

## The Beginning

The whistling wind shook Matt's tent, waking him. The days were growing colder, the leaves creating a blanket on the forest floor. Matt reached for his worn leather journal and marked another day past. 234 since the end started. 64 since he'd last seen anyone. 173 since he'd talked to any of them. Most people that were still around didn't trust the snap of a twig beneath their shoes, let alone a stranger. Thoughts of goodbyes swirled through his head. He tossed the journal aside, rubbing his thick, scruffy beard. *Better get moving.*

After packing up his tent and supplies, Matt set out, searching for food, shelter, a sign of humanity. Red, orange, yellow, the colors flurried around him as he walked through the woods. An hour into his trek, he found a stream and filled his jug with fresh water. Downstream, a doe was drinking peacefully, seemingly unaware of the hardship humans were dealing with. From behind him came a sharp crack, a break in the silence of nature. The deer heard it too, finally looking up and noticing him, but she didn't run. An arrow came from above him, piercing the creature right in the heart. Before he could move, a young woman jumped down from the trees, bow hanging behind her back and a shotgun pointed at his chest. He put his hands up.

"That was quite the stunt. You're quick. I'm Matt." He tried to keep his voice calm, but the words sputtered out unnaturally.

"What are you doing out here?" Her hazel eyes narrowed in on him.

"Looking, for, I don't know. Something. Anything. Life." He looked behind her to the ever peaceful doe.

"I've been watching you. Your tent's not going to last you long out here, you know."

"I'm sorry, you've been watching me?" he asked, though he wasn't too surprised after witnessing her hunting abilities.

“You’re in my area, of course I’ve been watching you.” She looked him over, circled him before dropping her gun a little lower. “You don’t have a gun?” she asked, but it came out more like a statement.

“Not really a gun kind of guy.”

“Other weapons?”

“I’ve got a little pocket knife, comes in handy.”

“How do you hunt?”

“I’m vegan.” The woman doubled over with laughter. He couldn’t help smiling, her laughter was the sweetest sound he could remember.

“You’re not long for this world, living like that. What do you have?”

“Old protein bars, freeze dried meals, got a couple of those left. Some canned foods. I’ve got books, some old booze I’ve been hanging onto.” Matt watched as she bit her bottom lip, setting her gun down against the tree she’d hopped out of.

“You were planning on living through the winter on that? You don’t have a place? Just, roaming and, what, living on a fucking prayer?” She paced a bit, her hands on her hips. Matt wasn’t sure what to think of the woman who’d just pointed a gun to his chest judging his life choices, but he also didn’t think she was wrong. “Books?”

“Yeah, books. Some good ones, some not so good.” A laugh escaped his lips. The woman tried to hide a smile, her copper hair falling over her face. Then she straightened, looking him dead on.

“Okay. You can stay at my place, just for the winter. But you’ve got to help. That means hunting. And keeping your head down, you’re not sneaky. And that’s it. You stay for the winter, then you go. No ties. I don’t need that.”

“Everybody needs a little socialization, don’t you think?” he asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“I don’t need that. I’ve got everything I need. You don’t. And I can’t believe myself to be a decent human being in this world of shit if I let some vegan die in the woods eating his last protein bar. Don’t make me regret this.” She turned and grabbed her gun, walking to the doe. He stared at her, not really believing the events that had just taken place. Not sure he believed she was even real. She looked up at him, her eyes wide.

“What are you waiting for? Come help. Sun’s going down soon.”

Matt and the woman made it back to her cabin in the woods. It wasn't huge, just what she needed with a little extra room for boarders. She taught him how to skin and butcher the deer, saving its pelt. The woman spoke with her hands more than words, looking up every step to make sure he was paying attention. They hadn't said much since leaving the stream.

It'd been years since Matt had eaten meat, but the only thing stopping him over the past months was his lack of knowledge in the sport of hunting. The thought of a warm, hearty meal made his stomach growl so loud he thought she'd heard it too. He helped the woman in the kitchen, chopping carrots, potatoes and an onion she'd pulled from her garden.

