Chapter 1

Guam 1949

“You received the orders today?” Dr. Siskee asked, his cheeks squishing inward.

“Doctor Siskee, I am not required by any authority to update you on a preset schedule.” General Tibern waived his hand, dismissing the Doctor. “I inform you of things at my discretion.”

Dr. Siskee turned away from the General before rolling his eyes. “Very well, General. I will be ready to begin phase two trials by the end of the week.”

“Excellent Doctor. I look forward to an update soon.” Tibern’s confident tone, tinged with sarcasm, made Dr. Siskee shiver. He found it revolting.

Without another word, the General walked away, leaving Dr. Siskee to his own devices.

Siskee sighed. If he didn’t require the umbrella of protection against ethics violations provided by off-the-books government funding, he wouldn’t tolerate arrogant bastards like Tibern.

The good Doctor had suffered banishment within the scientific community, his ideas branded dangerous and unscrupulous.

Former colleagues, some he called friends, cut him off in the end. Siskee only had this secret lab and the promise to continue his work unabated.

Siskee picked up the rotary phone on his desk, dialing an extension. It rang twice.

“Yes Doctor?” A voice answered.

“We start working in earnest tomorrow. Please see that all lab preparations are handled by morning.” Siskee hung up the phone without waiting for a reply.

He required two assistants for his work. He had handpicked them personally. Allies in his quest to achieve the impossible.

Within a few years, by Siskee’s estimation, they would be ready for the first human trials.

Lack of recognition from the scientific community did not bother Siskee. He sought victory over nature’s hold on ordinary men. Achieving that would more than satisfy his ego for the time being.

Siskee rubbed his hands together, getting up from his chair and moving over to the record player near his desk.

Selecting a record randomly, he stood listening as a classical jazz ensemble began playing.

After letting the soft melody fill his mind for a few minutes, Siskee returned to his desk and sat down.

He had much work to do before greeting a new day.

Chapter 2

"Maybe we should stay with them father." Luke was beginning to feel uneasy. "We barely made it this far on our own. It's too dangerous out there for just the two of us."

Minjun clicked his tongue, showing dislike for Luke's suggestion. "They are brutes my son. Not safe here."

"It's not safe out there either. We stay here for now and leave when it works to our advantage. It's not forever father." Luke argued.

Minjun rubbed his shirt, contemplating their options. "Maybe we stay for now. But not long. It not good idea."

Luke sighed. Knowing his father was unhappy and scared to be among this rough group of people weighed on him. "It's just for a while father. Not long."

Nodding, Minjun turned toward Luke's automobile, their only source of shelter for the moment.

Luke agreed with his father. This group did not offer a significant improvement over going it alone.

Luke could see it from his father's side. They were as likely to be robbed or killed by strangers in this group as outside it. Also, the scrambler threat loomed all around.

"Hey there! Luke, isn't it?" Luke turned his head away from watching his father, seeing a young man he didn't know walking toward him.

"Umm, yeah. I'm Luke." Keeping his tone neutral, Luke felt his body tense. How did this guy know his name already?

"Yeah, great. I heard you introduce yourself to Frank earlier. I just wanted to come over and say hi. My name's Gavin."

Gavin held out his hand, waiting for Luke to take it.

"Pleasure, Gavin." Luke accepted Gavin's hand, eager to end the conversation.

"Hey, I understand man. You've got the look of someone who has almost decided not to stay with this bunch of troublemakers. They don't inspire much confidence on the surface." Gavin chuckled.

"Ah, well, I…" Luke did not know how to respond.

"No worries man. Take your time. It's okay. Your reaction is normal." Gavin assured Luke. "Maybe just give them a few days before bailing."

"Okay." Weary of strangers, Luke just smiled, not saying more.

Gavin snickered, returning Luke's smile. "Okay. Take your time. That's all I'm sayin. Give your father some time too. You'll see maybe we're not so bad as you and your father's first impression of us."

Gavin turned away, leaving Luke to digest their conversation alone.

Luke glanced back and forth between Gavin and his father.

Sighing again, Luke headed over to join his father in their vehicle.

He didn't expect to get much sleep tonight.

Chapter 3

Fear beat her to England.

Genevieve found herself battling drainers and scumbags alike.

The pilot she had contacted weeks before to take her across the pond was trying to bail on her, leaving her stuck and without other options.

"It's too dangerous in the States, Ms. Messina. You are better off holding up here until things get better." The pilot repeated himself, restating the same thing in four different ways.

"Can I just buy your plane?" Genevieve let her frustration show. She didn't care about angering the pilot.

"Buy it?" The pilot paused, trying to predict the near future value of money in his head. "I'm not sure that's going to work."

Genevieve had learned how to fly several small aircraft herself. She had taken a few hours of training, spending time in some of the private jets she had rented for longer flights around the world. She did realize these few hours did not make her qualified, but desperation to get home overruled common sense at this point.

"Why not?" Genevieve persisted, now thinking of a way to steal the plane.

"Well, I might need it later myself. I might need to flee." The pilot's tone was flippant, as if the answer should be obvious.

"Where would you go? You just said staying put here was the best thing to do." Genevieve was just trying to keep the pilot talking while she scanned the area for possible witnesses.

"I know a few places. I've got some connections Ms. Messina." Genevieve could tell the pilot was blatantly making stuff up. She was confident he didn't have anywhere else to go.

"Okay, well, maybe I could show you a place I know is safe and we can go there together. Would you at least let me present it to you? Then you can decide." Genevieve tried to sound concerned for the pilot's safety.

The pilot frowned briefly, scratching his chin. "I guess that would be okay. Show me."

"Not out here. Let's get somewhere away from any curious ears and eyes." Genevieve gestured toward the jet owned by the pilot. "In there."

The pilot turned to look at his jet. "In my plane?"

"Yeah, why not? It's safe in there isn't it?" Genevieve asked.

"Yes, of course it is. People don't just hang out in my plane. I'm a businessman." The pilot tried to sound professional.

"Great. Let's do some business then. Both get what we want." Genevieve replied.

The pilot hesitated for a moment, scratching his chin once more. "Okay, that'll work I guess. It's unusual, but then again, so is the world right now."

The pilot shrugged and turned toward his plane, Genevieve close behind him.

The pilot opened the main cabin door and waited for the stairs to extend out and downward, motioning for Genevieve to go first up the stairs.

She made her way into the small main cabin area, setting herself down in one of the deep cushion seats along the aisle.

The pilot took a seat across from her. There was a table between them for holding drinks, playing games, etc.

"Okay, show me what you got." The pilot stretched a little in his seat.

Genevieve stood, moving around the table closer to the pilot. "I've got to get moving…and you are nothing but an unnecessary obstruction."

The pilot frowned briefly, leaning back in a futile attempt to distance himself from Genevieve. "Hey, back up. What are you doing?"

Genevieve kicked him hard in the shin as he held his hands straight out in front of him.

"Ouch, fuck! Get away you crazy bitch!" The pilot yelled, lowering his hands to rub his shin.

Genevieve jumped toward the pilot, bringing her knee swiftly into his face while pulling his head toward her.

For just an instant, her hunger returned. She wanted to sink her fingers into the man's skull, but the feeling vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

She remained atop him in the seat, punching his right ear repeatedly as his bent nose began bleeding profusely.

Jumping back off the seat, Genevieve took a quick breath, then stepped up close again. The pilot was holding his nose, mumbling in pain.

With two knuckles protruding from her fist, Genevieve throat-punched him, collapsing his windpipe.

The pilot fell out of his seat into the aisle, choking sounds filling the cabin.

Once he was on the cabin floor, Genevieve removed a knife from her belt, bringing herself to the floor, thrusting the knife into the side of the pilot's head as he choked.

The pilot's body spasmed briefly, then went still.

Taking a deep breath, Genevieve got to her feet and turned toward the cockpit.

Once inside the cockpit, she spent the next couple of hours familiarizing herself with the layout.

She would not be contacting the tower for clearance. She doubted anyone would make too much fuss about one plane leaving this small airport without authorization under the present circumstances.

People were fleeing places all over England and the world. Regulatory authorities would be overwhelmed with more significant issues if they were still operational.

Genevieve received no transmissions from the tower as she taxied the plane for takeoff. She presumed that was answer enough.

This specific model private jet could take her at least a couple hundred miles inland after she reached the eastern US. That would have to do.

She could almost see The Mountain. Almost feel home-free and safe.

She just needed to keep moving.

Chapter 4

"Tell them to park behind the blue bus, up there!" The man pointed across the road, then turned back in Gloria's direction.

Gloria smiled, welcoming him over. "You're keepin 'em in line today Lenard."

Gloria's makeshift refugee camp was blossoming into a community. Lenard was among the early arrivals, and Gloria liked him at once. A couple of weeks later, she put him in charge of screening and organizing new arrivals.

Lenard and five other people handpicked by Gloria were the only ones allowed to carry firearms in the area.

Lenard chuckled as Gloria handed him a cup of coffee.

"Thank you, Mam." Lenard accepted gladly.

"Just one today?" Gloria inquired, examining the camper van as it pulled into a space behind a blue bus across the road from her cabin.

"So far. But it's still early." Lenard followed Gloria's gaze. "We'll see how the day goes."

"How's everyone behaving?" Gloria turned her attention to the other vehicles on both sides of the road.

"They're behaving well. It's their only option. I won't put up with any bullshit." Lenard spoke with a tone of confidence Gloria admired.

"That's what I like to hear." She replied.

"Cowboy available anytime today?" Lenard took another sip of his coffee.

"Could be I suppose." Gloria sipped her coffee as well. "What's up?"

"The new arrivals said they saw some headsucker activity in Sandpoint yesterday. I wanted to see if Cowboy would go with me to check it out. I don't want 'em showing up here unannounced."

"Already that far?" Gloria looked down the road, concern growing in her voice. "Yeah, I'll get him on the walkie in a minute."

"Don't worry." Lenard tried to sound confident, but Gloria could also see that he was worried. "We'll put 'em down if they get too close."

"I would prefer you didn't get that close to them." Gloria tried to pick out a fly that had flown into her coffee.

"Me too." Lenard admitted. "We may not have a choice."

Two hours later, Cowboy walked up Gloria's driveway, having not driven his truck in over two weeks.

Cowboy nodded to Lenard as he approached the front steps. "Lenard."

"Hey Cowboy." Lenard smiled. "Thanks for coming."

"Not a problem." Cowboy adjusted one of his boots. "I want to get a closer look at these things. See what I can make out about them."

"Me too, actually." Lenard admitted. "I haven't seen any in person yet. Gloria is worried though. She thinks we can't handle ourselves."

"We should be cautious." Cowboy added. "We don't need to take any unnecessary risks. Just recon."

"Agreed." Lenard picked up his rifle from the porch steps. "You ready?"

"Where's Gloria?" Cowboy looked around the porch and out toward the road.

"Off doing her own recon, I guess." Lenard answered. "She took some people to scout the surrounding forest."

"I see. Let's get going then." Cowboy began heading in the direction of Lenard's Jeep. "You drive."

Lenard followed Cowboy, and they were on the road in under a minute.

There was silence for a while. Then Lenard spoke up. "Some of the people comin' in say these things aren't all the same."

"Tell me more." Cowboy kept his eyes on the trees.

"I guess some of them are smarter than others, more calculating. Most are like rabid dogs, going after anything that moves." Lenard explained.

"We'll see what we find out today. We may need to start doing regular scouting of the area to keep aware of things." Cowboy turned his attention back to the road.

"I figured that would be necessary sooner or later. I don't want these things sneaking up on us." Lenard thought for a minute. "Although, I don't know how they would find us this far away from everything."

"Enough people driving up this way could lead them here." Cowboy mused. "A slow migration, like insects."

"Maybe the dumb ones just follow the smart ones around." Lenard slowed to avoid a pothole. "Like a herd or something."

"Maybe." Cowboy replied. "Or the other way around."

Silence fell over them again as they headed toward Sandpoint. They saw a few people parked alongside the road as they drove but didn't stop to chat with anyone, and no one waved as they drove by. People were keeping to themselves.

Cowboy preferred that to a run-in with bandits.

When they were about two miles outside Ponderay, a town bordering Sandpoint, Cowboy broke the silence. "Stop here. We'll go the rest of the way on foot."

"Understood." Lenard acknowledged, turning his Jeep onto a side road, parking about fifty feet from the main highway.

Cowboy got out, opened the back door to pull out his rifle, then joined Lenard behind the Jeep.

They walked along the side of the road, taking time to listen and scanning all around them.

As they headed down Highway Two, Cowboy recognized the gun store on their right. It was a white building with a red metal roof.

"Let's check this place out. See if anything's left inside." Cowboy kept his volume low.

Lenard nodded, following Cowboy.

Cowboy could see as he approached from what remained of the double glass doors that looters had already visited the place.

Inside, they found the store picked clean, a few oddities scattered about the floor and shelves.

Soon, they were back out on the road and heading toward Ponderay. It was close to noon, the sun sitting above their heads.

Lenard took a swig of water as they walked in silence.

Some cars sat abandoned in both lanes of the road, doors ajar. Cowboy assumed people were fleeing from something or someone in a hurry.

It wasn't long before they could see a few bodies lying in random spots along the road and in the ditch, apparent victims of headsuckers.

Cowboy approached one body, squatting to get a closer look. He pulled back a woman's long, dark hair. Beneath one strand of hair, Cowboy spotted a faded pink blotch. He found a few more on the dead woman's head in different places.

"Headsuckers have been through here." Cowboy continued examining the woman while Lenard kept watching a few feet away.

"I don't hear anything. Do you think they're watching us?" Lenard asked, feeling uneasy.

"Could be, but I am usually pretty decent at…" Cowboy stopped speaking.

Lenard jerked his head around to glance at Cowboy. "What is it?"

Cowboy pointed up the road, a quarter mile ahead of them. "Something's walking toward us."

Lenard knelt, squinting his eyes, trying to see where Cowboy was pointing. "I see 'em. Are they walking funny?"

Cowboy couldn't tell from this distance. He motioned for Lenard to follow him as they stayed low and moved over to the side of a building off the road.

Cowboy could see the road from his new position while obscuring most of his body.

As the figures approached, Cowboy could see that whoever this was, they weren't moving like ordinary people. These strangers turned in various directions, heads looking up as they progressed. They were looking for something, but Cowboy couldn't determine what they were trying to find.

Two infected moved toward him and Lenard. Cowboy motioned Lenard back and moved behind the wall himself.

Cowboy could see that the rest of the group followed the first two. Still watching the sky as they headed toward Cowboy and Lenards' position.

"What are they doing?" Lenard did his best to whisper, but nerves were getting to him.

"It looks like they are headed directly toward us." Cowboy whispered.

"Can they see us?" Lenard began fidgeting with his rifle.

Cowboy put a hand on Lenard to calm him. "Don't get jumpy on me. I need you focused."

Lenard nodded, bringing his arm back to his side.

Cowboy peeked around the corner of the building again. The group was about one hundred feet away. However, it was still moving toward them, jerking and shuffling along together.

Cowboy back-stepped, inching closer to Lenard. "I think they're headsuckers. Let's go around the building."

Lenard's eyes widened for a second, then his head bobbed up and down. "Okay."

Cowboy went around the building, running along the back, turning to move up the other side.

As he did, Cowboy could see a person heading toward him from the front side of the store. The stranger saw him as well. Without stopping, it uttered a guttural yell and began sprinting toward him.

Cowboy took a step back, taking a pistol out of the holster on his belt. He was about to shoot when the headsucker froze.

Cowboy kept pointing his gun toward the headsucker but did not shoot. He couldn't understand why it had stopped running.

Several other headsuckers ran up behind the first one a few seconds later, stopping next to it.

If Cowboy didn't know better, he would swear they looked confused.

"Why did they stop?" Lenard whispered behind him.

"I don't know." Cowboy admitted. "I really didn't know what to expect from these things."

On a whim, Cowboy took four steps toward the group of headsuckers.

"Cowboy."

"Cowboy!" Lenard whispered again, panic rising in his voice. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing what happens." Cowboy replied.

He continued moving forward, gun pointed at the center mass of the group.

The gang of headsuckers backed away, keeping the same distance from Cowboy as he advanced.

"Is that all of them that you saw?" Lenard stayed an arm's length behind Cowboy, speaking at regular volume.

"Keep a watch behind us." Cowboy instructed, continuing to step forward.

Soon the headsuckers in front were in the parking lot, nearing the road as Cowboy reached the edge between the side and front of the store.

Cowboy stepped out from the wall, entering the parking lot area himself. Lenard hesitated a few seconds, looking back in the direction he and Cowboy had come, before following Cowboy into the open space in front of the building.

Cowboy stood motionless, pointing his gun in the general direction of the headsuckers. Then, on a whim, he took aim at one in particular and fired a shot at its head.

The headsucker fell over, dead. The others appeared undisturbed, continuing to hover at the same distance.

"Interesting." Muttered Cowboy, waiting a minute before firing again, taking down another one.

The headsuckers remained unfazed; however, this time, Cowboy noticed individuals within the group beginning to spread out.

There were eleven remaining in the group. Cowboy took down three more in rapid succession.

Eight headsuckers remained as the group spread out. One headsucker started moving away from the group. This one, a woman, shuffled around an invisible perimeter, maintaining a constant distance between herself and Cowboy.

"Why are they moving away from us?" Lenard spoke not in fear but curiosity.

"I have no idea." Cowboy admitted. "Maybe there is something about us that is unusual. Not the same as the people in this town."

"Fucking weird." Lenard thought aloud.

"Compared to what?" Cowboy chuckled. "Nothing about any of this is usual behavior."

Lenard said nothing and kept his gun aimed at the woman who had made a complete circle around them.

"I think if we try to head back to the Jeep, they will follow us at this same distance." Cowboy lowered his gun to see if that would produce any changes in behavior. It did not.

"They don't seem to care about us shooting them or pointing a gun at them." Cowboy joined Lenard in watching the woman as she continued to circle them.

"Yeah, somehow we're creating a barrier they won't cross." Lenard stepped up beside Cowboy. "Or they're waiting for something to happen that we don't know about yet."

"Could be." Cowboy agreed. Cowboy raised his gun again. This time shooting the woman who had been circling them.

Another one broke off and began circling them as the woman had been doing.

Cowboy was also about to shoot this one when Lenard tapped his shoulder. Cowboy stopped, following Lenard's finger as he pointed down the road leading into town.

More were approaching. A way off but heading their way.

"We can't stay here." Lenard said. "There'll be too many of them soon."

Cowboy nodded. "I have an idea. I'm going to run straight at them. It might confuse them for a few seconds. Get them to scatter a bit. You run in the opposite direction and get out of their direct sight. Get back to the Jeep and meet me at the ammo store."

"How are you gonna get there without all of them?" Lenard nudged his head toward the headsuckers hovering around them.

"Let me worry about that. Just get the Jeep and get to the ammo store. You'll probably only have a few seconds to break away when I run toward them." Cowboy answered.

"Okay, understood. Ready when you are Cowboy." Lenard let out a breath, preparing himself to run.

"On three. One, two, three." Cowboy bolted toward what was left of the group. The group dispersed, headsuckers running from him in multiple directions.

Lenard disappeared around the store, running in the opposite direction of Cowboy.

Cowboy changed direction several times, charging toward different headsuckers to keep them confused.

This was all the time he could buy Lenard.

Make 'em count, Lenard. Cowboy took off running at a sprint down another side road.

This road was narrow. The headsuckers would need to follow Cowboy in a sequence one after the other instead of running after him side by side as they could do in the parking lot.

Cowboy didn't stop to see if they were, in fact, following him. He had no reason to suspect they wouldn't.

Darting off the road, Cowboy navigated through a small grouping of trees, headed for a minor subdivision on the other side.

Cowboy ran past two houses, stopping at the third to glance behind him.

He couldn't see anything but could hear running through the trees and strange groaning noises.

Sprinting to the house's backyard, Cowboy disappeared into a small, wooded area behind the house. His strategy was to not establish any kind of specific direction.

He still needed to figure out how these things were tracking him. Using a simple strategy of misdirection was all he could manage.

After a couple more minutes of running in a zigzag pattern through a wooded area and a field, Cowboy found himself within sight of Highway Two. He backtracked before making an L-shaped pattern toward the ammo store.

He figured it would take Lenard at least twenty minutes to reach the Jeep and about five minutes to arrive at the ammo store. That was all, barring any run-ins with headsuckers.

Cowboy heard faint groaning sounds behind him, but they were less distinct than before. His strategy succeeded in getting the herd off Lenard.

Cowboy hurried away from Highway Two, going into a much larger wooded area, dense with trees and underbrush. He figured this would jam up the group pursuing him or throw them off his trail altogether.

Ten minutes later, Cowboy found himself back on Highway Two, facing the direction of the ammo store. Hearing nothing behind him, Cowboy stayed off the road as he jogged toward the ammo store's parking lot. Lenard should be there soon.

As Cowboy approached the large building with the distinguished red metal roof, he could see Lenard's Jeep fifty yards away from the entrance.

Cowboy diverted away from the parking lot and toward the Jeep.

"Get us turned around fast." Cowboy ordered Lenard as he opened the passenger door and hopped inside.

 As the Jeep spun around, Cowboy turned to watch behind them as Lenard floored the gas pedal. He spotted no movement.

"That was pretty fucking close man." Lenard's voice cracked as he tried to slow the adrenaline pumping through his body and his breathing.

"It was a little rougher than I expected, but we managed." Cowboy's voice remained even.

"We almost didn't Cowboy. That could have gone a really bad way for us." Nervous laughter escaped Lenard's mouth as he shook his head from side to side.

"We'll face run-ins like that and probably rougher again." Cowboy took another look behind them. "Get used to it quickly or you won't last much longer."

"Shit!" Lenard blurted out, shaking his head again.

They rode without speaking to Gloria's cabin.

Chapter 5

WHAP! Roger swung the bat hard, smacking his attacker across the face.

"Behind you!" Tommy yelled.

Roger twisted as one of the turned leaped at him. He fell backward from the force and weight of his girthy assailant.

Roger's attacker did not wait until hitting the ground on top of him to start clawing at his face.

Roger tried to hold on to the man with one arm and break his fall with the other. Once on the ground, Roger continued holding spasming hands grabbing for his face while using his free hand to pull out the knife on his hip.

The scrambler’s hands were pinned between Roger's arm as his body squirmed and spasmed against the ground. Sitting atop Roger, sparkly saliva dripped from the large man's mouth.

Roger gave up trying to find his knife, securing the thing's hands as they broke free from where he was holding them.

It took all his strength to hold them in place.

Roger felt his grip slipping as the berserker’s rage intensified. In a few seconds, it would be all over.

From his peripheral vision, Roger saw a blur above him. Something hit the man attacking Roger. It was his bat, he realized.

The man seemed dazed but did not fall over, lessening his attempt to escape Roger's hold.

Another swing and a hit. This time the man froze for a second, then fell backward onto the ground.

Roger scooted across the pavement, still buzzing from the fight.

He watched as Tommy kept swinging, pulverizing the large man's head into the pavement.

Tommy used the bat to steady himself, panting from the effort.

"Damn! That big boy was quick!" Tommy yelled between breaths.

"Strong too." Roger sighed. "I was about to lose that ground battle."

Tommy looked over at Roger. "Naw man! You had it handled."

Roger shook his head, gritting his teeth as he rolled over to stand up.

He walked over to join Tommy in admiring the bat's handiwork. "We better find some shelter. Two hours till dark."

Tommy looked up and down the street. "This ain't a great place to shack up. We better keep moving. Get to a different part of town."

"We won't make it. We gotta find a place here for the night." Roger dusted off his jeans.

"Shit. This is gonna be a long night." Tommy exhaled, trying to stifle a cough.

"We'll have a lot of long nights ahead." Roger patted Tommy. "We just gotta keep moving when we can."

Nodding, Tommy pointed up the street in front of them. "I know a place that might work for one night."

A scream coming from the opposite direction got their attention.

Roger turned, scanning both sides of the street, trying to see anything running at them. "We better get moving then."

With that, Roger motioned for Tommy to lead the way, and they were off again, maintaining a steady jogging pace.

Tommy's hiding spot was about another ten minutes away. It was an old burger joint. The windows were busted on the front side of the restaurant facing the street.

Tommy stepped through a broken window. Roger followed after him.

Once inside, Tommy led them behind the sales counter and into the back room. There was a kitchen beyond the swinging door.

"Through there." Tommy pointed to a door at the back of the kitchen.

After they were inside, Tommy turned and closed the door. Roger helped him scoot a small couch in front of the door.

"It doesn't lock." Tommy informed Roger. "Help me move that old fridge."

Together, they scooted the refrigerator up against the couch.

Tommy exhaled, using the wall to slide himself onto the floor.

"I'm so tired." Tommy rubbed his hands over his bald head, massaging his scalp.

"You get some sleep. I'll take first watch." Roger looked over at the door, calculating the weight of the couch and refrigerator together. He figured it would give him enough time to wake Tommy if necessary.

The night passed without incident. Roger and Tommy took turns guarding the door and sleeping.

The next day they were back out on the street as the sun rose, seeking a less active part of town.

They could hear screaming, yelling, and gunfire as they moved between cars and buildings, to stay hidden.

As they progressed into a more suburban section of the city, the buildings were getting farther apart.

Tommy started lagging behind after a few hours of darting between buildings and vehicles. His ribs were broken, injured during an attack by one member of a gang of outlaws three days ago.

Roger didn't know how serious the injury was, but it bothered Tommy more than he let on.

Tommy's breathing became raspy. He needed medical attention, but that was impossible with their present circumstances.

Roger didn't know if they would ever see someone with medical training again.

Rounding the quick-stop gas station, Tommy started wheezing, holding his chest.

Roger tried to yell out a warning, but it was too late.

Tommy almost ran into a woman holding a gun. He stopped just before slamming into her.

The woman spun toward Tommy, holding up her gun. "Whoa dude, not so fast! Back up! Back up now!"

Roger stopped behind Tommy and held his hands up to show he and Tommy weren't a threat.

"We are just passing through. My friend is injured. Broken ribs. He didn't see you." Roger said, backstepping along with Tommy.

"Shut up!" The woman yelled back. "No talking."

The woman kept her gun trained on Tommy, eyes locked with his.

After about twenty seconds, the woman spoke again. "You two got anything valuable on ya?"

Roger blinked. Was this woman blind? "No… can't you see us? We only have the clothes we're wearing lady."

"Fuck!" The woman yelled, continuing to point the gun at Tommy. "Well, you're worthless then aren't ya?"

As she spoke, the woman pulled back the hammer on her revolver, getting ready to shoot.

"Hey lady!" Roger started waving his hands in front of himself. "We are no threat to you. We got nothin. Just let us…"

Before Roger could finish his sentence, the woman fired a shot, hitting Tommy in the middle of his chest.

Tommy staggered, falling to the ground.

"No!" Roger yelled, rushing over to Tommy on the ground. "Tommy!"

Roger knelt beside Tommy. He could see Tommy's mouth moving. Roger held his hands over Tommy's chest to stop the blood from spilling out of him.

The woman fired again. Roger heard the bullet ricochet off the ground to his left.

Spinning, Roger got to his feet and took off running again. The woman pulled the trigger as he ran. The hammer of her gun clicked on the firing pin. Her weapon was empty.

"Shit!" Roger heard the woman yell as he ran around the corner of the gas station, not slowing as he reached the back of the building. Once there, Roger kept going, sprinting toward an adjacent structure.

Roger stopped once as he reached the next building, looking back at the gas station's rear. He didn't see the woman or anyone else.

Roger took a few minutes to catch his breath, resting his hands on his knees.

Looking around again, Roger knew he had to check on Tommy. See if he was still alive.

Roger waited for about ten minutes, then ran back over to the rear of the gas station. He peaked around the side of the building, saw no one, then crept along the wall to the front.

Roger could see Tommy lying on the ground about thirty feet away as he neared the front of the gas station.

The woman was nowhere in sight.

Roger scanned the immediate area several times to check for the woman again before heading to Tommy.

As soon as he got close, Roger could see that Tommy was dead.

"Damn. Shit Tommy." Roger muttered to himself. "Shit."

Roger knew he couldn't do anything for Tommy. He was on his own.

Standing where he was for another minute, looking around again for the woman, Roger headed back around the gas station.

The reality of what had just happened began to sink in as Roger retreated. He stopped, putting his hands to his face, slowing his breathing.

Tommy was Roger's best friend. Now Tommy was gone.

Roger knew he didn't have time to mourn Tommy. He had to keep moving.

The night was closing in again, and he didn't have a place to stay.

