

## Chapter Twenty-seven

From *Savage* by Jade C. Jamison

*“Walk with Me in Hell” – Lamb of God*

LARRY LAY ON the couch for a couple of hours recovering from whatever had happened to him earlier. By the time he felt up for moving around, it was late afternoon and, even though the sun hadn't yet set, it had dipped over the mountains. It would be dark soon.

Not that it mattered. We had no way out of there now, so we had to formulate another plan. I decided I wasn't going to talk to Vera about it if I could help it. She'd thus far not been much help in strategizing anyway, and now she was acting illogical, as though Kevin and I had plotted to harm her husband. The isolation and fear and not knowing seemed to be causing her to crack.

Losing one's shit wasn't productive, though.

So I figured Kevin, Larry, and I needed to try to figure out another solution. There still seemed to be no promise of power being restored anytime soon, and I hadn't heard any manmade noises outside, had heard nothing other than the forest—no planes overhead, no vehicles coming to visit my aunt. Not a thing. I had no idea how we would get out of this mess other than by hiking.

And that would surely be death this time of year.

I needed to do something useful; otherwise, I was going to fall back into the fucking abyss I'd been in over the past year. Things might have gone to shit with the virus and even more now that we were stuck in the middle of nowhere, removed from civilization, but one thing was for certain: I hadn't felt this alive in a long time. Oh, don't get me wrong—I was so distraught, worrying about the safety of my kids, and I was devastated over the loss of my aunt...but I had a purpose, a reason. What that was, I had no idea, but something was pushing me like I hadn't been driven in a long time.

No, I wasn't happy...but I was alive.

I announced to no one in particular that I was going to figure out dinner. It was time to finish off whatever was left in the refrigerator and freezer, because they weren't going to last, and that was when I remembered that Aunt Lou had a bigger freezer in a corner of the garage...and then that made me think of the food she kept in what she called her “root cellar”—it was simply a cool, dry place where she kept the spoils of her garden that would last several months into the winter, as well as purchased nonperishables and all the fruits of her canning efforts, a task I'd just helped her with a couple of months earlier. I clenched my teeth together as that memory washed over me, one of the two of us canning tomatoes and beets and pickles along with freezing corn and peas. It had been an enjoyable couple of weekends spent with one of my favorite women on the planet.

I'd never be able to spend time with her again.

And the fate of spending time with my children was also dubious.

It would have been so easy to just let those feelings consume me, eat me alive, but something inside me had awakened, that part of me that had been dormant for a while now, that part that had just decided it was done. There was a fighter in there...and she was back.

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Because we had no artificial light other than what the fire provided, I found myself easily falling asleep shortly after it had grown pitch black outside. Right before I rested my head, Kevin had made an announcement that he was going to smoke his last cigarette, and he'd bring wood back in with him.

I fell asleep before he returned.

The next morning, I was ready to do whatever needed to be done. I stoked and refueled the fire and then I found a box of oatmeal in one of Aunt Lou's cabinets. After finding her kettle (thrilled that it looked hardy enough to withstand the rigors of the fire), I put the water on to boil and then found a notepad and pen. Everyone else began to stir with the noise I was creating, and that was good. No more messing around. We had work to do if we were going to get out of here.

And that was the plan. I saw, when preparing the oatmeal, that we were almost out of the water Aunt Lou had stockpiled. Aside from dying for a shower and hating the way we used the toilet, I also ached for my own surroundings. I'd always dreamed of living up here in the mountains, enjoying the kind of life Lou and Felix had had for so many years, but now I doubted I could appreciate something like that. I felt so removed from everything.

Maybe if all the amenities I was used to hadn't been stripped away. One might argue that electricity was a luxury, but if you've lived with it your whole life, it's not a luxury. It's a necessity, and it's damned difficult trying to figure out how to live without it. Running water and heat on demand are others, even relative ease of transportation. Cinderella's old song "Don't Know What You Got (Till It's Gone)" came to mind as I pondered all these things I was trying to live without for the meantime, and while the song might have been about love, it could easily extend to life and all the things that made our existence bearable.

Everyone began sitting up and stretching. Vera was a little groggy but she seemed more like her usual passive self rather than the stark-raving bitch she'd been yesterday. I tried to let my animosity go, though, because I might have responded the same way if I thought someone had neglected a loved one who fell in harm's way. I didn't want the fact that she could have been there helping too (and therefore less likely to point a finger) to cloud my judgment.

