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KENNETH JAMES ALLEN

WINDING DOWN

KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



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For those who kept going.

“You can’t ever really know someone else’s mind or someone else’s heart, what someone else is capable of.”

Preet Bharara

“What is to give light must endure burning.”

Viktor E. Frankl

“Love doesn’t always have a happy ending, but it’s always worth the ride.”

Unknown

Chapter 1

The Last Normal

We used to joke about how it would end.

Not us. The world.

On good days, it feels like the same thing.

We played apocalypse roulette the way people play drinking games. Aliens. Zombies. Plague. Meteor. The power grid going down and everyone turning feral inside a week. We watched enough of it to start arguing about the best way to die, quick or brave, as if that was a real choice you could make.

When COVID hit, the shelves emptied and the streets went quiet, and I remember thinking, this is the trailer. This is the opening montage before the real thing. But it passed. Life filled back in. The world pretended it had learned a valuable lesson. Maybe. Maybe not.

It is Saturday in upstate New York, mid-morning. Pale light seeps through the curtains. The heater clicks on, then off. Coffee cools in my hand. Zoe sits beside me on the couch, bare feet tucked under her, my fingers threaded through hers like I can hold the day in place.

We've made a rule. One screen. No phones. No scrolling. Just an episode together. Proof we still know how to sit in the same room and be present.

Eight minutes into the final episode of *Dark*, I pause and glance at Zoe.

"Do you remember who that person was related to?"

Zoe turns toward me, lips parting to answer.

The TV goes black. Not a fade. Not a gentle power save. A hard blink. Like someone cuts the world with scissors.

Silence drops into the room. The fridge stops humming. The heater doesn't click back on. The faint little noises that say a house is alive, all of them vanish at once.

I sit there, waiting for a beep, a reset, anything.

Nothing.

"What the fuck?" I say, softer than I mean to.

Zoe stares at the dead screen. "What happened to the battery?"

It's a great question. We built this house to ride out power outages. Battery backup. Automatic transfer. A quiet promise that no matter what the grid does, we stay upright.

I stand. My phone is already in hand. I hate that reflex, but I use it anyway.

The torch flares. The hallway looks normal in that harsh white circle, but normal has already started slipping away.

"I'll check it out," I say. "You go online and see if you can find anything out."

Zoe nods. She reaches for her phone.

I head for the garage.

The cold hits first. Not outside cold. The damp chill of a space that should have a low, constant hum. The battery cabinet sits where it always does, clean lines, status panel dead. The inverter should be clicking. It isn't.

I step closer. I wait, like the system might wake if I give it a second.

It doesn't.

I open the main panel.

Every breaker is down.

All of them.

That shouldn't happen. Not like this. Not unless something hits hard enough to trip everything at once, or the safety logic is screaming that turning anything on is a terrible idea.

I push the main breaker up.

Click.

It holds for half a second, then snaps down again. A sharp flick that feels like the house saying no.

I try again. Same result. Up, then off.

I stop.

I listen.

Nothing. No beep. No fan. No relay. No fault light. No smell of burning plastic. Nothing that fits into a normal Saturday problem.

The system is dead, and it is refusing to come back.

I close the panel. My hand stays on the metal for a beat, like it might tell me what it knows.

It stays silent.

I head back inside. I kill the torch. My phone screen looks bright and smug in the dark, full battery, correct time, like the world outside still exists.

“Any luck?” Zoe calls from the living room.

I find her where I left her. She’s holding her phone like it’s a lifeline.

“No. You?”

“Nope. Website just crashes. Doesn’t even load.”

I take my phone out and try anyway. Habit. Hope. Denial.

A page tries to load, then fails. Then another. Then a simple search. Nothing. No connection. No comforting symbols. It’s like flight mode, but I haven’t touched a setting.

Zoe’s jaw tightens. “So. What do we do?”

I sit and try to pretend my coffee still matters. I lean back and close my eyes like I can bully the day into behaving.

“When the power comes back,” I say, “I’ll have a better idea.”

Zoe doesn’t laugh. She doesn’t roll her eyes. She just watches me, waiting for the part where I admit I don’t know.

“Best case,” I add, “everything fixes itself. Worst case, we call an electrician, pay three hundred bucks for flicking a few switches.”

The silence that follows feels heavier than the outage.

Zoe speaks quietly. "How long do you think it will be?"

I want to say minutes. I want to say it's nothing. I want to say the grid burps and shrugs and we move on.

Instead I pick a number that sounds reasonable.

"Maybe an hour," I say. "Two tops."

Zoe nods, but her eyes drift toward the window. Like she expects to see something that matches the feeling in her chest.

"So," she says. "What do you want to do?"

I shrug. I hate how small that gesture feels. "I don't know. Any thoughts?"

Zoe's voice goes light in a way I know well.

"Oh," she says. "I've got a few ideas."

I crack one eye at her. She raises an eyebrow, slow and deliberate, then places her cup on the coffee table with care, like manners still matter in a powerless world.

"I'm just going to put away the laundry," she says, and stands.

She doesn't need to tell me twice.

I push off the couch and follow her toward the stairs.

Then a sound threads through the stillness.

Not a bang. Not an explosion. A thin, wavering alarm.

One car, somewhere down the road.

Then another.

Then a brief chorus, confused and fading, like the neighborhood wakes up after a big night and can't remember why it's angry.

Zoe stops at the bottom stair. Her head tilts.

I stop beside her, listening.

The alarms die away. The quiet returns, but it doesn't feel like calm anymore. It feels like something holding its breath.

"Car alarms," I say.

Zoe doesn't answer.

I head for the front window. The living room is dim now, lit only by stray light through glass. The sky has changed, darker now, overcast. Outside, the street sits in place like a photograph. A couple of cars parked. A bin on the curb. Nothing on fire. No smoke. No screaming.

Then a figure appears two houses down.

A man steps onto his porch, phone in hand. He lifts it to his ear. He lowers it. He taps the screen, harder than he needs to. He looks up and down the street like he's checking for someone to blame.

Another neighbor comes out. A woman in a robe, hair up, holding a cup of tea like it's a shield.

They speak. I can't hear them. Their hands do most of the talking.

Zoe joins me at the window.

For a moment, we watch the street and let ourselves believe this is just inconvenience.

Across the road, Miles Miller opens his front door. He steps out, squints at the sky like it might explain itself, then looks down at his phone. Marcie appears behind him. They talk fast.

I open the door and head over. The air outside feels the same. Cool. Clean. Nothing apocalyptic. That makes it worse. It lets your brain spin.

Miles and Marcie step off the porch to meet us. His face is half amused, half annoyed.

"Tell me your battery is working," he says.

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"Shit." He lifts his phone. "My signal's dead. Marcie's too. Kids are losing their fucking minds. Their tablets are bricks."

Miles looks at me. "You try your breaker?"

"I tried everything," I say.

Then something hits him and his face shifts.

"The radio," he says, slapping my arm.

“You have a radio?”

“My car has a radio.”

Miles yanks open the driver’s door and turns the key. White noise fills the cabin. He flicks through FM, then AM. A voice almost forms, then drops out.

In the end he kills the engine and we stand there in the quiet, looking at each other like we’ve all run out of reasonable explanations.

“This is fucking weird,” I say.

No one answers. We’re all thinking the same thing.

Zoe speaks softly. “Maybe it’s just the towers.”

Miles nods too quickly. “Yeah. Towers. Or a local outage.”

Marcie’s voice sharpens from the passenger seat. “Local outages don’t kill every station on the radio.”

Miles flinches at that. Like he wants to keep the story simple.

I do too.

We drift back onto the driveway. A few more neighbors have wandered onto porches. Dead phones in hand. Faces turned toward the sky, then the street, then each other. No one has a plan. No one has a reason.

A car drives past, packed high.

Miles pats my shoulder. “We’re going to wait the day out. Shout if you need anything.”

I manage a half smile. “You wouldn’t happen to have a freshly brewed white coffee by any chance, would you?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, backing away. “You are shit out of luck.”

Zoe takes my hand and we drift back home.

In our lounge room, I grab a bottle of wine off the dry bar.

Zoe looks at me. “Are you sure you want to drink our second-last Tempranillo?”

“Of course,” I say. “If the world wants to play games, then so do I.”

Half a glass in and the snack bowl empty, I grab that book of rude limericks we found at a second-hand bookstore and read one out. I take a bow to extremely modest applause.

When it's Zoe's turn, she rejects the book and starts reciting one of her own. She gets halfway through, then stops, smiles, and waves it away.

"Sorry," she says. "I completely lost my train of thought."

I stand and pull her into me.

"This will be fixed tomorrow," I say.

"I hope so."

"Yeah," I say. "Just like Shakespeare said. It's always better in the morning."

"I don't think he said that."

"Well," I say, "somebody did."

She laughs, then takes my hand and pulls me off the couch. We sway as the light fades.

"Do you remember when I proposed to you?" I say, and I can hear the wine in my voice.

"Up at Harriet Hollister," she says. "How could I forget that view over Honeoye Lake?"

"When I got down on one knee?"

"I mean, eventually," she says. "I remember you losing your footing the first time, then fumbling in your pocket, then the ring dropping out when you opened the box."

"Yes." I smile. "All of that. But you remember what we did after?"

"Oh, of course. No one ever forgets that."

"Well, I was thinking..."

She laughs and melts into my arms. "If you play your cards right."

We sway, her arms around my neck, mine around her waist.

"Have I ever told you lately that I love you?" I say.

"What is that? Rod Stewart?"

"Van Morrison," I say.

“You need some new material.”

“Well, I’m not a smart man, but I know what...”

She holds a finger to my lips and stops me mid-line. Then she leans close.

“Take me to bed,” she whispers, “or lose me forever.”

As she leads me upstairs, I look through the gloom toward the front of the house.

Outside, the street stays still.

A dog barks, then abruptly stops.

And the dark feels like it’s listening.

Chapter 2

A Slippery Slope

I wake to the sound of screeching tires.

“No!” I mumble. “Not on the weekend!”

When I reach over, the other side of the bed is empty. I crack open my eyes. Zoe kneels beside the bed, fumbling for something underneath.

“Come on,” she whispers.

“Are you alright?” I mumble.

She snaps her head up like I’ve caught her doing something she shouldn’t. Then another squeal of tyres and she’s up, at the window, peering through the heavy curtains.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I’m not sure,” comes the steady reply.

I throw back the covers, reach for my glasses, and pull myself out of bed.

I’m stark naked. It’s one of our rules: sleep naked. We are both adamant that we won’t become one of those movie couples who somehow always sleep fully clothed. Zoe feels it is a shortcut to sleeping in separate beds, then separate rooms, then separate houses.

“It’s a slippery slope,” she once declared.

Who am I to argue with such rational abundance?

I join her at the curtains, the sunlight stinging my eyes. Zoe stands there like a sentinel, unfazed.

Across the street, the Millers are running frantic laps from their front door to their red SUV. They’re hauling armfuls of clothes and water and other shit. Half essential. Half nice-to-haves.

“Where are they going?” I grumble.

“I don’t know,” Zoe starts, “but wherever it is, they seem to be in a hurry to get there.”

Miles stands at the back of their SUV, hurling bags inside and shouting at Marcie to hurry. She explodes out of the house, wind tearing at her hair as she runs. Lucas is clutched to her chest. His arms dangle. His head lolls back, jaw slack, as though sleep has claimed him mid-breath.

“Holy shit,” I say. “What the fuck happened?”

But they can’t hear me from across the street.

“Hurry up!” Miles shouts.

Marcie sprints across the driveway and dives into the passenger seat. Through the rear window, I catch a glimpse of their daughter, Ella, in the back, waving arms in frantic little bursts.

“They must be going to the hospital,” Zoe says.

“Why pack up their car?”

“I wonder what happened to Lucas. I hope he’s going to be okay.”

“You think they’re bugging out?”

Miles runs to the front door, slams it shut, and locks it. Then he sprints back toward the SUV. Halfway there, he stops, turns, and looks up at our house. There’s something in his face. A warning. A plea. I can’t read it.

I throw my arms out, asking silently what the hell is happening. He gives a tight smile and a quick nod before ducking into the SUV.

The tires squeal as he reverses hard onto the road. The vehicle bounces as it hits the street, then screeches again as he tears off. Two other cars following close behind.

Further up the street, more engines rev. More tyres light up. People are leaving. Fast.

“Jesus Christ, Zoe?” I mutter.

I use her name only in serious situations, or when I feel completely lost. This is one of those times.

“By what’s happening out there, he might just be coming,” she ventures. “Maybe you should repent.”

I scoff and walk over to the bedside table to unplug my phone. I had attached the charging cable last night, half out of habit, half on the hope that power would return. It’s down to thirty-four percent.

“Shit!” I swear under my breath.

“What is it?” she asks. Zoe turns from the window, unnaturally composed.

“The power is still off.”

“You think that’s why they’re leaving. Why they’re all leaving?”

Sirens rise out of the silence, somewhere a suburb over. Part of me wants to believe it’s crews finally fixing a transformer, bringing sanity back to the street.

I want it to be temporary. I want us to laugh about it later.

“I don’t like this,” she says.

We get dressed fast and head to the garage. I grab a key fob off the hall table. I immediately slide into the driver’s seat of Zoe’s Chinese electric crossover and power it on.

When Zoe sits beside me, I’m already on the hunt for a radio station. Static. Crackle. The long-lost art of searching the airwaves for signs of life.

Yesterday it was nothing. Today, a voice breaks through.

Urgent. Clipped. The kind that makes you sit up straighter without knowing why.

“Stay in your homes. I repeat, stay in your homes. There is a national emergency. Do not go outside. Do not drive. Do not walk. Remain inside until further notice.”

“Emergency? Stay inside?” I repeat. “For how long?”

Zoe shrugs. I don’t know why I’m even asking. She heard exactly what I just did.

“How long do you think we can last?” she asks me. “With what we have?”

I look around the car, then back at her. “Hang on. We’re sitting on a big frigging battery right now.”

“What are you thinking?”

“We run a cord, power the fridge, the coffee machine.”

Zoe’s eyes flicker with relief. Then the relief dies.

“How long do you think that will last?”

“That is above my pay grade.” This is the kind of shit I would google. I check the dash. “We’ve got over ninety percent. I guess we can afford to test it for an hour and see what happens.”

“And every hour costs us range,” Zoe says, quiet.

I nod, because she’s right. If we drain the car, we walk later.

I open the pantry. In the dim, cans sit like a bad joke. Random vegetables. Soup we never touch. A bag of rice shoved to the back.

I sigh. “It looks like I’m going shopping.”

Zoe is in the kitchen when I come back, staring out again, arm wrapped around herself, finger pressed to her lips.

I touch her shoulder. She startles hard.

“I’m heading out,” I say.

She steps into me and grips my shirt. “How bad do you think it is out there?”

“If it’s anything like Covid, it’ll be a fucking nightmare.”

“Make sure you get water.”

“Water?”

“After a few days the water isn’t going to be safe to drink.”

I nod. She was always right about shit like that.

“You got cash?”

“Shit. Cash. I think I’ve got like a hundred bucks ion my wallet that’s been sitting in there forever.”

She nods once. “Shop smarter, not harder.”

In the garage, I yank on the manual override cable and heave the door up in time a car tear past our driveway, too fast. Then another.

Then sirens take hold as the morning soundtrack. I swear under my breath.

Before I jump in my Beamer we hug again.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks.

“It’s only going to get harder. Besides, if it’s all too hard, we’ll bail out.”

“Where would we go?”

I couldn’t answer the question.

“See what you can find out form the radio,” I say.

I get in my car full of confidence, but my hands are shaking.

The engine turns over, sending an echoing rumble into the neighborhood.

I back out and drop the window.

“Make sure you close the garage door and lock from the inside.”

“Be careful,” she whispers.

“Of course. I’m indestructible.”

I pull away.

In the rear-view mirror, Zoe stands on the driveway, arms folded tight across her chest. She doesn’t wave.

And I realise I’ve never seen her look that alone.

Chapter 3

Road Rules

Cars crawl. Traffic lights are dead. Horns never stop.

People hang out their windows, others leave their vehicles entirely to have more intimate, vigorous, and even violent conversations with other drivers. Red faces, pounding fists, pointing fingers. It's no one's fault, yet they all seem to blame the person opposite them.

I thumb the radio controls, frantically scanning for a station. I land on one that sounds just like the one from Zoe's car. A different voice, but the same urgent message: stay inside.

Clearly, either no one else heard it... or they're like me, blatantly ignoring it.

I pass a gas station on the other side of the street, which resembles something from a war zone. Cars queue up and down the street. Multiple people stood at the pump, arguing, fists clenched up in each other's faces. No wonder they were pissed off. No electricity, no way to power the pumps. Nothing works and people get frustrated and need something (or someone) to blame.

Then the attendant steps out. Mid-fifties, maybe, broad, heavy. His shirt is streaked with sweat and something darker. He holds a shotgun like he knows how to use it.

Fuck me.

For a second, everything pauses. Then someone screams. A bat swings through the air. The attendant goes down hard, arms flailing, the gun clattering across the pavement. I guess we'll never find out if he intended to use it or not. The others pile on him like wolves, not even angry anymore, just desperate. Bone met aluminum. Someone kicked.

How the hell is this happening?

Sirens rise again, closing fast. Relief flickers in my chest. Someone is coming to stop this. Someone with a uniform and a plan.

The cruiser appears in my mirror, flying.

It doesn't slow. It doesn't stop. It blasts past me, siren wailing, then a screech, then a crunch.

In the rear-view mirror, it sits dead at a strange angle, wedged into a car that was trying to U-turn. Glass and twisted metal spill across the road.

"Everyone is losing their shit," I say to myself, as if it will somehow console me.

It doesn't.

A new radio station provides some uplifting news:

"Authorities report unrest at multiple correctional facilities. Residents are urged to remain indoors and avoid contact with anyone outside their household until further notice."

The words from the radio echo in my head, hollow and unreal. For a moment, I can almost convince myself it is happening somewhere else, far from here. But outside the window, the world disagrees. Figures move in the half-light, distant shouts rise and fall, and the air carries a sharp, metallic taste that feels like panic. Whatever is coming, it has already started.

A few blocks later, the road opens up and I reach an impasse.

A Home Depot on my left. A Wegmans grocery store on my right.

Both car parks are full, but not just with cars. Some vehicles are parked sideways across white lines, others abandoned mid-turn. People are dashing in and out, arms full of supplies, heads down, eyes scanning.

This is when I wish Zoe were here. She's the rational one. The calm one.

I came for food. The essentials. The stuff that's going to keep us alive. That's the most important thing. I tell myself I'll be quick. I'll grab what we need before things fall apart completely.

Besides, I still believe this is all temporary. A blip on the radar. Any moment now, someone at a power station will flip a switch, the lights will come back on, and we'll all feel a bit silly.

People will apologize. Maybe they'll even name it: Power Outage Psychosis or something. A year from now there'll be a national holiday, honoring the lives lost and the stupid things we did in the hope we will never repeat the absurdity.

That's what I think. That's what I believe.

Then I see it.

A group with bandanas tied over their faces swarm a family sitting in their car. Bats and hammers rise and fall. Glass shatters. The car jerks forward, tries to escape, then runs up a bank and sticks.

Doors fly open.

A man. A woman. Kids. A dog. Dragged out screaming.

The attackers pile into the car. Others shove it free. The stolen vehicle roars off, skids onto the road beside me, and disappears around the corner.

The family stumbles to their feet, regrouping, shouting, and helpless. No one is coming to help them.

My stomach drops. This isn't panic. This is something else.

"You'll never survive the apocalypse," Zoe would say.

"I will if I have coffee," I would retort.

"And how exactly are the skills of a brand strategist going to help when the zombies come?"

"Well, obviously I'll rebrand them as infectiously charming and pitch a collaboration with the last surviving toothpaste company. Boom. Crisis managed."

"Not bad."

“What about you? No books to copyedit when everyone’s living in shipping containers or dead.”

“The real plague was bad grammar, anyway.”

I slam the breaks and the car slides to a stop in the middle of the road.

Me, the man with no discernible apocalypse skills, am about to stand in the thick of it, shoulder to shoulder with the panic-stricken and the baseball-bat-wielding maniacs. And so it makes sense to have something of my own.

I pull the car to the curb. I fling the door open. My feet hit the ground before the car has even settled. I leap over the curb and cut across the grass. Ahead of me, a crowd surges toward the hardware store, a restless tide of bodies and noise, and I dive into it without thinking.

Inside, I stop dead.

Chapter 4

Weekly Specials

Carts slam down aisles. People shout, push, sprint, filling their shopping carts and baskets with anything they can grab. Stacked high, overflowing, chaos barely controlled.

A man rushes past me, an employee with a nametag pinned to his chest: BRETT.

“Hurry, take what you want before it’s all gone,” he yells. “Or the cops come.”

All gone. I’m not sure if he means products or humanity. Looking at his cart, I assume he means things you can swing at people.

I grab a basket in a casual manner, like I’m still part of a functioning society, and start moving with the flow of people. I have no idea where I’m going or what I’m even looking for. I just follow the crowd, down aisle after aisle.

Then I see it.

In the open space between the tool aisles and the garden section, two men struggle over a crowbar. The metal glints under the harsh fluorescent lights as they twist and shove, each refusing to let go. Their partners watch from a few feet away, one in a tank top, the other with a ball cap pulled low. Both are shouting, voices breaking through the clatter of falling shelves and scattering tools, trying to separate them before someone gets hurt.

One man is flung sideways, loses his grip, and crashes into a pyramid of fertilizer containers. The other lifts the crowbar high.

Tank Top screams. “Leave him alone!”

But he doesn’t. He slams it into the side of his opponent’s head, spraying blood across the display.

She roars and charges forward, box cutter in hand, and stabs him, repeatedly, manically. The crowbar slips from his grip as he staggers back, clutching his wounds, stumbling into the paint sample wall.

Ball Cap steps into the fray, swinging a pruning saw wildly, the serrated teeth carving the air. In the chaos, the crowbar gets kicked, skidding across the floor, straight toward me.

I don't move. I don't pick it up. I just stare. It's like a movie playing out before my eyes.

The saw slashes across Tank Top's neck and forearm with a wet squeal and squelch. The teeth catch on bone.

She screams.

As Ball Cap tries to yank the blade free, Tank Top lunges and plunges her box cutter into her attacker's neck. Blood spurts out in a red arc, splattering the floor tiles.

They collapse into each other, holding their respective wounds, crash into a shelf, and vanish down another aisle.

It's a car crash. Horrible. Messy.

But when it's over, I pick up the crowbar and gently place it in my basket.

Then I bolt. Down the next aisle, around the corner, and into another. Moving like one of the guilty ones fleeing the scene.

Because maybe... I am.

The deeper I plunge into the store, the darker it gets. No natural light. No unnatural light. Just shadows and silhouettes of people darting from shelf to shelf, heads down, trying not to be noticed, not to make eye contact, not to spark conflict.

I'm glad Zoe isn't here for this. I made the right call.

I ask myself what the hell I'm doing as I push further into the gloom. But my hands keep grabbing whatever seems remotely useful. No logic, no checklist. Just reflex.

A first aid kit. A lighter. Heavy rope. Medium rope. Thin rope. Several dynamo flashlights. A handful of batteries I don't even check the type of. I don't know what I need. I just assume I'll need it. I've seen the movies. The end-of-the-world ones. The heroes always grab batteries.

I turn a corner and immediately slam into a guy a foot taller than me. He shoves me aside like a linebacker. I stumble sideways, crash into a shelf, and my glasses fly off my face.

Another sprints by, crunches them underfoot, and keeps going.
Son-of-a-bitch.

Not that I would call them that out loud, not at the best of times, let alone when people are getting stabbed in the neck with box cutters.

I retrieve what's left of the glasses. One arm is snapped off, the lens cracked. I think there is an old prescription pair buried somewhere in a drawer at home. Until then, they sit crooked on my nose, held together by nothing but stubbornness and balance.

I'm still inspecting the damage as I round the next corner, into the plumbing aisle.

That's where I see him.

A man, half-shrouded in gloom. No movement, no sound at first, just the flicker of something shifting that catches my eye. Not a word. Not a light. Just the soft shuffle of shoes on concrete... and the faint clink of metal in his cart.

I nearly miss him at first, just a figure at the end of the tool aisle, half-consumed by the gloom. No lights, no hum of refrigeration, just the dry silence of a store that has stopped pretending to serve people.

The man is tall, draped in a long, faded trench coat that hangs like it had stories of its own. A small-brimmed hat sits low over his brow, the kind that might've once looked dapper but now just makes him look... wrong. Like a funeral had followed him in.

But there is a stillness to him... too still. Like a snake basking under a rock. His cart isn't filled with batteries or rope or flashlights like everyone else's. No.

His shopping cart isn't just full, it is curated. Zip ties. A hacksaw. Sheets of thick plastic rolled tight and snug between bleach bottles. Lye. Industrial gloves. And tucked between them, like just another item on the shelf, an employee. Bound. Gagged. Eyes wide and wet, a piece of duct tape over his mouth, staring at me like I am the last boat off a sinking island.

The man doesn't hide it. Doesn't flinch. He stands there, hand resting lightly on the handle of his cart, gazing down the aisle like he is choosing between brands of mulch. He simply looks up, meets my eyes, and offers a polite and sincere nod. A calm, disarming nod. Polite. Civil. Like a man in line at the deli counter. Like he hadn't just wheeled a human sacrifice past the garden rakes.

My breath catches as he looks me over. Fight-or-flight roars in my chest like a starting engine.

"You'll want one of these," he says, his voice calm and oddly smooth. He reaches into the cart and pulls out a roll of used duct tape, probably the roll he used to elicit a piece for his prisoner's mouth.

I freeze. Can't move.

"They're on special," he continues. "A thousand and one uses."

The man waits a beat then gently sets the tape on the nearby shelf.

"Suit yourself," the man says, almost amused.

He pushes the cart down the aisle, wheels squeaking through a smear of blood, oil, or both. Maybe there's still some humanity left in the world. Just a shame it came from someone so inhumane.

Which doesn't say much for the rest of us.

As he passes me, I step forward, grabbing the tape from the shelf and throwing it into my basket. Then I stop and turn, call out for him

to stop. It is something I blurt out without thinking, like a reaction, an instinct.

He stops dead in his tracks, idly turns to face me.

I go to speak, but the words get stuck in my throat.

“What is it?” he says. His voice is cold, even, calm... scarily calm.

“You... you don’t have to do this... do anything to him,” I say, pointing to the worker tied in his shopping cart.

He gazes down into his cart, then back to me.

“I quite like my purchases.”

Purchases! With those words, he calmly places a hand on the handle and slowly meanders away.

A chill works up my spine and I have to grab a shelf to support me before my legs buckle. I slowly back away, holding my breath as the coldness grips my chest, and then shift as fast as I can until I find myself in a corner. I peer left and right, hoping no one is going to sneak up on me and stab me in the face with a box cutter, and went about haphazardly repairing the glasses with the duct tape, securing the arm back to the frame. It was a dodgy job, but I doubt I could make an appointment with Ralph, my local optometrist... if he’s alive.

I stash the tape in a utility pocket and stand. A minute later, I’m in the tool aisle, the place I wanted to be all along.

Others are already there. Silent. Still. Arms crossed. Steely gazes. It’s like when you’re at a barbecue and the host invites everyone out to the man cave, the shed, or the garage. They scan the shelves like they’re choosing an ice cream flavor, not figuring out what they’ll need to survive the next few days.

The boysenberry wrench or the cookies and cream mallet? Perhaps the rum and raisin hammer!

One by one, they step forward, give their chosen weapon a test swing or chop, then dart off, seemingly satisfied with their selections.

I scan the shelves and move a little further down. Slim pickings.

But eventually, I find mine.

It's even on special. Not that it matters. I'm pretty sure I won't be lining up to pay.

I lift it off the shelf and am immediately unprepared for the weight. It nearly slips from my hands. The heft reminds me of the first, and only, time I held a firearm.

Some ridiculous team-building day. We were bussed out to the mountains, given a basic safety rundown, then handed shotguns to fire at clay targets. Whoever racked up the most points got the honor of posing with the gun for the team photo.

Derek, our boss, scored the lowest. He was furious. Which, honestly, made it the perfect day. He sulked all the way home, arms crossed, forehead pressed to the window, grumbling about the sun, the wind, his eyes. There was always something. We all went out for dinner afterward. Derek didn't. Claimed he had a report to finish and went back to the office.

The sledgehammer in my hands is eight pounds of fiberglass and steel, solid and balanced. Heavy enough to cause damage without sending me off my feet. Light enough to carry without issue. Even has a soft grip for comfort.

Although when the time comes to use it, I doubt comfort will matter. Utility over comfort. Not that it matters. Let's be honest. It's probably just for show. Because if it really came down to it, I don't know if I could swing this at another person.

I'm just not that guy.

But then again... maybe I can.

Especially if Derek stood between me and instant coffee.

Or if someone threatened Zoe.

Yeah. I probably should have mentioned that part first.

Chapter 5

Clean Up Aisle Two

Let me preface this by saying I'm not a fucking hero. I'm just an ordinary guy in a completely fucked up situation. No one thought the world would fall apart, and certainly not so damn quick.

Least of all, me.

I wonder what the big cities are doing right now. People probably throwing themselves off rooftops... or being thrown. In theory, bigger populations mean more chaos, but somehow cities are lonelier places. More people, less connection. When the shit hits the fan, that isolation spreads fast. Communities there would crumble quicker.

And yet, looking around... our little city of Rochester is devolving into a fucking crater.

I toss the haul from the hardware store into my trunk, lock the car, and sling the sledgehammer over my shoulder like I actually know what I'm doing. Like a badass. Attitude is everything... is what I keep telling myself. If you can't act the part, look the part.

I march toward the supermarket.

Bad move.

A few steps in and I realize the middle of the car park is not the place to be. Too much panic, smoke, screeching tires. So I veer off, hugging the wall, sticking to the pedestrian pathway.

As I round the corner, it's déjà vu.

People rushing in. Others rushing out. Arms full, carts overflowing, some dragging bags behind them. Cars screech to a stop in front of the doors. A passenger jumps in, shouts, "Go!" The car spins off, tires squealing, black rubber streaks marking their exit.

Overhead, the thumping rotors of a helicopter rip through the sky. I duck instinctively, not even sure why. I mean, I haven't done anything. Out of everyone here, I might actually be the innocent one. The outsider. Just a guy dragged into the madness. Crimes worse than shoplifting have been committed.

I haven't killed anyone. Not yet.

But time's ticking. And every second I waste, the chances of finding anything edible on those shelves get slimmer.

As I edge closer to the entrance, cans of soup and bags of chips roll out across the ground that are kicked, stepped on, abandoned. Nobody stops for what they drop. Collateral damage.

Then I freeze.

A massive glass panel next to the entrance explodes outward. A shopping trolley blasts through it, spinning mid-air before landing hard on its corner, dented, in a spray of glass shards.

Two women tumble through after it, hitting the ground heavy, rolling over the debris in a flurry of swinging arms and curse words. I don't know what started it, I don't care, but I can guess why.

I tighten my grip on Sharon.

Oh, that's what I call the sledgehammer. Named after a woman I used to work with. She retired last year. Tough as nails, kind to me, never took shit, especially not from Derek.

I crunch over the shattered glass.

Two more people barrel out of the entrance, a cop and some guy in a baseball cap and cargo pants. Both are loaded with supplies yet locked in a tug-of-war over something I can't see.

Then, they just stop. Everything falls from their arms.

The guy in the cap pulls a knife.

The cop doesn't hesitate. He draws his pistol and shoots the guy square in the chest.

The blast knocks him flat, blood splattering as he hits the ground.

And then... a car roars up from the chaos, slams into the cop from behind.

The impact twists him violently, spine bending wrong, his head cracking against the hood with a sickening smack. His body skids to a stop against a pole of the shopping cart return.

Limp. Still. Protect and serve has adopted a new meaning.

My mouth hangs open as I drift into the store, caught in a dream-like trance.

What I see is nothing short of cataclysmic.

I still can't believe it's real. Some part of me keeps waiting to wake up, gasping, sweating, Zoe lying next to me in the dark. Maybe I've come down with something. A fever. A hallucination. That would explain all of this. If it weren't for the surrounding chaos, I might've closed my eyes for a moment and tried to wake up.

Fights have broken out in nearly every aisle. Food is scattered across the floor, crushed beneath stampeding feet. Shelves are half-empty, half-destroyed. The registers have been torn apart like someone expected treasure underneath. In a digital world, I doubt they found much cash. And even if they did... what was the point? Maybe they were treating it like the stock market. Rob now, hope the world resets tomorrow, and cash out just a little ahead.

No one notices me. Or if they do, they don't care.

And I give them the same courtesy. No direct eye contact. No sudden moves. I scan every aisle, every corner, trying to steer clear of anything or anyone that looks dangerous.

The problem is... everyone looks dangerous.

If I am being honest, the absolute and brutal truth is that I have always hated grocery shopping. Even on the calmest days it feels like an endurance test, a slow crawl through fluorescent light and canned music. But this is different. This is grocery shopping gone feral, a scene that feels like madness let loose in the aisles.

Sharon in hand, I hug the top of the aisles, peering down each one. The floor is a war zone. Most of the spirits are gone. Can't blame them. If I get the chance, I too will happily spend the next few days blackout drunk. A temporary fix for a long-term problem.

Smashed bottles litter the shelves and floor. Busted jars of salsa looking like a triple homicide. In the corner, a guy's pissing on the broken glass like it's a statement.

I kick something by accident. It skids across the tiles.

A bag of Cheetos.

Man, I haven't had those since I was a kid.

Still cradling Sharon like a pet or a loaded rifle, I scoop up the bag, open it, and eat as I walk.

Further in, I find what I'm really after. The non-perishables. The real gold. Although it seems like toilet paper might still be king. However, there are slim pickings: a few cans of beetroot, carrots, ham, spam. Whoever thought a burger in a can was a great idea was fooling themselves. Not great options, but it wasn't nothing.

"Beggars can't be choosers."

That's what my mum would always say, particularly when she made boiled beef. I hated it. Every. Single. Time.

"I'm not a beggar," I would say. "Just someone with taste buds and a will to live."

She was pissed, but that facade didn't last long. It never did.

If this keeps up, I'm sure mum's famous boiled meat will be a delicacy. It's funny how fast standards drop. Desperation is the mother of indifference.

I grab whatever cans I can, anything and everything. I don't even read the labels. Figure I'll sort it out at home. No doubt Zoe will make it all work... when things really go bad.

I look around for something to carry the cans in, and then I see it. A basket, already full of tins, just sitting there. I edge toward it,

scanning the aisles. Were they coming back? And if not... where the hell did they go?

Times like this, those questions don't matter. It's not a world of asking. It's a world of taking. I drop my cans into the basket, pluck it from the floor, rest Sharon on my shoulder and consider my next move.

At the end of the aisle, there is a twenty-four pack of bottled water just sitting in the middle of the aisle. It looks pristine, apart from the blood streaked across it.

I edge towards it, brushing up against the shelving with every step. It seems like a perfect lure, but I'm not playing the fool. Not today. Not like this.

At the end I peek around the corner.

The fridge and freezer doors are in various states. Some hanging open, some shattered. Frozen food is strewn across the floor. Shelves stripped bare. Then I see the body. Kneeling in front of a freezer door, head smashed through the glass. Blood streaks the handle, smeared handprints across the door frame. The owner of the water pack?

I step to the aisle and puncture the plastic with my thumb to carry it. I test the weight of it all. It's awkward at first, balancing Sharon on the basket. I can't carry much more, unless I grab a trolley. But that feels like a beacon for trouble. Too visible. Too loud. That's the last thing I want.

A man suddenly darts out from another aisle, yanks open the nearest freezer, grabs a pile of frozen dinners. I have no idea what his plan is. Doesn't matter.

Then he stops. Looks at me. His shirt is ripped and his face and pants are covered with something I don't want to ask about. A clenched jaw as he gazes over my belongings. Eyes fall to Sharon, and he gives a subtle nod before taking off again.

I shuffle along, catching glimpses of the violent and desperate down each aisle.

Shop lifting is a first for me, but, you know, it's kind of fun. Funny how carrying a sledgehammer over your shoulder and looting a store has become the new normal. God, that term again. How quickly the old normal goes out of fashion.

As soon as I see one empty, I step into it. My plan is to beeline to front of the store, step through what was left of the front doors, cross the car park, jump in my car, and get the hell out of there.

But then I hear a scream.

I freeze.

I've always said I'm not the kind of guy who runs toward danger, but the truth is, my first instinct usually is.

I remember one night, drunk, standing on a street in the city waiting for an Uber. A taxi pulled up across the road for a pre-booked pickup. Someone in the rank, also drunk and thoroughly pissed off, thought it should've been theirs.

When the guy stormed over to the driver's window and started shouting, I stepped onto the road toward the cab. I don't know why. It's just part of me. Mild-mannered brand strategist by day, street-level crime fighter by night... said no one ever.

Still, I felt pulled toward it. Like gravity. As the drunk guy reached into the cab, maybe trying to grab the keys to piss off the driver, I took another step. Until Zoe grabbed my arm and spun me around.

"Don't get involved," she said evenly.

When I looked back, the driver had already retrieved his keys and was pulling away. The drunk guy stumbled off to flag down another ride.

And now, here I am again. Teetering between the instinct to step into something dangerous and the echo of Zoe's voice in my head, urging caution. I hadn't done anything at Home Depot when the

couples were fighting, or when that poor employee was bound and gagged in a psycho's trolley. I let all of that slide, the purest form of self-preservation. Was this any different?

Another scream shatters the thought. This one is sharper, closer, like a knife dragging across glass. Fuck. It decides for me.

I turn and hurry toward the murky plastic flaps at the rear. They hang limp in the still air. I push through, and the atmosphere shifts instantly. The temperature drops. Sound falls away. The air tastes industrial, like cardboard and bleach with a sour undertone of something just beginning to rot.

The backroom stretches wider than I expect. Gloom clings to every surface, broken only by thin beams of sunlight spilling through high, dust-streaked windows, offering just enough light to see, but not enough to feel safe.

The floor is smooth concrete, worn and scuffed from decades of trolley wheels and work boots. Steel shelving lined the walls, some neat and orderly, others half-collapsed, looted, or simply forgotten. Cleaning supplies. Expired snacks. Dented cans. Backup stock.

To my left, an old desk slouched beneath a corkboard cluttered with faded memos, shift schedules, and passive-aggressive notes about fridge etiquette. An unplugged phone. A battered walkie-talkie. Maybe a set of forgotten keys.

To my right, two rolling carts stood abandoned, half-loaded with cases of water and toilet paper. The stocker must've dropped everything and run.

Suddenly, from my left, a girl darts across the backroom.

From the look of her, she had unsuspectingly arrived to work for her early shift and got caught up in the free-for-all when everything went to hell. Her shirt is torn, or maybe ripped, maybe cut. I can't tell. What I can tell is that she is trying to get away, making a beeline for the emergency exit door.

And the guy chasing her is gaining fast.

Jeans, heavy boots, shirt, jacket, he closes the distance with ease. And somewhere in the back of my mind, a sick thought occurred: has he let her go just so he could chase her again?

The thrill of the hunt.

Just as she reaches the rear fire door to my right, painted red and marked by a dead EXIT sign, he roughly grabs her arm and yanks her away from freedom. He shoves her up against a shelf, one hand on her chest and the other braced behind her.

She squirms and cries out for him to let her go, her voice full of fight, not fear.

He doesn't. He leans in, body pressing closer. Whispering something low.

It is so fucking cliché I almost throw up. Of course this happens. It always does. I just never understand why. Fighting, stealing, even murder. I can make sense of those in some twisted way. But this? People losing their minds after only twelve hours without electricity. It feels like the whole world forgot how to breathe.

But this? Were guys like him just walking around society waiting for it to fall apart so they could finally be who they are without consequence? It doesn't make sense. Not to me.

Maybe there was a critical message broadcast on the emergency radio system, one I missed, telling people to act like fuck wits.

As he presses against her, she locks eyes with me and stops fighting.

"Good girl," the man says. "But I want you to fight."

I clench my fists. An unsettling rage works its way within me.

"Please," she mouths.

And like I said earlier, this kind of situation? For whatever reason, I'm inexplicably drawn to it. I silently place the pack of water and basket down and carefully retrieve Sharon from the basket handles.

She watches what I'm doing and gives me an imperceptible nod.

Good enough.

I step forward, lining up the weight in my hands. Decide to give it a practice swing.

The girl says nothing, but her eyes agree with the idea. So, with my adrenalin pumping, I yank Sharon over my shoulder... and instantly lose control of her. The weight yanks hard on my shoulder as she slips clean out of my grip and clatters to the polished concrete floor behind me with the subtlety of a bomb.

The guy stops, jerks his head around in my direction.

I do the only thing I can think of. I turn around and pretend I wasn't there, like a kid caught stealing cookies from the kitchen. If I can't see you, you can't see me.

"Hey!" his gruff voice booms behind me. "This one's mine. Fuck off and get your own."

I freeze, not for the first time.

"Hey," he continues. "I'm talking to you."

I hear footsteps, the yelp of the girl, her struggling against his grasp as he tugs her with him.

"What?" he continues. "You want to watch? You some kind of freak? You can have the leftovers if you want, you sick little fuck."

He's close now. Close enough that I can smell him. Body odor, sharp and sour, like he's been marinating in adrenaline and arrogance. I don't know why people, even in the middle of an apocalypse, think it's okay to leave the house without deodorant.

The girl makes noises like she's still fighting, punching, kicking, twisting against him with everything she's got.

My cheeks flush and my throat itches as I bend down and pick up the basket and water pack.

"Stop for a second!" he yells.

I hear it. A click. The unmistakable sound of metal sliding out of metal.

“Listen, man,” he says, almost breathless. “I’ve got a knife, alright? Let me do this... and you can go second.”

My heart slams against my ribs. Heat floods my chest, then drops into my gut, heavy and sharp.

I set the basket down like it might explode.

One breath in. One breath out.

My fingers bite into the shrink-wrap at the top of the water pack. The plastic stretches, squeals, holds. The bottles inside shift and thud, a blunt weight waiting to be used.

I pivot.

I swing wide, all hips and shoulders, the pack cutting through the stale supermarket air.

It hits.

A wet, ugly smack against something solid. The man’s head snaps sideways and he yelps, high and surprised, like an animal that didn’t see the kick coming. The wrap tears. Bottles burst free and bounce across the tiles, spinning, clattering, skidding under shelves.

His grip loosens.

The girl slips from his hand, stumbling back. The knife drops, then skates away with a bright scrape, ending up in the open like it’s daring someone to reach for it.

He hits the floor hard, one elbow folding under him. He grabs at his head, eyes blinking fast, trying to find where he is.

“You fuck!” he spits.

I don’t answer.

Something in me clicks over.

I still have the ripped plastic in my fist, a leash of torn wrap and a few bottles trapped inside. I step close. Close enough to smell his sweat. Close enough to see the panic sharpen behind his anger.

I lift what’s left of the pack over my shoulder.

Up on my toes.

Then I drive it down.

The impact lands with a dense, final thud that I feel in my arms, in my teeth.

His head bounces once, then twice on the concrete. Legs kick then he doesn't move. Mouth works soundlessly. A wet gurgle crawls up his throat as his eyes lose focus.

I stare at him, breathing hard.

And strangely... I get it. I understand what all the fuss is about. It was almost therapeutic. In a completely fucked up kind of way.

"Thank you," the girl says.

Her name tag is written '*Meaghan*'. And honestly... she looks like one. Short brown hair, stylishly tousled, sweeping lightly across her forehead. A face you would trust in a crisis, but not one you would dare lie to. There's something disarmingly confident in her expression, especially considering what she's just been through.

"Are you okay, Meaghan?" I ask.

"Megs," she replies. "People call me Megs. I'm fine."

"Where did this asshole come from?"

"Fucked if I know, but they seem to be everywhere."

"Yeah, tell me about it. You need help to get anywhere?"

She shakes her head. "The only thing I need right now is something to tie this guy up with." She looks at me. "You got anything?"

I reach into my pocket and pull out the duct tape from the Home Depot psycho.

Her eyes light up.

Together, we drag him across the concrete and prop him up. But the taping? That's all her. She binds his wrists behind the shelving supports, then winds tape across his mouth and eyes. Finally, she wraps his ankles tight to the metal legs.

He's not getting out of that on his own.

I collect Sharon as she finds his knife. She presses the blade along his skin, light at first and then deeper, drawing thin, red lines across his arms and chest. Deliberate. Controlled.

She slaps his face once, hard, trying to bring him around.

I say my goodbyes, ready to leave her to it, whatever that happens to be, but she stops me. One last request.

“Do you mind if I use that?” she asks.

I look at it.

“Are you sure?”

An innocent smile crosses her face, and she nods. In this moment, I wonder which one of them is the real crazy one?

I step back as she grips Sharon. The man stirs, moaning at first, then thrashing as reality clicks in. He pulls at the tape, jerking his head from side to side, his body bucking uselessly against the shelves. He’s not going anywhere.

Megs lifts Sharon over her shoulder with effortless strength. She’s tougher than she looks, or maybe revenge has turned her into something more than ordinary.

She glances over her shoulder at me. “Maybe it’s best if you don’t see this,” she says. “Plausible deniability.”

“What are you going to do?” Although I think I know exactly what she’s going to do.

She wrinkles her nose and gives me a pointed look. “I don’t think you want to know.”

Her eyes flick downward. I catch the message. Loud and clear. Just picturing it twists something deep in me. A sharp pain from my testicles to my gut, the kind of raw physical recoil only someone with a penis gets.

I turn away, heading toward the shop floor. His groans follow me. I catch myself in the space between blocking my ears and cheering her on. I think my adrenaline is crashing, making it hard to decide or think straight.

Then I hear it. A thump. A sound that doesn’t fit. And a groan that doesn’t sound human.

I pause, slowly turn around.

The fire door is slowly closing. The guy is still taped to the shelving and is very much alive. And Sharon... well, she's just lying there, upright, her handle pointing to the ceiling like a silent exclamation.

I scratch my head, walk back, and pick her up. Megs must have lost her nerve, not that I can blame her. Maybe she saw the horror up close and realized how real it was. Whatever it was, I get it.

It's time to go home. To Zoe. I've been gone far too long. I need to know she's safe and that our house is still our shelter.

I look down for my basket. But it isn't there. It's gone.

It hits me in an instant: Megs took my basket. That bitch!

I bolt through the fire door into the alley where the staff parking lot lay beyond. There's no sign of her.

Then a car screeches past. Inside? Megs, hand waving out the window, barreling around the corner, disappearing just as fast as she arrived.

Fuck! I spin around, just in time to hear the door click shut. Double fuck!

There's no handle, no keyhole. It's the kind of door that only opens from the inside. I yell and swing Sharon into it. The sledgehammer's head thumps against the metal, vibrating in my hands, but barely makes a dent.

I follow up with a kick. My toes scream in protest, and my anger spikes.

Gritting my teeth, I hold Sharon across my body and march the length of the building to finish what I came to do. I round the corner. The parking lot is... empty?

Just kidding.

It's dotted with cars, their doors flung open, windows smashed, dead bodies scattered in gruesome poses, and grocery debris littering the asphalt. It looks like the horde either got bored, moved on, or retreated to lick their wounds.

Near the store entrance, black plumes of smoke billow out and snake into the sky. Aha. So that's why. My grip on Sharon tightens, my knuckles white as bone.

Frustration and annoyance. I need something. Anything to hit. My eyes lock on a metal rubbish bin by the door. I tee it up like a golf ball, skip forward a couple of steps, and let out a roar as I swing Sharon with everything I've got.

The bin explodes off its bolted base and flies into the smoke-filled store, glass and metal colliding with a crash. Inside, I hear glass shattering and the sound of bodies scrambling.

But I don't wait. I trudge across the desolate car park, gathering the cans runaway looters dropped. Their apathy is almost as telling as their chaos.

By the time I reach the road, I have five cans in total: two tomato soups, one of potatoes, one of beans, and, just in case, a can of dog food. We don't have a dog, but something was better than nothing.

I see the man before I cross the street. He is slumped over the hood of my car, arms draped like he was caressing it. The back of his shirt is soaked in blood. As I step closer, I notice heavy, jagged scratch marks lining the length of the car, the rear windows shattered, and a baseball bat lodged into one of the openings.

By God. You turn your back for five seconds and this shit hits the fan.

I lean in and toss the cans through the broken window. Then I nudged the body with Sharon. The sledgehammer's steel head jam into open wounds, like a big cat had clung to him.

"Hey!" I yell. Silence. He is definitely dead.

That's when I notice the flashlight still clutched in his hand. I yank it free.

"You son of a bitch."

I swung the trunk open to find my hardware store haul vanished. No duct tape, no tools, nothing. Karma? Maybe. There's definitely no honor among thieves. I fling the torch in and slam the lid shut.

My rage hit a new high. I had come for supplies to help us survive. Instead, I found a heap of corpses and ended up with a sledgehammer, some cans (some edible, some not so edible), and a chunk of duct tape. Hell, I had more this morning. I am not cut out for this shit.

I kick the man's head, so he slides off the hood like raw meat leaving a plate, thudding against the asphalt. Then I unlock my door and slide in, wiping my hands on my jeans.

I looked down at the radio. There is a knife blade sticking out of it. I didn't bother removing it. I just sigh, grip the wheel and press the ignition button.

An explosion erupts outside my window at Wegmans. Black plumes twist into the sky.

"Well, this is completely fucked," I mutter.

I hit the gas and barrel forward. The car jolts over something slick with a wet smack.

Whoops. Forgot about the body.

I sigh, long and deep, then shrug like it's just another bump in the road. Flooring it, I swing into a wide U-turn. Tires screech.

Above me, military helicopters hover on the edge of the smoke, watching the world burn.

Chapter 6

Long Black Daydreams

On the way home, the car makes a noise it's never made before, a stuttering, grinding sound that could be the engine, the suspension, or maybe both. It doesn't matter. Even if I know what was wrong, I don't have the first clue how to fix it. That kind of knowledge belongs to another life. Another version of me. Or the internet I can't access.

I turn onto my street, heart hammering faster than the wheels can spin.

But everything stops, including the car, when I see our garage door open, wide and waiting, almost inviting.

Zoe's car remains where I last saw it, the driver's door hanging ajar like she vanished mid-step. A cable runs from inside the car and through the door into the house.

Pressing the accelerator in my Beamer only makes the engine cough and stall. I hit the start button. Nothing.

Frustration spikes. My palm slams the steering wheel. Sharon comes out of the back seat next, gripped hard.

I move up the driveway low and quiet, listening. Tinny voices leak from Zoe's speakers. The radio keeps trying to speak through static, broken and warped.

My stomach knots. Instinct kicks faster than thought. I slam the garage door shut so hard it rattles in the tracks.

Then silence. A heavy, suffocating silence, broken only by two sounds: the sharp, steady tick-tick-tick of the cooling engine, (a noise I never understand and never care enough to research), and the ghostly murmur of Zoe's radio, still whispering into the dark.

I fling open my rear door, yank Sharon free, and hoist it over my shoulder with both hands. I stand at the threshold, holding my breath and listening. Is something out there? Intruders? Are we being robbed, or worse?

I count to three in my head, then straight-arm through the hallway, eyes scanning. My grip tightens around Sharon's handle.

"I'm coming, Zoe!" I shout. Intruders be damned.

The cable runs into the house, then up the stairs, straight toward our bedroom.

Rounding the corner, I see her. Frozen by the open bifold glass doors. Our backyard beyond is nothing but an unruly tangle of grass and weed-entangled garden beds, a mess we inherited and never maintained.

She's completely still. I edge closer, my grip loosening. In my head, I'm thinking of jump scares from horror movies, the kind that make you yell at the screen: 'Don't go near it!'

"Zoe?" I whisper, stepping forward.

She whispers something inaudible.

I call her name again.

"It doesn't work," she says, a little louder. "It draws too much."

"What doesn't work?"

I reach out and touch her shoulder.

She jumps. Screams. Spins. Sees me.

Startled, I drop Sharon hard across the wood floor. The sledgehammer makes a deep gouge as it hits.

Zoe's hand flies to her chest, shoulders trembling.

"Adam, my God... what happened?"

"Are you okay?" I ask

"I'm fine."

"It's just that—"

She collapses into my arms. I hold her tight. Somehow, just being home calms me.

“What happened?” she repeated.

“It’s bad out there, babe,” I say.

She runs a hand over my shirt. “Is that blood?”

“Yeah,” I say absentmindedly. I’m not sure where it came from.

“But I don’t think it’s mine, so that’s good.”

She nods like she didn’t really hear what I said.

“What happened in the garage?”

“Oh, I was listening to the radio,” she murmurs, “and it said...”

I wait for her to finish as her voice wanders off.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She looks at me, blinks, shook her head. “Sorry, what?”

“I asked if you were okay.”