Roger felt lonely and vulnerable. This feeling made him shiver. Roger hadn't experienced this sensation since he was a kid. It was foreign to him.

As sudden as they had come on, Roger pushed down his emotions.

Forcing himself to focus, Roger took off running again.

He was a survivor.

Roger cleared his mind, set on making it through this night.

Tomorrow was tomorrow's problem.

Chapter 6

Carly fought to scream, but the mask covering her face fell back to her mouth and nose before she could.

No one had spoken to her since she arrived. Security personnel removed Carly from the transport vehicle, leading her into a concrete room. A man in combat fatigues cut away Carly's clothing with scissors. Another soldier handed Carly a body suit, covering everything save her head and extremities.

Two armed men ordered Carly to lie on a mechanical contraption resembling a table and bound her arms, legs, and midsection.

Struggling for breath, the material covering her face became damp as water flowed over it. Carly's body twisted and convulsed as the wet cloth made breathing impossible for several seconds.

The cloth lifted, allowing for respiration, but only for a second or two. Carly coughed as her body’s impulse to breathe sucked in air. The material lowered down onto her face and the process repeated.

She had no means of gauging the passage of time, but it felt like several hours had passed during each session.

When it was over, Carly felt the table rise.

Carly's screams echoed through the mechanized torture chamber, muffled within the oppressive darkness. Uncertainty and dread crept in as she floundered in despair.

She heard no voices. An unfeeling machine oversaw Carly's torment.

The table rolled back into a body-sized compartment. Dim lights illuminated the space, revealing to Carly her enclosed surroundings.

Next, some type of gas filled the cell, causing Carly to lose consciousness.

The table leaned to either side. Straps attached to Carly's arms, legs, and midsection connected to sections that could lift away from the flat surface.

Carly's muscles received exercise this way on a set schedule to encourage circulation and prevent atrophy while bound.

She did not know how her body received nourishment. Perhaps after she passed out from the gas.

Isolation from any human contact tore away Carly’s mental defenses.

Carly burst into tears each day, feeling her body spasm as she wept in desperation.

No one questioned her. She needed to learn what Sebridge wanted with her.

This repeated torment broke her, making her want to cooperate.

Sebridge had mentioned her "friends" being here as well. Carly did not know what that meant. Were they undergoing torture? Probably.

With each cycle of agony, the certainty that she would tell Sebridge anything he wanted became more robust. Carly could do nothing for herself.

A few times, she evacuated her bladder and bowels. It was humiliating, but that was the point.

No one came in to clean her up during the cycle. She lay in her own filth until the session concluded.

Once again, the table tilted up and rolled into the small compartment, filling with gas, causing Carly to lose consciousness.

When she awoke, she found herself clean, wearing a new body suit.

Carly's mind slipped into despair without the ability to note passing of time. Thoughts of killing herself overwhelmed her, but Carly was bound. Her captors had considered this possibility as well.

A contraption in her mouth prevented Carly from biting off her own tongue. She felt powerless to control any part of her own destiny.

"She'll tell us whatever she knows soon." Sebridge, standing in front of a row of display panels, watched on a screen as Carly was being tortured.

"Very well. Keep me posted on her and the others." A voice replied.

"Will do, Sir." Sebridge clicked off the intercom.

Looking at the other panels, Sebridge could see each of the captives.

Next to the monitor showing individual captives was another screen, presenting real-time brain wave updates.

"That one will be ready after a couple more cycles." Sebridge pointed to one of the brain wave pattern readouts. "Run two more cycles. Then get'er cleaned up."

"Yes Sir." A tech, sitting at the panels in front of Sebridge, nodded without looking up.

Chapter 7

“I’m glad you like it.” Gavin handed Luke another bowl full of macaroni. “It’s an old family recipe.”

“Thanks.” Luke smiled, accepting the food. “Your family should be proud.”

Luke began eating his second bowl of macaroni, picking up an empty package on the table. “The guy in this picture does look a lot like you, actually.”

“Yeah, I know. Everybody tells me that.” Gavin took the box from Luke, holding it beside his face and smiling.

“Hey, does your dad want any of this stuff? I haven’t seen him eat anything yet.” Gavin turned his gaze toward where Luke and his father were parked.

“No, he’s okay. He’s been eating in the car.” Luke tried keeping his tone neutral, but his face expressed worry.

“Can I bring him something else?” Gavin asked.

“Maybe some authentic Korean food.” Luke sounded bitter and frustrated.

“He doesn’t like American food?” Gavin took a seat next to Luke at the table.

“Some, but mostly no. He’s used to eating food that he cooks himself…from fresh ingredients. He hasn’t been eating much of anything lately.” Luke admitted.

“Maybe I can find some spaghetti noodles or something. Is that close?” Gavin began eating, shoveling a massive spoonful of macaroni into his mouth.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. He’s just stubborn. Set in his ways.” Luke shook his head.

They finished eating in silence. Gavin took Luke’s bowl when he was finished and got up to rinse everything out in a small container full of soapy water.

“So, do you know many of the other people here?” Luke remained seated as he examined some of the other cars parked nearby.

“A few.” Gavin replied. “Most people here aren’t too chatty. I’ve met about five or six in all I guess.”

“You think we’re safe here? You know, from the infected?” Luke asked.

“Maybe for now. I don’t really know, but it seems like there may be safety in numbers. Maybe more so from looters than infected.” Gavin set the bowls and spoons on a towel.

“Have you ever seen one attack somebody?” Luke couldn’t help himself. He was curious.

“Yeah, a couple of times. It’s horrible.” A look of disgust formed on Gavin’s face. “They are crazy fast and violent.”

“Have you lost anyone to them?” Luke decided to press Gavin.

“Me, no. I got no one to lose. I’ve been on my own since high school. Only had a mom. She didn’t give a shit about me. I lost contact with her years ago.” Gavin didn’t seem fazed by the question.

“Oh, I see.” Luke wasn’t sure how to respond. “I’ve only got my father. My mother died from cancer two years ago.”

“Condolences.” Gavin replied. “Family wasn’t really focused on in my house growing up, but I can see your father means a lot to you.”

Luke nodded, not knowing what else to say. “How long are you going to stay with this group?”

Gavin looked around. “As long as it works for me. As long as it’s safe here.”

*And no one knows how long that will be*. Luke kept his thought to himself. He supposed his situation, apart from the family thing, was the same as Gavin’s. Luke and his father would stay here as long as it was safe.

Luke thanked Gavin for the meal and got up to check on his father.

Minjun was sleeping in the front seat when Luke approached the vehicle. Luke considered waking his father but thought better of it, instead taking a seat on the hood.

Luke sat, watching a family of three eat their meal at another picnic table. If he didn’t know their situation, he might think they were just breaking at a rest stop, snacking before hitting the road again.

Luke turned on the hood to look at his father again, still sleeping. Worry about his father kept humming its tune in the background of his thoughts. His father was tough but also older. Luke didn’t know how much “roughing it” his father could handle, especially if he didn’t eat.

He had to get his father to eat something soon. A few old candy bars and popcorn just weren’t enough. Luke feared his father might get sick or too weak to travel if he went without eating real food for days on end. It seemed giving up his store, running away from the danger, had done something to his father.

Luke resigned himself to making his father eat something as soon as he woke. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. His father could be stubborn, but so could Luke. They may argue about it, but his father was going to eat.

The family finished their meal, moving away from the table. Their little boy ran ahead of his parents, skipping along the weedy path leading into a large parking lot.

The boy’s mother yelled for the boy to slow down, followed by the boy’s father.

Almost a typical day, Luke thought as he began planning the argument with his father.

Perhaps they would both work up an appetite.

Chapter 8

Angelika's container ship ran aground just outside La Madre, Quebec.

Swimming the short distance to shore was not difficult. Angelika kept her small group of changed ones quiet.

The abandoned container ship was noticed not too long afterward. However, the distracting matter of a global catastrophe prevented any thorough investigation into the ship crew's fate.

Angelika could sense the rhythms and frequencies changing around her. The transformation moving across North America worked like a direct line to Angelika's mind, allowing her to determine when the odds began shifting in her favor.

La Madre and the towns around it were easy sources of replenishment, most being killed swiftly. Some were allowed to turn, becoming berserkers themselves. Only a handful shared the same fate as Jan, joining Angelika's inner circle.

It was necessary to prepare for what came next.

Angelika knew others like her existed. She could sense them as they could sense her.

Conflict was inevitable. It would end in death for many, but not all. The vanquished who remained alive would be assimilated by their conqueror.

Like her peers, Angelika was driven to dominate her kind. The victor taking in energy from all the others, evolving into something new.

It was this new being Angelika felt driven to become. It was her purpose.

She must prepare and be worthy of transformation.

Other beings Angelika did not understand but could feel were also joining together. They would become The Portal.

Angelika's new form would stand at the portal, welcoming ancient ones of immense energy. She longed to join with their energy. It promised to sustain her infinitely.

Jan stood alongside Angelika outside St. Quentin Arena. Several people from the small town had gathered there, making it a final refuge.

Angelika's horde attacked brutally and in haste, no longer trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Any organized official resistance had vanished, police and military forces being overrun or regrouping elsewhere to fortify positions.

Faint yells and cries of panic filled the night air from within the arena. Sounds of gunfire echoed against the building's walls, traveling from scattered locations throughout the town.

Angelika began walking toward the white double doors, separated in the middle by two panes of semi-transparent glass. One pane was almost shattered entirely, run through with the head of a teenage girl.

Jan followed closely after Angelika. Synced with her movements, they operated as a single mind inhabiting two bodies.

Angelika stepped through the door on the left, partially held open by a body on the floor.

A few screams could still be heard, but those would cease quickly as Angelika's berserkers drained the last refugees.

Aside from the two dead bodies at the entrance, little blood spilled within the small arena that previously served as a hockey rink and concert hall.

Valeena, one of Angelika's more brutish drainers, stood halfway up along the stadium seating. She mercilessly crushed a man's skull, her tentacles extending deep within.

The man's eyes rolled back into his head as his body convulsed slightly. Valeena drained him within seconds, allowing his body to flop down onto the crude stadium bench seat below.

Each member of Angelika's small horde was slightly different regarding aggression and intelligence. Jan, for example. She chose to join with him completely. His mind harmonized with hers seamlessly. Valeena embodied savagery, with a body and energy suited for quick domination of victims.

From start to finish, it had taken Angelika's swarm less than twenty minutes to kill or turn nearly three hundred of the town's residents in this confined space.

The town's population drained of mind energy, Angelika reached out to her turned ones, exiting the arena and heading west.

Jan followed closest, and then the others. Some lingered, a quirk perhaps of their transformation, routinely defying Angelika in subtle ways.

Angelika was still evolving within herself, her transformation not yet complete. She was not able to absolutely control the defiant ones.

It remained to be seen how this might influence her chances of victory over others like her.

A force pushed Angelika to gather mind energy and prepare those who moved with her.

Chapter 9

"I haven't seen anything but smoke on shore since yesterday." Gerald continued scanning the shoreline to their port side. "Maybe the crazies ran off."

Conrad sat on the bow, looking ahead to nowhere in particular. "You want me to let you off so you can check?"

"Grumpy and funny this morning huh?" Gerald turned away from Conrad, now scanning behind them.

The boat floated gently in the small harbor, carved into the shore by developers to provide a safe haven for watercraft owned by wealthy homeowners nearby.

"What are you worried about anyway, Connie?" Gerald turned toward the river moving just outside the bay to their right. "We got enough food to last for a least six more weeks."

"Then what?" Conrad allowed contempt to show in his tone. "We need to start planning now, not when our food runs out."

"Take a day and relax brother. You've been twisted up since we got on this boat. You'll think better if you clear your head for a day. Chill out." Gerald lowered his binoculars, turning to face Conrad.

"Do you already have something set up somewhere?" Conrad locked eyes with Gerald. "Just waiting for the optimal moment to dazzle me again?"

"I might. But it's not the same digs as the place we were stayin." Gerald admitted.

"Tell me about this place you got." Conrad looked back toward the water, starting to feel less grumpy despite himself.

"Rich dude, father of the guy I was given a beat down to in the garage actually." Gerald paused, smiling to himself. "Anyway, he owns a country estate thirty miles or so out of the city limits. We gotta get to land and get a car to get there, but the two of us? Come on! No problem."

"Maybe we should go down the river a bit. See if things get quieter, less smoky." Conrad looked back toward the dock. "Say farewell to our friend there."

Gerald followed Conrad's gaze. "Damn Fucker! He was quick, wasn't he?"

The thing of interest to Conrad and Gerald stood at the dock's edge, close to where they pushed away. Its head continued to jerk back and forth, routinely snapping back to lock in on the boat again.

"Indeed." Conrad agreed. "I don't want to get any closer and find out if those things can swim. Also, we don't want to go ashore where it can see us."

"Okay." Gerald nodded. "I'll get us out on the river. Enjoy the sun brother. It's gonna be a beautiful day."

Gerald patted Conrad's shoulder as he headed up the ladder to start the boat's engine. Conrad forced a grin, willing himself not to wince when Gerald patted him.

As Gerald started the engine and began moving the boat out of the small harbor and into the river, Conrad watched the berserker on shore.

Its attention remained focused on the yacht. Conrad saw the creature jump into the water as the ship entered the river. A few moments of splashing, then nothing.

*Where did it go?* Conrad grabbed Gerald's binoculars and began surveying the area around the dock.

Soon the dock and the harbor vanished from view. Conrad lowered the binoculars, turning to join his brother above him.

"Did you see it jump?" Conrad asked as he stepped off the ladder.

"Uh, no. I was driven." Gerald kept his eyes ahead. "Where did it go?"

"I lost sight of it after it jumped in the water." Conrad turned, looking behind the boat. "I have no idea where it went."

"Well, I doubt it can swim as fast as this boat on the river." Gerald chuckled. "Nothing to worry about. We'll be way away from it soon."

Conrad shook his head, not convinced but unable to do anything about it.

"We'll get down the river. See if things settle down. We should stay on the boat if we can a while longer. We got enough food and supplies. It's safer for now." Gerald didn't look at Conrad as he spoke.

Conrad said nothing, merely continued looking ahead. Gerald was right, but Conrad somehow felt exposed out in the boat. He liked having corners and stuff around him. It felt safer.

Neither spoke as Gerald continued steering the boat downriver. It was still early, but the sun was already making it quite warm outside. It would be hot by midday.

Conrad felt frustration building in him again. He could not let go of his resentment at being hung out to dry. That and the hitmen Sal had likely sent caused Conrad to feel numb, continuous anger that never went away.

It was difficult for Conrad not to take his frustration out on Gerald. It wasn't Gerald's fault, and he needed Gerald.

Sighing, Conrad nodded and took a seat up top, telling himself to enjoy the morning while the temperature remained cool.

Maybe he would just take a day to relax and not worry about anything. Clear his mind.

Conrad looked over at Gerald. He stood behind the wheel, smiling as he continued looking ahead of them.

*Must be nice*. Conrad chuckled to himself bitterly, resuming his effort to ignore the anger, if only for a short while.

Chapter 10

“We saw signs of people camping a few miles away, but the fires were cold. It looked like they hadn’t been there in quite a while.” Gloria finished reporting on her scouting mission as Cowboy and Lenard sat quietly on the front steps of her porch. “Someone’s been walking on trails bordering the national forest recently, but it looks like they just kept moving.”

Neither Cowboy nor Lenard commented when Gloria stopped talking.

“You two have a fight or something?” Gloria moved around to stand in front of them. “Spill.”

“We saw them.” Lenard spoke up first. “The headsuckers are moving north past Sandpoint and Ponderay.”

“You saw them?” The alarm was clear in Gloria’s voice. “Did they see you?”

“Yeah, they did.” Lenard sounded dejected. “They chased us. We barely got away.”

“Shit!” Gloria’s reply came out louder than she intended. “I thought you were gonna just do some recon. Not make friends with them.”

Lenard looked over to Cowboy, keeping quiet but not hiding the anger on his face.

“Cowboy?” Gloria followed Lenard’s gaze. “What happened?”

“I wanted to examine some of the bodies on the road. Check their heads. A small group of them spotted us while I was doing that.” Cowboy kept his eyes on the driveway, speaking calmly. “We were too far away from the Jeep so I had to distract them while Lenard went back to get it.”

“They coulda got us.” Lenard’s voice was shaky, a mix of anger and fear. “We shoulda ran when we first saw them.”

“Maybe.” Cowboy admitted. “But we did get some intel for our trouble.”

Gloria’s mind was already writing a script for the scolding she wanted to give Cowboy. Still, she decided that was probably not the best idea.

“What did you find out?” She asked instead.

Cowboy didn’t reply immediately. It looked to Gloria like he was still processing their experience.

Finally, Cowboy spoke up. “They kept their distance once they got close. They wouldn’t attack us. I don’t know why.”

“They just circled us. Cowboy shot a few of them as some kind of test I guess.” Lenard added. “He bolted toward them as a distraction so I could run back for the Jeep.”

“Did they chase you in the Jeep?” Gloria pressed. “Are they headed up the road?”

“I didn’t see any of them as we drove away.” Cowboy replied. “I don’t know which direction they’re headed in now.”

“Shit.” Gloria felt her anxiety turn up a notch. “We gotta keep watch for’em then. That’ll mean going out again to check.”

“Agreed.” Cowboy stood up. “I’ll do it alone next time. I’m better on my own.”

Gloria watched Cowboy head down the driveway and turn toward his house. Then she turned to look at Lenard.

“Did he say something to you? Piss you off?” Gloria moved closer to Lenard.

“I think what he did was an unnecessary risk. He told me if I didn’t get used to it, I wouldn’t last much longer.” Lenard looked up to Gloria, eyes watering a little. “Cowboy’s an asshole.”

Gloria didn’t know if Cowboy risking an engagement with the headsuckers was necessary. However, she had come to rely on Lenard’s management skills, and he was currently an asset she didn’t want to lose.

It didn’t surprise her that Cowboy didn’t go soft on Lenard either, but she would speak to him alone when she had time. Get a better read on things.

“I’m glad you made it back safe, regardless of what happened out there. I need you here.” Gloria put her hand on Lenard’s shoulder. “Take a walk or something. Clear your head. I’ll handle things around here for a while.”

Lenard smiled weakly, nodding. “Thanks Gloria. I will. I’m glad we made it back too.”

Gloria pulled her hand away as Lenard stood up, smiled at her once again, and headed down the driveway toward his camper trailer.

Gloria kept her face expressionless as the anxiety within her grew steadily. She was a master at hiding her emotions. This was no different. Gloria could keep her cool on the outside, and soon, she would push the anxiety down, burying it somewhere deep.

She did agree with Cowboy that more interactions with the headsuckers were probably coming soon. She didn’t know how Lenard would hold himself together, but she didn’t want to lose him.

He had somehow managed to become a friend while she wasn’t paying attention.

That said, Gloria knew herself. She would fight alongside him, but Gloria would not risk her life to protect Lenard. Her survival instinct was just too strong for that. Gloria would look out for herself first.

She took a deep breath, forcing all the anxiety to leave her body.

It was time to make the rounds, let everyone know she was there, keeping an eye on them.

Chapter 11

"We have to go Jony!" Tobias was nearly shouting, all patience abandoning him.

A loud guttural yell from outside made him shiver uncontrollably as he turned toward the window.

"I can't leave Boppy Pops here!" Jony's voice was crackly, as she was nearly crying at the thought of losing her toy poodle.

"Boppy Pops is going to get us killed if we stay here any longer." Anger building, Tobias grabbed Jony's arm and started pulling her away from their master bedroom doors. "We can still make it out the back. At least I think we can."

The sound of something beating on wood resonated up from downstairs. It was accompanied by an inhuman yell, followed by screaming downstairs inside the house.

Tobias could hear one of the maids yelling for the others to follow her out the back door.

Jony struggled against Tobias, trying to get back to the bedroom. "Just leave me here. I can't live without BoPo!"

"You have to listen to me love. We have to go now!" Tobias continued dragging Jony toward the staircase leading downstairs.

He had almost pulled Jony over to the stairway when another crashing sound was quickly followed by an unmistakable growl. The thing had made it into the house.

Tobias could hear it running across the floor toward the staircase.

In changing direction, Tobias began shoving Jony from the staircase toward his upstairs office. "Too late. We'll have to jump out the window."

Jony continued to struggle, seemingly oblivious to the thing growling louder as it ran up the stairs. "It can't have BoPo!"

In complete panic, Tobias slapped Jony hard across the face. "Listen, BoPo is gone! We're dead if we don't get out the window now!"

Jony's eyes teared up as she started to cry, still struggling to break free of Tobias. "You hit me! How dare you!"

Tobias turned the handle to his office door, pushing the door open as he heard footsteps reaching the top of the stairs. Growling again, the crazed intruder leaped toward Jony.

Jony didn't notice. She was looking directly at Tobias, continuing to hurl insults at him. "You scoundrel Tobias! I will see that…"

Jony never finished her sentence as the enraged creature bounded onto her from behind. Jony screamed, a look of utter confusion on her face.

Tobias stood frozen as the berserker wrapped its legs around Jony's torso, its hands closed around her head, dragging her to the floor on top of it.

Jony continued screaming. Tobias could not make himself move as he watched in horror.

With its hands clasped around Jony's head in a death grip, tiny tentacles began to protrude from the creature's fingers, boring into Jony's scalp and forehead.

Jony's screaming faded, replaced with shallow choking noises as her eyes rolled back in their sockets.

Her body convulsed softly as the creature fed on her.

Tobias could barely pull himself out of the trance. He shook his head suddenly, willing himself to move.

Taking one last look at Jony being fed on, Tobias scooted into the room as quietly as possible, closing the door behind him and locking it.

He winced as the lock made a crisp clicking sound, sliding into place to secure the door.

Quickly, Tobias moved over to the window, pushing it open with a barely audible grunt.

In seconds he was halfway out the window, one leg dangling over the side, followed by the other. Tobias lowered himself as best he could. Hanging about ten feet above the ground, he let go of the trim along the window's border.

Tobias flopped to the ground clumsily, crying out as he landed on his back.

Scooting across the ground while also trying to stand up, Tobias made several attempts at getting to his feet before finally achieving his objective.

The garage was about forty feet away to his right. A large, hedged-in garden to his left, nearly twice that distance away.

Tobias looked back and forth between his two options, frantically trying to figure his odds of success with either choice.

The sound of another horrific animal growl traveling out through the open window to his office got him moving instantly.

He took off at a full sprint toward the garage. He would need to input the code for the garage door to get inside.

Fumbling with the input panel door, he finally managed to hold it up while inputting the code with his other hand. His fingers shook uncontrollably. It took two attempts before the garage doors began rising.

Tobias didn't wait. He crouched and scooted himself under the door as soon as possible. Once inside, he rushed to the driver's side of his BMW X5 M. It unlocked as he approached, sensing the key fob in his pocket.

The vehicle chirped softly. Tobias opened the door just enough to slide inside. Pressing his thumb again on the ignition, the dash display panel lit up as the vehicle started.

Tobias switched the SUV into reverse, not looking behind him as he floored the gas pedal. The BMW shot out of the garage, scratching the side of the door on its way out.

He yanked the steering wheel around as the vehicle continued moving backward, trying to get a straight shot at the long drive leading away from his house.

As he did so, Tobias glanced at the open window to his upstairs office. He saw a blur of something jumping out and landing on the ground.

The thing that had killed his wife just moments before stood looking expressionless at him.

It took off, running toward him just a second later. Tobias switched the SUV into drive, spinning out the tires briefly as the vehicle lurched forward and began accelerating quickly away from the house.

Checking his rearview mirror, Tobias could see the creature still chasing him but falling farther behind.

Tobias sighed, tears beginning to run along his cheeks as he sped away.

He still needed to decide where he was going. He was utterly alone.

Fighting the urge to cry, Tobias couldn't make the last few feet of the driveway without running off the road. He nearly lost control of the vehicle as it lurched wildly over the bumpy terrain alongside the highway.

*Just drive. Get away.* Tobias hit the steering wheel, feeling suddenly helpless.

*What am I going to do*? The next few weeks of his life were going to prove challenging, to say the least.

Chapter 12

Roger stood, hands raised, as the group’s leader circled behind him. “You’re all alone, huh?”

“Yes, my friend was shot a few days ago. He’s dead.” Roger looked straight ahead, keeping his voice even.

“Well, we aren’t too keen on takin in strangers. It’s too dangerous. Sides, you got nothin to trade anyway.” The man continued standing behind Roger. “You best be movin along then.”

“I can be useful. I can get things for you. I know where there’s food. You let me stay and I’ll take you to it.” Roger tried not to sound desperate. Being on his own the past few days had taken its toll on him. “I am also handy with a gun, a bat, an axe. I can help protect your group.”

“We should let him stay. See if he’s useful.” A woman spoke up somewhere out of Roger’s field of view. “We already lost Sid, Merrell, and Geena. We need able bodies.”

“Quiet Abby.” The man walked around to face Roger. “I’m Jesse. What’s your name?”

“Roger. Pleasure to meet you, Jesse.” Roger met Jesse’s gaze.

“You an honest man, Roger?” Jesse moved closer to Roger.

“I am.” Roger paused. “But, me sayin it don’t mean shit. I want a chance to prove myself. Just a chance.”

“Huh.” Jesse turned his head away to spit. “You don’t got the look of a cheat. I guess that’s somethin.”

Jesse looked around at his people for a minute, then turned to Roger, waving his arm. “Come on in then. We’ll see how it goes. Step outta line I put a bullet in your head. Got that?”

“Loud and clear.” Roger nodded.

Jesse led Roger through the makeshift barricade Jesse’s people had built, blocking entry to their little camp. The camp was located in what used to be a gated trailer park community.

As Roger followed Jesse into the trailer park, he saw a few people sitting around a campfire in front of one mobile dwelling.

“We killed the crazies inside and took over the place. Threw the bodies over the back wall.” Jesse explained as he led Roger to a small table off the driving path. “Eat up. Bert’ll show you a place to sleep. We’ll let you rest a little. Then you’re gonna show us to the food you mentioned before.”

Without another word, Jesse left Roger standing in front of the table. Another man, presumably Bert, stood next to Roger at the table.

“You like beans and potatoes?” The man asked.

“I like anything that’s food about now.” Roger felt his mouth watering a little.

“I hear that.” The man picked up a bowl and scooped beans from a large kettle. “Have a seat. Eat up. I’ll take ya over to one of the trailers after.”

Roger did as instructed, sitting down at one end of the table. “Thank you.”

“My name’s Bert, as Jesse already said.” Bert plopped a few spoonfuls of mashed potatoes into another bowl and handed it to Roger.

“Roger. Much appreciated, Bert.” Roger accepted the bowl and sat it down next to his beans, immediately helping himself to the contents of both dishes.

When he was finished, Bert took the empty bowls from Roger and led him over to one of the trailers. “Get some shut eye while you can. Jesse’ll wanna get to that food you mentioned in just a bit.”

Roger nodded to Bert and let himself into the trailer, which looked messy inside but not dirty. It was evident that Jesse or somebody had looted the place for any valuable items.

Roger made his way to the back of the trailer, finding one of the bedrooms. The bed was unmade, but it did have a blanket and pillows. That was more than Roger had seen in over a week. He flopped down, falling asleep before getting the covers pulled over himself.

A hand shaking his leg brought Roger out of his slumber in a start, causing him to jerk awake.

“Easy, Roger.” Jesse backed away from Roger. “Didn’t mean to startle ya. It’s time to show us to that food you mentioned.”

Roger rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, of course.” Roger yawned as he sat on the bed, slowly getting to his feet.

“I’ll wait for you outside. Take a moment to get your bearins and meet me by the gate.” Jesse turned, heading out of the trailer.

“Will do.” Roger sat back down on the bed for a moment. He suddenly realized he hadn’t slept more than a dozen hours in the past four days. The sleep he did get was not restful, to say the least.

Roger took a few deep, slow breaths, standing up once again. He looked around for his shoes but quickly realized they were still on his feet. He hadn’t bothered with taking them off before crashing onto the bed.

Three minutes later, Roger was standing by the front gate. “I saw a few turned on my way here. They are closer to where the food is located. They might still be around.”

“I’m lookin forward to seein what you can do about that if we run into’em.” Jesse smiled, handing Roger an aluminum bat and a knife.

Roger took one last look around him. Along with Jesse was Bert and a woman Roger didn’t know, making up their little group of adventurers.

All three of Roger’s companions had handguns on their belts. In addition to his gun, Bert held a large crowbar in his right hand.

It took about four hours to arrive where the food Roger had promised was located. It was a warehouse building in the small industrial district of a town called Ellensville.

