

Maria

Lizzy Lee (2010)

Something's not right, Dylan Johnson thinks as he shoots down a couple more invading enemy soldiers through the character on the television screen. When he hears a young girl scream from outside, the seventeen-year-old presses the pause button on the controller and leaves his game to look out the window.

At first, Dylan feels like he is still playing his video game when he sees the scene out his window. "What the hell...?" he breathes as it registers.

He stares at the numerous dead bodies cover the road for as long in either direction as Dylan can see, with the organs torn out of the corpses. Hearts, livers, lungs, and intestines are everywhere. Dylan can barely identify the mutilated and bloody lumps as bodies; there'd be no way to put names to the faces.

He blinks a couple times, not quite sure what to think of the situation. Not a single living person is to be seen, at least not from Dylan's Main Street apartment a few floors up. Fear is actually the last thing that enters his mind; curiosity drives him down to the street.

Once Dylan opens the door at the bottom of the steps, the reality of the tragedy hits him. As he closes the door behind him and takes a step out, the metallic scent of oxygenated red liquid, strong in the air, overcomes him, and he almost cannot move.

Though the cause of this disaster could strike him too, this fact doesn't cross his mind as Dylan heads out and checks a nearby corpse. The blood hasn't even dried yet, so this didn't happen that long ago. Then he remembers the scream. Who'd it come from? A victim, a witness, or a possible murderer?

An image of someone doing this with their bare hands pops into his mind, and he has to put his hand on the ground to stop from losing balance. One would have to be completely sick, barbaric, and twisted to do something this morbid. Not to mention the fact that the murderer couldn't possibly be human.

Dylan looks around for any possible cause, or sign of life, but finds nothing. As he walks down Main Street, the scene of a once-lively downtown turned apocalyptic begins to really get to him.

"Is... anyone... alive?" he tries to call out, but all he can do is whisper. He looks into the windows of the stores as he passes them, but finds the same thing: more dead bodies with the organs

covering them.

Suddenly, a noise from behind startles Dylan, and he turns around quickly, ready to face whatever is there.

"Dylan?" a young woman, about the age of sixteen, whispers.

"Alissa Monroe," Dylan somewhat snickers. "What are you do- What happen- How'd you survive?" he stutters, looking for the right question to ask.

"Well, how'd you? I was inside, taking a bath with my headphones on. I just got out, and was gonna find a place to eat at for lunch... Then..." she says, looking around.

"I don't know how I missed this entire thing happening... I was simply playing some Call of Duty. Then something sort of felt odd, and I heard a little girl scream," he explains as he walks up to her, carefully stepping his bloody feet around the mutilated bodies.

"Have you seen Jade?" she asks.

He stares at her incredulously. "Look at these bodies. Can you identify *any* of these faces?" he nearly screams at her.

She shakes her head, saddened, disturbed, and overwhelmed by the situation, and turns around, annoyed by Dylan. When she does so, she sees a figure moving around a ways down the street.

She stumbles backwards a little, but Dylan is there to keep her steady. "Wha—who is that?" she breathes, unable to raise her voice any higher.

"I'm not quite sure..." Dylan replies slowly, stepping around Alissa, his eyes glued to the figure. He then looks around quickly for some sort of weapon, and the first thing he finds is the gun of what he assumes is a dead cop. "Not sure if it's loaded," he breathes as he walks close to one of the many buildings lining Main

Street.

The figure begins to walk towards Alissa and Dylan, and the two duck into the closest door. Alissa leans against the wall between the door and a broken display window and slides down, though there is blood everywhere. She hugs her knees to her chest and looks around what she sees was once a pastry shop. "That must be old Morey," she sighs as she stares at a body hanging over the counter, its organs covering the counter and floor.

"Well, it looks like they'll have to rename *Morey's Pastries*," Dylan says as he crouches along the wall beneath the window, and peeking over the sill.

"So heartless," she sighs pitifully.

"Shh," he says quickly as he leans a little out of the window. "It's gone..." he breathes after a long minute.

Alissa turns and sticks her head out the hole in the wall and looks in the direction of the figure, but sees nothing now, either. "Creepy."

Dylan hops out of the window, using his free hand to push himself over the sill. "Stay," he commands quietly as he crouches down.

"Yes sir," Alissa says sarcastically. "What else am I—Dylan!" she whispers excitedly as she turns and runs out the door and crouches next to him.

