

# **“Fiver”**

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By  
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STEF PUSHED THE DOOR with the barrel of her shotgun. It creaked open and she stepped inside, taking slow, cautious steps. The room was dark, air stale, but there was enough light coming in from the large windows lining the wall, to see it had once been a space of great splendour. However, its greatness, like the rest of the world since the end, had become a casualty of neglect.

Everything was covered in dust, and aside from the trail of red silk left behind by the index finger Stef ran along a sofa cushion, the room paled in colour. Yet, despite the dull surroundings, she could see the room harkened another era—a house like this, a playground for the aristocracy—and like the others on this floor, filled with the finest money could buy.

A large chandelier, devoid of crystals, dangled from the ceiling in the centre of the room, as cobwebs trailed from candelabra sconces lining the walls. Vases filled with dead flowers stood tall on top of grimy tables, and a hole had formed in the large carpet that lay in the centre of the room.

A rat scurried across the floor and Stef shifted her attention to the rodent, aiming the gun in its direction. She hated rats. It meant food was near, and that never amounted to anything good. Eyeing the dark corner with a finger on the trigger, she steadied her breathing and prepared to shoot.

If it were bread and cheese the rat was after, Stef wouldn't mind. She'd grown tired of canned food, pilfered from abandoned homes and the shelves of already scavenged markets. But those delicacies, along with other pleasures like electricity and running water, were gone, and she, like every other human that remained, were now food to the world's new apex predator.

Stef paused her approach and waited for the trademark sound that pricked the skin on her arms and haunted her dreams—the guttural moan of the undead. Counting each second, like one would between each clap of thunder and flash of lightning during a storm, Feeders did not wait quietly. If a human was near, their teeth began to chatter, and within seconds one found themselves under attack.

When Stef reached five and it was still quiet, she realized this room, like the others, was clear of threat. Lowering her gun with relief she looked around, turning her attention back to the room.

Stef had read about places like this in Jane Austen novels—large estates with oversized fireplaces donned by ornate mantles, and oppressive mouldings that ran along every door, floor, and ceiling—but never imagined she would find herself seeking shelter in one.

A man with dark eyes and white hair stared down from an enormous portrait hanging above the fireplace. The man of privilege and honour, and the others confined to smaller canvasses around the room, his equally entitled ancestors, no doubt.

Like every other house they'd found over the last few months, Stef wondered where they were...the lucky ones that called this place home. Had they fled, taking only their most prized possessions? Or were they overrun by undead hordes, and now Feeders themselves?

Stef's stomach grumbled. Surely a place of this scale had a sizable pantry. She hadn't had anything to eat for a few days—not since she'd eaten the last of her beloved Toblerone—and was desperate for something that would satisfy her hunger.

It was bittersweet, digging into the honey and almond nougat. Stef never imagined a candy bar would hold any kind of significance. She'd purchased it, along with a bottle of water on her way out of Heathrow the day before the world changed—a quick energy fix to help her make it through a twenty-four layover in London, before meeting up with friends in Paris for the summer—and finishing it had felt like the final nail in the coffin of what life was like before.

She knew, however, the idea of finding food was pointless. Luck would not strike twice on the same day. They had been fortunate to find this place and food would be the icing on the decaying proverbial sundae.

Stef shook her head and turned away from the fireplace. The past year was like a bad dream. No, bad movie. She had been thousands of miles from home when the Zombie Apocalypse began, and with no real survival skills her days should have been numbered. Had it not been for Fiver, she wouldn't have lasted beyond that first week.

Her cheeks warmed—hell, everything warmed—thinking of Fiver. The girl with the beauty of a Nubian princess and the confidence of a queen that sat next to her on the train that morning as she headed into London, was someone she never expected. But fate crossed their paths when it chose, and Stef was glad that it had. Fiver was one of the strongest, most beautiful people Stef had ever met, and if she were being honest, the only reason she'd made it out of London alive.

Stef smiled, remembering the way her heart skipped when Fiver, seeing her struggle to fold the map she held, placed a hand on Stef's knee and asked, "Would you like some help with that, Love?" And when the two kissed after Fiver gave Stef a proper tour of her city, she'd nearly melted.