They saw none of the turned ones Roger had mentioned during their trip to the warehouse. It was a quiet journey.

Roger led the small group around to the back of the warehouse. A door that had been pried open was held shut by a small dumpster. Together with Bert and Jesse, Roger pushed the dumpster aside, allowing the door to swing open.

“Food’s a little way in past the door. I’ll go first.” Roger headed into the building. Jesse followed directly behind him, then the others.

They walked through a small room just beyond the door, heading through another doorway into a much larger space.

“To the right.” Roger changed direction, heading past two rows of half-empty, large metal shelves.

At the third row, he stopped, stepping aside to allow Jesse and the others to get a clear view of the shelves.

“Damn!” Bert exclaimed. “That’s quite a haul.”

Jesse nodded, moving past Roger and into the row of metal shelves. The shelves contained various non-perishable food items and some toiletries as well.

“I’ll get a flat cart from the other room.” Roger began moving away from the aisle. “We can load it up and push it back to the trailer park.”

“Sounds good.” Jesse picked up and inspected some of the packaged food.

A few minutes later, Roger was back with a flat cart. “I can grab another if this one gets too full.”

Bert and the woman Roger didn’t know began bringing over sacks of rice and beans, laying those down first. Then they headed back to get some smaller items to stack on top. Roger joined them.

Jesse took a few minutes to explore the rest of the warehouse. He returned with a few items, including a radio, a gas lantern, and some fuel to fill up the lantern. “Found this stuff on a table across the room.”

“The first cart’s full.” The woman informed Jesse. “We got the other cart and filled it up too.”

“That should do.” Jesse replied. “Let’s get’em out of here and get home.”

“It’ll be easier to take them out the garage door.” Roger began pulling one of the carts out of the larger room.

Bert followed with the other cart. Roger led them over to the big garage door, leaving the cart temporarily to manually crank the large door open.

Roger had the door open and was turning back for his cart when they heard something growl somewhere outside.

“Is that a dog?” Bert asked, moving toward the open garage door to get a better look.

“Stay ba…” Before Roger could finish speaking, something lunged at Bert. It took a few seconds for Roger to realize it was a dog.

Bert yelled frantically as the dog chomped down on his forearm, trying to pull Bert to the ground.

Jesse and the woman drew their guns but couldn’t get a clear shot at the dog.

Roger could see saliva dripping from the dog’s mouth. It sparkled faintly.

*Shit! Animals too.* Not having a gun, Roger grabbed his bat from beside the garage door, bringing it up for a swing as he rushed the dog.

Roger swung with all his strength, hitting the dog squarely in its rib cage.

The dog stumbled a little but seemed to tighten its grip on Bert instead of letting go. Bert cried out in pain as he danced around the room with the dog hanging onto his forearm.

“Shoot it, goddammit!” Bert yelled, hitting the dog with his other hand. Bert couldn’t reach his gun, which was situated on the side of his attacker.

Roger got himself lined up with Bert to take another swing. He aimed for the same spot as before, hitting his target with more force this time.

The dog let go of Bert’s arm, falling to the ground.

Roger heard two shots as the dog was flopping around on the ground, attempting to get back up. The dog fell back to the ground, not moving.

The woman spoke up now. “Fucking animals can be turned too! Unbelievable.”

“Arlene. Check on Bert.” Jesse commanded. “Roger, stay with me.”

Roger followed Jesse out the garage door. Together they made a quick circle around the back of the warehouse, returning to find Bert and Arlene sitting on a bench just inside.

“How ya doin Bert?” Jesse tried to sound calm, but his face betrayed him. Jesse was apprehensive.

“Damn thing sunk into me good.” Bert let out a few deep breaths, wincing in pain.

“I found some first aid stuff. That faucet has running water. I’ll get it rinsed out and bandage it up.” Arlene didn’t look at Jesse as she gently nudged Bert to stand up and follow her to a sink farther back in the room.

Roger moved closer to Jesse, speaking in a low voice. “Can bites turn people?”

Jesse shook his head. “I didn’t know animals were affected fore today. Geena got bit. She died a few days later.”

Roger said nothing in return, watching along with Jesse as Arlene cleaned up Bert’s injury.

“We made quite a bit of noise.” Roger turned to look outside. “Could attract some crazies.”

As if on cue, a loud yell that didn’t sound quite human reached them from somewhere close by.

“Get that door closed.” Jesse pushed Roger toward the garage opening. “We gotta get quiet fast.”

Roger rushed to the garage door, cranking it down as fast as he could.

The door came to rest on the concrete floor beneath it with a thud, followed by another haunting yell outside.

“It’s getting closer.” Roger whispered to Jesse. “We should move deeper into the warehouse.”

Jesse nodded, gesturing for Arlene and Bert to follow him and Roger into the larger supply room.

Roger waited for everyone to enter the room, then shut the door behind them.

“Get low, between the shelves. Stay as quiet as possible.” Roger whispered.

Jesse and the others did so, sitting in one of the aisles of metal shelves.

They didn’t hear anything for several moments. Then another yell, followed by someone banging on the garage door.

Bert and Arlene covered their ears as the banging continued. Jesse fixed his eyes on the door to the room where they had sought refuge.

Roger crawled over to Jesse as the banging continued. “If it can’t get in, it’ll probably lose interest and wander off eventually.”

Jesse nodded, saying nothing in return.

The banging slowed after ten minutes or so. They heard a few more sounds of someone hitting the walls outside in random places, then nothing.

“We can’t leave this place tonight. It’s too dangerous. We gotta ride out the night here.” Roger covered his mouth as he whispered into Jesse’s ear.

Jesse looked toward Bert and Arlene. “I don’t know if Bert can make it that long without gettin some better attention on that wound.”

“If we leave before tomorrow. None of us are gonna make it.” Roger raised his voice above a whisper. “I’ve been through a couple of run-ins with these things. Best thing we can do is wait. These things tend to linger for a long time once something gets their attention.”

Jesse looked around the room, then back at Bert. Roger could tell he was teetering toward making a run for it.

“I was with people. Same thing happened to us. They ran. I didn’t. I’m still here. I heard them screaming when those things got them, just outside. We all waited over twelve hours. The turned are patient. We’ll all die if go out there too soon.” Roger tried to keep his voice calm.

Jesse lowered his face to the floor, holding it there for several seconds. “Shit. We’ll stay here for the night. Fuckin things already took too much away from me.”

Roger let out a quiet sigh, rolling over onto his back. He could sympathize with Jesse, but the odds were too much against them getting out safely.

No one spoke as the hours passed slowly. Bert had begun shivering uncontrollably shortly after nightfall. As the evening wore on, his breathing grew raspy and shallow.

All Jesse could do was sit by and watch Bert deteriorate, unable to offer any comfort.

Roger sat away from the others, relieved he had convinced Jesse to stay. Seeing horrible deaths hadn’t been easy, but Roger felt little emotion watching Bert suffer. After losing Tommy and witnessing others falling to the horrors outside, Roger found himself growing numb to it all.

He understood strength in numbers but wouldn’t allow himself the luxury of getting close to anyone ever again. Friends were a liability.

Roger clearly saw his value in offering something to a group. He could fight and find things, which were assets he could trade for safety.

Jesse still held on to the fantasy he could protect the ones he loved. Love and compassion, at least to Roger, were excellent ways to get oneself killed in this new reality.

No one slept through the night.

Roger kept his distance as Bert struggled to hold on till morning.

Chapter 13

Yǔ xī gasped, squinting as utter darkness gave way to the agonizing sting of a thousand tiny needles behind her eyes.

Bright lights flooded the room, emanating from the ceiling.

“Hello Justine. Or do you prefer Yǔ xī?” A man’s voice filled the room.

As her eyes adjusted, Yǔ xī could see that she was sitting behind a table and alone in the room. The room was barren except for a table in front of her and the cold steel chair supporting her.

“I am going to ask you questions. I want straightforward answers. Only clear and complete answers are acceptable. If you choose not to cooperate, you go back for more conditioning. Say yes if you understand.”

“Yes.” Yǔ xī’s voice faltered. She had not spoken aloud in weeks to anyone.

“Excellent. You will see that I am reasonable if you cooperate. Your life is not over. You can thrive again.” The man’s voice sounded friendly, almost cheerful.

Yǔ xī felt broken. She knew she would tell this voice anything. She wanted to please her captor. Be obedient.

“Tell me about the artifact. Why did you value it? What does it do?” Now slightly less friendly, the voice went straight into asking questions.

“It can do things beyond my understanding. We used it to develop a formula intended for release upon the world’s population.” Yǔ xī sputtered, not wanting to show any sign of hesitation. “I wanted to continue the work of understanding it. Using it to control future events, if possible.”

“Do you know what will happen now that this… formula… has been released?”

“It was too soon. We were still months away from completing the formula. They attacked the facility. Too soon.”

Yǔ xī felt tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn’t understand why she was crying. She only wanted to please the one questioning her.

“Is there any way to stop what’s happening?”

“No. I don’t know. Probably not. I was relying on scientists and other experts to figure it out. I’m not a scientist.”

“Were you working with anyone else? Tell me about them.”

“I…We…There’s…” Yǔ xī found herself stammering. This confused her. Why was she not answering the question?

“Yes, continue. Complete sentences please.”

“I…” Yǔ xī couldn’t make her vocal cords work. Her mouth froze.

“I will give you another chance. Answer me and we can continue. Fail to answer and you go back for conditioning.”

Panic filled Yǔ xī’s body. She felt tingling throughout, fearing a return to the other room.

Yǔ xī began hyperventilating, then convulsing as her brain shorted out. Spasming wildly, she lost consciousness, falling over in the chair, continuing to spasm as her body jerked across the floor.

“Get in there. Get her stabilized.” Sebridge ordered, leaning over a table in the observation room. His knuckles pressed hard onto the table’s surface, turning white from the pressure. “We can’t let her die. We need more intel.”

Technicians were already scrambling out of the room before the Colonel finished speaking.

Sebridge stood upright again, crossing his arms as he watched medical personnel beginning CPR on Yǔ xī. Her body continued to spasm. Technicians hovered over her body, yelling frantically at each other, their panic levels rising. Sebridge didn’t accept failure to follow orders.

Yǔ xī ceased her spasming as IV’s were hooked up to her in both arms. A gurney was brought into the room for her. She was hurriedly carried out and taken directly to the on-sight medical bay.

“Let me know when she’s ready, and we’ll start again.” Sebridge turned away from the observation window, debating whether to start on the second captive or wait until tomorrow.

“Sir, her vitals are erratic. She won’t be ready for further interrogation for at least a few days.” A technician held a hardline receiver away from her face, avoiding direct eye contact with Sebridge.

“I want to know the second she’s ready for another round of questioning. We’re going to get the answers we need. In the meantime, prep our second guest for tomorrow. We start at 0500.” Sebridge didn’t wait for a response, leaving the room almost before he finished speaking.

“He’s going to kill all of them doing this.” Another technician muttered under his breath, watching the door in case Sebridge returned unexpectedly.

“That’s not our concern. Do your job and keep your mouth shut.” The woman, still holding the phone away from her ear, made it known with her tone that there would be no further discussion.

Sebridge headed to medical to check on Yǔ xī. He found her lying in a bed, restrained and unconscious.

He had no concern for her well-being. He only wanted her healthy enough to continue the interrogation. All of his prisoners would probably die from either conditioning or questioning. If they survived, perhaps they could prove helpful with the artifact.

As soon as he was done with them, Sebridge would shoot these traitors in the head. He needed to get actionable information and utility from his prisoners.

The world falling apart outside, Sebridge found himself willing to use every tool at his disposal.

Chapter 14

Genevieve approached a rural airfield about seventy-five miles inland from the eastern coast of the United States.

She found landing the plane more challenging than taking off. It took three attempts to put the aircraft down. Genevieve brought the small jet to a stop just off the edge of the single airstrip.

Taking a few minutes to settle her nerves, Genevieve pulled herself out of the pocket-sized cockpit. The dead pilot lay where she stabbed him, blood caked all over his face and clothes.

Rummaging through storage compartments in the plane yielded a few things of value. Genevieve found a weather alert radio, two flashlights, a small backpack, and a first aid kit.

There were various non-perishable food items stored in cabinets behind the main cabin. Genevieve loaded the backpack with crackers, chips, and granola bars.

Genevieve found a few channels broadcasting warning messages while in the cockpit, but nothing beyond that.

Using the plane's GPS, she calculated The Mountain's location twelve hundred miles away from her current location. Genevieve needed to move, find a car, and avoid bandits and drainers.

A map of the United States could prove helpful.

Exiting the plane, Genevieve walked to the small office near the airstrip's vehicle entrance.

The door stood cracked open.

"Hello." Genevieve held up her knife, still dirty from the pilot's blood. "Anyone around?"

No answer.

The office appeared deserted. There was a modest waiting area inside. A couple of Styrofoam cups, half filled with stale coffee, and an open bag of chips sat on a wooden table in front of a disheveled couch.

Beyond the waiting room was another section, separated by a door. There was a square opening in the wall with a desk on the other side where a receptionist might greet visitors.

Genevieve tried the door, finding it unlocked. Beyond the door, she found a cramped office with an opening leading into the receptionist area.

The office lay full of clutter. Papers littered the floor like leaves after a storm. Broken shards of glass crunched under Genevieve's shoes as she poked a toe through the rubbish and tamped it down. It looked like someone had been looking for something here, or there had been a tussle. Rubble crunched underfoot, and glass shards stabbed at her feet. She noticed blood splattered across the back wall in a wide swath, dried in dark blotches.

Genevieve listened for any sounds of people, then busied herself looking around the desk, cabinets, and floor for any maps.

As she was about to give up, she looked at the wall beside the door leading into the office.

A dry chuckle escaped her mouth as Genevieve walked over to the wall, removing a map of the United States hanging on the wall in a picture frame.

She carried the frame into the reception area and turned it over to pull off the back. Rolling up the map, Genevieve exited the building.

There were two vehicles in the parking lot, an old Chevy pickup and a newer model Toyota SUV. Genevieve checked both cars to see if either had any keys. Finding none, she returned to the small office to check for keys.

Near the receptionist's desk, she spotted a keychain with a Toyota emblem on one key. Soon she had the SUV started and headed out of the parking lot.

With just under three-quarters of a tank of gas, she figured the Toyota would get her about three hundred miles closer to The Mountain. That was, of course, barring any run-ins with drainers or outlaws.

The sun would set in a few hours. She didn't want to risk driving at night. Pulling off the road, Genevieve unrolled the map. It was a general overview of the lower forty-eight states. It provided no detailed driving routes.

She could see the general direction she needed to go but no specific route to The Mountain.

Once she got closer, it would be much easier to navigate, as Genevieve was more familiar with the area around The Mountain.

She needed to keep driving in that general direction and stay off the roads at night. A car with headlights on could draw unnecessary attention.

Frowning, Genevieve steered the vehicle back onto the road and kept driving. She searched for a place to pull off for the night.

She passed several promising dirt roads, choosing one to her right. The road narrowed and curved, with tall trees on either side. Half a mile down the road, she crossed a bridge with a recreation area on the other side. Genevieve saw no other vehicles parked there.

She turned off the road, parking her vehicle behind a dense grouping of trees concealing her from the road. She spotted a fast-running, shallow creek under the bridge.

The park appeared well-manicured, a popular rest area for locals. Tonight it would serve as a safe place for Genevieve to rest and wash up in the creek.

She opened the driver's side door, staying still to listen for any unusual noises. Birds and leaves rustled along with a gentle breeze, but nothing extraordinary.

This would do for one night.

Chapter 15

"At least you still got your family. That's more than a lot of folks out there." Ed rested his hand on Charles's shoulder as he stood on the screened-in porch with a cup of coffee.

Charles sat in a rocking chair, face buried in his hands, saying nothing in return.

"Probably doesn't feel like it," Ed continued, "But it could've gone a lot worse for you. You still got most of your family. A wife and kids who need you to be strong for 'em."

Rubbing his hands over his face, Charles grunted in reluctant agreement, lifting his eyes to stare at some trees beyond the porch. "I really do appreciate what you did for us. We would probably all be dead if not for you Ed."

"I had to. I couldn't listen to all that screamin and shootin and do nothin." Ed took another sip of his coffee. "Those bastards were a rough bunch."

Charles snorted in disgust. "Yeah, to say the least."

"Your Misses is down by the grave we dug for your son. You should go talk to her. See how she's doin." Ed tossed the rest of his coffee through the screen.

"I know her Ed. She needs space for a while. I'll go to her when she's ready." Charles began rocking in the chair.

Ed patted Charles's shoulder again. "Well, I'll get some breakfast ready for the kiddos. See if they'll eat today."

Charles forced a smile. "Thank you. Really. For everything."

Ed left Charles on the porch, heading inside.

A few minutes later, Brianne came onto the porch to join Charles. "Hi, Dad. Have you been up long?"

Charles turned toward Brianne, forcing himself to smile again. "Yeah, a while." He lied. Charles had not slept in two days.

"I want to ask Ed to teach me how to shoot." Brianne took a seat in the other rocking chair. "You think he will?"

Charles looked away from Brianne, thinking about trying to talk her out of it, then decided it might be prudent.

"I think so." Charles answered. "But only if I can learn to shoot too."

Brianne's face lit up in surprise. "Really? You'd be okay with it?"

"It's probably an excellent idea, considering the type of people about in the world these days." Charles conceded.

"Will Mom be mad?" Brianne looked around, trying to find Charlene.

"Maybe, but she'll get over it. We gotta protect the family we have left." Charles replied.

Charles stretched the tired muscles all over his body. “You should go see your Mom. Give her a hug. She's down by Casey's grave." Charles hesitated, then added, "Don't mention the shooting thing just yet. Just see how she's doin."

Brianne mustered a weak smile, getting up from the chair. "She's depressed is how she's doing. I'll just give her a hug and be quiet."

"You're wise beyond your years young lady." Charles chuckled. "Give your dad a kiss and you can go."

Brianne kissed Charles on the forehead, then ran off the porch to find her mother.

Charles leaned back in his chair for a minute, then stood up, stretching and yawning this time, feeling knots all over his body.

He headed into the cabin to check on Ed's success at getting his kids to eat.

Chapter 16

Guam 1955

“You are all standing here today because you have managed to survive the experiments until now.” General Tibern strode back and forth slowly in front of his captive audience, enjoying the moment. “Soon, you will be tested outside of these walls. We want to see if our money is well spent.”

Five men faced the General. They were men with nothing to lose. The General had plucked them out of trouble in the civilian world, put them through boot camp, and then brought them to a small island.

“Thank you General. That was quite moving.” Dr. Siskee couldn’t help himself either. He enjoyed insulting Tibern with false compliments. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I must give these fine gentleman a thorough checkup.”

Tibern scoffed quietly, his head twitching. “Fine Siskee. See to it they are ready when I am.”

Siskee waited for Tibern to leave. “That man is such an obnoxious prick.”

Siskee spoke without addressing anyone in particular. He felt free to express himself in front of these men. They always remained silent, never reacting to anything he said.

“Mr. Ibrahim. Please have a seat.” Siskee waited for one of the men to step forward and join him at his work area in the front of the room. “How are you feeling Mr. Ibrahim?”

The man sat without speaking. “I guess I’ll find out soon enough.” Siskee didn’t expect a verbal response. None of these men talked to him directly. Only Tibern could make them speak.

“We’re taking a little blood today, and saliva.” Siskee prepared a syringe as he made small talk with his silent patient. “Nothing too invasive. At least not as long as you stay alive.”

One by one, Siskee took samples from the men, finally excusing them from the room when he had completed his task.

Returning to his lab, Siskee sat the samples on a shelf built into one of the walls. “Leong, please be a dear and run labs on all these samples as soon as possible.”

Leong looked over at Siskee from across the room, where she was standing next to a bed, examining another test subject. “Dr. This one has vitals now. It doesn’t make sense. We checked him after injection. He was dead.”

Siskee looked over at Leong, concern, and curiosity competing for expression on his face. “I know he was dead. I checked him myself.”

Curiosity won. Siskee hurried over to the bed. “Fascinating. How is this possible?”

“Should I draw blood?” Leong asked. “See if we find something there?”

“Yes, of course. Do that now.” Siskee replied.

“Most curious indeed,” Siskee muttered as Leong went to grab a syringe nearby.

Chapter 17

"You are good boy. I am stubborn father." Minjun's face showed a faint grin as he walked next to Luke.

Laughing out loud, Luke replied, "You are my father and I love you. I'm always going to look after your wellbeing."

Luke felt overwhelming relief that his father started eating again and moving around. Minjun's demeanor reflected his former self.

"I want you to not worry so much about me, my son." Minjun slowed, squeezing Luke's arm. "You must have strength to survive this, with or without me."

Luke turned toward his father. "With or without you?" Luke grew worried. "Why would you say that?"

"We are only at beginning of this unfortunate time." Minjun smiled, but his smile lacked any comfort. "It get worse before get better."

"You must be strong too then. I need you here with me." Luke struggled to keep his voice from shaking. "You should not talk about not being here."

Minjun looked away, taking in the surrounding view. "I in no hurry to go, son. Just being realistic. I old man."

Luke embraced his father. "You stay with me as long as you can. Promise me."

"I will stay. I will be strong for how long I can." Luke's father returned the embrace.

Luke was still hugging his father when the gunshots rang out from somewhere behind them, followed by voices yelling.

"What is it?" Minjun asked, confused as Luke pulled away from him.

"Shooting, in the direction of the parking lot. "You stay here. I'm gonna check it out."

Luke guided his father to one side of the path, stepping around to get past.

"Stay away from danger. It not safe." Minjun yelled after Luke.

"Just stay here! Don't follow me. Hide in the woods. I'll come find you after." Luke didn't turn to face his father, instead running back the way they had walked.

It took Luke about five minutes to reach the parking lot, running as fast as he could manage on the uneven terrain.

As he got closer, there were more gunshots, and he could hear a man crying in horror.

"Get off her, you bastard!" A man's voice cried out. "Get off her!"

Luke emerged into the parking lot to find three men standing around two people struggling on the ground.

As he drew closer, it became clear that the three men were in shock.

"What's going on?!" Luke yelled out as he approached the scene.

None of the men turned to address Luke. One man was holding a wooden bat and swung at the man on top of the scuffle. "Get 'em off her!"

The other two men stood crouching as if they were getting ready to fight but did not intervene.

The man with the bat continued to swing away at someone on the ground. "Stop it! You sick fuck!"

Luke got a better view, stopping next to the crouched men. A woman flailed on the ground, held by a man clawing at her face in a maniacal frenzy.

In desperation, she slapped the man's face and body.

"Get it off me Wade. It's trying…get…me."

Luke stopped next to the two men doing nothing, then knelt beside one of them, picking up a shovel.

Ramming the shovel into the attacker's head, Luke pushed him off the woman. She scooted away on her side, hyperventilating.

Luke didn't hesitate, bringing the back of the shovel down hard on the attacker's back.

Luke had never seen one of the turned up close, and he wasn't sure what was going on.

The attacker rolled out of Luke's reach before he could manage another swing with the shovel.

"Get her out of here!" Luke yelled over his shoulder as the attacker jumped to his feet, turning toward Luke.

Luke saw drool running down the attacker's chin with a faint sparkle. This was one of them.

The enraged thing charged Luke. This time Luke hesitated a split second too long. The drainer launched itself on top of him, pushing Luke to the ground.

Luke had held on to the shovel, however. As he fell to the ground, his attacker's weight dropped onto the shovel, pushing itself through its midsection.

Luke kept his grip on one end of the shovel, the turned man held by the other end halfway sticking through it. It clawed and grabbed at Luke but could not reach Luke from where it was stuck on the shovel.

Luke heaved with all his might, pushing the shovel away from his body enough to get out from under his attacker.

The creature lost its balance and fell to the ground, unable to get back up with the shovel sticking through its midsection.

Luke leaped up, turning to see the man with the bat standing a few feet behind him.

Luke turned toward the man, snatching the bat out of his hand.

Swiveling back toward the creature, Luke could see it had gotten to its knees, getting ready to stand.

Luke wound up for a big swing, running at top speed. With one circular motion, Luke connected with the side of its face, sending it sprawling again to the ground.

Luke wound up again, taking another shot at its head. There was a loud crunching sound as the bat made contact. The creature jerked a few times and then stopped moving with one side of its face caved in.

Raising the bat for another swing, Luke stopped himself, lowering the bat and throwing it to the ground.

Luke turned halfway to look at the people behind him. There were more gathering spectators. They stood staring at him and the dead berserker on the ground in silence.

The woman Luke witnessed getting attacked when he first arrived was nowhere to be seen.

Luke remembered his father back on the walking path.

Looking back and forth between the path and the people staring at him, Luke took off in a sprint, not waiting for any kind of response from the gathering group of spectators.

*Let them clean all that up.*

Chapter 18

"I see 'em." Gloria whispered. "Looks like ten altogether. They're huddling. Keep scanning the sky, like they're looking for something."

"Yeah, that's what we saw near Ponderay." Cowboy kept his voice low, just above a whisper.

"Why would they be back here, in the woods?" Gloria thought aloud.

"Maybe they're just lost. Got turned around somewhere, wondered out here." Cowboy mused.

Gloria continued watching through the binoculars as Cowboy lifted his rifle to train his scope on them. "I don't like them this close, but I might not be able to get them all. Shooting at 'em might get the one's I miss coming after us."

"What are they looking for in the sky?" Gloria spoke up, not acknowledging Cowboy's previous comment.

"Don't know that either." Cowboy was trying to calculate how fast he could shoot ten headsuckers.

As they continued watching them, the headsuckers turned toward Cowboy and Gloria's position and began shambling in that direction.

"Cowboy, maybe we should get out of here. I don't want them getting too close." Gloria lowered the binoculars to look at Cowboy.

"They can't get to us too fast. This cliff'll slow 'em down quite a bit." Cowboy continued watching through his scope.

Moments passed, with Cowboy and Gloria watching the group make their way toward the cliff.

As the headsuckers continued getting closer, Gloria became uneasy. "I really think we should move back a little."

"They can't climb straight up the side of this drop off in front of us. They'll have to go around." Cowboy set his gun down. "If they start going around, we'll split."

Gloria shook her head but said nothing.

The group of headsuckers neared the cliffside and stopped, heads jerking in multiple directions toward the sky. One group member stepped out, attempting to walk up the cliff. It slid back down after only a few steps, landing on its hands and knees at the bottom.

Cowboy crept closer to the cliff's edge, staying on his belly. Gloria was becoming more anxious. She shook her head, lowering it to her hands as she held her position.

Looking down, Cowboy got a clear view of the group below. Several stood close to the incline but did not climb up.

Minutes went by with little activity, and Cowboy scooted back to Gloria's side. "They look confused like they don't understand the cliff."

Gloria was about to respond when Cowboy held up his hand. "There's a deer." Gloria followed Cowboy's finger to a spot about a hundred feet beyond the cliff's edge.

The deer stood motionless for several seconds. Then it began approaching the group of headsuckers.

Gloria felt a pit in her stomach. She was curious to know if the group would rush the deer. It continued walking toward the group near the cliff.

"Something's off." Cowboy muttered. "That deer isn't behaving normally."

Gloria focused her binoculars on the deer to get a better look. She noticed something odd at once. "It's drooling. Weird drool. Glittery."

"It's one of them." Cowboy replied, drawing up his gun to get a better look himself.

The deer walked up next to the group, ignored by the headsuckers. It showed no fear of them.

Cowboy scooted closer to the edge again, looking down while trying to stay hidden.

He watched as the deer scanned the surrounding sky, much like the headsuckers. The deer's head bobbled once, and then it turned, running parallel to the cliff.

"What is it doing?" Gloria followed the deer with her binoculars.

Cowboy didn't say anything immediately. Before he responded, the headsuckers began shuffling away in the same direction the dear had gone.

"It's going around to get up here." Cowboy moved back from the cliff's edge several feet and stood up. "We gotta get moving. It's tracking us and they're following it."

Gloria stood as Cowboy took off into the trees, jogging to catch up with him.

"We're about two miles from the road." Gloria looked all around her as she kept pace with Cowboy. "Can we make it there before the deer gets to us."

"We can't go back yet." Cowboy stopped, listening for a few seconds before speaking again. "We have to kill it first. It'll lead that group to the road if we don't."

Cowboy sidestepped, moving to the left and away from the road leading to his and Gloria's homes.

"We gotta lead them off a little. I'll shoot the deer when it gets close. We'll walk away from the road for half a mile, then zigzag back toward it." Cowboy continued moving through the rocky terrain, stepping around groves of trees.