Especially since, after today, we could go back to being neighbors who waved to each other once in a while but never engaged in conversation.

I had wondered how oatmeal would go over, because I knew not everyone was a fan like I was, but I think they appreciated the fact that it was something hot and we hadn't enjoyed a hot meal in days. It was also one of those foods that seemed to stick to your ribs, something else we hadn't had much of since leaving home.

It was quite satisfying. I didn't remember loving oatmeal that much before, but it was now a favorite. After I'd gathered up the bowls, I placed them in the sink, debating when I wanted to get some snow from outside to melt and clean them out. I wanted to talk to my companions first, though. Ideas were fresh in my mind and the pilot light to my motivation was lit, ready to fire things up.

I returned to the living room where Larry started rubbing his belly. "I think I need about twenty more of those to feel full."

I smiled as Kevin said, "No kidding. I think the first thing I'm gonna do when I get back to town is go to Chili's, have some barbecued ribs."

Larry's eyes lit up. "Yeah. I think I could go for one of their burgers with cheese and bacon." Vera rolled her eyes, but I could see hope in them as well.

"Or pizza." Kevin said. "With pepperoni, Italian sausage, and extra cheese."

“First, we gotta get there. And that’s what I wanted to talk to you guys about. How do we get home?”

Kevin grew serious fast. “I was thinking about that. How far is Chipeta Springs? Maybe I could walk, take the gas can with me, get it filled, bring it back.”

I grimaced. “It’s at least five miles away...and the snow’s deep. Maybe in the spring, but right now? There’s not enough daylight.”

He clenched his jaw, considering my words. He looked dubious, as though he was ready to argue with me and try it anyway, but then Larry said, “What about neighbors? Maybe someone around here could give us a ride to Chipeta. Would that work?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. I don’t see why not.”

Kevin asked, “How close are the neighbors around here?”

“Well, obviously not like in the city, and way up here, they’re spread out a lot more than the people closer to town, but I know of a few homes close by. Aunt Lou’s closest neighbors are a family west of here—the Bransons, I think their name is. They aren’t too far away.”

Larry clapped his hands together, announcing that, as far as he was concerned, it was a done deal. “Sounds like a great plan to me.”

Kevin gave a nod of his head and Vera...well, she just sat there like she often did. I was grateful that she was back to her usual self, but now I had the added bonus of feeling like I had to walk on eggshells in case she was on the verge of exploding again.

I had wanted to do some brainstorming so we could think of other potential ideas, but the men seemed to think this was the best idea. It probably was.

It gave me hope.

So I put the notepad and pen away and then walked back to the living room, planning to grab the metal bucket that was beside the fireplace so I could fill it up with snow and melt it so I could wash dishes, but all three of them were already up, putting on shoes and coats, ready to get the help we needed so we could get home.

Vera muttered, “I wonder how bad we stink from not showering.”

I hadn’t thought we smelled bad, simply because we’d only been there a couple of days and we hadn’t done much that would have made us sweaty and gross smelling, but once she’d placed that thought in my head, I worried. I hoped we wouldn’t make a bad impression on anyone inclined to help us. Of course, we could try to explain our dilemma. Then I almost laughed at myself. The neighbors would know the power was out, even if they had a generator, and they would understand.

I grabbed my coat and slid it on, and Larry once more led the way to the door. I was now to the point where I didn’t mind that he’d kind of appointed himself to be our leader (and I didn’t think anyone else cared most of the time either), but he needed to realize that sometimes he’d have to step back.

Like now.

He didn’t know where the Bransons lived. I told him they were to the west and, I supposed, he could potentially find them, but it was irritating that he wasn’t even asking me. Once we were on the deck, he paused and, of course, we all followed suit.

He turned, an eyebrow raised, and said, “You know...we haven’t been able to keep up with the news. I don’t want to put the fear of God into ya all, but we might want to be, ah, *prepared*.”

We didn’t have to be geniuses to know what he meant. He meant that we needed to be on guard for anyone who might be infected...and, as much as I hated to give him credit (because spending time in close quarters with all these people was starting to make me a little edgy and

irritable), I had to admit that he was right. Before I could answer, though, Kevin said, “What do you have in mind?”

