wheel, blaring the horn and attracting more of the infected.

I leaned forward to push Jason out of the way as Wolf still struggled with a blue-faced hacking Martin. Martin's free hand grasping at the belt, suddenly latched onto me and Wolf released his hold on Martin's wrist to grab the other one from grasping me. Gun shots fired, one, two, and three. Martin's purple face gave in and he dropped forward, his head creating a loud thump against the dashboard. I gasped when I looked to Wolf, three gunshot holes right in his chest. Crimson spurted from each gaping hole. "No! Wolf, oh God, no, no, no."

"Juliet." He coughed, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "My Juliet."

"Shhh... Don't speak." He leaned onto me and I took him into my arms, running fingers through the dark strands of hair surrounding his face. "I love you, you know that? Since you first offered me that can of food in the alley."

"I've always known." He cringed from the pain of speaking.

"Shhhh..." The tears were falling hard from my eyes. I couldn't control my emotions.

"You have to do it, Juliet. Before —"

"I know, Romeo."

He smiled weakly and reached his arm towards me to cup my face, his sleeve falling forward to reveal a tattoo of a Shakespeare quote. *Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say goodnight til it be morrow.* "You have to take charge of Verona." He winced again, his face turning ashy-pale and sheen with sweat.

"I'll do it for you." I placed a hand over his on my cheek and he smiled, blood still trickling. I reached for Martin's gun on the floor near Wolf's feet.

"I love you, my Juliet." Wolf still smiled at me, blood still trickling. The trembling gun pointed at Wolf's forehead. I heaved back and forth, the oncoming sign

of vomit rising in my throat. He kept his eyes locked on mine, our hands still together against my face. His eyes were so dark and luminous, so mesmerizing and they deserved to remain that way. I inhaled sharply and pulled the trigger before it was too late, before Wolf lost his eyes to the color of nothingness. His hand fell from my face and I screamed in pure agony, like my very soul had been ripped from my core. I cried, dry heaving several times before the vile actually protruded. I took out both Martin and Jason from the back of the heads before they had a chance to attack me. I was sure they had already lost their colors but I didn't really care. All I cared about was holding onto Wolf, stroking his hair while his dark eyes still looked into mine.

The herd of the infected lingered for two days, but finally gave up to chase some other distant sound. All I cared about was that they didn't go towards Verona. I had already lost enough. The SUV behind me had been emptied out by anything living, but it still held the goods and Wolf and me had gathered together. The least I could do was return home with everything we had found. I found my way out of the vehicle and transported all of the goods into the emptied vehicle. Lastly, I tried moving Wolf's body. I wanted to give him a proper burial back home; there was no way I would leave him here. But he was too heavy and I was too weak to move him. So I was painfully forced to leave him where he lie. I would return for him, there was no doubt of that.

The arrival back to Verona was miserable. The herd had passed around the walls surrounding Verona, some managing to slip through and take out some of our people. The devastation of losing our leader was profound. They listened intently to how we were attacked, how we both tried to escape, and Wolf being shot trying to save me. He died gallantly, as he had lived. I fell into a deep sleep once I had finished my report. We agreed to return for Wolf's body first thing the next day.

We had managed to haul Wolf's body back home as a team, each member distraught with just one glance at him. The holes in his chest had turned black with aged blood. But the single shot on his forehead, my shot, was completely clean. There was something disturbingly comforting in that.

I stood over Wolf's body one last time, cupping the side of his face and feeling the calloused cuts of his hand – the hand like my father's. We built a pyre for those who had died, instead of placing them in the ground with the others who had turned and been killed. Wolf didn't deserve that. He deserved to be honored like a warrior would. When the fire was lit, I remained standing next to him, just out of reach of the licks of the flames. I halfway considered lying next to him, letting the flames engulf me, but I had made him a promise. I was the new appointed leader of Verona and I had big shoes to fill. I was no true Juliet, as Wolf liked to call me. I hated that name, but I knew I would miss Wolf calling me that. So I stood where I was until there was nothing left of my best friend, my one true love, except the remaining scent of desecration. The scent would always linger with me, just like Wolf's luminous midnight eyes, to remind me of who I once was and who I had finally become.

“For Whatever Ails You”

By Hillary Mitchell

You're looking in the mirror.
The porcelain sink is cold beneath your palms,
So why are they sweating?
You can feel anxiety rising and falling,
Pumping the blood through your veins in irregular waves.
A tingle runs over your bare skin,
Up your spine and around your neck,
Dragging goosebumps behind it.
A lump rises in your throat as the mirror gazes back.
Blonde curls pinned so carefully,
So they'll frame your face just so.
Every curve of every curl soft and shining.
A short, straight nose,
Coming to a point just above a small, red mouth.
You search for answers in your reflection's eyes.
You beg this woman who looks back for a solution to the ailment that aches in your gut
And in the back of your head, pulsing at the base of your skull.
Her mouth sets in a straight, flat line.
You know what she's thinking:
Anyone who sees you envies you.
You're privileged to be a wife,
Lucky to be a mother.
Your children adore you.
A shudder cuts through you in long, jagged waves and guilt washes over you.
You can almost feel grubby hands reaching for you,
Little arms and legs tangling around your knees and ankles
Tying you down.
Your hands ball into fists as if by instinct.
Long, polished nails dig into your palms.
The woman in the mirror can't be you.
Can she?
Her eyes are cold and wrinkles have settled into her skin.
Does her husband despise them?
Does he look at her long enough to see them at all?
That can't be you,
You're the girl who was so relieved to see a ring always sparkling on her hand,
Who doted on her children and was determined to create a home.
A bitter taste spreads over your tongue as you remember her.
Where is she?
Your reflection angles away as you pull the door of the medicine cabinet open.

Your hand trembles slightly as your fingertips rests on the bottle they're looking for.
It's the same thing every day.

Twist,

Shake,

Pause.

You close your eyes and swallow the pills,

Replace the bottle,

And avoid the accusing gaze of your reflection as you close the cabinet.

Wash your hands and turn from the mirror.

Your husband will be home soon and it's time to put the roast on.