"Got it." Gloria began scouting for a place to ambush the deer. "Over there." She stopped, motioning to their right. "It's a little higher and we got better visuals around us."

Cowboy nodded and headed in that direction. Gloria had chosen a piece of elevated ground with several bushes and two large trees in the center.

Cowboy took up position on the left, and she took the other side. Both remained silent as Cowboy scanned where they had been. Gloria did the same.

About thirty minutes later, she spotted the dear prancing through the trees. She lost sight of it several times before it emerged into the clearing just in front of where they were taking up a position.

In one smooth motion, Cowboy raised his gun and fired. The deer fell to the ground less than a second later.

"Help me carry it to the cliff." Cowboy was already moving toward the deer. "We'll throw it down. That might throw the suckers off a little."

Gloria helped Cowboy carry the deer back to the cliff's edge and throw it over.

As they were heading away from the cliff, Cowboy halted again, raising his hand. Gloria stopped as well.

Soon she could hear footsteps running. "Is that them already?" Gloria whispered. "How did they get here that fast?"

Cowboy said nothing, raising his gun and pointing it toward the trees in front of them.

A few seconds later, one headsucker appeared several feet away, nearly running over the cliff's edge. It skidded to a stop, turning toward them in a crouch.

To Gloria's surprise, it did not charge them but remained crouched. Soon the rest of the group emerged from the trees. They held up about fifteen feet away from Gloria and Cowboy. After a moment, a few of the group began moving back and forth in a semi-circle, maintaining their distance.

"What are they doing?" Gloria felt more curious than scared.

"Same thing that other group did when I was with Lenard." Cowboy replied. "They didn't attack us then either.

"What are we gonna do?" Gloria felt panic returning. "We can't outrun them in the woods."

"Shoot 'em." Cowboy answered. Without waiting for Gloria, he lifted his rifle and began shooting one after the other until only two remained. "You want a shot at 'em?" Cowboy lowered his gun, turning his head toward Gloria, but keeping his eyes on the two remaining headsuckers.

Gloria nodded once, sighing. Unholstering her revolver, She leveled it on one headsucker and took her shot. Before it fell to the ground, she had already shot the other one.

"Great shooting." Cowboy smiled, turning to wink at Gloria. "You know how to use that thing. You remembered, headshots only."

"Of course I did." Gloria smirked. "I'm not just a pretty face you know."

Cowboy grunted with approval, moving forward to inspect the bodies.

"How did they know to follow the deer." Gloria asked, joining Cowboy.

"Can't say." Cowboy knelt to get a closer look. "But now we know they're capable of coordinated attacks." Cowboy felt one body. It was cold.

"Yeah, and beware of all animals," Gloria added. "More shit to watch out for."

"No kidding." Cowboy agreed. "Means we gotta be extra watchful."

"Do you think natural predator animals are more dangerous than prey animals?" Gloria also walked around some other bodies on the ground, kneeling next to one of them.

"Could be." Cowboy mused. "They might also be harder to infect though, unless they're too hungry to care and go after a deer like our friend down there."

"Fucking great." Gloria blew air out her mouth, feeling a little overwhelmed. "A pack of wolves stalking my camp."

"We gotta update the refugees pronto." Cowboy stood up again. "Can't afford to let ignorance doom the whole group."

"Let's get going." Gloria stood up as well. "Daylight'll run out faster than we think. I don't want to be out here in the dark."

Cowboy removed his hat, running his hands through his hair, before setting it back on his head. "Lead the way. We can take the direct route. We're not being followed."

Gloria took off into the woods, Cowboy close behind her.

Chapter 19

“Two other ones were shot while that lady was being attacked,” Gavin informed Luke.

“I heard the shots but didn’t really think about it at the time. I just happened to see what was going on with that lady first.” Luke sat atop a picnic table; his head propped up by his hands resting on his knees.

“One of the guys who shot one said their skin is ice cold,” Gavin added.

Minjun sat on the bench seats of the picnic table across from Gavin. “This place maybe not safe now. We should think of moving.”

Gavin shook his head slightly, turning toward Minjun, but remained silent.

“More people around us means an early warning system father.” Luke offered, trying to present a practical argument for staying put. “We’re less likely to be the first ones attacked this way.”

Minjun grunted, evidently digesting Luke’s argument.

“That makes sense.” Gavin got up the courage to speak now. “Alone, you’ll be the first ones attacked for sure.”

“Maybe so.” Minjun began. “But more people, more noise, more attract crazies here.”

Luke could see the point his father was making but still felt going it alone would be more dangerous. “I agree father, but I still think we’re better being in a crowd that gets attacked than being alone and getting attacked.”

Minjun didn’t reply as he straightened his back, looking away into the forested area around them.

Luke let out a long breath. He didn’t want to upset his father. He also didn’t want to leave the relative safety of the larger group. “Let’s see how things go from here. If this place gets attacked again soon, it may be best to move on.”

Minjun nodded but remained silent.

“Does that sound reasonable to you, father?” Luke needed a quick check on his father’s mood.

“I suppose. We wait. See how goes.” Minjun spoke quietly, turning to his son, curling his mouth into a slight grin.

Gavin and Luke were making small talk when, a few minutes later, the man who’s girlfriend had been attacked approached the picnic table.

Gavin saw the man first and abruptly stopped talking. Curious, Luke turned to see what had distracted him.

“Hey. Hi. I’m Wade. Just wanted to thank you for getting that crazy off my girlfriend. I froze up. She’d probably be dead if not for you…or turned. So, Thank you.”

Luke stood up, nodding and smiling at Wade. “No problem. I really didn’t think about what I was doing. It just happened.” Luke extended his hand to Wade.

Wade shook Luke’s hand. “Well, it’s much appreciated. If I can ever return the favor, I will.”

Wade nodded again to everyone and left, walking back toward his vehicle.

“You’re the local hero now, Luke.” Gavin grinned wide, slapping Luke on the back a few times.

“Shut up.” Luke could feel his cheeks turning red. “Some other people shot two of them. They’re just as heroic as me, which isn’t much really.”

“Yeah, but you got down and dirty with one of them. You wrestled it.” Gavin continued.

“I got it stuck on the end of a shovel. We hardly wrestled.” Luke corrected Gavin.

“No man, you kicked it’s ass. There’s no denyin that.” Gavin walked around the picnic table a few times, swinging his arms, punching the air. “Bam! Bam! Bam!”

“You are brave boy, Luke.” Minjun waited for Gavin to quiet down a little. “I proud of you.”

Luke turned toward his father, suddenly feeling warm inside. He strode over to his father, hugging him tight. “Thank you, father.”

“Please don’t do again.” Minjun’s muffled voice spoke from behind Luke’s arm. “Don’t want you hurt.”

Luke said nothing, continuing to hug his father. *I can’t promise that father.*

Chapter 20

“I can’t reach it! Keep hitting the damn thing!” Gerald shrieked, rushing back and forth behind Conrad.

Conrad continued swatting at the scrambler as it grabbed the side of the boat, trying to nab anything with its hands.

“Damn thing swam after us.” Conrad commented between swats. “Fucker swam for miles.”

Gerald bent next to Conrad, trying to jab his paddle into the scrambler’s face. As he was doing so, his knees slid out from under him, causing Gerald to drop the paddle into the water.

The creature, hands flailing wildly, found the paddle, gripping it tight.

Gerald cussed, swatting the scrambler across its face as it bobbed in the water. “Damn! That thing’s cold.”

“Don’t touch it!” Conrad yelled. “Move outta the way! Let me hit it!”

Gerald moved a little, trying to grab the paddle away from the creature in the water. Conrad continued swatting it across the head.

“We gotta kill it, or it’ll keep following us.” Conrad stopped swatting, out of breath.

The scrambler scratched at the side of the boat with one hand, still holding the paddle with the other.

Conrad rested his hands on his knees, catching his breath. “Get your gun. Shoot it.”

Getting up quickly, Gerald scooted up the ladder, retrieving his handgun.

“I’ll get that fucker.” Gerald slid down the ladder in one smooth motion.

Conrad stepped out of the way as Gerald pointed the gun over the boat and fired twice into their attacker’s face.

As the dead scrambler began sinking, Conrad moved to stand beside Gerald, looking down into the water. “We should move. Just in case those gunshots attracted anything.”

Gerald nodded, heading back up the ladder. “Yeah, on it.”

As the boat started up and began moving along the river again, Conrad sat in the back, allowing himself a moment to recover.

Having something go after them like that from the water unnerved him. Conrad rubbed his hands together, thinking of how to convince Gerald to ditch the boat.

He wanted to be on land again. Corners, and the ground beneath him. Nothing menacing them from the water.

It wouldn’t be an easy sell, but Conrad could be persuasive when driven to do so.

Chapter 21

They managed to get Bert back to the trailer park. He held on for two more agonizing days after that.

"Thanks," Roger grunted, allowing Jesse to take his shovel. Roger climbed out of the hole he and Jesse had just finished digging for Bert's body.

Roger stepped away as Jesse and two other men Roger didn't know picked up the wrapped sheet holding Bert and lowered it into the hole.

Nobody spoke as, together with Jesse, Arlene, and the two other men, Roger picked up his shovel again and started filling in the hole.

Jesse said a few words over Bert's grave when they had finished. Roger waited nearby until people started dispersing.

He went over and sat on a picnic table in front of the house Jesse had designated for him when he first arrived.

A few minutes later, Jesse came over to sit with Roger. "Never seen a fella go that way. It's a terrible fate I wouldn't wish on no one."

Roger nodded. "Me either. I know that was a tough loss for you."

"I know you was tryin to keep us safe, but I can't help but think maybe we coulda done something if we had gotten back here sooner." Jesse didn't look at Roger.

"No, we couldn't have. His fate was sealed as soon as he got bit. There's no medicine here that could have saved him." Roger kept looking forward as well. His voice was calm.

Jesse shook his head. "Maybe so. I'm just angry is all. Not meanin to take it out on you. I just gotta vent a little."

"No worries." Roger picked up a glass half full of water and drank it in one gulp. "We gotta be smart when we go out there. Those things will eat us for lunch if we're not."

Jesse looked at Roger. "You survived out there on your own. I guess that takes some smarts."

Roger remained silent as Jesse continued. "You made good on your promise. We got the food. There's more there too. Maybe we go back in a few days, get the rest."

"We'll be better prepared. Facing danger like that tends to wisen people up a bit." Roger commented.

"No doubt about that." Jesse agreed.

Jesse waited a few seconds, then spoke up again. "I want you to stay here, with us. You're a fella that can handle himself in a tight spot. We could use you."

Roger nodded. "I would like to stay. I got no better options anyway."

"It's settled then." Jesse stood up. "Make yourself at home. Some folks might stop by, introduce themselves."

Roger forced a smile. "Great. Look forward to it."

Jesse laughed. "You're not the sociable type I take it."

"Just used to bein' on my own is all." Roger turned to watch a few people across the drive eating a snack outside.

"We don't bite. Folks here are pretty decent once you get to know 'em." Jesse left without waiting for a reply, leaving Roger to sit alone.

Roger could feel his body aching. He stood up and headed into his trailer, keen on getting a few hours of solid shuteye.

Undressing, Roger crawled into bed, enjoying the feeling of sheets below and blankets above him. In a few minutes, he was fast asleep.

Roger awoke suddenly, aware of someone getting into his bed. "Hello?"

"Shh." He heard a voice whisper to him. "Don't talk." It was Arlene.

Arlene scooted under the covers with Roger. He could feel her body pressing up against him. She had undressed as well.

Roger remained still as Arlene positioned herself on top of him, rubbing against his body.

She took hold of him with her hands, guiding him into her and riding him slowly at first, then faster.

Roger grabbed her around the hips, controlling her rhythm. She resisted his efforts, trying to maintain her quick pace.

Arlene moaned as she began to climax. Roger did as well, feeling himself let go inside of her.

She remained atop him for another minute, lowering herself onto his chest.

"I needed that." She whispered in his ear. "Just needed to release some tension."

Arlene curled up next to Roger in bed for several minutes, not speaking. Roger didn't move, unsure what to do or say.

After what Roger guessed was twenty or thirty minutes, Arlene got out from under the covers, grabbed her clothes, and got dressed again.

She left without saying anything. Roger lay in bed, awake.

Turning over a few times, Roger finally got out of bed, slipping on his jeans and a shirt to sit outside at the picnic table.

The sky presented clear overhead, stars shimmering brilliantly.

Roger could hear insects chirping and a slight breeze dancing in the leaves.

Chuckling to himself, Roger reflected on the past few days and pondered his future.

Maybe he needed the temporary relief as much as Arlene.

Roger sat, enjoying the silence and solitude until the sun greeted him a few hours later.

Chapter 22

“So, powering the artifact with a low voltage allowed your scientists to utilize it in some way, making this formula. Do I have that correct?” Sebridge stood behind the one-way mirror, rubbing his chin.

“Yes, they were able to use frequencies generated by the artifact to build modified DNA from a variety of existing DNA specimens.” Carly further explained.

“And this immunization protocol applied to you, tell me exactly what it was meant to accomplish.” Sebridge inquired.

“I was told very little. It was not acceptable to ask questions. I was given a series of injections into my bone marrow and blood vessels. It was explained to me it would prevent succumbing to the infection if I was ever exposed.” Carly did her best to be cooperative. She would do anything to avoid ever being conditioned again.

“Who explained this to you? Did this person or persons represent an organization?” Sebridge couldn’t get anywhere with Yǔ xī. Maybe Carly would offer what she could not.

“This person worked for The Group. That’s what it was called. It was made up of powerful, wealthy individuals who operated secretly.” Carly no longer felt loyal to the organization that had tried to kill her.

“Did Yǔ xī, or Justine as you may know her, work for The Group as well?”

“I don’t know that name. I didn’t know all the sitting members of The Group.”

“Sitting members? What does that mean?”

“Individuals who held voting power in The Group. Sitting members set the course of The Group’s activities. People like me carried out their objectives.”

“Did you know the identities of any sitting members?”

“No, I do not. I do know someone who does. Conrad Doren.”

Carly hesitated, then added. “Also, there was a Chinese woman. She represented The Group. I don’t know in what capacity. She owned a restaurant…Your Goose is Cooked. In New York. I don’t know her name.”

“Thank you Carly. That is useful information.” Sebridge let out an audible sigh. “Tonight you will sleep in a bed, comfortably. You will be treated well as long as you cooperate. Is that understood?”

“Yes, I understand. Thank you.” Carly smiled despite herself, feeling relief flood into her.

A moment later, part of the wall moved aside, revealing a hallway.

“Please follow the dotted lights to your quarters. Do not deviate from the path.” An automated voice sounded.

Standing, Carly nodded. She entered the hall, where floor lights blinked on either side of the passage. Carly followed the illuminated path to another door. The door slid open, and she stepped inside an eight-by-eight room.

The space came furnished with a small table jutting out from the wall to her left and a chair pushed under it. A sink and toilet sat against the back wall to her right. Across from the toilet/sink combo was a platform, sticking out from the wall, holding a covered mattress. Two blankets and a pillow sat atop the bed.

A single light switch just inside the door controlled one overhead light. It was simple but clean.

The door closed behind Carly. She went over to the mattress and sat down on it. Pushing the pillow and blankets aside, Carly lowered herself, bringing her legs to her chest.

Carly began sobbing uncontrollably without knowing why. This mattress felt incredible to her. It was the most satisfying thing she had ever felt.

Carly’s crying had nearly subsided when a small slit in the door opened, and a meal tray slid into the room. Carly sat up and walked over to the door, taking the tray.

She timidly picked away the tray’s contents, unused to eating food herself. It had been weeks since Carly had fed herself anything. At least she felt like it had been weeks. Carly had lost all sense of time while in the conditioning room.

She still had seen no one else. She didn’t care. It was enough to be sleeping on a proper bed tonight. There were no thoughts of escape.

Finishing what she could of her meal, Carly put the tray next to the door and returned to bed.

This time, she unfolded the blankets and set the pillow at the head of the mattress.

Pulling the covers snugly over her body, Carly felt her body relaxing.

Within minutes, Carly fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 23

Leaves and dirt flew up in a cloud as bullets hit the ground in front of Ed.

“Stay down!” Ed yelled back at Charles and Brianne.

“Remember,” Charles whispered to Brianne, “he’s gonna draw their fire. Get them goin after him. We go around behind. Then shoot’em.”

It was a simple plan. Brianne and Charles had become familiar with guns under Ed’s tutelage. Now, they were getting their chance to put training into practice.

“Mom’s gonna kill you if you get me killed.” Brianne spoke under her breath to her father as she followed Charles through the cabin and out the back door.

“I know,” Charles replied too quietly for Brianne to hear. He led Brianne down the back porch steps and into some tall grass and bushes nearby.

The shooting continued as the so far unseen attackers took the bait. Charles made a wide C pattern through the denser vegetation. Brianne could hear men and women yelling and shouting updates to each other.

Charles crouched lower in front of Brianne. She mimicked his position, moving cautiously behind him.

“Head up the driveway, flank him!” Charles and Brianne could hear one voice clearly. It was coming directly in front of them, on the other side of two trees.

“Wait.” Charles murmured to Brianne, holding his hand behind him to slow her movement.

They heard footsteps running away. Charles got down on his arms and knees, inching forward around one tree. Brianne waited for his signal.

Charles gingerly hugged the tree with his shoulder as he poked his head around just enough to get a visual of the other side. There was a man and a woman. The man was holding a rifle up, taking aim. The woman held a handgun with both hands, ready to shoot.

Charles slowly backed around the tree, turning his body to signal Brianne. Motioning with his right hand for her to go around the other tree.

Brianne, still squatting, lowered herself further and began crawling toward the tree, getting ready to edge around it the way her father had done on the other side.

As Brianne brought herself around just enough to see the other side, she glimpsed the woman standing. She could see the rifle pointing ahead and part of the man’s arm, but she dared not move around the tree any further.

The man took one shot as Brianne watched, causing her to flinch. Brianne closed her eyes, forcing herself to focus and steady her hands.

Before Brianne opened her eyes, she heard gunfire to her right. The man holding the rifle fell forward onto his knees. The woman turned around, shooting toward the trees. Brianne ducked around quickly, not taking a shot.

The woman, yelling in a rage, continued shooting, But Brianne realized she hadn’t seen her or her father yet.

Brianne waited for an opening when the woman ran out of bullets or stopped firing. The woman continued yelling and shooting into the cluster of trees and bushes, Brianne covering her ears and pressing herself into the ground as best she could.

Several seconds passed, and there was silence. Brianne opened her eyes. Looking over, she could see her father across from her on the ground. He was looking at her. He raised his hand, giving her a thumbs up to let her know he was okay. Brianne did the same.

Brianne was supposed to shoot after her father did, but she got flustered and missed her chance.

“Again.” Charles mouthed the word at Brianne, then turned over onto his belly to move around the tree.

Brianne also rolled over, taking a deep, quiet breath, swearing that she wouldn’t freeze up again. She heard yelling from somewhere near the cabin, followed by more shooting.

Before Brianne managed to edge around the tree again, the woman yelled out from the other side. “Melvin! Dana!, Billy’s been hit!”

Charles got up on his feet behind the tree as the woman yelled. Holding his rifle tight, Charles jumped out from behind the tree and pulled up his rifle, shooting before he could adequately take aim.

The bullet hit the woman in the back of her left leg. Charles fired again, but his arm was shaky, and the bullet hit the ground to the woman’s right.

Grimacing in pain, the woman fell to one knee but pivoted around as she did so, taking a shot in Charles’ direction.

Brianne had a clear line of sight now. Panic filled Brianne as the woman fired at her father’s position. Brianne fired her revolver twice without thinking, trying to keep the barrel pointed toward the woman as best she could.

Without looking to see if either bullet had found its mark, Brianne bolted back around the tree. Holding her breath, Brianne froze in a crouch, waiting for a hail of bullets in her direction.

A couple more shots rang out by the cabin, but there was only silence in her direct vicinity.

Seconds passed. Opening her eyes, Brianne sneaked a glance at her father. There he was, crouching like her. He appeared uninjured.

Charles held a thumb up to let Brianne know he was okay. She held on up for him as well.

Holding their position for several more seconds and hearing nothing, Charles signaled to her that he would take a look.

Brianne nodded, holding her breath again as Charles poked his head around the tree.

Without looking back at her, Charles stepped out from around the tree and out of Brianne’s sight. She heard a shot from the other side.

Anxiety rushed in again as Brianne abandoned caution, running around her side to see what had happened.

She saw her father standing over the woman, his gun pointed at her chest. The woman was still.

Brianne watched as Charles turned his body toward the man, curled up on the ground. She could see that the man was trying to crawl away from her father but didn’t quite have the strength to move his body across the land.

Charles pointed his rifle at the man’s back, firing once, hitting the man between his shoulder blades. The man stopped moving as well.

More yelling from up by the cabin. Charles began back peddling quickly, grabbing Brianne’s arm as he pulled her back around the tree.

Charles continued pulling Brianne farther into the bushes, away from the scene of their shootout. The yelling was getting closer. The other shooters were coming back to where Brianne and her father had just been.

Brianne felt her father pushing her to the ground, crouching beside her, his gun ready to shoot.

She could hear footsteps and a woman’s voice yelling. “Billy! Billy! Wanda!”

A split second after that, the sound of bullets being fired swiftly rang out. Then silence.

“I got’em! They’re dead!” It was Ed’s voice. “It’s safe to come out!”

Charles stood up first, keeping his gun up in front of him. “Ed!”

“Yeah, I’m fine!” Ed yelled out. “I got’em!”

Charles knelt to help Brianne up off the ground. “Stay behind me.”

Brianne nodded once, following her father toward the sound of Ed’s voice.

Less than twenty seconds later, Brianne could see Ed’s face through the trees. He was standing in the driveway. Brianne and Charles emerged onto the driveway.

Ed was standing beside two bodies on the ground, wiping his forehead with one arm.

As Charles drew closer, he saw that Ed’s left arm was bleeding.

Ed met Charles’ eyes. “One of’em nicked my arm. It’s not bad.”

Brianne moved beside her father. She could see the two dead bodies up close. Suddenly, Brianne felt lightheaded, staggering a little where she stood.

“Whoa. Easy. Are you hurt?” Charles clasped both his hands around her shoulder. He then started patting her back, checking for bullet holes.

“I’m fine. It’s fine. I didn’t get hit.” Brianne heard herself saying. It felt like her voice was far away. Brianne tried to take a step forward.

Everything went dark.

Chapter 24

Genevieve hated snakes.

The one slithering in her direction didn't appear dangerous, but it was still unnerving.

Genevieve had squatted to pee at a pull-off. She felt herself becoming irrationally angry at the snake for choosing to slither her way when it could have chosen any other direction.

The one-time Genevieve had slept over the past few days, she dreamt of feeding again. The urge was getting stronger. It had been over a month since her first time, taking the boy hiding in a dumpster. The hunger had returned. She couldn't resist it for long.

Standing up seconds before the snake made its way over to her, Genevieve decided to follow a path in the trees a little further. She had been driving for many hours and welcomed the opportunity to stretch her legs.

The trees were spaced out in this area. Tall grass grew between them. The geography was slowly changing to level ground and fewer trees.

Although the characteristics of where she was resembled The Mountain, Genevieve was over five hundred miles away. She would be crossing over a lot of changing terrain before arriving there.

Genevieve was a little surprised she hadn't seen more people. The few she did see did not acknowledge her as she passed them by. This was probably normal before the collapse. It didn't bother Genevieve a bit. She preferred that behavior to bandits chasing her.

The two-door Honda Genevieve was driving had about half a gas tank. She would need to find another vehicle soon.

Returning to the pull-off from her short excursion, Genevieve felt alarmed when she saw another vehicle pulled over.

She could see two men. One relieving himself behind the truck, and the other sitting in the driver's seat.

*Take them.* Genevieve felt her body instinctively move toward the men but forced herself to stop. They might be armed. She needed the advantage of surprise to take them both safely.

Neither waved to her as she approached her own vehicle. However, the man in the driver's seat turned to get the other man's attention.

The man behind the truck looked up toward Genevieve, staring at her without expression. He finished up his business and returned to the vehicle's passenger side.

Genevieve got into her vehicle casually, not wanting to appear nervous.

Looking into her rearview mirror, she could see the truck was not moving. The men appeared to be watching her.

Slowly, Genevieve pulled out onto the road. A few seconds later, the truck did as well. It kept its distance from her as she drove.

Genevieve felt the tension building up inside her. Were these men dangerous? Were they following her? Part of her wanted to stop her vehicle suddenly, wait for them to catch up, and attack them at once. Fast. Element of surprise.

There was little she could do but continue driving. She needed another vehicle soon. Her mind was already devising various scenarios where the men attacked her. She pictured her reactions, all of them violent.

Her body began calming down as Genevieve imagined herself fighting off and feeding on both men.

Genevieve sped up a little. From her rearview, Genevieve could also see the truck speeding up but still keeping the same distance.

She sped up a little more. The truck did as well.

The road was becoming curvy, and Genevieve concentrated on maintaining her speed around the turns. A few times, she lost sight of the truck afterward. Eventually, however, it came back into view. It appeared to be speeding up, trying to get closer.

While she looked for places to turn quickly, Genevieve calculated how long it would take her to pull off the road and take up an ambush position.

Suddenly, people came into view a quarter mile down the road. They appeared to be standing in the middle of the road, walking in her direction. She couldn't determine how many exactly, but more than ten people were moving toward her.

Getting closer, Genevieve could see that these people were not behaving normally. They were drainers.

Genevieve slammed on her brakes. Looking in the mirror again, she could see the truck coming around the last curve behind her. It continued moving closer, stopping several hundred feet away.

The drainers kept moving toward her, increasing their pace.

Without thinking, Genevieve pulled the steering wheel hard, turning her car around and heading back toward the truck. Lowering her driver-side window, she began waving frantically at the men.

The truck remained parked, waiting for her to pull up next to it. Looking down at Genevieve as she approached, the man in the vehicle rolled down his window, his face filled with expectation and nervousness.

"Thank God!" Genevieve's face showed anxiousness. "Can you help me? I can't get around them."

"Sure, pretty lady. We'll get it sorted. Just hang tight." The man driving sounded like he had just cornered a prized turkey in the woods.

He turned toward his friend in the passenger seat, speaking too quietly for Genevieve to make out what he was saying. Then he turned back to Genevieve. "I'm Isaiah." The man smiled, his teeth stained heavily. "That there's Kris." The man continued, patting the other man on the shoulder.

"They're coming quickly. You have to stop them!" Genevieve's panic was not entirely forced.

Kris got out of the passenger side, turned toward the truck's bed, retrieved a rifle, and moved around to the front. "How many you figure I can pop Isaiah?" Kris grinned. His teeth were much cleaner.

"Hold up Kris. Let's make this fair for us both." Isaiah also got out of the truck, gathering a rifle from the truck's bed.

As Isaiah moved passed Genevieve, he winked at her. "Well, lady. We'll probably get 'em, but you should get out and be ready to run just in case."

Genevieve played along, pretending not to realize she could get away faster by driving. "Oh, okay. Sure. Thank you so much."

Isaiah joined Kris at the front of the truck. Genevieve exited her vehicle, walking over to lean on the truck's bed. Kris looked back at her, smiling. She knew they thought they had her.

The drainers were still drawing closer, about a hundred feet away, and moving quicker.

"Let's open up on 'em Kris. Slow and steady." Isaiah rested one arm on the hood of his truck, taking aim. Kris did the same.

Gunshots began ringing out as Isaiah and Kris took turns bringing down the drainers one after the other. The drainers continued toward them, seemingly unphased.

Genevieve used the distraction to casually walk up behind Isaiah. He was focused on his targets, not worried about what she might do.

Just inches away, Genevieve grasped Isaiah's head tightly, digging into his scalp as tentacles grew from her fingertips and dug into his head.

Isaiah yelled one time. Genevieve yanked him down from behind, completely throwing Isaiah off balance. He clumsily tried to break his own fall, but Genevieve pulled his head with such force that he fell too quickly, head smashing into the blacktop below.

Isaiah ceased struggling. Genevieve felt his light energy dim. He was fading quickly. The head injury killed him before she could finish taking what she needed from him.

"Isaiah?" Kris called out. "Where'd you go brother?"

Releasing Isaiah's head, Genevieve rolled under the truck, hurriedly scooting across to the other side. She could see Kris's feet and calves as she stopped moving.

Kris took a few more shots, then stopped again. He looked at the remaining drainers, nervous because Isaiah had disappeared. Kris scanned all around the truck. The woman was missing too.

