

Alone

‘So?’ Michael asked as Angela approached him. He stood near the gates, beneath a dying chestnut tree. His hands rested on the guns at his hips. The handle of a cross-bow poked over his head. His Stetson was always pulled forward, keeping his eyes in shadow, making it difficult for anyone to read him.

‘They’re still deciding,’ Angela answered. She’d known Michael a long time, since the apocalypse began, but still felt uncomfortable around him. Like most who knew him, Angela had the feeling he could lose control any second. He was always tense, a live-wire; like old-dynamite that could explode any second. He was also the best shooter she had ever seen. And he had saved her life more than once, out in the wilds, before she came here.

‘Well shit.’ Michael scuffed a tattered boot through the dirt. ‘Not good.’

‘It’s not a no,’ Angela said.

‘It’s not a yes either,’ Michael shot back. They stood there silently for several moments; Michael staring down at his feet, Angela staring at Michael.

‘It’s because I’m gay,’ he said suddenly.

‘What?’ Angela asked, surprised.

‘That’s why they can’t decide –they don’t want a gay guy around.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘It’d be just like them to use that to keep me out.’

‘*I’m* here and *I’m* a lesbian,’ Angela responded.

‘Yeah, but I bet they see you as woman first,’ Michael challenged. ‘A woman who can have kids. They probably think I’d just be using up precious resources.’

Angela turned her face away, aware there were some on the council who probably did hold this view.

‘You’d think having me and my guns would make it an easy decision,’ Michael complained.

‘You don’t exactly make them feel comfortable,’ Angela said, keeping her gaze averted.

‘What about all the people I’ve helped?’ he argued.

‘Come on!’ Angela turned back to face him. ‘You only help yourself really.’

‘Hey, I gotta put food on the table same as everyone else,’ Michael defended himself.

‘No matter whose table it came from,’ Angela said.

‘Everybody’s gotta earn their way in this world,’ Michael continued. ‘It’s eat or be eaten.’

‘You just happen to benefit more than most.’

‘Because I’m better than most!’

‘Says Michael,’ Angela said softly, examining her own feet.

‘Yeah, says Michael,’ he snapped back.

Again, a pause opened between them. Michael stared down the road, unblinking in his focus. Angela snatched glimpses of him from under her fringe.

‘They’re afraid of what you do, what you could do, to them,’ Angela said.

‘With those,’ she added, nodding at his guns.

‘They should be thinking about what I can do *for* them, with these.’

Both were silent for several more moments, lost in their own thoughts.

‘Why here?’ Angela asked.

‘Why not?’ Michael answered.

‘There’s got to be more to it than that,’ Angela said. Michael scuffed his boots through the dirt again, as he weighed his answer. Angela deserved honesty, considering she was putting herself out on a limb for him, but this was personal.

‘Ok,’ he said finally. ‘It’s for James.’

‘James?’ Angela was surprised. She hadn’t heard Michael mention his partner in a long time.

‘Yeah.’

‘It’s been nearly a year,’ Angela stated.

‘You don’t think I know that?!’ Michael hissed at her.

‘Sorry,’ Angela said, stepping away from him and the heat of his anger.

‘Can you just explain it to me then?’

‘He wanted to come here,’ Michael said eventually.

‘When?’

‘About a month before he died.’

‘Why didn’t he come?’

‘I didn’t want to, and he wouldn’t leave me.’

‘Why didn’t you want to?’ she asked.

‘I didn’t think we needed anyone else,’ Michael continued. ‘No-one can sling their guns as well as I can. And I was second only to James with the cross-bow. I thought having all these ... *people* around would make us vulnerable and slow us down,’ he said as he waved his hand towards the camp behind them.

‘And?’ Angela prompted when Michael fell silent. She was intrigued by this insight into Michael and his relationship.

‘And, well, James didn’t agree,’ Michael said. ‘He thought being around other people would make us safer. You know, safety in numbers. He thought we should teach people our skills, to make everyone safer. He thought we should be part of society, not always on our own, riding around the wilderness shooting things.’

‘So?’

‘I won the argument,’ Michael said. ‘We didn’t come.’

‘And now you want to? Why?’ Angela asked.

‘I think James was right,’ Michael admitted. ‘Ever since he died I’ve been out there alone, wandering, hunting them, saving the occasional traveller. But for what. I’ve got nothing. I’ve got no-one.’

‘James would be proud of you, you know,’ Angela said.

‘He’s dead because of me, so I doubt it,’ Michael said matter-of-factly.

‘It wasn’t your fault Michael,’ Angela said. ‘You can’t—’

‘Ssh!’ Michael silenced her and stood statue-still, staring down the road. Angela’s gaze followed his through the iron gates. She saw three figures stumbling towards them. Zombies. Michael raised his cross-bow and shot an arrow into each

figure's an eye socket. Even from this distance he was deadly. They all fell silently to the road.

'How many is that now?' Angela asked.

'Six thousand, four hundred and eighty-three,' Michael answered. He turned and stared at Angela. 'That number should be *all* they need to make this decision. Tell them.'

Angela nodded and headed back inside. Michael stayed at the iron gates, under the chestnut tree, looking down the road, alone.