Their dream day, however, had been rudely awakened by the wailing of sirens outside Fiver's flat later that night, and when pandemonium erupted shortly after, Fiver grabbed her car keys with one hand and Stef's hand with the other and raced out of town.

A noise in the hall shifted Stef's attention and she turned, holding her gun steady.

"All clear," Fiver said before entering the room.

Relieved, Stef lowered the gun.

"Anything?" Fiver asked.

"No," Stef shrugged. "Just a couple of rats."

"Good," Fiver smiled and walked to the centre of the room and walked around. "What do you think?" she asked; her Cockney accent beginning to ease.

"It's like Downtown Abbey," Stef replied.

"God, no," Fiver shook her head. "That's Jacobethan. This is Georgian, love."

"Architecture, too?" Stef asked, shaking her head in admiration.

Fiver was an intoxicating blend of worldly intelligence and good old-fashioned street smarts. A combination of a working-class childhood and teens' years being groomed by a scholarship-based, top notch education.

"Not just a pretty face you picked up on The Tube," Fiver walked over to Stef and reached for her hand, pulling her close.

"I think it was you that kissed me," Stef whispered as Fiver leaned in and kissed her. The heat between their palms surged as Fiver moved her mouth expertly over Stef's and then finished the kiss by sucking on Stef's lower lip.

"Where are the others?" Fiver asked, pulling back.

Stef inhaled to catch her breath; her lip tingling where Fiver's teeth had held it. "Still building the perimeter. Once they are done though, we may have our first real night of rest in months."

"Who said anything about sleeping?" Fiver winked.

Fiver's appetite was insatiable, and Stef was not complaining. But, she just really wanted to remember what it was like to sleep in a bed, safe from death, for just a few hours.

"Did you find anything to eat?" Stef asked, ignoring the carrot Fiver dangled.

"Didn't make it to the pantry."

Stef rolled her eyes, playfully. "What were you doing this whole time?"

"Clearing the rooms upstairs...and thinking."

“About?”

“This place.”

“What about it?”

“How would you like to stay here?”

“We are.”

“No, I mean...just us...without the others.”

“What?”

Unlikely alliances had been created amongst the survivors. Strong and smart teamed up with the armed and capable. Stef and Fiver met the others in their group—Joel, Tasha, and Red—shortly after leaving London, and had been together ever since.

“We are smarter than the whole lot,” Fiver scoffed.

“You are smart,” Stef held up the shotgun in her hand. “I just happen to have a talent I didn’t know I had.”

Stef remembered the first time she had held a gun in her hand. She hadn’t even shaken as she pulled the trigger, just in time to nail the Feeder that had surprised them seconds earlier, right between the eyes.

“A good talent,” Fiver countered. “But seriously, think of it...you and me and this place all to ourselves.”

“Be serious,” Stef brushed off the idea and walked over to the window. With her eyes now adjusted to the dark, Stef watched as Jael, Tasha, and Red worked on the perimeter. They were just about done.

“I am.”

“Sure,” Stef laughed and turned back around. Seeing the look in Fiver’s eyes, she stopped. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“I want what’s mine,” Fiver crossed her arms.

Stef shook her head. “Come again?”

“This place,” Fiver looked around. “It should be mine.”

“We can’t pull a Buckingham.”

In the weeks after the fall of London, survivors stormed buildings once belonging to the Crown and British government, and from what we’d heard over pirated radio transmissions, the same had happened in the States.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Fiver replied crisply.

“Then what *are* you saying?”

Fiver stared at Stef, saying nothing, then took a deep breath, and nodded to the portrait over the fireplace. “That man was Lord Reginald Camden. He built this place in 1820. And...” she paused for a moment. “He was my great great grandfather.”

Stef looked to the portrait and then back to Fiver.

“My great great great grandmother worked for him,” Fiver continued. “He loved her, but not enough to give the daughter she bore him a name. And that woman there,” Fiver pointed to a smaller portrait of a beautiful blonde with blue eyes, wearing a silk gown, the colour of the sky. “She is the reason I was raised with nothing, and why ten years ago, Callum Green, a Camden, twice removed, inherited everything.”