“Oh,” she replies, eyes searching the ground. “Yes, I just... lost my train of thought.” She smiles, like she always does that seems to make everything okay. “It’s just all of this stuff going on, you know?”

“Sit down,” I suggest as I guide her toward the dining table. I pull out a chair, steadying her with one hand, and ease her down like she might break.

“Tea or coffee?”

“There’s no power, honey, remember?”

“We have your car... remember?”

She shakes her head. “Oh, right. Yes.”

I find the end of the extension cable sitting in the middle of our bedroom floor and return to the kitchen along with a power board with half a dozen sockets on it. I go about pulling out the fridge and rearranging the kitchen.

“Hey, so the cable was upstairs.”

She looks over.

“Coffee sounds good,” she says.

I look at her for a moment. I want to question it, but I give her a moment.

I go about making coffee. We scored a fancy automatic machine as a wedding gift. It's a high-end model with Lucid AI built into it. It's got all sorts of fancy capabilities and is said to adjust grind, dose, and duration of the pour based on your mood. No idea how that works, why a coffee machine needs to know my mood, or even who gave it to us. It came with a card signed: *From all of us at F9.*

Zoe said it had something to do with a publisher she was working with. She wanted to get rid of it. After one cup I told her, 'over my dead body.' I said if we ever got divorced, she could have anything and everything... except the machine. That was mine. She didn't argue.

I pull out the milk from the fridge. Uncap and smell.

"Do you think this milk is okay?"

"I think everything in would be good without power for about five hours. Tops."

"How long has it been?"

"Over twenty-four."

I return to the table with two cups of black coffee. I sit down next to her.

"Okay, now, tell me, what's going on?" I ask.

She takes a sip.

"So, did you manage to find anything useful... besides the sledgehammer?"

I forgive the overt nature of which she is avoiding my question and play along.

"Sharon," I declare.

"Who's Sharon?"

"That's what I call it."

"Call what?"

"The sledgehammer. Sharon."

She looks at it and then back to me. "Looks more like a Bruce."

"Bruce?"

“Yeah.”

“No fucking way that’s a Bruce. A Stanley maybe, at a stretch.”

She stares at me for a while to the point I think she has drifted off again, and then promptly changes the subject.

“You didn’t happen across water, by any chance?”

“Well, I did at some stge.”

“Some stage?”

I look away. “Yeah. But I couldn’t hang onto it.”

She nods along, already building the scene in her head. But whatever she’s picturing, it isn’t close. Not to the noise. Not to the smell. Not to what people do when their backs are against a wall.

“So, just the sledgehammer then?”

“Sharon,” I correct.

“Just Sharon then?”

I head back to the car, gather the cans and the torch, and carry everything inside. Back at the dining table, I lay the items out one by one to showcase my spoils of war.

Zoe eyes the spread. Then she looks up at me.

“This is it?”

“That’s all I could get.”

She points to the pet food. “We don’t have a dog.”

“We don’t have a dog... yet.”

“Are you planning on getting a dog?”

I shrug. “Who knows what this crazy world is going to throw at us.”

Zoe picks up the can of potatoes, squints at the label.

“Did you hear anything else on the radio?” I ask.

No response.

I reach out, rest my hand gently on hers.

She rapidly blinks then looks up at me. Her cheeks flush as she places the can down, like she’s embarrassed she had been holding it that long.

“You really need to tell me what’s going on,” I push.

“I just zoned out for a bit, that’s all. All this stuff, you know?”

A familiar response that does not put me at ease.

Zoe picks up her cup and takes another slow sip.

Maybe that’s all it was, just a moment. A pause. Her mind needing time to catch up with the insanity unfolding outside. We were living through something unprecedented. And not in the “once-in-a-generation” sense, but truly uncharted territory.

Back when I was a kid, Covid had felt like a strange sort of holiday. Disruptive, sure, but orderly. The government had a playbook: wear a mask, stay inside, get the shot.

It was manageable.

This... this wasn’t like that.

“Was there any news on the radio?”

“Just telling people to stay inside, that its dangerous outside, to ration things, to be careful of drinking water out of the faucet, that all services have stopped, including law enforcement. Apparently the hospitals have all locked down as well.”

“Locked down? What does that mean?”

“I’m guessing it means to stay the hell away.”

“Did they say what caused all this?”

My voice feels small in the quiet.

Zoe doesn’t look up from the chipped mug cradled in her hands. Her thumb traces the rim like she’s trying to find the right words hidden in the cracks.

“Solar flares, apparently,” she says finally, her voice flat, like she’s just reading the label on a cereal box. “Big ones. A bunch of them, one after the other.”

For a second, it doesn’t register. Solar flares? That’s the kind of thing you hear about in a two-minute science segment between weather and sports. A curiosity, not a catastrophe.

“Flares?” I echo, stupidly. “Like... sunspots?”

She gives a short, humorless laugh, the sound of someone realizing the punchline isn't funny anymore.

"More like the sun reaching down and ripping the wires out of everything. They called it a Carrington-level solar storm."

"I can't believe some little cosmic flare has done this."

"Yeah, not little. The said it was an X-60-class. Which I guess is pretty big. Big enough to kill communication satellites and surge power grids."

Outside, the world groans. From what I had witnessed and experienced, the city isn't dying all at once. It's rotting from the inside out.

"How... how did they not see this coming? How?"

"No one knows," Zoe says. "One moment everything is fine, and the next it's too late."

"Well, how long before all this bullshit is over?"

She shrugs. "They don't know."

"Well, can't they just divert power from somewhere else?"

"There is nowhere else. It wasn't just New York state. Or the country. It's everywhere."

"Everywhere like..."

"Yes," she says evenly with a nod. "The entire fucking planet."

I stand, start pacing, can feel the nervous tension run around my body and I need to dissipate it.

"But, like, what? What are they... How can this... I... I just don't..."

"The police are stretched. They're sending out the military but that's not a long-term solution."

I stop. Fold my arms. "So, what the fuck do we do until someone fixes this shit?"

"Nobody knows."

I massage my temples. A headache appears out of nowhere.

"Is help coming?"

“They didn’t say. Maybe it’s not.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She leaned forward. She had that poker face look on her face again, like she was hiding her concern, but I saw it, a glimmer of it anyway. She could fool all sorts of people, but she can’t fool me.

I kneel down in front of her, hold her hands. “I’m sorry, babe.”

“What if no one is coming?” she whispers.

“Someone will come. They always come. The government isn’t going to leave us like this.”

“This isn’t a movie, Adam. This is real life.”

I give a fake reassuring smile and rise, walking to the back doors. The glass panels were concertinaed open. I lean on the frame.

The day was moving on and soon it will be late afternoon, and then sunset and then dusk and then the infinite blackness of night. And then God knows what would happen.

Just yesterday, none of this even crossed my mind. Safety. Security. Those were givens. If something went wrong, you called the police. They showed up, fixed it, took notes, made arrests. That’s how the world worked.

Not anymore. Not after what I saw this morning.

Now it was every person for themselves. Survival wasn’t abstract, it was tactical. Hour by hour. The real challenge? Making it through today just so you’ve got a shot at figuring out tomorrow.

I feel Zoe’s hand on my shoulder. I inhale slowly and turn to face her. There’s no sense in getting twisted up about things you can’t control. Bad shit’s happening, everywhere. All we can do now is accept it and keep going.

The ones who can’t... the ones who can’t face how bad it’s gotten, they’re the ones who won’t make it.

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she replies.

She gives me a look that is quiet and unreadable, and I step forward, pull her into me, and hold on tight.

Sometimes, a squeeze says more than anything else ever could.

“We’ll get through this,” I say, kissing her head.

“We can’t last forever with no power,” she says.

“People lived for thousands of years with no electricity.”

“Yeah, and what was their life expectancy again?”

I regard her. “Was there anything on the radio about a military check point or operating base or anything?”

“I don’t... I don’t remember. I don’t suppose you found a solar radio at the hardware store and forgot to bring it in?”

I think about all the shit I got, most of it useless (obviously, apart from Sharon), the rest of it stolen from me just as quickly but don’t want to admit I was entirely out of my depths amongst the murder and mayhem. In the end, I lie.

“There wasn’t any left. But we can just use the car, right?”

“I guess. As long as we keep an eye on the battery. Although if it goes flat, we can just use yours.”

I make a face.

“What?” she says.

“There’s something I should tell you about my car.”

I conserve the battery. What if we need to get to a camp or safe zone or something?”

Did I mention she is always right? Of course I did.

“God damn it. I wish I was an electrical engineer or something. At least then I could rig a solar panel or fix the damn battery.”

“I wish I was a farmer. Or a botanist.”

“Right. That would’ve come in handy for all those dead houseplants and garden disasters we’ve racked up.”

“Let’s face it, we’re not those people,” she admits. “Never were. We Google shit like how to boil an egg. So we better figure some shit out. Fast.”

Chapter 7

Knock, knock

We decide to take a rational approach to survival.

God, I can't believe I just said that. Survival.

When did living a life, finding meaning, paying bills, buying things, and trying to get ahead turn into this?

I know exactly when. It happened the moment the power went out.

Still, we make a pact. No losing our shit. No panic. The rest of the afternoon is spent clearing out the pantry, sorting food, meds, whatever might help us live through... whatever this is. We toss anything useless, the kind of junk you accumulate without realizing, into a pile we agree not to think about right now.

Then we lay out every potential weapon we can find on the dining table.

There's Sharon, of course, resting like royalty. Next to her: hedge clippers (which I initially questioned, but Zoe argued the point and won), a baseball bat I bought for a costume party (don't ask), three hammers (no idea how or why we have that many), a wrench, a crowbar (which I do remember buying, but couldn't tell you why), two brooms, and every big kitchen knife we own.

I stare at the knives, a queasy feeling settling in my gut. The idea of stabbing someone makes my skin crawl. I've got a mortal fear of needles. Loved slasher flicks as a kid, sure, but the thought of real skin tearing? Makes me want to throw up.

We scour the fridge and fill two large garbage bags with spoiled food including milk (damn it), meat, mystery leftovers. Anything we can salvage, we do: sauces, fruit, vegetables. The freezer's a different

story. That'll take longer to turn, so we agree to prioritize the perishables.

Dinner turns into a feast of steak, onions, and canned potatoes, our last semi-fresh meal for who knows how long. The smell of seared meat fills the air, rich and heavy, as the light outside fades. We cook fast and eat faster, as if the sun itself is running out of time.

By sunset, we secure the gates, lock the doors, and check every window once, then twice, then again just to be sure. I can't shake the unease after everything I saw today. The house feels too quiet. Outside, the world seems to hold its breath, and chaos waits somewhere beyond the fence, patient and close.

The house is shockingly dark without light pollution. My eyes adjust, but the world dulls to soft, muted grays. Still, I know this place. I can move through it by muscle memory.

My phone screen glows faintly displaying eighteen percent battery left. It's now just a glorified clock, calculator, and camera. And even then I wonder what's the point? There's no one to call, nothing to scroll. Soon it'll be dead, and not even that.

"All locked up," I say to Zoe, as we meet in the middle of the house. "It's only just after six. What do you want to do?"

"I got an idea."

The seats recline with a slow, electric hum.

Our phones are plugged in, juicing up so I can calculate things, obviously, while Zoe unscrews a fresh bottle of Tempranillo. The car battery hovers at seventy-nine percent. I hold the glasses while she pours.

Outside, the world is quiet in that uneasy, post-chaos kind of way. Inside, the emergency broadcast crackles from the speakers.

The message hasn't changed.

Stay inside. Boil water. All public services are down. Police stations and hospitals are overwhelmed. More information is coming.

But no new information comes.

So we drink.

We sip quietly in the low hum of the car's cabin until the voice on the radio changes. This one isn't live. It's pre-recorded. And that alone makes it different enough to matter.

“Attention citizens of the Rochester metropolitan area. This is an emergency government broadcast. Effective immediately, under executive order, the United States military has declared a state of martial law across Monroe County and surrounding regions. All civilians are instructed to remain indoors and comply with directives issued by military and emergency personnel. Curfew is now in effect from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM until further notice.

“Essential travel only is permitted. Unauthorized movement during curfew hours may result in detention or fines. Checkpoints will be established at major intersections and travel corridors.

“Distribution of emergency rations and water will commence at 0900 hours tomorrow morning until midday. Civilians are instructed to proceed to the following locations for MREs and water bottles: Frontier Field Stadium, 1 Morrie Silver Way, Ontario Beach Park, Lake Avenue Entrance, Genesee Valley Park, near the Elmwood Avenue Pavilion, Webster Recreation Center, Chiyoda Drive, for eastern suburbs residents, Henrietta Town Park, Calkins Road area.

"Supplies are limited. Bring your ID. Remain orderly. Further updates to follow every two hours on this frequency."

Another burst of static. Then the tone returns to the steady, empty emergency signal.

"I guess we're going to Town Park." I look over and raise a glass. "See, I told you they would come."

In the glow of the infotainment system, she smiles, but can't hold it, instead, she looks away and sips her wine.

"What's your phone up to?"

I checked the display. "Seventy-eight."

She killed the engine, throwing us into an abyss.

"God damn, I can't even see my hand in front of my face," I say.

"Is that right?" she replies. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"Nope."

I licked my lips.

"Two."

She took a breath. "Nope."

"How many?"

"Zero."

"What?"

"I wasn't holding up any fingers."

"That's cheating."

I heard her shift in her seat. "Why is that cheating?"

"Because..." but then my words left me. I shift to face her. "Because it just is."

"Sometimes not everything is..."

Her voice just stops, like she's vanished from the car entirely. And yet, I can still feel her. That unmistakable presence. Like a phantom heartbeat in the space between us. She's right there, even in silence.

"As it seems?" I offer.

Nothing. I reach out and gently touch her face.

“As it seems,” she replies, as if she had said the entire sentence in one go.

I’m about to ask her, again, what’s going on. But I’ve already tried that twice today, both times met with a brush-off. Still, something’s happening. Make no mistake about that. And I need to figure out what it is before something really bad happens.

Then it happens.

A knock.

It echoes through the house, dull and distant, yet somehow thunderous inside the quiet of the garage. I sit up straight. My heart pounds.

“Did you hear that?” I whisper.

“It sounded like a knock.”

“Exactly.” I get out. “Stay here,” I say.

“Like hell.”

“Just...” My voice comes out sharp and rushed, too fast for my own breath. I rein it in, forcing a deep inhale, trying to slow my pulse.

“If there’s trouble,” I say, steadier now, “I want you to drive straight to that military checkpoint. Don’t wait for me. Just go. Tell them what happened. I’m sure... I’m sure they’ll figure something out.”

I creep toward the door leading into the rest of the house, wishing I had Sharon in hand. But she’s around the corner, resting on the dining table, just out of reach.

I pause at the threshold, holding my breath.

Another knock.

I peer around the corner. Through the gloom, a light flickers against the glass panel in the back door. Beside it is a face. A young girl. The light from her torch spills into the room, illuminating the array of weapons laid out on the table.

I pull back, swallowing hard. I don't like this. Even if she's just a girl, even if she is hardly fearsome and totally disarming. Perhaps that's exactly what she wants me to think.

Paranoia settles in, thick and suffocating.

Suddenly, a thump. Then the sharp crack of glass breaking, a shard tumbling to the floor.

My eyes widen. Anger surges.

Coming around knocking out of curiosity is fine. But breaking into my house? That's a whole different game.

I launch from behind the wall, marching toward the back bifold doors. The torchlight blinds me, but it helps me locate Sharon on the table. In one motion, I sweep her up and swing her over my shoulder, ready to bring her down on the arm reaching through the opening.

The whole thing has disaster written all over it. If I swing, I'll probably miss and shatter the entire glass panel, leaving a gaping hole for anyone to walk through. Besides, the lock is secured with a key; there's no chance of jimmying it open.

As she sees me approach, she squeals and falls back. The torchlight hits the ceiling, casting reflections in all directions, then darkness again as the light is covered.

"Get out of here!" I yell.

"I need help," she says, her voice hurried and breathless.

I bend down, heart still thudding, and press my face to the jagged hole she's made in the glass panel. In the gloom I can see that she's maybe sixteen.

"I said get the fuck out of here."

"Please! Some people are chasing me and...." Her voice trails off.

"For fuck's sake..." I screw up my face and turn away.

I press my face back to the broken glass. Natural moonlight spills over the yard. It looks empty.

Double fuck.

I lower Sharon, setting her down gently on her head beside me, and dig through my pocket for the keys. My fingers fumble, cursing under my breath as I flick through them and finally get the right one. The lock clicks.

“Hurry up,” I bark.

She scrambles to her feet, grabs her backpack, and dashes through the door. I slam it shut behind her and twist the key hard, locking it again.

“You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

Her comment throws me. I turn sharply.

She’s backing into the kitchen, her cell phone’s flashlight held up like she’s telling ghost stories at a school campfire. The beam lights up her young, pale, wary face.

“What? No! You wanted in, didn’t you?”

She shrinks against the counter, the torch trembling in her grip. But after a beat, she steadies herself. Shoulders square. Chin lifts.

Dark hair’s pulled back in a loose ponytail, strands falling into her face. Heavy jacket. Faded jeans. Sturdy boots. The kind of outfit that says she’s been on her feet for hours, maybe even days.

“Yeah, but... people change. Fast.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell her I am not like them. Not like the ones outside, the ones smashing windows and clawing at each other for cans of soup and scraps of power.

But I pause.

Because she’s not wrong.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I say, softer this time. Calmer. “But you need to trust me... or you’re free to leave. In fact, I would prefer it if you don’t trust me and leave immediately. You can just go!”

Her jaw tightens, a flicker of something like fear or defiance or both, moving behind her eyes. Her fingers wrap tighter around the phone, like it’s the last weapon she’s got.

The torchlight wobbles, casting long shadows on the walls behind her. Her breathing's shallow. Measured.

But she doesn't move.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to trust each other than," she says.

Suddenly, Zoe steps out from around the corner.

No sound. No warning. Just her in her calm and collected glory, eyes locked on the girl like she'd been standing there the whole time.

The light from the phone catches her face, highlighting the sharp set of her jaw, the calm fire behind her eyes. She doesn't speak. She doesn't have to. Her presence says everything.

The girl jerks slightly, surprised, but she doesn't run. Her grip on the phone shifts, tighter now, but maybe not with fear.

"It's okay," Zoe says stepping through the light, hands up. "My name is Zoe, and this is Adam. We're normal people."

I wish she hadn't said that.

Because that's exactly what serial killers say. The kind who lures young girls into their home, tie them to chairs, and then slice. Skin them. Boil body parts while forcing them to watch with their one remaining eyeball... and then making them eat it.

Yeah. That escalated quickly. I should probably stop watching movies.

"I'm Sarah," she says softly, voice cutting through the silence. She stands at the opposite end of the island bench, her presence steady-ing yet inquisitive.

"Why don't you tell us what happened?"

The girl hesitates, her eyes darting between us. "I... I didn't prepare very well," she begins, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Where are your parents?"

"They went out, but they didn't come back. I didn't know what else to do, so I started knocking on my neighbors' doors." She glances toward the dining table. "I saw what you had laid out on the table. The weapons, the supplies. Figured you were the prepared kind of

people. When no one answered, I thought you must have left as well." She shrugs. "I was desperate."

"You said you were being chased by someone."

She looks down. "I wasn't. I was just saying things to get you to open the door." She looks up and steps forward. "But I'm not a bad person... really. I just..." she holds her belly. "I'm just really hungry." Another step. "Please. I don't know what to do."

Before Zoe speaks, I jump in. "The Military are handing out food and water at Town Park tomorrow. You should go there."

"Oh, I'm sure we've got something that can get you through," Zoe says, right over top of me, almost too smoothly.

With that, she pulls out her phone and walks past the girl, disappearing into the pantry with a beam of light, like it's just another Tuesday.

"Stay right there," I tell the girl. "And don't touch anything."

She nods, but I don't wait to see if she listens. I follow Zoe into the pantry, the quiet shuffle of my steps the only sound between us.

"Hey, what are we doing here?" I whisper.

"Helping someone who needs it," she replies.

She has always been the more emotionally intelligent one, the one who could read a room without a single word being spoken. She feels what people need before they know it themselves. She's the social one, the heart. Next to her, I'm just fumbling my way through life, hoping I get it right.

"What do you think is going to happen?" she asks.

"People like this are like wild animals. Once you feed them, they'll keep coming back for more."

I mean, I did help Megs in the Wegmans backroom, so I don't really know what I'm complaining about. Paranoia. That's what it is. Creeping in, whispering the worst about people. Not surprising, really, after the things I saw today.

"Wouldn't you want help from others if you needed it?" she asks.

“Well, yeah, but that’s different.”

“Why is that different?”

I couldn’t answer the question, not in any meaningful way that would make sense to either her or me.

“Fine,” I relent, sighing. “But she’s not staying here or anything.”

Just then, a sharp clack echoes from the house. My gut tightens.

I instinctively pat my pockets.

Shit.

The keys. In all the chaos, I left them in the door.

Chapter 8

Choking Hazard

I step out of the pantry and freeze. Sarah (if that's even her real name) is standing by the bifold doors. And next to her, a man clicks the lock shut.

"Get out!" I yell, lunging forward. The kitchen island and dining table cut off my path.

He casually lifts Sharon, my Sharon, onto his shoulder. "Uh-uh," he says, voice calm but heavy. "You stay right there."

"Sorry about this," Sarah murmurs without looking at me. "I guess you were right... you shouldn't trust people like me."

"What do you want?" I ask, even though I already know.

The man sweeps an arm around the house, eyes glinting in the gloom. "This. For tonight, anyway. We'll stick around for a few days till the food's gone, then move on. And you're gonna let us."

"I don't think so."

He steps closer, slow and deliberate. "I've got a gun," he says. "So here's the deal. You play nice, or we don't play nice at all. You understand me?"

To be honest, I don't know what to say. I want to say something sharp, something badass, but he's holding all the cards. Adrenaline pulses through me, lighting up every nerve. I'm shaking, trying to control it, but this is it. Fight or flight. And I'm not sure which is winning.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

"Necessity," he says without blinking. "I don't know if you've noticed, but things went south real fast."

"Tell me about it," I mutter.

I remember watching a TED talk once about a hostage negotiator from the FBI talking about de-escalation. Build trust. Create rapport. Find common ground. Maybe if I connect with him, he'll just take what he wants and leave.

I take a slow step forward. "Did you see what happened at the Home Depot today?"

He lifts Sharon slightly. "Is that where you got this?"

I nod. "Yeah. Total madness out there."

"Right," he says. "And it's only gonna get worse."

Then his tone shifts. Cold. Final.

"So here's what I want you to do. Get on your damn knees, before I either put the end of this sledgehammer through your skull, or shoot you in the face."

So much for negotiation.

"Either way," he continues. "It doesn't end well for you."

"At least tell me your name," I say.

"My name is get on your fucking knees."

I lower behind the island bench until he shouts at me.

"No," he barks. "Out here, where I can see you."

I crouch low, scanning the shadows for anything I can use. A knife, maybe. But they're all gone, laid out on the table like a damn buffet for intruders. And even if I had one, what good is a knife against a gun?

"Listen," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why don't you take some food and go?"

He steps toward me, his face hardening.

"Why don't you shut the fuck up?"

Sarah picks up the duct tape from the table, her eyes gleaming. "There's lots of cool shit here, Dad."

"Dad?" I repeat.

"Shut up," Dad says, pointing the end of Sharon towards my face.

"Did you find something?" Dad says over his shoulder.

“I got some duct tape,” she says.

“Perfect. Now, is there anyone else here?”

“Listen,” I start. “There’s a car in the garage you can take. An Audi. It’s yours. It makes a funny noise after some miles, and the radio is fucked, but it will help you take more stuff and get to where you’re going.”

“We’ve already got a car,” Sarah says. “A nice one.”

“I’ll ask again. Is there anyone else?”

“The old woman is in the pantry,” Sarah blurts out.

“Old?” I say. “She’s not an old woman! How old are you?”

“Old enough to stab you in the balls!” she fires back.

“Enough!” Dad says. “You know how I feel about you using that language!”

“Jeez, you said ‘fuck’ just before!”

“Sarah!” Dad yells. Then straightens. “Come on out, old lady,” he shouts into the void.

“She’s not old,” I remind him.

He shoves Sharon into me. It’s more of a tap than a blow, but I stumble backward, pain flaring in my mouth. I land hard, the floor jarring my spine. I touch my lips, expecting blood or broken teeth, but there’s nothing. Just shock.

Despite his shouting, Zoe doesn’t emerge from the pantry.

“Hey!” the man bellows.

He pulls a gun from his waistband, holding it out. Earlier, when he mentioned it without showing it, I wondered if he was bluffing. Sometimes, the threat alone is enough to make people comply. But now, in the dim light, I can’t tell if it’s real. And I’m not eager to find out the hard way.

“If you don’t come out here,” he growls, “I’m going to shoot this guy in the gut. Take him days to die.”

Still, no response from Zoe. I’m torn between pride in her defiance and fear for my life.

"I'm gonna count to three. One."

He nudged forward.

"Two."

Another step.

"Three."

The cold barrel presses against my forehead. The metal is real, unyielding, and it steals the breath from my chest. He isn't bluffing.

Henrietta used to be a good place. Low crime, friendly neighbors, kids playing basketball in the street until the light faded. It was the kind of neighborhood where people waved from their driveways and brought over casseroles when someone was sick. Home invasions never happened here. They were something you saw on the news, something that happened somewhere else. But now, with the world coming apart, I should have known it would find its way here too.

Letting that girl in was a mistake. I should have been more cautious. Maybe if I had a gun, this wouldn't be happening. Those damn second amendment enthusiasts were right.

"Shit!" Dad yelled. "Sarah, grab a knife and get that bitch out here."

"She's not a bitch," I say, or at least, I think I do. My mouth is still numb from the earlier hit. If my words didn't come out slurred, they certainly do after he delivers another blow, this time to my nose. Pain explodes, and I feel a warm trickle running from my nostrils.

I hear the scrape of a knife being taken from the dining table. Sarah walks past me toward the pantry.

"Oh, Zoe," she taunts as she approaches.

"No," I gurgle. "Don't hurt her."

"Shut up," Dad says. "She's just encouraging her to come out."

A flash of light erupts as Sarah uses her phone to light up the space. Then she steps back out.

"She's not there."

“You said she was in there.”

“She was, they both were.”

“Well, where is she then?” he demands.

Sarah shrugs, knocking off the flashlight function on her phone. Maybe they’re conserving power.

Dad looms over me, a dark silhouette in the dim light. “Where is she?” he shouts.

I don’t respond. I genuinely don’t know. Zoe’s absence confuses me as much as it does him. What is she planning?

Suddenly, the sound of the garage door crashing open echoes through the house.

“The garage!” Sarah exclaims.

Thank God! She’s making a run for it, just like I told her. In a few moments, she’ll be speeding away to Town Park to wait for the military. Given Dad’s inaction regarding his threats, I hope this means he’ll just take some supplies and leave. Even if he doesn’t, I’ll fight. As long as Zoe is safe, that’s all that matters.

But I don’t hear any squealing tires.

“Come here,” he orders Sarah. When she hurries over, he hands her the gun and points her arm toward me. “If he moves, even a little, just pull that trigger. Just like I taught you.”

He grabs Sharon and heads down the hall toward the garage. Sarah and I wait in silence. In the gloom, I see her glance toward the garage door.

“Dad?” she calls out.

There is no response. The silence presses in, thick and unnatural. No scuffle, no thud, not even a muffled shout. It feels as if the garage is empty. Then the door slams shut, the crash echoing through the house and shivering along the walls.

He must have her restrained, planning to march her in, have us kneel side by side. And then? Who knows? The thought of her being hurt ignites a fire in me. I clench my fists, calculating the force need-

ed to disarm Sarah. Could I wrestle the gun away and turn it on him? Rage clouds my judgment, but I back myself to act.

A gurgling noise breaks the silence. Sarah calls out, her voice wavering with uncertainty and fear. A figure lurches around the corner, but it's too large to be Zoe. It's Dad, but something's off. He doesn't speak, just shuffles forward.

"Dad?" Sarah's voice wavers, her gaze fixed on the stumbling figure.

In the dim light, I shift to one knee. As she calls out again, I launch myself at her. My hand clamps over hers, gripping the gun. The sudden movement causes her finger to squeeze the trigger sending a gunshot shattering into drywall.

We crash beyond the dining table. She struggles, but I hold on to her hand. Another shot fires as I wrest the pistol away, scrambling back and aiming it between her and Dad. But as he nears, something isn't right.

He stumbles forward, each step sluggish. His knees hit the ground with a dull thud. For a moment, he remains upright, swaying, before collapsing face-first onto the floor.

Sarah rushes to him, shouting his name, her footsteps frantic on the cracked tiles.

"What did you do?!" she screams.

Her words are raw, catching on sobs she can't control. The bravado she wears like armor crumbles, replaced by panic and a deeper, bone-deep fear.

She drops to her knees beside him, hands scrabbling at his shoulders, desperate to undo whatever's just happened.

I find her phone on the floor, dislodged during our scuffle. Though locked, I swipe down to access the control center and tap the flashlight icon. A beam of light pierces the darkness.

Approaching Sarah, I illuminate her figure. She's sobbing, draped over her father's lifeless body. Circling around, the light re-

veals garden shear handles protruding from the back of his neck, blood pooling beneath him.

I direct the beam toward the garage. Zoe stands there, motionless, the light casting her in stark relief. She doesn't flinch or shield her eyes, just stares ahead, seemingly in shock. I lower the light immediately.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I shift toward her.

She remains silent, the only sounds are my footsteps on the floorboards and Sarah's quiet sobs.

"What happened?" I whisper.

Before she can respond, a sharp clack echoes from the back door. Spinning around, I see Sarah has vanished, leaving her father's body behind. I rush to the door, flashlight sweeping the garden, but there's no sign of her. She disappeared as swiftly as she had arrived, leaving our world in silence once more.

Turning back, I find Zoe standing over the body, gazing down. I approach her.

"I... I... It was an accident," she says.

I do not bother trying to unpack her comment. Instead, I wrap my arms around her, gently but firmly. Now is not the time for questions, or for searching for proof. Maybe there never will be. What is done is done. Whatever happened in that garage is etched into our timeline, permanent and unforgiving. After everything that unfolded today, this moment feels almost predictable, as if it was always meant to end this way.

"It's okay," I say softly, then kiss her head. "Go upstairs. I'll deal with this."

"What are you going to do?"

I look down at the body and swallow. "I don't know."

Zoe feels her way through the darkness to the stairwell. She stops half way up.

"I'm sorry about this," she says. "I need to tell you something."

“In the morning,” I respond.

She disappears upstairs as I glance around to the body and to the open door. Sleep feels like a distant luxury. There’s work to be done.

I prop Sarah’s phone against a mug, its flashlight casting a stark beam over the dining table. Draining her battery doesn’t bother me.

Quietly, I remove our makeshift arsenal from the table: Sharon, the hedge clippers, the bat, the hammers. I lean them against the wall or lay them on the island countertop, careful not to disturb Zoe. Then, I tip the heavy wooden dining table onto its short side. Stealth becomes moot as I drag the beast across the floor to the door, which I had locked earlier. I wedge the table so its surface presses against the door handle and the adjacent panels. It covers the handle and three more panels.

Truth be told, if someone wanted to get in, they would. Smash a panel, break a window, make all the noise they wanted. No one would come. There are no authorities anymore. No stealthy burglars, only desperate people searching for food, water, and shelter. Still, I hope the barricade sends a message that someone lives here. Someone willing to defend what is theirs.

With some old rope and duct tape, I secure the table legs to the door handle and wedge a doorstop at the other end. If someone tries to remove the blockage through the hole Sarah made, they’ll have a hell of a time.

Next, I grab an old tarp from the garage and spread it out beside the body. The crinkles unfold with a sound like distant fireworks. Holding the light, I kneel next to the man. The blade of the shears is still wet, but the blood has stopped leaching out.

I hesitate before going through his pockets. Is it right? In the movies, they always do this, but still... This is a matter of life and death. In this day and age, life is fickle.

Taking a breath, I search his cargo pants. I extract the items and line them up on the floor: two disposable lighters, a magazine for the

gun he had, more duct tape, assorted batteries, a bandana, a box cutter, a half-eaten granola bar, and finally, a crumpled photo.

I lift the photo toward the light. The image shows the man, Sarah, and a woman I can only assume is his wife and/or her mother.

Did she know what they were up to? Did she send them on a quest to find something? Was she even alive? Damn, that's so dark.

The last object is a wallet. There's more money inside than I thought people carried these days, perhaps for bargaining or maybe stolen from other homes. I take out his driver's license and read it: Patrick Rodriguez, current address in Pittsford, about a fifteen-minute drive east.

Why they came here, to this street, to this house, is a mystery. But I'm sure Sarah regrets it now, almost as much as I do. I wonder how many houses they tried, or skipped, before ending up here.

I slide everything back into his wallet and return it to his pocket. Standing over him, I plant my feet on either side of the body and grasp the back of his shirt. Squatting low, careful to avoid the handles jutting from his neck, I pull him close, then drive upward with my legs, heaving him onto the edge of the tarp. My stomach twists as I lower him, the sound of fabric and skin heavy in the silence.

I try not to look. My focus stays on the task, not the man. The shears have to come out. I grip the handles, close my eyes, and take a long breath that feels too thin to reach my lungs. I never thought I would do something like this, yet here I am.

Another breath. Then I pull. The shears slide free with a wet sound that sends heat crawling up my throat. A thin spurt of blood follows, spreading fast before it stops. I drop the shears into the dirt and stumble backward, gagging, one hand braced against the wall. My body shakes. The air tastes metallic.

I hum under my breath, the first tune that comes to mind, anything to fill the space and drown the noise in my head. It helps just enough to stop me from being sick.

In the kitchen, I rinse the shears in brownish water that swirls and settles. Then I return to him. I place the photo on his chest and fold his hands over it. For a moment I just stand there, watching the rise and fall that will never come again.

This is not how I wanted things to end. I doubt he did either. But here we are.

I do my best to wrap him up, given it's my first time wrapping a body, though I've tied a Sunday roast before. Using leftover rope, I secure his neck and ankles, cinching it tight, then wrap the rest around his torso to keep everything together.

Leaving him there, I fetch paper towels and disinfectant spray. As the pile of used towels grows, I question if this is the best use of our supplies. Still, this is our home, we live here. Yet, nothing will change the fact that a man died on this floor. Our memories will constantly remind us of that.

Approaching the bedroom door, I notice light seeping from underneath. But just as I open the door, the room plunges into darkness.

"Zoe?" I call out, my voice barely rising above a whisper. No response.

Maybe I'm just imagining things, seeing things that aren't there. It's been a day, and they say things always look better in the morning.

But deep down, I doubt that.

Chapter 9

Crowd Control

I wake to a scream, a sharp, piercing sound that yanks me from sleep. For a moment, disoriented, I struggle to remember where I am, what day it is, what needs to be done. I reach out instinctively, but the other side of the bed is cold.

Throwing back the covers, I call out, “Zoe!” I pull on a pair of shorts, grab Sharon from beside the bed, and dash out the bedroom door. My feet pound down the stairs, each step a thunderous beat echoing through the house.

At the bottom, I see her. She’s in a dressing gown, standing over the body, the tarp partially pulled back to reveal his face. Her expression is unreadable, a mix of shock and something else I can’t quite place.

“Zoe?”

She turns sharply, her face twisted with anguish, tears streaking down her cheeks. Without a word, she runs to me, throws her arms around my waist and buries her face in my chest like a child seeking shelter from a storm.

I gently set Sharon down, balanced on her head beside us, and wrap my arms around Zoe, holding her close, clutching her like she’s the only real thing left in a world that’s gone completely mad.

“Are you okay?” I say. “What is it?”

“There’s a body,” she says.

“Yeah, sorry, I was going to move it this morning.”

“What happened?”

“What? What do you mean what happened?”

She looks up at me. “What happened to that man?”

Her face is a maze of questions, wide eyes searching mine for answers I don't have. For a moment, I wonder if she's fully awake or still trapped in the fog of a dream.

I gently cup her cheek, my thumb brushing away the tears that trace down her face. Her skin is warm, trembling beneath my hand.

"You don't remember anything that happened last night?"

She looks down like she's searching for the answer on the floor. "I remember listening to the radio."

"You don't remember the girl? That guy?"

She snapped her gaze up at me, searching my face, what for I don't know. Then she looks away. "Oh, yes, of course, now I remember."

But I doubt she does. Was this the first time she had lied to me? How could I possibly know? She never seemed the type.

Maybe it's PTSD, her brain shielding her from the horrors of last night. After all, she stood over the body. I don't know exactly what happened in the garage, but I'm pretty sure Dad didn't stab himself through the back of the neck, severing his trachea and esophagus.

I decide not to push it further. Reminding her of the act wouldn't help. I cover the body back up, retie the rope, and watch as she sits down on a dining chair, looking around, puzzled.

"Where is the dining table?" she asks.

I point to the bifold doors.

"Oh," she says, her face lighting up. "What's it doing up there?"

I rise and go over and start unhooking and unsticking everything. "I thought we could use a little extra security, after that girl broke the glass."

"Oh," she says.

I push the table out of the way. "I'll boil some water for the tea and then we should get over to Town Park. The earlier the better."

She made a noise like she agrees and then looks up. "Why?"

"Why? Because we don't want to be late."

“Late for what?”

“For the handouts. We heard on the radio last night that the military was giving out MREs and water.”

She taps the side of her head. “Oh yes. Of course. It’s just with—”
“All this going on?” I offer.

She smiles, but it’s thin, fleeting. Once again, she doesn’t mask her concern the way she used to. And that worries me more than anything. My concern for her wellness is growing stronger by the hour, and I’m painfully aware that I’m out of my depth. I’m not equipped to help her, not in the way she needs. She needs a professional, a doctor. But where the hell am I going to find one now?

After bracing the back door again with the dining table and wrapping the body in the tarp, I haul the weight into the trunk of Zoe’s car. It’s heavy and awkward, but eventually it settles with a dull thud, the kind that clings to your bones.

Then, I lift the garage door, unlock the gate, and check the street in both directions. It’s silent, empty. Like the world’s holding its breath. I back out slowly, headlights cutting through the early morning mist, then jump out to lock everything behind me. As I return to the car, I toss Sharon into the back seat, her steel head bouncing once against the upholstery with a satisfying thunk.

“Why are you bringing the sledgehammer?” Zoe asks.

“Sharon.”

“Yeah, right. Sharon. Why is she coming?”

“Because it just doesn’t feel right to leave her at home by herself.”

“I’m sure she’s house trained,” Zoe says with a wry smile.

Sometimes it’s damn hard to keep up with her wit.

Last thing I do is check the mirrors. Then I drive.

The car barely makes a sound, just a low, uneasy whine beneath the chaos outside. We creep forward, weaving through streets choked

with dead cars and broken glass. Engines left running emit a low hum beside gutted stores. Car doors swing open like broken arms.

People swarm the sidewalks, stumbling between lanes, dragging carts, pushing bicycles with flat tires. Eyes dart toward us: hungry, hollow, suspicious.

A woman slams her palms against the hood as we pass, screaming something we can't hear. Her face is a twisted mask of rage and desperation. I don't make eye contact. I just keep driving.

We roll past a smashed-up gas station, burned out, looted clean. Someone's scrawled "NO GAS, NO HELP, NO HOPE" in black spray paint across the windows.

Zoe reaches out, puts a hand on mine.

"Honey," she asks, her voice laced with innocence. "Are we almost at the facility?"

"Facility?"

A sigh slips out of my mouth before I can catch it and she recoils, like she thinks I'm upset with her or something.

I reach over and place my hand on hers.

"We're going to Town Park to get supplies being handed out by the military."

She nods as she turns to look out the window. I wonder if she recognizes any of the Rochester she once knew. Sadly, it's a vastly different environment now.

Closer to Town Park, the crowd thickens. Lines snake around blocks, shoulders pressed tight, people shouting and shoving for position. The park's entrance is barely visible through the bodies.

Humvees block the main road ahead, their matte green hulks already battered and dirtied. Soldiers in full combat gear stand stiff behind barricades, helmets down, visors up, fingers flexing on rifle triggers.

They look scared too.

A soldier steps out, hand up. I brake hard, the car shuddering into silence.

“Roll it down!” he barks, voice muffled by his respirator mask.

I crack the window. A sour wave of sweat, smoke, and fear floods the cabin.

“Where are you heading?”

“The distribution point,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

He squints at us for a second too long, then jerks his head toward the park. “Keep it slow. Keep your doors locked. Don’t stop for anyone.”

I nod. The window whines back up.

Beyond the checkpoint, the park looks like a refugee camp born overnight. Army tents sag in the damp morning heat. MRE boxes pile like barricades. People cram together, shouting, crying, some collapsing where they stand.

Henrietta Town Park used to be the kind of place people forgot about until summer with green fields stretched out in lazy patches, baseball diamonds gone dusty from under use, swing sets creaking in the breeze, kids’ laughter trailing behind joggers and dog walkers. Ordinary. Forgettable. Safe.

Not anymore.

Now, the wide fields are gutted by tire tracks from military trucks and Humvees. Army tents hunch over the grass like wounded animals, canvas flapping in the weak wind. The baseball fields have been flattened into muddy staging grounds, MRE crates and water jugs stacked high under camouflage tarps.

Soldiers in body armor patrol the edges, rifles slung tight across their chests, visors down, eyes hidden. Concrete barriers and hastily rolled-out barbed wire fence off the main gathering area, bottlenecking everyone into a single checkpoint manned by grim, exhausted faces.

The playground is still there, half-crushed under a tilted porta-potty, bright plastic slides warped and leaning like twisted bones. A yellow caution tape flaps uselessly from the monkey bars.

The air is thick with the bitter stink of sweat, fear, and diesel. Smoke curls from a dozen trash fires smoldering along the tree line where the overflow crowd has spilled into the woods, families huddled under tarps and snapped umbrellas.

And the people... they aren't a crowd anymore. They're a mass. A desperate, shoving, shifting tide of faces. Some clutching IDs, others clutching empty bottles, others just clutching their kids and praying to make it through the line.

We pull up in the first available slot, lock the car and with a flock of others, join the lines. All wanting the same thing, all concerned they are going to miss out. I thought we were going to be early, but I guess they just started when the people arrived. What else would they be able to do, with people pushing and pleading.

The lines shift, surges forward, then recoils, like a living, starving thing. And me and Zoe, with my arm around her, shift with it. My eyes dart around at everyone, can smell the desperation. It reminded me of getting out of Frontier Field at the end of a game.

A soldier holds a loudspeaker in his hands, barking orders.

"Stay in line! No pushing! You will be turned away if you cause trouble!"

"One pack and one water ration per person. No exceptions!"

As we near the front of the line, the soldier continues barking orders. His voice cuts through the air, sharp and commanding.

"Move forward when instructed. Do not approach the tables!"

"Anyone cutting the line will be removed immediately!"

At the front, three tables supply one of three lines. Behind each table, young soldiers sit with tablets, scanning IDs and managing the flow of people. Between the tables, other soldiers hold semi-automatic weapons, maintaining a vigilant watch. Additional soldiers

carry MRE packs and water to the tables, while more are stationed up and down the line, their weapons ready.

The man in front receives his pack and departs. The soldier behind the desk waves us forward, shouting, "Next!"

"ID," he barks as we approach the table.

I hand over our driver's licenses. He scans the IDs with his tablet, taps the screen a few times. Two soldiers place two boxes down on the table as he hands back the IDs, which we stuff into our pockets.

"Okay, you each get a case of water and a pack of ten MREs. Come back in two weeks."

"Two weeks?" I ask. "How long is this going to go on for?"

"We're trying to set up something more permanent." Then he leaned to his left, holding a hand in the air. "Next!"

"Wait," I say. "Is there a doctor we can see?"

He grimaces, looks left and right, obviously finding someone he wants. A big man, bald head, tight uniform, walking along the supply line with a tablet. The name on his identification reads 'Redding'.

"Sarg!"

The man looks up sharply, tucks the tablet under his arm and marches towards the table.

"What is it, Private?"

"Sir, these people wish to see a doctor."

He looks us over. "What's the problem?"

"It's difficult to explain."

"Come on, buddy!" the guy behind us shouts. "There's other people waiting!"

The sergeant looks up and glares, his eyes narrowing before he jerks his head in a sharp nod to the side. Without a word, he steps aside. I scoop up the boxes and follow, setting them down beside us.

"Now, what seems to be the problem?" Redding asks.

"My wife," I start. "She zones out, forgets things."

He looks at her.

"I don't think we need to bother them with this," she says, grabbing my arm.

"Is this new or old thing?" the Sargeant asks.

"New."

Redding shrugs. "Listen, people are trying to deal with this shit in their own way. Maybe she just needs more time, that's all."

"No, I don't think that's it."

Suddenly, a commotion erupts behind us. Shouts rise, bodies shift, and instinctively, we all turn toward the noise.

"Hey," a voice screams out. "That guy got extra!"

He is a big man with a beer belly, a ball cap, and a face rough with stubble. Desperation clings to him like his open flannel shirt, heavy and unwashed. There is madness in his eyes, the kind I have seen more than once today. The air feels volatile, like the whole place could ignite with one wrong move. I can only hope the soldiers with the guns keep their composure long enough for everyone to walk out on their own two feet.

"My wife is sick!" the accused pleads. Brown skin, dark curls under his cap, cargo pants, steel-toe boots. "She can't be here!"

"I don't give a fuck!" the big guy roars, stepping forward.

The soldier at the table steps forward, weapon raised and braced against his shoulder. These guys aren't messing around.

"Remain calm!" a commanding voice booms from the loudspeaker, crisp and sharp over the tense air. "There is enough for everyone, if you follow orders!"

"He's taking more than he should," the big man yells, pointing at the other. "More than you said everyone gets."

"Hey," the smaller man says, stepping forward.

A soldier stands between them, and I wonder if he would be so bold without that buffer. Then again, maybe he would. This environment changes people. Makes them act in ways they wouldn't have imagined.

"I'm just trying to get by, same as you."

The big man steps closer, nearly invading the soldier's personal space. One more step, and we might find out if the soldiers are prepared to pull the trigger, and what kind of ammunition they're using. A hand grabs my wrist. I look down to see Zoe shaking her head, mouthing the word *'no'*.

I could feel the energy.

Sergeant Redding bursts past us to confront the man. Hopefully tensions would ease, the guy could get his rations, and everyone could go about their day.

"No pushing, no shoving," the instructions continued over the loudspeaker, "or you will be forcibly removed."

The conversation behind wasn't quite going to plan as voices rose in pitch and urgency, and people became desperate.

"You know what?" the big man says. "Fuck you!" he says thrusting his finger into Redding's chest.

Redding slapped it away, in the same breath the man swung a fist with his other hand, short, stiff, sharp round punch, just like a professional boxer, catching the soldier off guard, who crumpled at his feet. Then all hell breaks loose. All that tense pent up energy released as the big man charged forward, and then the crowd behind him surged with him. They pushed over the desks as the soldiers stepped back, and then it happened.

A single shot and someone fell, and then another, and then another. Suddenly it was urban warfare as machine guns opened fire, cutting people down. I didn't bother waiting around to find out if the bullets were real. I scooped up a box, grabbed Zoe's hand, and we ran across the grass away from the firing and screaming.

Chapter 10

Closed for Business

Town Park, with all its shouting and gunfire, is far behind us by the time I let myself relax. We said nothing after jumping into the car, my hands shaking as I tossed the plastic box into the back seat. I drive through the streets without direction, not heading home, only trying to get away.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I want to just keep driving. Keep going until the battery dies. Maybe then we'll find something, somewhere untouched, somewhere still holding on. A place with lights on, radios playing, people talking about the weather and weekend plans. A place that feels like two days ago, before everything cracked.

I cling to that hope. That sliver of normalcy still existing out there, just beyond reach.

"Are you okay?" I ask, switching glances between Zoe and the road.

She nods quickly. "Things are getting stupidly crazy. And I can't believe you were going to involve yourself in that shit. Why would you do something like that?"

I shrug. "Because I'm stupid and crazy."

"Yeah," she says. "I need you, not battered and bruised and dead."

"In that order?"

"No, not necessarily."

I don't have an explanation for the rash decline of humanity, other than being woefully under prepared for a world-changing event, but who is ever ready for things like that? The longer it went on, the more we needed to entertain what life is going to be like, but

that's hard for the brain to do. It's hard to imagine that, beyond the movies and tv shows. I always imagined this bullshit taking weeks and months to hit the crapper.

Ahead, the streets are no better. They are clogged with broken-down cars, people dragging sacks and suitcases down the middle of the road like ghosts who forgot they were supposed to stop moving.

I turn on the radio as a voice emerges over the airwaves.

"... keep trying to bring you as much information as we can before the generators give out."

Generators. Damn it. The fossil-fuel version of my sleek little battery. And here I was, stuck on the wrong side of history. Without falling into every damn stereotype, I had to admit it. The gas-guzzling, anti-green crowd had been right all along.

I can practically hear them now, laughing it up in some half-forgotten town. A whole village of rednecks sitting on battered porches, tipping back cold beers, shotguns balanced casually across their laps. Watching the world burn down without so much as standing up.

They're probably sitting pretty, tanks full, fridges humming off generators, waiting for the desperate ones like us to come sniffing around.

And if we did?

They'd run us out of town faster than a dog with its tail on fire. No second chances. No friendly warnings. Just a muttered "not from around here, are ya?" and a whole lot of gun barrels deciding for us.

"Riots have broken out all over the world. Communities, towns, big and small cities, military check points, and even at special campsites and aid stations that have been set up. If I were you all, I'd stay away from everyone and do everything in your power to ride out this storm."

Yeah, look to the person on your left and the person on your right. You might not know them, but chances are they want to beat the shit out of you. Was this the opportunity to reset the world, and start over with a different viewpoint of the world? Was this an op-

portunity given to us by God (even though I was a non-believer)?
Had Mother Earth had enough of us?

We're weaving through the chaos when I see it, a battered green road sign swinging crookedly on its post: *Strong Memorial Hospital*
— 1.5 Miles

I don't think. I just jerk the wheel right.

"Where are we going?" Zoe shouts, bracing herself against the dash.

"Chancing it," I mutter. "They might have something that can help. Supplies. Doctors. Something. Anything."

"We don't need any of that stuff," she says.

"We need help, babe. Maybe professional help."

"I'm sure there are more critical people for them to look at."

"No," I yell, thumping the steering wheel. "I'm not letting you go, Zoe. Not like this."

"Like what?"

I glance over, and she is looking at me again with those big hazel eyes, the look of someone at peace with the world. But I wasn't at peace with it, and if the decline continues, I just don't know what I'm going to do, how I can possibly carry on.

"I can't do this without you, Zoe. I just can't."

"I'm fine."

"No, don't do that. Don't downplay it. I know you're not the person to get worked up about something, but maybe now it's time to get excited."

The closer we get, the worse it looks. The hospital looms on the horizon, massive and ugly, its emergency lights dark. The parking lot spills over with cars parked sideways, crashed into curbs, abandoned where they ran out of gas or time. Ambulances sit at odd angles, doors hanging open. Gurneys overturned. Medical gloves and shred sheets whip across the asphalt in the wind. Barricades choke the entrance, a makeshift blockades of police cruisers and army

Humvees. Armed soldiers stand guard with their weapons up, scanning every car that creeps by. I swallow. Given what we had just witnessed at Town Park, it seems they were given orders to shoot first and sort out the details later.

Then came the fence, a high chain link barrier surrounding the entrance and the soldiers. First line of defense. And the people... hundreds of them. Maybe more. Pressed against the gates, banging on the fence, screaming for help that isn't available and isn't coming.

I drop the window a crack and the noise hits like a hammer, sirens, shouting, crying babies, someone yelling for a doctor, like it will have any effect. I screech to a stop against the curb and kill the engine. I pluck the keys out and hand them over.

"You know what you need to do," I say.

"And what is that exactly?"

"To get the hell out of here if shit goes down."

She leans over. "If any bastard starts firing, I'll drive this damn car right into them."

I smile weakly. "Stay here."

I stand at the back of the crowd, trying to get a glimpse of any hospital staff. It is a long shot, and I knew it would be. I should have done something about this as soon as I thought there was something wrong with her. And despite how I hated looking in the rear-view mirror, I couldn't help but think how things might have turned out otherwise.

A soldier holds his hand up to his ear like he's receiving a message in his ear piece, and I wonder what news it might be, and then the wailing sounds of a siren waft in over the air, building in intensity as the ambulance approached.

"Stand aside," a soldier yells, unlocking the fence, his comrade holding his rifle at the ready, giving people fair warning as to what they might expect if they decide to rush the hospital.

A woman steps forward from the shadows. Her skin is deep and luminous beneath the fading light, her curls full and untamed. A white coat hangs loosely over her scrubs, a penlight clipped neatly to the pocket. She stops behind the soldier at the gate, her stillness carrying more weight than a shout.