"It's been a while, but I used to make a mean beef stew. Learned from my mama, Loretta." He looked up to meet her eyes, but she stared down at the garlic clove on her board. "Do you mind if I cook us a meal? It's the least I could do."

"Okay," she replied, still mincing the garlic.

"Speaking of names, I mean, I told you mine. I feel like, if we're going to be here a while, I should probably know yours." She hesitated, as though it was a dark secret she promised never to tell, and moved to grab a pot for him to cook in.

"Josie."

"Josie. Well, I'm very glad to meet you, Josie." He walked to his bag of supplies and pulled out a nearly full bottle of whiskey, then looked around the kitchen for glasses. Josie put a hand on his as he tried at the third cabinet. She reached above him to the next door and pulled down two rocks glasses, setting them on the counter. The whiskey's smell was intoxicating, and he noticed Josie felt the same, closing her eyes as she brought the drink up, soaking it in. "Cheers and, well, thank you."

"Cheers." Her freckled cheeks flushed before the glass had even hit her lips, finally meeting his deep brown eyes as she took her first sip.

That night he heard her shuffling through his bags. He wasn't mad, he wanted her to feel comfortable, to trust him. Taking in some stranger during these times was not an easy choice. As the world grew dark, the people changed with it, adapting. Evolution, some would say. Survival even. But Matt felt differently. When God's turned his eyes, some people take it as their moment to do the same. Not Matt, and not Josie either, he knew.

When Matt woke, he found Josie sleeping, curled up on a chair in the living room with a book of Beat poetry she'd found in his things. She stirred, opening her eyes. "I'm, I'm sorry, I just-"

"You have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing. I'm sorry I woke you up." She stared at him, not knowing what to say, so he spoke first. "So, what's next?"

They spent their days working, as promised. Matt tried to learn, often fumbling and ruining their chance at new meat to store for the winter months. Josie didn't ever get angry about it, just tried to show him again. They talked about their before, the people they'd lost, where they found themselves in the first few months after the end began. Matt worked in the garden, harvesting the last of the vegetables she'd grown before the hard winter set in. Josie had managed to stock her storage cellar before things got too bad, filling it with canned goods, flour, seeds, even seasonings and coffee to keep life light as long as she could.

They spoke of books and poetry, about their hold on the world, travelling through time as pieces of what was, what could have been, of dreams and wishes and everything in between. They spent nights by the fire, a small pour of bourbon or tea to warm them inside and out as they remembered their parents, how they'd grown up, the things they'd planned to do and never did or didn't have time to do. Matt talked about old loves, Josie listened. He never pushed her to share, feeling the pain that still lingered.

Matt learned to pull his weight in fishing and cooking, making most of their meals. They'd sit at her small table, taking their first bites in silence, but Matt always looked to see her reaction. Josie's body would soften, her eyes closing, chest rising like she was taking the deepest, most sensational breath of her life.

"How is it?" he'd ask with a smirk.

"Just fine." After a while, she'd say this with a smile too, her cheeks rosy.

After a day of hunting, fishing and searching abandoned cabins for food, they ended the night with dinner and a cup of mead Josie made. Matt started to clear the table, moving to Josie's plate when she grabbed his hand.

"Matt."

"Yes, Josie." He replied more than questioned, her hand igniting his with fireworks.

“I’m going to cut your hair.”

“What?”

“You’re a mess, nearly as bad as you are at hunting. You need help.” She tried to keep a poker face, but they both broke out in laughter.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry you’ve had to see me like this for so long. I’ll take all the help I can get,” he chuckled.

Josie sat him down at a chair in the kitchen, covering him with an old sheet. Her hands gently tucked it beneath his collar, bringing him goosebumps. She worked with care, letting his soft black coils fall to the floor. Every brush of her hand to his skin sent electric waves rippling through his body. As she started on his beard, he watched her, taking in all of her features, memorizing her movements. She took a step back to see how she’d done and caught him staring at her. Her mouth opened, about to speak, but she quickly bit her lip and looked away.