Stef thought back to the last few months—Fiver’s insistence they keep moving North and the look on her face when they first came upon the estate—and Stef knew she was telling the truth.

“Shit, you’re serious.”

“Of course, I bloody am.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“It’s a dodgy history, don’t you think?”

“Not any dodgier than a couple two of my cousins that married,” Stef laughed.

To this Fiver laughed. “You don’t care?”

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know...I just...” Fiver trailed off. “I just...I love you, okay, and I didn’t want to lose you.”

“What?” Stef asked, not sure she heard Fiver correctly.

“I didn’t want—”

“No,” Stef shook her head, “the other thing.”

“Love you?” Fiver asked.

Stef nodded.

“Well yeah,” Fiver said wryly. “What else do you think this is?”

With those three words Fiver had given Stef her heart. She knew this. And she wanted to show Fiver she would keep it safe.

Stef lifted the shotgun, pointing at the portrait of the blonde. “She was responsible?”

Fiver nodded and Stef pulled the trigger—a hundreds year old portrait gone, just like that.

“Bloody hell!” Fiver jumped back and looked at Stef, eyes wide with excitement. “Why did you do that?”

“For you.”

Fiver looked at Stef, biting her lip. “That was hot.”

“Was it?” Stef lowered the gun.

“You know it was, Love,” Fiver closed the space between her and Stef, and placing both hands on her cheeks, kissed her again, deep and with force, their tongues dancing.

“What happened?” Jael shouted as he ran up the stairs and into the room, with Tasha in tow.

Stef and Fiver pulled apart.

Tasha looked down at the gun in Stef’s hand and back up, scowling. “We’ve been out there risking our necks so you could what, target practice and alert every Feeder within a mile radius?”

“Oh, toss off,” Fiver rolled her eyes.

“You toss off, Fiver,” Tasha shot back.

“What’s going on?” Red ran into the room.

“Your girl came in hot,” Fiver nodded to Tasha.

“Only because your girl is in here shooting up the place,” Tasha shot back.

Red looked to the hole Stef shot in the wall and then to where she and Fiver stood. “Looks like it was you two that were hot,” Red winked.

Fiver shook her head and looked at Red with disgust.

“Oh, lighten up,” Red slung an arm around Tasha’s shoulder.

“We only shoot to kill. You know the rule,” Tasha accused Stef.

“Give it a rest,” Fiver waved Tasha off.

“You give it a rest, Fiver,” Tasha shot back. “I have a right to know if your girl is putting our lives at risk.”

“Listen, Tasha,” Fiver pushed the sleeves of her coat up.

Jael and Red watched the girls argue with wide curious smiles.

“What are you laughing at?” Stef asked, angered by the delight on their faces.

“Are you kidding me?” Jael laughed. “This is the hottest thing I’ve seen in months.”

“Alright,” Red held up his hand, attempting to put an end to Fiver and Tasha’s heated exchange. “That’s enough.”

“Who died and put you in charge?” Stef asked, tightening her grip on the gun in her hand.

“Come on, Midwest,” Red held his hand out. “I count on you to be the sensible one.”

“You know, I really hate that name, Red.”

“Woah,” he held up his hands and laughed. “Did the two of you sync up your periods or something?”

Tasha laughed and Stef lifted the shotgun and pointed it at her. “Something funny?” she asked.

“Oh, come on,” Tasha rolled her eyes. “Put that down.”

Stef kept the gun on Tasha.

“Seriously, put the gun down, Mid...Stef,” Red corrected.

“No,” Stef said stubbornly.

Red ignored her and turned away. Angered by his dismissal, Stef pulled the trigger and shot a hole in the wall. He jumped, and turned around, eyes wide.

“I said,” she straightened, “no.”

Stef turned to Fiver and nodded, indicating for her to take over.

“Okay,” Fiver nodded back and then turned to Tasha and Red. “Here’s the thing...it’s time this party broke up.”

“Fine,” Red yawned. “I’m beat and could use some rest.”

“No,” Fiver cleared her throat. “I mean, the five of us. It’s time to go our separate ways.”

