

af's

INFECTED HEARTS



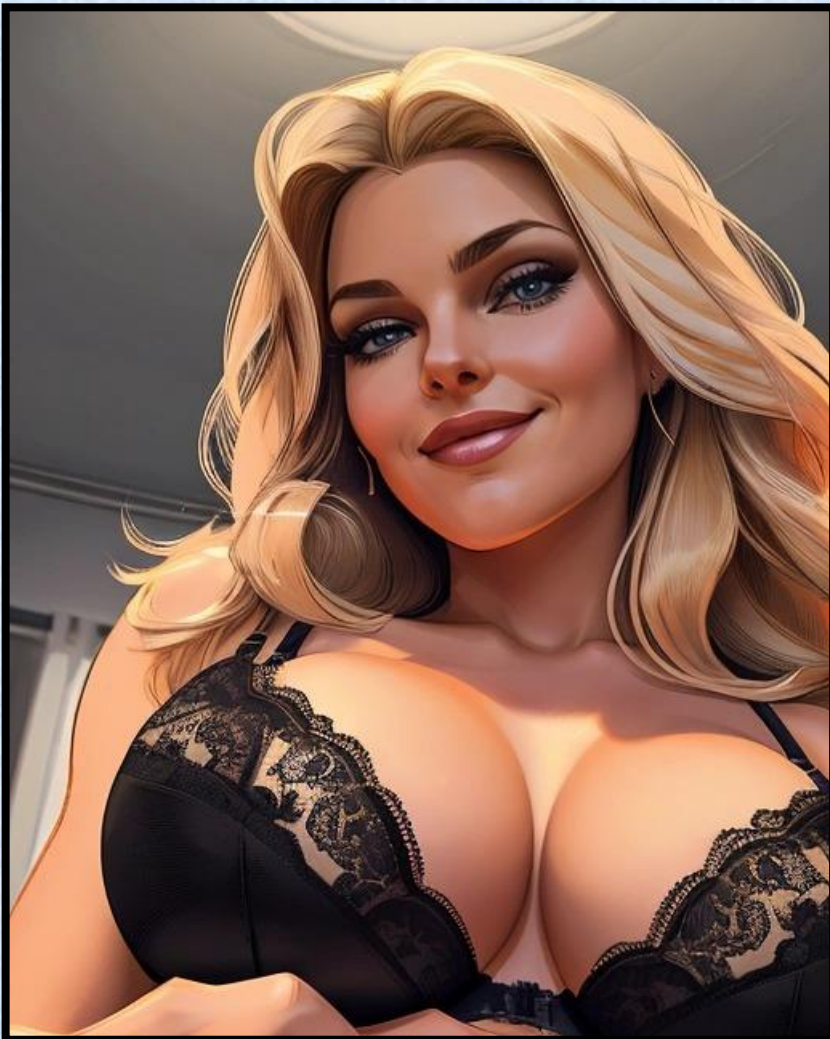
CHAPTER 10. GOOD NEWS

DAY 31

"You're so cute when you sleep."

An earthquake shook the house, jolting Adam awake. It was early morning. He saw a woman's face hovering above him, golden curls giving her away immediately. Suzie.

"Sleeping Beauty finally woke up. There was so much blood. Haha. Matilda said your heart was just beating too hard," she teased. "Makes me wonder what exactly you and your mother were up to alone."



Her tone was playful, and she looked a little better than before. Adam rubbed his eyes, noticing Mark lying beside him.

"I heard how you risked your lives for me and Mark. Thank you." Suzie ruffled Adam's hair like he was her oldest son.

"I'm glad you're feeling better. Where's my Mom?"

"Shh. Just tell me, would you really want to... with your mother?" Her tongue was clearly loosened by the antidepressants. "I need to know because of Mark. When my baby grows up, could he end up like you? Doesn't it disgust you to think about your mother's body? I mean, Matilda

is a gorgeous lady but she's not 20. "

"I don't know what you are talking about. Ahem."
He felt extremely uncomfortable.

"Yes, of course you don't." She smiled. "I'm sorry. Whatever happens between you and your Mommy is your business. Being in love with your mother is actually very sweet. I'm just curious. Maybe I could help you the way you helped me with the pills. I could talk to her and..."

"Why are you so stubborn!?" Matilda's voice rang out from somewhere deep in the house.

"Well, looks like my husband and your Mom are at it again," Suzie said with a smirk. "Matilda hasn't been herself since you passed out yesterday. Think about my offer by the way."

Adam didn't respond. Instead, he hurried downstairs to the garage.



"One car for you, one for us," Matilda said. "What's so hard to understand? You already stripped



a third one for parts. Two working cars are better than one, especially if your jeep breaks down again."

"It won't break down! And why the hell do we need two cars?" Carlo snapped. "They'll burn through too much gas!"

"Two cars are safer!"

"No, they're not! I don't even know if you two can drive properly. And we don't know who that minivan belonged to. Better to strip it for parts and be done with it."

"It's been one day, and you already forgot we helped your wife!"

Carlo grunted, annoyed, but kept working under the hood.

"That's what I thought. Never argue with a woman, Carlo!" Matilda turned and spotted Adam.

He hadn't expected it to feel this awkward, meeting her eyes after what had happened between them.

"Hi, uhm... Mom."

She led him inside, away from Carlo's sight, and placed her hands on his shoulders.

"How are you feeling? I was worried about you?! You were out for so long! Why do you keep making me worry? I told you to stop what you were... doing."



"I didn't think about the consequences," he mumbled.

"Maybe you should have? Maybe you should start thinking about the consequences of your actions more often." It felt like she wasn't just talking about his health.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Come on, I'll make you something to eat." She turned him toward the kitchen and gave him a playful slap on the butt. "Naughty boy."

He smiled, relieved that she wasn't angry, but then Matilda froze. There was a strange sound through the house.

Carlo stepped in, eyes wide. "The radio... it's talking?"

They rushed upstairs. Suzie sat by the radio, gripping the dial.

"...If you can hear this... survivors... head..."

She fumbled with the volume, cranking it up.

"*Savannah, Georgia.* I repeat, all survivors, head south to Savannah, Georgia. The city is fortified. Military safe zone established. Supplies, shelter, medical aid. If you're out there - keep moving. Avoid big cities and don't travel at night, I repeat. Avoid big cities and don't travel at

night.”

he message looped, then dissolved back into static.

Carlo disappeared for a moment and returned with a map. “It’s far. We have to get past Atlanta, then another day or two of solid driving.”

Suzie sighed, setting down a bottle of prozac as she stroked Mark’s head. “Finally, some good news, baby.”

Matilda wrapped her arms tightly around Adam’s neck, pressing her boobs against him. “We’re saved.” Adam returned his mother’s embrace.

Just as he convinced himself to stop having those thoughts about his mother, Matilda pulled him right back in.

Adam put his hands on her waistband and pulled Matilda harder against him, trying to feel her hard nipples.

“Ughhh... It’s too hard, Adam.”

“You’re celebrating too soon. We still have to get there, and between us and Savannah are thousands of infected.”

“Oh, stop grumbling, darling,” Suzie said. “Or I’ll turn on the Christmas radio again. We finally

have clear instructions, and we’re not just driving into nowhere. Stop being such a pessimist.”



"I'm a realist." Carlo suddenly turned to Adam and Matilda. "Adam, stop hugging your Mom and come with me."

Before Adam followed, Matilda leaned in and kissed his cheek, letting the kiss linger. Adam swallowed hard and headed down to the basement. The air reeked of gun oil and dust.

Carlo stomped down the stairs, arms crossed. He gave Adam a hard look.

"It's good that we know what to do, but now I need to be sure you can protect my wife. Atlanta's big, probably crawling with the infected."

Suddenly, he yanked a gun from behind his jeans, Adam's gun.

"Where did you get that?"

"Stole it from your room. This P365 is solid, but only if you know how to use it. Otherwise, it's dead weight."

"Give it back." Adam reached, but Carlo twisted his arm, locking it in place.

"Your daddy's dead. Figured as much. Don't expect sympathy or sorry. This is war. You're responsible for your mother now. You're her man. Got it?" He shoved the gun into Adam's pinned hand. "Be weak, and you'll end up like him. Then what happens to her? You want her dead? Or worse? Raped?"