Larry looked me square in the eyes. “Your aunt own any guns?”

“She used to. She and my Uncle Felix used to go hunting in these mountains all the time. But I think she gave all her rifles to her kids after my uncle passed.”

Kevin frowned. “A woman living by herself removed from everything and she didn’t have a gun?”

“She never saw a reason to. She trusted her neighbors.”

“It’s not the neighbors I’d worry about.”

Larry added, “Yeah, and I’m sure she saw her fair share of bears up here.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t going to debate why my aunt lived the way she had. And it turned out her thinking had been justified. She’d never had need for a gun. I was pretty sure she had a small handgun somewhere, but I didn’t know how effective bullets would be against someone infected anyway. Kevin said, “Why don’t we look in the garage first?”

I nodded, turning around and opening the door again. Without a word, we all trudged through the house to the door of the garage. When I opened it, the overwhelming stench of gasoline hit me. That was another thing I thought maybe we should clean up before we left...but I knew time was of the essence. We all walked inside and Kevin said, “Damn, Dingel, it smells like the prelude to an arson out here.”

Larry shrugged. “Man, I’m sorry. That was bad.” I glanced at Larry, expecting him to look abashed but...there was something else intermingled with it, something I wasn’t able to translate. I blamed my overwrought nerves. Kevin nodded as we all began looking around on the shelves in the garage.

There wasn’t much in there. A few tools as well as boxes of Christmas decorations, but we were striking out in the weapon department. Vera got on her hands and knees to look on a lower shelf close to the garage door and pulled out a crowbar. “Think this’ll work?”

Larry smiled, looking almost like a proud father. “Hell, yeah.”

Kevin raised his eyebrows. “That gives me an idea.” He opened the car door, remembering the makeshift weapon we’d planned to travel with. It was less than a minute before he had the tire iron in his hand. I didn’t know how effective it would be, but—for some reason—he looked formidable.

Larry nodded and looked at me. “Maybe we should head out to the shed or the barn and see what they have to offer.”

The four of us made our way to the outbuildings, and both Vera and Kevin decided that they too would look for other weapons in case they found something better. There were lots of garden tools, and I couldn’t decide between the big hedge clippers or a shovel. Larry found a sledgehammer and grinned as he picked it up and swung it around.

He seemed to be in his element.

I finally deferred to my companions. “Which would be better?”

“They’d both be okay. You probably should ask yourself which you can wield better. Is the shovel too long and bulky?”

I gave it some thought. “Yeah, probably.”

Kevin smiled. “Then you should go with the hedge clippers.” He was right...but somehow the shovel felt better.

“I could keep—*things* at bay better with the shovel. It’s longer.”

He shrugged. “Up to you.”

I nodded and put the hedge clippers down, tightening my grip on the handle of the shovel. We were ready to go.

As we walked across my aunt's property, I noticed several things. What made the biggest impression on me was how the air smelled clean and fresh. As we passed by the occasional tree, the smell of the pines lingered in the air. The snow was still soft but deep, and it was going to take us longer to get to the neighbors' than I'd originally thought. I was wearing boots but not snow boots, and I knew my feet were going to be cold by the time we finally made it there.

I reminded myself that it was okay, though. Soon, we'd be on our way home. My feet could warm up later.

I also noticed that the sun was already lower on the horizon. We needed to hurry, so I started walking a little faster. It was damned cold. I wasn't used to temperatures this low, but that was part of being in the high country. Aunt Lou had loved these woods and loved the weather too, but she had mentioned the past couple of years that the cold was starting to get to her. Feeling it firsthand, I could understand why.

The sky was a cool, light blue decorated with thin white clouds here and there. No stormy gray clouds, and for that I was grateful. We needed the sun and decent weather for our trip home. It could storm once we got back.

Another two steps and I felt a hand clamp down on my shoulder, stopping me from moving. Larry's voice was low but I knew it was him. "What in the fresh fuck is this?" Even had he not stopped me, the tone in his voice would have made me freeze. I could tell that he sensed danger, and my subconscious felt the need to heed it. Kevin stopped walking beside me and I saw Vera on Larry's other side, so we all stood almost side by side and looked at the edge of the clearing where the forest began in earnest. There I could see what Larry was referring to. There were several people who had spotted us and were moving toward us with purpose. It didn't take long for me to figure out that they were infected...and we were probably fucked.