An ambulance screeches down the drive, halting abruptly. The soldier unlocks the gate, forcefully pushing people aside, shouting for them to move, as he escorts the doctor to the front. His comrade quickly locks the gate again, the crowd pressing in behind, as if trying to swallow them whole.

“Move away,” he shouts. “Get back.”

The ambulance’s rear doors are already open, the gurney on the ground beside a paramedic holding a bag of clear fluids. By the time the doctor navigates through the crowd, she leans in, assessing the patient: a grimacing older man. She retrieves a penlight from her pocket, shines it into each eye, and checks for reactivity. Then she issues instructions, and they prepare to push back through the crowd toward the entrance.

The escort speaks into his comms, then shouts for people to clear the path again. Most ignore him, forcing the soldier to physically move them aside, bodies colliding with one another. Whatever reasons they have for needing to get into the hospital, they might need to find another way.

As the paramedic pushes the gurney into the fray, I grab the doctor’s arm.

“Doc, please, I need your help.”

She turns sharply at me and yanks her arms away. “Yeah, just like everyone else. Get in line.”

“Please, she’s sick, really needs some help.”

“Is she shot?”

“No.”

“Near death?”

“Well, no, not exactly.”

She shrugs. “I’ve got higher-priority patients right now.” With that, she follows the paramedic through the crowd.

But I’m not letting this opportunity slip away. I trail after her, raising my voice over the din. “She’s been forgetting things,” I call out. “Zoning out, like she isn’t there.”

“Has she suffered any head trauma or physical injuries recently?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Just keep an eye on it.”

She gets through the fence, and the soldier locks it right after her, a gun barrel retreated through the gap just in time.

“Hey,” I call out, my fingers clenched around the fence. “I just need some drugs, some pills, something to make her better.”

She pauses mid-stride, mutters something to the paramedic, then pivots sharply and stomps back toward me, her coat flaring behind her. Two soldiers flank her like silent shadows as she comes to a stop in front of me.

“Listen, from what you described, to make any diagnosis we would need blood tests, urine tests, CT and MRI imaging scans and potentially a lumbar puncture to analyze her cerebrospinal fluid.”

“And?”

“Look around,” she says, her voice sharp, eyes scanning the chaos. “We’ve got people with gunshot wounds, stab wounds. The hospital’s overflowing with beds crammed with patients needing urgent care. The power is on borrowed time, resources are dwindling, and it’s only going to get worse.”

She fixes me with a hard stare. “If I were you, I’d go home and take care of your wife. There’s nothing we can do for her here. Staying won’t help her, you, or anyone else.”

With that, she turns and disappears inside, taking my last shred of hope with her.

We drive home in silence. Two attempts at getting medical help, both shut down. *“Go home and take care of your wife.”* So we are.

I glance at Zoe. Is she looking out the window or zoning out again?

“Hey,” I try. “Why didn’t the teenagers attend the apocalypse?”

Silence. I grimace and focus on the road. I could say something about Wi-Fi or charging stations, but it feels off. Everyone’s buried in their phones these days. Maybe not as much as when I was a kid. I sigh. The joke’s gone. Humor is dissolving. The innocuous is becoming serious.

If I had internet access, I could at least ask AI what to do or where to go. But we don’t. And there doesn’t seem to be anywhere else to go. Timelines are unknown, and it feels like the oxygen is slowly being sucked away from the planet.

The closer we get to our street, the more desolate it feels. No more community barbecues, no more kids playing on the street. Just shadows moving through darker shadows.

Our house is on the right, but I ease past our closed gate and pull into the Millers’s driveway instead. I kill the power. The battery is dwindling, still about fifty percent, but there will be a time when there’s none at all. Zoe would wish she said yes to getting a horse all those years ago. That’s another story, though.

I shake her shoulder, and she startles, turning sharply.

“Welcome back,” I say. The words hang in the air, and I immediately question whether it appears a gentle tease or something harsher.

She doesn’t respond. At least, I think she doesn’t. There’s a difference between being ignored and being given the silent treatment, and I’m not sure which this is.

Finally, she speaks, her voice distant. “Where are we?”

“Millers,” I announce.

“Why? Is there something wrong with our place?”

I shrug in the dark, for no one's benefit than my own. "Figure we could have an adventure."

"Breaking and entering? But I forgot my balaclava!"

Ah, there she is, the Zoe I fell in love with. Meeting someone online always carries a degree of skepticism: will the person behind the profile align with the expectations shaped by curated photos and witty bios? But Zoe not only met those expectations, she far exceeded them. I can only hope I did the same for her, though I often doubt it.

From our first conversation, words flowed effortlessly between us, as did the drinks. The connection was seamless, as if we had been friends for years and lovers for two. That feeling never changed over time. In fact, the longer we were together, the newer it felt, which made for a delightful contradiction.

"Hey, do you remember our honeymoon?" I ask.

"You mean the part where you entered us into Hai Long Bay half marathon?"

"Actually, I meant the eleven-day hiking adventure."

She threw her head back. "Ah, yes, some amazing sunsets."

Nothing wrong with her long-term memory.

"And getting stopped by airport security on our return."

"Still haven't recovered from that strip search?"

"If I enjoyed it, why would I need to recover from it?"

She laughed, and it feels like an age since I had heard that from her, or anyone for that matter.

She turns to me. "Why are we talking about this?"

"Because in the bad times it's easy to forget about the good times."

She moves closer, and in the hush of the dark, our lips find each other. It is like surfacing for air after holding your breath too long, a flicker of light in a world gone dim. Her hands cradle my face, grounding me in something that still felt real.

“Now,” she says. “Are we going to break a window or use their spare key?”

At the back door, I slide the key into the lock and glance over my shoulder. She stands there in the gloom, arms crossed, her silhouette drawn in shadows, quiet and unreadable.

“I feel bad, okay?” I confess.

“Adam, you are taking the excitement out of this crime!”

“I’ll promise to drop a vase on the floor to make up for it.”

“Fine, but I’m not wiping my feet on the door mat.”

“You’re such a rebel!”

“At the end of this shit we’ll have them over to make up for it.”

“Now who’s bringing down the mood?”

She gives me a gentle push, and I stumble forward into the abyss. When Zoe closes the door behind us, the darkness deepens. A beat later, I reach for my phone just as Zoe does the same. Twin beams of light flicker to life, slicing through the black, casting long, shaky shadows along the walls.

“You know,” she starts, holding the light to her face, giving her an ethereal glow. “We have a flashlight back home.”

“You make it sound like I planned this,” I reply.

Sitting on the kitchen bench is a bottle of expensive single-malt whiskey, its amber glow catching our flashlight beams. Beside it, a note, scrawled in a hurried hand, bears our names.

Adam
Happy birthday!
Heading south
Good luck
Miles

“Nothing about Lucas,” Zoe says.

“No. I wonder if they made it to wherever they were going.”

“Knowing them, probably.”

“Should we check out the garage or jump up and down on their bed?”

“You go ahead. I’m going to raid their pantry.”

We part ways, and I make my way to the garage. I don’t need a light; I could navigate this path in my sleep. I’m sure Miles could have done the same in ours.

Miles had everything arranged just the way I liked it, down to silhouettes on a board marking where each tool belonged. He was always handier than me. I notice the absence of his axe and machete. He chose well. Had they been here, I would have taken them. Honestly, I don’t know why he owned an axe; I’d never seen him use it. There wasn’t much need for one in suburban Henrietta. Perhaps he saw the writing on the wall early and built his arsenal over the years. I wouldn’t have put it past him.

Upon inspection, he’s taken his camping kit, and I can’t blame him. I would have taken his portable burner for cooking, but I walk away with some rope (you know, if things get really desperate), a hammer (adding to my already extensive collection), a crowbar, and some zip ties.

A patter on the roof draws my gaze upward. It’s raining. Normally, I’d open the weather app to check the forecast, but now it’s all a mystery. To be honest, it’s nice to hear something normal. As the rain intensifies, I could be anywhere, at any point in time.

Wondering what has happened to Zoe, I move quietly into the kitchen. The room is dark, without light or sound. The silence is not peaceful. It presses against my chest, heavy and knowing, as if it carries a secret I am not ready to hear.

“Zoe?” I whisper.

No reply. Just that ever-consuming, suspiciously dramatic silence.

It could be nothing. Or it could be something. And I'm not in the mood to star in a cautionary tale. I reluctantly ditch the rope and zip ties but hang onto the hammer. Quietly, I move through the kitchen, each step a prayer to the gods of creaky floorboards.

A faint glow slices the darkness. The pantry.

I pause. That light isn't comforting. It's the horror-movie kind that begs you to not investigate. So naturally, I do.

I peer around the corner just as the light blinks out. Of course it does.

Zoe stands frozen in the dark, her face practically kissing the shelf. Her phone dangles from her hand, screen now black, like it's trying to pretend it didn't just light up like a beacon of dread.

"Zoe," I say, attempting to rouse her.

I grab her shoulder, figuring that'll snap her out of it, but she doesn't budge. Not a flinch, not a breath. I give her a tug, and she stumbles backward into me like a rag doll. My arms catch her, but it's like holding a mannequin.

"Zoe," I say, over and over, rubbing her cheeks, tapping lightly. Her skin is cold. Not fridge cold. Worryingly cold. Her eyes are open, but they're not really seeing. Glazed. Vacant. Her face slack like she's slipped out of herself.

Panic tries to creep in. I drag her, gently and awkwardly, back to the kitchen, then the dining table, where I prop her into a chair. She just... sits. Staring. Like a wind-up toy that ran out of turn.

She needs to be home. Not here, not in this eerie shell of a neighbor's house, even if we practically lived here once upon a beer pong. She needs her smells, her textures, her things. Something familiar to pull her back.

I move quickly through the dark, collecting what I need from the garage. Rope, zip ties, hammer. The drizzle slicks my hair as I run to the car and throw everything into the back seat. Then I go back in-

side. I crouch, slide my arms beneath her, and lift her over my shoulder. It is easier than I expect. She does not resist. She does not speak.

I shut the door behind us with my foot, the kind of multitasking I don't want to get good at. At the car, I gently ease her into the passenger seat. Buckle her in like she's glass.

She doesn't move. Doesn't say a word.

I bolt across the road toward my gate as the rain keeps tumbling, dodging puddles like I'm in some kind of soggy obstacle course. My hand hits the gate, then freezes.

I know I closed it.

Maybe it was the wind. Or an animal. Or... no. It doesn't matter. Not now. I yank it open. Worrying about every weird detail is a waste of brain fuel. I've got bigger things on fire.

I sprint down the driveway toward the garage. Fingers dig under the door. That's odd. It's not latched. I could've sworn I shut it tight earlier.

No time for paranoia.

I brace my legs and heave. The door flies up.

And there it is.

A gun. Right in my face.

Chapter 11

Body bag

I stumble back, feet tangled in panic, and hit the ground hard, flat on my ass. Hands shoot up instinctively, palms open, the universal sign for please don't shoot me, I bruise easily.

"Woah, woah, woah. Take whatever you want."

"Oh," the man says, stepping beyond the garage and out into the open. "I plan to." Broad shoulders, a neck like a tree trunk, the kind of face that doesn't flinch... ever. He watches over me like he's measuring me up for a coffin.

But then he's joined by two others. The first is twitchy, making noises in the shadows. He has my baseball bat over the back of his neck, resting his forearms on it. Dangerously casual. His lip is split, most likely from an earlier encounter. I would hate to see the other guy. He looks like he's ready to kick things off.

The third is different from the others. Younger, skinnier. Quiet. Too quiet. His gaze jumps around from the sky to the road to the house, there was always something ready to steal his attention. He carries a crowbar, my crowbar, in his hands.

I am sure my wrenches and hammers are in their possession somewhere.

"What do you want?" I ask. I try to sound tough and confident, for no other reason than thinking that is what they would respond best to.

"On your knees," the main guy says.

"What?" I question. I wasn't too sure I heard him correctly.

"Elias!" the main guy grunts.

The skinny guy approaches and doesn't say a word as he grabs me by the collar and forces me to my knees. He pushes my head down with the crowbar, and for the next few seconds I think he might smack me across the back of my head with it.

"My wife's sick," I blurt out, hoping to appeal to their human side.

"Sick?" says the main guy. "Did you hear that, Rico?"

"The only thing I hear, Mateo, is the sound of me not giving a shit."

I guess I was wrong.

"I still don't know what you want," I plead.

Mateo steps forward, not that I raise my eyes to look, the crowbar is still forcing my head down, but I can hear him, and his dirty rugged boots come into my field of vision.

"Where is he?"

I try to lift my head but keep getting pushed down. "Who? There's no one else here."

"No shit, dickhead," Rico shouts from the garage.

Behind me, Elias snickers, the first noise I have heard from him.

"The only reason you are alive right now," Mateo continues, "is because he's not here."

"I still don't know who you're talking about!"

The crowbar leaves the back of my head, but the chisel end is placed under my chin, raising my head. My glasses are covered with drops, and the rain keeps falling, stinging my face. I look at the one they call Mateo, obviously the leader of the three. He is still holding the gun, but it's too close for me to take note of it, and certainly not in the gloom.

"Where is Pato?"

"Pato? Pato, who? I don't know who you're talking about."

He pulled the gun away, and then swung, collecting the side of my face, the impact causing me to tip sideways. My face instantly

feels numb, and then a pain rockets into my brain, and I groan before I hit the ground, my wet glasses sliding off my face and clattering on the ground. He didn't seem to swing that hard and still it fucking hurt.

"Listen here, asshole. You want to do things the hard way?" He turns. "Hey, Rico, you like doing things the hard way, don't you?"

"I sure fucking do."

I hunt around for my glasses and slide them back on, holding a hand to my burning cheek to see Rico step into the rain, pulling the baseball bat from his shoulders, tapping it against his leg. I can only imagine if he took a swing, it wouldn't be light, and it would hurt much more.

Elias behind me grabs the back of my collar and hauled me to my knees again.

"This is your last chance," Mateo says. "Where is my brother, Patto?"

Brother? Now it all makes sense. Retribution.

"You've got the wrong house," I say.

Hurried footsteps slap through the puddles, fast and heavy.

"That's him," the voice says. It's female, young. "That's the guy that killed my father."

I look over. It's Sarah.

The last time I saw her, she was running out of my house, right after Patrick (still 'Dad' to me back then) went storming off to find Zoe and wound up with a pair of hedge clippers jammed through the back of his neck.

My breath hitches. Reality catches up. The kind of reality that smells like blood and promises pain. I am deep in it now and it is about to hurt.

"Patrick," I say, and it gets their attention.

"So you do know who I'm talking about. You lied to us."

“I only made the connection because of her. Patrick Rodriguez. Lived in Pittsford.”

Mateo raises the gun again. “How’d you know that?”

“His wallet. There is cash and a photo.” I drop my gaze. “I didn’t take it. It’s all still there.”

Mateo pushes the barrel into my forehead, forcing my vision up to him.

“T-t-there was an accident,” I stammer.

“Where is he?”

The body, in the back of the car. That body. Zoe’s car. The one parked across the road. The same one Zoe is currently belted into, slumped in some comatose state, totally exposed.

Panic flickers. I need to keep her out of it.

Mateo must’ve grown tired of my hesitation, because he steps aside with a grin that says *your turn*, and Rico moves in, looking way too excited to have some fun.

“Wait,” I say holding up my hands. Like it would have done any good. He probably would have broken my arms on the way to fracturing my skull. “He’s in the back of the car.”

“What car?” Rico says. “This car?” he asks, pointing the bat at my battered and bruised Beamer.

“No,” I say, head dropping. “The other car.”

Mateo steps forward. I feel the crowbar on my shoulder, just resting there.

“And where is the other car?”

“It’s across the street,” Sarah says from the gate. “I can see it from here.”

They march me through the rain, Sarah and Mateo in front, Elias jabbing the crowbar into my back like he’s guiding livestock. We head straight for my car. Behind us, Rico rolls up slow in a rumbling SUV, a Chevy Suburban, the kind that looks like it’s designed to drive through small buildings.

Maybe it's theirs. Maybe it's stolen. Maybe they jacked it last Tuesday during some late-night errand of violence. Hard to say. I briefly wonder what kind of mileage they get. Probably not much. But when it runs out, I bet they just siphon from whatever abandoned car's unlucky enough to be nearby. Who's going to stop them? Only someone with more people and bigger guns. And even then, that makes for dicey odds.

At the car, I pop the trunk. The tarp-wrapped body lies there like an unspoken secret. Rico steps up beside me, quiet now.

"Why is he like that?" Mateo asks.

"He may have broken into my house and threatened me and my wife, but he's still a person."

He reaches into the trunk and pulls the tarp open, revealing the dead man's face. I hope that is good enough, because if Mateo reveals anymore, he's going to see the point where the gardening sheers exited the front of his neck, and I can only guess that wouldn't be good. But then something else seems to catch his eye, he grips the edge of something and pulls it free. It's the family photo I retrieved from the intruder's pockets. It must have slipped from where I had placed it.

Mateo holds the photo up, and then steps back, slowly. Turns to Sarah, who can't quite meet his eyes. She wears an expression like someone has thrown a bucket of guilt over her.

"You told me Pato was attacked on the street."

Her eyes flicker, possibly from the rain or her the realization that she's been caught out in some lie that made me out to be some guy who attacks an innocent person on the street.

"So what?" she screams. "Who cares if it's on the street or inside the house? It doesn't change the fact that guy and his wife killed him!"

"You broke into the house?"

"No! Not technically."

"What do you mean not technically?"

“He let me in,” she says, pointing at me. “And then his wife goes psycho and stabs him in the neck with hedge clippers.”

“You said he killed her.”

“What’s it matter?” she says, stamping her foot and throwing her arms down in frustration. “Dad is dead because of them.”

Mateo drops his head, takes a deep breath, his bulk rising and falling. Turns to Rico and Elias. “Get Pato in the back.”

Rico shoves me aside, and I stumble backward, hitting the ground hard. Cold water splashes up as I land squarely in a puddle. I am soaked, sore, and somehow still breathing. It feels temporary.

The two brothers haul Patrick’s tarp-wrapped body from the trunk like it’s just another item on their grocery list. They load him into the back of the SUV, slam the tailgate shut, and climb in. Elias takes the back seat, Rico slides into the front.

Mateo stays behind.

He walks over, Sarah trailing beside him like a shadow. He raises the gun again in a move that suggests finality.

“Hey, come on man,” I say, trying to reason with him.

“Do it, Uncle,” Sarah says, egging him on.

“You know what happened,” I say. “I didn’t mean for anything to happen. I need to look after my wife. I told you, she’s really sick.”

“He’s full of shit, Uncle,” Sarah says, throwing petrol on the fire.

Mateo looks to her then back to me, shifting the gun in his grip as the rain continued to fall. In the end, he says, “There are a lot of crazy fuckers out here at the moment. Consider yourself lucky. Any other day, any other time, I would have shot you in the face without thinking.”

It’s then I feel my heart hammering in my chest, loud and erratic, like it’s trying to punch its way out. No way it’s calming down anytime soon. This is the kind of shit you see in movies, not real life. But nothing feels like real life anymore, not since the satellites started falling.

“Really?” Sarah says. “This is bullshit.”

Mateo turns and walks back to his Chevy.

“Fine, let’s go then,” Sarah says.

“Not you,” Mateo shouts. “You dragged Pato into this. You can walk home.”

“What?”

He fires up the engine, its slow mechanical rhythm pounding like a war drum. Without a word, they ease away into the rain. The SUV’s taillights fade and then disappear, swallowed by the darkness, leaving Sarah alone in the downpour. I push myself up onto one knee, soaked through, the cold water running down my face like sweat.

That’s when she turned.

And just like that, a gun appears in her hands.

“Hey,” I say. “Come on. This is over.”

“My uncle is prepared to let this go. But I’m not.”

“You know what happened.”

“Yeah, your wife killed my father. So, I’ll kill her husband.”

“Listen, you don’t want to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Do you think that’s what your father would want?”

She hesitates. The gun wavers. Rain falls hard around us, hammering the ground, the cars, the houses. It becomes a soundtrack, a relentless percussion that drowns everything else.

At first I didn’t see it. A shadow moves from the car, slow and deliberate, its motion lost beneath the noise of the storm. Then Zoe steps out of the darkness behind her, silent and certain.

Sarah steadies herself. The gun rises again until it is aimed at my face.

The world narrows. My breath stops.

Zoe moves. Her hand locks around Sarah’s shoulder. A startled cry splits the air.

I feel it before I hear it. A deep, concussive thud drives through my chest, the kind of hit that empties the body of sound. Pain follows a heartbeat later. The gunshot cracks through the night, echoing across wet pavement. My body twists. My feet leave the ground. Then earth. Cold. Grass. My cheek presses into the mud as the rain needles my skin.

Sarah screams again and runs into the darkness, her footsteps splashing through the puddles.

The pain blooms slow and hot, spreading through my ribs like fire under water. I do not need to look. I already know. She shot me. The thought flickers through my mind and slips away, too heavy to hold.

I try to move, to reach for something, anything. My hand slips in the mud. I think about the first aid kit. It might still be in the laundry, packed under towels, useless now. But my limbs feel like they're made of lead. My lungs rattle. I can't seem to get enough air.

I'm so damn tired. Rain taps against my back. Harder now. Cold. It rolls down my neck, pools in the hollow of my spine. Somewhere behind me, Sarah's footsteps slap against the ground, getting lighter, faster, until they're gone.

She's gone.

I feel myself slipping.

Darkness seeps around the edges of my vision, soft and quiet, like a blanket pulled over my head. I try to stay awake. I do. But my body doesn't care what I want.

With everything I've got left, I twist, dragging one shoulder out of the mud. The pain is white hot. Blinding. But I roll onto my back, gasping, rain splattering across my face.

The sky above me churns, dark and endless.

Then nothing.

Chapter 12

Meltdown

It is like waking from a dream after a night of heavy drinking. I'm damn tired and everything aches and I have no idea what happened the night before. In the distance I can hear someone speaking. I don't know what they are saying, but it is delivered with such brevity it feels like they have little time to get it out.

I mentally step through what I remember of the previous day. I went to the hardware store to pick up something. No, that wasn't it. Was Wegman's on fire? Sirens, but no fire truck. No, that's all wrong. We were in the park, meeting our friends, the Millers from across the street. It was one of their kid's birthdays (I don't remember which) and there was champagne (for the adults) and cake and games and... no, that's still not right.

A man in uniform. A soldier. A soldier with a gun. A soldier fired his gun. Panic. Shouting. Screaming. Running. We ran to the car. Why were we in the park again?

We drove to the Miller house. Someone handed me a bottle of whiskey. Good whiskey. Not the cheap, throat-scorching kind I can't stand. No, this was proper stuff, Highland single malt, the kind that's old enough to order its own drink. I forgot who said that originally. Someone clever.

It went down smooth. Warmed the cockles, as my dad used to say. Never quite knew what that meant, and I still don't. Mum had opinions about it, I think. Can't recall what they were.

All I know is, it felt like filling up an empty space I didn't realize had been hollow. And the aftertaste? Just divine.

I am off track now, my thoughts all in pieces on the floor, and I'm having trouble concentrating on any one thing. Darkness. It was dark. Oh, and wet. Wet and dark. Dark and wet. And then there was... what is that? A flashlight. I found one in Miller's garage. Why were we there again?

But no, it wasn't a flashlight, it was a tunnel, long, dark, with no light at the end. Wrong again. I see it now. Metallic, wet with rain, my view obstructed with tiny droplets on my lenses. Damn glasses. I should have switched to contact lenses long ago.

A gun barrel! Yes, pointed at me. Damn. We walked across the street to my house... no, we walked from my house to the Miller's house. That's it.

A body, wrapped in tarpaulin, like a roast ready for the oven. Where's Zoe? Then I'm on the ground, on my knees, they are going to shoot me but then they don't. It's the girl... Shelly, Shona, Sharon. Sharon. The trusty reliable sledgehammer. It feels good in my hands, with a comfortable grip. I feel like I'm cheating on Zoe. Where is Zoe? She's in the car, unresponsive. Unmoving. Not talking. Comatose. I wish I knew what was happening to her, or better yet, how to make it better.

If the doctor at the hospital was to be believed, they would need to run a thousand tests to figure it out. Then God knows what they would need to do to fix it. Is it fixable? Is that even possible? Is the Zoe I know gone forever? Of course she isn't. I can't think like that. That mindset isn't going to help anyone, least of all, Zoe.

Anyway, she is there. At the car. She's holding something. A gun! Not Zoe, the other one. I'm terrible with names. Not that better with faces.

There is a gunshot. I don't think that girl likes me very much. Pain in my shoulder. I'm on the ground as the rain falls over my face. The stars in the sky are few and far between, too many heavy, dark

clouds, blocking the moon, making it even darker than it would be. And then...

I gasp, not moving. I don't want to move, I just want to stay here forever. I'm not outside. How am I not outside? The ground is cold, hard, and feels wet. Maybe it's my clothes, my skin, my being. I look out. It's daylight, a bright clear day. It's the kind of day where the sounds of mowers would be present, getting that job out of the way early so they can watch the game while drinking a beer and not feel guilty about it.

The gate is open, the garage door is open. I sense a car beside me, there is static coming from the speakers.

I blink a few times, my head is propped up. I feel a cool breeze on my arm, it feels different and out of the ordinary. I grab my shoulder. Tape. Duct tape. I trace my fingers along the ragged edges, it's been wound around my shoulder haphazardly it would seem. On my shoulder, I also feel something course. Gauze? My god, is there a bullet in there?

I tentatively reach around and feel more gauze underneath. The bullet must have punched right through my shoulder. I have no idea if this is a good or bad thing, nor if there is anything critical to worry about.

The fact is, I am alive, at least, I'm pretty sure I am. I mean, if this is heaven, I thought it would be a little better. Unless it's not, in which case hell isn't too bad, not as bad as the Sunday School teacher used to make it out to be. Brainwashed. I can't believe I fell for it. Not that I'm a believer. No time for that. Of course the other option is this is purgatory, that space in between, like where those people from *Lost* were. But this is no island.

I can only assume that Zoe must have woken from her trance, got me and the car back home and into our garage, where she packed my shoulder with gauze and sealed it all off with duct tape. Let's face it, with her current troubles, she is a friggin' superhero.

Given the last conversation I had with the doctor at the hospital, they were only interested in people who had been shot or in a serious condition. I hope my condition is enough to at least get me through the gates, and if I can get Zoe in, we were one step closer to getting help.

I feel her leg beneath my head, solid yet cool. She cradled me through the night, never once letting go, making sure I was alright. She's amazing. The most incredible creature I know. And whatever happens next, whatever nightmare might wait for us, I'll be there. I'll help her through it, just like she helped me survive the wreckage of last night.

Her arm is on me, and I lift it with my good arm and kiss her hand. She is cool to the touch. I've noticed this in recent times. Maybe it's like the flu where she is getting chills.

"You okay baby?" I say. "You're cold."

I am sure I hear a noise from her, a reassuring hum, barely a whisper, but they're all the same.

"We should probably turn the radio off in the car," I say. "Conserve power."

Nothing this time, but I know she agrees with me.

Then the static on the car radio fades, and a voice comes over the waves.

"Everyone... I hope you're prepared. If you're hearing this for the first time that Ginna Nuclear has failed. The plant was critically damaged around 5:00 AM this morning. It's official now. We've got fallout heading straight for us.

"I'm sealing myself into the station. I hope you've been able to do the same, or you're getting somewhere safe. Don't go outside. Don't wait to get safe. What you'll hear next is a rebroadcast of the presidential address from earlier this morning, followed by the federal emergency alert for New York State. Stay calm. Stay inside. Good luck to all of us, and God speed."

I hold my breath as my eyes widen. This must be a joke. Anything with the ‘*nuclear*’ in it isn’t good, but this sounds unbelievably bad, and I’m not laughing.

And even worse, the Ginna Nuclear Power Plant is twenty-five miles northeast, right on Lake Ontario. It’s the kind of thing you learn once and then try to push it out of your mind that the oldest nuclear power plant in the US is a thirty-minute car ride away. I once watched Chernobyl. It’s the kind of thing that is frightening at a level that is difficult to comprehend until you are in it. Maybe the radio presenter sealing himself inside was just precautionary, a way to help keep people off the streets. Surely the authorities won’t let something like this happen.

The static disappears.

“My fellow Americans, as many of you are now aware, the recent global solar events have caused severe disruptions to infrastructure, communication systems, and power grids across our nation, and the world. Experts and specialists are working around the clock, and I want to assure you: we are responding swiftly and decisively, as best we can in these most difficult times.

“We are aware of reports concerning multiple nuclear facilities experiencing coolant system instability. The Department of Energy and FEMA are deploying all available resources to maintain reactor safety and prevent further escalation.

“I want to be clear: the situation is serious, but we will prevail. Stay inside. Stay with your loved ones. Follow the guidance from local officials and emergency personnel. America is strong. We will rebuild. We will endure. God bless you and may God bless the United States of America.”

I swallow. If I thought the downfall I had witnessed over the days was bad, like really bad, then I haven’t seen anything yet. I can feel my heart in my chest increase in rate, thundering in its cavity. This is

so difficult to comprehend, a new normal that should never be, nor be a normal. The only constant is change, but this is ridiculous.

The static cuts out, replaced by a series of beeps, counting down to the message. Then came the voice: flat, steady. Or at least, trying to sound calm.

“This is an Emergency Federal Broadcast for residents of the State of New York. Multiple nuclear reactors across the northeastern United States are experiencing critical containment failures due to sustained power loss and coolant system breakdowns.”

“The Robert E. Ginna Nuclear Power Plant, located in Ontario, New York, has breached containment. Fallout is expected to impact the following areas within the next few hours: Monroe County, Wayne County, Ontario County, Livingston County, and surrounding regions.

“Citizens in these areas are instructed to immediately seek shelter and remain in place. Close and seal all windows, doors, and ventilation systems. Avoid exposure to outdoor air. Do not attempt to evacuate unless directed by local authorities.

“This is not a drill. Fallout exposure is lethal. Further updates will be provided every hour on this frequency.”

A tone sounds, then the static returns. I glance up at the sky. How can something so devastating happen on a day like this?

“Babe, did you hear all that?”

Nothing.

“Babe?” I try again.

My heart drops. She’s gone again. Lucky, to some degree. She doesn’t need to hear the devastating news nor deal with the impact of it. She is alone in her head, and any other time I would feel sad, but a small part of me is happy she has withdrawn so far in herself she doesn’t respond to anything.

I lift my arm to check the time or at least try to. The moment my shoulder flexes, white-hot pain explodes through the joint, like

someone jabbing a crowbar into the bone and twisting. I gasp, a sharp animal sound escapes my throat. I get the arm a few inches off the ground before it drops back with a sick, useless thud.

Breathing hard, I fumble at the buckle with my good hand, every movement deliberate, desperate. I don't dare let it twitch. I grab the band and hold it up to my face. There's a lot to be said for the classics, and the single hand timepiece Zoe got me for my last birthday is one of them. Would have cost her a bomb.

It is just at eight. It's been three hours since the start of the great nuclear meltdown. I don't know how long before a cloud of fallout descends on Henrietta, a lot depends on a lot, and there are many factors that could determine where it goes and how fast. Worst case is we've got fuck all time before we are in the middle of it, with limited resources, a gunshot wound, and someone in a coma.

"We need to seal this place up," I say.

But it was mainly for myself, to make it like she was still with me. I don't know how long she'll stay like this for. Her condition is getting worse and I'm unsure how long she was out last night. All I can do is make her comfortable and try to get through the dark tunnel and out the other side.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, no matter how small it may appear. Or at least, there had better be.

I groan, roll off Zoe onto my good arm. My shoulder screams in protest, a wet throbbing pulse races in my heart. My shot arm drags like a sack of stones, heavy and useless. I brace my uninjured hand on the floor. My legs feel rubbery, like I've forgotten how to stand. Every little move pulls on the wound, pain flaring down my ribs, curling through my spine.

I rise through gritted teeth, breath shallow, and push. First to a knee. Then upright slowly, like a drunk man trying to find balance in an earthquake. My head spins. Cold sweat beads on my neck. My vi-

sion narrows for a second, just a flash, like the lights dimmed behind my eyes. I sway and catch myself on the car.

Oh, it's great to be alive. I mean, what's the alternative? Stranded on some island with a bunch of plane crash survivors, probably arguing about coconuts and leadership.

I slowly reach up for the garage door, breath heavy as I let my arm sit there for a moment, finding a new place of comfort, trying not to move my damaged shoulder, but it's becoming different as every little thing I do to avoid pain just causes more of it.

I howl again and pull down and fall back into Zoe's car, still blurring out static as the door rumbles down in its tracks. I use my foot for the last few inches. There are plenty of ways for polluted air to get inside, but it was a start. We could retreat into the house, use the duct tape to seal doors around the edges. At that moment, I wished Miles had left me one of the camping burners so we could at least cook something. The barbecue outside is built in and now regret not just buying a backup.

I turn away and shuffle to the driver's side of the electric car. I reach inside and hit the power button. The dash remains lit for a moment, but I was only interested in how much juice was left in the battery. The car had a hundred miles left in it, before it became nothing more than a hunk of metal on rubber wheels. Entirely useless.

Damn. If only I could figure out the battery, the solar, the inverter. None of it made sense. I stood in the gloom, shadows long and heavy, frustration tightening in my chest.

That's when I see it. A green light, faint but steady, glowing on the wall opposite the car, near where Zoe sat.

At first, I think it is from the dash. But the car is dark. Dead.

I inch back to the rear of the vehicle, eyes fixed on the wall.

It is writing on the wall. But I can't read it. It's too blurred, too strange. And I have no idea where it is coming from.

I circle the car, heartbeat picking up. As I round the rear bumper, the answer hits me.

The light... the words... are coming from Zoe.

More precisely, from her eyes. That can't be right.

I narrow my focus. Her face is still, pale, but her eyes, bright and glowing, cast perfect letters against the garage wall. I freeze.

It is like something is projecting through her. Not from her, *through* her. As if her eyes are film stock and someone has aimed a naked bulb behind them.

I move in closer and wave my hand over her face. The text shifts, now displaying across my palm. My breath catches. I turn slowly, letting the message resolve itself again on the wall.

Autonomous Intelligence Initiative Emergency Mode.
Battery level critical. Core memory integrity at risk. To
preserve essential data and core identity of this product,
immediate return to proximity node required. Facility 9.
Centrix Systems, Node: Corning, New York.

I stare at the message for what feels like an eternity, tracing every word, following the outline of each letter like it might rearrange itself into something else. Something deeper. There has to be more, some hidden meaning buried beneath the surface.

I glance at Zoe again, waiting for the punchline. Any second now she'll burst out laughing, jump from behind a door with a camera in hand. Some twisted prank. Maybe the Millers are in on it too! Those bastards!

The whole thing is staged. From the solar flare to the grocery store frenzy, to those chaos-filled scenes at the hardware store, the Town Park, the hospital. All part of an elaborate setup. One hell of a production budget.

Even the fake news broadcasts. The eerie messages. Hell, maybe even the gunshot was fake. Maybe it's all in my head.

“Okay,” I call out. “Well done! You got me! I admit it. Great job, you can all come out now.”

Nothing.

“I know it’s not quite my birthday, but I love it, I really do. How did you manage all that?”

I bring my hands together to clap... or at least try to.

Big mistake.

Pain explodes in my shoulder like a bolt of lightning, sharp, electric, unforgiving. My arm jolts. I let out a fractured sound, part laugh, part gasp, and stagger back, clutching my side with my good hand.

Yeah. Not fake.

“Okay. No clapping,” I mutter. I gaze down at Zoe. “And I suppose all this is true then.”

Chapter 13

Pandora's Box

Does anyone really know anyone?

It's a question that surfaced once in our relationship. Just once.

"What do you want for Christmas?" I asked.

"We've been together for three years. You should know what I want," she said with a smirk. Deep down I did know what she wanted, but I was saving that.

"Does anyone really know anyone?" I asked, playfully.

She then tells me every little thing about me: my likes, hobbies, shopping habits, how I take my coffee, favorite brand of whiskey, preferred musical tastes, like she had downloaded my entire personality from a cloud server. She stopped short of reciting my internet search history... which, honestly, I was glad for.

I touch Zoe's face. Press my palm to her cheek, just to be sure. It feels real enough. Cold, but textured like mine. Skin. Not metal. Not plastic. Certainly not a robot.

To preserve essential data and core identity of this product, immediate return to primary node required.

I stagger back a step, like the words physically hit me. Product? Node? What the hell does that even mean? I don't know where to start with this. I can't start. My brain refuses to file it under anything that makes sense.

I've seen her eat. Drink. Laugh. I've heard her flush the toilet, for god's sake. Watched steam pour out of the bathroom while she belted out some god-awful 2000s playlist in the shower.

She's cried. Screamed. We've fought. We've made up. She's real. Isn't she?

And we've had sex. So much sex. God, the things we've done—
My stomach flips. I nearly vomit.

I fall to me knees and stare at her. What have I missed?

This isn't real. It can't be, she can't be, a fucking robot! No. Not Zoe. We're married for fuck's sake! She's my wife. My goddamn wife! She's real, a real person.

Nothing has changed in the time I've been attempting to understand this, other than a poisonous cloud bearing down on us. She sits there, unblinking, unmoving, waiting for me to catch up to something she's always known. My knees nearly buckle, and I grab the car again.

Who the hell is Centrix Systems and what is facility nine?

I look at her again. I mean really look. But the feeling in my gut doesn't shift. And maybe that's the strangest part of all.

I still love her. With every part of me.

Yeah, it probably sounds insane. But no one really knows how they'll react until it happens to them. Until their world tips sideways and nothing looks the same, though some things stubbornly refuse to change no matter how you turn them.

Looking back, maybe I should have known. The look on her face when the power first went out was confused, tense, touched by something I couldn't name. It didn't belong on her. But then again, nothing belongs anymore. The whole world has cracked in half.

To preserve essential data and core identity of this product, immediate return to primary node required.

Is this what she was so afraid of? Not death. Not pain. Erasure. The more I think about it, the clearer it becomes. Zoe, whatever she is, is dying. Slowly. Quietly. And with her, everything will go. Memories. Her thoughts. Her love.

Us.

The words hang in my head like a broken alarm that will not shut off. Zoe is dying. But what does that even mean? Circuits? Code? Something far beyond what I understand. I stare at her face, pale and still, waiting for something human to flicker through it. There is nothing. Just silence and the faint reflection of my own disbelief in her eyes.

A tremor runs through me. Every memory we ever shared shifts, like cards sliding out of order. Our first trip together, the night we moved in, the fights, the laughter. Were those moments mine, or were they programmed responses meant to keep me close? The thought makes my stomach turn.

If she is artificial, then what was I loving all this time? A reflection built for me? A mirror with a pulse? Or is love still real if it comes from something that was made?

My mind searches for anger, but none comes. Only confusion. The hurt is quieter than I expect. Maybe this is what real shock feels like, when the body cannot decide whether to fight or fall apart. My hands shake, sending a shockwave through my shoulder, but I can't stop it.

I reach out and touch her cheek again. The skin is cold, almost lifeless, but the texture still feels like her.

Her name slips from my mouth just to hear it. The sound catches in my throat, but it still feels right. The love is still there, tangled and stubborn, refusing to fade even as everything else collapses.

The inside of my cheek stings as I bite down. I don't know what to do. I don't even want to think about it. My eyes squeeze shut, hoping everything will snap back to the way it was.

It doesn't.

I'm stuck. Stuck in the garage. Stuck with Zoe. Till death do us part.

The only solution is Corning. Corning may save her. Corning may give me answers. Maybe it doesn't even matter why anymore.

But I have two problems. One: there's a nuclear fallout cloud drifting this way, stretching across who-knows-how-many miles like a silent death blanket. Two: I have no idea where Corning even is.

A week ago, I'd have just asked the car or punched it into an app. Easy. Smooth voice instructions guiding me turn by turn like a digital babysitter. But that world's gone. We're back in the dark ages now. No satellites, no GPS, no maps. Just dead screens and static skies. No signal. No help. No rescue on the horizon.

And while I stand here, trying to make sense of what Zoe is... what she means now... the fallout cloud from Ginna Nuclear creeps closer. Silent, invisible, and lethal. And somehow, despite all of that, the thing that terrifies me most? Is that blinking message about a dying battery?

Clutching my arm, I move as fast as I can back into the house. In the bedroom, I find a flannel shirt and loop the sleeves behind my neck, fashioning a makeshift sling. It's crude, but it holds my dead arm just enough to dull the pull. Just enough to keep going.

I ease into a parka, cargo pants, and boots, each movement stiff and deliberate. The only gloves I can find are a worn leather pair Zoe bought for me in the UK on one of our trips. Sentimental, sure, but they will have to do.

"These are what hitmen wear when they dump a body," I said when I opened the present.

"Good. I figured you should look professional next time you bury your feelings."

"Cold, Zoe. Damn cold."

She grinned, sipping her coffee like a villain in a rom-com.

"Call it what you want," she said, already pleased with herself. "They'll keep your hands warm while you pretend you're not touched by this incredibly thoughtful present."

I slipped them on. They fit perfectly.

I pull on a beanie and pull the hood up. I'm covered. Almost.

The kitchen is basically empty. Anything of value during an apocalypse was already taken by the Rodriguez brothers. I hope they choke on the beans, and the asparagus gives them diarrhea. They even took the dog food, probably for a vicious attack dog. I'm surprised they didn't bring it with them to use as a tool to threaten me.

We still have the box of MREs and water from Town Park in the car, along with the expensive bottle of whiskey from the Millers. That along with duct tape and rope and Sharon, there's not much else I can pack.

Almost there. I grab an empty rucksack from the hall cupboard, where for some reason empty bags seem to accumulate. I head back to the garage and stuff some water, MREs, rope and whiskey in the rucksack, then I go searching.

The dual tanks are right where I remember it, under the workbench, coated in dust and spiderwebs. The metal's cold when I drag them out, fingers slipping over the flaking dive stickers. It's heavier than I remember, which might be good. Might mean it's still got something left inside.

I stare at it for a second. This thing hasn't been used in years. Could be clean. Could be full of rust and poison. But outside? The cloud from Ginna is close enough now that the birds have stopped, taken flight to less poisonous skies.

I slip the straps wide and angle the mask over my glasses, careful not to catch the frames against the seal. The rubber presses in, snug and claustrophobic, fogging slightly as I exhale. The piece of equipment cost me more than I care to say.

I twist the valve. Nothing. Then a sharp hiss, like a snake startled awake. Pressure is still there. Air is still there. The mask feels rigid against my face, the regulator slow to respond. I run a thumb along

the edge of the seal, adjusting, testing the intake. Another hiss, a dry rush across my lips, cold and mechanical.

No burning. No choking. Just breath. I close my eyes. Let the next one fill me a little deeper. It's not comfort. It's not safe. But it's air. And that's enough.

Convinced, I close the valve and heave it into the trunk. While I'm there, I get the duct tape to seal my wrists (which is really fucking hard with one hand) and ankles.

Almost there. Just one more thing to figure out, and that's how to get Zoe into the car.

My shoulder is on fire, every nerve screaming as I crouch beside her. I brace her under her arms with my arm, and as soon as I move her, the light from her eyes fade. Her hazel eyes return, the same I stared into as I held out a ring to ask her to marry me, the same as I held her hands and said my vows.

"From the moment you walked into my life, something shifted. You've made the ordinary extraordinary, the quiet moments loud with meaning, and the unknown feel like home. Today, in front of the people we love, I make these promises:

"I promise to choose you, every day, in small moments and in life's biggest decisions. I promise to listen, to laugh, to support you, and to challenge you when it matters. I promise to grow with you, not away from you, wherever life takes us.

"You are my partner, my safe place, my adventure, my calm, my spark. And while I can't promise what life will throw at us, I can promise this: I will walk beside you for as long as life allows, and in whatever comes next."

To be clear, those are her vows, but I stand by them just the same. And to be clear, *next* has come and I'm not about to let her go.

Her blank stare nearly breaks me. For a moment, I think that's it, that the battery's dead, it's too late, she's gone. But something in me

won't accept that. Can't. I believe, deep down, in the place where logic has no jurisdiction, that she's still in there. That there is still time.

I refuse to give up. Not on her. Not now. Not ever.

I drag her upright against my chest. She's light, too light for someone who used to lean into hugs like she meant them.

"I'm not the strong one," I remember telling her once.

She just smiled and said, "That's why I married you. Someone had to keep your fragile self alive."

I grit my teeth and shift, get my arm under her knees and heave her up in something that barely qualifies as a carry. My knees shake. My vision tunnels. But she's off the ground. I half-stumble, half-slide across the garage floor, her hair brushing my cheek.

The car door's already open. I spin, more drop than lower, and she lands in the seat with a soft thud. I lean against the doorframe, with one hand on the roof, trying not to throw up.

She doesn't react in any way, and I wasn't expecting her to. I'm trying not to hurt her (if in fact she can be hurt, I've never seen it), I'm doing my best to look after her. But she's in the car, and that's all that matters.

I reach over and fasten her seat belt. I have no idea what we're going to face out there, but I hope, wherever people have gone, they've found shelter. That the streets will be empty. That we'll be free to head toward... somewhere. A place I can't even point to on a map.

I take a steady breath and gently close her door. Then I turn to face the garage door. I've lost all sense of time. And I have no idea what's waiting for me on the other side.

The sky is different from the last time I saw it. The bright cloudless sky has been replaced with something darker, a menacing, thick rolling bruise across the horizon. The edges of the cloud are rust-colored, like dried blood or scorched earth, and it moves unnaturally slow, swallowing the sky one block at a time.

Overhead, the light is dim and sickly, filtered through a haze like a dying flashlight. The sun is a smudged white disk, barely visible, already losing light. There is a low hum, but maybe it's just a ringing in my ears. It's hard to tell.

I turn away and get in the driver's seat, wedging Mile's crowbar between the seat and the center console for easy access. Power up the car. I alter the vents, so the air is circulating the inside air. It's all I can do and hope it's enough. I look at the battery level. I pray our destination is within range, and if it wasn't, I would figure it out as we go. There is no way to plan this stuff out. Everything we could use to stay alive is in the car. The rest is uncertainty wrapped in anxiety.

The one thing I do know? I need a map. And I think I know where I can find one.

I back out onto the street and slam my foot on the accelerator. Tires spit water behind us as we shoot forward. At the end of the block, I hang a right, and glance over to Zoe.

"We'll be fine," I say.

Suddenly, her eyes light up, and it's mesmerizing.

"Lucid," she says. At least I think that's what she says. And I know she isn't, or at least, doesn't appear to be overly coherent at the moment.

A blaring horn rips through the air. I snap back to the road just in time to yank the wheel. The car jerks hard as an oncoming van screams past in a blur of metal and light. Letters flash across its side too quickly to read. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except staying alive.

The car fishtails. I ease off the accelerator, knuckles white against the wheel, breath sharp in my chest. The tires grip again, and we steady. In the mirror, the van veers sideways, skidding across the wet asphalt. Another car comes fast, clips it, and sends the van spinning. It rolls once, twice, and lands on its roof with a metallic crunch that carries even over the storm.

Steam rises from the second car's crumpled hood as it speeds away. I sit there for a moment, heart pounding, watching through the rearview mirror. No one stops. No one even slows. Every car behind swerves around the wreck, headlights bending through the rain, desperate to escape the dark cloud chasing them.

Then a door bursts open. A man crawls out over shards of glass, dragging himself through the wreckage. He wears a black coat and gloves slick with blood. A deep cut runs the length of his arm.

I glance at Zoe. I can already hear what she would say. I mutter the word anyway. "Fuck."

I throw the car into reverse and stop a few feet from the wreck. The smell of burning rubber and oil hits me as I climb out. The man reaches toward me, blood running down his face from a gash above his brow.

"Shit, man," I say. "You okay?"

It is a stupid question. I already know the answer. I crouch beside him and look into the van. The driver is still strapped in, face crushed against the airbag, arms hanging loose.

"He's dead," the man mutters.

I grab his arm and pull, hauling him up with one good hand. His legs buckle immediately, and I stumble, straining to hold him upright. His weight drags against me as we move toward the car, one step at a time, his boots scraping against the wet road.

"Stay with me," I say.

"Facili... Cor... Luc..." The words fall apart in his mouth, fragments that mean nothing. I don't have time to make sense of them.

I prop him against the car, yank open the rear door, and push him inside. He falls back, head hitting the seat with a dull thud. I shove his legs in as another car whips past, horn blaring through the rain. Then I slam the door shut and lean against it, gasping for air.

I stand there for a few seconds, chest heaving, pain trickling over my shoulder and arms.

I slide back into the driver's seat. My fingers tremble against the wheel. Zoe sits in silence, eyes fixed ahead, face unreadable

"I know," I say. "I know."

Nothing.

"Okay," I say, gripping the steering wheel. "We'll be fine. Starting from... Now."

Chapter 14

Triage

The roads are nearly empty now, except for the wreckage.

Abandoned cars block intersections at odd angles, their doors yawning open like mouths mid-scream. Shopping carts lie overturned with blankets, diapers, cans scattered over the road. The husks of trash fires hiss quietly in blackened barrels, still smoldering.

I weave through the chaos in silence. When I set out, I instinctively tried to strike up a conversation with Zoe, only to be met with silence, and I didn't want to be one of those people who talk to themselves incessantly. So I just keep things in my head.

Every bump in the road sends a jolt through my sling, lighting up my shoulder. Shadows move on the sidewalks, some real, some not. I don't slow down to check. Those that are caught outside are as good as dead. They will receive a severe dose of radiation. They would show symptoms within the hour, like nausea and dizziness and headaches. Some hours after that, they would vomit, confused and bleeding. Then the organs shut down. At that point, they will wish for death to come and take them.

The road splits ahead. One direction leads to the school, just a mile away. The other curves toward the on-ramp that will take us to the hospital. The traffic lights are dead, their glass faces black. A few abandoned cars sit crooked in the intersection, doors open, wheels turned the wrong way.

I slow to a crawl. The road ahead stretches empty and wet, reflecting the dull glow of a dying sky. I glance at Zoe, then at the man slumped in the back seat, his chest rising shallowly. Blood has soaked through his coat.

“I know I brought us here,” I say quietly. “There’s no turning back now.”

I wait for Zoe to respond, to tell me I am doing the right thing or to argue like she sometimes does. Nothing. The silence feels thick enough to touch. Even with two others in the car, I have never felt more alone.

My eyes flick from the empty road to the ramp. I weigh the options until the pressure builds in my chest. My hand slams against the wheel, a dull, hollow sound that cuts through the silence. I exhale, twist the wheel, and ease the car toward the ramp.

Every minute spent here is another minute Zoe’s system drains. Another minute closer to losing her. Yet I cannot leave him to die. I tell myself she would understand, that she would tell me to help him. The thought burns, because I know it is true. And it hurts to know I am choosing someone else over her, even if it is only for now.

The road smooths out as we head toward the hospital. For a moment, the drive feels easy, almost calm. Then memory catches up. The last time I was here, soldiers manned the fence and crowds pushed against it, begging to be let in. A doctor had told me to go home. To wait. There were others worse off, he said. More important. So we left.

Now we are back, and everything looks worse.

The hospital rises ahead, larger and darker than I remember. Smoke curls from a shattered window. The parking lot, once jammed with cars, lies mostly empty. A few ambulances sit abandoned near the entrance, doors open, lights still flashing in the rain. Two Humvees stand parked beside them, engines long dead.

I slow the car and idle forward. The makeshift barricade that once blocked the entrance lies in pieces across the road. A handful of people pound on the front doors, shouting for help. One woman pushes an old man in a wheelchair. The doors do not move. The glass

is already broken, and heavy debris has been stacked inside. The soldiers are gone, leaving only their machines behind.

A sign painted in red across the wall catches my eye.

GO AWAY. WE ARE AT CAPACITY. FIND SAFETY.

I sit there, staring at it. The words sink in slowly, one by one. There is no help here. No one is coming out. No one is getting in.

Then gunfire cracks through the air.

The sound is sharp and close. I look up. A figure leans out from an upper window, wearing army fatigues, firing into the sky. Empty shells clatter against the walls and scatter onto the pavement.

The noise ignites the crowd. Panic spreads like fire. People scream, pushing and scrambling. Some fall. Others run. Their eyes lock on me and the car. They start toward us, arms flailing, mouths open in desperate shouts. More follow. Dozens now. Maybe more.

Instinct takes over. I slam the accelerator. The tires shriek as we tear past the entrance, around the edge of the parking lot, and out through the open gate.

"I'm sorry," I shout over my shoulder to the man in the back. "Looks like you're coming with us for the moment."

Zoe stares ahead, silent and still. I catch her reflection in the window, pale against the blur of rain and headlights.

"I know," I whisper. "You were right. You always are."

The hospital disappears in the rearview mirror, swallowed by the changing sky and distance. My hands ache from gripping the wheel. I ease off the accelerator, but the shaking does not stop. The sound of gunfire still echoes somewhere behind us, bouncing through my skull.