"Shut up." Adam yanked his hand free, gripping the gun. It took everything not to raise it. His face burned with rage.

"Shoot at the target on the wall, and then I'll show you how to handle my rifle. Keep your elbows loose. Breathe steadily. And don't slap the damn trigger, squeeze it. I'm not a soldier; I was a shooting instructor my whole life. I'm scared, boy. Really scared, but our women shouldn't know and see it."



CHAPTER 11. BRUISE

DAY 31



Adam and Matilda returned to their bedroom when it was finally time to sleep. Soft Christmas music played on the radio. It was a strange reminder of their new normal.

"I'm so glad this nightmare is almost over," Matilda sighed.

"Yeah, me too."

She sat on the bed and let out a small gasp, struggling to take off her pants.

"Ughh... Adam. Can I use your help?"

"Something wrong, Mom?"

She hesitated for a moment, glancing at the table beside her. "There's some ointment there... Could you grab it for me?"

She glanced down. Adam followed her eyes, spotting the deep purple bruise on her right thigh. "I didn't want you to see it... I got it

after yesterday's crash."

"Oh, Gosh, Mom. You should have told me." He grabbed some ointment and sat beside her, gently applying it to the bruise. His fingers moved over Matilda's skin.



"I didn't want you to worry about me too much." She shivered.

Adam spread the ointment over the bruise while his other hand massaged the skin and muscles below her knee, tracing along her calves. Matilda let out a soft sigh, sinking deeper into the bed.

"A little gentler... sweetheart... Don't rush, and don't be so tough. No one's ever given me a leg massage before." She giggled. "You should've seen Carlo's face when I called for help, and he walked in to find you lying in blood and me in just my bra. Suzie was laughing about it all night. God, it was embarrassing."

"I can imagine."

She ran her fingers softly over the back of his head as the ointment spread warmth over her leg. Adam kept his focus on the bruise, rubbing in slow, careful circles.

"You've always been like this, you know."

Adam glanced up. "Like what?"

She smiled. "So attached to me. Always taking care of me."

Adam huffed a quiet laugh. "Yeah, well... someone has to."

Matilda chuckled. "After what you've said yesterday, I couldn't help but remember how you always wanted to be more than just my son. Do you remember when you were little, maybe four or five? You refused to sleep in your own bed, because you were convinced I'd get lonely without you."

Adam groaned. "Mom.."

"Don't 'Mom' me," she teased, ruffling his hair. "You used to hold onto my shirt while you slept, like a little puppy. And if I tried to move away, you'd wake up all grumpy, saying, 'No, Mommy. Stay.'"

Adam's face burned. "I don't remember that."

"Uh-huh." Matilda laughed, shaking her head. "Do you remember Mrs. Callahan, our old neighbor? You used to glare at her every time she talked to me. I think you thought she was a villain or something."

"She *was* creepy! Always watching us through her curtains."

Matilda shook her head, smiling. "You were convinced she was plotting against us. And don't even get me started on your 'security patrols' at night."

Adam's face turned red. "Mom.."

"You'd march around the house with your little plastic sword, checking under tables and behind doors, making sure no 'bad guys' were inside. And if I tried to tuck you in early, you'd tell me, 'No, Mommy. I have to keep you safe!'"

"I was a weird kid."



"You were the sweetest, most loving little boy. And you still are, my baby." Her hand drifted to his cheek, cupping it for a moment before dropping away.

He swallowed. "You don't have to baby me, Mom. I'm not a kid anymore."

"I know. But you'll always be my boy. My little protector."

Adam focused back on her leg, the ointment glistening against her skin.

"Mmm... your hands are so warm," she whispered, eyes fluttering shut. The warmth of his hands and the soothing motion of the ointment started to dull the ache in her leg.

"I'll always be your little boy, Mom," he whispered.

Matilda parted her legs a bit to let her little boy in and make the whole work easier. He gulped and looked right between his mother's legs.

She was wearing sheer red panties. He could swear he could see her red pubic hair. And there was this magnificent scent...

Matilda placed her hand on his head, gently stroking his hair. Adam quickly refocused on her leg, his heart pounding. He was too afraid to look at her face, he didn't want to know if she'd caught him staring.



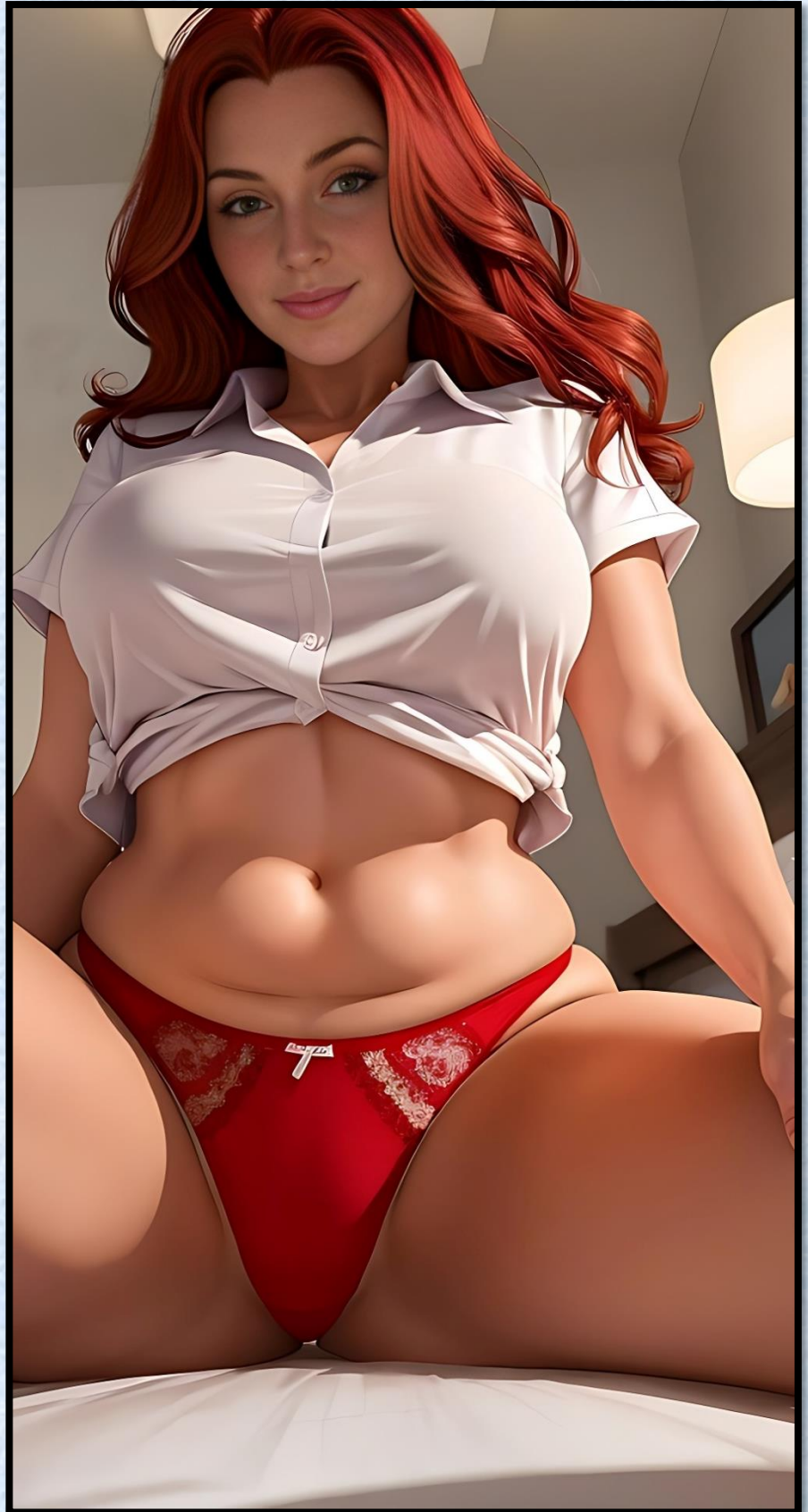
Her skin was warm, soft, pale, speckled with tiny freckles. He leaned in, pressing a slow kiss to her thigh. When he finally looked up, their eyes met.