"Where'd you go? This isn't funny man. We can take turns with'er after. Get up here!" Kris's voice became whiny as he became increasingly agitated.

Kris began walking toward the back of the vehicle. Genevieve waited till he was where she wanted him, swinging her legs out quickly from underneath to send him flying forward in a sprawl.

"Ah, fuck!" Kris yelled out as he suddenly lost his balance, arms flailing.

Genevieve rolled out quickly, coming up to a standing position as Kris lost his grip on the rifle, sending it flying off into the ditch.

"You fucking bitch!" Kris yelled out, reclaiming his balance a few seconds later and turning around to face Genevieve.

Kris's eyes darted toward the gun a few yards away, but Genevieve was already rushing him. He held out his arms, lamely attempting to push her back.

Genevieve swatted them aside, amped up from feeding on Isaiah. She jumped onto him, wrapping her legs around his midsection, digging into his skull, tentacles already protruding from her fingertips.

Kris reached up, attempting to pull Genevieve's arms away from his head. "Oh fuck! No! Ahhh!"

Staggering back several steps, Kris finally fell to his knees, rolling forward on top of Genevieve. His body quivered, gurgling sounds emanating from his mouth, eyes rolling back in his head.

Genevieve felt an ecstasy flooding her body. Every pain or worry she had ever felt melted away, replaced with clarity and calm she had only felt once before when taking the boy's life.

She drained Kris as she had the boy, leaving nothing left within him. His body ceased its quivering, and she was done.

Pushing Kris aside, Genevieve stood up. Her senses were elevated, and her brain was functioning clearer and faster than ever.

She noticed that a few drainers had passed, uninterested in her. Something within her understood the meaning of it at once. She had no idea how or why.

The mindless drainers were not attracted to her. Only the higher-functioning ones would find her appetizing. She understood something both useful and threatening at the same time.

Genevieve could walk amongst the unthinking berserkers but would be continuously threatened by any with higher-order mental abilities. This second group could strategize, plan, and track its prey.

Genevieve learned that back in Europe but needed more time to think about the different drainers and their characteristics.

She realized she would have to learn fast or become a victim herself.

The drainers finished moving around her in near silence as Genevieve began collecting the rifles no longer needed by Isaiah and Kris.

She rummaged through their truck, collecting bullets, dried food supplies, and other things. These she placed in the trunk and backseat of the Honda.

She had three handguns, two rifles, and ammo for all of them. Isaiah and Kris were ready for a showdown with somebody and probably anybody they saw out here.

Checking the truck's fuel gauge, Genevieve found it registering a little less than half a tank. The Honda would probably take her farther.

It was time to get back on the road. Get closer to The Mountain.

Genevieve felt better than she had in weeks as she continued driving along the highway.

This was a feeling she could grow to like.

Chapter 25

Cowboy didn’t enjoy hiding things from Gloria but didn’t know what to say to her about it. Their run-in with headsuckers had affected his body, much like what happened to him after going out with Lenard.

Stronger than before, the sensation of calm awareness.

He hadn’t slept in two days and felt no need for it. Cowboy’s body and mind were clear and alert. Ready for action.

In the week since coming across the small group of headsuckers with Gloria, Cowboy reinforced his bunker, making it easier to fend off attackers.

He had placed a few guns, ammunition, knives, and survival gear at the emergency exit under the rusted-out old truck. Enough supplies to survive for ten days out in the wilderness.

Traps were set along the property’s perimeter. Not to kill or maim, but merely to notify Cowboy of someone coming on the property. He would use the night vision cameras outside to track the movement of intruders. This would give him time to plan a response if any were necessary.

Gloria had begun forcefully turning more people away from her refugee camp a few times. “I can sense the troublemakers; they seem to be gathering nearby.” She had informed Cowboy two days ago.

Lenard, previously annoyed with Cowboy, seemed to have toughed up a bit. He led a group to establish a perimeter around the refugee camp. Regular duty shifts had been set up, protecting the area around Gloria’s cabin twenty-four hours a day.

A community was developing under Gloria’s watchful eye. For the most part, Cowboy stayed out of it, only dropping in occasionally to stay in contact and keep his positive standing with Gloria.

Today Cowboy set out on his own into the woods. He wanted to test a theory. Still trying to determine if it was him specifically who had a strange effect on headsuckers, Cowboy intended to pinpoint a group of them. Finding them successfully would also test another working theory.

Cowboy could sense the infected. He didn’t know how, but his mind alerted him to their presence if they got within a specific range.

Not willing to trust a feeling; however, Cowboy needed to verify what he thought might be happening.

His mind was leading him southeast into the Kaniksu. This infected group would be traveling along US 95, heading toward Canada if his newfound abilities were legit.

Trekking through the forest offered little challenge as the terrain consisted of a naturally manicured forest for the most part. Hikers often visit this national forest to enjoy its pristine environment and escape civilization.

Cowboy understood the second part of what drew people to these locations but found no enjoyment in experiencing mother nature for the simple pleasure of being amongst flora and fauna. His forays into the woods were only when necessary and only when he was getting paid for a job.

About three hours of brisk walking brought Cowboy within view of today’s target. He could see them. A group of around forty headsuckers, shambling along 95, heading north. His senses had not betrayed him. One theory verified, at least.

Moving closer, Cowboy aimed to shed light on his other theory.

He approached them from behind, cautiously shortening the distance between himself and the back of this dangerous throng.

Within a hundred feet of them, a few in the back slowed, looking into the sky casually as if following some trail above them.

Soon, others followed suit. Cowboy stood in place, roughly fifty feet behind, as one by one, the headsuckers stopped and began probing the sky above.

The ones in the back were the first to notice him. They turned and began moving toward him. Within seconds the entire group joined those at the back, trotting around to form a semi-circle.

When the first headsuckers got within twenty feet of Cowboy, they suddenly changed course, steadily moving around him in a slow circle but not pushing any closer.

It did indeed seem that Cowboy had influence over them. They encircled him, but none would approach him beyond twenty feet.

Two theories had been verified.

Cowboy turned himself, moving counter to the direction the headsuckers circled him. He didn’t understand why this was happening but had little interest in explaining it.

Flashes of his past flooded Cowboy’s mind in a blur. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe normally until he could clear his head. The sheer anguish of being experimented on repeatedly by government scientists could never be entirely forgotten.

Cowboy remembered one voice in particular. It was the one called Siskee. A doctor of some sort. Cowboy didn’t know for sure. But the voice was unmistakable. “You are the best one we’ve made yet Mr. Duger.”

Siskee ultimately proved the reason Teagan Duger became Cowboy. Experimented on, ordered to carry out atrocities, and finally betrayed by those who made him, Cowboy came into being. He would take what was given to him by the government and use it to become an elite hitman for hire. An elite hitman with no connection to the man who joined the military to evade legal difficulties.

Cowboy opened his eyes again, seeing the headsuckers still circling him, maintaining a constant distance.

It occurred to Cowboy that he wasn’t willing to just stand here indefinitely, enjoying this bizarre standoff.

He had brought two grenades, but twenty feet wasn’t a comfortable distance for such incendiary munitions.

Likely, the headsuckers would follow him in any direction. Cowboy decided on a whim to go with that. He began walking to his right. The closest infected stepped back as he moved closer to them, bumping clumsily into the ones behind them.

Quickly the group spread apart as Cowboy stepped off the road and made his way across the ditch into the trees nearby.

As predicted, they followed him, matching his pace and direction into the forest.

Cowboy felt confident he could lose this group in the woods within a brief time. He began running, turning direction as he had done when creating a distraction for Lenard to get the jeep.

Running around trees and altering his course several times, Cowboy caused the headsuckers to spread out and separate from each other. He ran back and forth between clusters, encouraging confusion as smaller groups ran into each other.

This game of cat and mouse was paying off. Cowboy ran deeper into the woodland to further throw off his pursuers, heading east and away from his cabin and Gloria’s refugee camp.

The large herd made quite a noise running through the trees. Cowboy stopped routinely to listen, determining if he could hear footsteps behind him. When he could no longer, Cowboy decided it was safe to head south and west.

The sun had set about an hour prior, and Cowboy would be negotiating his path in the dark. This wasn’t a problem but would likely slow his progress home. It had been a long day, and he still had hours of walking ahead of him.

Emerging from the trees, Cowboy paused to scan the road before heading out into the open. The darkness brought dangers closer without being seen, but Cowboy could hear no footsteps around him.

As Cowboy reached the pavement, he stopped again to listen. Still nothing. He started walking again.

As he stepped off the road on the other side, Cowboy suddenly heard a shrieking sound to his right.

Turning, he could just make out a figure standing beyond the shadows of darkness. The thing appeared to be motionless. Another shriek.

It was one of them. Had it tracked him all the way here?

Farther away, Cowboy heard another shrieking sound, then another. More headsuckers. The one closest to him was calling the others, alerting them their target had been found.

Cowboy turned quickly, running away from the motionless figure in the distance, making for the cover of the forest nearest to him. He heard more shrieking as he continued moving south inside the timberline.

*Apparently, these fuckers are getting smarter.*

Cowboy couldn’t risk heading back to his cabin or Gloria until he was sure he had lost this horde completely.

He didn’t know whether the one he saw on the road was pursuing him. If so, it must be neutralized quickly.

Cowboy stopped suddenly, listening. Footsteps. The one he saw on the road was in pursuit.

Bringing up his AR-15, Cowboy listened closely, determining the creature’s approximate distance and speed.

Closing his eyes, Cowboy slowly moved his rifle back and forth, syncing up the barrel with the sounds of underbrush being disturbed on the forest floor.

Cowboy slowly depressed the trigger. *PFFT. PFFT.* Two quick shots, barely audible with the carbine’s attached silencer.

Something crashed into a tree several meters away, and then silence.

Moving cautiously toward the sound, Cowboy quickly found the recipient of his bullets, hunched over a tree trunk. He had managed to injure it. Wounds that would indeed have killed an average person only seemed to slow these creatures down temporarily.

The thing was already getting back to its feet. Cowboy fired again. The headsucker’s head recoiled sharply, and it fell to the ground, not moving.

Cowboy listened for a moment. Silence, except for the chirping of insects. He was alone. But that wouldn’t last if he didn’t get moving again.

As Cowboy ran south a while longer before making a wide arc to head back home, he began processing the day’s intel.

He could sense infected. They did not attack him but pursued him, developing their own hunting skills over time.

This group had been more innovative than the one he and Lenard had encountered. They had their own method of tracking prey and communicating with each other.

It was time to come clean with Gloria about what he had been experiencing. Also about what he had learned today.

Cowboy wasn’t a team player, but he owed Gloria at least that much. It might be enough to keep her and a few others under her watch alive.

He would look out for himself either way.

Chapter 26

“Baby…talk to me. What’s happening? What can I do?” Charles Sr hovered over his wife, feelings of helplessness and despair overcoming him.

Charlene wretched again, body shaking uncontrollably where she lay on the floor of a spare bedroom in Ed’s cabin.

It had all started with a cough a week ago. Today, Charlene could barely move without crying out in pain.

Charles rested one hand on Charlene’s shoulder, gently rubbing her hair with the other. Feeling powerless to do anything for his wife, Charles fought back tears as he sat quietly next to her.

“I can feel it inside.” Charlene could barely speak above a whisper. “It’s taking me.”

Charles felt panic crawling up his body. “What do you mean? Tell me what’s happening.”

Charlene didn’t answer. She remained curled up on the floor, wheezing and coughing softly.

Closing his eyes, Charles wished it all away. His mind would not allow him to contemplate this new terror. After losing his son, Charles couldn’t lose his wife too.

Charles reached under his wife’s body, intending to lift her onto the bed. “No, leave me here. Please.” Charlene scratched out a few words.

Removing his hands from under her body, Charles stood up, staring at Charlene for another moment.

Finally, he sighed loudly and stepped out of the room.

In the hall, Charles found Brianne standing there, her face full of concern and fear.

“How are you feeling?” Charles hadn’t really spoken with her about her fainting spell following the attack on Ed’s cabin.

“I’m fine Daddy. How is Mom?” Brianne’s body showed the tension within. She, like Charles, refused to accept the possibility of losing another family member.

Charles stared at the floor, unsure how to respond to his daughter.

“How is she Dad?” Frustration and panic were bubbling to the top. It was evident in Brianne’s voice she expected her father to tell her everything would be okay.

“She’s not doing well. I don’t know.” Charles did not move as he barely managed an answer.

“You have to do something for her!” Brianne surprised herself with the outburst. Charles recoiled slightly, steadying himself on the wall.

“I can’t do anything for her Brianne. There are no hospitals around and it’s too dangerous to try finding a doctor.” There was no emotion in Charles’ voice. He could feel a gentle numbness taking over inside.

“How can you say that? Mommy’s going to die!” Brianne couldn’t help herself. She yelled at her father.

Charles looked at Brianne, his eyes calm and clear. Staring at his oldest daughter, taking in her anger and fear.

He said nothing in reply, merely stepping around her and heading outside to the back porch.

Brianne remained in the hall, just outside her mother’s room. Her fingers tingled with dread as she moved closer to the door leading into her parent’s bedroom.

Reaching for the doorknob, Brianne hesitated a few seconds. Could she handle seeing her mother this sick? What would she say to her?

Grimacing, Brianne took hold of the knob and opened the door.

“Mommy. Can I come in?” Brianne began speaking before the door opened completely.

There was no answer. As the door opened, Brianne saw her mother lying on the floor next to the bed. Charlene wheezed softly.

“Mommy?” Brianne tentatively moved closer to her mother. “Are you okay?”

Charlene tilted her head slightly, finally hearing her daughter speaking to her. “Brianne (*coughing*), yes dear. How are you?”

“I’m fine mommy. I’m so worried about you. Daddy won’t get help. What can I do?” The worry and anxiety in Brianne’s voice could not be hidden.

“Don’t be angry with your father dear.” Charlene turned her head back, away from Brianne. “He needs to be here for you all.”

“Mommy, are you gonna get better?” Brianne sought reassurance from her mother. “Are you gonna be okay?”

Charlene coughed again, this time violently, before speaking. “No, dear. I’m not.”

“No mommy. Don’t say that.” Tears began to roll down Brianne’s cheeks. She couldn’t stop them. “I need you to be okay.”

“I’m dying Brianne. I’m not getting better.” Her voice was so soft and low. Brianne almost didn’t hear her mother speaking.

“Please don’t say that, mommy. Please!!!” Brianne began crying. She rushed toward her mother, kneeling beside her and laying her head on Charlene’s arm.

Charlene winced from the pressure. Brianne pulled away hastily, not wanting to cause any discomfort.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Brianne found it challenging to speak clearly as she continued crying. “I just wanted to hug you.”

“It’s okay dear. You didn’t hurt me.” Charlene felt the pain all over. Any pressure intensified her agony.

“Just tell me what I can do. Anything. Please.” Brianne had utterly broken down. She let the tears run freely as the part of her that was more child than young lady came out.

Brianne sat crying as Charlene didn’t respond for several moments.

“Be strong for Charlie and Lyla. You must. For me.” Charlene’s words were slow and labored. “Help your father.”

It was too much. Brianne got up quickly, running out of the room and straight out the front door. She kept running for an indeterminate amount of time. Brianne just wanted it all to go away. She wanted it all to be a nightmare she would wake up from soon and find her mother healthy again.

Out of breath and still crying, Brianne finally plopped down on a fallen tree somewhere in the woods. She buried her head in her hands, continuing to sob. She didn’t care who heard her crying or if it put her in danger.

This was more sadness than she could bear.

How could this be happening to her? Hadn’t she already gone through enough?

Brianne sat in the woods a bit longer, releasing her tension and worries as tears continued to flow.

She didn’t know where she would find the strength to keep going if her mother left her.

It was too much to contemplate.

Chapter 27

“I can, but the older models are easier is all.” Gerald kept scanning the boat launch area, surveying the few abandoned vehicles. “We should stay on the boat for a while longer. It’s safer.”

“How do you figure that?” Conrad looked back at the water, expecting to see the scrambler they had fought off emerge onto the bank. “Those things could surround our boat anytime, day or night.”

“They can do that on land too.” Gerald shot back. “Day or night.”

Conrad despised Gerald defeating his irrationality in two sentences. He just hated the water. That was it.

“That one should work.” Gerald pointed to an old Chevy Blazer at the parking area’s edge. “If it’s got gas. I can get that beast runnin.”

Conrad nodded, still eyeing the water nearby. “Get on with it then. Let’s get going as soon as possible.”

Gerald followed Conrad’s gaze to the water. “That thing is long gone. We probably killed it anyway.”

“Maybe.” Conrad turned back toward Gerald. “The Blazer.”

Gerald rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Okay. On it.”

With his second attempt, Gerald got the Blazer started. “See! Piece of cake brother.”

Gerald drove the Blazer over to their pile of stuff from the boat. Together they loaded it in the back.

“Where to?” Conrad asked, not wasting any time.

“It’s a bit of a drive. By the looks of it, we’ve probably got enough gas to get there, barring any unforeseen obstacles.” Gerald rubbed dust off the steering wheel with one finger as he rolled down the window on his side.

“Some thirty miles you said before?” Conrad tried not to sound impatient.

“Yeah, about that far.” Gerald looked up at the ceiling as if trying to remember the place’s exact location. “Shouldn’t be a problem finding it.”

“Let’s get going then. Engine makes too much noise to be sitting in one place too long.” Conrad tapped his leg, squirming in his seat.

Gerald pulled out of the parking lot, whistling an old song aloud.

Conrad could feel his muscles relaxing. He was glad to be moving, putting distance between himself and the water. The farther away they got, the better.

The road leading away was rough. The Blazer bumped and rattled as it traveled over numerous potholes.

“Slow down a little. Damn.” Conrad couldn’t help himself. This bumpy ride was already giving him a headache.

Gerald slowed but soon started speeding up again. Conrad just shook his head, staying quiet. He didn’t have the energy to keep chastising his brother’s driving.

As they neared the highway, Conrad and Gerald saw the roadblock ahead. Several cars sat stranded at the pullout. Half a dozen parked with the doors ajar.

As they got closer, a few bodies lying on the ground became visible.

“They had a run-in here for sure.” Gerald came to a stop about thirty feet away from the closest vehicle. “Wanna try going around?”

“Yeah, we have to. No other way to go.” Conrad also rolled his window down, sticking his head out to view the bodies.

Gerald drove the Blazer to the left, avoiding a Subaru just off the road. As they inched past it, Conrad could see a person inside. They appeared dead. Conrad thought it odd since all the doors remained closed.

The Blazer navigated onto the highway from the ditch with ease. Gerald deftly handled the thick foliage, picking up speed as the front tires contacted the road.

He turned left and continued driving. “We got no map, so I’m gonna be guessing most of the way, at least until we get closer. I don’t got these roads memorized.”

“If we see anything dangerous, we’ll just turn around and go another way.” Conrad rolled up his window to avoid catching more bugs as they drove.

“Unless we can’t.” Gerald didn’t turn to look at Conrad, keeping his attention on the road ahead. “I know general direction, but not multiple ways to get there.”

“Understood.” Conrad felt relieved just to be out of the water. “We’ll take it as slow as we need.”

Chapter 28

Carly met Marik after two weeks of being completely isolated. They became acquainted in the cafeteria.

On two occasions, they were allowed to walk outside together in a small, enclosed area. There was a walking path with emerald green hedges on either side.

Cameras watched every activity and conversation in case they said or did something mischievous. Carly was hyper-cautious. She would do anything to avoid further conditioning.

“You’ve seen it?” Marik sat across from Carly in the dining area, eating a sandwich. “The artifact?”

“Yes. Twice.” Carly had already finished her sandwich. Soon they would receive instructions to return to their sleeping quarters.

“I took it from him. The man who attacked your facility in Belgium.” Marik bit off a large piece, chewing loudly.

“I know. They told me about that.” Carly sat looking to the side of Marik. Conversing still felt uncomfortable to her after so many weeks of isolation. “His name was Andre.”

“Yes, Andre. That’s him. I think I killed him.” Marik picked up a glass of water, using it to wash down his mouthful of sandwich.

“I’m glad.” Carly looked down, not wanting to say anything negative about her current circumstances for fear of being reprimanded. “He caused many problems.”

Marik chuckled, saying nothing.

A few moments passed, and a voice came over the room’s intercom. “Return to your sleeping quarters immediately.”

Carly said nothing as she stood. Marik stood as well. Neither spoke as they left the room.

Marik was a different breed from Carly. He too had endured weeks of torture and isolation but still thought of getting free.

Like Carly, he eventually told his inquisitors everything he knew. For Marik, however, confessing was a foregone conclusion. He waited and endured the torture and isolation for a long enough time to seem broken.

In his mind, Marik was already planning his escape. He figured as long as he stayed alive, freedom also remained possible.

Each time he was let out of his sleeping quarters, Marik would recon the surrounding areas, looking for vulnerabilities and ways to get out.

He would use Carly in his plan. The difficulty was trying to talk about it without those listening figuring out what he was doing.

It would take time to develop a coded speaking pattern with Carly.

Of course, if an opportunity to escape presented itself before all that, Marik would undoubtedly take advantage of it.

Carly and Marik were both vaguely aware of events outside, despite not receiving regular updates. Information given to them was tightly controlled.

Still, if he could get out, Marik was confident he would survive amidst the chaos.

No longer did Marik feel any obligation to Yǔ xī. He didn’t actually know for sure she was still alive.

Marik had told his captors all about his relationship with Yǔ xī. Sebridge had informed him during questioning that she was also being held and questioned. He figured she would break, having gone through the conditioning process himself. Everyone who did would eventually break.

There was no benefit to denying his connection to her. She would tell them anyway, eventually.

His strategy was to cooperate. Be compliant. Make his jailors think he presented no risk of defiant behavior.

If things on the outside were deteriorating, as Marik suspected was happening, this place, wherever it was, might be under threat as well.

If and when that happened, Marik would be ready.

Chapter 29

“You can’t just take my things!” The elderly man teared up, feeling helpless.

“I can do whatever I want you old fuck.” Holding a box of food items, the younger, much larger man continued rifling through the old man’s belongings.

Luke and Minjun were walking by as this scene played out. “Hey! You!” Luke put a hand on Minjun to stop him. “Wait here father.”

Minjun reached out to Luke. “Leave them. We should not mess there.”

“I’ll be back soon father.” Luke pulled away from Minjun, walking toward the large man.

“Butt out. This ain’t none of your business kid.” The large man turned away from Luke, continuing to toss through the old man’s items.

“You can’t do this. Those are my things.” The old man waved his hands, starting to get worked up.

Luke stepped between the old man and the younger man, putting up a hand to silence the older man. “You need to stop that. Leave his stuff alone.”

The big man rose and turned toward Luke. “What are you gonna do about it you little shit? I’ll beat you to a pulp. Get out of here.”

“You got that backwards.” Luke remained where he was. “It’s you who needs to leave.”

Sneering, the big man began moving toward Luke. “I’m gonna teach you to mind your own business you little shit.”

The big man swung at Luke, but Luke sidestepped him, pushing him off balance. The big man stumbled a bit, then regained his balance. “Keep it up shithead. I’ll tear you up.”

“You should leave, now.” Luke got into a fighting stance, readying himself for another attack.

The bully squared up with Luke, running at him full speed. Luke intended to move out of the way at the last second, but the man stopped before reaching Luke. He brought up his arm, stiff-arming Luke in the face. Luke fell backward, falling unbalanced to the ground.

His attacker kept coming. The big man kicked Luke in the kidney while he was down. Luke let out a yell of pain, rolling away, but not quite fast enough.

Another cry of pain escaped Luke’s mouth as he felt a foot hit him in the back again. “You enjoyin this ass whoopin yet kid?”

Luke rolled in the man’s direction, bringing his fist up and making contact with his groin. The man recoiled. “Oh, fuck.”

Struggling to get to his feet, Luke moved toward the man as he staggered back, still swearing.

Luke punched the man twice, causing his nose to bleed. The man swung without being able to see in Luke’s direction, his fist missing its target.

Luke boxed the man’s left ear, causing him to let out a whelp of pain. “You fucker! I’m gonna kill you!”

In a rage, the large man charged Luke, using his body weight to push Luke to the ground. As he fell on top of him, the man punched Luke’s ribcage.

They rolled around on the ground for several seconds, Luke trying to squirm out of the man’s grip. The man continued pummeling Luke all over his side and back. Luke could feel himself getting woozy from the blows. It was difficult to catch a breath.

The man sat up for a moment, also out of breath. Luke was too weak to break free.

Luke watched through blurry eyes as the man lifted his hand, forming it into a fist. “You ain’t ever getting up you shit.”

Two people came into the edge of Luke’s vision, grabbing hold of the man atop him, pulling him off.

The man started yelling again, trying to break free. “Get off me shitheads! He had it comin!”

One of the people who pulled him off Luke didn’t say anything as he positioned himself around the back of Luke’s attacker, placing him in a chokehold.

The big man struggled as he lost his balance and sagged in the other man’s arms. The man holding Luke’s attacker moved to the ground with him, releasing his hold as the big man lost consciousness.

Luke felt too woozy to stand. Each time he took a breath, his ribcage screamed in protest.

The two people rushed to him, gently raising and setting him against the old man’s truck.

“Take it easy guy. Slow. Take it easy.” One of them said to him.

Minjun appeared beside Luke as his two rescuers moved away. “Luke, tell me. You okay.”

Luke made a couple attempts to answer before getting a few words out. “I’ll be alright. It’s not too bad.”

“Luke, I tell you not do this. You must listen.” Minjun placed his hands on Luke’s ribs, gently moving over them.

“Ow.” Luke blurted out as his father found a particularly tender area. “That one might be broken.”

“Are you his father?” Luke heard another voice speaking.

“Yes, I father.” Minjun answered.

“If you’ll let me take a look at him. I have some medical training.” The man who had subdued Luke’s attacker knelt next to Luke, doing the same as Minjun had done. “Looks like he’s got a couple broken ribs. I can patch him up a little, but he’ll need time to let them heal. Stay in bed for a while.”

“Thank you Sir.” Minjun allowed the man to continue examining Luke. “You save my son. That man horrible.”

“He’s a rough fella for sure.” Luke heard a woman’s voice. It was the other person who had helped pull off his attacker.

“Your boy is very brave, but not too smart. He shoulda called for help.” The woman knelt beside Minjun.

“I tell him not go.” Minjun looked toward the woman. “He not always listen good.”

“Thank you.” It was the old man’s voice. “He woulda taken everything. Thank you.”

Luke managed a weak smile. “It’s no problem.” His words were weak, unable to finish the sentence. Luke grimaced again from the pain of trying to breathe.

“No talking for now kid. Just try to breathe easy.” The man stood up. “I gotta run and get some of my stuff. I’ll be back in a few to patch him up a little. My name’s Mitch.”

Mitch held out his hand for Minjun. “Minjun.” Luke’s father replied, shaking Mitch’s hand.

Mitch ran off, but the woman remained next to Luke and Minjun. “You can gather up your stuff mister. We’ll take care of that bastard in a few.” The woman looked at the old man as she spoke.

The old man nodded, beginning to pick up his things that were scattered about the area.

“I’m Teena.” The woman introduced herself but did not offer to shake Minjun or Luke’s hand.

“Thank you Teena.” Luke managed to say.

“Next time call out for help. Make a noise. Get people’s attention. That guy woulda hammered on you till your head was flat.” Teena looked over at the unconscious man lying on the ground.

Luke said nothing but knew Teena was correct. He should not have taken on that guy alone.

Luke waited for Mitch to return, not looking forward to how sore he would be tomorrow or the eventual lecture from his father he knew was inevitable.

At least he stalled the guy long enough to protect the old man. It had been sufficient this time.

Chapter 30

Roger didn't like it, but it wasn't his call. Jesse had a soft spot for family.

"It's my son. He's messed up, but he's my boy". Jesse's eyes betrayed him, showing defeat.

Roger looked away, already sensing the beginning of the end for this small settlement of survivors.

Roger recalled events of the previous day in his mind.

"It's me pa." Jordan stood at the gate, waving. "You gotta let me in."

Roger took a spot next to Jesse at the gate that day, looking over the rag-tag group outside.

His first impression of them did not bring any comfort.

"Jordan, where you been son?" Jesse's initial reaction sounded tough. It would soon crumble.

"Runnin'! Jordan couldn't hide his desperation. "Them bastard drainers is everywhere pa."

"Who are your friends son?" Jesse scanned over the motley crew accompanying his wayward child.

"We been lookin after each other. They're my crew." Jordan's look of pride was unmistakable.

"They're a rough lookin bunch." Jesse eyed Roger, expressing concern about Jordan's group. "They gonna cause trouble?"