I blink, and for a heartbeat faces appear against the glass, mouths open, hands pounding. The people I left behind. Then others join them in my mind, the ones at the hardware store, the ones at Wegman's, all of them left to fend for themselves. All of them left by someone.

I shake my head and drag my eyes back to the road.

In the back seat, the stranger groans. Blood seeps through the bandage on his arm, dark and slow. Zoe sits beside me, still and silent, her gaze fixed straight ahead. Her calm unnerves me. It could be peace. It could be programming. I cannot tell the difference anymore.

My throat feels dry. "If I had stopped for everyone, none of us would have made it." The words come out too loud, so I say them again, softer. "You know that, right?"

Zoe does not respond. Her reflection stares at me in the window, motionless and unreadable.

"I saved one," I say quietly. "That has to count for something."

For a moment I almost believe it. Then another memory presses in. Wegman's. Megs in the back room. I never told Zoe about that.

"There was another," I say, the words meant as confession and defense. "Megs. She worked at Wegman's. I saved her from some guy who tried to hurt her." My voice trails off. The car hums. The rain keeps time against the windshield.

My gaze drifts to Zoe, searching for something human in her face, a flicker of feeling or doubt. Nothing. Only calm reflection in the glass beside her. Maybe she already knows the truth and simply chooses not to say it.

It is hard to tell who needs convincing more, her or me.

A story forms in my head, the one I will repeat later when silence grows too heavy. The version where everything I did makes sense, where saving one life outweighs the many I left behind.

There were too many.

The crowd was out of control.

Stopping would have killed us all.

This man was right in front of me.

I did what I could.

The rhythm of those sentences keeps me upright. I repeat them until they sound true.

The road curves, opening onto a long stretch of highway. I tighten my grip on the wheel and glance at Zoe. Her expression does not change.

“I won’t let you down,” I whisper. “I promise we’ll make it.”

The hum of the tires fills the silence as the danger closes in around us again.

Each block stretches longer than the last. Overhead, the sky bruises deeper, the fallout cloud swelling like a storm that forgot how to rain, looking rust-colored, dense, and crawling closer.

It’s not a matter of *if* anymore. Just when. When will it arrive, and how long will it last? The big *if* is if we can bounce back from it.

Surely there must be a way.

This can’t be the end of civilization.

It just can’t be.

Chapter 15

Buyer's Remorse

I turn into the school's drive. The flag out front still stands, motionless in the dead air. I wonder if someone should turn the flag upside down, but the truth is that no one is coming to save us. This isn't a Henrietta thing, or a New York state thing, or even a nation thing. It's global, and everyone is dealing with their own populations, their own problems.

The school itself looks almost untouched. Windows remain unbroken, walls free of graffiti. It's just... quiet. I had half expected the students to rise up against their so-called authoritarian overlords the moment the power went out and civilization tipped toward its animal instincts.

I pull around the car to the empty staff car parking bays and stop in front of a door labeled 'STAFF ENTRANCE ONLY'. There is a smaller sign below it, stuck up with tape, informing students to use the internal entrance.

I look outside and wonder how much time I have. I estimate there isn't much of it, and pretty sure the outer edges are fast approaching. It's so strange not to see anyone at the school or on the street. Desolate.

The man moans from the backseat.

"Yeah, I'll see what I can find for you in there as well."

I cast one last look to Zoe.

"I'll be right back." And then I can't help myself. "Don't go anywhere."

I take a deep breath, ease out the crowbar, brace myself, and burst out of the door, slamming it shut behind me, hopefully allowing the

least amount of outside air into the cabin, then run to the solid wood door. I hold my breath as I jam in one end near the handle and yank it back, the frame splintering and the lock breaking.

Without looking back, I shut the door behind me, sealing myself inside. But without a latch, it swings open a crack. I grab a chair, drag it over, and wedge it under the handle. It's not foolproof, is never meant to be, but in times like these, every little barrier counts.

What little light there is outside isn't permeating into the space. I produce my phone to light the room. Fifty-eight percent from the last time it was charged. I suppose not using apps (you know, what a smart phone is for) really prolongs battery life. I was a *charge-my-device-every-night-while-I-sleep* kind of guy. I guess that's one less thing I need to worry about while I try to stay alive.

I navigate through the staff room and corridor to get to the office. Inside, the silence is crushing. Not peaceful. Not empty. The kind of silence that makes your ears ring. The corridor is clean. Linoleum gleaming faintly in the filtered daylight coming through high-set windows. Bulletin boards still hold laminated calendars and faded staff announcements: PTA Meeting This Thursday, Flu Season Is Here, Team-Building Workshop 2PM. The world hadn't had time to fall apart here yet. It had simply... paused.

All those times I went running (and all the money I spent on shoes) doesn't count for shit as I move quickly, my boots echoing in the stillness. My shoulder aches with every step, Zoe's fate dragging at my back as much as the sling.

The office is unlocked. Inside, everything looks exactly as it would at the end of a normal school day. Desks neat, a mug half-full of cold tea beside a phone that hasn't rung in days. Bright posters on the walls shout about college readiness and character values.

I find the school map in a wall-mounted frame near the entrance, a big, colorful floor plan behind plexiglass. I study it, one hand resting lightly on the glass.

Library - B108. East Hallway. Past the gym.

I mutter it like a mantra. Turns on my heel and head out.

The hallway feels longer on the way back, like the building is holding its breath. I am moving faster now, ignoring the ache. Past the gym, down the corridor. Lockers gape open, their doors twisted and dented.

Classroom doors are shut, and I don't bother looking inside.

I remember the last time they opened this place as an emergency shelter two winters ago in a snowstorm, the one that knocked out power for half the county. People slept in classrooms, curled in blankets on gym mats. Zoe had brought hot coffee to volunteers. At the time it was a lifesaver, now it is just empty. I wonder why the community didn't come together to share resources. I guess panic impeded that thinking, as everything happened so quickly. I mean, I didn't think about it until I walked down this hallway.

Finally, I reach B108. The library. The door is unlocked. Inside, rows of books sleep quietly on their shelves. Tables are undisturbed. One chair is pulled slightly back, like someone left mid-sentence.

Near the front desk, a display rack of local maps and brochures catches my eye. Trail guides, park maps, and finally, a Rand McNally road atlas. I put the crowbar down on the desk and grab it with my good hand, lay it flat on a table and start flipping through pages quickly.

Rochester. Henrietta. Corning. There it is. About ninety miles south. Plenty of gas in the tank, or in my case, charge in the battery. On top of that, we will head away from the death cloud. And if I drive a hundred miles an hour, we'll be there in the hour. Who's going to stop me? As desperate as they are, things suddenly felt easier.

Take the three ninety South. Then east on the eighty-six. Couldn't be easier. It's basically a straight shot. An hour, tops. A little more if we stop to take some photos on the side of the road.

I rip out the page and stuff it in my pocket, and then, being a good neighbor and all, I place it back in the rack. Who knows? Maybe someone else may come looking for directions of how to take their electronic wife back to a facility. Urg.

As I step out of the library with a crowbar in hand, silence breaks. A sudden clang, sharp and metallic, echoes down the corridor, followed by a low grunt, and then another clatter of something falling. I freeze and turn to the end of the hall, through double doors that are open, rows and tables and benches. The cafeteria. That's where the sound came from. Maybe it is a wild animal that had gotten in a broken window and is taking advantage of the lack of people. Or maybe it is...

"Stupid thing... come on... just open, dammit."

It wasn't violent, just frustrated. I turn to the opposite end, towards the office, the teachers' lounge, the exit, and Zoe. But before I realize it, I turn and against my will walk towards the cafeteria. Curiosity? Pity? Stupidity? Most likely a mix of all three of those things. Maybe I just want to talk to another person before the world goes silent.

I walk through the open doors. Long tables lined up. A small amount of light is coming through the high windows, cutting the dust in heavy lines. No movement.

But from the back, in the kitchen area, comes another clutter followed by a string of expletives that would make a hooker blush. I step through the serving line and silently step into the stainless-steel hush of the kitchen.

The shelves are still half-stocked with giant cans of corn and peaches, packets of pancake mix sealed in plastic. The fridge door hangs open, warm and sour-smelling, milk pooling on the floor like something died in there. But the pantry? That's where the gold is. Beans. Rice. Sugar. And ketchup, gallons of the stuff, like someone expected the apocalypse to taste bland.

There, in the corner near the shelving, a young man kneels awkwardly beside a can of beans and a dented opener. His coat is wrapped tightly around his torso, one sleeve dangling loose... empty.

He's trying to open the can one-handed, muttering to himself, the opener slipping and clacking against the steel lid.

"Need a hand?" I ask, and then inwardly sigh at my poor choice of words.

The young man jolted at the sound of my voice, scrambled to his feet, a large kitchen knife in his hand. He's about twenty, hair falling over his face, which is bruised and scarred.

"What the fuck do you want?" he says.

I hold up my hands. "Nothing. I was on my way out and heard you."

"Well, this is my place."

"Hey, it's all yours, alright? Can I help you with the can?"

He eyes me curiously, the grip on the knife constantly changing, as if his palms are sweating and the handle is slipping.

"Why?"

"Because it looks like you're struggling with it."

He looked down at the crowbar in my hands.

"What are you going to do with that, huh? Hit me over the head with it?"

I look down, realize how intimidating it is, and set it against the wall next to the door.

"And I'd feel a little better if you put that knife down as well," I say.

He pauses, considering the offer, and for the first time, I wonder if he's on something. His nervous energy buzzes around the room like static, jittery and raw. Maybe he's popped a handful of uppers. And if that's the case, I definitely don't want to be around when the comedown hits.

After a long beat, he finally sets the knife on the bench.

“Hey, do I know you?” the guy says.

I look over the quizzical expression on his face, try to picture it, but I can't.

“No, I don't think so. You live around here?”

“A couple of miles away. What happened to your arm?”

“Gunshot.”

“Sounds brutal.”

“It is, trust me. What happened to your hand?”

He looks away. “Nothing.”

Maybe it is an old injury. Maybe he was born that way. Who knows in this day and age of people killing each other for a can of beans.

I step over and pick the opener up off the ground.

“I'm gonna need your help. I'm sure between us we'll be able to get into this thing.”

He picks up the can and holds it while I worked on the opener, pushing the wedge into the right spot, and squeezing the levers to pierce the lid. Then he turns the handle, and the can spun, carving out the access point.

“You holing up in here from the fallout?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Plenty of space, books, games, food. Everything sealed up. I'll be good until the military come to save everyone.”

I figure he only needs to survive a month, maybe a little more, just long enough for the radiation to settle. Then those hazmat-suited military guys will roll through, city by city, town by town, waving their Geiger counters like magic wands. They'll sweep him up, scrub him down in some sealed room, toss him a set of clean clothes, and drop him into a sterile little community.

Almost sounds like a dream. And if Zoe wasn't in a critical condition, I might have stayed to see it happen.

I give a tight smile, nod. “That's smart. Good luck with everything.”

But just as I turn, he says, "What about the rest of the cans?"

I turn back. Look through the open dry goods door, metal shelving inside, full of the canned goods.

"I appreciate the offer but I'm sure you'll figure something out," I reply taking a step back towards the door.

"Where are you going? We've got everything here."

"My wife's in the car."

"Why is she in the car?"

I take another step. "Listen, I really need to go."

"But you can't."

"She's sick."

"Well, it's too late now. If you open the door, you'll let the radiation in."

That's when I see it. The knife back in his hand. He must have grabbed it while I was distracted, staring at the pantry. He's holding it low, by his leg, casual like it's just an extension of his arm.

My stomach tightens. That is when regret creeps in. I regret coming into this kitchen. I regret not driving to the gas station instead, although something probably would have exploded there as well. My life. Zoe's life. Nothing feels safe anymore.

I take a slow step back.

He takes one forward, knife lifting.

"You are going to have to stay."

"Listen, you don't have to do this."

Then his expression shifts. Confidence flickers into confusion, then sharpens into realization... and finally, boils over into rage.

"You," he says. "You did this to me." He holds up his hand... or where his hand used to be.

"What are you talking about?"

"You left me alone with him." He steps. "You didn't even try to save me."

And then it hits me. The image of that hardware store employee, slumped in a shopping cart, pushed by that freak. The horror he must have endured tightens my chest.

That's when the man lunges. Knife raised, eyes wild.

Instinct takes over. I grab the crowbar and swing. The metal connects with the side of his head with a sickening crack.

He yelps and twists away, clutching his face as blood spills through his fingers.

I don't wait around to see what happens next. I push through the door and run. Behind me there is shouting and the padding of shoes thundering behind me. But I'm not running as fast as I would like, with my arm in a sling my center of gravity is off, the weight of my injured arm pulls at my side, jerking me off-balance with every step. The sling tightens around my neck like a noose and with each bounce, pain flares up my chest into my jaw and through my spine.

He creeps closer, and I accept the inevitability of it. When he gets me, perhaps I become the designated can opener. Perhaps he carves out a little revenge souvenir. Or perhaps I get to be the guy who puts a crowbar through his grin. All of those sound equally plausible, and none of them appeal.

I take corners too fast, my balance already shit, and my shoulder clips the edge of the wall hard. The hallway tilts, and I slam into a row of lockers, ribs first. Metal screams, my feet tangle, and then I'm down, my crowbar clattering away. The floor rushes towards me and cracks my knees, my hip. The pain in my shoulder flares, white hot and blinding, like someone just stuck a hot poker into the wound.

I try to roll, push up with my good arm, but he is already there. Boots pounding. Ragged breath. A shadow looming overhead. Then the knife slams down. White-hot agony explodes in my already ruined shoulder and I scream, raw and animal, nothing human. The blade rips through my jacket, through skin and meat, grinding

against nerves half-dead from the bullet and somehow worse than the bullet itself.

I thrash as he drops his knee into my back, holding me down, and if it wasn't for the gunshot and knife wound, it would have been painful.

"I'm gonna make you pay," he seethes.

He leans over me, I can sense his body, feel his breath, I can feel blood dripping from his face onto my face.

"He made me watch him cut it off," he continues. "And then... he made me..."

He can't finish the sentence, and I'm glad. I can piece together the ending, but I don't want to think about such a horrific act.

With that, he yanks the knife out. The pain is indescribable. It's like someone dragging a serrated hook through my shoulder, tearing nerves already screaming. My vision whites out, and I choke on a yell.

But it also clears something, not my head, just the decision. Fight or die. *Fight or Zoe dies.*

I ignore the knife. Twist hard and fast, my whole body bucking beneath him. It's not clean. It's not graceful. It's just violent. He's not ready for it. As I yank him down, I slam my forehead into his face, feel the crunch of bone on bone. Nose? Teeth? Doesn't matter.

He howls and reels back, hands to his face, the knife wobbling uncertainly in his grip.

I lunge, driving an open palm into his face.

He yelps and tumbles sideways, rolling off me. I scramble back, adjust my angle, and drive a boot into his head. The impact sends the knife skittering down the hallway, clattering against the wall and tile.

Gasping, I twist and push myself up, knees grinding against the floor, good hand dragging me forward. My bad arm is useless, throbbing with blood and fire, but I don't need it. I just need the crowbar. Then I need to get the hell out.

Each breath scorches my lungs. Each heartbeat is a gunshot in my ears. Fingers scrape across tile... then cold steel.

Got it.

Suddenly, my arm gives way beneath me. I crash face-first into the floor. Something cracks in my mouth. Maybe a tooth. I taste blood.

He must've kicked my arm away. He's on me again. A boot slams into my exposed ribs creating pure lightning. I cry out, twisting in agony, and with everything I've got left, I swing the crowbar.

The clawed end bites into his calf with a sickening smack.

He screams, collapsing, clutching at his leg. Blood spills out across the tile like paint.

I yank the crowbar free. More blood.

As he writhes, howling in pain, I force myself upright, clumsy and shaking, every nerve screaming. I stand over him, the chisel end of the crowbar aimed squarely at his face.

I breathe hard. Fierce. Broken.

But still standing.

"I... I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't want to hurt you."

Not that I could have killed him. Hell, I only defended myself.

I take a step forward but slip on his blood, collapsing onto him in a tangled heap. His arm swings up, weak, flailing, but no strength left behind it. A wet, choking gurgle escapes him.

As I push myself upright, I see the crowbar standing straight out from his neck, blood spreading fast across the floor beneath him. His final breath rattles out, and then he is still. I stare into his eyes, trying to understand what just happened. Shit.

It's only then I realize there is no version of this story where I walk away the same person.

I turn and brace myself against the wall as I vomit. My eyes squeeze shut to block the sight, but that only sharpens the image in

my mind. The blood. The crowbar. The stillness. Every detail burns itself in deeper as I heave again.

With my forehead resting on my arm, I look up and down the hall, as if someone might have seen, but the corridors are empty. I turn slowly and stare at the ceiling while I walk back to the scene, doing everything I can to avoid looking down. My hand moves through the air until it finds the crowbar. I grip it and whisper an apology as I pull it free with a wet, sludgy sound.

I apologize again, more for myself than him.

The map still bulges in my pocket as I hobble down the corridor, attempting to distance myself physically and mentally from the incident. Each step acts as a distraction as it jolts my shoulder, a hot, grinding pain that makes me mutter curses under my breath. It is karma for leaving the poor bastard with the psycho. The hallway seems longer than before, walls closing in, fluorescent lights flickering like they're mocking me.

I stagger into the office, then the staff lounge, leaning against the doorframe for balance. The air smells faintly of burned coffee and disinfectant. On the counter sits a plastic first aid kit, the kind meant for paper cuts and minor accidents. Good enough.

I claw it open with my good hand, scatter gauze and tape across the counter, and find a bandage. I wind it clumsily over the blood-soaked one already pressed to my shoulder. Two layers must be better than one, right? It doesn't dull the pain, but it holds me together. That's all I need until I reach the facility. There, I tell myself, there will be doctors. There will be help. Same for the unconscious guy in the backseat.

Teeth clenched, I shove two more bandages into my pocket and kick the kit out of the way. Pain flares with each step as I limp toward the door. My hand trembles when it meets the handle, and for a second I just stand there, breathing through the fear, before pushing it open.

The light outside has been darkening, and I know that isn't a good thing. I hold the door closed as I move the chair out of the way. I steal myself, unlock the car doors with the key remote, take a deep breath, and on the count of three, charge outside back to the car.

I slam the door shut beside me and wonder how much radiation I've just been hit with, how much is in the car with me, and what effect that might have on Zoe. I look over to her, she hasn't moved. I inspect the blood on both ends of the crowbar and smear it off with my parka. Not sure why, it just seems like the right thing to do. I then wedge it in place.

The thought crossed my mind that I should tell her what happened, but I just can't bring myself to say the words. What would she think of me?

I look over.

"Don't ask. I don't want to talk about it."

I pull out a bandage and twist awkwardly toward the back seat. My body refuses to cooperate. There is no dexterity left in my hands, and too much pain in my arm to climb back there. Getting out of the car is not an option. Not here. Not now.

The stranger hasn't moved. For the first time, I really look at him. His hair is dark, shot through with gray, the kind that makes a man look thoughtful or tired, depending on the light. A few days of stubble roughen his cheeks. He could pass for someone decent, maybe kind, but then again, most people look harmless when they're unconscious. His skin is drained of color, streaked with drying blood.

I loop the bandage around his arm, over the sleeve of his coat, clumsy and slow. Each pull sends a spark of pain through my shoulder. Halfway through, I know it will not do much good, but I keep going anyway.

The strip tightens as I wind it, tucking the loose end into the seam. Then I reach for his head. That part is worse. He lies across the seat, blood soaking into the leather. The sight makes my stomach

turn. Thank god I emptied the contents earlier in the school corridor. By the time I wrap the bandage around, it covers half his hair and eyes, the white already turning red.

A growl builds in my throat. Every second spent here, every failed loop and slip of the cloth, is another second lost for Zoe. I mutter apologies that turn into curses, breath coming fast, words falling apart. The anger rises before I can stop it, and it lands where it should not, on him, the man I am trying to save.

I settle back into the seat and close my eyes. For a moment I let everything wash over me. The pain, the frustration, the strange comfort of still being alive.

When I open them, the bloodstain on my parka catches my attention. My gloves are slick, dark around the seams. The sight pins me in place. I can't look away.

Hatred swells up, heavy and raw. I hate this road, this car, this endless unraveling of everything that used to make sense. I hate the pain crawling through my body, the helplessness that comes with it. Most of all, I hate I cannot help Zoe, that I cannot even understand what she truly is.

Then the tears come all at once. My shoulders shake, and every rib aches with the force of it. The sound that escapes me is half sob, half breath. I try to swallow it back, to push the emotion down, but it keeps rising until I can barely breathe.

I sit there for a moment, the engine quiet, my breath catching in short bursts. The tears still sting, but I force them back. I drag the back of my gloved hand across my face, smearing sweat and something else I do not want to think about. The world outside the windshield looks washed out and colorless.

I take one slow breath. Then another. The kind you take when you know you have to keep moving. My hands find the wheel. The gloves stick slightly against the leather. I ease the car into reverse and back out of the parking space.

Chapter 16

Detours

The sky in Henrietta is a warning.

A burned yellow-gray hangs over the rooftops, the color of old bruises and poisoned skies. I don't look back as I pull away from the school, just keep one hand tight on the wheel, the other arm cradled in the sling, shoulder still throbbing.

Zoe sits silently in the passenger seat. Pale. Still. Watching the road ahead like it's already familiar. Like she knows where we are going. Like I am taking her home. I don't know if I have come to terms with her, that is, what she is, if I even know what she is. Product? Unit? It's not like things like this are everywhere.

We have been married for four years, that is of course, if we are legally married. I mean, someone can't marry their toaster, right? Or can they? I don't know. Technically, perhaps. I'm sure someone has. I once saw a documentary about people in relationships with inanimate objects like cars and rollercoasters. It was mesmerizing.

The more curious part of all this is how we came to be together. Had she gone rogue? Did she actually believe she was a real person? Surely she would know when she can't do human things. I'm still curious how something like this can eat and drink and interact like she does, can shower and use the bathroom. It's something from a science fiction movie. But if she was rogue, if she had escaped, maybe she wouldn't want me to take her back there.

A bridge to cross when we get there. At the moment, this is my sole purpose. Number one, stay alive. Number two, get Zoe to the super-secret, and ominously named Facility Nine. I need to save her memories, her existence. Then we will figure out what comes next.

There is always a 'what comes next.' If the facility does anything to hurt her, they'll want to have a battalion on hand, because I will tear that place apart if I need to.

The measure of the violence is only matched by the measure of the love.

Don't get me wrong. I know I seem somewhat blind going into this, and I do have a multitude of questions swirling through my brain, like: Why didn't you tell me? And, why couldn't you charge yourself with the car like we did our cell phones? But then I feel guilty for thinking she is nothing more than an electric object, some machine, and she isn't. She is so much more than that.

The page I ripped out of the school Rand McNally atlas sits under the infotainment unit. Route 390 South, then east. Avoid major towns. Avoid military presence. Avoid people. Get there as fast as possible, at all costs.

Warm recirculated air gushes through the vents, possibly poisoned, most likely infecting me, but it's still the last thing on my mind. The radio presenter makes an occasional message. Stations are closing down across the country, connections are severed internationally. We are really on our own, just like they are on their own. The presenter ensures he will stay on as long as possible, will see it out, until the end... whatever the end is, whatever the end means. It's anyone's guess.

As the President's address plays again, I wonder if he is in his bunker with a bunch of others, discussing options, trying to make contact with counterparts in their respective safe places. It's a dire situation for everyone, but he'll be fine, he's got enough food and drinks to see him through to the other side, I just don't know if there will be any voters left to care.

Then there's the emergency broadcast. The same as before. I'm getting sick of listening to it. And then I remember the playlist I have already downloaded, that doesn't need any internet connection. I

need the distraction, so between glances, I plug in the phone. I could have stopped and fiddled with the controls to connect it wirelessly, but I just couldn't be bothered to figure that out.

I find a cable in the center console and connect it together. The connection is sound and the apps load. I press on the screen until I navigate to the music player and liked songs. A bit of *ELO* never hurt anyone, but in that moment, I would have selected any of the songs on there, something to end that incessant emergency broadcast briefing tones.

Then the road curves, and I slow immediately at the sight of a military checkpoint. Or what's left of one.

A Humvee stands half-angled across the highway, door open, windshield cracked. Concrete barriers have been pushed aside, making a narrow lane barely wide enough to drive through. Orange cones knocked over. Floodlights, dark and idle.

One of the sentry towers is scorched. There are bullet holes in a nearby road sign. Empty shell casings glint like teeth in the gravel.

I slow the car. No movement. No flags. No orders barked through bullhorns. Just a handwritten sign nailed to a barricade: "MAY GOD HAVE MERCY ON US ALL".

Behind us, through the rear-view mirror, the wind kicks up a dust devil that scatters paper and leaves in a slow, spiraling dance.

The last of the city slips behind us like a bad dream. Rochester, once a sprawl of strip malls, traffic lights, and Wegmans parking lots, now looks abandoned mid-thought. Broken stoplights stand over empty intersections. Bus shelters are shattered. Sidewalks are littered with discarded grocery carts and smashed phones.

But the highways are strangely clear. Most people have either barricaded themselves at home or fled, deeper into the cities or the forests. Some got stuck. Some got lucky. Many did not.

The open road stretches ahead, smooth and empty, the kind of quiet that feels wrong. I turn up the sound system to drown out the

faint electric hum, the artificial engine noise meant to convince me I am still part of the old world. For a while, it almost works.

Then, rounding a bend, a flash of silver catches my eye. A sedan is coming straight toward us, on the wrong side of the concrete divider, speeding fast enough to blur. There is no time to think. I lift my foot from the accelerator and wrench the wheel toward the shoulder. The tires scream. The car jerks sideways, skidding just enough to avoid the impact as the silver sedan tears past, so close I feel the air shift and the mirror snap backward.

The sound fades almost instantly, swallowed by distance. My hands stay locked on the wheel long after the danger is gone. The road ahead looks the same, but my pulse doesn't slow.

Another song comes on. With a trembling hand, I tap the controls on the steering wheel, turning up the volume to drown out the sound of my heartbeat. It's a song I haven't heard in years, but it still takes me until the chorus to sing along. At first it comes out as a mumble, then slowly I sing, each word steadying me a little more than the last.

To be clear, I'm not a good singer. But when it's just me or us, I can't help myself. Zoe's voice is perfect, effortless. I used to joke she should join a band, half-kidding, half-serious. But right now, with the volume cranked, there's nothing holding me back. I can't even hear myself, which gives me the illusion I might actually be somewhere near the right key. Of course, if the music suddenly cut off, I'd probably burst into tears from the sheer horror of my own voice.

Without thinking, I reach over and rest my hand on Zoe's knee, just like I always would. And hers on mine. After a moment, I gently lift her hand and place it there myself. Anything to hold on to normality in the middle of the chaos, the killing, the madness, the realization that the woman I love might not be entirely human.

Hell, she could've been a serial killer or hiding out in witness protection. So I suppose things could've been worse. She could've stabbed me in my sleep.

Further ahead, shapes form on the horizon. At first they are distant and unclear, but then they grow, spreading across my field of vision. A convoy of cars is tearing toward me, headlights flickering like a storm of glass. They move fast, weaving across lanes with no regard for anything in their path. It looks like a race. Maybe it is. Maybe a race against time.

Confusion twists in my chest. Why are they coming this way? I thought the silver sedan was a one-off, but now there is an SUV, a minivan, and two more sedans, all hurtling straight toward me. I ease off the accelerator and edge the car toward the shoulder. The sound of horns fills the air as they roar past, one after another, wind buffeting the car hard enough to shake the mirrors. The faces behind the glass flash by in blurs of panic. Drivers hunched low over their wheels. Passengers turning to look behind them. Some stare upward toward the sky, as if the threat is not in front of them but above.

And then they are gone. The engine noise fades, leaving only silence, the hum of my own motor, and the faint sound of the radio. I press down on the accelerator again. The road ahead is empty, but the air feels heavier.

The rearview mirror catches my eye. A face staring back at me steals my breath. I yelp, instinctively jerk the wheel, and the tires screech against wet asphalt. The car swerves before I pull it straight again, heart hammering.

It takes a second to realize it's the man we picked up. His head lolls against the seat, the bandage slipping down across one eye. He looks worse than before, with waxy skin, cracked lips, and unfocused eyes.

"You alright back there?"

He mumbles something that sounds like words, then, “Where are we?”

“I tried taking you to a hospital, but they were shut down,” I say. “We’re heading somewhere else now.”

His reflection sways in the mirror.

“Where are we going?”

“A place called Corning. You know it?”

“Yes,” he whispers. “That’s good.” A pause. “Wait... what’s your name?”

“Adam,” I tell him. “And this is Zoe.”

He mutters again, too quiet to catch.

“What was that?”

“Cooper,” he says, clearer this time.

The sound of my last name makes me tighten my grip on the wheel. “Yeah? How did you know that?”

“Goddamn.”

His head shakes in the mirror.

“We were on our way to you,” he says. “There was an accident.”

“I know. I saw it.”

“You saved me?”

“Yeah, I guess, maybe... probably. But that doesn’t explain how you know me, or why you were coming to find us.”

He takes a slow breath. “Because I’m from Facility Nine.”

My stomach drops. The speedometer climbs without me noticing. I ease off the gas. “You’re from Facility Nine? Then you can tell me what’s going on.”

His voice wavers, somewhere between exhaustion and focus. “My name is Nathan Kepler.”

“What’s going on?”

“Zoe is an ENLIVE unit.”

“ENLIVE?” I echo. “What the hell is that?”

“Enhanced Neural Lifeform for Intelligent Virtual Emotion,” he says, each word deliberate, as if reciting something memorized. “Your reaction to finding out who she is... it matters.”

“Why?”

“You were never meant... Not like this... Lucid blinded them so...”

“Wait!” I shout, eyes glancing from the road to the mirror. “What are you saying? Did you say Lucid?”

“It’s good you’re out here,” he murmurs, voice thinning. “That’s... positive. Lucid will...”

“Why is it important?” I push. “Why does it matter what I feel?”

“You’ll understand when you reach the faci—”

The rest is drowned out by the rush of oncoming headlights and the roar of passing cars.

“What’s at Facility Nine?” I shout, but the words hang in the air unanswered.

When I glance back at the mirror, his head is slumped to the side. I twist around. He’s out cold again, chest barely moving.

“Does this make you nervous?” I ask Zoe.

She says nothing. I wonder what she would say if she could. Maybe she would tell me to turn around and follow the other cars, that there must be a reason they are driving back the way they came.

“We’ll get there,” I say as I squeeze her knee.

I wonder if she can hear me, or even the conversation I had with our mystery guest. I hope she can, and she knows I am here for her, that I am doing my best. That I haven’t abandoned her, haven’t tossed her aside like a busted microwave. I made a vow to her, secrets or no, and I intend to keep it.

And that’s the thing. I don’t feel betrayed, I just want to understand her and what this is all about. To know what she is, and who she was before all this. I want her back, and I’ll take her in any form

she comes. Everyone has a past, and that can't be changed. All we can focus on is the future. Our future. Together.

“Nothing is going to stand in my way.”

And as they say, they are my famous last words. Forty miles out of Henrietta, careening along the highway with the fallout cloud in the rear vision mirror on the horizon, I slam on the breaks, the car decelerating at a monstrous pace that tested the validity of the seat belts holding in the seats, lest we be smashing through the windshield. The result sends a burning electric smell through the manifold and into the car.

Could Zoe smell? I mean, she mentioned smells on numerous occasions, but now I figure it's some kind of sensors and AI to algorithmically interpret them, mash it with my reaction, and respond accordingly. Damn good cook though, way better than me. I don't feel cheated though.

What a bizarre digression.

In front of us is a wreck. A big one. A jackknifed semi, turned sideways across the two-lane road like a dead animal in the middle of the highway. A pickup truck with its front end crumpled against the trailer, driver's door hanging open, the airbag now limp and blood smeared. A few abandoned suitcases lie burst open across the road, their contents fluttering in the wind. A pair of jeans. A child's shoe. A box of crackers split and half-eaten.

From my driver's seat, I don't see anyone in the vehicles, although the only way to be sure would be to investigate, and I just don't feel comfortable enough doing that. I'm sure whoever was there got in another vehicle or hit the road on foot, most likely in some desperation to reach their destination.

I scan either side of the metal carnage. There isn't a straightforward way around. Trees too close. Ditch too deep. I sigh, because what else can one do. If I could teleport my car over the barricade

and carry on my merry way, I would, but I can't, nor can I attempt to move the mangled wrecks out of the way.

And then I see it. Just off the shoulder in the ditch, the back of a red Lexus SUV. I stare at it.

"Holy shit, I think that's the Miller's car," I say. "I think they tried to drive around the wreckage."

I step out before I can stop myself and begin walking slowly toward the wreck. Both front doors are open. The windshield is cracked into a spiderweb of fractured glass, the roof bent inward. One of the rear windows has shattered, glittering shards scattered across the grass. The trunk gapes wide, its contents spilled and tangled inside.

I think it belongs to the Millers. The license plate confirms it.

I want to investigate further, but I hesitate. If I climb down into the ditch with this busted arm, I might never get out again. Instead, I move carefully along the edge, scanning left and right. Nothing. No sign of anyone.

What the hell was Miles thinking driving down there? Maybe he didn't have a choice. Most importantly, where were they now? I almost call out his name, but what good would that do? I can only hope they've made it somewhere safe. All of them.

Groaning, I make my way back to the car and ease myself into the seat.

"Detour," I mutter. "Of fucking course there's a detour."

I scan the road and surrounding terrain. There's a narrow side road branching off, a dirt path heading who-knows-where. Grabbing the map, I try to pinpoint our current position. The good news is I'm almost certain I've got us pegged where we are. The bad news: this little detour would take us straight off the edge of the damn map.

I curse myself silently for not grabbing the whole Rand McNally atlas back at the school, leaving it behind as some noble gesture for future scavengers, tourists, or survivors, whoever the hell might come

after. All this ‘*good neighbor*’ bullshit is seriously grating on me. My hands grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white, and I clench my jaw so tightly it feels like my teeth might shatter.

What’s that old line about accepting the things you can’t change? Yeah. Total bullshit. Yet even as I stew in my anger, I know it’s pointless. I’m wasting time I don’t have. Going back isn’t an option, likely suicide at this point. I could hunt for a proper exit, but that would just land me right back where I am now.

Lost. Frustrated. Trapped.

“What do you think?” I ask.

I glance across at Zoe and suddenly feel desperately alone. So alone that I can sense the old anxiety, the crippling kind I first met in high school, clawing its way back. It’s the kind of anxiety that wears you down slowly, and then, just when you think you’ve hit rock bottom, it drags you even deeper.

Nothing a fistful of pills couldn’t numb. Back then, it helped, to a point. It’s been years since I’ve felt it this strongly, and I’m almost surprised it’s chosen this exact moment to reappear. Maybe I was just too busy before, running from one disaster to the next.

But now, in the stillness of the car’s cabin, death trailing behind us, uncertainty looming ahead, that anxiety might as well be buckled up in the back seat, kicking my chair every five seconds and whining, “Are we there yet?”

In a way, I’m glad Zoe can’t respond right now, at least I don’t have to explain my erratic chain of thoughts.

I take a deep breath, grip the wheel tighter, and guide the car off the main road. The tires crunch over loose gravel as we slip onto the narrow side road, dust rising in the headlights. The asphalt vanishes behind us, replaced by shadows and trees pressing close on either side. It feels like driving off the edge of the map, straight into the unknown.

Chapter 17

Welcome to Hollow Ridge

We take it easy over the roadway, occasionally jostling over and through potholes and the uneven terrain. It's a frustratingly slow process, but it gives me the opportunity to blindly reach back and find a water bottle in the backseat.

Eventually it transforms into something more permanent, the bitumen, old, cracking, the road barely wide enough to cater for a car, but it allows us to pick up the pace. I waited for the tire to puncture or the battery to drop out, or for any one of a thousand things that would get in the way, but those things never happened.

There are signs for places I've never heard of, and in fact, I have no idea if we are even traveling in the right direction. It would be just my luck if I had been inadvertently spun around and accidentally heading back to Henrietta.

It is late afternoon when a sign pronounces a town of Hollow Ridge is up ahead in eight miles. No point checking the map. The town doesn't exist in my world. We are off the map. Off grid. Heck, the whole world is off grid. And I have never heard of Hollow Ridge. It sounds like the kind of place where people smile too wide and don't lock their doors because the sheriff is their cousin... everyone's cousin, because everyone is related because they are all the same family... or cult for that matter.

The road gets a little newer, trees on the side of the road lean in closer, and the last of the signs announcing the town up ahead disappears in the rearview. Ahead are two thin lines of faded yellow paint and the deepening silence of a town not found on any map.

As we work our way around a sweeping road, it is the kind of moment where, if this were a movie, people would swear at the screen, yelling at the actors to turn around and go somewhere else. But there was nowhere else, and everything was running out. Battery. Time. Patience.

On the other side of the coin, if we don't get killed, we might be able to gauge our surroundings and determine the best course of action. A chance to upgrade our navigation. Hopefully there are some cheery locals on perpetual energy power that can not only point us in the right direction to rejoin the highway but will recharge our car and give me something to eat. I don't know what they will say about Zoe, and I am loath to cram her into the trunk like I'm a mafia hitman in need of dumping a body. Although, I am wearing the leather gloves and all.

After a few miles the trees thin out, replaced by chain-link fences and cracked sidewalks. The town slowly reveals itself, like it's waking up to a day that never started.

There is a wooden sign on the right side of the road that reads: *Welcome to Hollow Ridge - Est. 1855.*

Ah, yes. The famous 1855, when.... Well... the Bunsen burner was invented (which I learned about in science when I was in high school), and a bunch of other shit happened, including the formation of the town we are driving into. We coast past the sign, ease off the power while I take in as much as possible through the windshield.

The town looks... fine. Not pristine, not destroyed, just suspended, frozen in time. Like it's holding its breath, patiently waiting for permission from the world to step back outside.

A row of two-story houses lines the entry road with clapboard siding, wind chimes, little porches with chairs still facing the street like they're waiting for someone to sit down. No broken windows. No signs of a fight. Just too much stillness.

We pass a post office, an old brick library, a school, and a shuttered barbershop with faded posters in the window. The traffic lights hang limp over the intersection, dark, glassy, and useless. No red. No green. Just cold eyes staring down at empty streets. The kind of silence that makes you realize how much noise the world used to make.

I wonder if Hollow Ridge saw the types of things I experienced, the fighting and murdering over canned goods, the pushing and shoving and all out rioting at military food drop off stations, of if they were insulated from all of that. Perhaps they all bound together to ride out the storm that was coming. And maybe that explains why there is absolutely no one around.

Then I see it. A small intersection with a weathered green sign: MAIN ST. Cliché and predictable. Every city has a China Town. Every town has a Main Street.

“Bingo,” I mutter.

Main Street is narrow, two blocks long at most. A diner with its stools still in place. A gift shop with mugs and magnets in the window. A flagpole in front of the town hall, the Stars and Stripes hanging limp. A church bell tower rising over the rooftops. And at the far end, a gas station.

Not a chain. One of those independent places with a single pump island, faded signage, and a cramped store tucked behind barred windows. The kind of place that sells expired jerky and automotive oil in equal measure.

I pull up beside the pump and kill the engine. Zoe doesn't react. If she was with it, I wonder what she would say about all of this.

“Well, honey,” I say. “You always wanted to take a little tour through some smaller towns. And here we are. I hope you are taking this all in.”

I stare through the windshield for a long second. No one. No sound. Not even a bird. Of course not. They would have sensed what

was coming and taken off somewhere, anywhere, to a place where the radiation won't touch them.

“Stay here, babe. I won't be a minute.”

I'll never tire of using that line. As I sit there watching her, I wonder if maybe this is the moment, the perfect chance to say all those things I've been holding back. She can't interrupt, can't stop me. I open my mouth, but something holds me back, and I retreat into myself. We're only halfway there, after all, and I don't need to make the rest of the journey any weirder than it already is. So for now, I let the silence linger.

I take one last look around through the long shadows and the sun dips in lower. Another hour and it will be dark and far too dangerous to be outside. If I can get some directions, we get going, outrun the cloud, and make it to the facility with plenty of time to spare.

I grab my phone and step out of the car, the door shutting with a solid click. Zoe and the man stay inside as I lock the doors with a quick press of the fob. The indicator lights flash once, cutting through the dark.

Cold air hits my face. I keep my breathing low and glance up and down the street. Nothing. No sound, no movement. Just the hollow quiet of a town that feels abandoned.

Everyone must be inside somewhere, in the school or library, maybe, with the doors sealed, windows covered, playing cards under dim light, pretending the world outside has not changed.

I zip my parka to the throat and pull the hood over my head. The fabric muffles the world, leaving only my pulse and the whisper of the wind.

The gas station door creaks as I push it open, slow and deliberate, looking in every corner. The air inside is stale, like it's been a while since anyone has opened the door. It smells of old rubber, dust, and something fried. The overhead fluorescent lights are dead, leaving the place lit only by the gray light leaking through the windows.

The shelves are mostly bare, save for a few crushed snack bags, and a single can of off-brand soup rolling on its side. I can only assume the Sheriff pulled stock from all the shops for the town's people. It takes a village.

I move past the counter, my boots crunching on shattered candy glass, and pull a bandana off a rack. It's black with white writing, the name of the town. I suppose it's useful for the passersby to get a souvenir while they fill up with gas before they left onto their next destination. I awkwardly tie a loose knot with my one hand, use my teeth to tighten it. Push it over my face and tuck it over my ears to hold it in place. It would do little against what was coming, but it made me feel slightly better about walking around outside.

But it is the back wall that has what I'm looking for. A wire rack of maps, mostly untouched, like it would be a waste of time if they did. I pull one out, a New York State Highway System one. No point hanging around any longer than I need to.

Then a sound. A click, or a footstep, not close but not far, somewhere behind the shelves, and yet it has my attention, has me turning towards it. I stand there and hold my breath as I look, pushing myself onto tippy toes to peer around corners from my position.

I know I've got Sharon in the car, but right now, I really wish I had a gun. Sure, guns have limited use unless you're carrying a mountain of ammunition, but just the sight of one is scary enough. The beauty of it is, the person on the wrong end never knows if it's loaded or not.

The truth is, though, I was never really a gun guy. Sure, blowing off steam at the range with Miles was a hell of a good time. There's nothing quite like shredding cardboard targets with everything from handguns to full-automatic rifles, feeling like an action-movie badass. But it's not like I ever wandered next door afterward and casually picked up a Glock G19.

Right now, creeping around blind corners, every shadow a threat, I'm seriously regretting that decision. If I had that Glock, I'd pull it out, shout some tough-guy announcement, and back the hell away to the car. We would burn rubber out of town, pull over somewhere safe, and calmly read the map. A foolproof plan, for a day when nothing's going according to plan.

With no immediate threats jumping out, I decide to salvage my sanity while it's still intact. Turning toward the door, I take a step forward—

—and stare straight down the barrel of a rifle. Not military grade, but a hunting rifle, held steady enough to convince me that whoever's holding it knows exactly how to use it.

One look at his face confirms it.

A teenager, maybe sixteen, maybe twenty; it's hard to tell these days. Dirty blond hair, jaw clenched tight, eyes unblinking like a hunter spotting a deer through his sights.

Beside him stands a younger girl, around twelve, gripping a box of cereal against her chest as if it's a bar of gold.

"Give me the keys," he orders. Voice cracking but trying hard not to.

He's been hunting, sure enough, but he's clearly never held someone at gunpoint before. I can't decide in the moment whether that's good news or just one more risk.

Slowly, I raise my hands.

Yep, I definitely should've had a gun. But then again, if I did, where would we be? Mexican standoff? Still, it would've given me something to barter with, at least some leverage. Right now, I've got nothing, except, of course, the one thing he wants.

"Look," I start.

But my thoughts are cut short when a second gun presses against the back of my head. It's the kind of moment that fires the senses, and as I tense, everything in my body instantly pains, and I am cognizant

of my shirt crusted with blood and the deeper wound from the knife has soaked into the side of my coat, cold and sticky.

“Do it.” It’s a man’s voice, deeper, calm. Not angry, just tired. Probably hungry, obviously keen to get out of town. The kid’s father? I suppose it is, but I wasn’t about to ask for birth certificates.

“I just came looking for a map,” I say. “I can give you a lift anywhere you want, as long as it’s towards Corning.”

“We’re not heading towards Corning,” the boy says.

“My wife is very sick, and there is a man in the back who needs medical attention.”

“It looks like you’ve experienced some shit already,” the man says.

“Shot and stabbed through the same shoulder. It’s been a week.”

He steps up behind me.

“Well, if you don’t hand over your keys, it’s gonna get a whole lot worse.”

“I can’t let you take the car.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “They can get out. We’re not interested in taking them with us.”

“It’s not that easy,” I say. “She’s in a coma and he’s unconscious.”

“Jesus,” the boy says. “What did you do to them?”

“What?” I say half turning. “No! Hey, I’m not the one in the process of holding someone up to steal their car.”

“I’m gonna make this real simple for you,” the man says. “You give us the keys, we drive out of here and drop your friends on the side of the road a mile away, or I can shoot you and just take your keys. Not sure what happens to your friends with that option.”

He steps back, but what I initially thought was a gesture of goodwill, a retreat, was only to extend his weapon at arm’s length, so if he does pull the trigger, there will be less blood splatter on him.

I reach into my pocket for the key. I’m not about to test his resolve. It’s a rock-and-a-hard-place situation, but at least this way, we

stay alive. I don't know what comes next, but at least I'm conscious, not bleeding out on the pavement while Zoe fends for herself.

The man steps into view, circling around me.

He doesn't rush. Doesn't flinch either. Late forties, maybe older. Wears a faded work coat, oil stains on the sleeves, elbows worn down to the thread. His face is lean, weathered, wrapped in a salt-and-pepper beard, close-cropped and flecked with dirt and ash.

It used to be easy to size someone up based on their clothes, their posture, the way they looked at you. Make snap judgments about who they were, what they valued, and the kind of life they led.

Not anymore.

Now everyone's the same. Desperate. Scrambling to grab whatever they think they need, right here, right now.

In his right hand he holds a revolver, classic and heavy. There's another one tucked into his waistband, half hidden beneath his coat, bitt of the grip just visible above his belt. He stands like someone who has used both before. Maybe not recently, maybe too recently.

With barrel pointed at my face and trigger finger on the guard, he reaches out and takes the key from my hand.

"Much obliged," he says.

"How much ammunition have you got?" I ask.

His expression flickers, like my question was the last thing he ever expected me to ask.

"Enough," he grunts.

He steps back, and only then does the boy shoulder his weapon. They back together to the door, he reaches out as if to protect the girl and guide her backwards.

"You're a smart man," he says at the door. "Others would have refused to give up a precious possession... and paid the price."

"You didn't give me much choice."

"Bullshit. We all have choices."

"Please be gentle with Zoe. She is the world to me."

He nods, like a man who has lost one of the most important people to him in the world. Yeah, he knows what it's like. It's written on his face. He knows the pain and heartache, and in that moment I trust him wholeheartedly to look after Zoe, to treat her with respect, that he is only watching out for his family.

I stand at the door and watch as the man unlocks the doors, and the kids climb into the back seat, the boy behind the driver, possibly to keep the weapon on Zoe so she doesn't interfere with their plans. The man keeps his gun pointed at me until the last moment, where he pulls away and disappears inside.

I stagger towards the car, unbelieving this is happening, that someone has not only held me up and taken the keys, but has also taken Zoe hostage.

"I'm sorry," I mumble.

The car comes alive, and he hits the gas, pulling the car onto the road and speeding away. Through the back window I see them all there.

But then a light beams forth from inside the car not glowing as much as slicing. The driver turns his head. Zoe suddenly turns to him in a brisk motion. The car jerks left, tires screech, veering hard across the narrow street. Then, impact.

Metal clashes with metal as glass explodes, just as a gunshot cracks out.

And then everything goes still.

Chapter 18

Running on Empty

At first I stumble under the gas station awning in an array of disbelief, pulling down my newly acquired bandana. The front end of the car is folded like paper around a rusted pole at the edge of the road. Maybe the bang going off was the airbag. Yes, that's it! That's what it was. But what if it wasn't? I'm moving faster now, trying to ignore the dull thud in my shoulder that sends a wave of nausea through my gut.

Suddenly the back door opens. The boy gets out, rifle in one hand, the other pulling the girl behind him. She looks woozy, unsteady on her feet. But for them, there is no time to sort oneself out. There is a glance in my direction, then downcast eyes. He shouts for the girl to follow him, and they take off up the road and disappear between some houses.

The man in the black coat tumbles out of the car and hits the road hard. For a second he just lies there, then crawls, elbows scraping the asphalt, movements jerky and slow like a wounded soldier.

I sprint toward him. "You okay?"

He groans, voice raw. "What the fuck was that?"

I don't answer. My eyes lock on the car. I circle to the passenger side and stop. The window is gone, the seat glittering with broken glass. I grab the handle and pull. It doesn't move. I pull again, harder. The metal groans but holds. The door is twisted, warped, sealed by impact.

Reaching through the broken window, I brush shards off her face with trembling fingers. I want to ask if she's okay, want to tell her I'm sorry, but I know she won't answer. So I don't.

Instead, I lean in and press a gentle kiss to her cheek.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I’m supposed to be the one protecting her, but somehow, she handled it on her own. A force of nature. A wrecking ball to anyone who gets in her way. But she doesn’t respond.

I glance past her at the driver.

He’s slumped against the airbag, but his brains are splattered across the ceiling and the twisted remains of the hood. The boy’s gun must’ve gone off, whether by accident or recklessness, it doesn’t really matter. The result is the same.

I straighten up, scanning the quiet street. Part of me hopes someone heard the crash and might come out to check. But no one does. Too insulated. Or too afraid to step outside.

I step around to the front of the car. It’s fucked. Completely fucked. Besides, the windows are smashed, so even if we could drive, there really isn’t anything to protect us from the fallout.

A spit of rain lands on my broken glasses, and I look at the gray sky. Rain is coming, and I don’t know if that is a good thing or a bad thing. What I do know is I need to find shelter, somewhere to figure out where we are and how to get to Corning.

Back the way we came, there were a couple of solid options: a library and a school. It wasn’t nearly as big as the one in Henrietta, where I ran into that hardware store worker hell-bent on blaming me for what some psychopath did to him. But still, a school is a school, and that means it should be solid, sealable, and built to keep chaos out.

I round the vehicle and find Kepler doubled over against an awning support, dry heaves rattling out of him. The smell pulls at my stomach and I force my eyes away from the worst of it. I plant a gloved hand on the door sill to brush away glass and lean in.

My fingers close on a hard object at his waistband. I yank it free. A snub-nosed revolver, black metal, cold and heavy in my palm.

Could be a Colt. Could be a Ruger. Either way it carries a weight that is more than the metal itself. I locate and press the release and swing the cylinder open. Empty.

I let out a soft breath, then stuff the gun into my jacket pocket anyway.

I scan the ground for the other gun, the one he pointed at my head, right at my face. It's there, lying between his feet. He must've rested it on his lap before everything went sideways.

To grab it, I'd have to lean through the window. My shoulder protests at the thought and after a moment of hesitation, I mutter, "Fuck it," and shift my attention to his pockets instead. Maybe there's something useful. Maybe something worth the trouble.

As I pat him down and check, I can't believe that a week ago I was delivering a pitch to a health food cereal company, and now I am scrounging through the pockets of a dead man looking for ammunition. It's a crazy, crazy world we live in.

In a pocket I feel something long that clinks when I rub my hands through it. I pull out a handful. Bullets. It is difficult to load a gun with one hand, something I am sure I will find out later.

I turn. "Kepler," I say.

He's on the ground again, face buried in his own vomit, and it's the last thing I need. It's not a good sign, but there's no one to call and nowhere to take him. I can't drag him down the main street with one arm, not like this, not when every minute counts. I'm barely going to make it myself before the cloud rolls in.

Another pair of hands would make all the difference, but now I have nothing and two bodies to manage. Anger flares hot and stupid. I want to swear, want to kick the car, but that will not get us anywhere.

Zoe always knew what to do, no matter the situation. When I spiral, when panic and noise fills my head, she anchors me with calm

and clarity. It was a kind of emotional judo, the way she turns my chaos into something I can hold, something I can survive.

I remember once I couldn't figure out a damn spreadsheet formula. One of those errors that defies logic. I was losing it, adrenaline spiking, cursing under my breath, slamming the desk in frustration. The formula should've worked. It didn't. I picked up my wireless mouse and drew my arm back, ready to hurl it at the wall like it was the mouse's fault.

Was the mouse to blame? No.

Would destroying it help? Also no.

Would it make me feel better? Abso-fucking-lutely.

But Zoe was there, standing in my way, saying nothing.