Matilda was staring at him, unblinking, a small smile curling at the corner of her lips.

How long had she been looking? Did she see me peeking?

Her fingers slid through his hair, and then she leaned in, brushing her lips over his lips. It was a little peck. Heat crawled up his spine. Goosebumps spread over Adam's skin.

"I know that you're at a special age, and things are really hard for you right now. I didn't forget about yesterday, and I still see, Adam, that you have these wrong feelings."



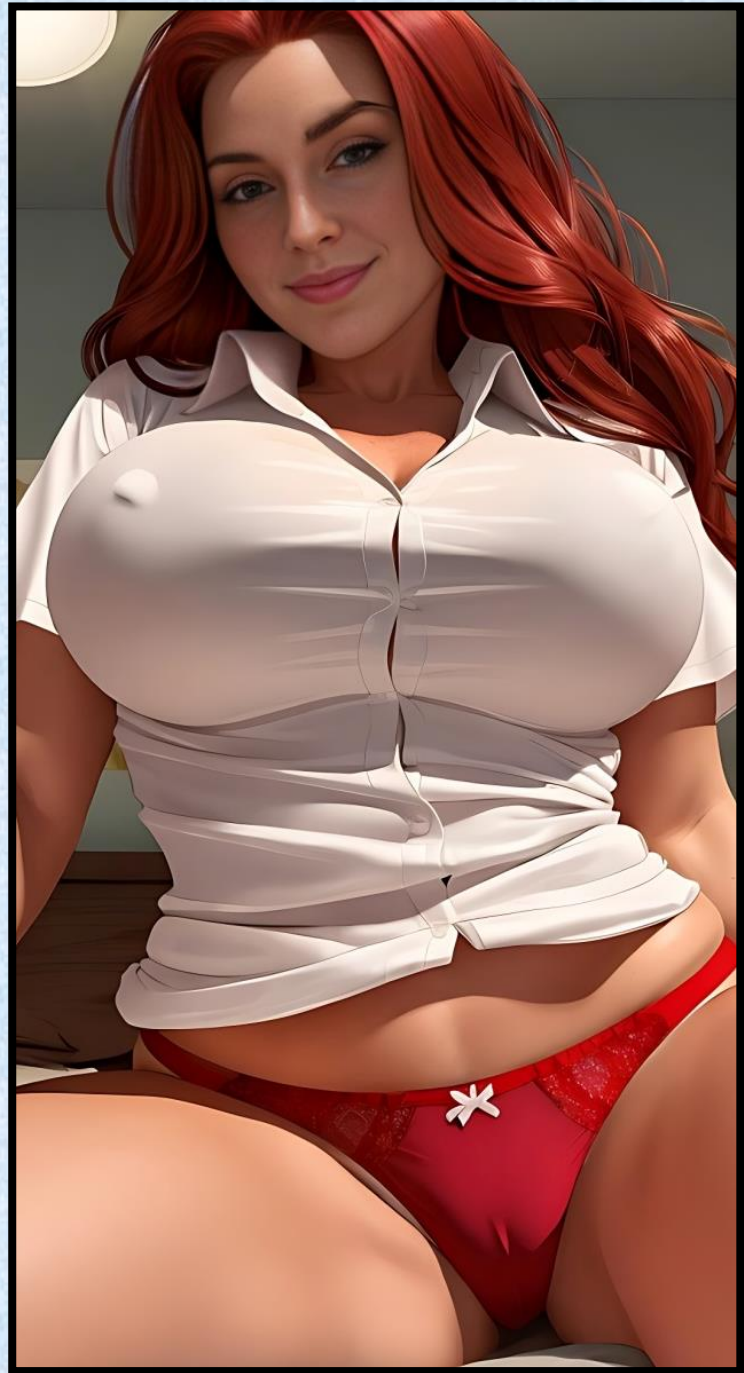
"No, Mom... I..."

"Let me talk, please. You were grabbing my boobs and kissing me. What was that about otherwise, huh? No matter how awkward this is, we have to deal with it. I want you to remember that I'm your Mommy, and you're my little boy, Adam. Okay? Don't forget about that. You'll definitely find someone when we're safe. Someone who deserves you. And I can totally wait a bit for grandkids."

Adam swallowed. "Yes, Mom... I'm sorry for...." His words got tangled. His cheeks flushed again. "That's a really weird conversation for mother and son to have."

"Don't tell me, but it would be weirder if we both tried to ignore it. It's not your fault that you love me in a..."

The door to their room swung open. Suzie stormed in, her eyes immediately landing on the bed, perhaps hoping to catch mother and son in something inappropriate. Adam's hands were still resting on Matilda's thick leg, and the air carried the scent of ointment.



"Well, well. Sorry for interrupting," she giggled. "There's hot water. You can have a shower before bed. Together, if you want." She then stormed out of the room.

"Is that how she tells us 'thank you' for risking our lives?" asked Matilda.



CHAPTER 12. PEACEFUL DINNER

DAY 40

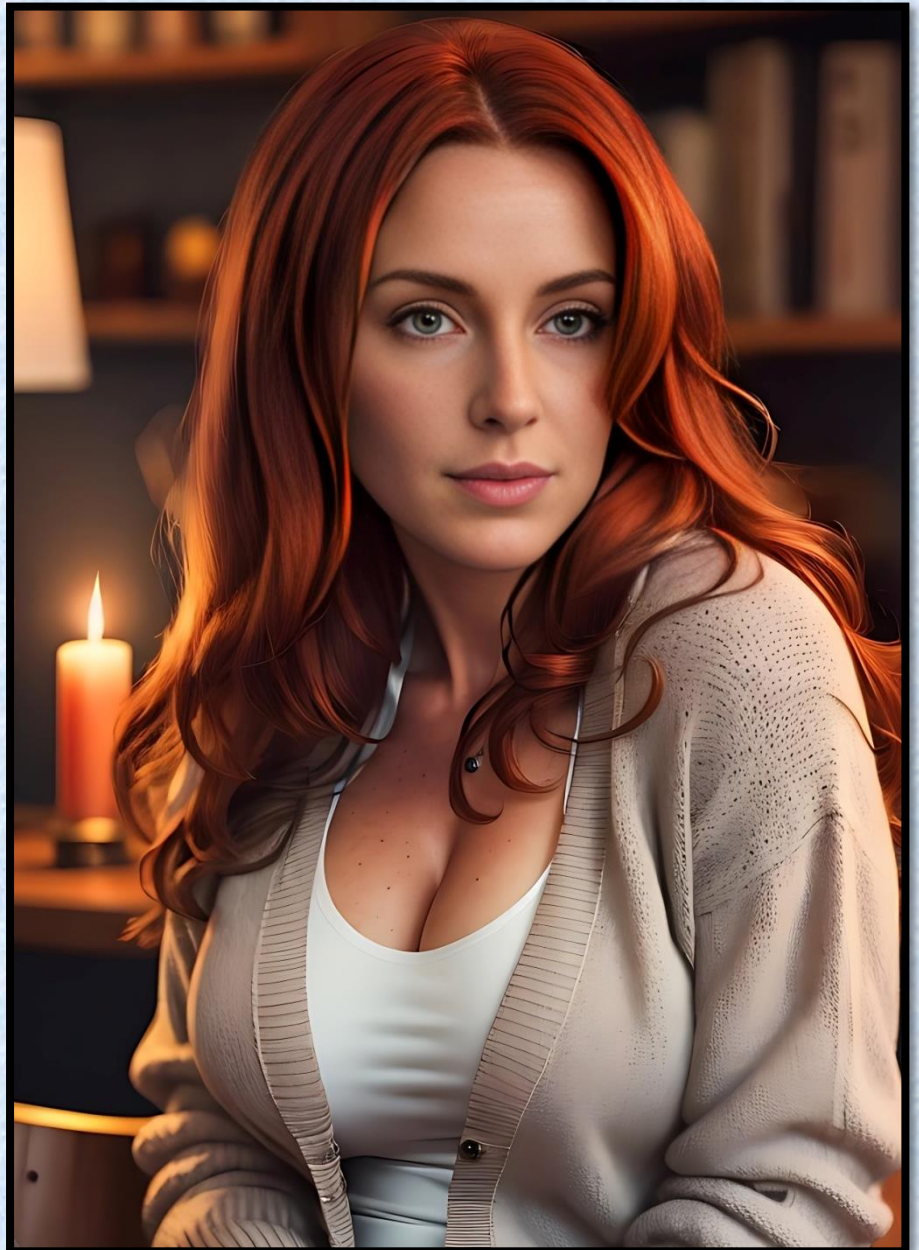
In the following days, Adam distanced himself from Matilda to sort out his feelings. He and Carlo were working on cars and practicing with guns.