"We just need a place for a bit. We'll be moving on again after a day or two." Jordan's voice didn't sound genuine.

Roger should have spoken but was a newcomer himself. Jesse had listened to him about Bert. However, Roger knew that what happened with Bert still ate at Jesse. Jesse believed they could have done more to keep Bert from dying.

A long sigh escaped Jesse's mouth. "We'll give you a day, two at most. You can't stay here with them."

Jordan looked at the ground. "Okay pa. That's all we need."

A woman in Jordan's group spoke in a low voice, but Jordan shushed her. Roger couldn't make it out.

"We gonna have trouble?" Jesse took note as well, challenging Jordan on the spot.

"No pa. No trouble. Please, just let us in" The women's savage outfit caught Roger's attention as Jesse shoved her away.

"I'll run 'em out they cause trouble. Understood?" Jesse wasn't ready to relent just yet.

"Yeah, we got it. No trouble." Jordan smiled at Jesse. Roger felt his anxiety rising.

“Okay, let’em in Ned.” Jesse backed away from the peek hole, turning toward Roger with a look of challenge and apology blended.

"Allright!" Jordan cheered as the gates rolled apart.

Jordan brought his gang inside, stopping to hug Jesse along the way. "we won't make ya sorry pa. You can trust me."

Jesse returned the hug but did not speak.

Jordan ignored Roger and everyone else as he led his people through Jesse's community, selecting the children's play area for them to settle in.

Roger forced himself to avoid eye contact with Jesse. He didn't trust his face to hide his apprehension. There was no way this ended well for anyone.

"I know it was one of 'em that did it." Jesse sat next to Roger in front of Roger's trailer the following day. "I gotta confront 'em bout it. Get 'em gone. Couldn't keep the peace for one damn day."

"You think we coulda done more for Bert." Roger looked ahead, examining the trailer across from them.

"What?" Jesse seemed surprised by the statement.

"Tell me. I want to hear you say it aloud." Roger needed to get Bert out of the way with Jesse. The current situation with Jordan gave him an opening.

"I followed your advice Roger. We did like you said." Jesse turned to look at Roger.

"You weren't happy about it." Roger didn't take his eyes off the trailer.

"He'll no, I wasn't happy. Bert was my friend. He was family." Jesse paused. "Why you bringin that up now?"

"You blame me for Bert. Maybe not entirely but you think we shoulda left the food stash sooner. He might still be alive if we did. Tell I'm wrong." Roger stared straight into Jesse.

Jesse looked away from Roger. "Maybe, maybe some part of me does. That's just the hurt lookin for somethin to blame." Jesse shook his head. "I know you was just tryin to keep us safe."

"You think runnin your boy off is gonna be a problem or you wouldn't be sitting here talkin to me." Roger knew where Jesse was headed in his thinking. "You want my help because I don't give a shit about him. But, I'm not willing to have you blame me later for how it goes down."

Jesse lowered his head. "You read me too well Roger. Damnit."

"He's your boy, but he can't stay here. If you don't get him gone, someone else will. Then you'll lose power with the people in this community. They'll look to someone else to lead them." Roger figured it best to lay it all out in the open.

"If I can't protect 'em, maybe they should. Jordan bein my boy don't mean I can let his people thievin get by." Jesse seemed on edge, between defeat and resignation.

"If I help get rid of him, I gotta know you won't hold on to resentment about it later. It's that way or I won't be part of it." Roger was giving Jesse an ultimatum.

Jesse didn't speak for a moment.

"You have my word. I won't blame ya later, whatever happens. Now, will you help me run of my son or not?"

"I will. Lets get to it." Roger stood, turning toward his trailer. He wanted his shotgun.

Roger walked beside Jesse to Jordan's makeshift camp in the children's play area.

Jordan caught sight of them as they approached.

"Pa!" Jordan called out, noticing Roger's shotgun. "What's up?"

Jesse remained silent as he and Roger stopped just a few feet from Jordan. Several of Jordan's group sat around him, seeming disinterested.

"Someone in the community had food and knives go missing this mornin after they left their trailer." Jesse was all business like he was talking to a stranger. "We know it was someone here took it."

Jordan scoffed. The woman who had whispered something to him yesterday outside the gate laughed. She spoke up again. Roger could hear her this time. "We gonna take what we need."

Jordan shot a look her way, and she stopped laughing, continuing to smirk at the others sitting around her.

"You don't take what's not yours here. Thought I made that clear yesterday." Jesse turned his attention to the woman, disgust growing on his face.

Jordan hesitated, looking back and forth between Jesse and his gang. Roger could tell Jordan was debating pacifying his father versus looking weak to his people.

Jesse surprised Roger, speaking up before Jordan offered any reply. "You gotta clear out. Can't have ya here no longer."

Jordan looked at Jesse, not understanding that his father would force him out with such urgency.

A man sitting close to Jordan got up, walking toward Jesse. "You don't talk at us about what we gotta do, old timer."

The man continued moving toward Jesse, raising his hand to take a swing at him.

As he was getting ready to unload on Jesse, Roger brought up his shotgun, slamming the butt end into the man's face.

The man fell backward, unconscious to the ground.

Everyone else around Jordan stood up, turning toward Jesse and Roger. Roger leveled the shotgun on the group.

"You all get movin now. Walk out the gate. Just get out. I'll shoot the next one makes a move I don't like." Roger took aim at the one from Jordan's group closest to him. "This one can die first."

Jordan spit then spoke up. "We don't take threats from no one." Jordan brought a knife out from under his shirt. Jesse at once recognized it as belonging to the woman who confronted him about being robbed earlier in the day.

"I'm gonna come over and gut…"

Roger pulled the trigger, sending a slug into the man standing just a few feet away. It tore a hole through the man's chest.

He staggered back into the person behind him, falling to the ground.

Roger already had the shotgun pointed at a new target before his first target fell.

Jesse stood next to Roger, speechless.

"You all be outta here in ten seconds, or I keep shooting till you're all dead." Roger looked into the eyes of the woman who had laughed when they first approached Jordan a few minutes ago.

The woman's demeanor had changed. She looked panicked and afraid. She knew Roger would kill her.

"We gotta get Jor." She had already started toward the gate.

Jordan hesitated a second, eyeing his father. Jesse just stood next to Roger, staring at the dead man on the ground.

Jordan hissed in Jesse's direction, then ran after the woman.

The gate was already open as per Jesse's instructions. Jordan and his people were gone less than thirty seconds later.

Roger walked after them, stopping just inside the gate. Satisfied Jordan had gone, Roger tilted his head toward the men standing at the entrance, returning to Jesse.

He found Jesse standing over the dead man, joined now by Arlene and a few others.

"Jordan's gone. The gate is closed again." Roger turned his gaze toward the dead man as well.

Jesse looked up at Roger, clearly still dazed by recent events. "That didn't go well at all."

"It did. We got 'em out. That's what you wanted." Roger wasn't willing to give Jesse an inch of time for regret.

Arlene moved around to face Jesse. "Roger did what was necessary. Probably saved us all."

Jesse avoided eye contact with Arlene, keeping his eyes on the dead body in front of him.

"I need a moment. Let me be." Jesse said nothing more.

Arlene got Roger's attention, signaling him away from Jesse. "Give him time. He'll need a few."

Roger shook his head, but Arlene put her hand on his arm. "He knows you did what had to be done. Just give him some time."

She pulled Roger away with her, leaving Jesse alone. Everyone else backed away as well, leaving Jesse to stare in silence.

Roger felt annoyed but relented.

He removed Arlene's hand from his arm, walking back to his trailer alone.

Chapter 31

Cambodia 1965

"Two minutes!" Baako scanned the terrain, eyes quick and alive.

The transport helicopter skimmed trees just below. They were going in fast. Quick in and out.

Baako Ibrahim, the newly assigned commanding officer of General Tibern's secret assault team, was leading five men on their second mission.

They all underwent Dr. Siskee's experiments to augment their physiological abilities. Tibern had overseen their training.

They were still being tested.

"Go!" Baako, first out and down, hurried the men following after him into the thick vegetation surrounding their drop zone.

Every man knew his assignment and the land they stealthily moved over intimately. Baako required them to spend two weeks living in this tropical forest, learning its personality and mannerisms.

Their target resided forty kilometers due west from the drop point. Dropping closer risked exposure. These soldiers would close the distance in under three hours, effortlessly gliding through thick vegetation.

The target, Seang Kong-Kea, operated as a go-between, supplying arms from the Chinese to the Vietcong across the border. Seang was a warlord, profiting from the so-called police action in Vietnam.

Baako Ibrahim and his men would end Seang's reign today.

High-altitude photos provided details of Seang's compound ten kilometers southeast of Ban Bake. Ibrahim's team moved into position in silence, giving away nothing as they positioned themselves within striking distance of the east guard tower.

Something was off.

The guard tower was unoccupied. According to intelligence reports, two guards were stationed on all four lookouts in rotating shifts. It should always be busy.

Baako knew to always expect the unexpected. This was no different. Be ready for anything.

Signaling his men forward, Ibrahim took point, providing cover while his team scaled the unguarded wall.

Once down on the other side, it quickly became evident that the courtyard section of Seang's compound was unoccupied. This also contradicted intelligence reports.

The place should have at least eight sentries constantly patrolling. No one was there.

Moving toward the main house, Baako's men found no resistance.

Ibrahim went for the door ahead of his team. He found it unlocked, which did not at once seem odd, but alarm bells began going off in Baako's head.

Entering the house, the team of elite soldiers cleared each room in turn.

"House is clear." Valendy, one of Ibrahim's team, reported. "Do we wait or bug out?"

"Hold." Baako looked straight ahead, his mind racing through scenarios involving an empty compound. He arrived at the most likely possibility in seconds. "They were expecting us."

Ibrahim's men began spreading out, taking up defensive positions. Waiting for the imminent ambush on their location.

The sound of crashing glass somewhere within the house signaled the beginning. It was a distraction to direct their attention away from the frontal assault.

Moving in synchronicity made possible by their enhanced senses, Baako's men avoided the sudden onslaught of bullets following the sound of breaking glass from the opposite direction.

They could hear yelling from beyond the house. Seang would bring his army to neutralize them with overwhelming force moving in from all sides.

Two men moved forward, crawling low as round after round sailed above their heads. The front door exit offered the shortest path to safety.

The soldiers used the bullet holes created by continuous firing to point their 338-hybrid sniper rifles toward the enemy, picking off targets one by one with surgical precision. Retrofitted from a base model Mauser hunting rifle, this version offered prolonged firing, without reloading, courtesy of a large magazine.

Within minutes, Baako's sharpshooters cleared the front yard enough so his team could make their way toward the wall where they entered the compound.

Baako covered for his men, picking off enemy soldiers firing on their position with his rifle until the last man was over the wall.

The first man on the ground across the wall covered for the rest, using a grenade launcher to create random explosions within the compound.

The last man up turned back toward the courtyard, hanging on the rope while he covered for Ibrahim to climb up himself.

It took Baako's team less than two minutes to get over the wall from the front door of Seang's house. They hadn't completed their mission, but they had all got out alive.

Someone had tipped Seang off about Ibrahim and his men.

Finding out who would be his first task once he returned to Guam.

He needed to get his men out of harm's way.

Chapter 32

The first ones to fall upon Angelika’s horde, those all but robbed of higher brain functions, fought viciously, but without coordination.

Jan, along with Mateo, ran straight into them. Mateo had shown himself to be loyal but impulsive.

Jan grabbed one berserker, ripping off its head as he tossed its separated body into three others. Mateo jumped over two, quickly smashing their heads into each other, crushing their skulls instantly.

Angelika had sent her berserkers to flank Dryden’s horde. She wanted him to think he had the upper hand until it was too late.

Several mindless ones leaped across the ground, getting around Jan and Mateo.

They only had eyes for Angelika.

Close behind, Dryden followed. He knew a hundred berserkers likely could not subdue Angelika. That was not his intention. Their task was only to distract her and keep her busy.

Angelika stood motionless as the throng reached her position. At once, five jumped at her from nearly fifteen feet away.

Angelika dropped to the ground a split second before they landed on her.

Twenty more berserkers, plus Dryden, were next. Angelika sprang up, pushing herself off the ground and into the middle of the approaching group. She landed atop two of them, driving her fists through the top of their heads.

Angelika pivoted next, clearing her hands of brain mush and bone fragments as she beat at anything in front of her, separating torsos, heads, and limbs.

She could sense Dryden before she felt him. Having firm control over his horde, Dryden deftly moved them aside with a simple command, sent from his mind to theirs, as Angelika continued dismembering bodies around her.

Dryden struck Angelika from behind, moving in a blur and knocking her off balance. She flew nearly thirty feet, smacking hard into a thick tree. The tree shook as Angelika bounced off it, falling to the ground.

As Dryden landed to immediately begin feeding on Angelika’s mind, her horde sounded out behind him.

Angelika had removed many of Dryden’s berserkers from play during her fit of violence several seconds prior. Her mindless ones met no resistance, emerging from nowhere and madly rushing Dryden.

Angelika had sacrificed some strength to control her berserker’s route through the forest, directing them around Dryden’s frontal assault. She would not be able to recover fast enough from Dryden throwing her into a tree to defend herself.

As Angelika had done with his, Dryden began making quick work of her berserkers, peeling several in half within seconds, and slicing through the rest with expert efficiency.

Angelika rolled over on the ground, her body trembling from massive trauma. Already wounds all over her body were fading, muscles and bones reattaching, strength returning.

Would it be fast enough?

Angelika knew it wouldn't be. Doing the only thing she could, Angelika assaulted Dryden’s mind, seeking to overpower him. He was distracted by the mindless ones.

Dryden froze with one arm sticking out the other side of a body, still holding the body up and off the ground as he did.

He jerked violently, dropping the body and nearly falling to the ground. Angelika’s two remaining berserkers at once overtook him, ramming into his body as he convulsed from Angelika’s mind attack.

The two greedily clawed at Dryden’s face and head, digging into his skull as tentacles emerged from their fingertips. Their only drive was to feed.

Dryden resisted Angelika. He was strong. Assailants digging into his skull hindered him, but not for long.

Dryden pushed back against Angelika with such force that she fell back to the ground in agony, feeling the sharp sting of being suddenly evicted from Dryden’s mind.

Two bodies flew into the air as Dryden leaped to his feet in one motion, instantly turning toward Angelika.

He was in full fight mode, but the berserkers had gotten into his mind during their brief time feeding on him.

Dryden had lost power. Angelika was not back to full strength, still reeling inside her own head.

He charged at her, still on the ground. Angelika managed to push herself out of the way just in time.

Dryden was already coming at her again as she turned to face him. This time she managed to dodge most of the force of his punch into her midsection, barely catching the end of it as she moved aside.

Angelika followed up with a leg sweep, missing Dryden entirely.

They circled each other closely, within arm’s reach of each other. Angelika and Dryden locked their minds, diverting precious energy to resist attempts at the mental onslaught.

Therefore, they both failed to sense another like them, hovering a short distance away and waiting to take advantage of their weakened states.

No berserkers sent ahead.

One figure landed on top of them, hammering each from above as she came down.

Angelika and Dryden fell to the ground, surprised. For the average person, the force of downward pressure would have left them nothing but a pile of crushed bones and organs.

Dryden lost consciousness briefly after rolling a few feet. Angelika could not move as her body repaired many broken bones, crushed insides, and torn muscles yet again.

Barely aware of her surroundings, Angelika lay staring up at the figure above her. Angelika’s mind was too weak to sense anything about this stranger who had interrupted her battle for dominance.

Some part of her recognized it was one like her, but she could not yet sense it effectively. She needed more time to heal.

She would not get it this time.

Sensing more power in Dryden, the unknown figure first turned to him. Kneeling quickly, she drained his remaining mind energy in seconds but did not entirely finish him. He would fall under this mysterious attacker’s authority, becoming part of its horde.

Angelika could feel her body getting stronger when the stranger finished with Dryden.

It turned toward her, still kneeling. In a flash, it was beside her, greedily feeding on Angelika.

She felt her mind dimming. Comprehension being overrun by a growing nothingness.

Suddenly, the unknown creature stopped feeding.

Jan and Mateo were there. Angelika could sense them somewhere around her.

Her mind returned in a rush, giving her no time to strategize.

She must flee.

Angelika rolled away from a continuing scene of violence as Mateo and Jan battled together against Angelika’s attacker.

It was all but inevitable that Jan and Mateo would fall tonight. Killed by one whose power dwarfed theirs exponentially.

Angelika did not think about those things as she fled into the surrounding forest. Distance quickly grew between her and this evening’s catastrophic defeat.

It could be enough time to get away, maybe not.

She would soon feel the effects of the amount of energy she had spent this evening.

She would need mind energy to replenish and recover fully.

It was also possible that she would become prey for one like her, but more substantial. She didn’t know.

Alone, her horde decimated, Angelika fled this new threat to her existence.

Chapter 33

A group of twenty vehicles sat motionless on the road ahead of her.

Genevieve cursed to herself as she stopped in her newly requisitioned Toyota Camry. She had traded it out after ditching the Honda eighty miles ago. Apparently, abandoning cars with keys still in the ignition was not uncommon during this upheaval of civilization.

The engine still running, Genevieve sat looking at the line of cars. It didn’t appear possible to drive around them. She could see a few people standing next to their vehicles, chatting.

Genevieve felt herself being watched cautiously by one individual standing in the back, who put a hand on the person next to her. The second person, a man, waved toward Genevieve.

“Shit.” Genevieve scowled at the man, realizing she had two options. Turn around and find another way or move forward. The second option would likely require interacting with these people, and turning around would add time to her journey. Both possibilities were at once unappealing.

Turning her frown into a smile, Genevieve sighed, driving forward slowly. She would play nice for a while, then get around these idiots.

“Howdy Mam.” The man standing at the back moved toward Genevieve as she exited her vehicle. “My name’s Ian.”

“Erin.” Genevieve replied, walking forward a little to shake the man’s hand. “Haven’t seen many people along this road.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t imagine you would.” Ian turned back toward the woman he had been standing beside. “We’re part of a group heading to a small settlement set up in a rest area a ways ahead.”

“Is something the matter?” Genevieve wanted to find out why the vehicles were stopped.

“One of the families in front just got back from up the road. Say there’s scrambler activity about five miles away along the road.” Ian looked past the woman before him, eyeing the road ahead.

“Are you waiting for them to pass?” Genevieve followed Ian’s gaze.

“Kinda. We really don’t know what to do in all honesty.” Ian looked back toward Genevieve. “You out here alone?”

“Yeah, barely got away from a group of scramblers myself.” Genevieve needed to come up with a backstory quick. “I was traveling with some people I met at a gas station. They didn’t make it.”

Ian shook his head. “They’re after everyone. It’s crazy.”

Genevieve didn’t say anything, looking into the ditch. She didn’t want to add any more details than necessary.

“Why don’t you join up with us?” The woman Ian had been standing with joined the conversation. “Safety in numbers. There’s not just scramblers out here. We’ve seen some shady characters along the road.”

Genevieve hadn’t thought of being invited to join this group. She didn’t know how to respond.

Ian looked at the woman, then back to Genevieve. “Mindy’s right. You aren’t safe alone out here. Someone’ll be after ya sooner or later.”

“I…uh.” Genevieve fumbled, playing out all her options.

“Okay, I guess so. Thank you.” She finally said, not sure if this was the best idea.

“You headed anywhere in particular?” Genevieve and Ian had moved over to stand next to Mindy, who spoke up as they did.

“West. I had contact with some family there before cell phones went out. I’m trying to get to them. I need to know if they’re safe.” Genevieve made up a story quickly, preferring Ian and Mindy didn’t pry for details.

“A lot of people doin that.” Mindy bobbed her head in agreement. “People want to be with their family. I understand.”

Genevieve smiled, making eye contact with Mindy.

“We’ll send someone along in a bit to see if things have cleared up.” Ian straightened, apparently also not happy with being at a standstill. “You can park a little closer if you like. Hang out till we can get moving again.”

“Thank you. I will.” Genevieve got back in the Camry, driving it forward several feet, closer to Ian and Mindy’s Suburban.

She turned off the engine, smiling again at Ian and Mindy standing behind their vehicle.

*Fucking great!* Genevieve felt frustration building inside. She could drive through the drainers if not for these idiots blocking the road.

Her new plan was to stick with them no longer than necessary to get back on her own. However, thinking about it more, she realized she may be at risk.

If there were stronger drainers, like in Europe, being alone might draw them to her faster. In a group, she was less noticeable.

She would have to get back on her own eventually. She wasn’t taking a bunch of strangers to The Mountain.

Settling it in her mind, Genevieve decided she would stay with this group for as long as they headed in the same direction. Then split.

It seemed like a solid plan.

Chapter 34

“Sense them? And they won’t attack you? How?” Gloria removed her baseball cap, running her fingers through her hair.

“I tested out my theories a few days ago. I can’t explain it myself. It’s odd. No doubt.” Cowboy expected Gloria to ask a bunch of questions. He didn’t have many answers.

“This just came on suddenly?” Gloria expressed doubt.

“I just thought of it a week ago. I was thinking back on what happened with Lenard and then with you. I wanted to try engaging with them alone.” Cowboy sat down on the edge of Gloria’s couch, resting a hand on his leg.

“Okay.” Gloria lingered in silence. She didn’t know how much she could press Cowboy for answers. She knew he wasn’t the chatty type. “Will you tell me anything more? Something different about you?”

“Different?” Cowboy perked up at this. He wasn’t like most people.

“Did something happen to you? How are you different from Lenard, me, or anybody else?” Gloria kept her voice calm and soothing. She didn’t want Cowboy to get defensive.

Cowboy moved his eyes to the floor, unsure how much to tell Gloria.

“I don’t want people around here getting any ideas about me…thinking I’m a threat, lashing out cause of fear.” Cowboy started to say more, but stopped.

“We’ll keep it between us. You know I keep my word.” Gloria allowed Cowboy time to offer more.

“I went through some stuff in the army. Well, it was the army at first…then something else. Don’t really know what you would call it.” Cowboy began opening up. “We were experimented on. Stuff I don’t understand, but we didn’t ask questions. It was horrible, but I became a better soldier. I could think faster, react better, move quicker…”

“Experimented on, okay…” Gloria was mindful to keep her tone neutral. Non-judgemental. “But you never experienced anything like what happened with me or Lenard when you were…I don’t know…doing an op?”

Cowboy smiled, realizing Gloria didn’t know what to ask. “No, nothing like that. It got hairy sometimes, but nothing like that.”

“I guess it makes sense. If you didn’t know what was being done to you. You probably can’t explain any of this then.” Gloria patted her hands on the table, thinking through Cowboy’s recounting.

Cowboy said nothing. Gloria walked closer to him, still considering his input.

“I don’t see any reason not to use this if we can. Make it work for us.” She stopped a couple feet away from Cowboy. “How far away can you sense them?”

“I don’t know exactly. The group I tracked on 95 was probably closer when I first sensed them. Maybe it depends on how many there are of them.” Cowboy rose, turning toward the window.

“I do appreciate you telling me about it. I will keep this between us.” Gloria thought of something else as she spoke. “Do you sense direction or is it a different feeling?”

“Yeah, a general direction. Feels like pressure is the best way I can describe it. I feel focused on a direction.” Cowboy hadn’t described the sensation aloud before.

“Is there anything else you’ve been experiencing?” Gloria didn’t know if Cowboy would be in an opening-up mood again anytime soon.

“I haven’t slept in four days. Haven’t needed to.” Cowboy offered, not thinking much of it. He had gone without sleep many times in the past.

“Okay. That’s different. You know most people become wrecks after twenty-four hours of no sleep, right?” Gloria pictured herself going that long without rest.

“I guess. Yeah, I realize that. I just don’t have occasion to discuss sleep with anybody too often.” Cowboy turned to look at Gloria, realizing this was the most he had ever recounted his past to another person.

“Well, I would like to have both of your abilities. It would be an asset.” Gloria tried not to sound as envious as she felt.

Cowboy could see the advantages of his heightened senses. “I know. I wanted you to know because if I sense something and warn you, I don’t want you asking questions about it in the moment.”

“Understood.” Gloria put her hand on Cowboy’s arm. “I won’t. Thank you, Cowboy.”

“How many people you turned away this week?” Cowboy was ready to change the subject.

“Uh, let’s see. There were three guys in a bronco and then a gang of five with shotguns. So, that makes two groups this week so far. It’s early in the week though.” Gloria smiled to herself, looking out the window along with Cowboy.

“Any of’em violent?” Cowboy asked.

“Yeah, the gang with shotguns threatened to start taking shots at us, but we had them covered from all sides. I offered to turn their van into a noodle strainer.” Gloria sounded like she would have enjoyed doing so.

Cowboy grinned. “Sounds like great stress relief.”

“They backed down. Drove off in a hurry. Haven’t seen’em since.” Gloria began moving away from Cowboy. “I’m off. Gotta check on my refugees again. It’s a full-time job these days.”

“I’ll see myself out.” Cowboy replied, turning to wave in Gloria’s direction.

Cowboy felt relieved he had let Gloria in on his secret. He didn’t think she would tell anybody.

This would make it easier if he needed to warn her in a hurry.

With the number of people congregating here, the possibility of encountering headsuckers increased by the day.

Better to be prepared.

Chapter 35

"Ha! I bet you would try it again. You know if you wanted to impress a guy." Mitch continued chuckling as Luke’s cheeks turned red.

"Yeah, he would. Definitely." Gavin joined Mitch. "It's okay man. We get it."

"Don't let 'em get to you Luke. I think it's a sweet story." Teena smirked, showing irritation at Mitch and Gavin's laughter.

"Whatever." Luke sighed, rubbing his ribs.

"How's the ribs?" Mitch's expression turned serious. "Still botherin ya?"

"No. Yeah, a little. It's nothing." Luke forced his hand to his side, trying to play it down.

"It takes time. You won't heal overnight." Mitch shook his head, picturing the scene of the big man hunched over Luke, getting ready to launch a fist into Luke's face.

"Whatever happened to that huge dude anyway?" Gavin asked.

"We handled him." Teena jumped in before Mitch could reply. "He won't be around again."

Mitch just nodded, keeping silent.

"Uh-huh. Okay." Gavin could see that neither Teena nor Mitch were going to offer further details on the matter.

"There's been more o'them crazies around lately." Mitch changed the subject. "I saw two of 'em put down myself. Heard of four others."

"My father keeps bringing up leaving." Luke looked around, not wanting Minjun to overhear their conversation. Luke saw his father was still sleeping in the car.

"Teena and I have too." Mitch cast a glance at Teena.

"We think more of them are headed this way. From the city. It'll be chaos here soon." Teena looked toward the entrance to the rest area.

"Yeah, probably." Gavin agreed.

"You're arguing for leaving? What happened to stick around here?" Luke raised his eyebrows at Gavin.

"I'm not arguing for leaving. I've just been thinkin about the ones from the city is all." Gavin could tell his voice sounded defensive.

"You still think staying here is the best option?" Luke pressed Gavin.

"I don't know. Maybe. It would be chaos if a bunch of 'em show up here. I don't know." Gavin shrugged, moving his gaze to the ground.

"Where will you guys go?" Luke turned back to Mitch and Teena.

"We don't know. We've heard of a few places east and west but haven't decided on anything yet." Mitch kicked his boot against the picnic table, struggling with an answer.

"Maybe my father is right. It has been getting more dangerous here by the day." Luke looked at his father again, blowing air out of his mouth.

"You can head out with us if you want." Mitch turned toward Teena. "We can travel together. Probably safer. I can't promise it though."

"If you guys all decide to leave, I would like to come as well." Gavin knew he wanted to stay with Luke. He would do whatever Luke did.

"Sure. Not a problem." Mitch patted Gavin on the shoulder. "You're welcome to join us."

"Anyone else here…" Mitch's sentence was interrupted by loud growling, followed by gunshots nearby.

"Shit!" Mitch yelled. "Another one's got in here!"

Mitch ran toward the sound, followed by Teena and the others.

This time Luke would not be stepping in to break anything up. He was too injured to be of any use.

Mitch got there first. Luke heard him yelling before he could see what was going on.

A berserker knocked down two people, a woman, and a teenage boy. It clawed at their faces. The woman screamed as she swatted their attacker to no effect. The boy held his hands over his head in terror.

Mitch didn't hesitate. He ran up behind the scrambler, jamming his knife into its head.

It fell limp on top of the woman and boy.

The woman started crying. The boy scooted away, kicking his feet along the ground.

Mitch reached down, pulling the body off the woman. "You're okay. It's dead. It can't hurt you."