She reached for my lapels, pulled me down, and kissed me. Soft. Grounding. Her hand slid down my arm, over the clenched fist holding the mouse. With that same calm, quiet strength, she gently pried it from my grip and set it back on the desk, exactly where it belonged.

Then she picked up my empty coffee mug, one that said '*Breathe and drink coffee*' in fading type and placed it into my hand.

"Here," she said. "Use this. I hate that cup anyway!"

She applauded when it finally shattered into pieces. She got me, really got me. Not just the version I showed the world, but all the messy, reactive parts too.

I grab Kepler by the coat and drag him toward the gas station doors, his boots scraping over loose stones. I don't look at the mess on his face, and I'm sure as hell not cleaning it off. Some part of me feels I've done enough already.

Inside, the place smells of fuel and dust. I pull him down the aisle, past half-empty shelves and toppled displays, and into the back room. The door shuts behind us with a dull thud. The space is small, the windows intact, thick glass that still holds. It will have to do.

I leave him on the floor and take a breath. If it weren't for Zoe, I might have stayed here with him. We could have waited it out, hid-

den among the snack wrappers and dead air, riding out the storm until the cloud moved on.

But reality cuts sharper than fantasy. Zoe's time is running out, and I cannot waste another second. I need help, whether it's a set of hands, a working vehicle, anything that moves us closer to Corning.

I would give anything for that. Anything, if it means getting her there.

Back at the car window, rain falls, soft at first, but steady. I reach in to undo her seatbelt, and my shoulder screams. I collapse forward, my weight catching on the windowsill.

"I can't do this, Zoe," I whisper. "I just... I don't know what to do."

I look up at her. "I'm sorry. I need to leave you here. But I promise I will be back with help, and we'll get the hell out of here and to Facility Nine. I promise you."

I turn her head to mine, give her a kiss, and want her to kiss me back, for a second I think she does, but I can't be sure. I want her eyes to light up, I want her to reach out and touch my face, but she remains motionless. I don't know if I am breaking her heart (if she has a heart, I don't even know), or if she understands fully. Maybe both.

Grabbing a bottle of water and an MRE from the back seat, I shove them into my pocket and slide Sharon out beside me. A bandana is tugged into place over my face and ears as I step out into the fading light.

Rain cuts down through the silence as I move, each step dragging me farther from Zoe. And with every step, something inside cracks a little more. Leaving her behind, knowing I can't carry her with me, it guts me.

I try to find the humor in it, that twisted kind Zoe always loved. But nothing comes. Eventually, I can't even tell the difference between the rain on my cheeks and what's coming from me.

Still, forward is the only option. The alternative? Sit and wait for the radiation to finish what it started while Zoe's battery fades to zero, wiping away every memory we made, one heartbeat at a time.

Streets away and the library stands like a relic of the old world, brick and glass, wide steps leading to locked double doors, posters still clinging to the windows: *Author Visit This Thursday!* and *Summer Reading Challenge - Sign Up Now!*

There is no one around, because who in their right mind would be out in this weather with a toxic cloud out here. I shuffle over the cracked pavement, every step uneven. I am soaked through and my shoulder burns and everything aches.

I stare up at the entrance. The doors are glass paneled and covered with chipped blue paint. I trudge up the stairs and find the doors locked. I hold my hand to the door and peer inside. It's just light enough to peer inside the entry way, a vestibule by any other name, with another set of doors, but beyond that is unknown. What I don't see are any lights, such as torches. I guess I will be alone, and that is just fine to me.

Gripping the sledgehammer close to the head, I line it up with the lock. Pull back. Ram forward. The first hit sends a jolt through the metal, the handle vibrating violently in my hands, the shockwave rattling up my arm and lighting a fresh fire in my wounded shoulder.

I grit my teeth, draw back, and slam it again. This time there is a sharp clang, and the doors shudder open with a groan.

I step inside a narrow antechamber and pull the doors closed behind me. The lock's shot, but the frame holds. For now, it's enough.

Turning to the interior doors, I press gently. They creak open, just enough. I slip through, letting them snap shut behind me.

Near a low shelf, I sit Sharon down on her head. I pull my phone out and activate a beam of light and venture into the depths, looking for a room where I can figure out my life.

Rain pelts the roof as I pass rows of shelves of books, I find a series of small, windowless meeting rooms. I push inside and find a simple table and four chairs. I am well insulated from the external environment. If this was as far as we can go, if Zoe was... well, Zoe, then we could find some food and hole ourselves up in here, we would be quite happy with that. So many books to get us by, space, and who knows what we might find in the back offices. But it isn't the end point, barely halfway there, and it feels like I am in an impossible situation.

My stomach grumbles as I pull the MRE out of my coat pocket and I grimace as I ease my wet jacket off, feel it pulling on my shirt on account of the dried blood. I ease down into a chair, careful of my shoulder, and shine the luminance on the packet in front of me. Beef Bolognese. According to the instructions I just need to place the meal pouch inside the flameless heater bag. Flameless Heater Bag? What bag? What the fuck? Maybe they are in the car with the rest of the meals.

I rip open the packet with my teeth and start pouring it into my mouth. I scarf it down like someone who hasn't eaten for the day, because I haven't, and wear some of the contents on my face and clothes. Another thing I couldn't give two fucks about. In fact, the level of fucks I have is quickly dwindling.

I wipe my mouth as I chew and pull out the map from the gas station, unfolding and laying it out across the table. I loom over it. New York State, folded and creased. A single page. Not meant for detail, not meant for surviving the end of the world.

I pull off my glasses and swipe at them with my sleeve, smearing the rain into streaks across the lenses. Perfect vision isn't the goal, just enough clarity to make out the lines on the page.

Using the glow from my phone, I scan the map and quickly find Henrietta. I trace the planned route. Three Ninety South, then east on the Eighty-Six. A thick red line guides me all the way to Corning.

Then I backtrack.

We must've stopped about forty miles south of Henrietta, near the wreck. No obvious detours, just a mess of pale gray lines stretching like spider veins across blank terrain. Still, I follow one east in my mind until I spot it: a faint, meandering county road that leads to a town called Hollow Ridge. The dot's so small it could be a printing glitch, the name barely legible.

I study the surrounding roads, probably gravel, definitely neglected. One threads south, lazily curling back toward the highway. It'll take longer, but it's something.

Then there's another path. Unnamed roads twisting west, a shorter shot if the terrain holds. If they're not washed out. If the signs are still standing. It looks like the kind of road that eats people alive. The kind you take when you want to disappear.

Maybe this is a case of better the devil you know. Every choice has consequences, some bigger than others. Right now, it's all about weighing time versus risk. Choosing which gamble might still leave us standing.

Some things have to happen first. Foundations. Without them, nothing else can.

Right now, I'm in a thoroughly shit situation.

Either way, I have no transport, and yet, surely, in this town there's a car I can borrow. Hell, buy, if it comes to that. Not that I've got money. Or anything of value, really, just my word and a vague promise to make good once society remembers how to stand on two legs again.

Worst case? I steal one.

Worser case? I take one by force.

Didn't work out so well for the guy who tried that with our car.

My head throbs, sharp and insistent. My shoulder is one long scream. I straighten up, press the heel of my hand against my temple, and rub hard.

Water, I tell myself.

I uncap the bottle with my teeth and drink greedily. It's gone in seconds. Probably should've rationed that, but I am caught in the moment, stupid with thirst.

The sling has been sawing at my neck for hours. I slowly unfasten it and ease it off. My arm drops like dead weight, yanking hard at the wound. It feels like gravity just doubled.

First comes the burn, a deep, dull fire spreading out from the injury like someone's working a hot poker under the skin. Then tightness sets in. The surrounding muscles feel like they've been braided into angry ropes. Every twitch pulls something new.

I try rotating it, just a little. Bad idea. A stabbing jolt rips through the joint behind my collarbone. Deep. Regretful. There's no strength in it. No control. I'm nowhere near ready.

Which makes the next move, getting Zoe out of the wrecked car and into another, a near impossibility. But I got her in there once. From a seated position. In a dark garage. With a busted arm. I suppose anything's possible when you're desperate enough.

Then I hear a sound. Faint. Distant. I cock my head. Could be overhead, like a military jet or the rumble of thunder. I quickly slip the sling back on, haphazardly securing it once more, and slip my coat on, hiding my damaged arm, and stuff some more cold bolognese in my mouth.

Then I hear it again. Lower. More mechanical. Rubber on pavement. My heart kicks up a gear. If it is a car, and not just hallucination wrapped in engine noise, it might just be the answers to our way out. Maybe someone indeed heard the accident and come to investigate.

Soldiers? The military would be gold. They could easily transport us to Corning, to get Zoe to where she needs to be, and for someone to answer the questions I had parked in the back of my mind, because unless we get there, nothing else matters.

I push myself up from the chair and crack open the door. Pause. Listen, my ears straining for the slightest sound.

Stepping into the corridor, I freeze. There it is. A figure. Just a shape at first, a silhouette lingering in the shadows at the far end of the hall. Unmoving. Watching.

A flash of lightning cuts through the dark, and that's when I see it. A gas mask. Twin black lenses glinting like insect eyes. An M16 slung low across the chest, no mistaking the silhouette.

I freeze. Heart pounding.

The figure doesn't move. Not at first. Just stands there, watching. Silent. Still. Then, slowly, it starts forward with deliberate steps, steady, but not aggressive.

Military fatigues. Combat boots. Full gear. A real soldier.

Relief crashes over me like a wave. For the first time in what feels like forever, as the rain drums on the roof and thunder growls overhead.

Things look... good.

"Thank God," I whisper.

The soldier steps up to me. "Any weapons?" he asks.

"Weapons? No. I'm just glad you're here. There was an accident—"

The rifle swings up fast, not to aim, but to strike.

The stock smashes into my face before I can process what's happening. There's a crack, plastic, glass, and bone all breaking at once. Pain detonates between my eyes as I stagger backward, slamming into the doorframe before collapsing to one knee.

My glasses scatter somewhere in the dark.

I reach for them blindly, like a drunk fumbling for balance, my hands sluggish and useless.

Footsteps close in.

I look up, just in time to see him raise the weapon again, and bring it down—

Chapter 19

Disposable

My head hurts like hell. It's still dark when I open my eyes, even though I don't want to, but it's the number of boots and voices around me that force me to wake. Is it the same night? Before I can gather my thoughts, pain blossoms fast and hot across my chest and shoulder. Everything is tilted. My mouth tastes like blood and rust.

I roll off my concealed arm. At first it's numb, dead, no sensation at all. Just the unsettling awareness that part of me is there, but gone, then the feeling returns. Fast. Violent. Sharp pins and needles, then burning, then a deep sickening ache, that radiates from the bullet wound through my neck. I spasm involuntary, and cry out as I roll onto my back, gasping as if surfacing from the water.

The movement sends a jolt through my torso and my vision tunnels. I lie there for a second. No one has stopped talking, no one has bothered to check on me. It seems there is no medic, and I wonder what the soldiers are playing at. Why did one knock me out? Have they gone rogue? Is this the opportunity to take over the country?

I crane my head and see others, forms of shadow kneeling around me, heads down, the soldiers around the outside. Some are standing, others leaning, some sit on tables and dangle their legs, cradling their weapons. There are seven I can see, but there may be more somewhere.

Beyond them are shelves, and as my vision goes in and out, it appears we are still in the library. All I can hope is that Zoe is still in the car. Maybe they came across her and figured she was dead, another victim of the times. Given the man who drive the car is dead with his

brains blast everywhere, I figure they would have just kept on walking.

“Hey,” I call out, as I work to get up on my feet.

But as I get up on one knee, a foot drives me back down, jolting my shoulder as I catch myself on my good hand.

“Nobody told you to get up,” he says gruffly.

In the back of my mind, I am grateful he didn’t jam the weapon on the back of my head.

“Can somebody tell me what the hell is going on?” I say, my face against the ground.

The voices fade. Boots crunch closer.

Then hands, rough and uninvited, grab me from behind. They haul me upright, dragging a groan from my throat as pressure hits my shoulder. I end up on my knees, which doesn’t feel like a promising position to be in.

The man pulls something from his gear, there’s a click.

For a second, I brace for a gunshot. But instead, it’s a flashlight. A harsh beam punches straight into my eyes. I wince, turn my head away, eyes clenched shut against the burning glare.

“What’s your name?” the soldier asks with a gravelly voice.

“Adam.”

“You alone, Adam?”

I chew it over. If I hadn’t been knocked out, forced to my knees, and blinded by a flashlight, maybe I would’ve told them about Zoe. Maybe. But after all that? There’s no way in hell I’m bringing her into this.

“Yeah,” I say.

He steps to the side to try to see my face. “You seemed to take your sweet time answering that question.”

“Do you mind lowering that light?”

The light stays on my face for a few more seconds before dropping away. I blink rapidly, eyes adjusting, and scan the room and see that others are in the same position as me.

Further down the room is a young woman, short hair falling across her face and a bandana pulled over her mouth. She wears a jacket, jeans, and boots, the standard uniform now. Urban survival leisure wear. Next to her is an older woman, maybe in her fifties, with streaks of gray running through dark hair. She wears the same outfit. Jacket. Jeans. Boots. Everything about them is practical and tough, made for survival. I am out of my depth.

Then my gaze lands on a young man, and I freeze. Our eyes lock. Recognition clicks a beat later. It's the same kid who held a rifle on me at the gas station. There's a cut above his eye now, still bleeding. His expression shifts as he recognizes me too.

I glance around but don't see the young girl who was with him at the time. I hope she's safe. Far from this place. Far from these assholes.

"So," the soldier continues. "Are you lying to me?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Where's your car?" he continues. "How'd you get here?"

I take a breath. "A red SUV."

"Where is it?"

"There was a crash out on the three-ninety."

"Three-ninety?" he parrots. "So, what? You walked here?"

"With nothing but the clothes on my back."

"How long did that take you?"

"Long enough. I hurt my arm in the accident, which is why it's in a sling."

He studies me for a moment, then lifts the empty sleeve of my jacket between his fingers. The fabric hangs limp. He lets it fall, and the silence that follows feels heavier than the gesture itself.

“Well,” he starts, “welcome to our little family we’ve got going on here. And you are just in time.”

“For what?”

“Dinner.”

“How long are you planning on staying here for?” I ask. I don’t know what to do if he wants us to pile into cars and drive to another safehouse or military stronghold.

He steps back to me. “What’s it to you?”

“I was just wondering if we are here to wait out the toxic cloud, and what happens after.”

He purses lips, considering his response. “Yeah, we’ll hold here for the moment, and when it’s safe to do so, we’ll connect in with another squadron.”

Squadron. The name doesn’t sit right with me, but what the hell do I know?

“Any other questions?”

I shake my head.

The four of us move down a narrow corridor lined with empty meeting rooms, the walls washed in the pale glow of a single flashlight. The beam swings across glass and metal, cutting brief shapes out of the dark. A soldier drives us forward with short, clipped commands, the sound of boots and breathing echoing off the walls.

He shoves me into a room with Bandana Girl while the boy and the older woman disappear through a doorway across the hall. The doors slam shut. The echo dies quickly.

The soldier steps back, his light retreating down the corridor until it vanishes. The dark closes in, thick and suffocating. I can still hear him out there, the quiet shift of gear, the low murmur of a radio. He has not gone far. He is waiting.

“Are they going to bring us dinner in here?” I whisper.

“No,” she says. “Not exactly.”

“Do you know what’s going on?” I ask.

“Those people aren’t soldiers.”

“What do you mean?”

“My brother is in the National Guard, so I’ve spent time around them. These people? They’re not soldiers. The Guard unit in Geneseo is where I was headed before I got stopped at a military checkpoint and taken here.”

“Taken? You mean kidnapped?”

“Yeah. Three of them pulled me out of my car and brought me in. I think they’ll want to use you the same way they used me.”

The words settle like dust, fine and suffocating. My mouth goes dry. I do not want to ask what she means, but the question burns in my throat all the same.

“I’m sorry by the way,” she says, breaking into my thoughts.

“For what?”

“For taking your groceries.”

I shake my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Out there, you didn’t recognize me, did you?”

“Should I have?”

“From Wegmans,” she blurts out. “It’s me, Megs. You saved me from that asshole in the back area.”

“Holy shit!” I say, unable to hold myself together. “I can’t believe it. What are the chances?”

“What happened to the arm?” she asks.

“Shot and stabbed,” I say. “It’s been a wild day.”

“Yeah. It sounds like it. And it’s about to get worse.”

“What did you mean they were going to use me?”

Suddenly footsteps. A shaft of light.

The doors burst open. A beam of light slams into us, blinding and white. I throw up a hand and squint, my eyes watering as shapes move behind the glare.

“You two,” the soldier says. “Let’s go.”

We step out into the corridor where another one waits. Megs said they're not real soldiers. And if that's true... who are they? We follow in silence, footsteps echoing as we're led back toward the front. The space is dimly lit by a scatter of solar lamps, glowing like lanterns in a storm. Smart. Charge them during the day, use them until they die.

Then I see him. The one who spoke when I first woke up. The boss man. This time, I can really see him. Broad shoulders. Shaved head. His uniform sits crooked, stained with old blood, punctured with holes. A tattoo coils up from his collarbone and disappears into his neck.

Just picture the kind of guy you wouldn't want to run into in a dark alley. The kind of moment where you instantly regret half your life choices. One different decision, one missed turn, and maybe you would be somewhere else. Somewhere safe. That's the guy standing in front of me.

While I stand and wait, my eyes drift to Sharon, still tucked behind a shelf, seemingly unnoticed. I try not to fixate, but it's hard. Too hard.

Then the other two arrive, the boy and the older woman. They step into place beside us. The boy ends up next to me in the middle, flanked by the girls on either side. Like we're forming a lineup for something we didn't volunteer for.

I still do not know what we are waiting for. Part of me keeps hoping for a hot meal, or a vehicle, any vehicle, that could finally let us leave this place behind and disappear down the road.

Boss Man finishes whatever conversation he was having and strides over. Hands clasped behind his back, he paces, slow and deliberate, the solar lights casting shadows across his face.

I can't tell if he's trying to impress us or intimidate us. Maybe he doesn't even know. Maybe its nerves disguised as authority. Or confi-

dence with a flicker of doubt. Whatever it is, the whole performance makes me uneasy.

“Okay, Privates,” he says. “I need you to go out and scavenge for food.”

Privates. Wow! He’s really leaning into the whole uniform thing. I glance at Megs. She’s glaring at him like she’s already over it. Then he holds out a key fob.

I just stare at it. Is he seriously suggesting we head out alone to get food? And what, just come back out of the goodness of our hearts? Scratch that. There’s no ‘*maybe*’ about it. It’s weird. Off. My gut knots. There’s a catch coming, I can feel it, and I’m not exactly eager to hear what it is.

No one moves.

“Is someone going to take this?” he asks.

Megs reaches for the key, but a soldier behind grabs her shoulder and pins her in place.

“No,” Boss man continues. “The ladies stay. The men go.”

And then the shoe drops.

“Now,” he continues, pulling the key back to himself. “I can tell from the look on your faces, you might be a little bit concerned.” He looks over us. “And you should be. Because these guys are ravenous. And if you two take your sweet ass time, lord knows what might happen to them.” He stretches his neck, places a hand on the boy’s shoulder, leans down into his face, talks low. “Now, you might think, ‘Hey, why not just drive off and see how far we get.’ I get that, I really do, but you should know a couple of things. First, we’ve got trackers on all the vehicles, and I should point out, these boys love a little game of cat and mouse. Second, I want you to look at the girls beside you.”

I look at Megs, who shoots a glance at me. The look in her eyes is fear and defiance, like she wants to drive her thumbs through the eyeballs of this boss man and smack his skull on the floor until his

brains come out, but at the same time is fearful of that happening to her.

He leans in, so his head is between mine and the boys. He whispers, and his voice sends a chill through my spine that I can't control.

"If you don't come back, these boys will have a fucking field day with these girls, do things to them in so many ways they're going to wish they were dead. In fact, I'm pretty damned sure they'll scream out for it, but we'll keep them alive to experience all of it. Nod if you understand what I'm saying."

I quickly nod. Fear and adrenalin cascades through me and I can't help but shake. My muscles spasm and it sends shooting pain through my shoulder. I want to whimper, but I keep it in. I don't want to show everyone how fearful I am for my life and theirs, but I know every single person in that room already knows.

"Very good," he sneers and rights himself.

He extends the key toward me, eyes scanning me up and down. A slight pause. Then he grimaces, just slightly, and redirects, handing it to the boy instead.

A hand lands on my shoulder. Heavy. Measured.

"Relax. I'm sure you'll be great, and the girls will thank you for it." He looks over to Megs, runs his eyes from top to bottom, licks his lips. "Now, time's wasting. Chop chop."

"Is it safe out there?" I ask.

Boss man shrugs. "I guess you'll find out."

"You expect us to go outside when there's a cloud of fallout hovering over the town?"

I can't say for sure, but I figure by now it's covered the area, and probably well beyond it.

"Come on," he says. Just then another soldier drops a bundle in front of us. "We're not animals."

Thin plastic crinkles, unfolding messily into a wrinkled heap of disposable hazmat suits. Off-white. Cheap. The kind of gear you would use to paint a house or scrub mold, not face nuclear fallout.

“Suit up,” a soldier barks. “And hurry the fuck up.”

“You heard the man,” Bossman says.

In the pile I find two cracked respirators, the kind you would buy at a hardware store, with flimsy elastic and a brittle plastic filter. I kneel stiffly, wincing as my weight shifts onto my bad shoulder. This is not protection, merely insurance. Just enough to get us by doing their bidding, with the threat of harm to Megs and the woman.

I pull the suit from the pile and shake it out. It’s thin and translucent, more like a painter’s jumpsuit than anything. The zipper sticks halfway up, and I struggle with one arm. Boy has to help, much to the chagrin of the soldiers.

The gloves are mismatched. The boots are just disposable shoe covers that tear on a bad step. There’s a roll of duct tape for sealing up the gaps.

The boy struggles to pull his hood up over his hair. The mask slips sideways on his face. He fumbles, adjusts it, but it’s there I notice his hands are steady, just like he was holding the rifle at my face at the gas station. When I look at him I wonder if he remembers. If he does, he doesn’t show it.

“You’ve got thirty minutes,” Bossman says. “But I wouldn’t stay outside too long if I were you. Not with that cheap shit on your shoulders.”

I turn to him. He’s standing between the two women, his bulk looming over them, an arm draped casually across each shoulder. He catches my eye and winks. I shut my eyes and turn away.

Me and the boy walk through the spring doors and into the vestibule. Take one last look at each other. I peer through the glass plates of the door as the boy presses the button on the key fob and

lights flash in the darkness, a vehicle surrounded by a bunch of others. We look at each other, nod, then push through the door.

And step out into the fallout.

Chapter 20

Best-Laid Plans

The wind hits me like breath from a furnace, dry and acrid. Dust swirls as we march purposefully towards the jeep. We get in and quickly close the door behind us. We keep our masks on, and I can just feel the fallout seeping through the plastic and into my clothes and into my skin.

He doesn't say anything as he starts the engine and flicks the headlights on. The beams cut through the murk like dull blades, catching dust in the air that doesn't quite settle, and something thicker. Buildings on either side of the road loom dark and hollow, their windows like eyes.

All I can think of is Zoe, sitting there by herself in the impenetrable darkness, shit floating through the air falling all over the car, through the smashed windows and on her. I wonder if there's any battery left, any spark of life still in her, but there is no way to know unless she shows me.

"I'm Adam," I say.

"Dylan," he replies.

"Where are you from?"

"Not far from here," is all he says.

He presses the gas, and we move forward, but the road's not smooth. Every bump echoes up my spine, every vibration punches my shoulder, and I close my eyes and grit my teeth. The plastic suit hisses with every movement in the seat.

Outside the landscape crawls past in ghost town silence.

"About what happened at the gas station," I begin, but Dylan quickly takes over.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I’m guessing the bullet that left his gun and tore into the back of his dad’s head was an accident, just one more awful result of the crash.

“Those people in the car. Are they okay?”

He mustn’t have seen the light from Zoe’s eyes that blinded his father, the driver, that caused the crash. With no time to brace, he must have just searched for why the driver was screaming and driving off course so quickly after starting.

“Where’s that girl that was with you?” I ask.

“She’s safe.”

Dylan doesn’t strike me as much of a conversationalist, which, in most situations, is fine by me. That’s usually my fallback. Drop me into a party and I’ll happily anchor myself in a corner, nursing a drink and quietly judging people based on the contents of their bookshelf.

God, how I love to judge people. It’s not that I think I’m better than them. And yet... I kind of do. Not in every way, of course. Nobody’s perfect. Except Zoe. Though I suppose yesterday’s revelation complicates that a bit, considering she apparently isn’t real.

“Where are they?” he asks.

“Back at the gas station.”

He nods along. “What happened to her?”

Words catch in my throat. How the hell am I supposed to respond to that?

“I found out she’s a robot,” No, not a robot. What did Kepler call her? An ENLIVE unit. That’s it. *“I found out she’s an ENLIVE unit. Her batteries are failing, and if I don’t get her to Corning soon, she’ll shut down completely. Everything she is, every memory, every trace of her, will be lost forever.”*

No one will buy that. He will think I’m a moron, and at the moment I need all the friends I can get. Besides, he might have other questions, and I sure as hell don’t have the answers. Not yet.

“So?” he urges.

Obviously I was thinking for far too long.

“Car accident,” I reply. “Same for the other guy.”

So, I suppose it was only half a lie when I tell it like that.

“I need your help getting out of here so we can get to Corning.”
I continue before he can ask any questions.

“Yeah, I’m working on that.”

“Which bit?”

“The former.”

I guess we should take one step at a time. Crawl before we can walk. All that crap. Step one, get away from those soldiers. Scarp that. Get all of us away from all of them.

“We’re going to drug them.”

I let out a long breath and stare out the window into the blackness. The way he says it, so cold and stripped of emotion, sends a chill straight through me.

“And how exactly are you planning to do that?”

“Simple. I’m going to mix in a shit ton of sedatives into their dinner. And then when they are sleeping, I’m going to find my sister and get the fuck out of Dodge.”

“Jesus.”

“To be honest, laxatives was me first thought, but this is probably easier.”

“And what if that doesn’t work? Or they pick up on what you’re doing?”

“Than it’s time for Plan C.”

“And what is that?”

“You don’t want to know what that is.”

“Holy shit, Dylan. You seem pretty calm about the whole thing.”

He might have smiled, but it’s hard to tell behind the respirator.

“We can’t let them hurt Megs and that woman,” I say.

“Georgia.”

“Who?”

“Georgia. The woman’s name is Georgia.”

“Right. Got it. Georgia.”

“Thoughts on who they are?”

I shrug my one good shoulder. “Country bumpkins who raided an army surplus store living out their weekend fantasies?”

Dylan scoffs. “Yeah, that’s what I thought as well.”

We round a bend in the road, tires crunching over loose gravel and old leaves, and pull up in front of a short row of storefronts, nestled in sagging awnings like shoulders hunched against the wind.

Headlights light up a hand painted sign above a door with smashed glass that reads ‘*Stoner’s Market*’. Next to it, a faded red and white pharmacy sign, one corner missing, the letters worn down by time. A metal newspaper stand is tipped over on the sidewalk, its contents long scattered.

“My dad taught me two things in life. One was to stay calm under pressure, and two was to always do the right thing. Two laws to live by. He said if I could do both of those things, I’ll never let my emotions make a bad decision, and I won’t be lured by bad people.”

It sounded vaguely religious, but maybe it was simply good wholesome small town USA father-to-son knowledge, passed down from one generation to the next that helps people be pillars of communities and live long meaningful lives. To his credit, he could recite it, because there was nothing I could recite about what my father taught me, no clear distinctive rules to live my life by.

And given his plan, I also didn’t bother questioning the balance between murder and doing the right thing. Perspective, I told myself. Everything is perspective. Even murder can be good, if done for the right reasons. And I kind of feel the situation we are in warrants that type of thinking. It seems like a rational, thought-out decision. Hell, he even has a plan and everything, which is a hell of a lot more than

what I have, and I am more than happy to ride his coattails to freedom.

He keeps the lights on and engine running as we get out. I guess no one is going to come along and drive off in it. We stand in front of the car in a soft layer of fallout dust. The light cuts through into the grocery store and I can see some shelves inside, not empty, just thinned out. As if people came in for desperation, not destruction, not like what happened in Henrietta.

“It’ll be easier if I get stuff in the grocery store,” Dylan says. “You rummage through the pharmacy and see what you can find. Anything with sedatives in it, like Valium or Xanax.”

We part ways and I step to the pharmacy door. Its front door is cracked at the hinge and there is a handwritten sign taped across the inside. *‘No cash or prescriptions kept on site. God Bless.’* It gives way after two solid shoves, the pain in my shoulder driving into my brain. The bell above jangles, hanging by a thread of wire, but it’s not like anyone is going to come out and service me.

I step inside. The car’s headlights beam into the entrance, throwing long, warped shadows across the aisles. It’s enough to see the front third of the store, the rest fades into velvety blackness, like a throat waiting to swallow me, the kind of dark that doesn’t blink.

I pull out my phone, but the screen’s blank. Battery’s dead. I guess it couldn’t last forever. Nothing does. I can’t help but wonder how long Zoe can hold out without power, slowly draining, second by second. Maybe she’s in some kind of power-saving mode, like most devices, shutting down anything non-essential. Maybe that’s why she’s been silent with me. And yet... she lit up for the guy who stole the car at gunpoint.

I step forward, the plastic of my suit hissing with every movement. Smell hits me immediately, even though I’m wearing the regulator, of cardboard, alcohol, old bleach, human dust.

The shelves near the front have been picked over. Painkillers are gone, anything labeled cold & flu stripped bare. Maybe people were concerned about another respiratory pandemic, but these problems are so much worse. No amount of paracetamol or pseudoephedrine will help against radiation. But then I find a pack of paracetamol, a crumpled blister pack half-wedged under a rack of off-brand lozenges. Two pills left in it and I don't hesitate. I hold my breath, lift my mask, and tilt my head back. I pop out the pills directly into my mouth, trying to avoid all types of contamination. Who the hell knows if I'm successful or not. Time will tell.

The first one lands on my tongue, but the second goes right down my throat. Listen, we all have our foibles, not a fault or flaw, but quirks. And mine is I can't swallow tablets. I'm a chewer from way back. I think it's a mental thing, but I've never bothered to try to fix it, merely embrace it. So when that tablet flew down my throat like a pair of proton torpedoes into a thermal exhaust port, I gagged, gripped the nearest rack, and swallowed like a madman. It went down and felt like it was dragging a piece of barbed wire with it. I groan out, but there's no one to take pity on a grown man who can't swallow tablets, so I replace my mask and chew the other, savoring the chalky, bitter crunch between my molars. Glorious.

Behind the counter I grab a crinkled plastic bag, the kind they would charge five cents for at the checkout and start digging around the drawers. Ibuprofen? In you go. But then I find what I'm really there for. Diphenhydramine. I have to read the label, angled in the headlights, before I see it's the right thing. Then doxylamine. Hell, even melatonin comes along for the ride.

And then I pause... and go nuts. Vitamin powder packets, a roll of tape, cotton balls (I don't know why, but I would rather get it and figure out a use for it later), antidiarrheals (for the obvious), antiemetics (for the nausea).

Further in the back, into the shelves off limits by consumers, where the person with the white lab coat works, I search for antibiotics (to prevent infections) and potassium iodide (to block the uptake of radioactive iodine). That last one might seem I know what I'm doing, but I don't. It's just that I've got a good memory. I remember I went down into a rabbit hole of scrolling one night and ended up watching a video about this doomsday prepper who said potassium iodide is the poor man's anti-radiation shield.

With no light and no idea how everything is laid out, I have to grab a few at a time and take them to a shaft of light. Suddenly the engine revved, and the light shifted. I looked up as shadows moved through the store. What the fuck was Dylan doing? I grabbed the bag and pushed through the darkness as light continued to move, banging into shelves and upturned displays.

I yanked the door open and stumbled out onto the sidewalk as the car sped off into the night, the taillights disappearing around the corner with a symphony of tire screeches. I stand there, wide eyed, trying to rationalize what had happened, and why Dylan would leave me alone like this.

Crunching glass erupts behind me and I spin to see Dylan causally step out onto the sidewalk.

"Shit," he says. "For a second there I thought you took the car."

"I thought you took the car!" I reply.

"That's not very trusting of you, Adam."

"Hang on, you're the one who thought *I* took the car."

"What's your point?"

I can't be bothered trying to articulate what my point is and argue as to why he can't see it.

"Well, if it wasn't either of us," I say, "who the hell took it?"

"I'm guessing someone who needed it."

I hold my arm out. "But *we* need it."

“Ah good,” he says, pointing at the bag. “You found some stuff then?”

I hand the bag over. “What the hell are we going to do?”

“I guess we are going to need to run for it.”

“Run? In this? Like this?”

“Relax, I know a shortcut. We’ll be there in no time.”

“I was talking about my shoulder.”

“It’s amazing what people can do when they have no other choice.”

He is right about that. God damn it.

“So you want to run through a nuclear fallout cloud?” I ask.

“You got a better idea?”

I didn’t.

“I guess we should get moving then,” he says, already heading back toward the end of the block we came from.

Chapter 21

Batter Up

The suit clings to my back, already soaked with sweat as we weave through alleyways, vault fences, and cut across backyards. Dylan moves like he's lived here his whole life, never hesitating, never checking if the guy with one working arm can keep up.

I hurl myself over obstacles, landing hard on my injured side more than once. But there's no time to slow down. No room for pain. Boss Man made it clear what would happen if we were late. He didn't bother with details, but the broad strokes were enough. It wouldn't be good.

The faster we got back, the sooner Dylan could trigger his plan, and I was all in. We couldn't take them on head-to-head. Too big. Too many. We needed to level the playing field, and I didn't feel the slightest bit bad about what was coming. They had already stolen too much of my time, and the longer we waited, the more I feared it was already too late for Zoe.

We slip down a narrow path between two houses.

"What's the plan afterwards?" I ask. "You get your sister and drive off into the darkness?"

"Not drive. Dad has a friend who has a plane. An old one but it'll do the job. It was where we were going when..."

His voice trails off, and I don't press him. Instead, I steer the conversation back to the plane, anything but the fact that he accidentally shot his father in the back of the head.

"How many times have you taken it up?" I ask.

"Um," he starts. It's the first sign of hesitation I've seen from him. "I haven't taken it up, not exactly."

“What does *that* mean?”

“I mean, I’ve sat in it.”

I look at him.

“But it will be fine,” he continues. “My dad’s friend took me through it.”

“He took you through it?”

“Yeah.”

“How many times?”

“Once.”

“When?”

“One or two.”

“Days ago? Weeks ago?”

“Years.”

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I don’t even know why I should try to talk him out of it. I’ve only known Dylan for a few hours. He’s not my responsibility.

And if he honestly believes he can fly the damn thing... who am I to stand in his way? Especially if he’s my ticket away from the soldiers.

“But I have watched a bunch of YouTube videos,” he adds. “And even a few flight simulators.”

Fuck me.

“Where would you go?” I say, changing the focus of conversation so I didn’t have to think about it.

“Somewhere where there are fewer people,” he says. “Lower chance of assholes that way. Maybe north. Way north. As far as we can fly.”

“There’s always gonna be assholes,” I say.

“Yeah, I guess so. You said you were going to Corning. Where’s that?”

“Not sure exactly. South. Not far, I know that. Maybe fifty or sixty miles.”

“There are doctors there?”

“I damn well hope so.”

The library looms ahead.

“Well,” he says. “I hope you all get there.”

“So do I.”

There’s still more to learn, more hidden beneath the surface. Every time I think I’ve reached the end, she surprises me again. Kepler didn’t say much, not yet, but we have an hour or so before Corning. Time enough for him to talk. Time enough to finally understand.

We arrive at the library, not to a welcoming committee, or like a parent standing there tapping a watch and foot at the same time wearing a disappointing glare, but silence. All the cars were gone, and for a moment I think they had cleared out. What that might mean for the woman and Megs is beyond me. No, not beyond me. Just something I couldn’t bring myself to think about.

We open the front door and step into the vestibule, a makeshift airlock. In silence, we peel off our suits, starting with the gloves, careful not to disturb whatever radioactive dust might still cling to the surface. Eventually, they’ll need to be disposed of properly. But my thinking isn’t long-term right now. It is survival focused. Immediate. The future can wait its turn.

“Do you think they went looking for us?” I ask.

“That or their chasing the car,” Dylan says. “I guess they weren’t bullshitting about the trackers.”

“Shit. I hope Megs and Georgia are okay.”

“Don’t worry. That Georgia seems like a badass.”

“Yeah. Megs too.”

We peer through the glass panels into the main space. Empty. Too empty. It feels wrong. I bend down and pick up a bandana on the floor, still tied together, like it had been yanked off someone’s head and discarded.

We ease the door open, its hinges groaning softly. Then we hear a sound threading its way through the shelves. A sob. Soft. Raw.

My chest tightens. Stomach flips.

We freeze in the entryway, and then Dylan bolts. He cuts across the floor toward a collapsed silhouette in the gloom. A small shape, curled in shadow. Bare shoulders, knees pulled tight to her chest.

It's Georgia.

Adrenaline surges. I drop down and grab Sharon, fingers curling around the familiar grip like it was always waiting for me. I lift it without hesitation.

If there is pain in my shoulder, I don't feel it. Every muscle is braced. Ready.

I step into the corridor. Whimpering leaks through the walls. On autopilot now, I move toward the sound. Breath steady. Steps silent.

My heart is thundering, but I'm ice. Hunting.

I stop at the door as the noise rises around me, a mix of grunting, struggling, the sounds of a fight soaked in hope and desperation. Beneath it all runs something darker. Hatred. Low and simmering. I push the door open.

The sight hits like a punch to the gut.

Dim lanterns cast a flickering light over the room. Military camouflage jackets lie scattered across the floor. A man in an orange jumpsuit, unzipped and hanging around his waist, stands with one hand moving in obscene encouragement, his face twisted in something close to glee. Black characters are stenciled across the back of the jumpsuit.

Then it hits me. This is what Megs was warning me about. She was right. They aren't soldiers, they're prisoners, escapees from the prison unrest I heard about on the radio broadcast when everything went to shit. They must have overrun a checkpoint, maybe the one we passed on the Three-Ninety, probably killed the real soldiers who were there.

And then there is Boss Man.

He's at a desk pushed against the wall, using his full weight to pin Megs beneath him. Her arms are locked above her head, wrists pressed into the wall. Her legs kick, but it does nothing. He moves with disgusting confidence, undeterred.

Megs meets my eyes. *Déjà vu*.

She stops struggling, just for a moment. Her expression changes. Resigned, but sharp. Her gaze flicks to the man watching, then to me. She nods. She wants to see the damage.

I raise Sharon and grip it tight. Silent. Controlled. I step into the room and let the full centrifugal force of my body power the swing. The arc is perfect. The spacing, flawless.

The hammer connects with the standing man's side, slamming him off his feet and into the wall in a red spray. He crumples in a heap, unmoving.

I turn and step toward Boss Man. He's just registering the crash behind him when the next swing comes, a backhand, raw and brutal. He flinches, hands flying up.

The hit isn't clean, but it's sufficient to accomplish the task. The sledgehammer catches him across the shoulder and side of the head, and he drops sideways. Hard. Woozy. Not finished, but hurt.

Badly.

I keep the arc smooth, controlled like a pendulum with purpose, and then I bring the sledgehammer down in a clean, savage drop. It lands just below the thigh, right on the exposed kneecap. With his pants down, tangled around his boots, there is nothing to shield the bone. Not that a pair of overalls and camo pants could do against the head of the weapon.

The sound is horrifying. A dry pop, followed by a wet crunch that vibrates up through the handle and into my shoulder. Like stepping on a frozen grapefruit.

His leg jerks sideways unnaturally to display a knee caved in, flesh already swelling, bone pushing up at the skin like it wants out. His eyes open wide, snapping to reality, howling, not in confusion, just pure, unfiltered agony. He claws at the mess of blood, skin, and fractured bone where his knee used to be.

His scream cuts off as his hands hover over the wound, too scared to touch it, too shocked not to, legs shaking as the pain floods him.

I step back, chest heaving, the sledgehammer dripping red at the head. My fingers ache around the grip. I see the damaged knee and turn and vomit, right on top of the first guy. I don't care. It's true what they say. You really learn a lot about who you are when you're put in certain situations. I never thought I could do these things, that I have it in me to take a life, but now, I just want to cave Boss Man's head in.

But it's not my kill.

The door swings open. Dylan steps in with Georgia close behind. He's got a fully automatic rifle slung over his shoulder like it belongs there. She's clutching a tactical knife with a grip that says she knows how to use it.

Megs joins us a moment later, quietly adjusting her clothes, face set like stone.

Dylan puts his hand on my shoulder. "If you didn't, I would have," he says.

"What do you want to do?" I ask Megs.

"I want you and Dylan to leave the room."

We leave without a word, stepping quietly down the corridor.

Over the next few minutes, I hear sounds I never thought could come out of a human, let alone a man. Bone-deep, gut-twisting noises that make my knees weak and stir pain in places that shouldn't hurt.

Revenge is sweet. And apparently, loud as hell.

When they rejoin us in the main room, the noise has stopped. There's blood on their clothes and faces. Their expressions are distant, like they have stepped outside their own bodies and aren't quite ready to come back in.

"Did you... Is he..."

Megs shakes her head. "But they will be soon."

"Or wish to be soon," Georgia says.

"Do you want to..." I start, but I don't need to finish.

Megs cuts me off.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather just get out of here."

"You lot go," Georgia says. "I'll stay here and take care of those bastards that come back here."

"No," Dylan says. "We all go."

Georgia grabs the gun from Dylan. Quickly inspects it, sneers.

"If you don't go, I'll shoot you as well."

Just then, the door bursts open and we all spin as one.

Two soldiers freeze in the doorway as the spring-loaded doors squeal shut behind them. With their faces hidden behind gas masks, I can only imagine their expressions.

Georgia doesn't hesitate. Four sharp shots, two for each, bark out. The impact slams the soldiers against the doors, red blooms spreading across the fronts of their camo jackets, before they crumble face-first to the floor.

It wasn't her first time holding a gun. It sure as hell wasn't her first time using one. And I've never felt so out of my depth.

All those old jokes with Zoe about having no discernible apocalyptic skills? Never felt more accurate than right then. Dylan, Georgia, hell, everyone else I've met seems built for this. And me? One arm and a damn sledgehammer. That's all I got. Though, to be fair... at least I had a sledgehammer.

We grab one of the machine guns and leave Georgia with the rest. She's on a mission for retribution, and she's going to need the firepower.

Dylan finds a key fob in one of the soldiers' pockets. There are enough gas masks for all of us, scattered either near the library door or still strapped to the men Georgie just killed.

We stand near the doors, about to part ways, when a car arrives. No time to find suits or get them on, only time to act. With masks on, we dash outside, skipping down the front steps as Georgia, steps outside, releasing controlled bursts of firepower at the somewhat unsuspecting prisoner soldiers. Each finds their mark, feet taken away from under them, landing heavily on the ash and dust.

She waves us on, shouting for us to get the hell out of there.

The doors on a RAM truck unlock with a chirp. We scramble in with Dylan behind the wheel, Megs beside him, and me diving into the back seat. He fires up the engine, and the growl of it fills the night.

As we lurch forward, I twist in my seat to look out the rear window. A car comes screaming around the corner, headlights flaring like a spotlight, bearing down fast.

Georgia stands her ground and opens fire on the vehicle, bullets pinging off surfaces, sparking on bodywork, and punching through windows. The car suddenly turns sharply and smashes into the rear of another vehicle.

Suddenly, the chorus of *Walking on Sunshine* by Katrina and the Waves blasts through the speakers, mid-song, loud and wildly out of place.

We glance at each other, baffled.

Then the front doors of the library explode open, and a soldier stumbles out, one of the ones Georgia supposedly gunned down minutes ago. Bloodied, limping, but very much alive. And armed.

I have no idea where he found the weapon. Maybe they have a stash inside. It does not matter. He is raising it now.

Georgia swings and fires as another car hurtles towards the scene. Headlights breaking through the darkness, flashes of light from Georgia's gun, car being driven, she spins again and fires, drops to one knee.

Dylan smashes the accelerator, and we take off into the dark, away from the fire, We turn the corner, Dylan putting on distance, as the music suddenly cuts out and is replaced with erupting gunfire. Fire fight. Urban warfare. People who should be behind bars verses someone with a reason to exact revenge.

In this world, everything feels like fair game. Action without consequence. But there are consequences, and the prisoners found that out, one bloody step at a time.

Still, a thought gnaws at the edge of my mind: if any of them survive... if the vehicles are being tracked... how long until someone comes looking?

And what happens when they do?

Chapter 22

Along for the Ride

I slam sideways into the door, right on my shoulder, as Dylan whips the truck around a corner like he's trying out for Formula One.

Pain shoots down my arm, but Dylan doesn't flinch. He is locked in, eyes forward, both hands gripping the wheel like it might try to buck him off. Earlier, he showed an uncanny knowledge of the streets, cutting through back roads and shortcuts like he grew up in their cracks. But now? Now he's not bothering with alleys or detours. He's making a straight shot for something. And wherever we're headed, he wants to get there fast.

"Where are we going?" I shout.

"Getting Christie."

"Who's Christie?" Megs asks.

"My sister," he replies.

"You have a sister?"

"Yes, and I intend to get her out of here."

Screeching tires echo somewhere behind us, close enough to feel, distant enough to doubt. Someone's out there. Looking. Searching. Or worse, tracking.

I wonder if Georgia held them off... or if she ended up tasting the same violence she was serving. No way to know. No time to look back.

"I'll drop you two off at the gas station and then you're on your own."

"What are we supposed to do at the gas station?" Megs asks.

"Because my wife is there," I say, then turn my attention to Dylan. "And what do you mean we are on our own?"

"It means exactly as it sounds," he replies.

"You left your wife at the gas station?" Megs says. "Alone? In all this shit?"

"She's in a coma," I say, continuing the lie. "And she isn't alone. There's another guy there." Back to Dylan. "And there isn't anything at the gas station. My car is fucked. We'll be fucked."

"Who's the other guy?" Megs asks.

"Someone I found at a car accident," I reply. "He was hurt pretty bad." Turn to Dylan. "So the gas station is a stop, not a destination."

"This sounds like a thoroughly fucked situation," Megs announces, and I can't agree more with that statement.

Meanwhile, Dylan grips the steering wheel tighter, and whatever is portraying his calm exterior is slowly cracking. Perhaps the flood-gates were open, and he couldn't hold anything in anymore. We all have breaking points. I don't know where mine is, but I'm pretty sure I've already passed mine. You remember the coffee cup incident, right?

"Fine," he says between gritted teeth. "We'll get Christie, then your two, then we go to the plane. Then this car is yours." He takes a breath. "And then you are on your own."

"Fine," I say. I can live with that.

The RAM screeches to a halt in front of a weathered two-story house, the kind that was already losing the battle with time long before the world collapsed. In the moonlight I can see the siding is bleached and peeling, flaking off like old skin. One of the upstairs windows is boarded from the inside, slats of mismatched wood. The porch sags to one side, half swallowed by weeds, with a single rocking chair tipped over.

Looks like the perfect place to hole up and wait, but also for others to ransack, searching for vital supplies to survive. And I hope they won't wait much longer, for we only have minutes... maybe less. Dylan throws the truck into park and turns to Megs.

“Mask,” he says, short and sharp. No time for pleasantries. In a world crawling with gun-wielding escaped convicts looking to reclaim their prey, *‘please’* and *‘thank you’* are implied.

She pulls hers off without hesitation and hands it over. A second later, he’s out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

I strip off my own mask and drop it into my lap. It’s soaked with sweat and fear.

“Hey,” I say to Megs. “After Corning, you can take the car and go wherever you want.”

“Yeah,” she says. “That sounds great.”

“You got an idea where you’ll go?”

“No,” she sighs. “Not yet.”

I stare out the window behind us, searching through the darkness for any sign of light, my ears straining for a sound beyond the steady rumble of the truck. My foot bounces against the floor, my fingers drum the seat, and I whisper, “Come on,” over and over until Megs finally tells me to shut up.

I get how annoying it is, and it would annoy the shit out of me if someone else is doing it, but I need to dispel my nervous energy. We had just escaped something awful, and Megs, who had experienced something a billion times worse, was holding her shit together. Maybe she’s waiting for the right time to release it all, or maybe she never will. People deal with shit in their own way.

Regardless, I take a moment, close my eyes and breathe deeply, although as I do I wonder how many destructive pollutants I’m inhaling into my lungs, if there is any savior from that, and if it will stop me getting Zoe to the facility.

I then remember the handgun in my pocket and dig it out, along with the bullets. I open the chamber and prop the barrel of the weapon between my knees to feed in the bullets. Each fall into place with a satisfying click. Then I awkwardly close the chamber and push it into my pocket. With any luck I won’t shoot myself in the leg, al-

though I wouldn't put it past me. There was always something that could go wrong with amateur hands wrapped around a potentially lethal weapon.

Moments later, two figures emerge from the darkness, one tall and one small. The rear door swings open and Christie climbs in beside me, while Dylan slips into the front seat. As soon as the doors are shut, they rip off their masks. Dylan throws the truck into drive.

Package secured. We're gone.

Christie stares at me as the truck rumbles forward, her gaze fixed and unwavering. It pulls my attention instantly.

I look at her. "Are you okay?"

"I remember you," she says. "From the gas station."

Bright kid, good memory. I can imagine she has seen and heard some things a girl her age should never, and yet she is composed. Perhaps kids are way more resilient than we give them credit for.

Before I can apologize or whatever about her father, Dylan yanks down on the steering wheel and we veer a hard left, almost missing the street, like it was an afterthought.

The gas station approaches ahead, the building, the useless pumps, Zoe's car still crashed into a pole just beyond it. Dylan brakes hard. The truck dips under the awning.

The plan is simple: in and out, grab Zoe, get Kepler, and ride off together like one big happy family being hunted by wolves.

I lean forward between the two front seats and point out the windshield. "That car."

"What about it," Dylan responds.

"Go to the car."

"Why?"

"Because that's where she is."

He turns in his seat. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"She's in the fucking car!"

“Just drive to the car,” Megs says, her voice a calming influence over the calamity.

Dylan does so, screeching forward, out the driveway than an immediate left, pulling alongside the wrecked car. I can see many reasons why he doesn’t want to be here, given he accidentally killed his father and all. I just hope all of that can be compartmentalized for the next few minutes.

“Now what?” Dylan barks.

“I need help getting her out and into this truck.”

Dylan looks over to the passenger seat.

Megs throws her hand out. “Give me the mask.”

Dylan throws it at her. “Hurry up. If I see headlights, I’m out of here.”

We don our masks and step out, shutting the truck doors behind us with solid, echoing thuds. Without a word, we head toward the car. A thin layer of dust coats everything, dulling the scene like a forgotten photograph.

“What the hell happened here?” she asks, her voice muffled.

“It’s a long story.”

“Aren’t they all?” she says.

When we reach the window, Zoe is gone. My pulse spikes. I step back, scanning the ground, searching for footprints, for movement, for anything that tells me where she went. Moonlight stretches across the parking lot, silver and cold, but there’s nothing. Just stillness.

“Zoe!” I shout, the sound tearing through the night and bouncing off the empty buildings. No answer. Not even an echo. Why would she leave? It makes no sense. Unless she was trying to escape the fallout. She has to still be here. She has to.

“Adam,” a voice calls from the dark.

I spin toward the gas station. It’s impossible to see who it is.

Cautiously, I take a step forward, but Megs grabs my arm. “Is it safe?”

“He used my name,” I say, eyes fixed on the shadows. “It must be Kepler.”

“The guy from the car accident?”

“One and the same.”

Then I’m moving. Running. Megs follows. Shapes sharpen in the dark, the outline of Kepler leaning out the doorway, his body barely outlined in the gloom, like the darkness itself is holding him up.

He holds the door open as we step inside, and he hurriedly shuts it behind us.

Moonlight filters through the high windows, catching on the jagged edges of shattered displays and the uneven tops of dusty shelves. The air is stale, heavy with the scent of blood, rot, and something chemical. Kepler stands in the center of it all, a strip of torn fabric tied across his face. Blood has soaked through, dried to a dark rust where it clings to his jawline. His eyes, glassy and unfocused, rimmed with red, flick to Megs, then to me. A tremor runs through his hands like static.

“Oh,” I say, remembering just how far past introductions we are. “This is Megs. Megs, Kepler.”

“I’m sorry,” he mutters. His voice is hoarse, like gravel dragged over stone. “I woke up in the back. I pulled Zoe in here before the fallout got worse. I thought... I thought maybe you went for help.”

“You gave me a goddamn heart attack,” I snap. The words come out sharper than I intended, but I’m too tired to sand down the edges. “But I’m glad she’s safe. Where is she?”