He looks back and glares at her. "What?" he snaps quietly, slightly annoyed.

She glares back at him. "If you and I survived because we were inside, I wonder. Who else was inside?"

He thinks about this for a minute. "Well, I don't know. But if that figure is the cause of all this, then I don't want to make a lot of commotion by gathering all survivors. Just leave them alone for now. At least until I deal with whoever that was."

Alissa nods in agreement. It kills her, but she sighs, "You're right... Wait, until you deal with this?"

He turns back around, confused. "Do *you* want to?"

"No, but what about the police or something?"

He holds out his arms, showing Alissa the scene, not sure if she's quite registered it yet. "Lis, do you see anyone else *alive*?"

She glares at him. "So why not just go out there and join them."

"Or I could find what's causing this and stop it before your insides become your outsides."

"Whatever. You are *that* stupid," she sighs, then turns around to go back into the pastry shop as Dylan continues toward the place the figure was last seen.

A few minutes later, Dylan glances over his shoulder at Alissa as she crawls down the street, and sees Jade. Dylan watches as Alissa catches a glimpse of her best friend's combat boots and nearly screams. He dashes to her side to keep her from falling back into the sea of blood and bodies.

Dylan laughs to himself and pats her head, holding her in his arms. "Yeah, I'd be afraid of the freak, too," he says, eyeing the cause of Alissa's fright.

Jade, the same age as Alissa, snickers at Dylan out of pure hatred. "You're a friggin' moron, Johnson. I really wish you were among the corpses."

As she stands, Alissa pushes Dylan, but he grabs on to the ledge of the pastry shop's display window to catch himself. "Freak, were you over that way, a ways down, about ten minutes ago?" Dylan asks, pointing in the direction of the figure, not fully convinced that was Jade.

She thinks a minute. "No... I came from this way," she says, gesturing in the opposite direction. "I saw you two aimlessly wandering around and thought I'd come down and be the smart one, since we all know you can't handle it, Johnson."

He gives her the middle finger as he turns around. "Be the girls you two are, or the girl you pretend to be, Freak, and go hide while I play the part of the attractive hero that saves the day," he laughs to himself as he heads down the street.

Jade curses under her breath and walks away, Alissa cautiously and reluctantly in tow.

While wandering, Dylan spots what he thinks is the same figure again down the street about a quarter of a mile. When he sees that it appears to be a young girl with long hair wearing a blood-stained gown of an unidentifiable color, he begins to wonder who the child is. *It can't be the same figure... But the hair and dress are the same length...*

Though Dylan's sure the figure saw him, it turns around and walks down an alley. "Hey!" he calls, and begins running after it, the gun he found aimed in its direction. He still doesn't know if his weapon's loaded, but it makes him feel more secure having it.

Though his intent was to run after the girl, he barely manages to walk quickly, having to maneuver around the mangled and mutilated bodies, now becoming stiff and giving off a grotesque and sickening scent. He hurries down the alley way he's sure the girl went down only to find more of ever-present disgust.

"Where'd you go?" he yells. When he receives no answer, he begins searching the alleys around.

"Why does it matter to you?" Jade's alto voice calls out.

Dylan snickers. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"Oh, sorry, am I not who you were expecting to find in this wasteland?"

Dylan shakes his head. "Where's Lis?"

"Like you care."

"Why does it matter to you?"

Jade glares at Dylan. "Back there. Watch out, insanity is thick in the air..."

Dylan doesn't quite understand what she means by this, but he doesn't stick around to ask. He hurries past Jade, holding back any urges to smack her. When he finally runs into Alissa in the back of an alley way, he's shocked to see her kneeling in front of something he can't see yet.

"Lis, what are you doing?"

"I missed you too?" a petite girl's voice says, sounding discouraged.

"The hell...?" Dylan mumbles as he walks carefully up to Alissa. "What the *hell* is that thing?" he asks, now seeing a blood-covered child. Her hands are caked in crusted bodily fluid with spots all over her bare legs, arms, and face. He still cannot tell the original color of her stained night gown.

"I'm... not sure..." Alissa whispers, kneeling about a foot in front of the child.

Dylan aims his gun at the girl's head, sure she did all this. "It doesn't matter."

Now just hold on, Dylan..." Alissa counters, more emotion in her voice now. "You did all this?"

The hopeless, round black eyes of the fragile girl pierce into Dylan's heart, but he refuses to let it get to him. The girl then looks at Alissa and nods.