"I brought some wine from the house where Adam and I were alone. I figured, on our last night here, we could drink... and loosen up a bit," Matilda pulled out a couple of bottles of expensive wine from her bags.

Carlo, with a gun in his hand, peered through a small crack in the closed window, scanning the empty street and a couple of infected people wandering around.

"I'm in," Suzie said with a smile. Carlo had no choice but to agree.

"Just a little. We need to stay sharp tomorrow," he mumbled. The radio crackled again, but this time the recording was different.



"Atlanta... do not approach... do not approach... explosion..." The voice faded into static, and no matter how much Carlo tried to adjust the signal, nothing could be made out.

"Are they saying we can't go through Atlanta?" Adam asked, pouring the wine into glasses.

"We're not going through Atlanta." Carlo looked at the map in front of him on the table. "We'll go around it to get to Savannah."



Suzie grabbed the map and folded it. "Enough! Let's just be humans tonight, for the first time in a long while. Okay?"

Carlo grumbled but agreed.

"The dishes may not be perfect, but it's better than nothing," Suzie placed a plate of reheated soup in front of each of them.

They were eating in candlelight. Drinking, talking.

"So," Suzie gulped her wine. "What did you see when you went for the pills?"

Carlo looked up at the duo.

"I don't think there's anything to tell," Matilda said, nervously glancing at Adam, who was fully focused on his food.

"Come on, you were there. Did you see the infected up close?"

Matilda took a small sip of wine. "There was... a woman... infected. She

attacked Adam, and we had to... we..." Matilda's words got stuck in her throat.

Suzie nervously shuddered in her chair, nibbling on a piece of her golden hair.

"The first kill is always the hardest," Carlo said reluctantly, taking a sip of wine.

"Can we really call it a kill? She... she..."

"She was already dead. You're right," Carlo said with a nod. "The infected still seem human. They are walking, moving. That's why the brain registers it as a kill."

Carlo gave a faint smile, his lips barely visible under his thick beard. "Honestly, when I first saw the two of you, I didn't think you'd be able to kill an infected. Or do what you did for my wife." He reached out and, in an uncharacteristically tender manner, took Suzie's hand.

Matilda smiled, then quietly asked, "What if the government could cure them?"

Carlo chuckled, swirling the wine in his glass. "The government couldn't even fix potholes, and now you think they can fix this?"

"You've never trusted the government. Not since the moment we met," Suzie said.

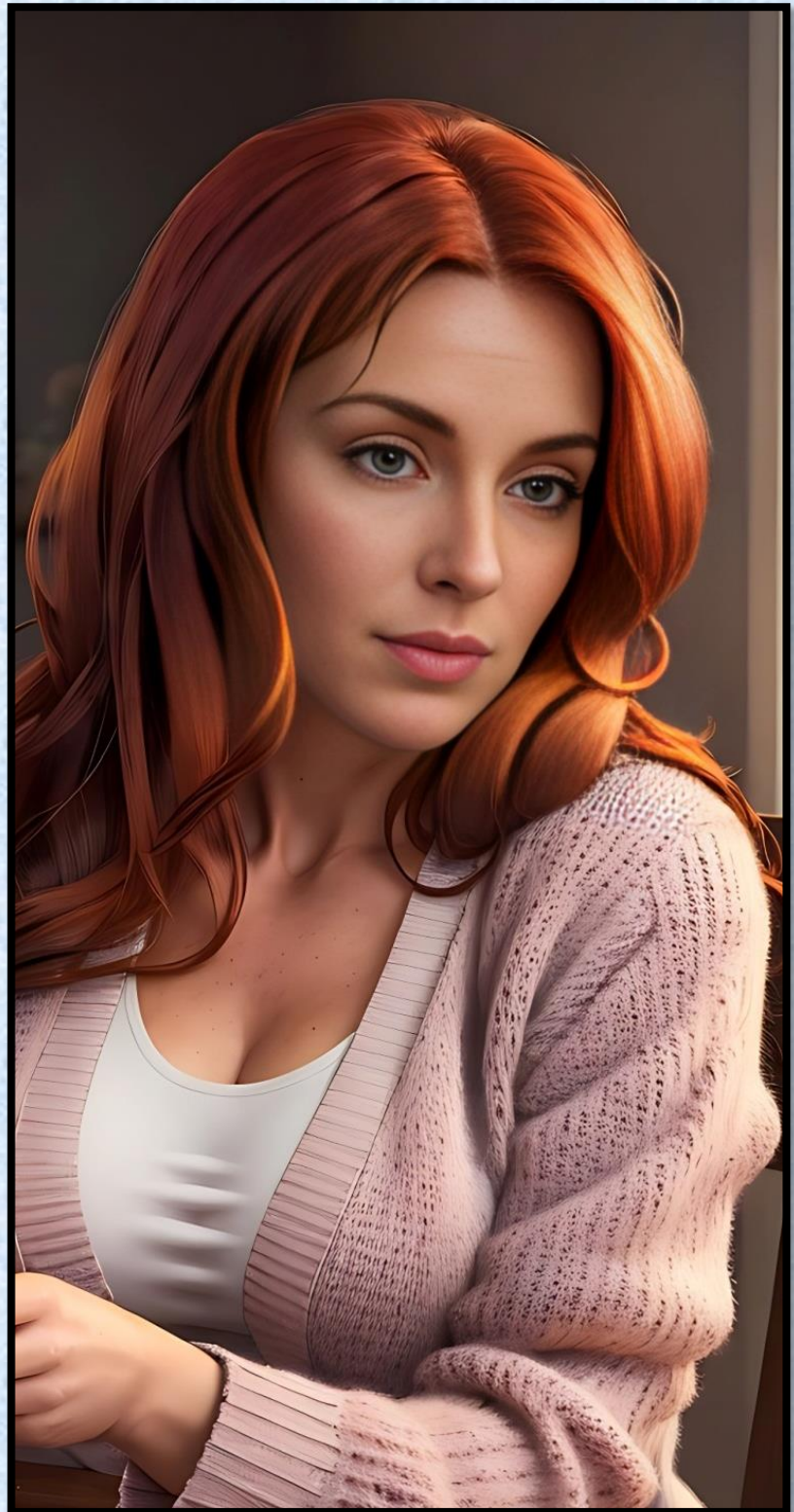
"Because, most likely, what's happening is their fault."

Suzie took another sip of wine. "It's funny, you know? We always thought we had all the time in the world. Never thought the world would just... stop."

Silence settled over them.

Matilda stared into the candle's flame. "I never thought my time with Abraham would end so suddenly. Things weren't perfect, and I thought another child might fix it... But the way it all ended was awful."

Carlo and Suzie said nothing.



"I'd be dead too if it weren't for Adam." Matilda turned and took her son's hand with a tender grip. Adam shivered as memories of that first day came rushing back.

"You're lucky to have a son like Adam," Carlo said.

"I know." Matilda leaned in and pressed a long loving mother kiss to Adam's cheek.

They just sat there; sipping their wine, pretending for a little while longer that the world



outside wasn't falling apart. The fear and exhaustion momentarily forgotten. The wine flowed, and for the first time in what felt like forever, they weren't just survivors. They were people.

Then, another earthquake struck. The house groaned, one of the candles toppled over, nearly setting the tablecloth on fire. Suzie washed down a Prozac pill with wine, barely holding back tears.