Still crying, the woman rolled over onto her knees, resting for another moment. "Thank you."

Mitch and Gavin drug the dead berserker away. Teena went over to comfort the woman. "You're okay. Your safe now."

The woman started crying again. "No! I'm not. More of them will come."

Teena said nothing, continuing to rub the woman's back.

Luke watched Gavin and Mitch, then turned toward the highway. *More will be coming.*

It was time to go. Luke realized he had decided. He would tell Mitch later tonight after they disposed of the body.

It wasn't safe here any longer.

Chapter 36

"Hello." Carly and Marik looked up from their sandwiches as a man entered the room. "Ms. Hennington?"

Carly didn't know what to say, so she kept it simple. "Yes? Do I know you?"

"No, Well, yes, technically, we've met. You probably don't remember me. It was brief. I was just a tech, so I can understand.”

"Who are you?" Marik interrupted, looking around for another sandwich or something else to eat.

"Oh, yes, how rude of me. I'm Jon Ramirez, former linguistics tech at the facility, in Belgium." Ramirez paused. "You two know about the facility, right?"

Carly said nothing.

Marik, who had initially dismissed Ramirez, directed his eyes toward him. "Are you an interrogator?"

Neither Carly nor Marik had seen anyone else besides each other since being taken to wherever they were. It seemed like a fair question.

"Me? Gosh, no." Ramirez seemed surprised by the question. "I'm here like you. Answering questions. I'm wondering what's going to happen to me. I talk fast when I'm nervous. Am I talking too fast now? "

"Yes." Marik looked away from Ramirez, distracted by his gurgling stomach.

Ramirez seemed unphased by Marik. "I didn't expect to see you here, Ms. Hennington. I can't believe they got you." Ramirez coughed, seemingly more nervous. "I didn't mean it like that. I just didn't expect someone with your connections to get scooped up and taken to a place like this is all."

"Are you going to eat something?" Marik had only one interest at the moment.

"My connections?" Carly needed to find out if this was some kind of test or a trap. "What connections are those?"

"You know, I just figured you would have some type of plan for the end of the world." Ramirez suddenly looked around. "Where do we get our food here?"

"In the wall." Marik waved his finger at the wall to the left of where Ramirez was standing.

"Oooookay." Ramirez walked over to the wall, bending a little to examine a small compartment behind some glass. "Turkey sandwiches. Yummy."

"Were you "conditioned" like us?" Marik didn't seem pleased that a new person had entered his social life.

"I probably had a gazillion mental breakdowns. Yes, I was." Ramirez lifted the glass cover to retrieve his food. He sounded oddly nonchalant about being tortured.

"You don't sound like a tortured person." Marik locked his eyes on the sandwich Ramirez was cheerfully taking over to a table next to them.

"Did we meet at the facility?" Carly ignored Marik's line of questioning entirely.

"Yes, yes. You came to see the artifact. I was one of the people trying to translate the glyphs. "Man, were we in over our heads there."

"And I talked to you during that time?" Carly searched her mind, recalling her last visit to the facility.

"Well, no. I guess technically we didn't meet in a, you know. We didn't speak to each other. You probably would never speak to me directly. Orin or Joelle, but not me." Ramirez took a bite out of his sandwich. Marik groaned quietly.

Marik could be onto something. This Jon Ramirez character was not acting like someone who had endured what she had. He was upbeat and optimistic. It was perplexing.

"Are you gonna eat all of that?" Marik gestured toward the remaining items in Ramirez's food tray.

Ramirez stopped chewing, food still in his mouth, and looked at his meal. "Yu cun ha ma auple."

Marik scoffed, holding his hand out. Ramirez handed him the apple.

Chewing up his last bite, Ramirez smiled broadly at Carly.

"Jon, you seem oddly cheerful for someone who was tortured for weeks on end." Carly knew she sounded accusatory but didn't care. Maybe some of her old personality was coming back at last.

"Ramirez, please. Everyone calls me Ramirez." Ramirez looked away from Carly and Marik. "My mind still can't accept it. I don't know what else to do. I'm completely broken inside." The sudden shift in the tone of his voice encouraged a smile from Marik.

"You are nutty." Marik examined the apple Ramirez had given him, taking a bite and chewing it slowly.

Carly didn't know what to think but decided Ramirez might be a legitimate prisoner here like her. "You told them whatever they wanted to know. You got out like us."

Ramirez nodded, still looking away, saying nothing.

"What happened to Orin?" Carly wanted to find out what Ramirez knew before letting down her defenses with him.

Ramirez continued looking away, not speaking. Carly wasn't sure he had heard her, lost in his thoughts.

Then Ramirez turned, watching Marik eat his apple.

"I don't know. It was crazy. The subjects all got out. Well, most of them, I think. I really don't know what happened."

"Do you know what happened to anybody?" Carly tried to sound conversational.

"Yeah, I know too much about what happened to a lot of people. They were attacked by the test subjects. Most died. They were yelling. It was terrible." Ramirez seemed unable to take his eyes off Marik gobbling up the apple.

"Ramirez!" Carly yelled. Marik stopped chewing briefly, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah?" Ramirez's eyes popped away from Marik, landing on Carly. "Sorry. I can't really process that too well either."

"How did you survive?" Carly didn't know if this question would send Ramirez twirling again.

"When the artifact lit up, after the power went out, I lost consciousness. I woke up a while later. There were people walking around…" Ramirez looked about to tear up. "They were, they were…"

"See, he's nutty." Marik finished the apple, setting the core on his food tray.

"Return to your sleeping quarters." A voice came over the intercom in the room.

Carly and Marik stood up at the same time. Ramirez didn't seem to hear.

"Ramirez." Carly moved closer. "It's time to go back to our rooms."

Ramirez turned his head toward Carly. "Yeah, okay."

Ramirez stood up with Carly and Marik. Tears were running down his cheeks.

"We'll see each other again." Carly didn't know what else to say. She wanted her words to sound soothing but wasn't sure they came across that way.

The door opened. Carly waited for Ramirez to walk out first. So did Marik.

"He's nutty." Marik laughed dryly. "I don't want that idiot walking behind me."

Carly said nothing, following Marik out of the room.

She still didn't know whether this was some new strategy to get more out of her or if Ramirez was just another prisoner like her.

Either way, she would likely see him again. He may be able to supply some helpful information. Maybe not. His mental state was obviously unstable.

He seemed just as likely to try killing himself as to eat a sandwich.

Chapter 37

"It's a little tense." I'll give you that." Arlene turned her head away to watch some children walk by. "People aren't being friendly these past few days."

Roger only nodded, considering his options.

"You gonna say anything or just wait for me to leave?" Arlene didn't turn to look at Roger.

"Huh?" Roger looked over at her, a confused expression on his face. "No, I didn't mean to ignore you. I'm just lost in my head a little."

"I can see that." Arlene grinned at Roger. "You want to be alone?"

"Not really. Sit with me. I just don't know if I'll make a great conversationalist today." Roger forced a smile in return.

"You talked to Jesse since, you know?" Arlene gestured into the air in front of them.

*Just sitting with me doesn't mean keep asking questions.*Roger frowned but didn't answer.

Arlene let her hands drop into her lap. "I guess that either means no or you don't want to talk about it."

Roger sighed, rubbing his forehead. "No, I haven't talked to him. I'm keeping clear of him at the moment."

"Why?" Arlene scoffed. "You probably saved all of us by chasing Jordan away. He's volatile and shitty."

"Yeah?" Roger didn't keep the doubt out of his voice. "It definitely doesn't feel like people are thankful about it."

"Well it was pretty brutal. You blew a hole through a guy." Arlene replied.

Roger shook his head, then nodded again as if his mood were proper for the occasion.

"Hey, listen." Arlene shifted on the picnic table to face Roger. "These people are thankful, but they're also rattled. People don't get shot to death a lot here. That's all."

It was Roger's turn to laugh. "So, you think it's all okay then?"

"Jesse, and everyone else, will get over it. It'll just take some..."

Roger put his hand up, stopping Arlene mid-sentence.

"What is it?" Arlene began looking around, not sure what had alerted Roger.

"Sounds like a diesel engine." Roger held his hand in the air, turning toward the back of the trailer park.

A few seconds later, there was yelling from that direction. As Roger and Arlene watched, a medium-sized box truck came crashing through the back fence.

From his vantage point, Roger could see that no one was driving the truck.

"Grab your gun!" Roger spun off the picnic table, running toward his trailer. Arlene jumped to her feet, going for her trailer.

Roger could hear more yelling as he swung the door open to his trailer, reaching inside to grab his shotgun.

Turning toward the truck, Roger watched as the vehicle continued forward until it hit a tree behind the children's play area.

A man and a woman from Jesse's community ran over to the crashed truck. Roger yelled for them to get back, but they appeared not to hear him.

"Shit!" Roger yelled, taking off toward the scene.

As he ran, Roger saw a rope pulled tight from the back of the cargo area and a door swinging down as the line drew it.

Two scramblers lurched out of the cargo area, falling to the ground. They quickly got to their feet, pivoting toward the man and woman standing at the front of the truck.

Roger brought up his shotgun, firing toward the closest scrambler. His shot missed. The scrambler jumped onto the man, pulling him to the ground and sinking its fingers into the man's head.

The woman screamed. Roger was almost to the truck when he saw what looked like two dogs run out of the cargo area at full speed.

The dogs landed in a tangle on the ground, kicking their legs to get to their feet.

Roger was to the truck. He took aim and fired again at the scrambler attacking the man on the ground. This time his slug took out a considerable section of the scrambler's ribcage and part of its arm. It fell on its side, letting go of the man.

The other scrambler had yet to move. Roger looked up at it. The scrambler made eye contact with Roger and ran behind the truck.

Roger couldn't see the dogs anymore, but he heard someone cry out on the other side of a trailer home near the play area.

Next, he heard Arlene's voice, shouting for someone to get out of her way. Then a gunshot.

Roger left the man on the ground and the woman standing next to him, heading for the closest row of trailers.

Roger crept between two trailers. One dog blindsided him. He fell backward, losing his feet as the dog lunged in front of him.

The mutated creature twirled in a half circle, ripping toward Roger on the ground. Roger brought up his shotgun, firing at the dog from close range. The dog's head exploded, inertia bringing its body forward before collapsing at Roger's feet.

More gunshots. "Help!"

Roger got to his feet, heading out into the driving path, running along all the trailers in this row. He saw the other scrambler dash behind a trailer to his left.

People were running all over the place. Men, women, and children.

Roger followed the scrambler. Turning round the trailer's side, he saw no one. It was still moving or had found another victim close by.

Roger kept moving. At the back of the trailer, he saw the scrambler again. It was feeding on a child.

Without hesitation, Roger fired into the scrambler's center mass. This time he blew it off the top of its victim.

The scrambler landed a couple yards from the child, a young boy. Roger ran up to the child, but the boy was unconscious, not moving.

Roger looked over at the scrambler. It crawled toward him, the lower half of its body connected by a thread to the rest of it.

Sighing, Roger walked over to the scrambler, hitting it with the butt of his shotgun and smashing its skull.

"Roger!" It was Arlene. Roger turned to see her rushing toward him and the boy. "Are you hurt?"

Arlene stopped as she saw the boy lying on the ground. "Oh Fuck!"

Arlene went down on her knees, checking the boy for injuries.

"The scrambler was on him." Roger walked over to Arlene and the boy. "There were two dogs. I got one of them, but the other one is still here somewhere."

"I shot it." Arlene began inspecting the boy's head. "He's got pink marks. It got into him."

Roger hunched to get level with Arlene, inspecting the bruises on the boy's head.

"His body is getting cold. What does that mean?" Arlene grabbed Roger's hand, placing it on the boy's arm.

"I don't know. It shouldn't be this cold yet, even if he's dead." Roger pulled his hand away from Arlene.

Just then, a woman ran over to them. "Oh God! Oliver!"

"Oh, Elena…" Arlene tried to comfort the woman, but she pushed Arlene's hands away in sheer panic at seeing her son on the ground.

"Oliver. Baby." The woman, Elena, feverishly rubbed the boy's cheeks. "Talk to me Oliver. Say something. Oh, God no."

Roger stood without speaking, watching Elena cry as she begged her son to wake up.

Arlene continued trying to comfort Elena, but it was clear Elena had tuned her out.

"Oliver no. You can't be hurt. You can't." Elena laid her head on Oliver's chest.

"Scrambler was on him. I shot it. It's dead." Roger backed away, unsure what this woman would do next.

Elena looked past Roger, seeing the mutilated scrambler. She blinked a few times, looking up at Roger next.

"Why did it have to be Oliver?" Elena cried out, returning her attention to the boy.

Roger looked up from Elena, seeing Jesse and a couple others jogging over to where he stood.

"Someone rigged the truck to drive through the back. There was a board wedged tween the seat and gas." Jesse looked down at Elena and Oliver. "What the heck happened here?"

"Boy got attacked by a scrambler. I shot it." Roger didn't make eye contact with Jesse.

"Good." Jesse moved his gaze between Roger and the scrambler.

"Didn't see anybody outside. We'll get that hole patched up right away." A woman beside Jesse nodded toward Arlene and Jesse, dashing off toward the damaged fence.

Jesse turned, watching the woman run off, then directed his attention back to Roger. "Would'ya take two or three people out and check again? I don't want any more surprises today."

Roger turned to Jesse, this time making eye contact. "Yeah. No problem."

Jesse returned Roger's look, nodding once.

After spending about forty-five minutes investigating two empty buildings and a neighboring street, Roger and his scouting team found nothing suspicious outside the trailer park.

"It was Jordan. He's gettin back at me for kickin 'em all out." Were the first words out of Jesse's mouth when Roger returned.

Roger looked away, not knowing how to respond.

"I know ya think I'm mad at ya for how ya did it with Jordan and his crew, but I'm not." Jesse's voice cracked.

Turning back toward Jesse, Roger felt anger building inside. "You damn sure hid it well."

Jesse let out a breath before speaking. "It's my own fuckin fault. I can't handle my own son's piss poor behavior. It's on me. Not you."

Seeing that Jesse was on the verge of tears, Roger's anger lessened. "I'm not judging you. Next time, I need you to handle it better. I did what I thought was necessary. I won't apologize to you or anyone else for it."

"I know." Jesse rubbed his nose, sniffling. "Don't expect ya to neither. Just try listenin to what I'm sayin. I'm mad at me. Not you."

Jesse held one nostril, blowing snot out of the other. "I won't shun you again. I promise. It wasn't about what you did."

"He's your son. It must be difficult. But if he comes around again, I'll put a slug in him." Roger held his gaze on Jesse, daring him to challenge his words.

Jesse looked down, nodding at the ground. "I understand. You do it. I can't."

Roger didn't wait around for Jesse to say anything else. He turned, heading back to his trailer.

He would let Jesse and the others clean up Jordan's carnage.

Chapter 38

"Oh no…Millie. Not you too!" Tobias Sanders watched as his long-time friend, Millie Baker, clawed away at his driver's side window.

Tobias had spent that past week squatting at a neighbor's house, finding it abandoned. He stayed until the food ran out.

Looking past Millie to the house, Tobias could see one of the maids in the window, obviously a berserker. The maid scratched at the window, frantically trying to get out.

Tobias could see that, like Millie, the berserker in the house wanted to get at him. It stared at him intensely as he sat looking at it.

"What am I supposed to do Millie?" Tobias whimpered. He couldn't believe his friends would let him down like this by getting infected. They should have been more careful.

Sighing loudly, Tobias shook his head, stepping on the gas and peeling out of the driveway.

Tobias thought about checking on a few other friends. He had scored with the first house. Maybe it was worth a shot.

Driving was anxiety-provoking for Tobias. Several times berserkers had run into his vehicle in a fit of rage, clearly abandoning any concern for personal safety. There were dents on both sides of his BMW to prove it.

He made the mistake of stopping for a group of them shortly after fleeing his own home. Thinking they would pass by his vehicle like pedestrians, Sanders was shocked when the whole group made a mad dash directly at him.

Panicking, Tobias put his BMW in reverse only to crash into a fence on the side of the road. As several of the infected lumbered onto the hood of his vehicle, he frantically drove forward again.

Tobias didn't want to be on the road any longer than necessary. It was too much.

His next closest friend lived about fifteen miles away from Millie's house. Pulling onto the freeway entrance leading out of this neighborhood, he soon found it jammed with abandoned vehicles.

"How could there be these many cars here?" Tobias vented. "This subdivision isn't that big!"

Tobias hit the steering wheel several times in frustration. "Damnit!"

Backing up, he turned to take a longer route, adding at least eight miles to his trip.

"Ridiculous absurdity." Tobias waved his arms, letting go of the steering wheel and accidentally activating the entertainment system. Slow Hot Wind by Pat Methany began playing through the premium sound system.

Laughing, Tobias flicked off the music. "Not today Pat." A soothing melody did not fit the description of Tobias's current predicament.

"Ha. Yes, of course." Glancing at his navigation system, Tobias could see another freeway entrance he had forgotten about. This would shave nearly five miles off his route. "Get off this damn road ASAP, Tobias."

Seeing this entrance was clear, Tobias sped up as he entered the on-ramp. "Piece of cake."

Gaining speed, Tobias had gotten up to seventy-five by the time he swerved out of the ramp lane. There were very few cars obstructing his path. He might make up lost time.

The plethora of joy ended quite suddenly a few miles later.

Doing a little over ninety, Tobias cursed. A man was standing on the freeway in front of several parked cars, waving hysterically at him. "What the fuck guy?"

Quickly scanning for a way to go around the bothersome stranger, Tobias gunned it, veering to the man's right.

About two seconds later, Tobias saw why the man was hysterical. There was an entire herd of sheep blocking the way.

Tobias slammed on his brakes, swearing again as he screeched to a stop. "Fucking hell! How in damnable fuck is this happening?"

Tobias watched the sheep passively standing several yards ahead. "Sheep? Where? Who has sheep around here? There's no farmers."

A shot rang out. Tobias ducked instinctively.

Turning to look behind him, Tobias could see several people standing beside the parked cars behind him. One man lowered a rifle, turning to say something to a few people standing next to him.

"What the fuck?!" Tobias held his hands up, face twisted in confusion.

Turning back toward the sheep, Tobias noticed something else. Berserkers. Crouching behind the sheep.

Tobias watched, horrified and fascinated, as one of the infected stood up quickly. Another shot rang out. The berserker fell backward out of sight.

"Shit." Tobias put his vehicle in reverse, backing up to another group of people standing next to their cars.

Rolling down his window, Tobias was greeted by one individual. "Tried to warn ya buddy. Scramblers using them sheep to hunt."

"Uh huh." Tobias entertained turning around, shuffling through various scenarios in his head. A new thought occurred to him.

"Are you all going somewhere together?" He asked the one who had spoken to him.

"Yeah, kinda." The man approached Tobias. "We've kinda been growing as we head west. Where you headed?"

"Well, umm, nowhere in particular. Just trying to stay alive here." Tobias fluttered his hands in the air in exasperation.

"Well, you could come with us, I guess. Maybe you could be our spotter. You seem to have a lot of enthusiasm for driving fast." The man smiled wide, laughing at his own remark.

"Ha ha, yeah." Tobias began speaking, then stopped himself. *Take control of this idiot Tobias.*

"I'm a little out of my element here. Thank you for trying to warn me. I know you were trying to help. I should have listened." *That's better.*

"Hey, no worries. We're all strangers out here. We coulda been bandits or something. There are more than a few of 'em out here." The man turned to look at the people standing behind him. "Some of us had run ins already."

Tobias watched several people nod in agreement. Bandits? Tobias hadn't thought beyond berserkers trying to get him. What if they showed up where he was alone at his friend's house? That wouldn't do at all.

"I would very much appreciate joining you, wherever you are going Mr.?..." Tobias needed to start using this guy's name. Get on a first-name basis.

"Oh. Just Brayden. Mr. Whitlock is my father. I'm just Brayden." Brayden beamed at Tobias, enjoying the role of welcoming a wayward stranger.

"Pleasure Brayden. My name is Tobias."

Another gunshot rang out. Tobias flinched again.

Brayden adopted a severe expression. "Yeah, it'll take a while probably to clear them out. They seem smarter than most. Thinkers. Haven't met any like that before. Just the crazier ones."

"Yeah, me neither. I didn't know there were various kinds of them." Tobias shuddered at the notion of berserkers that could think. It was horrifying.

Several gunshots rang out. Tobias didn't flinch this time. He looked toward the sheep, trying to see the result.

"They ran off the road!" The man holding the gun glanced up the road, shaking his head. "Damn!"

"What does that mean?" Tobias's eyes darted to the side of the freeway.

"May be tryin to go round. Get at us from behind." Brayden scanned the thick grass lining the freeway where the berserkers had disappeared.

"We should move on while it's clear. Get out of this area." Tobias heard the worry in his own voice.

"Let's get movin'! Quick!" The man who had been shooting yelled out, and people began clambering for their vehicles.

"Looks like we are." Brayden winked at Tobias. "Just stay close. Don't want to get too far ahead or behind." Brayden paused, then added. "Don't get too heavy on that gas pedal."

Tobias smiled at Brayden in a way he hoped didn't appear sarcastic. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you."

Tobias waited until a few cars had taken off before falling behind them. He wanted to be close to the front, not stuck in the middle, just in case another surprise lay ahead.

Trying to push aside any revulsion he felt about socializing with commoners, Tobias pressed a button on his display panel, bringing up Pat Methany again. "Maybe I should have caught the vibe sooner Pat."

Tobias smiled, trying to get into the mellow rhythm as he pretended he wasn't scanning his perimeter for thinking berserkers.

Chapter 39

"Cover the other side!" Lenard motioned toward his sentries. "Don't let 'em get behind us!"

Cowboy's prediction came to pass.

"Shit! We gotta hold'em!" Lenard felt panic threatening to overtake him, grimacing in horror as the armed band of thugs advanced into the refugee camp.

The attack began in an instant and out of nowhere. Lenard heard a yell from someone on the night watch crew, then a barrage of bullets.

He radioed Gloria, bolting up from the bunk in his camper van. As people awoke throughout the camp, fearing for their lives, more alarms sounded.

Lenard's team practiced for this eventuality. This night would put them all to the test.

A watch member was already standing outside his van as Lenard exited, holding his rifle in one hand. Two more appeared a few seconds later.

"Ryder, Nyra. You two are with me. Hector, get the others." Lenard felt his adrenaline climbing. "Take up a position at the back. Pick 'em off when you can. We'll move around to the left on this side."

The attackers were already moving into camp, shooting people unfortunate enough to have wandered out of their trailers or vehicles in surprise.

Gloria radioed Cowboy just after Lenard notified her of the invasion. Cowboy was at least fifteen minutes away. Gloria would send up a flare from her position after hearing two chirps on her walkie from Cowboy.

To get between the first line of attackers, Lenard and those with him moved between Gloria's cabin and a string of trailers. Gloria ran out the back door of her cabin into the woods to take the other side.

She intended to slip in behind the rear position of these outlaws and pick them off one by one, disrupting their cohesion and causing disorder amongst them.

Lenard could hear people in the camp screaming in terror as muzzle flashes lit up the night. He pointed for Nyra and Ryder to take up places to his left and right on the sides of trailers sitting between them and chaos on the other side.

Together, Lenard, Nyra, and Ryder took aim and began neutralizing the attackers, waiting for clear shots as the strangers advanced.

"Please no. Please." A woman cried as she lay next to her husband. The outlaw stepped up to her, gun in hand, ready to put a bullet in her head.

Nyra shot him before he did so. The man fell in front of the woman. The crying woman, not understanding what had happened, looked around in confusion. Nyra couldn't risk calling out to her. That would alert the strangers to her position.

A shot rang out, and the woman fell dead on top of her husband. Nyra cursed to herself.

Lenard could hear shots coming from where Hector had taken up position in back of the camp. The outlaws likely would try flanking Hector, just as Lenard and Gloria were trying to flank them.

Neither Lenard nor Gloria had any idea how many attackers were out there. Gloria dashed through the trees, keeping herself parallel to the road. She intended to cross well behind the action.

A bullet whizzing past her head sent Gloria to the ground. They were in the woods, on her side.

Lying there still, Gloria waited to hear footsteps. She rolled onto her back, rifle still in hand. Shooting in the distance, but no footsteps nearby.

Gloria used one arm and her legs to scoot closer to a tree, sitting up against it and scanning the surrounding area. She couldn't see far in the dark, but that probably meant they couldn't either.

Sending up a flare would alert the enemy to her position. She couldn't signal Cowboy from here. How much time had passed since she radioed him? She couldn't remember.

Gloria put her walkie on vibrate, pursing her lips together tight.

Cowboy could see the muzzle flashes as he rounded a corner, slowing to a stop. Jumping out of his truck, Cowboy ran back, slipping his keys on top of a rear tire as he darted into the woods.

He stopped to signal Gloria as they had discussed and waited for the signal flare. A minute passed. Nothing.

Gritting his teeth, Cowboy ran just off the road. He never intended to sacrifice his life for a bunch of helpless refugees, but he made a pact with Gloria and meant to keep his word.

He would look after her safety first. Then, if possible, do what he could for the pedestrians in her camp without getting himself killed.

From their position, Lenard and the others couldn't see the entire camp. Nyra focused on the area in front and didn't notice one outlaw come around the trailer beside her.

It was a woman. The unknown assailant shot Nyra a few feet away, killing her. Lenard swung around to return fire, but the woman was gone.

"Shit, Nyra!" Ryder yelled out.

"Shhh." Lenard put his finger to his lips, turning back toward Ryder. Ryder nodded, realizing his mistake. It was too late. The shooter had gotten around Lenard and Ryder while they focused on Nyra.

She took out Ryder with one shot as well, leaving Lenard alone. He felt a fresh fear growing inside him. The fear of being alone in a gunfight with some mysterious attacker who had taken out two of his team. Lenard stared at Ryder on the ground.

*Where the fuck is she?* Lenard's eyes darted all around him as he lowered himself closer to the ground.

Another shot rang out. Lenard heard a thud against the trailer next to where Ryder had fallen. Then footsteps approached.

Lenard turned, ready to fire toward the footsteps. "Hold it. It's me. Don't shoot."

"Shit." Lenard felt a flash of anger and relief. "Shit Noah. I almost shot you dude."

"Hector sent me around to check on you. We heard shooting over this way." Noah looked over to Nyra and then at Ryder. "Damn. I shoulda came sooner."

"We can't worry about them now." Lenard got Noah's attention before continuing. "Later, Okay. Later."

"Follow me around. We'll sweep toward Hector." Lenard got up, heading toward the last camper marking the boundary of the refugee camp. Noah followed.

Cowboy could see three men ahead as he trotted along the ditch. These weren't men from the camp.

Cowboy changed direction, running into the woods and just out of sight. These fellas were attempting to flank whoever was defending the camp from behind the last row of vehicles.

Cowboy made his way up beside the three men as they were getting ready to move closer to the camp again. He waited until they started moving to emerge from hiding, raising his AR-15 and dispatching them with practiced efficiency.

Without waiting to watch the last of his targets fall to the ground, Cowboy took off running again, closer to the main event of the evening.

He did not know where Gloria was. He would circle the camp, take out who he could, and see if he spotted her anywhere.

Gloria sat listening to shooting and yelling back at the refugee camp. She still couldn't hear anything close by, but it would be easy for someone to sneak through the trees with the nearby commotion.

Deciding to use the noise to her advantage, Gloria moved around the tree, supplying her meager cover, and headed deeper into the woods. Maybe this way, she could get around whoever took a shot at her.

It couldn't be going well back at camp. She needed to make a difference soon, or it wouldn't matter.

Lenard and Noah were around the last trailer. They spotted two strangers in the camp at once. A man and a woman standing just outside a fifth wheel by the perimeter's edge.

Lenard nodded to Noah, and they aimed at the intruders, neutralizing them. A split second later, another trespasser jumped out of the fifth wheel's side door, shooting into the night and yelling. Noah took that one out as well.

*How many more of them can there be?* Lenard wasn't sure, but he knew better than to let his guard down. Together with Noah, he began sweeping the area toward Hector.

Cowboy could hear them, but darkness and thick foliage obstructed their location.

"We gotta go now Glen. We've already been sitting here too long. We're supposed be swarming these fuckers."

"Just sit tight Sig. I'll decide when we move."

Cowboy used their voices to get behind them, shifting around to set up a clear shot.

Cowboy could see the outlaws. There were five of them altogether. No matter. He had enough bullets for everyone.

Instead of aiming for a target, Cowboy lobbed a grenade into the center of the human-looking shapes, then lunged for the ground. Someone yelled out in pain as the grenade hit them in the back.