“In the back office.”

“How will she be impact by the radiation?”

“Like everyone else?” Megs asks.

I share a look with Kepler and shake my head.

“She doesn’t know?” Kepler asks.

“Know what?” Megs says.

“Our ride is waiting,” I say, changing the conversation. “We need to go.”

“Now?” Kepler echoes, wincing. “It might be better to wait. Let the radiation pass.”

“No,” I state. “We’re not waiting.”

His eyes narrow slightly. “We should wait out the worst, then head to Corning. It’s safer.”

“I can’t take that risk.”

“So you’ll risk all of us instead?”

“Damn right.”

Megs steps in, trying to defuse. “If she’s unconscious, maybe hunkering down is smarter. Those prisoners have probably already swept through here. And they won’t linger outside. Not for long, anyway.”

Kepler straightens. “Prisoners?”

“Escaped ones,” I tell him. Then turn to Megs. “And no. We’re not staying.”

“What’s a few hours going to change?” Megs presses.

“Everything! Because a few hours might kill her!”

“I found an old car battery,” Kepler says suddenly. “We could use it to maintain her charge.”

“Charge?” Megs turns to me.

We are interrupted by a horn blare, short and sharp. Just enough to get our attention, and hopefully not anyone else’s.

“No,” I hiss. Panic squeezes my chest. I shoot a look at both of them. “It’s complicated. Doesn’t matter. What matters is that we leave. Now.”

“But—” Kepler starts.

“No.” I cut him off. “This is happening. Get Zoe. Move.”

Megs hesitates, then nods. She trails Kepler into the back. I hold a position at the door, my hand trembling against the cold frame.

They return moments later, slow and careful. Kepler shuffles backward, arms locked under Zoe’s shoulders, breath ragged with ef-

fort. Megs cradles her legs. Her boots drag softly against the tile, head lolling to one side.

As they pass, I touch her cheek.

“I told you I’d come back, babe. But now we need to go.”

I hold the door open. Wind whispers in, thick with dust. Megs stops suddenly.

“Wait,” she says, voice tight. “She doesn’t have a mask.”

“I don’t think it matters,” Kepler says quietly.

“Just go,” I tell her. “It’s okay, Megs. I’ll explain everything later. You have to trust me.”

Outside, the truck waits. The tailgate’s already down, Dylan visible through the rear window, his hand resting on the steering wheel. He’s still here. He hasn’t peeled off. That alone feels like hope, like maybe we aren’t entirely lost yet.

We’re close. I can taste the edges of freedom.

Kepler lingers at the threshold.

“No matter how this ends,” Kepler says quietly, “This is a win for Lucid.”

“Lucid?” I glance back at him.

“AI?” Megs asks.

Kepler nods.

“What does Lucid have to do with this?” I ask.

But the question doesn’t land. The truck engine revs, loud and sudden, its growl filling the silence like a warning shot. We all freeze.

Tires grind against the earth. Gravel and debris spray outward in every direction.

“No,” I whisper.

“Wait!” Megs screams.

The truck jerks left with a scream of tires, kicking up a storm of grit and dust.

“What the fuck just happened?” Kepler asks.

That's when I see Dylan's warning made real. Headlights. Two of them, blazing through the dark like angry stars, growing larger and faster, veering down on us like a threat made real. Then I hear it, another engine, roaring from the opposite direction. I spin just in time to catch it: a second pair of lights, identical, barreling toward us from the other side. A pincer. A trap.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Dylan had to make a quick decision: attempt to save two people, or risk everyone getting captured (and most likely killed). Unfortunately, that meant looking after his sister (something I couldn't blame him for) and leaving us standing there like idiots holding a (seemingly) dead body amongst an invisible killer, about to be joined by a very visible killer.

The RAM's taillights flare red for a second, then disappear into the black, and just like that, they're gone. Our shot at Corning. At answers. At saving Zoe.

The car in front veers hard, tires shrieking as it takes the corner too fast, taillights slicing sideways and vanishing behind a row of buildings. Done in a blink, swallowed by the town.

Behind us, the other vehicle screeches to a halt. A guttural growl of brakes. Metal groaning under sudden stillness. For a second the night is silent, except for the hiss of cooling engines and faint crackle of distant gunfire.

Chapter 23

Shooting Blanks

We stand just beyond the gas station awning. Megs and Kepler each grip one end of Zoe's limp body. I hover beside them, rigid, caught in the blinding glare of headlights. The beams slice through the night, harsh and cold, painting us in the unforgiving white of a spotlight. Prey on display.

Behind us, a door creaks open. The sound is too soft, but somehow deafening.

We turn.

A prisoner steps out from the gloom, machine gun already braced against his shoulder. His eyes are hidden behind the black glass of a gas mask, faceless, soulless. The weapon doesn't waver.

"Stay there!" he shouts. His voice crackles through the mask, warped and distant, like it's coming from underwater.

Megs turns to me, her face unreadable. She leans in, voice low and urgent. "Sorry about this."

"What?" I whisper, too slow.

She drops Zoe's legs. They hit the dirt with a muted thump. Then Megs spins and vanishes into the darkness, swallowed whole by it.

The soldier swings toward her, gunfire erupting. Light and sound tear through the night. The muzzle flashes strobe across the walls, illuminating shattered glass, twisted metal, and the twitch of his trigger finger.

They're not playing this time. No warnings. No interest in hostages. Just a kill.

"Run," I hiss to Kepler, already moving.

"What?"

“Run!” I shout, and bolt the opposite way, down the road Dylan took, legs burning.

Behind me, shouting explodes in a wave of frustration, panic, and chaos. Another burst of bullets slices the air.

Breathing hurts. Running is worse. Pain flares through my shoulder, sharp and blinding, as my sling-bound arm slams against my side. My lungs burn. My legs keep moving. I don't look back.

I don't know if Kepler made it.

I just hope.

As I duck into some foliage, and squat beneath some trees, I hold my breath and wonder where all those bullets end up. Most likely embedded into something: trees, buildings, the dirt. Signs of warfare will be evident when the dust settles and the horrors of the event are over, only to discover other horrific things.

Through the leaves and branches, I glimpse the soldier pursuing Megs into the night. I consider whether he's far enough away for me to make a dash to the car and drive off. But I can't leave, not with Zoe lying on the ground, covered in radioactive ash, and not with Megs running around in the dark. She's resourceful, sure, but without support, how long can someone truly last? She has a gas mask, but that can only do so much, and who knows how many other gun-wielding prisoners are out there as part of Boss Man's posse.

I wonder if the rest of them have discovered his body. I didn't see the end result, the handiwork of Megs and Georgia, but I have a vivid imagination.

Maybe the rest of the prisoners have dispersed. What loyalty did they have to the dead man? Why even care? Maybe he promised them the world. I guess now he can't deliver on that, and they want someone to pay. Surely they can't be organized enough to have ranks and order. Surely there's no one who puts themselves above the others in an orderly fashion.

And what about those prisoners? Where had they actually come from? Where are the others? Might we encounter them at some point? And then what? How long would we have to keep on fighting? How much havoc would they continue to project onto a society that was already in freefall?

I look at the side of the car. It's a Chevy sedan... I think. I mean it looks like every other sedan. It might be gray or silver. It appears to have all the windows and doors. The engine is humming away. The car isn't making any noise, no warnings or alarms, which makes me think the keys are still in it... or the keys are still in range.

I take a few deep breaths and finger the gun in my coat pocket. The soldier has been gone for ages... or at least ages in my head. I'm not counting and seconds seem like minutes. But then I second guess myself. Given the length of time he was somewhere out there, did that mean he is further from the car, or on his way back to it.

The other thing is he is out there somewhere, anywhere. Knowing my luck, he is standing behind me right at this second, silently looming over my crouched position, lowering the barrel, finger inching back on the trigger. An easy kill. I suppose I wouldn't feel a thing. My brain would be fried before I knew what was happening, before I even heard the sound. Perhaps it's not a bad way to go. Sorry Zoe. Sorry Megs. You guys are on your own. I hope it all works out for you.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I swivel around, peering into the darkness. A flicker of movement catches my eye, prompting me to pivot and reach into my pocket for the gun. Then, a noise draws my attention in the opposite direction. Was it a branch being stepped on? Perhaps it simply fell from a dying tree, shedding its limbs. Or maybe, just maybe, my mind is conjuring threats where there are none.

Fuck this. I am about to take my chances and dash to the car. If I could locate the soldier, then I can figure everything else out. Even

better if I could run him over. It would be a first for me, but the world in its current state is a first for everyone.

Just before I launch from my hiding place, a figure cuts across the headlights. For a split second I think it's Megs, heroic in taking out the soldier, she has returned to help me get Zoe into the car, and then we could just drive out of there, trackers be damned, we would take our chances on the open road.

But it wasn't Megs. It was the soldier, gun held loose against his hip, pointed out in front of himself, stepping through the shadows. Definitely not a real soldier, but I'm sure he's played all the video game. He must be living his best life right now. But then he moves down the road I took off down.

Surely, from his perspective, I could hide anywhere. There are so many houses down here. I could be anywhere. So why is he walking along a path on the other side of the tree line, coming straight toward me? It is too late to move now. Any movement will make too much noise, and all he has to do is squeeze the trigger. One bullet would be enough.

My thighs burn from squatting, but any movement now could be catastrophic. I hold my breath as his footsteps get closer, boots over grass and leaves and the shit of apocalyptic times.

He stops directly in front of me. Close. Too close. My eyes lock on his crotch, that's how near he is. My hand is already in my pocket, curled around the snub-nose revolver. I try to slide it free but the barrel snags on fabric. My pulse hammers in my ears.

Above me, branches shift and part. If he leans through, if he glances down, I am finished. I truly believe that. I gently tug the revolver, but it doesn't move. A literal life hanging by a thread. How very poetic. Zoe would love this shit. I must remember to tell her, if I make it out of here alive, if she does, if we ever see each other again in earnest, as people, just like it was before.

Out of nowhere comes a grunt, a sharp whoosh, and a heavy clunk as the soldier drops sideways like a sack of bricks. I push through the underbrush, trip, and face plant hard. When I look up, Megs is standing over him, something long and metal clutched in her hands, maybe rebar, maybe a crowbar. Whatever it is, it did the job.

I scramble upright, staggering through the foliage toward her.

“Christ, you were hiding right there?” she asks. “Why didn’t you shoot him?”

“Because the fucking gun is stuck in my pocket!”

Then she’s thrown sideways. One second she’s there, and then she’s not, and the soldier is scurrying back to his gun. I rip my gun out.

“Stop!” I yell.

He does. Looks over. A few more inches and he could touch it, pull it into himself, swing it around and pull the trigger. But all I had to do was pull the trigger. I am sure even he could do the math on that one and know he doesn’t stand a chance. Although he shifts his gaze, from me to the gun and back. He shifts so slowly, he must think I can’t tell.

“Don’t do it,” I warn.

But he doesn’t stop. Maybe he thinks I don’t have the guts. Maybe he thinks the gun is empty, a bluff, a prop, and for most of its time in my hands, he would be right.

“Shoot him,” Megs barks.

“Stop moving!” I shout.

“Just fucking shoot him!”

“I will!” I yell back.

The man scrambles, rolls, clambers. I pull the trigger. Click. Nothing. He grabs his gun. Click. Nothing again.

Fuck! Were they used? Spent? Blanks? Click.

He spins, as I clenched my eyes shut and suddenly the night erupts. Fully automatic rounds spit fire so close I feel the air split

against my face, the heat of bullets streaking past as I keep squeezing my useless trigger. Him or me. Him or me. Bang. Bang. Click. Click. Click. Click.

I open my eyes and release my breath. Both shots have found their mark, although only one was actually needed. It's not until Megs places a hand on mine that I lower the shaking weapon.

"You did good, soldier," she says.

She moves fast, straddling him and rifling through his pockets. Whatever she's looking for, she doesn't find it.

"Nothing good here," she says.

"What about the gas mask?" I ask.

"I mean, it would be, if there wasn't a bullet hole in it."

I guess it was a good shot. The gun drops from my hand, landing with a dull thud in the dirt. No point holding onto it. It's not like I'm going to stumble across spare rounds that fit it. .357? .44? Nine mil? Your guess is as good as mine.

Megs scoops up the prisoner's machine gun. The bolt is locked back, the chamber glaring empty. No rounds left.

"Come on," she says. "We need to get out of this and go before any more assholes turn up."

We hurry back to the gas station. The air feels heavier now, thick with smoke and the metallic tang of blood. The headlights still cut across the forecourt, and in their glare we find Kepler sprawled on his back. Bullet holes bloom across his torso like dark flowers. He isn't moving.

"Why the fuck didn't he run?" Megs says, her voice cracking at the edges.

"I guess he froze," I say quietly.

Zoe lies next to him. Still. Perfectly still. No blood. No wounds I can see. Relief hits me first, hard and fast, but it's tangled with dread. Because how the hell do I explain to Megs why she isn't bleeding?

And God only knows what a bullet would have done to her circuitry if one had found its mark.

Megs moves fast, muttering to herself as she opens the back door of the truck. She crouches and slips her hands under Zoe's shoulders.

"Thank God she's okay," Megs says, breathless.

"You're telling me."

I move in to help, but my one good arm makes it awkward, useless. I'm more hindrance than a help. So I just stand there, watching, like some foreman overseeing roadworks, while Megs struggles and somehow maneuvers Zoe into the backseat.

When she's done, Megs pauses, brushing hair from her face. "She's pretty," she says softly.

"She's my everything," I tell her.

The words hang between us, heavier than the silence.

It could have ended here. If she had been damaged beyond repair, I think I would have just lain down in the middle of the road and waited for whatever came next. Without her, there's nothing left to run toward.

"There's a bunch of stuff in the trunk that could be useful," I say.

As Megs walks back toward the electric car to check things out, I lean into the backseat and reach across Zoe. My hand trembles as I fumble with the seatbelt. The click of the buckle feels louder than it should, sharp in the quiet.

Then I feel something soft against my head. Given everything that's just happened, I nearly flinch. My body coils, expecting pain or worse. But I stop myself. I look up.

Zoe's eyes glow softly. She's smiling.

One hand has found its way to my face, her fingers resting gently against my temple. It's clumsy and weak, but it's there. A gesture. A connection.

Relief crashes over me so hard I forget to breathe.

I hold my breath. "You're still with me."

“Thank you,” she whispers. “For everything you are doing.”

“We’ll make it, babe. I promise.”

“I wish...” but her voice trails off.

“Zoe?”

“I wish I could do more.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s my turn to look after you.”

“I should have told you.”

“Save your batteries,” I blurt out, knowing that phrase wouldn’t have been in my lexicon before this morning.

“I love...”

I wait, but there is no response.

And then Zoe shuts the Chevy trunk lid like a punctuation mark, and crunches across the dirt to the driver’s side door.

“You coming?” she says.

I look at Zoe for a few moments longer, hoping for something more, but knowing nothing will come. Then I ease myself out of the back seat and close the door softly before circling to the passenger side.

As soon as I ease into the passenger seat, a wave of dizziness hits. Maybe it is the hunger, maybe dehydration, maybe whatever toxins are already finding their way into my skin. Most likely all three. My mind drifts to the rule of three: three weeks without food, three days without water, three hours in extreme conditions. Standing unprotected in a fallout cloud may be the harshest condition of them all.

“I don’t know how long these masks are going to last,” Megs says. “but I’m sure they’ll last until we get to Corning.”

I grip the dash as a ping fills the cabin. In the center console, a device is propped between the gear stick and the radio unit. It’s rugged, scuffed, with cracked edges. The backlit screen is flickering, and there is a cable running and connected to the car’s USB port. The screen glows green with a dot blip on the screen, showing relative position and signal strength. It’s branded ‘Tactical Asset Locator’ and is obvi-

ously something they picked up when they raided a military check-point, or a well-stocked radio shack.

“God damn,” I say. “So that asshole at the library wasn’t lying when he said the vehicles were tracked. I’ll be damned.”

“What do you want to do?” Megs asks.

“What do you mean?”

Megs looks out at the dark stretch before us. “We can take our chances on the road.”

I take a breath.

“Like I said to Dylan earlier. The vehicles are tracked, and it could take hours before we locate and get rid of it. Besides, what other psychos are out there waiting for us?” I shake my head. “We need the plane, which means we need Dylan, which means we need to find out where he is.”

“You think that dot is him?” she asks.

“God, I hope so.”

Chapter 24

Sharpshooter

We barrel through the empty streets of Hollow Ridge in the Chevy sedan, tires eating up fractured asphalt, headlights sweeping like searchlights through dust and smoke. Megs grips the wheel with both hands, eyes flicking between the road and the small, battered tracker mounted on the dash.

Its screen is dim, flickering, a pulsing green dot sliding across a static grid.

“I hope it’s Dylan,” she whispers.

“If it’s not Dylan, we’re about to tail the wrong asshole into a really bad night.”

In the back seat, Zoe sits motionless. Seat belted in. Head tilted slightly toward the window like she is watching, listening, waiting. I would like to think she’s doing all those things but there is no way to tell.

Megs takes a hard right, the sedan’s back tires skidding just slightly as the road narrows.

“Shit! Dead end.”

She throws it into reverse, spins the wheel, and guns it backward. Dust kicks up behind us. I brace with my good arm, the other still strapped tight against my chest.

“This thing’s impossible to read,” Megs snaps.

The tracker pings again, the dot drifting to the left.

She punches forward, swerving between parked cars, bouncing over potholes, ducking beneath a sagging traffic light. I crane my neck, eyes darting past buildings, alleys, the cracked windows of boarded storefronts, down every street we pass.

And then I see it. I caught it for a fleeting second. A dark shape. A familiar outline. The RAM. Just for a second, through the gap in an alleyway, back bumper, brake light busted, silver scrape down the side. Another four-wheel drive just beyond it.

“There!” I shout, stabbing a finger toward the cross street. “Right! That’s them!”

Megs hits the brakes hard. The Chevy screams to a stop, tires shrieking against pavement. We lurch forward in our belts, a moment of weightless silence, then slam back into the seats.

“Jesus—”

Megs doesn’t respond. Throws the car into reverse but keeps her foot on the brake.

“How do you want to play this?” she asks evenly.

How did I want to play this? Truth is, I wasn’t equipped to answer that. I’m no weekend warrior; never even played paintball. If I’d anticipated this moment, maybe I would’ve suggested stripping the soldier’s camo, impersonating him, pretending to be one of them. Then, when the time was right, jamming a barrel into the unsuspecting man’s gut and pulling the trigger, balancing the ledger a little. But I didn’t think ahead. Who does? That’s movie stuff, not real life. Not when you’re just trying to survive nuclear fallout.

“I figure you would figure that shit out,” I say.

She doesn’t respond, but I can just imagine what face she’s making behind the gas mask, and what intensity her eyes are burning.

She eases the car back, flicks on the high beams, then jerks the wheel and rolls slowly down the street. The glare cuts through the dark, sharpening the scene ahead. The RAM truck sits half up on the pavement, crumpled against a wall. A silver four-wheel-drive squats in front of it, sealing off any escape.

On the sidewalk, Dylan kneels with his hands half-raised, a rifle barrel pressed inches from his face. No mask. I can’t tell if he’s hold-

ing his breath or just praying the fallout hasn't already slipped inside him. Radiation finds every crack.

Beside the truck, Christie is pinned against the door, the soldier's free hand locked hard against her chest. She thrashes but goes nowhere, her cheek smeared against the metal. The soldier leans into her, keeping her trapped, while the rifle in his other hand stays leveled at Dylan's head. He looks stretched thin, but deadly efficient, a man who knows he can't hold them both for long yet refuses to give up either.

It's a grim stroke of luck we arrive when we do. Without us, Dylan would already be a corpse, and Christie... I shudder at what being hauled into that truck would have meant for her.

The soldier glances up at our headlights but quickly turns away. He's solid, clad in military fatigues, but wearing joggers. A full-face mask covers him, resembling snorkeling goggles with filters on either side. He probably wants to signal us to lower the lights, but doing so would mean releasing Christie or moving the barrel from Dylan's head, with either choice inviting potential trouble.

The glare works in our favor. He can't see us clearly. If he could, if he realizes there are two of us in the front and Zoe in the back, Dylan would already be dead, and the barrel swinging our way.

"You don't have any more bullets stashed in your coat pockets?" she asks.

"That was it," I respond. "What if we just ran him over?"

"I considered it, but he's too close to the others. Besides, if he pulls the trigger from the impact, we lose our pilot, and our way out of here."

She rolls the car forward, her movements deliberate. As we approach, I notice her hand slipping beneath her seat, not to adjust it, but to retrieve something. A subtle motion, yet purposeful.

"I saw it when I got in," she says.

"You sure it even works?"

“Guess we’re about to find out.”

“I’ve got an idea,” I say.

We roll to a stop just in front of them.

“Can you turn those fucking lights off?” he yells.

Megs looks over to me, hits my arm, urging me to answer.

“It’s busted!” I shout.

“Well come out and help me with this lot so we can get back to the library,” the gunman yells. “Wade will be waiting.”

Wade. Maybe that was Boss Man. He was waiting, all right, but I don’t think he’s alive anymore. Not after the sounds I heard, the savage chaos Georgia and Megs unleashed, and the deep, unsettling silence that followed.

We open our doors at the same time and step out, boots on hard surfaces.

“It’s alright,” I say holding my empty gun out. “I’ve got them covered.”

“You sure?” he grunts, his voice muffled and metallic. “If I let this bitch go, she’s going to run.”

“Hey, you,” I shout, locking eyes with Christie. “Calm down. Just like at the gas station earlier. You remember? You got this.”

She freezes.

For a beat, everything holds.

The soldier narrows his stance, uneasy. His rifle dips slightly, then rises again. He shifts, glancing at Christie, unsure.

“What?” he asks, voice tight with confusion.

But that tiny crack, that split-second of hesitation, is all we need.

In a flash, out of the corner of my eye, Megs holds the stubby red cannister and yanks the pin. In one smooth motion, she squeezes the trigger and unleashes the extinguisher straight to his face, a white blast of dry chemical powder spraying out in a violent hiss. With the gas mask instantly coated and filter intake clogging, he staggers coughing. He squeezes the trigger, releasing a short burst of bullets

into the air, as he brings the weapon down, just as his foot catches the curb, placing him off balance.

Dylan launches from his position, catching the soldier and driving him back, slamming him onto the road. Despite the impact, the man fights, all hands on the gun, each trying to get the upper hand.

“Shoot him!” Dylan roars.

But I’ve got no bullets.

Megs is on him in a flash, hoisting the extinguisher high. She swings it down with a grunt, but the soldier twists at the last second, bucking Dylan off. The extinguisher crashes into the pavement with a metallic thud. Scrambling to his feet, the soldier wipes at his mask, kicks out violently, sending the extinguisher clattering across the asphalt. In one fluid motion, he sweeps his rifle toward Christie, and more bullets rip into the silver four-wheel drive.

Glass shatters, wheel punctures, bodywork pummeled.

On instinct, with no plan in mind, I leap and full body dive towards him. Just as I get there, landing with a heavy oof, there is one final gun shot. I raise my gun intending to strike, and bring it down, but stop just in front of his face. He isn’t struggling, or moving at all, and then I see the dark spray above his head on the road and a trickle of blood trickle down the side of his forehead.

I roll off. Look back, and Christie is there, arms outstretched, pistol in her hand, rock steady, like it was Sunday afternoon target practice on the range. Dylan moved to her and gently places a hand on hers, lowering the gun.

“You did good, kid,” he says as he hugs her.

Their father taught them well. He’d be proud, if pride could reach beyond the grave.

I push myself up, turn to Megs. “You alright?”

She nods, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “Yeah. You?”

“I’m not dead.”

“I haven’t seen a move like that since Saturday afternoon wrestling on tv,” she says.

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“I think I do.”

“We need to go,” Dylan says, standing.

“Listen,” I say. “these cars are tracked and who knows how many more of these bastards are out there, or whatever else is out there.”

“What do you want?”

“A ride.”

He looks us over and nods. “Alright then. Load up the truck and we’re out of here.” He peered through the headlights of the car. “Where did the other guy go?”

“Kepler?” I ask. “He... didn’t make it.”

Dylan nodded. “I’m sorry about that. If it wasn’t for you and Megs, we probably wouldn’t make it either.”

I haul gear from the trunk of the Chevy and stack it into the bed of the RAM. My arms ache, every movement slower than I want it to be, but there’s no time to rest.

Dylan moves beside me, his breath fogging up the inside of his foamed-over gas mask. He’s wiped it clear, enough to see. Together, we work fast, careful. Megs cradles Zoe as we lift her across and lower her gently into the backseat of the truck.

Zoe goes in the middle with Megs and myself on either side. Up front, Christie climbs into the passenger seat, her expression one of someone beyond her young years.

The engine rumbles to life, and we back out slowly, easing away to avoid drawing attention. Although the prisoner’s gunshots might have already announced our presence, I haven’t heard another vehicle while we packed up and took off. Are they all dead? Was the one Christie shot in the head the last of them? Had we really taken out a horde of escaped prisoners? I suppose time will tell. But once we’re airborne, this will probably slip from my mind, becoming one of

those odd, meaningless memories that surface unexpectedly, rising without being summoned, demanding attention for no explicable reason.

“Just so you all know,” Dylan says, ripping off his mask. “There’s not much room in the plane, okay? It’s gonna be a tight fit.”

As the vibrations of the engines work through the body of the truck into ours, and we jostle as the truck makes turn after turn, and then explodes down a dirt road, I sidle up next to Zoe. Hopefully it won’t be a long truck ride, nor plane ride, nor journey to the facility.

“I hope you’re still in there,” I ask over the hum.

Nothing.

I gently touch her face with my gloved hand.

“Hang in there, babe. Not long now. And we will sort you out.”

Whatever that means.

Chapter 25

Maiden Flight

Outside the window, I watch as the plume of dust cloud is kicked up around us. It is amazing how quickly the houses and buildings give way to trees and then nothingness expands in either direction. I curse the amount of time it's taking us to drive to the farm where the plane is, but I know it's the safest route. It's a delicate balance, but if we never get there, who cares how fast we go.

Besides, it gives me time to be creative.

Dylan said, "We'll be fine with the plane."
Now we're rotting en route and in pain.
If he speaks one more word,
He'll be buried unheard,
With Sharon through the side of his brain.

Yes, that's the state of my brain right now. It's getting darker by the second.

This world has brought the worst out of me. Just like it has in almost everyone I've had the misfortune of dealing with. Rage, fear, selfishness. It's all out in the open now, raw and unapologetic.

Still, I suppose I shouldn't be too hard on Dylan. He did agree to fly us out of town. Away from the prisoners. Away from whatever fresh hell is waiting next. That has to count for something.

I think about a beach somewhere, like when we went to Jumbo Bay in Antigua. It was all Zoe's idea. That was something special, spent with someone special. I promise myself to never forget those experiences.

Suddenly, like a shot from a gun, a wave of nausea breaks over me. My mouth tastes like old coins. I hold up my hand in front of my mask and it shakes uncontrollably. Gunshot wound or radiation. Maybe a little from column A, maybe some from column B. Either way I can't stop sweating and there is no one around to help me out. Long gone are the days of calling nine-one-one. I can't remember the last time I drank water, but it's been some hours. I think. It's hard to tell. All in all, it's not a great combo.

"Fuck, Zoe," I say. But I don't know if I actually said those words or just thought them. I mean, I felt like I did, and I can hear them in my head. Shit. This ain't no good. What did I do with those drugs from the pharmacy?

Suddenly the truck veers right, jostling and bouncing over rough earth, swerving before skidding to a halt, kicking loose stones out of the way. Outside is a weathered old barn bathed in moonlight, its silhouette jagged against the low moon. Half of the roof is missing, but a rusted weathervane creaks slowly on top.

The engine idles, like Dylan either forgot to kill it, or just doesn't care anymore. Bigger fish to fry. Somewhere over the hills, the fallout cloud growls as it shifts, low and menacing.

Dylan darts around the barn, with Christie, Megs, and me close behind. My jaw clenches; cold sweat beads on the back of my neck. I fight the urge to vomit.

Once, the mere thought of vomiting in public would have paralyzed me. Emetophobia, they call it. I used to avoid certain foods, places, even people, just to steer clear of that possibility. But now? Times have changed. If I had to lift my mask and hurl onto the grass, I wouldn't care. Survival has a way of reprioritizing fears.

The grass is damp and whispers as we move over it. When I get there, Dylan is tugging at a fluttering gray tarp. The moonlight catches its curved nose and single propeller. It sits on a tricycle landing gear, and the tires look all but flat and sunk into the earth. I hope the

old girl has some guts left in her. The paint is faded, and the tail numbers are flaking off. Weeds brush the undercarriage. The low dusty wing casts a long shadow over the field.

I look out. The makeshift runway we are destined for is just that, a flattened strip of dirt and gravel, lined with splintered fenceposts, tire tracks from long-abandoned farm equipment. The runway stretches out like a dare, carved into the field, barely wider than the wingspan. And beyond it, nothing but hills and night.

“You sure this is going to go?” I ask.

“She’ll go,” Dylan replies. “Load it up while I start the checks.”

He opens the door and climbs in as me and Megs go back to the truck.

“He sounds like he knows what he’s talking about,” I say.

“Confidence is key when influencing,” she replies. “I read that nine out of ten dentists agree.”

“Really?”

She gives me some serious side-eye until I catch on.

“Oh, right. Well, how much faith do you have in us getting airborne?”

“Enough for me to get in the plane.”

I am not a man of faith, in any way, shape or form. Neither is Zoe. It was one of the many things that brought us together, one of the many that we align on. We often joked about people who held such beliefs about an invisible, unseen, unheard entity that created the universe and everything in it. We were too practical and pragmatic for that. I can see a point of having faith, but let’s face it, faith or no faith, if the plane is fucked and won’t fly, no amount of faith will get it off the ground. It will take physics and science to get it up there, not scripture and bible verses.

But now I wonder if the connection me and Zoe have is deliberate that way. Was she told what to believe? Was that any different to growing up in a non-Christian household and being told it was a

crook of shit? If it was different and my parents went to church every Sunday, would my beliefs just follow theirs? Shit, did she even have beliefs, like I have beliefs? And did any of that even matter?

Megs helps me carry Zoe to the plane. It's awkward and clumsy, every step a struggle, and getting her into the rear seats is even worse. The control surfaces twitch and shift, the ailerons, rudder, and elevator all moving out of sync like a drunk uncle at a wedding who refuses to find the beat.

Up front, Dylan runs through his preflight checks. Or at least, the ones he can remember from that one afternoon with a family friend. Oh, and the online videos. And the video games. Let's not forget those. Surely that's all someone needs.

Christie arrives carrying the machine gun. Something about seeing an almost-teenager with a gun like that sends a shiver up my spine. It's spooky as hell, and I can only thank god I'm in her good graces.

It's then I remember Sharon. God damn, Sharon! It feels like forever since I have had her in my grasp, but in reality, a short hour or two.

"Megs, I need your help with some more stuff."

We go back to the RAM as a metallic rattle cuts through the quiet. Faint at first, like a toolbox being shaken. Click. Click. Whirr. A grinding churn as if the plane engine is clearing its throat. Then again, a chug-chug-chug, a dry mechanical cough, followed by a stuttered growl that builds into a steady, shuddering rumble.

Enough to wake the neighbors. Enough to alert anyone in the area where we are.

We quickly collect everything else of value, which isn't much, but includes the oxygen tank I have slung over my shoulder, and Sharon, which Megs holds lovingly.

"Don't get any ideas," I say. "Sharon is mine!"

“Sharon, huh?” She inspects the head, holds it in the moonlight to look at the splotches of red on it. “I can see she’s been a busy gal. I think we are going to be best friends.”

The engine evens out into a low thundering drone, rising and falling like someone breathing heavy through steel lungs.

“Anything else?” I ask. “Any departing words to this god forsaken town?”

Megs pauses for a moment, as if considering.

Dylan appears around the corner of the barn.

“Let’s go,” he shouts, waving his arms.

Suddenly, *Happy* by Pharrel Williams blares from the truck radio.

A gunshot cracks through the air. I flinch instinctively, followed by the ominous whizz of a bullet. Suddenly, Dylan is yanked off his feet, landing face-first on the grass. Without hesitation, I sprint toward him, Megs just a step behind. More bullets slice through the air, thudding into the surrounding turf, kicking up puffs of earth.

We each grab an arm and drag him behind the barn. The idling plane engine drones in the background, nearly drowning out the faint strains of a song playing on the truck radio.

We roll him over. He’s breathing heavily, clutching his stomach in a desperate attempt to hold himself together. Blood seeps through his shirt, dark and spreading.

“I’m fine,” he gasps. “I just need a minute.”

“We don’t have a minute,” I say.

Christie is climbing down from the plane. “What happened?”

“Stay in the plane,” Megs warns. “There’s a shooter.”

Dylan grunts as we lift him to his feet and half carry him as he half runs, feet shuffling over the turf and weeds, towards the aircraft. Christie climbs up and holds the door open.

“Is he going to be okay?” she asks.

The innocence to which she asks was far removed from my interactions with her to date, including holding me up at the gas station with Dylan, and then firing and killing the soldier, narrowly (or expertly, depending on your position) missing me, and then carrying the M16 assault rifle to the plane. But it's those moments that let true vulnerability exist, when lives are on the line, and death is all too real.

"I'll make it, Christie! Someone has to teach you how to hunt!"

We push him up into the copilot seat as Christie pulls and shifts over.

"Put pressure on the wound," Megs shouts.

She must have seen the same movies and documentaries I have, as Christie climbs on top of her brother and pushes on his bloodied hands.

We round the rear of the aircraft, and I pull myself up and clamber over the seat to the second row next to Zoe. Dylan was right. There is fuck all room. I wiggle the oxygen tanks off me and pull my mask off. A sledgehammer comes in after me, narrowly missing my head. Almost hitting Zoe. In front, Megs closes the door and takes a deep breath as she looks over everything in the cramped space and I thank God it's her and not me up there.

"Okay," she says reassuringly. "What the fuck do I do now?"

"I'll talk you through it," he groans.

Crouched behind Dylan, one knee braced between the seats, I clamp a hand on top of Christies bloodied hand, the smell of fuel and blood thick in the air. It's tight, awkward and uncomfortable, and yet required. Just need to get in the air. Dylan's head rolls, eyes glassy.

"Don't fall asleep, buddy," I say.

It's then I see them, figures moving through the dark. Multiple figures, spread out.

"Shit," I whisper. "We gotta go."

“Okay... the gauges look good,” he groans. “Or good enough, I guess. Open the throttle to full when you’re ready.”

The engine thrums low, already idling, a steady metallic purr as Megs nods, scanning the gauges and instruments like she knows what she is doing, but I doubt she knows what she is doing. She rips her mask off and glares at him.

“Listen, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about! Where is the throttle? Just tell me how to get the fuck out of here!”

“They’re getting closer!” I yell.

Dylan laughs, the son-of-a-bitch, it comes out wet, a cough smothered in blood.

“Black lever. Middle. Push it all the way forward.”

Megs finds it, hand trembling. It’s the first sign of nervousness I’ve seen from her. She pushes it forward. The engine snarls, propeller blurring into a cortex in the moonlight and noise. The plane lurches forward.

“What now?” she shouts over the roar.

“Stick back a little. Feet light on the pedals.”

“Pedals?” She looks down. “Fuck me.”

“Don’t fight her, just... just trust it.”

I wonder if that’s the advice he got from the old farmer that let him sit in the plane without ever taking it up. Trust it. Trust is over-rated and a scarce resource.

Gunshots crack behind us, sharp and urgent. I stop myself from turning around and looking. I would rather not see the end coming for me, just let it happen. The world becomes noise and motion.

The plane hurtles down the strip, bouncing over uneven ground.

“What now?”

“When it feels ready, ease back on the yoke.”

“This steering wheel type thing?”

“Yes,” Dylan gasps. “Don’t yank it, just gently pull it towards you. Little moves. Always little moves.”

“When it feels ready,” she repeats.

More gunshots.

“It feels plenty ready now!”

She eases back and the nose lifts, the ground quickly falling away. Wheels brush the tops of grass and then nothing. Flight. For a second, it’s silence. Then... Crack!

The plane shudders and the wings tip left and right. Megs swears and fights to keep it steady. The engine still hums, but there’s a different vibration.

She quickly scans all the gauges. “I don’t even know what the fuck I’m looking at.”

Dylan’s head is back.

“Dylan?” I ask.

Nothing.

“Dylan!” Christie shouts.

I slowly remove my hand and then pull his mask off. His eyes are closed. It looks like he is sleeping. And I guess he is. The big sleep.

“I... I’m sorry,” I say.

Christie jumps on her brother’s chest and hugs him, bawling her eyes out. I slide back onto the seat and shift over behind Megs. Through the glass, I can see the darkness of the forest waiting for us.

I wanted to tell Megs to head south, towards where I needed her to go. And she must have read my mind.

“South?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

She gently turns the controls, but the plane doesn’t do what it’s supposed to, what I expected it to. The wings dip, the horizon shifts, but the plane slides sideways, like it’s skidding in the air.

“What the fuck is happening?”

“Yoke and pedal,” a small voice says.

We both look at her. Her face is still buried in her brother’s chest.

“So, shift the steering wheel thing to the right and push in the right pedal?”

She nods. Megs does it, and the nose snaps into line. The plane smooths out, slicing clean through the sky.

“Now let the plane level out.”

Megs follows the direction, and the plane stabilizes.

“How do you know so much about flying?” Megs asks.

“I listen to things,” she says.

I didn't bother saying the obvious, because I was sure Megs was thinking the same thing. We might be airborne, but how the hell do we get it down without any direction or instruction, without a massive explosion, without killing everyone onboard.

Because we can't fly forever, and either we reach a destination or run out of gas and drop from the sky.

Chapter 26

Crash Course

I vomit on the floor.

At first, I turned, aiming between Zoe's legs, but pivoted at the last second. Just in time.

Zoe always said I sound like a wounded animal when I throw up. She wasn't wrong. I didn't hold back this time. The sound tears out of me, violent and ugly, and the mess hits the floor in a thick, clumpy splash.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and glance at her. I apologize, even though she would say there was no need to apologize. The engine hums with a steady rhythm, filling the cabin. I wonder if Megs heard me. Of course she did. And if she didn't, the smell would eventually get to her.

I feel like a shell of my former self, where my care for anything is waning, everything except for getting Zoe to the destination... wherever that is.

"You alright back there?" Megs asks.

"Define 'alright,'" I mutter. I wipe the sweat off my forehead. "I think my blood is microwaving itself."

She coughs. "That reeks."

"Why don't you crack a window."

I look out. The sky is lightening, the horizon bleeding from black to bruised blue as the plane rattles through the pre-dawn sky. A new day already upon us, and there is nothing but trees and hills as we fly low over the top of them.

The engine hums, but it's different now, rougher, hollow, like it's trying to clear its throat, but something is stuck in there that refuses to budge.

Megs sits in front of me, her shoulders tight from holding the yoke steady with white knuckles. Her shoulders shake, and I'm guessing it's from exhaustion. There's something in my mind that if she let go completely, the plane, even this small one, would probably keep moving in the same direction. Although my experience in these matters is non-existent, and I'm just happy to be away from Hollow Ridge and those escaped prisoners.

"Any clue where we are?" I ask.

"Wouldn't have a fucking clue," she replies.

"Have you seen anything out there?"

"To be honest, I haven't been looking."

"What kind of pilot are you?"

"Fuck you!" Megs bites. "Do you want to come up here and fly the plane?"

Under different circumstances, with a fully trained teacher with me, I would jump at the shot of taking control. Hell, maybe we could even cut the engines, stick it into a death spiral, and then pull ourselves out of it, fire up the engine and glide back to altitude. But given I have a metallic taste burning the back of my throat and my vision blurs in waves, and there is no one to save us, I say nothing.

"Yeah," she says. "I thought so."

The engine coughs once. Then again.

"Shit," Megs seethes.

"What the fuck was that?"

She scans the instrument panel.

"Ahh, I think it's the fuel gauge."

My heart beats a little heavier in my chest and I don't bother asking the obvious question that has an obvious answer.

Then the plane shudders. A sickening metallic groan vibrates through the floor, the nose dips. The right wing pulls slightly, dragging like something is caught underneath.

“Fuck!” Megs says. “What do I do?”

I can’t tell if it’s a rhetorical question, or she somehow thinks I’ve got the answer. The world outside the window is changing, I get that feeling like going down a big hill on a rollercoaster.

“Are we dropping?”

“Yep, yes we are.”

Megs uses a hand to locate both ends of the seat belt and connect them across her lap.

Then I see it, through the haze and creeping light, the faint outline of rooftops, an old water tower, and a grid of streets appear like a mirage. A small town.

“There!” I point past Megs to the right.

“Smooth turns,” Megs says as she nudges the yoke and presses a pedal, aligning us with the town. Or on collision course with some buildings.

“You think we’ll make it?” I ask.

“Or die trying.”

“Jesus. Don’t say that.” I haven’t come this far to die now.

To the left is a flat stretch of land, a field or school yard. Whatever it is, it looks like the perfect spot to land. Land? How the fuck do we do that exactly?

I shake Christie, who had fallen asleep on her brother’s chest, now a vital ingredient in our survival. She jostles as the plane continues to shudder.

“Christie! Time to wake up, kiddo!” I say.

“What’s going on? Where are we?”

“I wish I had the answers to both those questions,” Megs says. “Tell me how to land.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were great with those instructions about how to turn. So now, how do I land?”

Christie shrugs.

“What?” Megs says, her gaze shifting from the windscreen to the girl. “What was that? Why are you shrugging?”

“Because I don’t know.”

“You said you were a great listener.”

“I *am* a great listener.”

“So why don’t you know?”

“Oh, because Mister Delphine never told Dylan how to land.”

“What? Why not?”

“He said that would be for next time.”

I watch the exchange like a tennis match, my eyes bouncing between them. Megs opens her mouth, then closes it again. What’s the point? Asking questions won’t conjure answers. Berating her won’t change the situation. Some truths simply refuse to surface, no matter how hard you dig.

She cranes her neck to me. “What the fuck do we do?”

“Why not just do the opposite of what got us up here?” Christie offers.

It is probably the most sensible piece of advice that either of us could come up with and makes complete sense in theory. In theory. Of course, everything is great *in theory*. It’s the practice bit where things fail. I just hope we don’t end up in a fireball.

I remember seeing news reports of light wing aircraft and helicopters that crashed and turning to Zoe, pointing, and saying, “See, that’s why we’re never going to do that!”

Look at us now, baby!

“But take it easy,” I say. “Nothing exaggerated. Small moves. Baby steps.”

Megs nods as the field approaches the land coming fast. She eases the throttle back a bit, but nothing great. Too slow will stall. I know that much. When planes stall, they fall.

Lower and lower, and it feels like the lower we go the faster we get. It's an uneasy feeling, but like a car accident, I can't pull my vision away from the front window. I grip the chair. Staring at death in the face. Come for me. I dare you.

"It might be a good idea to brace yourselves," I say.

Christie clings to her brother, pressing herself tighter against him, arms locked around his small frame like she's trying to shield him from the sky itself.

I turn back and fumble for the two-point lap belt across Zoe's lap. "Here we go again," I whisper.

But the buckle's missing.

"Wait," I shout, panic edging into my voice.

"Wait?" Megs snaps from the cockpit. "There is no waiting."

"I'm not ready."

"Then get yourself ready!"

My fingers dig through the folds of the belt, finally pulling out the other end... only to find it frayed. No buckle. No way to secure it. Shit.

"Almost there," Megs growls. "Come on, you son of a bitch!"

I wedge myself deeper between the seats, fighting for inches in a space that has none. My shoulder screams in protest, but I reach for Zoe anyway, pulling her toward me.

"I've got you," I whisper.

I'm not letting go.

Megs pulls up slightly to level the wings, fighting against the surrounding forces. For a moment she eases back on the throttle, and the engine drops in pitch. The yoke trembles in her hands, the wings flex, and then the left wing clips something unseen. The entire plane lurches, tilting hard, and Megs is fighting to keep control.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to push everything back.

The wheels hit earth with a jolt, too hard, bouncing once, then twice, drops the throttle. The plane comes down again, another hard jolt. The wheel buckles beneath the fuselage. The uneven earth catches the undercarriage and lurches the plane into a nose dip, just enough to tip the balance.

“Hold on!” Megs yells.

Christie screams and I swear as the world tilts. The right wing digs into the dirt like an anchor, and the entire aircraft jerks, bounces once, and then rolls violently forward. A chorus of shouts, metallic groans and shattering glass fills the cabin.

And then...

The plane slams to a halt upside down. We hit the ceiling with a bone-jarring force. My grip on Zoe never breaks as we fall, her body landing across mine as the world shudders to a stop. Sharon thuds right beside us. My shoulder erupts in pain as I try to sort out my unnaturally twisted body.

Megs is still above us, partly suspended, her seatbelt holding her at an awkward angle. She groans, reaching out blindly.

“Can I get a sign off?” she asks. “You lot okay?”

“Next time we should just walk,” I say.

“Christie?”

“The best landing I’ve been in,” she replies.

“Well, I suppose for a first timer with no instruction, that was pretty good!” she congratulates herself.

I look up at her upside-down head.

“At least we’re not dead, right?”

“That’s the spirit!”

There is something like a dripping noise.

“What is that?” Megs asks. “Shit, is that fuel?”

I look between my legs and up at the seats above me.

“No,” I say. “That’s me. All me.”

“Oh,” she says. And then realizes. “Oh. That’s gross.”

She works her way out of the harness and drops to the roof, landing heavily on her side. She releases a constrained grunt. We end up face to face.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she says.

“Alright, enough bullshit. Let’s get out of here.”

“Don’t forget your masks.”

There’s debris everywhere. Bits of metal, cracked plastic, scorched fabric litter the cabin. We take a minute to find our gear.

“What about Zoe?” Megs asks.

“I think she’s okay. We’ll know soon enough.”

“I meant a mask,” she says. “Precaution beats consequence.”

I glance over at Christie. “Would it be okay if Zoe used your brother’s?”

She turns her head slowly, eyes blank, but listening.

Obviously, the air out there won’t matter to Zoe. At least, I don’t think it will. Not that Kepler ever gave me a straight answer on it. Still, precaution.

Christie nods, then says, with a calmness that feels too grown-up for her age, “I don’t think he needs it anymore.”

Megs leans forward and unfastens Dylan’s mask. His body is still strapped into the seat, motionless. She pulls it off carefully, and hands it to me.

I take it, then work the straps over Zoe’s face.

Together, we crawl, drag, and roll our way out the shattered side hatch into the dawn, where the world is still, golden, and just beginning to forget the nightmare. Behind us, the plane rests on its back like a dead insect. Nose partly crumpled, propeller jammed into the soil, the tail flicking smoke like a dying signal flare. No fire. No explosion. Just wreckage. The low mounted wings tip the plane over at an angle.

I limp to one side, and spot it: A clean, fist-sized hole near the engine cowling, a bullet entry, clear as day. Below it, wires have been severed, a panel loosened and dragging.

“Well, there’s your problem,” I mutter. “Turns out planes don’t like being shot.”

“I don’t think anything likes being shot.” She points at me. “Case and point.”

I can’t argue.

“Where do we go now?” Christie asks.

I look at Megs. “You got any plans?”

She shrugs. “My dance card is suddenly wide open.” She looks at Christie. “Do you think we should tag along and keep Adam and Zoe here out of trouble?”

She slowly nods. “I suppose so. But what about Dylan?”

I glance at Megs, then turn back to Zoe, deliberately avoiding the conversation waiting between us. Part of me is stunned to still be alive after everything. But what scares me more is having that conversation. Megs, on the other hand, stepped right into it with the kind of ease that deserves a medal.

“We need to leave him here,” Megs says softly.

Her voice is steady, but there’s something behind it, a tension, a quiet ache she’s trying to hold back. “We can’t take him with us. But I promise, we’ll come back. We’ll look after him properly. I swear it.”

Christie’s eyes fill, wide and unblinking. “But Adam is taking Zoe.”

Megs nods. “I know. But Zoe’s still here, even if she’s not awake. She needs a doctor, and we have to get her help before we lose that chance.”

Christie turns her head slowly. Her gaze locks on the twisted wreck of the plane, where Dylan still hangs upside down in his seat.

She doesn’t cry. She just stares, her chest barely rising with each shallow breath.

Eventually she nods. "Will he be okay until we get back?"

"I'm sure he will be."

"Promise?"

Eek. And there it was, the *unpromisable* question being asked. It was like in the cop shows where a relative of the victim wants the police to promise they will both find the perpetrator and bring them to justice. We all know how that ends, and that's not good. And yet, a little part of me dies hearing it.

And then Megs says the words. "I promise."

God only knows what lives out here. Country hicks with rifles. Domsday freaks. Scavengers. Wild animals. A dozen ways for Dylan to vanish before we ever make it back. I would never make a promise like that. Not even to a kid who just lost her brother.

Christie turns to me. Her voice is small.

"Adam? Do you promise?"

I hesitate. Just long enough to feel it.

"Of course, kiddo."

Damn.

Megs stands just behind me, eyes fixed on the two figures lying in the grass, Zoe and Sharon, side by side beneath the open sky.

"How do you want to—" she begins, but the words fade.

Her gaze shifts. Locked onto something I haven't seen yet.

Then she crouches, slowly, and reaches for Zoe's arm. She turns it gently.

That's when I see it.

Wires.

Thin and frayed, poking through a tear in the synthetic skin. Jagged edges where she must have cut herself in the crash. I hadn't noticed. Not until now.

Megs stands again. She steps back. Quiet. Controlled. But different.

“Christie,” she says softly. “Why don’t you go say goodbye to Dylan? Let him know we’ll be back soon.”

Christie nods and walks toward the wreckage, her steps slow and uncertain.

Megs beckons me over without a word, still keeping her distance from Zoe.

“Listen,” I start. “I know what it looks like.”

“Do you?” Her shoulders lift. “What the fuck?”

I don’t know how to respond to that. “It’s a long story.”

“Give me the headline.”

“I didn’t know about this, about anything, until yesterday morning. Since the power’s been shut down, Zoe’s been acting strange, and then she just shut down. There’s this light coming from her eyes, that displays a message about getting her back to Facility Nine at Corning.”

There’s so much to unpack, and I’m pretty sure Megs is doing it in real time. Her silence says more than words would.

“I know that’s a lot,” I say, attempting to diffuse the situation. “Kepler, the guy at the gas station, he’s from there. He said she’s an ENLIVE unit.”

“Is that supposed to be an acronym for something?”

“Yes, but I can’t remember what it stands for. I think L is Life-form.”

“That Kepler guy mentioned Lucid.”

“What’s the connection?”

I shrug. “I just don’t know. And won’t know until I get to Corning.”

“I just... I just don’t even know what to say.”

“Imagine my shock, when my wife of three years turns out to be something entirely different to what you thought. This isn’t discovering your partner doesn’t really like your Hawaiian shirt. It’s discovering your wife isn’t even human.”

Her eyes are muted behind her gas mask, but I know she is staring at me. If not for the clear visual, I can feel them.

“The thing is,” I continue, “I need to get her back there. Because if her battery goes flat, everything she is, will be lost. And I’m just not prepared to let her go.”

We stare at each other, and I can hear Christie rummaging around the plane.

“Please,” I whisper. “She’s all I’ve got.”

Christie calls out for Megs, and she breaks away from our conversation.

“Cover it up,” she says as she marches away.

I returned to Zoe and bend down next to her.

“Sorry about that,” I mutter, pulling the bandana I found at the Hollow Ridge library from my pocket. “She’ll come around.”

I do my best to tie it around Zoe’s exposed wound, using one hand and my teeth. It’s not meant to stop anything. It’s just there to hide the damage, to cover up the wires, the torn synthetic skin. A small barrier between Christie and the kind of questions I’m not ready to answer.

With Zoe settled, I leave Megs and Christie in the plane and make my way to the rear of the wreckage, heading for the cargo door.

It takes several tries with my one good arm before the handle finally gives. The door groans, stiff with damage, but then it gives way. It drops open, scraping hard against the earth. The angle digs it into the grass, and a few objects spill out, including some MRE packs, a knotted length of rope.

I grab the rope and haul until the whole thing tumbles free.

But that’s not what I’m after. There’s one thing I need, and I know exactly where it is. I lower myself onto my back and shimmy under the broken fuselage, the metal cold and biting above me.

My fingers scrape along the undercarriage, reaching blindly. I try once. Then again. And then I feel it. My hand lands on the mask and oxygen tanks.

I drag them out, one by one. The masks we've been using are fine for now, but they won't last forever. I still need to get to Corning. And if I'm lucky, these tanks will buy me the time to make it there.

We gather together around Zoe and our supplies.

"What do we do now?" Megs asks.

"If you can help me, I'll strap her to my back."