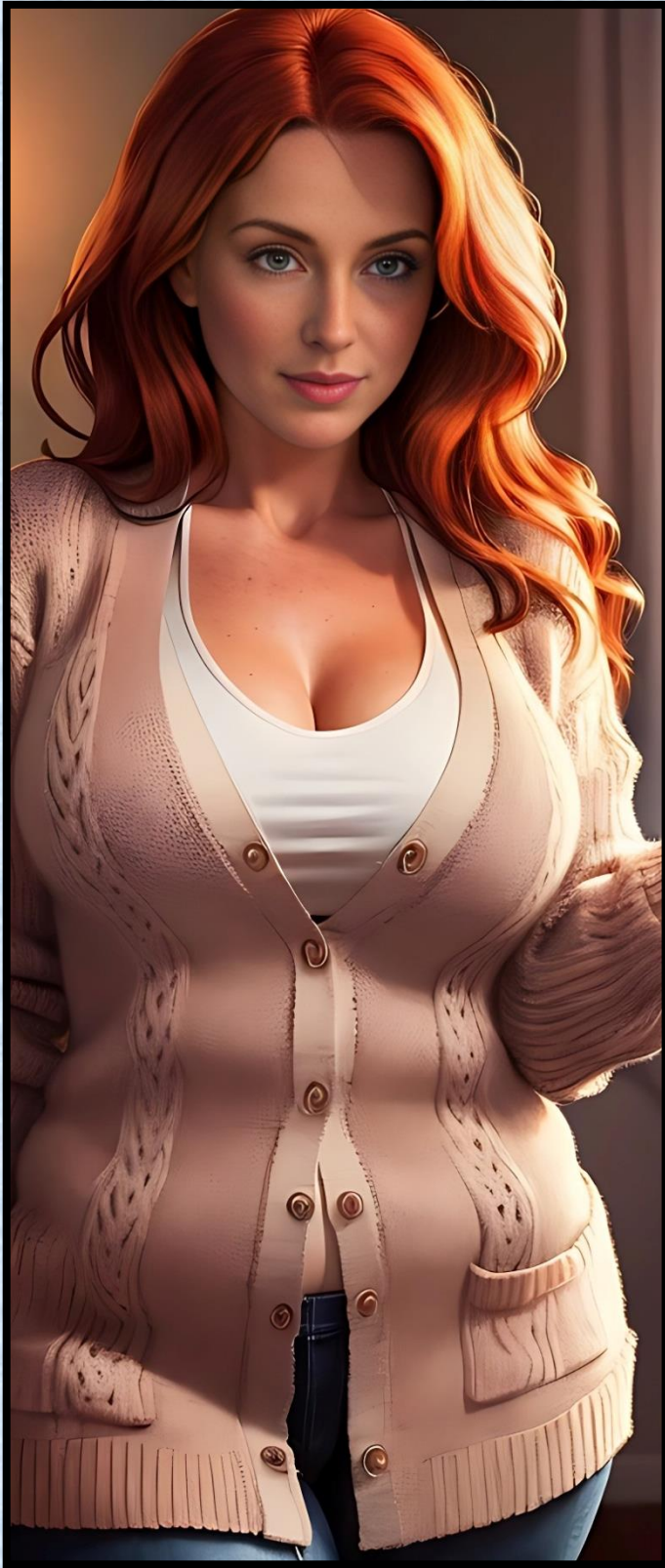
Matilda nestled closer, resting her head on Adam's shoulder. His arm slipped around her waist, holding her against him.

She melted into his touch after the wine. He could smell her scent, his heart pounding as he feared making the wrong move and breaking the moment.

A little drunk, Suzie cradled Mark. She fumbled with the buttons of her shirt, trying to pull it open, but Carlo stopped her.

"What are you doing, dear?" Carlo asked.

"I want to feed... *hiccup*... our baby. The one you said isn't yours. Don't think I forgot how you wanted to abandon him."



"Mom?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. You've had too much wine, Suzie."

"No!" she nearly yelled. "Don't treat me like a fool. I don't care if they know. They should! Maybe... maybe the end of the world is a good thing because otherwise... you'd still hate me. You'd still accuse me of cheating. You'd still say Mark isn't yours!"

He grabbed her hand. "Shut. Up."

She yanked her hand free and stood up, heading upstairs to bed. Carlo followed her.

Matilda took another sip of wine, pressing closer to Adam.

"Kids and marriage are so complicated," she whispered. Her hand suddenly rested on his chest. "Your heart is racing. You're nervous. Is it because I'm this close?"

Adam swallowed hard. How was he supposed to answer that? He was about to nod when a new song played on the radio, distracting Matilda.

"Oh!" Matilda smiled as Sinatra played on the radio. "Our song. Just like that first night... the dance. Remember?"

"Of course, I remember. It was... wonderful."

"It was, baby." Matilda finished the last of the crimson liquid and stood up, helping Adam to his feet.

"Let's dance. Like before. I liked dancing with my boy."

She guided his hands to her full hips and draped her arms around his neck. They swayed, bodies warm against each other. Adam occasionally stole glances at her neckline.

"On the worst day of my life," she whispered, her breath hot against his neck, "you kept me from losing my mind. I'll never forget that. I'll do anything for you."

Adam swallowed hard, his hands slipping lower, finding their way to her ass, almost by accident.

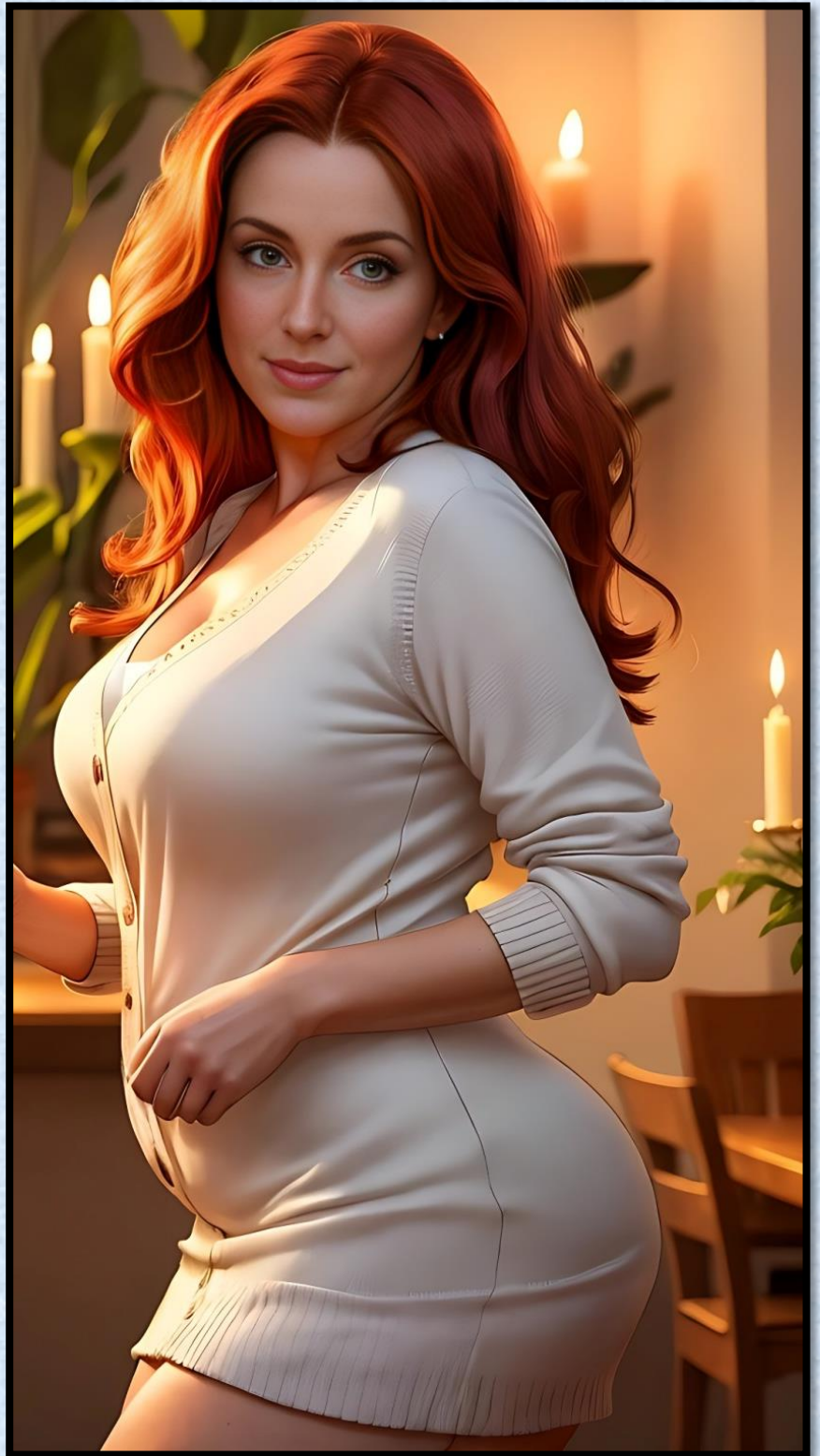
She moved dangerously close, her face inches from his. She leaned in, her breath warm, laced with wine. Their lips were a breath apart. Was she about to kiss him?