“All done,” she said, turning to grab a broom, but Matt took her hand in his.

“Thank you, Josie.” Her hand trembled as he ran his thumb over her satin skin. They stayed like that for a moment, just taking each other in, but Josie broke the hold.

“Gotta get up early, we should turn in,” she replied, leaving the mess of hair and heading quickly to her room.

Josie was already gone by the time Matt woke up. He knew where she’d be hunting, but took the early departure as a sign she wanted to be alone. He ate a piece of bread drizzled with honey and some tea to warm him up before heading outside. Matt grabbed logs and quartered them with an ax Josie’s dad left in the shed. Stories drifted into his mind, her life, her past, her family. Then her hazel eyes, the way they turn up when she smiles, her delicate fingers brushing fiery strands behind her ears, the way she laughs, the way she laughed that first day...the day he felt he could breathe again. He smiled, forgetting the job he was doing and just thought of her, all of her. *Josie.*

A booming roar interrupted his thoughts, coming from the direction Josie was hunting. *Bear.* He ran to her, not knowing what he’d do if he found the bear first, but he couldn’t leave her. The branches whipped at his body as he stormed through the forest. Finally, a clearing opened, revealing Josie face to face with the bear.

“Matt, GO!”

“I’m not leaving you here, Josie. Hey, bear! HEY!” The bear’s attention turned to Matt, and he made his way towards him. Matt stood tall and yelled, trying to scare it off, seconds away from attack. Then, a shot rang out. It missed the bear, but it was enough for the bear to change its trajectory, heading back into the woods. Josie grabbed Matt by his coat sleeve, pulling him in the opposite direction.

“Run!” They took off, making a wide circle through the woods back to the cabin, trying desperately to avoid another encounter with the bear. Matt’s lungs burned like a thousand icicles were piercing his chest, but he stayed at Josie’s side all along, looking back, left, right, trying to do all he could to keep them safe. Finally, they were back at Josie’s. Matt slammed the door behind them, dropping down as an added barrier between the outside world and their safe space.

“You could have died, Matt. That was fucking stupid!” She made her way to the kitchen, grabbing a glass and pouring herself a shot of whiskey. It went down quickly. Then she poured another and, after looking towards him, poured Matt one too, shoving it aggressively into his hand.

“Cheers,” he said, giving her a nervous grin.

“It’s not funny, Matt. Jesus, you’re a distraction. You are distracted. You could have died! Do you get that? I had it handled, I would have been fine or I would have died, but that’s what the end is, it’s just death, so you fight it, but you don’t do that by...by purposefully running into a fucking bear! You’re not going to survive acting like some big hero, Matt!” Josie paced in front of him, much like the first day he’d met her. It calmed his adrenaline fueled shakes, making him feel warm.

“Josie.”

“I said no ties, Matt. That’s what I said, so get me out of your head and live! That’s why I let you in here, so you can live!” She slammed her second shot.

“There’s a big difference in surviving and living, Josie. You’re right. I’m here because I want to live. And this here?” He stood, grabbing her shoulders to make her stop and see him, staring into her green and gold flecked eyes. “This is living. I’ve never felt so alive. All those months out there, surviving, I might as well have been another one of the dead. We made it past the end, but that’s not living, Josie.” His hand reached under her chin, gently guiding her lips to his. Her body relaxed into his, and he held her as he kissed her fully. The touch like osmosis, him

feeling everything she felt and was and him sharing his everything with her. At that moment, they were one.

It took a few breaths for Josie's eyes to open, but when they did they sparkled like never before. Matt brought his hand up, wiping a tear that had fallen from her eye and she smiled. "So, what's next?" she asked. He brought her into his chest, holding her close, and softly kissed her head.

"The beginning."