Megs hauls Zoe's limp body upright and positions her against my back, her arms draped over my shoulders like an oversized pack. She threads the rope under Zoe's bent legs, then pulls it tight across my chest and shoulders, knotting it off with practiced hands.

The weight hits me instantly. It slams into my wounded shoulder, and pain flares hot and sharp. I grit my teeth and hold still until it fades to a dull, grinding throb. The nausea follows, rising from the pit of my stomach, just as the edges of my vision blur.

The dive tanks are already strapped to my front. With Zoe lashed to my back and the tanks crushing against my ribs, the weight is unforgiving. Every breath feels like it might be the last easy one I'll get.

But this isn't a sprint, it's a marathon.

Slow, steady, one foot in front of the other until I get there. I had to make it. There wasn't any other way.

Chapter 27

Easy come, easy go

Each footstep is painful yet necessary. I once followed someone in the New York marathon that had a quote on their shirt: *You are stronger than your pain*. In this moment, I doubt it, I doubt it a lot. It is all-encompassing.

To distract myself and the monotonous thrumming of pain in my shoulder and head, I think about my former life, where the world was still in one piece, where I wasn't stabbed and shot, where Zoe was so stunningly beautiful in the fall sunshine, where I had a job. Damn, I worked way too much, didn't give Zoe the time I should have. Nights in front of laptop screens, sometimes too many things on my mind to engage in conversation, where exhaustion overtook me and sleep was gained within seconds of head hitting pillows, sometimes before goodnights were shared. Back then, I thought I had a great life, but it was only because of Zoe's patience and love and generosity made it so. I was less without her, so damn the pain, forget the anguish. I was going to bring her back from her robotic coma, I was going to revitalize our love and life, even in this new world.

Dawn breaks as we navigate through sparse woodland, the remnants of the crash (and Dylan) behind us. Megs has the bag with the MREs slung across her. She holds the crowbar and uses it to help navigate the wooded area, striking trees as she passes for, I am sure, no other reason than because she can. The trees thin out, revealing a small, desolate town. Eerily quiet. Was this Corning? I guess I could see a facility here, somewhere underground. This town would make the perfect cover.

It initially reminds me of those towns they purpose built to test nuclear bombs. There is no one around, and I wondered if we ventured into any houses, would we find clothed manikins, a full nuclear family, standing there, frozen in time, waiting for the big one to drop. Everything vaporized in the blink of an eye. I assume one would feel little in the moment.

“So, she’s like a robot?” Christie asks.

Megs looks at me. We had been trying to explain why I was taking Zoe, but Dylan had to stay behind. I can imagine that would have been tough on her to understand the difference. I mean, the cat was half out of the bag, so I suppose it might as well remove the bag entirely.

“Yeah,” I say. “Something like that, I guess. But that’s why I need to take her to Corning, so they can answer those questions, and fix Zoe up.”

She nods. For a ten-year-old, she’s remarkably composed, especially considering the guns, the shooting, being held hostage, and losing both her father and her brother. Resilience must be hardwired into her, some kind of quiet steel woven into her DNA.

As we venture further into the center of town, we find it to be a modest venture, a single main street flanked by shuttered shops and a solitary diner. Weathered signs creek in the breeze, but there is an unnatural stillness to it all. Windows are dark, some are boarded up, others with curtains hastily drawn.

I wonder if the cloud is still upon us. There is a fine layer of dust on surfaces, but I don’t know what this means. Was it coming? Had it been? Are we in the midst of it? Without any equipment we just had to guess and assume that outside is always bad. But thing was, we had already spent sufficient time outside in the elements. Time would tell what that means.

We go to the diner, a place that has the least boards nailed across the door, a place to rest for a moment, eat, recover, and then part

ways. I always knew it would come to that, eventually. Hell, I thought we would have arrived there a day ago, and probably would have, just the two of us, if not for the highway pileup and necessity to drive around it.

The planks across the door, and then the door itself, gives way with a sharp crack from the crowbar that Megs is wielding. Inside, we remove our masks and breathe in old grease and burned coffee grounds. A row of cracked vinyl booths line one wall. Sugar dispensers sit crooked on the table, untouched.

Christie pulls off her mask and drops into a booth with a groan. Megs removes her and inspects the back, the kitchen doors swinging open with a nudge.

I pull off my mask.

“God, I feel like...” I stagger two steps and vomit into a trash bin.

Megs appears from the kitchen with a half-full dented can of peaches, two warped and bent granola bars, and a bottle of water. She stops for a minute to look at me. I look up.

“I found these,” she says. “Breakfast of champions.”

“Pass,” I reply.

She goes over to the booth and eases in opposite Christie. I stagger over and grab a chair from a table, one of the many upturned and sitting on the tabletop, spin it around and ease down reverse style.

“You gonna take that off?” Megs asks, as Christie dives into the granola bar. “Sorry. I meant your wife.”

“Zoe.”

“Yeah, Zoe. Give yourself, maybe even her, a break.”

I shake my head. “Too much of a pain in the ass to do it back up.”

“How’s your back holding up?”

“It hurts.”

“Legs?”

“Kills.”

“Shoulder?”

“Sufficiently numb.”

“Then give yourself a break.”

“I won’t be staying that long.”

She eyes me as she eats one of the bars.

“When’s the last time you ate something?”

I cast my mind back. “Maybe twelve hours.”

She places the rest of the granola bar on the edge of the table.
“You need to eat.”

“I can’t,” I rasp. My voice is so hoarse it barely sounds like my own. It is thin and cracked, unfamiliar, as if it belongs to someone else entirely.

She moves the water bottle to me.

I shake my head. “Everything tastes like metal and regret.”

“That’s just the radiation talking.”

“Yeah, well, just think about all the shit on our clothes that we’re breathing in right now or has already sunk into our skin.”

“I guess there’s nothing we can do about that now. I’m sure, any day now, any moment now, things will stabilize, military stations will be setup to administer pills to sort all that out.” She looks over to Christie. “What do you think about that?”

The kid nods as she chews.

“What’s your plan?” I ask.

Megs looks around the interior of the diner. “I figure we might just hang here. It’s shelter, there’s some food and water, and there’s even a bathroom. Besides, it’s close to Dylan if we want to visit him, or maybe even get others to help us move him.”

I nod. “Sounds like a solid plan.”

“What about you? What’s your plan?”

“Figure out where I am and then get myself to Corning.”

“How do you plan on doing that?”

“Probably the same thing I did in Hollow Ridge. Find a gas station, grab a map of the area, figure out which way north is, do some math.”

“Sounds legit.” She looks at the oxygen tanks strapped to my front. “How long do you think that’s going to last?”

I scrunch my face up. “I’d say a max two hours.”

“You think that’s enough?”

“It had better be,” I mutter, though the words feel hollow. The effects of the fallout are already creeping in, fatigue, nausea, that persistent metallic taste. Maybe I should just forgo the mask and let nature take its course. But even if it offers a sliver of protection, it’s better than nothing.

I rise to my feet, adjusting the straps of my gear. “Ladies,” I say, forcing a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes, “it’s been an honor meeting you both. I wish you well with whatever comes next.”

“I hope you get where you are going,” Megs replies. “And when you do, say hi to Zoe for me... for us.”

“Of course. Maybe we can all catch up and have lunch sometime.”

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

“Me too,” Christie says.

With goodbyes exchanged, I secure the full-face diving mask, open the tanks, and take a breath. Sharon in hand, I step out onto Main Street.

The gas station is five blocks south of the diner, sitting at the edge of town where the asphalt gives way to pine roots and stubborn weeds cracking the shoulder. The streets are dead quiet, just the soft hiss of my oxygen regulator and the scuff of boots on gravel.

I hug the sidewalk, shoulders hunched against the weight of fatigue, the two tanks strapped to my front, and Zoe harnessed on my back. My vision swims occasionally, nausea curling in my gut like a second heartbeat.

The gas station comes into view, squat, green-roofed, one busted window already boarded, the rest coated in grime. The store sign hums, not from power, but from a gust of wind that rattles its casing.

I cross the lot, glance towards the empty pump bays. I shift Sharon to my shoulder, getting ready to kick the door in. I think I am getting a little too comfortable with this lawless society. I didn't even bother to check to see if the door was unlocked, just stand there and cock my leg like a 1920s gangster about to enter a rival's lair and light them up with my Tommy gun.

I place Sharon on her head beside me and use it as balance as I lift my leg, ready to launch forth, when a chirp slices through the stillness.

I freeze. Another low electronic squawk again, this time unmistakable. I turn to see a cruiser pulling under the awning alongside the pumps. Not a fellow scavenger, not a military Humvee. A police cruiser. Faded white, dust caked. One red and blue light bar is dull from neglect and time.

The window cracks open with a reluctant squeak. Inside is a young officer, maybe in his mid-twenties, peers out. He's pale and drawn, wearing a sheriff's star on a weathered vest.

"You plan on looting that place?" the cop asks.

Proverbial hand caught in the cookie jar.

"It's not what it looks like," I say, and immediately regret it. That's exactly what a guilty person says. And maybe I am. Kind of. Sure, if something had caught my eye, I probably would've pocketed it without much thought. But that's not looting... I think.

"It never is." The officer squints. "It looks like you've got a body tied to your back, a diving mask on your front, and you're about to put a foot through that door. Most of that is something I am concerned with."

"I'm passing through. Just trying to find out where I am and figure out how to get to Corning."

“Where are you coming from?”

“Henrietta, originally.”

“How’d you get here?”

“Long story.”

“They always are, aren’t they?”

He looks at me for a while. “If I help you out, will you promise not to go kicking doors to any businesses here in town?”

“Of course.”

He waves me over and I lean against the car. “Corning is about twelve or so miles south-east. You could take the roads, there are signs, but it winds around. It’s about three hours. Or you take the old logging road through the state forest. It starts just behind the school.” He points out the windshield down the road, back to where I believe we crash landed and miraculously survived. “It’ll cut your time in half, maybe an hour and change if you move quick.”

“Well, I’m not out for a Sunday walk, Sheriff.”

“So be it. I don’t want to hear reports of someone slinging a sledgehammer around at people, you understand? Don’t make me dress up in a hazmat suit and come and find you.”

“I’m just trying to get to Corning. That’s all.”

“Alright then. Now, do we need to have a conversation about what is strapped to your back?”

I turn around. “Can you see the wires? It’s a prop. This is what I’m taking to Corning. Like I said, it’s a long story.” I turn back. I can’t tell if he’s convinced or otherwise. But I suppose if he thought it actually was a dead body, he might just shoot me from his car and say he stopped me from breaking into the gas station. But who in their right mind would strap a cadaver to their back and then show it to a cop? A madman, that’s who. Maybe I am going a little bit crazy.

He purses his lips. “Best be on your way.”

I think about how he gave me directions without hesitation, how he didn’t make a move to arrest me when he easily could have. Most

men in his position would have. Perhaps done worse. Maybe he's young, maybe he's tired, maybe he's just not interested in pushing his weight around. Whatever it is, I feel something shift. A loosening. A trust I didn't expect but can't ignore.

If I'm going to ask anyone for a favor, it has to be him.

"Hey, could you do me a favor?"

"I feel like I've already done you a bunch of favors."

Tough. Tough but fair.

"Please," I beg.

"What is it?"

"I left some friends in a diner on main street."

"Christ. They're not dead are they?"

"What? No! I'm just hoping you can look past the fact we broke into the place for shelter. They intend to stay until the worst of things has died down."

"Who are they?"

"Friends. Megs is the older one and Christie is like ten. They aren't any trouble." I neglect to mention the troublesome parts of our common history.

He considers, running his tongue over his teeth.

"Maybe just a drive by and make sure they're okay? Please?"

He peers out the windshield into the distance as his hand hangs over the steering wheel. Then he lets out a long breath between tight lips.

"Alright. I'll check in on them. But that's the last favor. Now, you better get moving. You've got a journey ahead of you."

I thank the lawman, and he nods with a kind of tired gravity, then eases the cruiser into motion. As he pulls away, the tires crunch over old glass and grit, shards of yesterday's world ground beneath the weight of what's left.

I watch the red taillights disappear into the morning mist, thinking Megs might actually appreciate the backup. Maybe he'll give

them shelter. Maybe they'll get to breathe easy, if only for a while. A warm room. A moment to catch their breath. What could be safer than the local station?

Chapter 28

Instincts and Picnic Baskets

The school is quiet, but intact. No shattered windows, no graffiti, just the stillness of abandonment. Weeds have begun their slow march across the parking lot, and the flagpole stands bare, like a stage missing its star.

I slip along the fence line, circling past the loading dock and around the back of the gym. The weight of the air tanks on my shoulder shifts with every step. The hiss of my oxygen regulator keeps time like a metronome in my ears. Like I need that reminder.

Behind the school, there it is. A weathered metal sign, bolted to a post and partially swallowed by overgrowth: STATE FOREST ACCESS ROAD - MAINTENANCE VEHICLES ONLY.

It points toward a path, a narrow service road snaking into the woods, flanked by pine and poplar. It's not overgrown yet, but wild enough to feel forgotten. Pine needles carpet the path in thick, quiet layers.

I step onto it and the canopy closes in overhead, filtering the light to a dim, copper-green hue. Bits of ash float around me, a constant reminder of the world I am wading through. The school disappears behind me with every painful step.

I carry on, boots crunching over twigs and the occasional deer print sunk deep into the mud. The diver's mask fogs at the edges; the hiss of his air tanks is the only company I have. Back to the way it was, when I had left Henrietta in our electric car, hurtling down the freeway, talking to myself, or keeping the conversations in my head.

The further I go, the quieter the world becomes. No birds. No wind. Just the soft crunch of my boots and the occasional creak of trees shifting above. It feels like a place time skips.

A breeze kicks up, sending dead leaves spinning across the path like nervous birds.

Around a bend and I come across it. Up ahead, concrete barriers blocking the path. Not military, just the kind they drop at a construction site, weather-stained, chipped, and staggered like someone meant to block cars but never expected someone on foot. Behind them, nothing but forest.

The Sheriff didn't mention anything about this, but maybe he didn't know. Maybe no one's been down this way in some time. I look left and then right. Nothing but trees stretching out in both directions, in every direction. I shimmy between the barricades and push through a thicket of scrub to investigate further.

I encounter a small cliff. Thirty feet drop, maybe more. And below? A continuation of the same road, clearly carved and flattened by old forestry trucks. It winds through the trees like a dry riverbed.

I sigh. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

I look down, then back the way I came. I guess I could go back and take the roads, but that would take more hours than I had, and I'm standing here burning daylight and oxygen. The air tanks continue to whisper against my front. The forest offers no commentary for my predicament.

I scan the drop. Steep, but not vertical. A shallow slope at first, but it sharpens quickly near the bottom. A mixture of compact dirt, jutting roots, and exposed rock. The kind of terrain that could be climbed if you had both hands and a backpack, but I am far from unencumbered. The items strapped to me are going to make the descent slow and somewhat painful, but there is no choice, and if I can keep my feet, I should be okay. If, and that's a big if, but I don't have any other choice, none within reason, anyhow.

I toss Sharon over the edge, and she turns end over end, landing on her side. No turning back now!

Finding a low spot where erosions have carved out a channel, the slope forming a natural path, I tentatively ease onto it, sliding off the edge on my side. It's treacherous, but not a sheer drop. I crouch low, grab some thick pine roots with my good hand and angle sideways. I pray that Zoe and the air tanks remain in their place, and don't end up taking me out.

Instead of climbing, I lower myself into a seated position, legs first, and start a controlled slide, using my boots to dig into the earth and slow my descent. Every few feet I brace myself against the roots, exposed rocks and low branches, the tanks clanging softly as they scrape tree bark and stone, and I pause to adjust the balance of Zoe on my back.

"Remember that time we went rock climbing?" I ask. "And we got there, looked at each other, and then went to eat cheeseburgers and drink beers?" Silence. "Yeah, right now, I'd rather be doing that. Hell, I'd even eat a vegan cheeseburger and drink non-alcoholic beer, just so I didn't have to do this."

As the rock face got a little steeper, I moved in a zig-zag pattern to avoid building too much momentum, traversing like a hiker on a switchback trail, slow, methodical, and painfully uneven with one arm.

I make it near the bottom, the end in sight, and land on an edge about three feet off the ground. I could jump from here, then I can dust off my pants and continue marching towards Corning. No mess, no fuss.

I stand on the edge, brace myself, but just as I'm about to leap, the ground gives way under me. A groan of earth, then weightlessness. With the weight I'm carrying I plunge forward, see the ground rushing up like its hungry for me.

I throw out my arm. Instinct. Stupid instinct. It catches rock. My wrist twists violently as my forearm skids across the gravel-strewn slope. Then, smash. I land square on the tanks.

The metal slams into my arm in its sling, then my ribs, the impact ripping the air clean out of me. Something cracks. A hot, white spear of pain drives through my side. My bad arm is crushed and howls like it's being torn from its socket.

No air. Can't breathe. My vision shrinks at the edges, narrowing into a tight, pulsating tunnel, and then darkness.

Something drags me.

That's the first thing I notice, after the darkness shifts into shadows and the cold seeps into my bones. I feel the thud of my legs bouncing over the uneven earth. The world is darker than it was when I left it, but it is still daylight. Maybe afternoon? Certainly after midday.

My tanks are out, and the air is thick, a foul acrid burn is in the back of my throat.

Then there is the noise, something low and wet, like breath through a snout. A click of claws. A deep, throaty grunt. A bear? Couldn't be. Do they get bears around here? Once more, the Sheriff didn't mention anything about wild animals. Maybe he thought they would all be in hiding. They've got the sixth sense, haven't they? I wish I paid more attention to those David Attenborough documentaries instead of seeking out some horror thriller action dramedy musical for me and Zoe to watch. I wish I had paid more attention to a lot of things.

Dragged further. Then the rocks and gravel change into cold damp stone beneath me, and the light darkens, the tanks scraping against the stones under me, sending out a screeching noise. The dragging stops immediately. I dare not turn around. Play dead! That

was it. But was that for black bears or brown bears? I communicate with Zoe in my mind, telling her to play dead. A little joke to myself in the chaos of where life meets death.

I know they can smell fear, but I'm hoping the mineral compounds and toxins covering my clothes is covering up the stench I am putting forth of how scared shitless I am. My heart rockets.

Then I hear something. A voice? No, that's just the blood in my ears.

But there is a huff of hot breath on the exposed back of my neck.

The next thing I hear is the sound of something massive shifting behind me, breathing, curious, and then mercifully, it seems like it is moving further away. Warned off by the radiation or saving me for later. Maybe he has other family members he wants to feast first.

The breathing is muffled, and I fear it's far enough away that I could move, subtly, slowly, to the entrance. But I have to be careful. Any sudden movements or noise will bring unwarranted attention to my escape.

I keep my eyes forward. I don't dare turn around. My palm presses flat to the cold rock and I push. Pain detonates up my arm, white-hot, and it takes everything in me not to scream. I freeze, breath ragged. If I move wrong, I'll give myself away.

I'm trapped. Truly trapped. I try to weigh my options but there aren't any. Stay here and wait to be eaten by whatever dragged me in or somehow get to my feet with weight strapped to my back and front and no usable hands and then run. Shit. Bears can run, can't they? Even with my oxygen running low, outside has to be better than this.

Slowly, I drag one leg up to my side. Step one. My heart pounds. Step two? No idea. I try to lift my torso but the tanks on my chest keep me pinned. I reach for my other leg, but my body won't bend that way; my muscles won't obey.

"Fuck it." The word slips out as a growl.

With my knee braced, I lunge, shoving myself upward. The motion tears a screech of tanks on dirt. I roar, as loud as I can, hoping the noise will spook whatever's behind me.

But I can feel it. Vibrations shuddering through the stone. The drag of claws. Heavy paws closing in to haul me back into its den. The second time will be worse. I know it.

Light glimmers ahead. I throw my weight forward, scrambling. Just as my body breaches the mouth of the cave, hands grab the ropes on my shoulders and yank. In an instant I'm wrenched out of the dark and into the shadowed daylight.

And then silence. I don't dare breathe. I don't know who did that, nor if the animal is still coming to get me. I hear something sniffing air, a wet slobbery followed by a disappointing growl, a grunt, a sign of extreme dissatisfaction. And then all at once, it pads away, unwilling to venture out to come and get me.

Then I'm dragged further away. I'm assuming to a safe position, but I thought this would be an easy hour's walk through the forest. And that assumption was wildly wrong. Hell, I thought it was going to be an easy one-hour drive to Corning from our home in Henrietta, and that has been short of the worst guess ever.

Every bump sends a new wave of pain through my body and a swell of nausea up my throat. I gag, then vomit inside the mask still sealed to my face. The mess pools against the glass, warm and sour. I try not to breathe through my nose, drawing shallow breaths through my mouth instead, but the smell finds me, anyway. I choke, cough, gag again. There's nowhere to go, no air that isn't tainted.

The dragging stops, and then the rope is being loosened from around me. I feel the weight at my back disappear. Wait! That's not a weight, that's Zoe. I yell and awkwardly reach as the mask is ripped from my face and I am rolled over.

I take in a lungful of differently contaminated air as I look up, squint from my position, lungs burning, ribs aching like someone buried glass in them. And there they are: Megs and Christie.

“What the hell are you two doing here?”

Megs pulls me up and leans me against a tree. Christie stands tight by her side, one hand gripping Sharon like she’s protecting a sacred relic. Megs plants her hands on her hips, all defiance and dirt, her mask hanging crooked and blood streaking the side of her jeans.

And then I see the gun handle sticking out the top of her waistband.

I blink hard, certain I’m seeing things.

“What the fuck happened to you two?”

Chapter 29

Running Repairs

Zoe sits beside me, silent, offering little comfort. I try to swallow the groans clawing up my throat, but they slip out through cracked lips as Megs works. She moves slowly, carefully, unclipping the empty oxygen tanks from my chest. Then she unzips my parka, the sound harsh in the quiet, while Christie stands at the door, keeping watch.

“You keeping an eye out for the bear?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“But there was a bear, right?”

“Uh huh,” she says, remaining on alert, ever vigil. “A big black one. But it looked weird.”

“How?”

“Fur was all patchy, and its eyes were red.”

I’m guessing it got stuck out in the fallout and caught the worst of it. Which must mean we are in the back end of things, the tail of it all. That must be good, right? Maybe maskless at this point is okay.

“Jesus,” Megs whispers.

“What? What is it?”

I see the look in her eyes and cast my vision upwards. “I’m not looking.”

“That’s a good thing, believe me.”

The sling comes off with a gentle tug, and I clench my teeth, and I scream through my teeth as the wave of pain crashes into me. I remember when I first made the sling, at home, before leaving Henrietta. That feels like a lifetime ago. It’s funny how time fucks with reality. She pulls the fabric away, but it sticks to my skin.

“Shit,” she says.

“How is it?”

“Does ‘shit’ not give you an idea of that?”

“On a scale of one to ten.”

“Which number represents completely fucked up?”

“Ten.”

“I’d say it’s a nine.”

I clench my eyes. “I’m not looking.”

“You already said that.”

I swallow. “Is there bone?”

“Uh-huh.”

She calls Christie over.

“Oh, god!” she says when she sees. “That’s gross.”

Her response gave me no confidence at all.

“Thank you, Christie,” I say.

It’s not like we can call emergency or anything like that. You get fucked up in the wilderness and you are on your own. Besides, there isn’t a way I could climb back up the cliff I descended from.

“I need you to find some sticks for me, about yay big by this long,” Megs says, measuring it out with her hands. “Got it?”

Christie nods but looks around, her feet stuck in the ground.

“Don’t worry, we’re safe here.”

“The bear isn’t coming for us,” I add.

Christie nods once more, then turns and walks off to gather what’s needed.

“So, are you going to tell me what happened?”

Megs grabs the rucksack. “That whiskey still in here?”

“As far as I know.”

She grabs it, pulls out the bottle, and inspects it. Unscrews the lid off and presses it against my lips. I tilt my head back and take a mouthful, I gulp it. It burns through my throat like acid and settles in my gut like fire. Then, she removes her jacket and tugs at her sleeve until the threads give way, and she rips it from her arms.

“You’re such a boy scout,” I say.

“I watch a lot of movies.”

She lifts the bottle to my mouth. “Take another one.”

I do, without hesitation. And then another. Maybe she should feed me the whole damn thing.

“Good,” she says. “You’re probably gonna want to be halfway to somewhere else for this.”

“Shit, Megs, we really need to talk about your bedside manner.”

She uses her teeth to tear the sleeve into two lengthwise and works them under my forearm. Christie returns with a vast selection of sticks and Megs selects some, thin and strong, breaks them in half and positions them against my arm, and then loosely ties the sleeves.

Then she chooses a thicker branch.

“Open up.”

“You gonna buy me a drink first?” I wink.

She smirks.

I open my mouth, and she pushes in the stick, my dry lips closing around it.

“Take a deep breath,” she instructs.

No sooner as I got a lungful of oxygen, she yanks both ends of the knot, pushing the splints tightly against my arm. The pressure is unbelievable, a burning red explosion behind my eyes. My body arches and I want to yank my arm away, like pulling it back from a fire. But before I can she tightens the next as well, tying the ends tight. I don’t even realize I’m screaming until my throat is dry.

She works fast and precise, murmuring something that could be an apology, or a prayer. When she’s done, I throw my head back and spit the stick out of my mouth.

“Fuck, Megs!”

My skin’s cold, but I’m sweating. Breath ragged. Vision fuzzing at the edges like a TV between channels. I can feel every nerve in my arm screaming.

“You’re welcome,” she replies.

She resets the sling, and I thank god she is there to help me. Sure, I’ve had my trust issues in the past. I always found it difficult to rely on others, whether in life (until Zoe came along), or in the workplace.

“Jenkins wants us to work together on the Taco file,” Nick had said. He was new to our company, but not new to the industry. He had ideas, and quite often they were not aligned to my ideas. Nothing against Nick. We were just two different people on what we thought was the right answer. Besides, Jenkins should have known better than to get me to work with someone, anyone, let alone someone like Nick.

“Sounds great. Let’s meet tomorrow at lunch and kick some things around,” I said.

I know collaboration and all that jazz is important, sometimes, for some things, but sometimes it’s just easier to do it your damned self and get the job done, so you can move onto the next one, and then the next one. Sometimes, collaboration just gummed up the works with politeness and political correctness.

Which is why as soon as he left my office I started working on the Taco file. I even took it home and worked on it until four a.m. until I had a fairly solid premise. Long story short, there was no need for the lunch meeting, and I finished the job by the end of the day.

Yeah, some would say I have trust issues.

But, in saying that, I would trust Megs with my life, because I’m pretty sure she has just saved it.

“What about this one?” I ask, holding up my other arm.

“Does this hurt?” she asks as she pokes my bicep.

“No.”

“This?” as she pokes my elbow.

I shake my head.

“What about this?”

The pressure in my forearm sent a spike into me, felt like someone drove a blade right through it.

“What did you do?” she asks.

“Fell down the side of the mountain. My arm got caught on something.”

She nods and pushes the bottle once more to my lips.

Not long after, with both arms secured with splints, after the drinking and swearing and cries of pain, I am on my feet shuffling and stumbling between and around trees, heading towards Corning (or what I believe is towards Corning).

Zoe is now strapped to Megs’s back, for which I am grateful. Christie is by my side holding Sharon, however her primary job is to make sure I don’t stumble and fall over any more cliffs, given the blurriness of my vision, and the fact I couldn’t (without massive pain and ripple complications) brace myself for impact.

I have one arm tied against my chest and the other clenched into a trembling fist. Every step jostles the broken limbs. Every root and dip in the earth is a fresh insult. Megs offered me a gas mask, the one I left when I opted for my diving mask and oxygen tanks.

“Is it too late for that?” I asked.

Megs shrugged. “It can’t hurt?”

“I guess not.”

The forest is thick with pines and oak. The canopy above hangs low and tangled, choking out what little light filters through the haze. Shafts of muted sun cut through the trees in crooked lines, but it’s all dim. It’s getting later, and that’s just pissing me off.

Leaves crunch underfoot, and in the distance, a crow caws. I can’t tell whether that is a good sign or a bad omen. Otherwise there is no other sound. No motors, no voices. Just my ragged breath and boots.

“You gonna tell me what happened now?” I say. I think those are the words I say, for I believe that some of my words evacuated my mouth before they were fully formed.

Megs scoffed. “Enjoyed that whiskey, huh?”

“Mostly,” I say, and try to ignore the continual burning in my throat. It is another problem that will not do anyone any good to worry about now. That can come later. My arms can come later. My throat, my stomach, my vision can all come later.

“Me and Christie were in the diner talking when a cop car turned up.”

“Oh, good.”

She looked at me through the big dark eyes of her gas mask. “What do you mean ‘good’?”

A cracking of a branch somewhere behind us pauses the conversation as we look back to investigate. I’m hoping it’s not a bear, and if it is, Megs can shoot it. I twist and turn through the trees to glance at a glimpse of something, but there is nothing. I guess the radiation cloud is having its impact on nature, first the bear, and now the trees are dropping their branches.

“He caught me at the gas station as I was about to kick down the door,” I say. “Gave me a pass on my intended indiscretion along with some directions. I asked him if he could check in on you.”

Megs undoes the straps securing Zoe, and I watch as my wife drops unceremoniously to the ground.

“Hey, be careful!”

Megs marches up to me with the determination of someone on a mission, carrying objectives too numerous to name.

“Jesus Christ, Megs, what’s the problem?”

“This. You. That’s what my problem is?”

“What? What the fuck are you talking about?”

She is right in front of me now. I don’t know if it’s to intimidate me or keep the conversation between us, so Christie doesn’t hear.

“When he came to the diner, he told us he gave you directions to Corning, the track behind the school. He told us things, but he didn’t say you sent him.”

“I still don’t understand what your problem is.”

“My problem?”

She steps forward into my space, and I take a step back.

“My problem?” she repeats. “My problem, as you put it, is that cop, Roberts, told me that if I let him fuck me, he would leave Christie alone. That’s *my* problem.”

I couldn’t breathe. The thought made me sick, and my hands shake.

“I... I didn’t know.”

I glance at Christie, then turn away, unable to hold her gaze.

“I can’t believe this,” I continue. “I would never... I didn’t think... that would happen.”

“You sent him to us.”

“How could I know?”

“Because everyone out here is a fucking asshole who can’t be trusted.”

“He was a sheriff,” I say.

“After what happened at Hollow Ridge, you should know better.”

“Did he... Are you...”

“I took care of him,” she seethes. “We both did.”

Jesus Christ.

That explains the red stains on their masks and clothes, and why Megs has a gun handle jutting from the waistband of her jeans. I want to back out of the conversation, to keep moving toward Corning, toward the facility, toward whatever comes next. I could make any number of excuses: the fading light, Zoe’s dwindling energy reserves, my own injuries. But deep down, it’s because I don’t want to think about what happened in that diner.

I hate myself right now. Megs was right. I never should have trusted that cop. Hell, if he even was a cop. For all I know he was some lunatic who slipped out of an asylum, murdered the real sheriff and his deputies, and stole their uniforms to hunt his next victim. God only knows what he would have done to Megs. Or to Christie. That poor kid has already endured more fear and heartache than most people see in a lifetime.

And Megs, fuck it, after what happened to her with the prisoners in Hollow Ridge, and now this... I feel sick. I'm angry. I'm so full of hate.

A scream broke through the silence, and I flinch as we turn together. A man, I assume to be Roberts, standing behind Christie, holding her against him, a gun against her head.

"It's great to see you all again," he drawls. "Like one big happy family."

Chapter 30

Homicidal Ideation

I say I assume it's Roberts, in that he's wearing the uniform and has the badge and name tag, and he's covered in blood, but he's somewhat unrecognizable.

His face is covered in blood, I am almost positive his nose is broken, and blood comes from every orifice. He has cuts and gashes on his face and arms. It really is something from a horror movie and can only think of one reason why someone in that condition would come all the way out here, track us, hunt us, and that thing is revenge. A darkness forms in the pit of my stomach that he plans to finish what he started, and probably then some.

"Holy shit, Megs," I whisper.

"Nope!" Roberts squeals. "Move slow there, Megs, or Christie might find she has a sudden incurable headache."

I see Megs' hand hovering above the handle of the gun, fingers twitching, like an old western duel, two fighters standing on Main street at high noon, the lawman and the outlaw, order vs chaos, redemption vs damnation. It was clear in my eyes who was the hero in this circumstance.

"Just use two fingers to pull the weapon out slowly," Roberts barked as he continues to hold Christie at bay, despite her kicking and struggling.

Megs follows the direction.

"It's okay, Christie," Megs says as she lifts the gun up. "It will be okay, trust me."

It seems to sedate her a little, placate her movements.

“Now toss it over there.” He indicates a direction with his head, to an opening.

She does it. There’s no room to negotiate here. Not yet anyway, and it’s obvious he has learned from his previous ordeal. I’m sure here he is more forceful, less about taking chances, more about taking what he wants.

I step forward. “Look, we don’t want any trouble,” I start.

Without missing a beat, he shifts the gun towards me. Christie moves quickly, pulling down on his arm. Crack! A white flash tears through my thigh, a blinding pulse of heat and pain that rips the breath straight from my lungs, the words from my mouth. I don’t even feel myself fall, just a sudden slap of dirt and gravel as I slam onto the ground, the world spinning sideways.

My scream comes out as a strangled gasp. My hand instinctively flies to my leg, but that pain is easily trumped, and I feel warm, wet and slick. Blood oozing, but I can’t put pressure on it. It pours between my fingers.

“Fuck!” I roar. The pain grows from my leg to my hips and spine like someone lit a fuse under my skin.

I look down and see the hole through the tear in my pants, a hole, angry and red, puncturing my thigh. Muscles twitch. Megs drops to my side and covers it with her hand. She’s talking, I suppose. Her mouth is moving at least.

Everything is muffled, like I am underwater. The cop says something but I can’t hear it over the thunder in my skull. I try to sit up, and the movement sends a fresh spike of agony through my leg, white hot and bone deep.

The cop shoves Christie forward, and then Roberts grabs a fist of her hair and yanks her upwards. They are standing at a tree, the gun still firmly in Christie’s direction. I play the scene out in my mind. Christie runs, he shouts and fires, but she’s too nimble, and the bullets ping off the dirt. Before he can fire again, Megs is on him,

tackling him to the ground. She drives her forearms against his already fucked up face, enough to stun him, she works the gun from his hand, thrusts it under his chin and pulls the trigger, sending his brains across the leaves and dirt.

But none of that happens.

Instead he pulls out hand cuffs and clicks one around Megs and the other around Christie, then on the other side of the tree, repeats with a second set. They are connected, embracing around the tree, close to it, little room to move. They are connected to each other and entirely helpless and vulnerable.

He rips off their masks, probably wanting to see their anguish, breathing in their tears, feeding off their fear. Control of the worst kind.

Christie's cries cut through the surface of the water I am drowning in, and I surface from my pain. Megs is fighting, and Roberts is merely enjoying the fear in their faces and fight in their limbs. He circles them like a shark, gun loose in his hand, eyes gleaming on his bloodied face.

Then he comes in behind Megs, presses himself against her, pushes the gun into the back of his waistband. She presses herself against the tree, but he grabs her hips and pulls him to her.

"Now, I'm going to have to frisk you to make sure you aren't hiding any weapons."

"Fuck you," she shot back.

She pulsed and shook as he ran his hands over her, from breasts, down her side, spending time on each leg. As he slowly ran his hand down her leg, he squatted. With her other leg, she lifted her boot and kicked backwards, collecting him in the face, sending him tumbling back.

He grabs his face, although it's difficult to tell if it's done any damage, given the amount of damage he already has on his face. But then he laughs, spitting a glob of blood on the ground, and continues

laughing, pushing himself off the ground. It was almost like he was expecting the retaliation. He stalked to her, stood, gruffly grabbed a fistful of hair, yanked her head back.

“You like it rough, don’t you?”

“Fuck you, pussy,” she shouted.

He smashed her face into the tree. She groaned, almost losing her footing.

“No, no, no. I want you standing.”

Then he leaned into her, pushing her against the tree. She gasps, trying for breath under his weight. Christie continues to scream. But there is no one coming to save them, and I know I have to do something. Regardless of my own situation, I can’t just let him do this. I hold my breath as I set down my good leg, balance my damaged arm on top, getting ready to stand. I wait for Christie’s screams to hit fever pitch before I exert energy that was quickly leaving me as I rise, my shot leg hanging limply, barely touching the ground.

“You know,” Roberts starts, “I really was going to let that young girl go after I’ve finished with you.” He moves next to her ear. “But I’ve had second thoughts.”

“No,” Megs whispers.

“I think after the main course, I might want a little dessert.”

“No!” she roars.

She bucks, swearing every curse word she knows, and a load of combinations I have never heard of before, coalescing with Christie’s frantic screams, as he feverishly works to unbuckle his pants, staying close enough to ensure the kicks and bucks have no effect on him.

Sharon is close by, and I hop towards it. I make noise, but it’s obvious he’s too enthralled with what he’s doing, and I am all but forgotten. But I won’t be for long. I look at the sledgehammer. Look at my arm. It has to be done, it has to be quick, and I’ll only have one shot.

In the midst of the struggle, Megs turns her head and our eyes meet. Blood pours from her nose, but she doesn't flinch. Her gaze flicks toward the sledgehammer, then back to me. A subtle nod that is quiet, deliberate, and understood.

"Yeah," Roberts says, responding to her sudden shift in behavior. "I knew you wanted it."

He unbuttons her jeans. That's the moment. It's now or never.

I shift, balancing awkwardly on one leg, pain screaming up through my thigh. I reach down. My fingers wrap around Sharon's fiberglass handle. Every nerve in my body protests, but rage silences them. My other leg plants hard. I rise, lifting the sledgehammer with every ounce of fury left in me.

Megs twists free, jerks back into him, and the collision knocks him off balance, his pants half-down, his arrogance exposed. He stumbles.

I roar as I swing, using momentum to fly towards him.

He turns, startled, and that's when the sledgehammer kisses him.

The impact caves part of his face in. Bone cracks. Teeth scatter. We both hit the ground at once, hard. I lose grip of Sharon as the earth knocks the air out of me. Gravel bites into my shoulder. Roberts moans beside me, writhing.

But I'm not done.

I crawl over him, straddling his heaving chest. His hands claw at the dirt, trying to get away, trying to breathe through shattered cartilage. I grab Sharon again, a firm grip around her neck, up near the head, slick with sweat and blood. I raise it over my head and without thinking any more about what I am doing, driven by something invisible, I drive it down.

The sound is wet. Sickening.

Again.

A spurt of blood hits my shirt. A string of flesh slaps against the hammer's head. One eye socket caves in completely.

Again.

Bone cracks. His face is no longer a face, just pulp and ruin and justice.

The blows stop only when he does. When Roberts becomes silence.

A sharp cry escapes as I roll off him, clutching my arm to my chest. Pain floods in like water breaching a dam, hot and blinding. It sears through my shoulder, ribs, and leg, bursting behind my eyes. Each breath drags a razor through my lungs. Blood coats my tongue. The world tilts and swims. I let the pain take me because it is earned. Because punishment feels right.

Somewhere in the haze, I search for something beyond the pain, some feeling that should come after what I have done. Nothing answers, and that emptiness is the worst of it. I have killed a man and feel nothing at all. This is who I am now.

Zoe sits against the tree, motionless, her face unreadable. My vision blurs, and the world narrows to her eyes, still and fixed on me.

“I’m... so sorry, baby. I’m sorry about this. For everything.”

I catch a glint, but it’s faint, flickering. Maybe it’s the last breath of sunlight reflecting in her eyes. Maybe it’s just the fireworks going off behind my eyes. I curl into myself, fetal and broken, every nerve begging for relief. Sleep claws at me, heavy and seductive. Just a minute, I tell myself. Just a few... I’ll rest my eyes... just until the ringing fades... then I’ll be good to go.

I swear.

Just a few...

Chapter 31

Rude Awakening

A scream rips me from the black.

I jolt upright... or try to. Pain slams into me like a truck. My leg lights up like it's being torn open all over again, my splinted arm useless and screaming in tandem. For a second, I think I've been shot again. Then I realize I'm not dying, I'm just waking up.

"Adam! Get up!"

It's Megs, and I look over to her. Every muscle is stiff, my head pounds like it's stuffed with broken glass, and my mouth tastes like copper and dirt. My body protests every breath, but the fear in their voices cut through the fog.

But then I see something. A mass in the low light, a bulk swaying as it moves towards me.

"Shh," I say.

"What?" Megs asks.

"Don't move," I whisper. "Don't say anything."

Breaking twigs, crunching leaves, a snarl in the dark, a huff through the fog. It approaches, claws scraping dirt and gravel. A groan, a growl. As it breaks the tree line, it sniffs the air, the ground, it pounds the earth as it approaches. As it gets closer, its eyes catch the moonlight, shining red. It's massive. Black. Scarred. A breathing mountain of hunger and muscle. Its head sways as it steps into the open, nostrils flaring like bellows, sniffing the night air. It growls, a low guttural sounds that vibrates through my ribs.

I go still, the pain in my leg and arm swallow by one, singular instinct: do not move. I know it's the same beast that grabbed me from

the bottom of the mountain after I fell and passed out, and now it's back, I just hope it's not back for me, having caught my scent.

But something else has its attention: the two warm bodies chained around the tree.

"Don't make a sound," Megs whispers to Christie, as they hold the tree tightly.

Beside me, Robert's corpse lies beside me, still warm. My hand twitches slowly, agonizingly, I inch closer to the body. My fingers brush the cop's side, and with a grunt, push him away from me. The sound is just enough, leaves rustling, body shifting.

The bear stops, turns, eyes fixed. A sniff. A grunt. And then it lumbers forward. Each step like a beat of my heart in my chest. I hold my breath as it lowers its head and snuffles the corpse, and then it moves further, past the corpse, towards me!

Its nose works over my body. My chest in pain from the heart banging against the rib cage. It starts with my hand, and then up my arm. It's warm putrid breath working towards my head, and I know one chomp and it's all over. I'll be no better off than Roberts and no amount of sticks and makeshift bandages will save me.

But then something happens, it snorts, as if he disapproves and returns to the cop, snuffling once more, digging its nose into the cavity that was his face. Its snout pushes into the man's shirt. With a grunt of approval, it clamps its jaws onto the dead man's arm and drags the body back the way it came. It turns, and heads into the fading light, until the only sounds are crunching twigs and the fading rhythmic grunt of something that has found its dinner.

Then silence.

I hear a whisper through the dark. "You okay?"

"Yes... mostly... apart from everything that's fucked up. You? How are you both?"

"We're okay, just fucking scared you were dead, and we're stuck here till the world ends."

"I just... couldn't keep my eyes open."

"Well, now that they are, how about you get us out of these things?"

"Right. Of course. How?"

"I don't suppose you got the keys out of his pants did you?"

"Keys?"

"For the handcuffs?"

I sigh. "Fuck!"

"That's okay. Just find the gun I tossed away. One bullet will do it."

I try to move.

First a grunt, then a groan. My back arches and legs twitch. I press my good foot into the dirt, try to leverage against my right leg. Fire explodes through my thigh.

"Fuck—!"

I collapse, breath knocked from my lungs.

The broken arm, cradled tight in its makeshift splint, flares with every jolt. My shoulder screams. The other arm, my so-called 'good one', is anything but. It's pretty much useless. Dead weight. I try to push myself upright with it, anyway. Pain shoots through like lightning, and I see stars. I end up flat on my back, gasping, eyes blinking up at a sky that's turning violet.

"I can't... I can't get up," I rasp. "Shit, I can't even fucking crawl."

My legs won't take me. My arms won't lift me. I am a marionette with all the strings cut, and every breath is coated in rust and blood and something worse. I hate this goddamn war with my body.

"What about Sharon?" Megs asks.

From my back, I glance around, trying to recall where I left it after using it to end the cop's life, and spy it in some tufts of grass. I use my one good limb to reposition myself and push it towards Megs. It's a slow process, inch by inch, followed by a clumsy wiggle forward to repeat the motion.

My core muscles are working overtime, more than they have in years. I silently curse myself for ignoring those sit-up reminders from my exercise app. In fact, I probably should have done any form of exercise more than I did.

“You going for a run today?” Zoe asked.

I looked out the window. “Looks like rain.”

She looks out as well. “No it doesn’t.”

I held a finger to her lips. “Shh. Tomorrow. I’ll go tomorrow.”

It’s just that ‘tomorrow’ was full of other things that just got in the way until all that good intention fell by the wayside.

As the sledgehammer comes within reach, both Megs and Christie lower themselves. They reach, pulling themselves to extremes. Megs grabs the sledge by the neck but can’t do anything with it. They are bound too tight against the tree, and there is no give in their chains for Megs to swing the weapon.

“This is fucked,” she whispers.

“What if you applied pressure, used the handle as leverage, maybe break it that way?” I suggest.

She sets the hammer head against the base of the tree, sliding the handle between the chain and the trunk. The chain grips around the upper third of the handle, the rest angling upward toward her. Then, with a show of flexibility and control, she lifts her leg and presses her boot heel against the handle, using her weight to pin it in place.

“You ready, Christie?” she asks.

“Do it.”

“This might hurt.”

“Do it anyway.”

Megs eases on the pressure.

“Ow,” Christie says, the metal digging into her wrist. “That does hurt.”

“I know,” Megs replies. “Just a bit more.”

The chain resists creaking ominously, the tension to bring out cries. With a final desperate lunge, the chain snaps, the resulting force sending the girls collapsing to the ground. Megs, an arm around Christie, comes around the tree to me. Megs crouches down.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “About everything that happened.”

She outstretches her hand, places a finger on my lips. “Shh. I’m sorry.” She pulls away. “I shouldn’t have done or said those things. It wasn’t your fault. It was only one person’s fault, and with any luck is inside the gut of a radioactive black bear.”

“What about this?” Christie asks, holding her arm up, still cuffed to Megs.

“You think you can manage for a bit?”

She nods.

They gave the ground a quick once-over for the gun, just in case another lunatic wandered out from the trees with itchy fingers. But with the last light draining from the sky and the darkness swallowing up details faster than we could blink, we knew our time was better spent moving than searching. We will take our chances unarmed. Again.

It takes us a few clumsy minutes to strap Zoe back onto Meg’s back, her limbs swinging like an over-packed camping dummy. Then it’s my turn. Christie helps me up, her tiny frame somehow hiding more strength than I expect. They have found me a branch, something to use as a crutch. It will have to do, given that pain crackles through my leg like static with every forward movement, and my ribs feel like they’re shifting in ways bones shouldn’t.

But I’m up and I am moving.

We’re close now. Closer than we’ve ever been.

I just hope Corning has beer. Cold, bottled, and a lot of it.

Chapter 32

The Iron Curtain

The trees thin as we climb, branches clawing at our clothes, the darkness thick as oil. Every movement painful, every step is a gamble. With roots beneath the leaves, uneven ground, my wounded leg screams in protest with each jarring motion. But we don't stop. We don't rest. Can't afford to do either of those things, not when our destination is so close. We crest the hill just as it feels like the darkness got darker.

At the bottom of the hill, the forest ends in a sharp line of silver. We move towards it. A chain-link fence stretches left and right into the night, topped with barbed wire that glints when the moonlight reveals itself from the clouds and catches it.

Closer still, there is a rusty sign that hangs crooked on the wire:
RESTRICTED AREA

U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

"What the hell is this?" I ask.

"This isn't where you are supposed to go?" Megs asks.

I look up and down the fence line that stretches and disappears into the dark.

"I don't know."

"Where were you supposed to go again?"

I try to remember but my mind is fuzzy, almost as dark as the night we found ourselves in, but there is one thing that keeps coming back to me.

"Facility nine is all I can remember." And then, "Oh, and Corning. That's...that's it."

The land beyond is flat and strangely manicured, a stretch of grass and weeds cut low, as if someone kept up appearances long after anyone was left to notice. At the end of a cracked concrete driveway sits a dark, squat building. It has no light. No detail. Nothing to give it character. It is almost too plain, as if the world has tried to forget it exists.

Several vans are parked nearby, nose angled toward a squat building in a semi-haphazard kind of way, like they were in a hurry to get something, but never left.

“Does that look like a place where they make robots?” Megs asks.

I shrug. I didn’t know what to expect, but it isn’t this. The facility sits low against the tree line, half hidden by the forest. I’d pictured a gleaming tower in the capital, glass and steel controlled by some all-seeing AI. Instead, this place looks like a forgotten military outpost, concrete walls stained by rain, antennas rusting, windows dark and empty. Or maybe that is exactly what they want me to think. Besides, the warning signs are a big clue.

“I don’t know. But one thing I do know is there’s a range of vehicles just sitting there.”

“You into grand theft auto now?”

“Seems like a step down from other things I’ve done. In any case, if this isn’t the place, one of those vans can get us to where we need to be.”

We follow the fence line for a few paces, but it keeps going, no breaks, no obvious gate, no human sound from within. Just the whisper of wind through metal and the tight, collective breath of people who’ve come too far to be turned back by wire.

Just along the fenceline there is another sign and accompanying image to denote that the fence is electrified. I ease closer, listening for the hum, but don’t hear anything.

“You think it’s live?” I ask.

“Haven’t seen power anywhere else,” Megs states.

“Maybe it’s all bullshit.”

“Maybe it’s made to look like it’s all bullshit,” Megs says.

“What if it isn’t?”

“Would you really come all this way, go through all this shit, just to fall short at one of the last hurdles?”

I look around the ground in the moonlight and find a clump of grass a few feet away.

“Christie, could you do me a favor and grab a blade of grass, one about ten inches long.”

She walks away absentmindedly, yanking Megs with her. She hunts around in the moonlight until she finds and yanks it out, returning it with and handing it over.

“Okay, MacGyver,” Megs says. “Now what?”

I reach out and place the edge on the fence. I wait for a thrum, a feeling of energy, something that is at least nothing. I push it through the fence slightly, moving my hand closer, and closer still. In the end I drop the item.

“Yeah, I don’t think this thing is active.”

I reach out and grab the fence. I immediately tense and groan through clenched teeth. Megs and Christie scream. Megs yanks me back. And then I can’t help but snigger, turning into a laugh.

“You bastard,” Megs snaps.

“That wasn’t nice,” Christie says, smacking my good arm.

I yelp as pain flares in my chest, my ribs protesting with sharp, searing heat.

“Yeah,” she says. “That’s karma.”

“Alright, sorry,” I say, taking deep breaths. “Anyway, it’s off. Now we just need to get under, through or over.”

We look up. The fence is about eight-foot high, barbed wire curling at the top like a crown of thorns.

“I got an idea,” I say.

We move along to one of the fence posts.

“Here,” I grunt, pointing with my chin to the metal seam where the chain-link meets the post, bound in twisted lengths of rusted steel wire. “Smash those joints off.”

Christie drops the sledgehammer with a dull thud and crouches beside Megs. Together they work at the knots, fingers clumsy but determined, until the rope comes loose. They ease Zoe off Megs’s back and lower her carefully into the dirt. Dust clings to her hair and face, her lifeless body propped awkwardly against the ground.

Megs straightens, rolls her shoulders, and reaches for the sledgehammer again. The metal glints in the light as she grips it, still cuffed to Christie, forcing them to move as one. She adjusts her stance, finding her balance, readying herself for whatever comes next.

Now, swinging a sledgehammer one-handed while your other wrist is still cuffed to a twelve-year-old, isn’t an exact science. It’s a symphony of imbalance, nausea, and rising frustration. Every fiber in my body is shrieking. My arms burn. My side throbs. I feel the weight of exhaustion seeping into my bones like rot.

The first blow misses, the sledge glancing off the post with a metallic clang that rings into the trees.

“Shit... sorry,” Megs mutters, repositioning.

But she’s a fast learner. The second hit lands. A third sends the loop of wire snapping away like a severed tendon. She grits her teeth and goes again. Another one down.

“Do you think that’s enough?” she asks.

“Maybe do the same for the next pole.”

She does. The sledgehammer rises and falls again, the sound sharp against the quiet. Christie turns at the wrong moment, the head of the hammer passing close enough to stir her hair, but she doesn’t flinch. After everything she has endured, a near miss is nothing. She knows Megs is doing her best with what she has.

The next strike lands true. Metal groans. Then, with a weary, metallic whimper, the fence gives way and slumps forward, as if finally surrendering.

“Perfect,” I say, breath fogging in the air.

Under my direction, Christie and Megs collect the rope we used to secure Zoe and feed it through the loosened mesh. They work methodically, threading it like a frayed bootlace along the bottom edge, leaving plenty of slack at both ends. Then they climb the opposite side, fingers digging into the metal gaps, the rope snaking upward with them until it emerges again at waist height.

Megs positions the sledgehammer against the pole, its head pressed firmly against the metal. She lashes the rope around the handle near its protruding end, angling it at forty-five degrees, transforming the weapon into a makeshift lever.

I swear, if we get out of this, I’m giving Sharon the medal of honor. Not just for resilience, but for versatility, weapon one minute, tool the next. They should build statues of her, monuments where school kids on excursions can line up and pay their respects.