“What?” Jael demanded.

“You heard her,” Stef confirmed.

“We just built the perimeter around this place. We aren’t going anywhere,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Not to mention, what we find we split,” Tasha added.

“Well,” Stef turned her gun back on Tasha. “This place wasn’t found.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This place,” Stef looked around. “We didn’t find it. Fiver led us here. It belongs to her.”

“Right,” Red laughed.

“It’s true,” Fiver confirmed. “Which means, you’re trespassing.”

“Like hell,” Red laughed.

“You can have what’s in the tack house,” Fiver continued. “But this place is ours.”

“We will take part of this place and nothing less,” Tasha pressed back.

“I think you may want to reconsider your answer,” Fiver threatened.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Tasha sneered.

“Fine,” Stef cocked the trigger. “I will.”

“What are you doing?”

“I will give you to the count of three to get out of here. After that, what happens, you brought it on yourself.”

Fiver looked to Stef, a silent conversation passing between the two. They were no longer two, but one. What she wanted, Stef wanted, and would fight for it, no matter what it cost.

Stef winked at Fiver and turned back to face Tasha and Red. “Are you finished?”

“No,” Tasha answered angrily, hands on her hips.

“Fine,” Stef nodded and began counting. “One...”

“I told you we shouldn’t have trusted them,” Tasha said.

“Two,” Stef continued.

“Hey, Stef,” Jael held his hands up. “Come on, you’re not...”

“Three,” Stef said finally.

“Go to hell,” Tasha said simply, and Stef pulled the trigger.

“Holy hell!” Red screamed as Tasha flew backwards.

“It’s time for you to go,” Fiver repeated.

“You won’t get away with this,” Jael shouted.

“Oh,” Stef turned the gun on Jael. “I think we will.”

“You two are mad!” Red shouted.

“Not,” Fiver looked to Stef and smiled. “Not mad.”

“Leave or die?” Fiver commanded. “Choose now.”

“You can’t kill us,” Red countered.

“Why not?”

“It’s murder!”

“Oh, Red,” Fiver cooed. “You know when the world ended, so too, did our laws.”

“Well, there is a moral one. Killing humans...it’s wrong. We should be killing them,” he pointed out the window, “not each other.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” she shrugged.

“You’ll pay for this,” Red clenched his fists.

“We’ll take our chances,” Stef waved the barrel of the gun to the door. “Now move.”

Jael and Red made their way to the hall, walking quickly backwards so they could keep their eyes on Fiver and Stef. Once they had made it down the hall and out the door they turned and sprinted through the barricade and into the woods at the far side of the grounds.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” Stef turned to Fiver once they were gone, eyes dancing wildly.

“I know,” Fiver stared back at her, eyes wide.

“They’ll be back.”

“With others, I’m sure.”

“We’ll be ready.”

“We will,” Fiver nodded. “What do we do about her?” she nodded to where Tasha lay lifeless on the other side of the room.

“Let’s worry about her later,” Stef set the gun down on a table and walked over to Fiver. She didn’t care about Tasha, nor what would come next. Right now, she needed Fiver. In their world of death, she was life, and Stef had never needed or wanted anything more.

Reaching for Fiver’s beltloop, Stef pulled her close and kissed her deeply, and with command.

“I love you, too,” she whispered through the kiss, her pulse racing.

Fiver and Stef knew Red and Jael would be back, and when they did come, they would be in for the fight of their lives. But tonight, there would be no fighting. Tonight, it was about claiming their future, away from the clutches of the past, and rest.

Oh, who were they kidding...there would be no sleeping tonight. Judging from heat that surged between them as Stef backed Fiver up to the silk sofa, it was going to be a long, long night.

**D.M. Simmons** writes character-driven fiction and urban fantasy, science fiction fantasy, young adult, and new adult stories. She studied literature, creative writing, and communications at the University of the Pacific. Her debut novel EVOKE received a Gold Medal in the Reader's Favorite 2019 International Book Awards in the Young Adult category, and her short stories have appeared in various anthologies. To learn more, visit [www.dmsreadwrite.com](http://www.dmsreadwrite.com).