Adam's mouth parted, waiting, hoping, but Matilda didn't act.

"Your father was always my support when I needed it. At work, I was strict, giving orders, but at home, I relied completely on your father. I always knew I could trust him, but now..." She looked up at Adam, her face so close to his.

"I can take his place..." Adam said, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

Matilda let out a soft laugh. For a moment, she clung to his neck. Adam's grip tightened on her waist, his fingers digging into her hips.



"You're so sweet. You've indeed replaced Abraham." She nuzzled into his neck, lost in that light dance. And when she tried to move her head away, she was met by Adam's kiss. He touched his lips to hers, tasting hers. Their taste of wine. Dry, red, sweet saliva. His kiss was hungry, sweet, and full of desire.

"Gosh, you are so stunning, Mom." Their tongues interlocked for a couple moments, licking like animals before Matilda interrupted that sweet mother-son kiss.

"We're doing something wrong... Again... No..." She pushed Adam away. "We're just drunk. I shouldn't have let you drink. You're too young. I'm sorry."

"Mom..I."

She put her fingers over his mouth to silence him. Her wedding ring glinted on her finger, she poked it and walked upstairs, toward the bathroom.



CHAPTER 13. YOU ARE SO HOT, MOM

DAY 40

"You're too drunk, Matilda. What are you doing?" She threw off her sweater and jeans and pulled off her bra. Slowly and carefully, she pulled off her red - wet for some reason - panties and stepped into the shower stall. The warm water rushed in.

"He's your son. You shouldn't have danced with him like that. The way he looks at you... Do you really want to fill the hole left by Abraham with thoughts of your own son? You're a fool."

She pressed her palms against the cool tiles, trying to steady herself, but her heart pounded.



“Adam is suffering. Maybe Abraham's death was some kind of catalyst for new feelings to arise or old ones to awaken? What's happening to us?”

Meanwhile, while Matilda was focused on her thoughts, washing, Adam quietly entered the bathroom. His cheeks were flushed from the wine, his thoughts foggy, but he was only focused on what he needed the most.

His mother.

He saw among the pile of dirty laundry a pair of red panties. He spent what felt like an eternity thinking. Until finally he held the panties up to his face and smelled the odor.

At that moment, an electric shock ran through his body. It was the smell of his childhood. Tender, beloved, the smell of

his mother. That sweet and sour smell that made his brain melt. It was like he was back in time again, when he was twelve. And he loved her panties.

He took one last snort and threw the panties on the floor.

Matilda was unaware, enjoying the water. Her hand brushed over her belly. She was transported back to that day.

"Would another child change anything between us? It's unlikely it would bring back the spark. Abraham is gone, and there's no point in guessing. Now, it's just me and my Adam. The meaning of my life."

The shower room was filled with steam. Adam threw off his clothes, standing there completely naked. With his hard-on, he slowly entered the stall.

"Who's th...ADAM?!" Matilda turned around, sensing someone else's presence, and saw him. He was right there, so close, just inches from her, just inches from her breasts.

Insanely close.

"Carlo said the water's low again... we have to share," Adam swallowed hard.

Matilda crossed her arms over her tits. "You can't... you just can't." Her tongue was lashing out, either from anger or wine.

Adam looked below and through the streams of steam he noticed bits of red pubic hair just above his birthplace. Her pussy was still beneath layers of steam. He licked his lips, feeling the heat in his cheeks and his blood pressure rising again. His heart was beating so damn hard.

Adam stepped closer to her under the rushing water and put his arms around her waist. "I want to take care of you, Mom. Your little protector."

"You should give me some privacy, Adam... I'm....mhmm!!!"





He tried to kiss her, his hands pulling her arms away from her breasts. She was too afraid to resist, literally frozen. Letting him do whatever he wanted. His hard cock's pink head touched her pubic red hair.

"God, what are we doing," she tried to say. Her mouth didn't move, only Adam's mouth moved. "It's wine... It's wine, Adam. I'm begging you to stop. You will regret it."

"You're right, Mom. You're right; I still have a crush on you. Akgghhhh. And there's nothing I can do about it. Ughh... I love you. I think I always loved you."

It was electrifying, unbelievable. It was a

melting, flowery feeling. The kiss, the wine, the feeling of intimacy with her, their shared warmth.

"We are not..." She took a step back, trying to get away from him, but he moved closer and closer, closing the distance until she slammed into the wall. "Animals."

"You are so hot, Mom... Ughhhh...Yes." At that moment, he grabbed her breasts. He couldn't kiss her because he groaned. His thumbs rested on her hard purple nipples. He gently massaged

one breast with one hand, the other with the other, feeling the softness and firmness of his mother's tits.

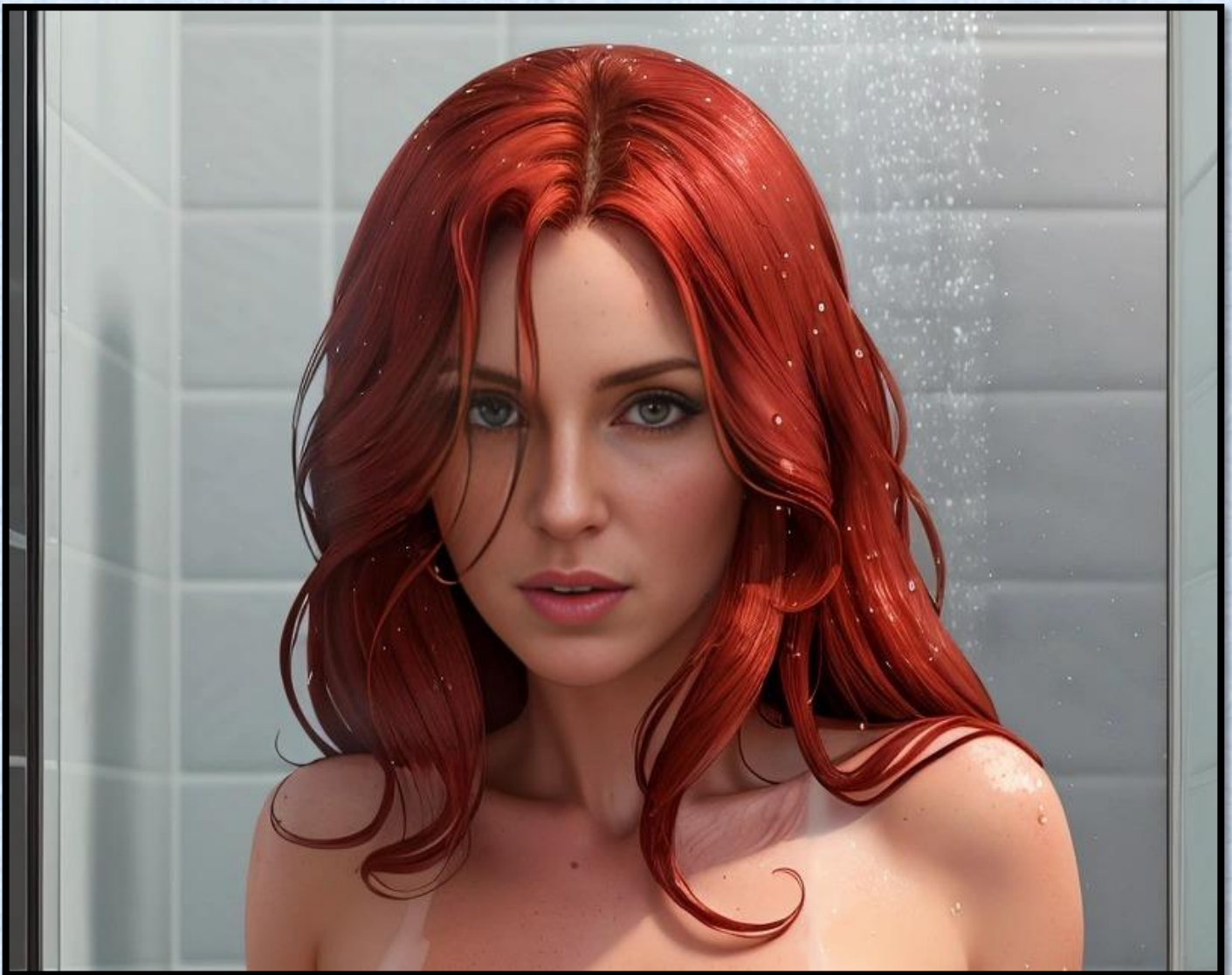
I just can't believe touching mom's breasts gives me so much joy. It shouldn't be like that, right? Uhhh... Mom.