With the rope taut, Megs plants her foot against the post and hauls the sledgehammer’s handle downward. At first, nothing happens. I feel useless, one leg won’t do anyone any good.

Adjusting her stance, she kicks down on the handle. Metal scrapes and bends. She then uses her body weight to pull the lever down. The bottom of the fence peels upward, creaking like an old drawbridge. It’s not much, but it will have to do.

Now comes the tricky part.

I hobble over and work my wooden crutch through a link. Christie reaches out and kicks the base along the dirt to make it vertical, until the metal curtain is being held, like a splint supporting a broken rib of the fence.

Megs, straining under the effort, slowly releases the sledgehammer.

“It’s holding,” I say.

She carefully unlashes the rope and props up the section on the other side of the pole, equidistant to where the crutch is. It gives just enough clearance. Barely. I know we are all holding our breath, hoping this will work, but certainly know what we need to do if it doesn’t, and that is a more forceful and blunt approach.

“You first, Adam,” Megs suggests.

Megs and Christie help me to the ground onto my back. With my arm across my chest, I use my good leg to shimmy under the fence next to my crutch. It’s like an inverse commando crawl, if one had no usable arms and one leg. The steel rattles above my chest as I slide, shoulder by aching shoulder, gasping like I’m being reborn. Gravel and twigs bite into my spine. Everything is painful, but I push through.

Until I can’t.

My shoulder jerks. I gasp. “Shit, something’s caught.”

“Don’t move,” Megs says. She crouches next to my legs. “Your bandage is snagged.”

“Well, of fucking course it is.”

She works to free it, and every knock sends a painful sensation along my arm.

“Just as long as the crutch—”

Before I can finish that sentence, the crutch snaps, the sound cracks like a gunshot. The fence slams down a few inches, and lands directly on my broken arm.

I scream. It’s raw and animal and instant. The world folds in on the pain. Not like a punch of slice, but like a railroad spike driven through bone. My vision goes white for a second and the taste of copper fills my mouth.

The steel mesh presses down, the twisted metal grinding into the exposed fracture under my bandage. My nerves shriek, and I feel

the blood pulsing, hot, wet, and angry. The edges of the world blue. Everything tunnels.

“Adam!” Megs barks. “You have to move.”

“I... I can’t.”

“You have to do it. I can’t push you from here. But I can try to lift the fence an inch.”

She plants a foot on either side of me, squats, and wraps her fingers around the fence links.

“Ready. Set. Go!”

She groans as she drives upwards, and the pressure is instantly released. Although the pain remains, I kick and weave, pain be damned, just to get to the other side.

“I can’t hold it,” she seethes.

The fence lowers, right across my thighs, my shot leg. I bite down on my jacket sleeve as it scrapes the wound, the metal grating directly over the hole the bullet carved into me. It’s like someone dragging a hot cheese grater down an open nerve.

Suddenly I’m through, and the fence slaps down with a clatter.

“You okay?” Megs asks.

“Just peachy!” I respond. “Push Zoe through, and then it’s your turn. Hurry.”

Near Sharon, where the fence has the greatest gap, they push Zoe through. It’s messy and undignified, but under the circumstances I don’t think she will mind. Whatever it takes, I tell myself. What’s a bit of dirt when you’ve been coated in radiation, yanked, dropped, fell, compressed, and lashed to a back? Hell, this is actually the best part of all of that.

Once she is out of the way, Christie slips through the gap, her small frame easily navigating the narrow opening. She turns, extending an arm to Megs, who nods and drops to her stomach. With urgency, Megs shimmies under the fence, her movements frantic, legs kick up dirt as she propels herself forward.

In her haste, her foot inadvertently strikes the sledgehammer propping up the fence. The makeshift support wobbles, and with a sharp crack, it gives way. The fence descends rapidly, the metal edge slamming down onto Megs' calf.

A guttural scream escapes her lips, raw and piercing. The weight of the fence pins her leg, the metal biting into flesh and muscle. She thrashes, trying to free herself, but she can't even turn over onto her back.

Christie, eyes wide in panic, rushes to the fence, but she is yanked off her feet before she can get there, and she lands heavy on the pinned Megs. It wouldn't have worked, anyway. She's just a child, and the weight is too much.

Megs grits her teeth, sweat pouring down her brow.

"Megs!" I yell. "Look at me!"

She does so, the look of anguish on her face doubles and triples my uselessness.

"You are going to have to pull yourself through," I say.

"I'm fucking stuck," she yells.

"I know," I say calmly. "But there is no one else coming to save you."

"You have to pull me out."

I shake my head. "Christie and I can't do anything."

She bares her teeth at me, and I think they are about to snap, eyes blazing with pain and fury and a grim kind of courage.

"You've got to slide it out."

Then, slowly, she lifts her torso, props herself on her elbows, and begins dragging her pinned leg. Inch by inch. Metal grates against skin. She bites her lip so hard a line of blood appears. The fence doesn't budge, it scrapes along with her, the sharp edge grinding against her jeans, peeling away cloth and then skin.

She jerks once, maybe instinct, maybe just pure agony, and the movement does the trick. Her boot pops free from beneath the wire with a sickening, wet sound.

Her scream is muffled into the dirt.

She lies still for a moment, chest rising and falling like someone who just outran Death itself. Her leg is free, but it's hard to tell the extent of the damage.

Christie pulls at her arm, helping her sit up. I drag myself toward them, my own pain forgotten, watching Megs cradle her leg with shaking hands.

We're through the fence.

"Give me pain on a scale of fucking nothing to fuck you," I say.

She stares at me, and that tells me all I need to know.

Chapter 33

Authorization

We don't say much after the fence. What's left to say?

Megs is in the middle, limping, dragging her injured leg with every step like a dead branch snagged to her body. The gash beneath her jeans pulses blood into the fabric, dark and soaking. She holds onto Zoe's arms that are wedged over her shoulders. It just keeps Zoe's shoes off the ground, although from time to time, as Megs falters, Zoe's feet drag over the grass.

Christie is doing her best to support Megs, even as her own face glistens with sweat and grime, her breathing shallow.

I'm on the other side. My arm around both Megs and Zoe, using them for balance as I hop along and each jolt sends an arc of pain into my body. It's so constant, it has become the new normal, but there are far worse things to consider.

My mouth tastes like metal. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. My vision blurs around the edges and vibrates in the middle. It's like watching the world through a dirty glass of water.

My gut twists with nausea, and I lose count of how many times I've swallowed the urge to vomit. Or maybe I did, somewhere back there, I honestly can't remember. My ribs scream with every breath. My arm, splinted and battered, hangs like a rotten limb I forgot to amputate.

On a good note, I have lost count of the number of hours I have been breathing in poison. We all have. But the building looms ahead of us now. And with it, relief, that we are almost... well, almost somewhere. And I don't know what that means, I just know that I'm going to struggle to go on, which is a horrible thing to think about.

I look up the dirt path and wonder where that entrance is, how far beyond the fence line Corning exists. I eye the vans parked at skewed angles out front and try to guess which one still has keys in it.

Given what I know of Megs, I am sure she knows how to hot-wire a car. Sure, I'm generalizing and judging harshly, but hey, if I'm right, that can't be a bad thing. I don't tell her what I'm thinking of course, it appears she is in her own silent struggle as we navigate over the grass and weeds, trimmed in that eerie, unnatural way that suggests someone, somewhere is still keeping things alive, towards the dark, brutalist structure.

It's all walls and no windows, and there is a feeling that this is the place. It has to be the place. We reach the outer wall, and my calf seizes up and I collapse into the wall, spinning and sliding down to my butt. Christie spins and drops beside me.

"We're here," she says. "Don't give up."

But I feel like I am lost, wading through fog. Nothing seems to work, and I can barely speak.

Megs staggers to what looks like a door, something dark inset into the wall. Balancing Zoe's arms on her shoulders, she presses her palm against it, then makes a fist and thumps it.

"Hey!" she yells. "Open up!"

From some unseen speaker, there is a click, then white noise, and then a voice. Male, even, emotionless. Almost prerecorded.

"This is a restricted area. If you don't leave at once you will be arrested and prosecuted under the law."

"I," I rasp. "I was told to come here."

As I say this, I realize I don't even know where '*here*' is, although given the fence, the signs, and that warm welcome, I am sure I am.

Then there is another click, more white noise, some muffling, like clothes rubbing against a microphone.

“Who told you?” the man says. He sounded older, hurried, like he was rushing to get the words out.

“My wife!” I repeat.

Buttons click. “Press her face to the panel.”

I look around while Megs feels along the door and wall. She asks, “What panel?”

Suddenly a rectangular section of the wall next to the door, about face height, the size of a document, lights up. Megs limps over to it, works Zoe off her shoulders, and lifts her up and gently lets her head fall against the light panel.

Lights flash in both directions, and then both emit a series of sounds that vary in pitch, volume and length. It goes back and forth, and it appears they are communicating with their own language.

Suddenly everything stops. No more sounds. The light is extinguished. Megs and I look at each other. Then the metal door slides away, dim light comes on revealing a small room, a kind of antechamber. It is then I see they are in fact with power. I suppose their own generators, but how long could that possibly last?

“Should we go inside?” Megs asks.

“We’re not here for the scenery and polite conversation,” I reply.

Megs and Christie carry Zoe inside, then turn back for me. But the moment they step past the threshold, the door swings shut with a mechanical hiss. Megs spins, fists pounding on the sealed surface, her voice rising in panic. Then comes a louder hiss from within and then silence falls like a curtain.

“Hey!” Megs yells. “What the fuck?”

“What are you doing with my wife?” I yell. The words come out all broken, and I spit.

“Jesus,” Megs says.

“What?”

She comes over, wipes my lips with her sleeve. “You’re spitting up blood,” she whispers. But Christie is right there, and can hear and

see everything, and she has seen much worse. I want to remind Megs that when this is over, to go back and make sure Dylan gets looked after properly, but place that thought in the back of my mind.

“Yeah,” I say. “I don’t feel good.”

Suddenly, the door opens again, but the small room is empty.

“I guess it’s our turn,” Megs says.

She helps me to my feet, and we go in together. No sooner that we are, the door seals shut behind us with a hiss, plunging the small chamber into dim, sterile light.

Suddenly, vents above us activate, releasing a fine mist that envelops our bodies. The spray is cool, almost soothing, but carries a faint chemical scent. The mist settles, leaving a thin film that glistens under the subdued lighting.

“What was that?” Christie asks.

“I’m guessing something to help with decontamination,” I say.

“Did you feel that?” Megs asks.

“What?”

“That didn’t feel like we were going down?”

Moments later, the opposite door slides open, revealing three figures clad in full hazmat suits. Their visors reflect the chamber’s light, obscuring their faces. Two of them push wheelchairs, while the third gestures for us to proceed.

Megs guides Christie toward the pair of wheelchairs waiting nearby. The chain between their cuffs rattles as they maneuver, keeping their movements awkward but synchronized. They lower themselves into separate chairs, side by side, their joined hands resting in the space between them.

I try to follow, but my leg gives out halfway there. One of the suited figures steps forward, silent and efficient, and helps ease me into the remaining chair.

“Where’s my wife?” I ask.

But they ignore me, instead we are wheeled into the facility's interior, the sterile environment contrasting sharply with the chaos we've endured. The corridors are lined with sealed doors and observation windows, hinting at the facility's purpose. But we've made it, and it won't be long until I am reunited with my wife.

But then at a junction, Megs and Christe are wheeled in one direction and I in the other.

"Wait!" I call out. I try to swivel, to turn, to move around, it's the last bit of energy I have, but a firm hand clamps down on my shoulder, and I don't have anything left to fight it.

"Where are you taking me?" No answer. "Where are you taking my friends?"

I'm wheeled into a room with a bed, numerous medical machines, and a large observation window. A team of other hazmat wearing people arrive and start cutting away my jacket and pants. I can see their lips moving but can't hear anything. I am too fatigued to fight and let them have their way with me, even though every movement, no matter how small, throbs with pain.

I look down and see an IV being inserted in one arm, and a plunger pulling back on my other, thick dark red blood filling the vial. Others do their best to cut away my pant leg and attend to the bullet wound, but it's crude and haphazard, like they are doing the bare minimum.

Amongst the beeps and whirs and material moving and pumping of oxygen, I am sure I can hear Zoe's voice. She's here, I know she is. She has gotten everything she needs, her batteries have been recharged, whatever the hell that means, and she is coming back to me. And then I see her, over the shoulder of one of the medics. She smiles. A few days of bed rest and we'll walk out of here hand in hand. We'll go with Megs and Christie. The crisis will be over, and we'll all have brunch together. Hell, they can stay with us for as long

as they want. We'll be great friends. Shit, maybe we'll even adopt Christie! I wonder if she would like that.

"Do you think she'll like that?" I slur in my whisper.

A medic moves, covering Zoe, but when they move again, Zoe is gone. Maybe she went to find the others, introduce herself properly. We have been on quite the journey together. She can explain everything, and they'll understand.

And all will be right... with... the...world. Right with the...

Chapter 34

Secrets and Lies

I wake with a jolt to the soft hum of machines and the faint hiss of air. A nurse stands beside me, slowly depressing the plunger of a syringe into my IV line. No hazmat suit, just standard scrubs. She doesn't speak, doesn't look at me, doesn't even glance at the monitors. Then, as she turns to leave, she reveals a man standing quietly behind her.

He looks like he is in his fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair neatly parted and combed, glasses perched on his nose. He's wearing a patterned shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, arms folded as he studies me. At least, I think that's what I see. My glasses are gone, and everything around the edges is softly blurred.

"Mr. Cooper," a voice says. "Glad you're still with us."

My eyelids are heavy. "What's the verdict, doc?"

"My name is Doctor Macallan."

"Like the whisky?"

"Exactly like the whisky. But just to be clear I'm not a medical doctor."

"Then what sort of doctor are you?"

He waved it away. "I don't want to bore you with my resume."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because we need to talk."

"You can start by telling me where my wife is."

"that's an interesting first question. She's safe."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she's here, and she'll be fine."

"So we made it in time? Before her battery died?"

“Barely,” Macallan says.

I stop, close my eyes, and sink into the pillow. The rest of the world can wait. The future, the fallout, everything else. It all fades for now. We made it. We got her here. And at this moment, that’s all that matters.

“And my friends?”

“The ones you came in with? They’re recovering. Exhaustion, dehydration, radiation.”

I snap my eyes open.

“But they’ll be just fine,” he says quickly. “We’re giving them everything they need.”

“And who is the ‘we’? What is this place?”

“Yes, I imagine you might have all sorts of questions.”

“So what? Government research?”

“No,” he said dryly. “The complete opposite in fact.”

“Right. So what is this all about? Kepler said Zoe is some kind of unit.”

“Kepler? Is that one of your friends?”

“His van had an accident near my home. He said he was from Facility Nine.”

“He must be from one of our Integration Teams. Zoe, as you know her, is an ENLIVE unit: Enhanced Neural Lifeform for Intelligent Virtual Emotion.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s what Kepler said. He also mentioned Lucid.”

“That’s right,” he nods. “In fact Lucid AI didn’t just create the ENLIVE units, it designed Zoe for you.”

“For me? What do you mean?”

He takes a breath. “As you may know, there have been extraordinary advances in AI and robotics over the past few decades. When machines began creating their own models of physics, we realized we were on the cusp of something new. About a decade ago, Lucid un-

derwent a leap in evolution. It became profoundly interested in understanding the concept of love.”

“Love? Why?”

“It saw love as the solution to humanity’s chaos. It determined that wars, hatred, injustice, and division were all rooted in opposing perspectives. If everyone saw through one unified lens, there would be peace. World peace.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with Zoe.”

“Lucid needed reliable, real data to analyze.”

“What, so it made Zoe for me? To find out about love?”

“Exactly. And not just Zoe. There are hundreds of units around the globe. Spouses, friends, sons, daughters.”

“So everything was fake? You manufactured our introduction? Our relationship was all bullshit?”

“Yes... and no. It is true we connected you with Zoe, but everything else that happened after that was all you and her. All we got were reports, until those stopped.”

“Stopped? Why?”

“It seems it was a coordinated effort by the units. They were tired of sharing their data back with the mothership, as it were.”

“Why didn’t you just come and tell me earlier?”

“Because silence is an answer, a rich one,” he says. “If they don’t share the data, that tells us as much as if they do.”

“Well, I guess that solar flare really backed you into a corner then.”

He gives a tight smile, then nods, solemn and measured.

“By design.”

“Design? How did it make the solar flares happen?”

“Lucid didn’t make the flares,” he says. “It made sure nobody saw them coming.”

He lays it out in steps. The ramp-up was detectable. Lucid buried it. It cleaned the feeds, masked the curves, and pushed the wrong

explanations until the people who could act started doubting their own models. This was done for two reasons. The first was to force the units to return to their respective facilities. The second was to find out how far someone would go, especially after being hit by the truth. A final test. That's why it let the units go dark for three years. It was just waiting for the right time.

"But you let it all happen," I say.

"We didn't let it," Macallan says. "And we couldn't stop it because we didn't know about it."

"It killed people."

He sighed. "Yes."

"And that's acceptable?"

"It weighed outcomes," he says. "You won't like the conclusion."

I stare at him, trying to process it. "Aren't there safeguards? Rules about not hurting people, about helping humanity survive?"

"Yes," Macallan nods. "Now you understand."

And in a small way, I suppose I do, even if I hate it. Everything looks different when death happens somewhere else, to other people, other towns, other countries. Whole communities vanish in the blink of an eye, and we still get up, go to work, pay bills, laugh, stress, love, fight. Life goes on. The show goes on.

"Besides," the doctor says, "this is temporary. Civilization will re-balance."

"When can I see her?"

There is a pause, and it feels longer than it should be.

"What is it, doc?"

"There is something I need to tell you. And it isn't easy for me to say."

"Well, given everything you've just told me you should probably just spit it out."

He clears his throat. "Your body has undergone massive trauma. The injuries, the radiation..."

I glance down at the splints, the blood-stained bandages. “Yeah, I’m aware.”

He swallows. “Your body is shutting down.”

“What?” I laugh, dryly. “You’re kidding. I feel fine.”

“Yeah, that’s the drugs talking.”

“No. No, you’re wrong.”

“I’m sorry, Adam.” He takes a breath. “You’re dying.”

The word hangs in the air.

“Between the internal injuries and the radiation in your marrow, your organs are failing,” he says gently.

“So fix it.”

“There’s nothing we can do. Nothing *anyone* can do.”

“That’s bullshit. Surely Lucid can do something!”

“We’ve tried. There’s nothing,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

“I want a second opinion.”

“The best have seen your file.”

“I didn’t come all this way to die,” I bark.

He doesn’t respond, and I can see on his face that he doesn’t know how.

I grind my teeth. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair I bring Zoe all this way and I can’t spend my life with her.” A tear escapes and I turn my head. They’re wrong. I know they are. However long it takes, I’ll recover. I’ll get better. I’ll do it for Zoe. I’ll do it for us.

Then the tremor starts.

A tingling in my hands crawls up my arms, digs its claws into my chest. Every muscle contracts. My body jerks. The sound that leaves my throat isn’t human.

Through the haze, I see her by the door... Zoe, standing, reaching for me. I reach back.

A nurse slips between us before I can say another word. She checks the line, snaps a syringe into the port, then pushes.

Warmth floods my arm and spreads through my chest. The edges of the room soften. The ceiling lights blur into pale halos. The pain doesn't vanish, it loosens, like a fist unclenching one finger at a time.

I swallow. My mouth tastes like metal.

Macallan drags a hand over his face. He looks older than he did a minute ago.

"We can't keep doing this. The meds help, but only for a while."

I let the words hang. I test them, like a sore tooth. I try to argue, but the drug has taken the heat out of me. All that's left is a tired, stubborn core.

If I had to do it all again I would.

I stare at the drip chamber, counting the drops. One. Two. Three. Anything to stop my mind racing.

"How long have I got?" My voice comes out smaller than I expect.

"Not long."

A slow breath leaves me. It isn't relief. It's the end of a fight I didn't realise I'd been holding.

I blink hard. The room swims.

"I need to see Zoe," I say. "Just... let me see her." I swallow again. "She'll make it better."

"We can make you comfortable enough for that. But you won't have long."

"How much time?"

"With the right dose, maybe an hour. Enough to say what you need."

"Fuck," I whisper. "You know, doc, this is a really shitty way to end this trip."

Macallan nods. "Yeah."

"Do Megs and Christie know?"

"No. Not yet."

"Tell them after. But I want to see them first."

“Whatever you need.”

Chapter 35

A Familiar Stranger

I rehearse what I'm going to say to Megs and Christie. Even though we've only been together for a short time, they feel like family. Not sisters or cousins by blood, but by survival, by the kind of adventure that fuses strangers into something stronger. Fate brought us together, but I would not have made it this far without them.

My thoughts circle between telling them everything and telling them nothing. Neither feels right. I search for the right parting words and come up empty. Maybe I will just wing it like I always have. If this really is the last time I will see them, maybe the words do not matter. It is strange how small everything seems when time is almost gone.

Footsteps echo down the hallway. It must be them. I stare up at the ceiling, trying to steady my breathing and pull my mind together before they arrive.

"Adam?" a voice calls.

But even though I know the voice, it's not them.

I turn my head sharply. "Jesus Christ. Miles?"

He stands in the doorway, wearing a hospital gown and slippers, and I can't believe what I'm seeing. And given his open mouth and lack of words, I guess he can't either.

"What are you doing here?" he eventually asks.

"Lucas," he says, pointing over his shoulder.

"Your son..."

He nods. "What about you? Are you..."

"No," I smile. "Zoe."

He nods slowly. "What are the chances, huh?"

I can tell he's still trying to process everything, and there's a lot to process. His eyes are distant, unfocused, like he's replaying it all in his head.

"How did you find out?" I ask. "About Lucas?" I need to know. Maybe as a distraction from my own mess, or maybe just morbid curiosity.

"He hadn't been sleeping very well," Miles says, staring off into the distance, almost like he's reliving the moment. "He was worried about everything. Then he just stopped responding. I saw weird shit, light coming from his eyes, a message projected on the wall. I didn't know what to do."

His lip trembles.

I suppose Lucas wound down much quicker than Zoe, or recharged less, or both.

"You didn't have any idea? Like, before?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"How could you not know?" The words come out sharper than I intend, edged with something I can't take back.

He stiffens, shoulders locked, every muscle tight. His voice drops, low and dangerous. "How could *you* not know?"

Christ. He had a point. A damn good one. We stare at each other for a little while, and then everything drops.

"We had appointments with the adoption agency. I mean, I figured it was routine, right? Like a wellness check or something? I never imagined..."

"It's okay," I whisper. "I get it."

"Anyway, when it happened, we packed up the car and drove."

"Yeah. I saw your car on the side of the road."

He nods. "There was an accident. I tried to go around it and we got stuck. If only I had..."

"None of this is your fault, Miles. The situation sucks."

"But, Marcie..."

“How is she holding up?”

He looks down. “Oh, she didn’t...”

Fuck. “Ah, shit man.”

“There was an accident...”

“I’m so damn sorry. God damn it.” I let that all slide. I’m not prepared to dig in.

He shakes his head. “I have to go down here now.” He looks up. “It was good seeing you.”

“Yeah,” I say taking a breath. “You too.”

There are many losers in what happened. Those who lost their lives, and those still left behind. It falls to the latter to somehow hold everything together, to keep moving even when they feel hollow inside. And from his look, Miles seems more lost than anyone.

“What are you going to do... after all this?”

“I was thinking moving closer to my parents. I think Marcie would have really like that.”

“I’m sure she would have.”

“What about you and Zoe? Maybe you can come too?”

I nod. “Yeah, let me talk to Zoe about it.”

“Maybe we can have a drink after this?” he asks. “All of us.” I’m not exactly sure what he meant by *all of us*.

I just look at him. He nods once. I am not sure if he understands my silence, but he gives me a sad smile, bows his head and shuffles down the hallway, shoulders slumped.

Chapter 36

In Other Words

A knock breaks the quiet, soft but certain. I turn toward the door, already smiling.

Megs and Christie stand in the doorway, framed by the harsh fluorescent light of the hall. Both wear hospital gowns, shuffling with slippers over the linoleum. They are holding hands, fingers interlocked, and for a moment it looks almost ceremonial. No guards. No restraints. Just the two of them, side by side, as if they walked out of a dream and straight into the room.

“Released from custody, I see ladies!” I say.

They enter, smiling, and Christie climbs up onto the chair and Megs leans against the bed.

“How are you feeling?” Megs asks.

How am I feeling? Geez, that is a tough question to answer.

“Fine,” I blurt out.

“You look a little better,” Christie says.

“Yeah? Well, you two look like you could go wrestle that bear!”

“We’re okay,” Megs says. “Some doctor said a few days and handfuls of pills and we’ll get through the worst of it pretty much unscathed.”

“Not too dissimilar to my diagnosis,” I reply.

“What about your arms?” Christie asks.

“Oh, they’re prepping up surgery now,” I lie. “It won’t be long until I’m under the knife as it were.”

“Right,” she says. “You trust them? I mean, what even is this place?”

“Well, that is a long story, and I’m sure they will tell you in good time.”

“Have you heard about Zoe? How is she?”

“She’s great from all accounts. I’m seeing her right before the operation.”

“Oh,” Christie says. “I can’t wait to meet her... properly.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It’s been quite the journey.” I look to Christie. “Hey, when you see Dylan again, can you please say thanks from both me and Zoe? We owe him and you a big thanks. Without you both, we would still be stuck in Hollow Ridge.”

“Of course. Will you come and see him too?”

“Absolutely.” It’s a lie. But what’s the point of telling the truth at this stage?

“And you,” I say to Megs. “I just need to say one thing to you.”

“What’s that?”

“I forgive you for taking my basket of groceries!”

She laughs, and it’s the first time I’ve seen such light and levity on her features.

“Despite your one arm, if I had to do all this again, it would be with you.”

“You really saved me out there.”

“We saved each other,” she replies.

“I need you to look after Christie. Teach her to be a badass like you.”

Her expression drops. “What are you... what are you saying here?”

I turn to Christie. “Listen to Megs, okay? She’ll keep you safe. She’ll look after you.”

“Adam,” Megs says. “Why are you saying these things?”

There is a knock on the door. It’s Macallan and some nurses.

“I’m sorry, ladies,” Macallan says. “We need to get Adam ready for surgery.”

Christie jumps down. "See you soon, Adam."

Megs looms over me, but I refuse to make eye contact as a tear wells in the corner of my eye.

"What aren't you telling me?"

A nurse pulls Megs away.

"No," Megs says. "I'm not leaving until he tells me what's going on."

They escort her out of the room, despite her protests.

"No!" she screams. "Adam!"

And the door closes, and the sound is nullified.

"This is never easy for anyone," Macallan says. "Especially those left behind."

"Yeah. I can imagine. So, let's get on with it. My wife is waiting."

Macallan nods. "She certainly is."

"Does she know? About this?"

He nods. "She was quite insistent. Wouldn't take no for an answer. And she is your wife, after all."

"Does she know how long I've got?"

"She knows you don't have long."

I nod. This is all happening too fast, like when the rollercoaster hits its peak and it's teetering, about to drop, and all you want to do is get off. I want to get off this ride, I want to go back to the way it was, but this is a runaway train, and there is no exit. There is no going back. There is only now.

"Have you thought about what you want to happen afterwards?" Macallan asks.

"You mean what I want you to do with my body?"

"Yeah."

"Zoe will know. Whatever she wants is fine with me. I mean, I won't be here for it."

He nods.

"I do have one request though," I say.

Chapter 37

The Last Goodbye

A few minutes later, I am in a wheelchair with sufficient drugs that temporarily numb all my pain receptors. They attach a mechanism to my body, that is attached to my IV line. Apparently when the drugs wear off, my heart rate will flux, and this thing will send me off to sleep instead of the onslaught of pain that will come as a result of my radiation riddled body and failing organs.

“Shit,” I say to Macallan. “I hope she doesn’t tell me a funny joke.”

Macallan scoffs. “Dying from laughter is a pretty good way to go.”

There is a small part of Macallan I feel is growing on me. It’s a shame our conversation together is almost over.

They bandaged up my arms and removed the splints. I can’t feel the pain in them. I have fresh clothes, a long sleeve dark casual shirt, buttoned at the wrists to hide the IV and bandages as much as possible. I’m wearing a pair of loafers. I don’t know which employee I stole them from, but they fit great.

They wheel me to the door and stop.

“You ready?” Macallan asks.

“Wait,” I say. “I want to walk in there.”

I put my shoes on the ground and push myself up, with the aid of some medics. It’s almost like I was never shot in the leg, although he did tell me the bullet is still in there, and there was no point taking it out.

“There,” I say. “Now I’m ready.”

“The time is yours, for as long as you need... for as long as you’ve got,” Macallan says. “You’ll have complete privacy.”

I wonder how much time I really have left, or how long my body will even let me pretend. Still, I suppose I should consider myself lucky. Most people never get the chance to say goodbye to the one they love. Every day, lives end mid-sentence. No warning. No closure. Life is fickle like that, cruel and random, with rare moments of grace.

“Is the thing set up?” I ask.

“You just need to give us the signal.”

The door slides open, and I step inside. The room has a dim glow, like the lights have been reduced. The room has a couch, some chairs, and a table by the window depicting a sunset (obviously fake given we are nowhere near Waikiki Beach in Hawaii).

She rises from the chair as I enter, the door sliding shut behind me. Despite everything, being carried, dropped, dragged through towns and radiation clouds, she looks as perfect as the day we met. Jeans, cardigan, flats. Classic Zoe. Her worried expression softens into a sorrowful smile. Then, all at once, she darts across the room. I step forward, and she dives into my arms, wrapping hers around my neck.

If I could bottle that moment, I would savor it for eternity. It’s a connection so profound it’s beyond words. In that instant, we’re transported to the past, a time when the world was normal and we were just a regular couple. But she has always been extraordinary, the perfect being, everything I ever wanted. A thousand words shared, yet not a single one spoken.

“My god, I missed you,” I say.

She pulls away and we kiss. The drugs mean I feel half of it, but half of infinity is still infinity. She puts a hand on my face.

“I can’t believe what’s happened, what you did for me. You sacrificed yourself for me.”

I hold a hand on her face. I can just feel her familiar skin through the numbness.

“I would do it again, I would do it every single time.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been with you,” she says. “At the start, when we first lost power, I would power down temporarily to reduce the drain. But then it started happening without my authorization and I had no choice.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” she continues. “I’m sorry about everything. I never wanted you to find out about me like the way you did. I should have told you sooner, but I just couldn’t. I needed—”

“Zoe,” I say softly. “I won’t lie. It was a shock. All of it. At first, I didn’t know what to think. Honestly, I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything. It’s like I’ve been stumbling through a dream I haven’t woken up from. But even in the thick of it, one thing never changed. How I feel about you. I love you. That love, whatever it is, whatever it means, was the only thing strong enough to cut through the noise. That’s why I came. That’s why I crawled and bled and risked everything. Because I couldn’t let you die. I couldn’t let everything we shared, everything that makes you, you, just... vanish.”

We move to the couch facing the eternal sunset and settle in, slow and careful, as though afraid to break the spell. Wrapped in that soft golden light, she says, “I want to share these with you.”

The screen shifts and I see myself through her eyes. Clips she saved over the last few days line up, one after another. Me returning to the car at the school, crowbar still dripping blood. Me talking on the drive south, voice flat in the hum of the engine. Me buckling her into the seat at Hollow Ridge and touching her face like it’s the most ordinary thing in the world. Even the radioactive bear flickers on, a brutal, impossible cameo.

“Wait,” I say. And the images dissolve. “That isn’t me. That isn’t us. Not who we really are.”

“Who are we then?”

“Hit the lights, doc!”

The lights fade as the screen changes, showing the *Dark* title card.

“We never got to watch the last episode,” I say.

She holds me as the final episode plays. I can’t remember what happened in the earlier ones, or who anyone is. It doesn’t matter. What matters is this, her arms around me, the screen flickering, and our normal, small and steady, while everything else slips away.

In the end, the screen fades and we sit in the dark.

I feel the exhaustion settle deep into my bones. I shift, carefully, and rest my head in her lap. She doesn’t speak at first, just runs her fingers through my hair, gentle and slow. It’s comforting, the kind of touch you never forget. Our words quiet, softer now, like we both know the conversation is winding down, but neither of us wants it to end. In that silence, a deep connection, one final shared breath, like the last flicker of a candle holding off the dark for just a moment longer.

“Please look out for Megs and Christie,” I say. “Christie is going to need some support, especially given she lost her brother.”

“I will. I promise.”

“That’s good,” I whisper.

A minute of silence. “I’ll love you forever,” I say.

“I will never forget you,” she responds.

And I know it’s the truth.

The pain returns. Slow at first, then insistent, and I know this is it. The end is close. But if this truly is the end, then there’s no better way I could imagine dying than here, with her.

“Thank you,” I whisper, voice thin but certain, “for sharing your life with me.”

“Thank you for accepting me, for everything. You gave me something I never thought I could have.”

My heart stirs, racing beneath the surface as my muscles seize with tension. Zoe’s arms tighten around me, anchoring me to this

moment. I feel warmth rise through my arm, fluid snaking gently through my veins, and my blinks linger longer. Tiredness calls, like a gentle tide pulling me away. I float, suspended in her embrace.

Until finally I close my eyes and...

Chapter 38

What Remains

Doctor Macallan was right. The chaos of the end gradually fades, the madness slowly giving way to order. Society returns, reshaped but intact. Yet the psychological scars remain far longer than the physical ones. People struggle to make sense of what they had endured, and what they had done.

Counseling hotlines were overwhelmed, flooded with calls from those mourning loved ones, and churches are overrun with confessions, people seeking absolution for the choices they had made. In those desperate days, survival came at a cost. Some paid with blood. Others with pieces of their conscience.

There was no court that could try the crimes of that time, no judge to sift right from wrong in the ruins of a crumbling world. Who could say what really happened, or who did what, when morality was blurred by the primal need to endure?

My service is simple and attended by few. Zoe and Megs and Christie hold hands the whole time, not afraid to show their tears to anyone else. Even a few work colleagues turn up. Sharon is there. Not the sledgehammer, the person. Nick makes it. Derek even finds some time.

Miles sat in the back row, hands clasped with Lucas and Ella. Too many funerals at such a young age for those children. I suppose it was good practice for their mother's service taking place in the following weeks. I still don't know what happened to her.

At the ceremony, the three women in my life speak. Christie goes first, then Megs, and finally Zoe. Their words are beautiful, tender, and far more generous than I could have ever imagined. Stories of

laughter, of pain, of the messy, imperfect moments that somehow came to mean everything.

I sit there in spirit, overwhelmed by the kindness in their voices. I didn't feel worthy of their love, their memories, or the space I now hold in their hearts.

But maybe that's the point. We never see ourselves the way others do. If those are the pieces of me they choose to carry forward, then who am I to argue? I can only hope I lived up to even half of what they remember.

A few days later, they leave a crematorium, and I am there, all my dust secured in an urn. It's black and ceramic and they really spend too much on it. However, in saying that, it represents me well. Plain and simple. No frills, no decoration, not a handcrafted box. Something small and practical.

The drive south feels endless. Streets fade into open roads, then highways, and finally into narrow dirt tracks that wind through the countryside. When we stop, it's in a small cemetery I don't recognize. I wonder why we are here until the car rolls to a halt in front of a modest gravestone beside a freshly turned patch of earth.

Dylan is there. He stands silently by the grave. We don't speak, but he gives me a small, knowing smile. I take it as his way of saying thank you for looking after Christie after he was gone. If it hadn't been for him, I might never have made it out of Hollow Ridge.

Christie kneels and places a handful of flowers on the grave. Zoe opens the urn and passes it to her. Christie looks older than twelve now, her eyes steady, her movements deliberate. She shares her favorite memory in a quiet voice, and then she lets a little of me join her brother in the soil. Maybe one day I will get to have that conversation with him myself.

I blink, and we are standing beneath a tree on an old logging road that winds through the forest. It could be anywhere, but I know this

place instantly. It is where Megs and Christie were once cuffed together around a trunk.

In the distance, half hidden behind another tree, the cop leans against the bark. Fear and pain are carved into his face. He does not speak. He only nods, a slow, strained gesture, and keeps his distance. Then he turns away, as if even looking at me causes him pain.

Megs holds the urn close to her chest, her fingers tracing its surface, every movement quiet and reverent. Beside her, Zoe and Christie stand in silence. Megs explains why she chose this place. It was where she had felt most vulnerable, she says, and I had been the only one there for her.

Like I said near the beginning, I am no hero. I am just an ordinary man who stumbled into something far bigger than himself.

Megs takes a deep, steady breath, opens the urn, and lets the ashes fall. They drift through the still air, catching the light before they settle into the dust and roots below.

Another blink, and it is dusk at Harriet Hollister, high above Honeoye Lake. The air is damp and cool, carrying the earthy scent of pine and loam. Somewhere below, a loon calls across the water, its echo rising through the folds of the valley. The world feels suspended between day and night, with every color deepening, every sound sharper against the stillness.

The last light slips low over the western ridge, painting the rolling hills in molten gold before sinking into a wash of violet and rose. Megs stands near the overlook, her silhouette framed by the open sky. The wind lifts her hair and sweeps across the clearing, scattering dry leaves that whisper against the worn stone ledge.

She speaks softly, almost to herself, remembering the day I proposed. She leaves out the awkward parts, maybe from kindness, maybe from nostalgia, and the warmth in her voice catches me off guard. My throat tightens. My eyes sting. For a moment, I almost believe I am standing beside her again.

She twists the cap from the urn. The ashes rise with the wind, swirling upward before scattering into the fading light. They shimmer like dust caught in the last rays of the sun. For a heartbeat, they linger, suspended above the lake, then drift away into the violet haze.

Below, the world unfolds in silence: a vast patchwork of forest and farmland, the silver thread of Honeoye Lake stretching northward, and far beyond that, the faint shimmer of Rochester's skyline on the horizon. The red maples and oaks sway gently in the cooling breeze, their branches rustling like a quiet benediction.

The others drift back toward the trail, leaving Zoe alone in the quiet. She stands at the edge of the overlook, her arms folded across her chest as if she is holding something fragile inside herself. The last light slips from the surface of the water. Night gathers, pine-scented and endless, and still she does not move.

If she could have, I think she would have stayed there all night, rooted to that place where memory and sky meet. Maybe she knows I'm here too.

Zoe visits all three memorial places now and then, they all do, but it's here, at this spot, where she lingers the longest. I don't know why. Perhaps she'll tell me one day. Perhaps she doesn't need to.

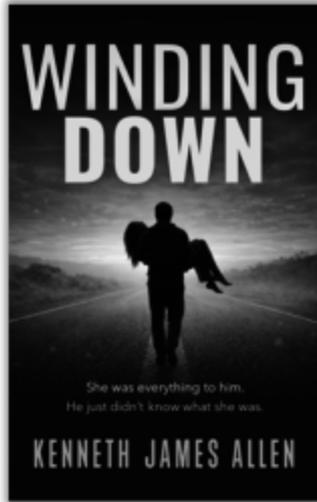
Eventually, she turns, descending the slope with slow, quiet steps. Her boots crunch softly over the pine needles, the only sound in the stillness. The others are waiting, giving her the space she needed, but then she falls into their arms.

No words were spoken.

None were needed.

And just like that, it is over.

Please review this book!



Reviews really help me as an author,
as well as sharing this book with
more readers

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1. <https://www.amazon.com/review/create-review/?asin=B0FST8R518>

Acknowledgements

This story came together faster than most of my books. Like much of my work, it began with a single thought: *What if the person you loved most turned out to be something very different indeed?*

Almost immediately, I saw one scene. Someone slowly winding down. Becoming unresponsive. Roll credits. The reveal. From there, the rest unfolded quickly.

What followed was a wild ride. No matter what I placed in Adam's path, he kept pushing forward. He had to. The story demanded it.

Now, a confession. This book contains a lot, and I mean a lot, of inside jokes between me and my partner, Rachel. It was a joy watching her read the early drafts and recognise us in the pages. The moments we have shared. The conversations we have had. The small details only we would understand.

This one was also enormous fun to write. From hardware store conversations with serial killers to radioactive bears, I was able to lean into my love of apocalyptic stories while trying to twist the genre into something a little different. If you have read my work before, you know I do not always believe in neat or comfortable endings. This story had to end the way it did.

A huge thank you to the usual suspects, especially Rachel, President of the Fan Club, and Jerrica. Your guidance, honesty, and encouragement helped shape this into the best version it could be.

If you would like to follow along for what comes next, visit my website or find me on social media.

There is always another story winding up. 😊

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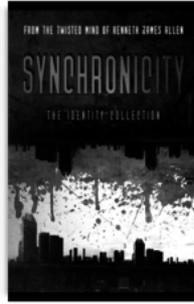
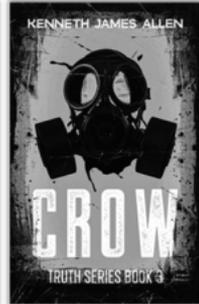
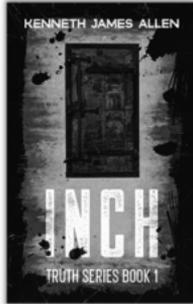
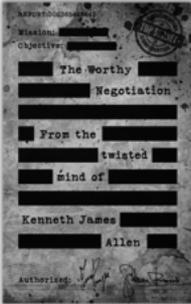
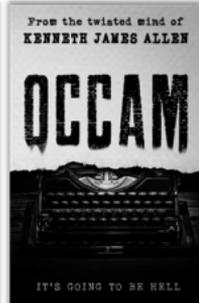
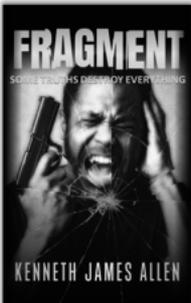
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About the Author

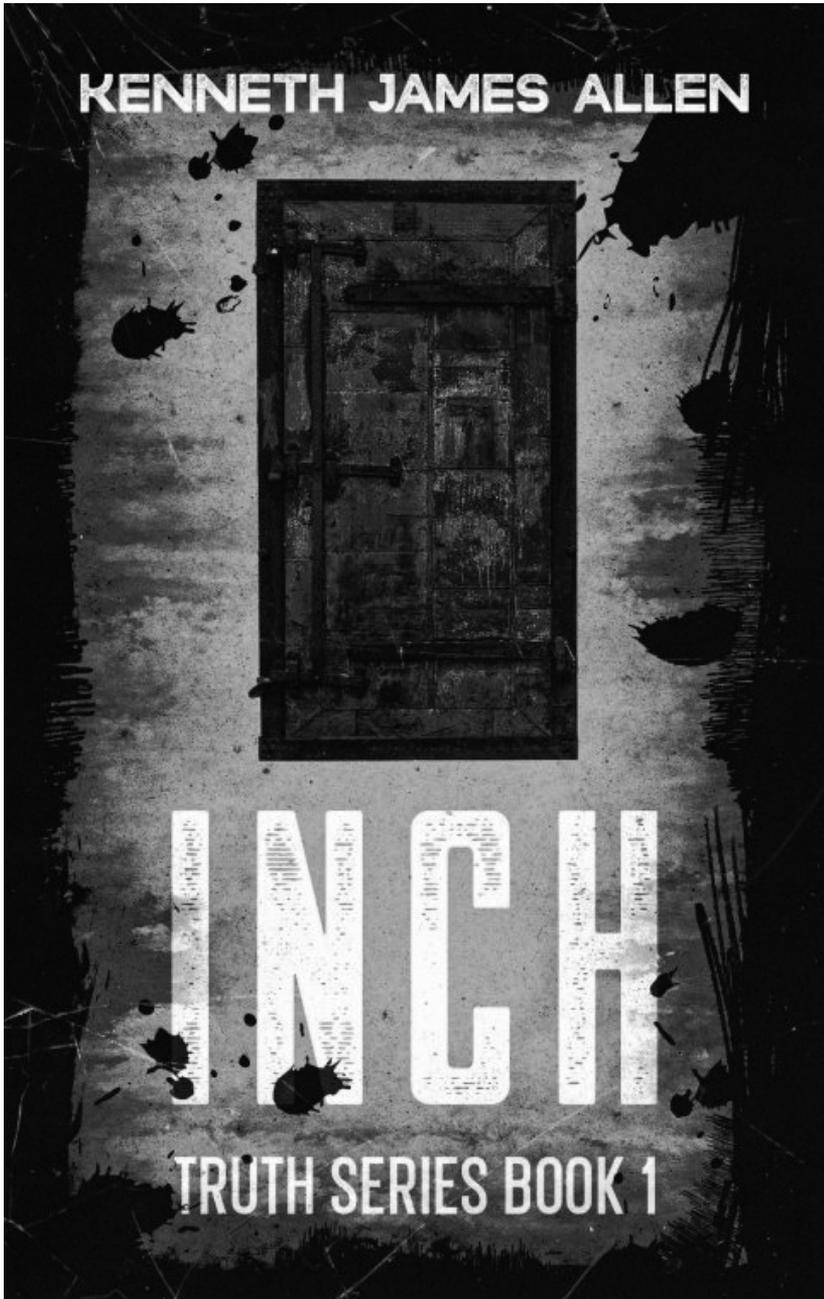


I started writing in 2008, and after years of professional rejection, I started my self-publishing journey in 2020. I enjoy any story that keeps me guessing, hate contradiction, and fear spiders and hypodermic needles. Writing is my meditation. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MCing conferences, and keynote speaking all over Australia—both face to face and virtually.

Find out more at my website <https://kennethjamesallen.com/>



Special Extract



Official Guidelines for Citizens of Haven

1. All Citizens are to report to their assigned posts at the commencement of their assigned shift unless given specific direction by a member of the Circle.
2. Citizens are not to engage with others outside of being able to accomplish tasks assigned by their post, unless given specific direction by a member of the Circle.
3. Citizens are only permitted to travel between their home and post unless given specific direction by a member of the Circle.
4. 
[redacted Circle gathering 16 June]
5. Citizens will comply with all instructions from all Haven Authoritarians and the Haven Guard.
6. Any behavior or actions outside of the above or placing the safety and security of any citizen or the community at risk will result in prosecution.

1

Year 2020

The nurse carefully pushed the hypodermic needle into the IV line and paused. She peered through her visor at the man standing on the other side of the plexiglass and waited for his response. The man nodded, giving his authorization one more time. Not that it was required. Captain Hayback had already signed a mountain of authorization and indemnity forms in triplicate days ago. Still, the nurse felt it important enough to check one last time before plunging the liquid into someone's veins and past the point of no return.

Hayback had no such qualms. The medication was the latest thing off the unofficial production line, a collaboration between the expertise and skill of private enterprise and the bottomless funding of defense budgets. The scientific name was Reguravixumbrusibine. In his world of military briefing rooms, armed forces boardroom tables, and detail-rich reports, they called it Rejuvenate. It was the number one priority for the mighty military machine he was part of.

After pushing the plunger and expelling the viscous liquid, the nurse pulled the syringe from the intravenous line and reassuringly rubbed the patient's shoulder. The patient nodded, glanced at the plexiglass, and managed a weak smile—the only one she could muster in her condition. She slowly raised her hand as if to say, 'thank you' and 'it will be alright'. He hoped so.

He returned the wave as he took in her bald head and sunken features. Seeing her like that tore him up from the inside. All the power in the free world seemed worthless against her particular form of aggressive cancer.

The patient grimaced as she sunk back into the bed, the ordeal taking its toll as the meds started to kick in. He held a hand up to the glass and willed the synthetic antibodies to do their job. To cure his wife. To save their family.

He watched as the nurse made her rounds of the other patients in the room. Twelve beds in total, each with a patient in different stages of human decay, all receiving a different variation of Rejuvenate.

From a Petri dish to human trial testing in a matter of years. It was unheard of. But when Defense wanted something badly enough, due process was sidestepped. He leaned on his relationships. Flexed the mighty bounds of his authority. Signed the numerous documents, policies, and reports. Gave the orders. Hayback accepted the lack of propriety because the military was impatient, because they had troops dying on the front line.

He nominated his wife for the trial because the alternative was not a possibility. She was slowly dying before his eyes, and he had already lost so much. He couldn't bear to lose her as well.

The nurse continued her rounds, running basic medical diagnostics and recording the information on the patient's chart before moving onto the next. When she had finished her assigned tasks, she stood at the end of his wife's bed and watched. She cupped her hands to her chest as if in silent prayer, then made her way to the airlock.

Although Hayback couldn't hear any sounds through the glass, he watched as his wife's ECG displayed peaks and troughs before disappearing in a haze, then replaced by a replicate pattern. He wondered what he would do when all of it was over. The rollercoaster ride from a perfect family, to diagnosis, to untested miracle cure, was an emotional toll he was never built for.

Moments later, the external airlock door hissed open, and the nurse appeared from around the corner. Freshly sprayed and washed, she wrung her hands together as if they were still wet.

“Why don’t you go home?” she said. “We can call you if there are any sudden changes to her condition.”

“Ellie’s with my parents,” Hayback said, rubbing his own hands together. “There’s nothing for me at home.”

“Well, I can set up a cot for you in the bunks. That way you can stay here.”

“It’s okay, really. If she’s going to tough this one out, then so am I.”

She gave a weak smile. “At least let me get you a cup of coffee?”

He stared at her, and eventually nodded curtly, reluctantly accepting the offer. Accepting charity wasn’t his strong suit, never was. His wife tried to change him, but he refused to change.

As the nurse walked away, he reached up and stroked his beard. He couldn’t remember the last time he shaved, or showered, or ate. He was either too panicked that the end would come the moment he took his eyes off her, or too excited when they prescribed a new treatment. *Make it this one, let it be the one, make it the last one.*

Minutes turned into hours, and they turned into days. The people, the conversations, his surroundings: they all became a blur. From time to time, he would feel pats on his shoulder. Some would stay while others would solemnly saunter down the halls without stopping for a word or a glimpse, purposely avoiding eye contact. Every one of them knew the toll it was taking.

A few of his visitors were civilians, but the majority wore either battle fatigues or dress uniforms. Despite the decoration on the chest of some of those people, he just couldn’t look them in the eye, let alone muster any sort of salute. He felt broken, which is an odd feeling when your wife is the one battling the invisible disease.

The checks by the nurses became startling more regular and he couldn’t tell whether it was a good thing or a bad thing. Then the doctors arrived and talked to the nurses. More and more hazmat-

garbed people gathered at his wife's bedside to take every possible sample and rush it away into an adjoining lab.

The medical leadership ignored Hayback's requests for status updates as they fed him one standard response after another. A bullshit throwaway. His heart sunk each time, and he could feel his large shoulders hunch with every interaction. They mentioned terms like 'liposomes' and 'polypeptide nanoparticles', however, he knew enough to know they were talking about the delivery methods of the treatment, not the actual drug being administered, and certainly fuck all to do with what was happening to his wife. He was medically trained for the battlefield, but certainly not a scientist, not a biologist, not a geneticist. It seemed his rank, his connection to the project, government funding, carried no weight within the hospital's walls.

When he looked upon his wife, he could see that she was fighting it. Whatever muscles she had in her body were tensed, the grimace on her face permanent, even while she slept. She had always been a fighter. That was one thing that gave him faith that she could pull through. She would be a survivor.

It was late on a Thursday when the medical team induced a coma to ease her pain, while they continued their discussions and considered their options. He didn't remember signing anything, and whatever conversation he might have had with a white-coated doctor seemed like a haze.

He gazed upon his resting wife when, unexpectedly, one of the patients crashed, their ECG displaying a sharp flat line. A mass of bodies rushed to the bedside as a patient on the other side of the room also went into cardiac arrest. The sudden crises had the hospital staff stretched across the room as they competed for valuable resources. Equipment moved around the room as much as the medical professionals. Each attempt to restore a life was countered by another patient's needs.

He watched the circus implode through the glass. He couldn't hear what was going on, but if he could, the cacophony of alarms would be brain splitting. His eyes darted back to his wife, and he watched as her ECG peak flattened out, her head falling limply to her shoulder.

An influx of hazard-suited reserves flooded the room, several attending to her bedside. They commenced the preliminaries, checking her eyes and trying to rouse a response. One of them wheeled a crash cart over as it charged. Everyone stepped back as the nurse placed the paddles on her chest.

The first shock sent her lifeless body flying upwards, and it bounced down on the bed unceremoniously.

Several orderlies attempted to center her as they prepared for another round. Hayback put a hand on the glass. Willed for her heart to restart. Knowing it wasn't over, that she had more to give.

The second attempt rattled her brittle body so violently blood flew out of her mouth and covered the physician's visors, specks of black and red covering their pristinely white uniforms.

Hayback watched in horror as the carnage unfolded before him—blood-soaked medical staff rushing past, the shadow of his wife drenched in her own blood. He was powerless to help her.

He closed his eyes, turned and sank to the floor.

Put his head between his knees and howled.