"Alone?"

The girl again nods. "But I missed you three..." She looks down at her hands, seemingly deep in thought.

"But... You're so little... How could you have done this?"

Smiling, the child is ecstatic that someone actually cares. Until now, she's only been greeted with hostility and fear. "She gave me this gift!"

"I'm not sure what she means by this, but she's *got* to go, Alissa." He again raises his gun and aims it at the child's head, still unsure of the weapon's loadout, and now unsure if a bullet to the head could even kill her.

The child whimpers and cowers, and as a surprising wave of pity comes over Alissa, she finds she cannot let Dylan kill it. She quickly takes a few wide steps to put herself between the two, and wraps her arms around the girl. "Dylan, hold on a second..."

"Are you friggin' out of your mind, woman?" he exclaims, dumbfounded. "This *thing* is a murderer, and you want me to *pity* it?"

"Just hold *on* a second."

Dylan shakes his head, almost tempted to take out Alissa, too. He doesn't know what's going on with her, but he doesn't want the thing to kill him.

"Why did you do that?" the girl asks, her voice still young and gentle.

"Why did you do all *this*?" Alissa counters softly.

"Because she told me to."

"Who?"

"My mommy."

Alissa opens her mouth to speak, but Dylan speaks first. "Oh. Her *mommy* told her to do this. Of course. My mom sends me out on errands to grab some milk and kill hundreds of people all

the time... The frig is going on here...?" he mumbles, throwing his hands in the air as he turns away from the two.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out... She's not an *ordinary* child."

Dylan lets out a laugh of pure amazement. "Well no shit, brilliant. And what was your first hint? The hundreds of mutilated and disemboweled bodies? Lis, normal kids don't single-handedly bring on the apocalypse! She needs to die!"

"No!" the child cries, her voice sounding afraid and innocent, as she buries her face into Alissa's chest. "Why are they so mad at me?" she asks, looking up at the teen with big, teary, solid-black eyes.

"Sweetie, look what you've done... You've... *killed*... so many," she manages to say.

The child thinks for a minute, looking around at the few bodies in the alley. "You mean... Mommy won't be happy, either?" She is worried now, and fearful for her life, though she doesn't understand why. The heartbreaking look on her face gives this away quite well.

Alissa shakes her head as she sees Dylan kneel next to her through the corner of her eye. "I don't think so, honey."

The girl sighs, tears spilling over her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mommy. I didn't know..." she says quietly, then looks up. "What's gonna happen to me now? Are you gonna kill me?"

Alissa doesn't say anything, tears forming in her eyes now, too. She looks up at Dylan, who's standing with his arms crossed. "What's your name?" she asks, stalling. Her voice is barely a whisper.

"Maria." There's fear in her voice. The child looks up at Dylan, and his heart sinks a little for the girl. He didn't think it was possible, or right, but he's beginning to feel sorry for the child. She even has a name.

"She's innocent..." Alissa mutters. "She didn't know what she was doing..."

"Alissa..." Dylan's trying to keep a straight head for this.

"I know... She can't stay here... But killing her is a bit harsh, isn't it?"

Dylan closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He shouldn't let this get to him, not after the horrific and gory tragedy surrounding them.

"It's only right, Alissa."

There is a long pause before the child speaks. "Will it make everything better?" she asks, almost hopeful. Her desire to fix her mistake just tears through Alissa, and she has to look away before the tears start trickling down her cheeks. "But I don't want to die..." The sadness and innocence in Maria's voice causes Alissa to completely break down, and she pulls the child into her arms and holds her tight, despite being covered in the blood of thousands of truly innocent people.

Dylan has to look away, tears actually welling in his eyes against his will. "Damn it..." he mutters to himself. *Damn it, Alissa... You just had to go and complicate this, didn't you...?*

Alissa finally stands, looking straight into Maria's eyes. "Don't be sad, Maria... This is the right thing to do. Be brave," she tries to tell her through her sobs.

The girl swallows hard and inhales deeply, then nods. Staring down at the ground, she stands too, awaiting her fate.

"Goodbye, Maria..." Alissa barely whispers.

Dylan closes his eyes and aims, once again, at the child's head. His hand trembling, he focuses his gaze on the girl and cocks the pistol. Alissa buries her face in Dylan's chest, and as a single tear is shed from the windows leading to his softened soul, he pulls the trigger.