It was just too good to think about the consequences. The wine kept whispering: Do more.

He looked down at the freckles on her breasts, her purple nipples. They were tender, silky, sleek, and gleaming. It was a pair of breasts worth dying for.

Breasts that he used to suck, lick, and drain. To nurse from his mother's breasts.

He raised his eyes to look at his mother.



She had a look he had never seen before. The weakness from the wine was gone and her eyes were full of undisguised anger. When was the last time he saw her this angry?

Never.

Matilda grabbed him by the throat and squeezed.

“Akggh...Mom.” His ears rang again, his blood pressure rising even more. It was obvious he'd pissed her off. Probably pissed her off more than anyone in her life. She clutched his neck as hard as she could. Matilda didn't care that he was her son. In that moment, he was just another man who had crossed a line.

She dragged him and kicked him out of the shower stall, holding him by the throat and throwing him to the wet hard floor.

“Get out!” She slammed the stall door shut and stepped back under the water.

Adam stood up and looked at his reflection.

Around his neck were the marks from her grip.



What did I just do?



CHAPTER 14. 'EARTHQUAKES'

DAY 41

They didn't speak or even glance at each other all morning.

"Listen, Adam. If you fall behind, I'm not stopping," Carlo said as they loaded the bags into the cars. "You wanted a second car, it's yours. But my wife comes first. Got it?"

Adam nodded, gripping his pistol.

Everything was packed, and the cars were ready. Matilda and Adam took the minivan, while Suzie and Carlo were in the jeep. Adam followed behind, stealing glances at Matilda, but she stayed silent. It was so awkward.

They drove all day without incident. Finally, at sunset, they saw Atlanta on the horizon, thick smoke curling from its ruined skyscrapers. They passed abandoned cottages, overgrown fields. Matilda woke from her nap and looked at the sunset. Even the sight of the ruined city didn't make her say a word.

"Mom... about yesterday..."

"I didn't let you speak," she replied, staring out the window.

"I don't know why it happened... I... I'm sorry. I was drunk."

"That doesn't excuse it." She finally looked at him. "I'm your mother, Adam. I just lost my husband, and you... you came onto me in the shower. I still just can't believe it."

"I wasn't trying to...I just..."

"Just what? Touch me? Kiss me? Do perverted, gross stuff? Sorry that I didn't want you to. I've let you cross too many lines. I'm a doctor, a vet, and I'm meant to protect life, not harm it. But in that moment... I really wanted to kill you. I wanted to snap your neck. Even if we were the last two people on Earth, like you said that first night... I'd still feel the same. You'll always be my little boy, no matter what. And what you feel... will never be right."

“But I’m not...”

“Never!”

Adam sighed, a strange sense of déjà vu creeping over him. In the rearview mirror, a car appeared, speeding straight toward them. Carlo was still in front of them, so the hell was that?

“Adam?” Matilda looked back.

Before he could react, it rammed into them. Tires screeched. The minivan spun out of control, veering off the road.

Carlo’s jeep kept going, slowly vanishing over the horizon.

The minivan flipped, landing hard on its side.

“Ughh... What the f...Mom?” His voice was hoarse. He reached for Matilda, she was unconscious. The car door yanked open, and a rough hand dragged him out, slamming him onto the tall grass.



A fist crashed into Adam's face. Pain exploded in his head, his ears rang, nausea creeping in. He coughed, trying to move.

"Bastard. Thought you could just run off with my car?" the man sneered.

Adam knew that voice. Bob. The man from the mall with a scar.

"I want to kill you slow, make it hurt, you little shit," Bob hissed. "For what you did to my family."

He pulled a knife from his pocket, pressing the blade against Adam's cheek, dragging it just enough to slice the skin.

Adam winced, warm blood trickling down his cheek. He struggled, his head still spinning from the impact.

"Watching over your house and waiting was so freaking boring, but now it's going to be totally worth it."



Bob barely had time to turn before a jeep came skidding onto the road, kicking up dust and gravel. The driver's door flew open.

Carlo raised his shotgun and fired. The blast hit Bob in the shoulder, sending him sprawling back with a scream.

"Get up, Adam!" Carlo barked, pumping another shell into the chamber.

Adam staggered to his feet, his vision swimming. He grabbed onto the wrecked minivan for balance as Bob groaned on the ground, clutching his bleeding shoulder.

"It's none of your business, dude. Leave it!" Bob said through the pain, but Carlo didn't answer.

Then came the growls. A few infected emerged from the trees, their hollow eyes locking onto fresh prey. The gunshot had drawn them in.

Bob groaned, clutching his bleeding shoulder, his face twisted in agony. Carlo didn't hesitate, advancing with his shotgun ready, but before he could pull the trigger again, Bob lunged at him, knocking the weapon away. They fell to the ground, wrestling for control as Adam struggled to regain his focus.

"He murdered...my... nephew!" yelled Bob.

"I don't care," said Carlo.

The infected were closing in fast. One of them, a woman with tattered clothing and blood-streaked lips, let out a horrific shriek before charging straight at them. She attacked Carlo the moment Bob jumped back.

They struggled until Adam shot her in the head. The body fell on Carlo, but he quickly got up and fired his shotgun at another, sending it flying.

Bob, bleeding, pulled his pistol and shot another between the eyes. It dropped, but more kept coming.



Suddenly, floodlights flashed, and the sound of an engine roared as several black armored vehicles rushed onto the road. Masked soldiers in tactical gear poured out, rifles aimed at everything around them. Their red laser sights flickered.

“Hands up! Now!” a voice boomed over a megaphone.

Carlo, breathing heavily, glanced at Bob. Both slowly raised their hands. The soldiers swarmed in, kicking Bob to the ground and forcing Carlo to his knees.

Adam, still dazed from the crash, stumbled to his feet and saw Matilda being pulled from the wreckage by two soldiers. Suzie and Mark were ushered out of the jeep.



“Carl!”

“It’s okay, darling... Akhh...” Carlo collapsed to his knees, his clothes torn from fighting with Bob and the infected. “It’s gonna be okay. You are saved.”

One of the soldiers grabbed Adam’s shoulder and shoved him to the ground. “Stay down.”

Over the radios, a command crackled: “Detonation in T-minus sixty seconds.”

Adam’s breath caught in his throat. He turned to the horizon to see Atlanta. And then...

A blinding flash erupted from the center of the city. The shockwave hit first. A second

later, the deafening roar of the explosion tore through the night. The sky turned white-hot as a massive fireball consumed the skyline, the mushroom cloud rising like a death omen far away. Buildings disintegrated. Flames swallowed everything.

Far in the distance, a bright flash erupted from Atlanta. The fireball climbed into the sky.

Adam pulled Matilda close, shielding her as best as he could. The earth trembled like a wounded beast. The earthquakes... it all made sense now.

They hadn't been natural.

They had been nuking the big cities.

One by one. Wiping them out.

"Atlanta's out," a soldier said. "Finally. Always wanted to see that place gets nuked. Now check the civilians."

Adam barely had time to process it before a soldier grabbed his arm and scanned him with a handheld device. A green light flashed.

"Clear."

Matilda was next. Green light. "She's clear."

Another soldier checked Suzie and Mark. Both cleared.

"Fuck off!" Bob snapped when they scanned him.

"Clear."

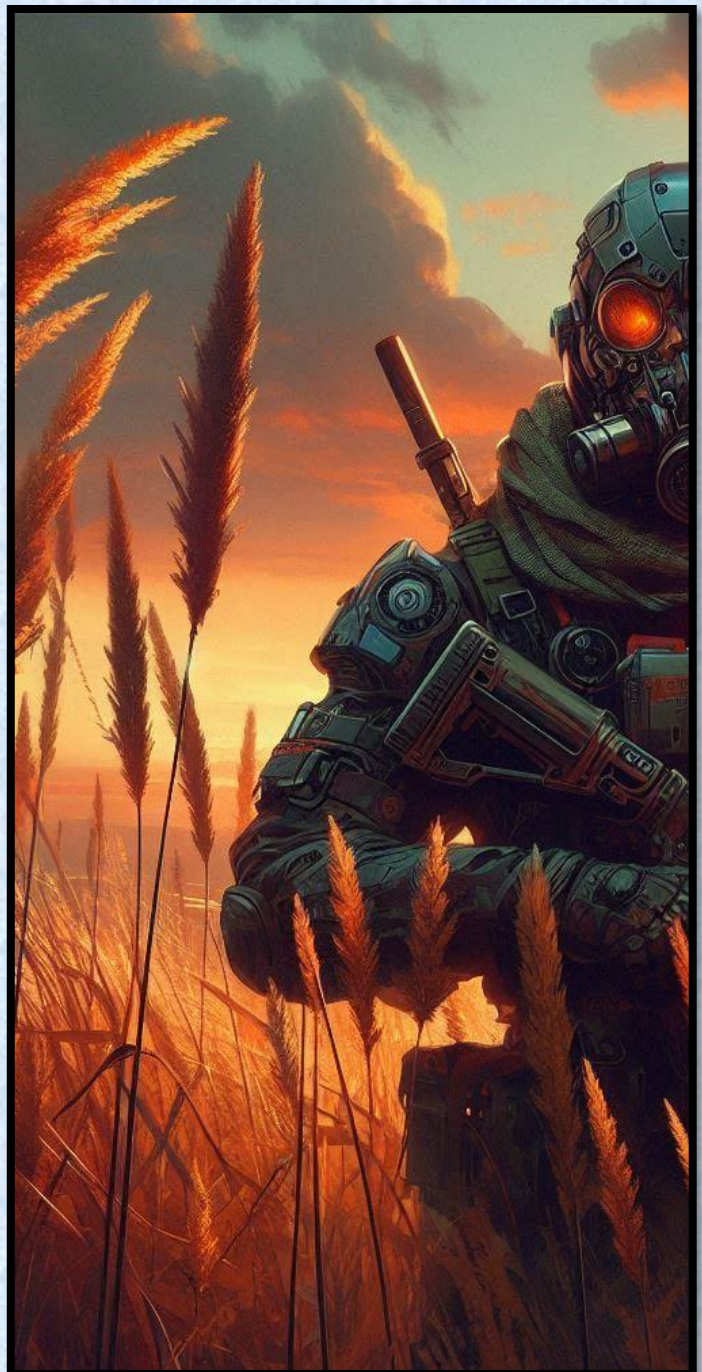
Then came Carlo's turn.

The scanner beeped red.

Carlo didn't move. He was looking at his Suzie and Mark. The soldier checking him hesitated before reaching for his radio. "Command, we have an infection case. Orders?"

Static crackled, "Terminate."

"No!" Suzie's voice cracked as she pushed past the soldiers, grabbing his arm.



"There has to be a mistake!"

Carlo gently pried her fingers off. "There's no mistake, baby." He slowly rolled up his sleeve and showed the bite.

A soldier raised his rifle. "Step away."

Suzie shook her head, tears streaking her dirt-covered face. "Please..."

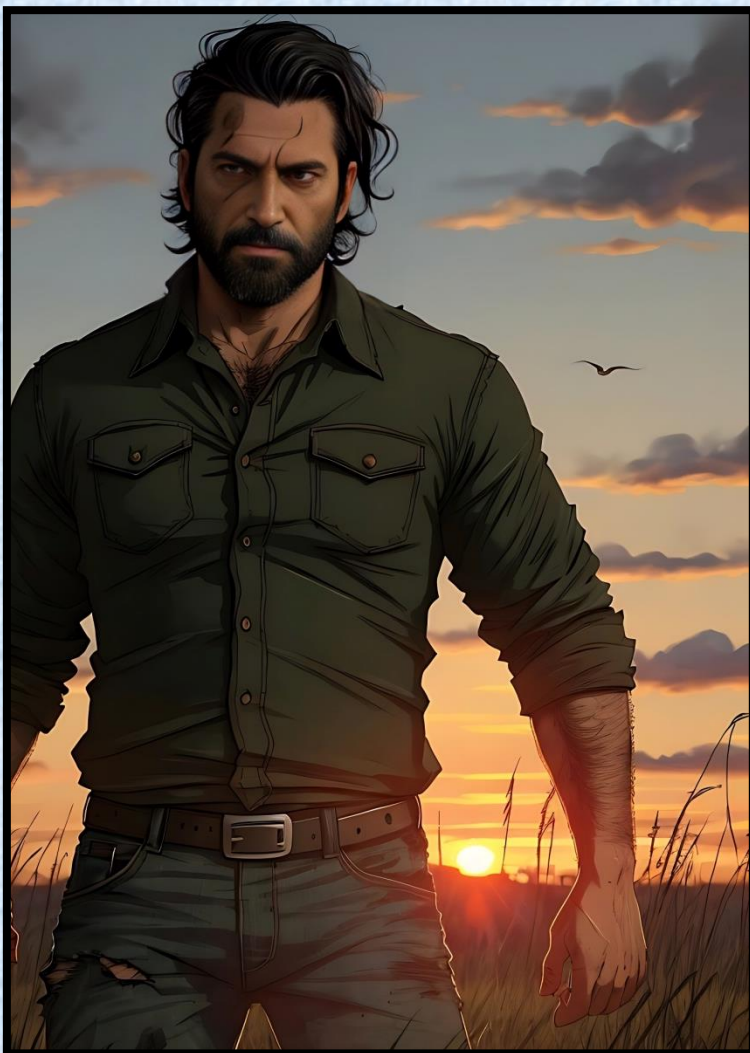
"Can't you cure him?" Adam pleaded. "Doesn't the government have something?"

The soldier scoffed. "Who said we're the government?"

That's when Adam noticed the word on their armor.

B.R.I.G.H.T.

Suzie clung to her husband, her hands shaking. "No. No, no, no. You can't do this. He's fine! He's *fine!*"



"Ma'am, move, or you'll be next."

"Suzie, go," Carlo whispered, pressing his forehead against hers. "I love you. Always."

Suzie sobbed, clutching his face, *burning* his image into her mind. "I can't. I *can't* leave you."

"Leave. Do it for Mark."

She shook her head, but the soldiers didn't wait. Rough hands grabbed her, yanking her back. She screamed, kicked. "No! Don't do this! Please! Carlo!"

"I love you," he called after her with his voice breaking at the edges.

She was dragged away, fighting until she had nothing left, until her cries became nothing but wordless sobs.

“Take care of my son, Adam.”

Those were his last words. The soldier’s finger tensed on the trigger. A gunshot rang out.

Carlo’s body hit the dirt. The life was gone from his eyes before he even fully collapsed. Blood pooled beneath, staining the grass dark.