Two seconds later, there was an explosion. Cowboy jumped up, running into the midst of them, shooting anything still moving at close range.

As he turned to resume his path toward the refugee camp, two men appeared out of nowhere holding revolvers. As the men opened fire without hesitation, Cowboy felt the first bullet strike his bullet-proof vest. The second shot missed.

Cowboy doubled over, concealing himself from the shooters behind a tree. He knew they would be on him within seconds.

Kneeling, Cowboy waited till the first man came around the tree, sticking a knife deep in the man's crotch and hitting his gun away.

The second man halted several feet behind. Using the first man as cover, Cowboy took aim with his rifle, shooting into the second man's center mass.

Turning back to the first, Cowboy shot him in the head.

Cowboy ran up to the second man, but he was already dead. He kept going. He would be at the camp in seconds.

Gloria had made it back to the road and across without incident. She turned around toward the camp, picking up her pace as the shooting continued ahead of her.

Looking toward the road, Gloria made out several vehicles parked in the ditch. She couldn't see any details about them. They were more shadows than anything else, but there was movement around them.

Stopping, Gloria turned toward the vehicles. She could start by taking out anyone staying back from the fighting.

Gloria could hear voices as she got closer. It sounded like two women and a man.

"We'll get some food from these people, don't worry. Probably some gas too." A man's voice.

A woman's voice followed, but Gloria couldn't understand what she was saying.

Gloria crept up on one vehicle as she exited the woods. She moved along the side closest to the trees, looking all around her for any movement on her side.

She crouched beside a truck where the people were talking on the other side.

"I don't know Lara. Not much longer." A different man's voice.

"Don't use the flashlight. No light." The other man spoke up.

The woman spoke, but Gloria wasn't waiting any longer.

She got as close as she dared before taking aim and shooting both men in the legs, one after the other. The men fell to the ground. The woman ran out of sight before Gloria could get to her.

Gloria returned her attention to the men before they could get their guns trained on her under the truck. She shot the first in the chest and the second in the throat.

She rolled closer to their side of the truck, checking for the woman. Nothing.

Gloria scooted from under the truck next to the two men's bodies. Still no sign of the woman.

Getting up into a crouch, Gloria caught sight of the woman as she rounded the corner of a vehicle farther back in line. The woman opened fire on Gloria with a shotgun.

The slug went straight into the door beside Gloria's head, sending fragments into her face. Gloria winced when the woman fired at her, ducking under the truck. She waited until the woman stopped firing.

Gloria didn't think the woman would be stupid enough to walk up beside the truck after how she took out the two men, but life is full of surprises.

A few slugs ricocheted off the ground under the truck, sending gravel at Gloria and into the vehicle's underside.

Gloria cursed as small rocks dug into her face and gravel pelted her body. She rolled away, almost coming out from under the truck.

Getting around without Gloria noticing, the shotgun barked in the woman's hands. A slug grazed the flesh of Gloria's leg. She cried out.

"That's right bitch. You gonna die now!" The woman yelled, taking another shot.

The slug went wide, and no more shots followed. Gloria waited several seconds. Nothing.

She opened her eyes again, looking out from under the truck. The woman was nowhere in sight.

She heard footsteps approaching. Gloria's walkie clicked twice, and she returned the pattern of clicks with two of her own.

A light stick appeared next to her on the ground. Gloria remained motionless, readying herself to shoot whoever was approaching.

The footsteps halted. "Gloria? You under there?" It was Cowboy.

"Yeah. It's me." Gloria replied, feeling relief wash over her, followed by intense pain in her right leg.

"Stay put. I'll come back around."

Gloria waited until she heard Cowboy coming up the other side of the truck. "Clear. Come on out."

Cowboy stood above her as Gloria scooted out from under the truck. "You hurt?"

"Umm, yeah. I can't walk. My leg took a bit of slug on the side." Gloria winced, finding it difficult to speak.

Cowboy shushed Gloria before she could say more. Turning, he took aim at a figure behind them.

"Where's mommy?" It was a little girl's voice.

Lowering his gun, Cowboy stepped aside, allowing Gloria to see the girl.

"She dead. I shot her." Cowboy's blunt reply caused Gloria to wince again in pain and surprise.

"That's okay." The girl didn't sound upset at all. "She was mean to me. I don't like her."

"Are you gonna try hurtin us?" Cowboy kept his finger on the trigger.

"No. I don't have anything to be mean to you with. Mommy has all the mean stuff." The girl walked toward Cowboy and Gloria.

"Any of these vehicles have keys?" Cowboy asked.

"Yes, mine does." The girl turned around, walking away from them. "Wanna see?"

"Sure." Cowboy turned to Gloria. "Wait here. I'll get us a ride back to camp if I can."

Gloria nodded, plopping her head back on the ground.

*What am I going to do with a little girl?* Gloria felt the severity of the evening weighing down on her at once. She realized she didn't hear any shooting.

*Did we survive?* Gloria let out a whimper as she lost consciousness.

Chapter 40

Canyon City, Colorado, 1982

“We will clear all that up for you. You will come with us immediately after. No hassle.” The woman fell silent, looking between Teagan and his father, awaiting an answer.

“Where will you take him?” Magnus Catawanee returned the woman’s gaze, eyes intense and severe.

“It is something we cannot disclose. He will be enlisted in a branch of the military. That is all I can tell you.” The woman kept her tone crisp, returning her gaze to Teagan.

Magnus exhaled, turning to his son. “You must decide this yourself. If you’re man enough to break the law and face the penalties of a man, you decide this as a man.”

Teagan shook his head, tears forming. “I’ll be going to prison for the better part of my life father. I can’t do that. I just can’t.”

“Tell the woman what you will do.” Magnus held no compassion in his voice.

Teagan felt powerless to control his fate at this moment. Prison scared him to death. The military sounded horrible. He sensed the resolve of desperation settling upon him.

“I’ll go. Get me out of here. Now.” There was no quiver in his voice. This surprised Teagan. He didn’t feel the confidence in his tone.

“Very well. You wait here. I will return for you shortly.” The woman stepped out of the room, leaving Teagan alone with his father.

“I tried to bring you up with honor and knowing how to do the right thing. It is my failure as much as your own.” Magnus looked at Teagan, but his son continued staring at the floor.

“You’re hardly ever home. How can you seriously believe that bullshit?” Tegan felt a rush of anger and fear, realizing he might never see his mother again.

“I was here enough to show you the right way.” Magnus kept his gaze on Teagan, unflinching in his reply.

“No. You weren’t.” Teagan would not miss his father. He felt no desire to be rude but also felt no compulsion to be agreeable.

Both remained silent. The woman returned fifteen minutes later.

“You will come with me.” She looked only at Teagan, her tone abrupt.

Standing, Teagan followed the woman out of the room. He said nothing to his father.

Chapter 41

"You want pickle?" Minjun extended the small jar toward Gavin.

"Um, no thanks. I just ate a few carrots and cheese." Gavin waved his hand, politely declining Minjun's offer.

"We leave soon. Grabbers coming." Minjun bit into the end of a pickle, looking out toward the freeway.

"Yeah. They probably will." Gavin agreed.

There had been several more scrambler spells in the past week. A few times, groups of scramblers had wandered into the makeshift camp. The occurrences were increasing in intensity and frequency.

Luke finished loading up the few items he and his father had spread out around their tiny space, double-checking around the car for remaining items.

"That's about it. Mitch and Teena should be pulling up soon." Luke rubbed his hands together, eager to get moving.

"I'm ready." Gavin returned Minjun's grin, watching him stuff the remaining piece of pickle into his mouth.

Gavin frowned, remembering he wanted to discuss something with Luke. "I took two guns from the people who died during one of the scrambler attacks. You want one?"

Luke pursed his lips, thinking. "I guess. What guns did you take?"

"I got a shotgun and a revolver. It's a thirty-eight, I think." Gavin turned toward his car to retrieve one of the guns for Luke.

"I'll take the thirty-eight. Unless you prefer that one." Luke looked toward his father, but Minjun appeared uninterested in the discussion.

"No. That's fine. I don't really have experience with either in all honesty." Gavin rifled through his backseat, pulling out the revolver.

Gavin handed the gun to Luke, along with a box of bullets. "These should last for a while."

"Yeah. Thanks." Luke examined the thirty-eight, checking the cylinder. There were four bullets inside.

Clicking the cylinder back, Luke looked up to see Mitch and Teena approaching in their pickup, pulling a small trailer.

"You folks ready to get outta dodge?" Teena thumped the door, sounding almost cheerful.

Minjun turned to address Teena. "We ready. Yes."

"You follow behind Mitch. I'll go last." Gavin was already headed for his car.

Luke nodded, waiting for his father to enter their vehicle's passenger side.

Mitch was near the end of the on-ramp when he paused, pointing his finger east. Luke looked in the direction Mitch was pointing, but he still couldn't see past the trees blocking his view.

"I'll be back in a minute." Luke didn't turn to look at his father as he exited the vehicle.

"What's up?" Luke hollered to Mitch as he approached his truck. Before reaching Mitch, however, Luke saw why Mitch had stopped. "Damn."

"Should we go back and warn people?" Luke could feel panic growing as he watched a massive herd of scramblers shuffling down the freeway about a mile away.

It was impossible to determine their exact number, but it had to be in the thousands. This was the herd they feared would come.

Everyone still at the rest area would be overrun in minutes.

Before Mitch could answer, Luke turned around, running to his car. "Wait for us. I'll be back in just a few."

Luke didn't wait for a reply. He stopped at his car, opening the door. "Father, wait for me. Don't get out." Luke didn't wait for his father to speak. He was already turning away, heading for Gavin's car before he finished the sentence.

Gavin started to roll down his window, but Luke was moving around to the passenger side. Gavin unlocked his doors as Luke reached for the door handle.

"Scramblers. Thousands of them. Back up. Hurry. We gotta warn people." Luke turned to scan behind them.

Gavin turned as well, putting his car in reverse. "Hold on."

They re-entered the parking area twenty seconds later. Luke grabbed Gavin's shotgun as he stepped out of the vehicle. Pointing it in the air and away, Luke pulled the trigger. A shotgun's firing sound caused a few people to look over in Luke's direction.

A few others had already turned to see why a car had raced back into the parking area in reverse.

"Scramblers! Thousands! Less than a mile away! Get out of here now!" Luke held one hand up to his mouth, yelling.

For several seconds nobody moved, continuing to stare at Luke. Then, one by one, people in the parking area began rushing to throw their belongings into their vehicles.

"There's no time! You have to leave now!" Luke tried to put as much urgency in his voice as he could muster.

Some people abandoned trying to collect their things, getting into their vehicles, and starting out of the parking lot. Others continued rushing around, trying to scoop up whatever they could in a hurry.

Luke got back in the car with Gavin. "Let's get out of here. I warned 'em."

Gavin said nothing as he sped up to stay ahead of the other vehicles leaving.

"We should get walkies." Luke looked back to see the line of vehicles growing behind them. "We gotta be able to communicate with each other on the road."

On the freeway, Gavin pulled to the side of the road so Mitch could get in front of them.

"Stay close." Luke jumped out of Gavin's car, running back to where his vehicle was parked with Minjun inside.

"What happen?" Minjun, obviously alarmed, spoke up before Luke shut the door.

Luke waved at Mitch to start driving. "Scramblers. Thousands of them. Headed toward the rest area."

"Oh dear." Minjun shivered in his seat, turning to look at the incoming throng as Luke entered the freeway.

Several other vehicles followed Luke as people abandoned the rest area. Luke didn't turn to see how many had listened to him. There was no time. The scramblers would be there any minute.

Mitch set a steady pace as they headed down the lonely freeway, swerving around abandoned vehicles.

None of them had any idea where they were going. They only knew a nightmare approached from behind.

Luke felt a sense of uneasiness creeping up on him. The future was uncertain.

"You are strong." His father's voice interrupted Luke's nervous thinking.

"What's that father?" Luke realized he hadn't heard the words.

"You are strong." Minjun put his hand on Luke's shoulder. "Not worry. You do what's right."

Luke sighed and chuckled at the same time. It was nervous laughter. "You think too much of my skills, father."

"No. I not." Minjun patted Luke's shoulder. "You think not enough of yourself."

Luke shook his head. "Okay father." Whatever his father was seeing, Luke didn't see it.

Luke reflected on their brief stay at the rest area, recalling how he rushed into dangerous situations without thinking it through.

He needed to be more cautious. He could have died, or worse, on each of those occasions.

"I need to be stronger in thinking before I act." Luke mumbled, not expecting his father to hear.

"Yes. That too." Minjun removed his hand from Luke's shoulder. "You not think. That dangerous. I scared for you."

Luke saw it from his father's perspective. What was he thinking? He wasn't. If he got hurt or killed, what would happen to his father?

"I'm going to change that father." Luke squeezed the steering wheel, chastising himself for being reckless.

"Thank you." Minjun's voice was quiet, timid.

Looking in his rearview mirror, Luke saw Gavin following close behind.

"We all must be more cautious. That's how we stay alive." Luke spoke his thoughts aloud.

They drove on, unsure of their destination or what lay ahead.

Chapter 42

“My gosh. This is really somethin. I didn’t think you were gonna make it.” Ed held Charlene at arm’s length, looking her over.

“That makes two of us Ed.” Charlene’s radiant complexion left no doubt she was feeling better.

“Your oldest was havin quite a time worryin about ya.” Ed stepped away, scanning around for Brianne. “I bet she’s a world away from that worry today.”

“Yes, her mood is much improved as well.” Charlene agreed.

Ed laughed gently, giving up on trying to find Brianne. “I’m so glad to hear it. Truly.”

Charlene rubbed her hands along her jeans, feeling a new energy for life since her surprisingly quick recovery over the past four days.

“How are things going around here?” Charlene felt like she wanted to be doing something productive. She wanted to start contributing somehow.

“Well, It’s goin okay I guess.” Ed’s voice sounded doubtful. Charlene could hear it.

“You don’t sound like it’s going okay Ed.” She watched his facial expressions closely.

“I don’t like to put my problems on others. I’ll figure it out. Look after myself.” Ed turned a little, keeping his eyes off Charlene.

“Ed?” Charlene started. “What is it?”

“It’s nothin. I’m fine.” Ed shifted back and forth on his legs, obviously experiencing discomfort.

Brianne and Charlie Jr. exited the front door before Charlene could say anything more.

“Mommy!” Charlie ran up to her, throwing his arms around her as he usually did. “Are you okay mommy?”

Charlene smiled, picking up her son. “Yes dear. I’m feeling much better.”

“Mom. You shouldn’t be trying to pick him up. You just got better.” Brianne reached for Charlie, beginning to pull him away from Charlene. Charlie strengthened his grip on Charlene, resisting his older sister’s attempt to remove him from his mother.

He started making whiny noises as Brianne continued trying to pull him off Charlene. “No! Stop Brianne!”

“It’s okay Bri. Leave him alone. I’m fine. Really.” Charlene turned away from Brianne slightly, trying to get her to release Charlie.

Brianne looked like she was going to say something but remained silent and backed away.

“She’s just worried about ya dear. That’s all.” Ed attempted to diffuse the situation.

“I know she is. It’s okay. I’m really okay.” Charlene insisted, moving her gaze between Ed and Brianne.

Charlene held Charlie for another minute, then set him down. “Hey bud. Can you do a little exploring with your sister? I gotta talk to Ed about something.”

“Umm. Okay. Come on Brianne!” Charlie ran toward the woods, not waiting to see if Brianne was following him.

“Brianne…” Charlene hesitated. “Please keep track of him for me. Please.”

Brianne sighed loudly. “Ugh. Fine.”

Charlene watched Brianne stomp off after Charlie. She waited for Brianne to get out of earshot.

“Ed.” Charlene began. “What’s up? You’re clearly in pain or something.”

Ed looked at Charlene briefly, then quickly away again. “Uhh, Damn. Okay. It’s my arthritis. I ran out of meds a few days ago. Never got a chance to get a refill before.”

“Where do you get refills?” Charlene pressed Ed for more details.

“In town. Down the road a ways. Alpena.” Ed was getting uncomfortable. He didn’t want to involve Charlene in his troubles.

“Ed, you’ve done so much for us already. We’d probably be dead if not for you.” Charlene raised her voice at the end as Ed raised his hand, trying to stop her from saying anything more.

“No, no. I did what any decent folk would do. Nothin special.” Ed shook his head, trying to disagree with Charlene.

“That’s nonsense Ed. Not many people would do what you did. I think you know that.” Charlene pressed Ed, trying to get him past his obstinance.

Ed just kept shaking his head silently.

“Well, you better give me some directions, cause I’m going down there find to you some meds today Ed.” Charlene turned to walk away from Ed.

“Hey!” Ed called out, alarmed. “Hold up. Just wait.”

“Better spill Ed.” Charlene ran onto the porch, heading inside.

“Dammit.” Ed scooted after her, grimacing in pain again as his bones and muscles protested.

Charles, Sr. was reading a book inside when Charlene burst through the front door.

“What’s wrong?” He stood up in a hurry, alarmed by Charlene’s sudden intrusion.

“Ed needs meds. We’re gonna get’em.” Charlene started scanning around the living room for Ed’s keys.

“What? We are?” Charles held out his hands in confusion, trying to catch up.

Ed came through the door a few seconds later. “Hold on Charlene. It’s too dangerous. You can’t go out there.”

“Tell him Charles.” Charlene began rummaging through drawers for Ed’s keys.

Charles turned to Ed, his expression one of utter uncertainty. “Umm, Ed. You need meds?”

Ed sighed again. “Ya’ll can’t go to town. It’s too dangerous.”

“Ed. You’ll be unable to move at all soon. I see how difficult it is for you now. Got’em!” Charlene held up Ed’s keys, jingling them toward Charles.

“Charles, tell her.” Ed pleaded, looking to Charles for help.

“I can’t tell her anything when she’s like this Ed.” Charles shrugged. “I still don’t entirely understand what’s going on. What meds?”

“Ed needs arthritis medication. He ran out and didn’t have a chance to get a refill.” Charlene rattled off a quick explanation, already walking in Charles’ direction.

“Okay.” Charles looked around for a gun. “But we shouldn’t go without some protection.

Charlene stopped. “You’re right. Of course. Slow down Charlene. I gotta tell the kids we’re leaving.”

“Wait here.” Charles bolted for the door. “I’ll round’em up.”

Ed helped Charlene load up two handguns and a shotgun while Charles sought out his children in the woods.

“I’m goin with ya.” Ed finished loading the shotgun. “I can drive. I can shoot. I know where we’re going.”

Charles reappeared, with all three kids following close behind.

“What is it?” Lyla spoke up first. “Are we leaving?”

“No dear.” Charlene picked up one of the handguns. It was a semi-automatic forty-four. “Daddy, Ed and I have to run into town. Ed needs arthritis meds.”

“What?” Brianne looked over to Ed. Her initial anxiety was replaced by concern. “Ed, Are you okay?”

Ed looked down at the floor, embarrassed that he was the center of attention.

“Brianne. He needs them. He won’t be able to get around if we don’t get them.” Charlene looked at Ed. “We need to do this for him.”

Brianne didn’t want her mother to go to town. She was afraid of her mother getting hurt. Brianne just got her back. But how could she protest? It was Ed. He needed help.

“I’ll watch Charlie and Lyla.” Brianne sounded calm, even to herself. “You go get what Ed needs. Hurry. Get back to us. We need you too.”

Charlene walked over to Brianne, wrapping her in a bear hug. “I need you too Bunny.” Charlene squeezed Brianne harder. “I know I’m not supposed to call you that, but I can’t help it sometimes.”

“It’s okay mom.” Brianne’s face was pushed up against her mother’s chest. Her voice muffled. “You can if you want.”

Charlene stepped back, taking a turn hugging Charlie, then Lyla. “You little monsters listen to your sister. Promise me.”

“We will.” Charlie and Lyla said at the same time.

“Let’s get going.” Charlene gestured for Ed to lead the way. Charles followed Ed, Charlene walking out last. She turned to blow kisses at her children. “Be back soon.”

Brianne watched her mother walk out the door, closing it behind her.

“Are mommy, daddy and Ed gonna be okay?” Lyla asked.

“Yes, Lyla. They’ll be back soon.” Brianne kept staring at the door, feeling helpless.

Charlie walked over to the couch, leaning over it to look out the window. Lyla joined him.

“You two stay inside until mommy gets back.” Brianne turned to look at them, already worried about them sneaking away when she wasn’t paying attention.

“Say okay.” Brianne raised her voice a little, trying to get a reply from them.

“Okay. Okay.” Both replied hesitantly.

Brianne let out a slow breath, walking over to sit in the chair her father had occupied only moments ago.

She picked up the book he had been reading. It was an old western. Looked cheesy. Brianne sat it down again.

It already felt like her parents and Ed had been gone for too long.

Chapter 43

“You can freshen up here if you like. Few of us ladies are headin up the river bank a ways. You’re welcome to join us.” Mindy had leaned over to poke her head in the driver’s side of the Camry.

“Thank you, yes. That would be great.” Genevieve felt grubby. She hadn’t bathed in quite some time. It was noticeable. She needed to tame the body odor.

“I got extra towels. Don’t know if you need one or not.” Mindy rummaged through the back of the Suburban as Genevieve walked up to her.

“No. I didn’t have a chance to grab anything like that.” Genevieve examined her fingernails, frowning at the dirt beneath their tips.

“No problem. Here.” Mindy handed Genevieve a towel. “You need any lady things?”

“Umm. No, thank you.” Genevieve hadn’t had a period since a couple of months after being inoculated several years ago.

The caravan had pulled into a large campground featuring a boat launch next to the river. A few scramblers shuffled about, being dispatched without difficulty. These particular scramblers were of the less animated variety.

Camper trailers, boat trailers, and motorhomes sat parked around the place, abandoned. A few caravan members systematically checked out each one after entering the campground.

Genevieve’s gaze lingered on a modern-looking men’s and women’s restroom structure parallel to the boat launch.

“Wouldn’t that be great?” Mindy laughed. “Water’s out. Already checked it.”

“Figured. Would be nice, though.” Genevieve shrugged. Life made Genevieve a hardened woman before the crash. Still, she realized how accustomed she had become to luxury and convenience.

A couple women made their way over to where Mindy and Genevieve were standing by the Suburban.

“Hey Mindy girl!” One woman ran up to give Mindy a hug. “Ready to scrub off your birthday suit in the cold water?”

The other woman approached more slowly, remaining silent.

“Who’s our new girl?” The woman hugging Mindy glanced over at Genevieve.

“This is Erin. Be nice.” Mindy squeezed the woman’s arms, backing away from her.

“I’m not mean, just dirty.” The woman winked at Genevieve.

“Erin, meet Konika.” Mindy looked apprehensive. “She’s a handful. Just ignore most of what she says.”

“Hey!” Konika swiped at Mindy’s stomach. “Don’t tell the truth about me while I’m standing here.”

Genevieve forced a pleasant smile. “Pleasure to meet you Konika.”

“And you Erin.” Konika offered a hand to Genevieve.

Genevieve accepted Konika’s hand. “Anyone else joining us for a dip today?”

“Maybe one or two more. I don’t know. We’ll wait for a minute or two and see.” Mindy glanced at the cluster of vehicles parked across from the out-of-service restrooms.

A minute later, three more women hurried over to join them.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road.” Konika made a big circle with her arms, pointing to the river. “These stinky cuchies gots to go!”

Mindy shot a look at Genevieve, an apologetic expression on her face. “Ignore her.”

Genevieve grinned. “It’s fine. She’s a character.”

Mindy chuckled, looking uncomfortable and shaking her head.

The women walked up the river about a quarter of a mile. Konika ran to the river’s edge, undressing in a rush and jumping into the water with a scream.

“You’re crazy Konika!” one of the other women yelled at her.

“Hurry up Tish! Your twat is rank!” Konika pinched her nose, making an exaggerated disgusted look as she did so.

“Shut your cock hole bitch.” Tish yelled back to her, cackling.

As Genevieve undressed next to Mindy, folding her clothes neatly, she watched the other ladies wade into the river, dipping under and enjoying the lazy current.

Genevieve waded into the river a few minutes later, finding the frigid water refreshing. She submerged, remaining under for a while, allowing the water to flow over her entire body.

Breaking the surface, she found Mindy standing next to her. “You doin okay? I know Konika can be a lot to handle for anyone at first.”

“Yes, I’m doing fantastic.” Genevieve rang the water out of her hair, preparing to go under again and repeat the process a few times. “I’m washing away days of ick. That’s all I wanted. Konika is no problem at all.”

“I’m glad.” Mindy rubbed water over her arms and under her armpits. “She’s actually pretty great. Always in a positive mood. Even during the apocalypse.”

Genevieve smiled, dipping herself under the water once again.

Mindy had wandered off by the time Genevieve resurfaced.

“Do I know you from somewhere?”

Genevieve heard a voice behind her. She turned toward it.

“Umm. I don’t think so.” She started squeezing the water out of her hair again.

“You’re name’s Erin?” The woman splashed the water lightly, scrutinizing Genevieve with her gaze.

“Yes. I’m Erin. And you are…?” Genevieve needed to change the direction of this conversation.

“Oh, yes. How rude of me. I’m Chloe.” Chloe held out her hand for Genevieve.

Genevieve took it. “Pleasure, Chloe.”

“I guess you have a familiar face. Maybe you just remind me of someone.” Chloe turned her gaze toward the other women moving around in the water.

“Yeah, maybe.” Genevieve agreed, still wanting to divert Chloe’s attention elsewhere. “Have you been traveling with this group long?”

“Umm, no not long.” Chloe looked down at her hands. They were getting pruny from being in the water. “About two weeks I guess. I managed to get away from some scramblers who attacked my girlfriend and me. I ran into this group a day later.”

“Where’s your girlfriend?” Genevieve joined Chloe in looking at the other women.

“She didn’t make it.” Chloe ran one hand over the water’s surface, making a small wave. “Just me.”

“I’m sorry.” Genevieve tried her best to sound sincere. “That’s very unfortunate.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Chloe continued looking down, recalling the trauma of her loss.

“I’m alone too.” Genevieve offered. “I didn’t lose anybody, but I’ve had a few run-ins with scramblers and outlaws. It’s dangerous out there.”

Mindy wandered back over toward Genevieve and Chloe. “You ladies all clean? We’re about ready to head back.”

“Yeah.” Genevieve looked at Chloe. “Come on Chloe. You can walk back with me.”

Mindy turned to Chloe. “I know it’s tough girl. One day at a time.”

Chloe forced a weak smile. “Yeah, I know.”

The women all made their way back up to the riverbank and began getting dressed. It was a quieter affair. Not a lot of back and forth as there had been when first arriving at the river’s edge.

Konika approached Genevieve as she finished getting her clothes on. “Hey girl!”

“Hey.” Genevieve smoothed out her jeans and shirt. They were a little clingy.

“You wanna join us for some grub tonight? We’re making some delicious canned chili and hotdogs. Yum yum!”

Genevieve couldn’t recall the last time she ate. Her body no longer hungered the same after the facility.

She didn’t really want to eat anything, but it occurred to her that declining the invite might make her stand out. She also didn’t want to bring any negative attention to herself.

“Yeah. Sure. Thank you. That’s very generous.” Genevieve grinned at Konika.

“Of course, honey.” Konika leaned in, giving Genevieve a hug. “Girls gotta look out for each other.”

Genevieve returned the hug, nodding and smiling as Konika backed away.

That night Genevieve pretended to enjoy chili and hotdogs, making small talk with people from the caravan.

She knew several people in the caravan intended to go their separate way at different points along the west route. Genevieve planned to do the same.

Running into stronger drainers was still a concern. But, as the distance between her and The Mountain dwindled, it became less so.

Chloe almost recognizing her wasn’t something Genevieve had planned for at all. She didn’t know if it would be a problem. Since she had already given a false name, it might create unnecessary difficulties.

She could explain giving a false name. Claiming that it was for protection.

She didn’t want anyone trying to use it against her, thinking a wealthy person like her probably had a safe place to escape all the craziness.

Genevieve needed to balance her risks. As she got closer to The Mountain, the chances of meeting a real drainer threat to herself lessened. The opportunities for being recognized increased the longer she stayed with this group.

She would face those challenges as she had all the others in her life head-on.

The Mountain got closer every day.

Chapter 44

She could sense it. She knew its name. Elle.

Angelika had fed a few times in the past week, but not enough to gain her full strength. Elle pursued her, together with Dryden.

There was no sense of Jan or Mateo. Probably dead.

Elle and Dryden were more than enough, however. They had the luxury of time to stop and feed whenever necessary, building up their strength.

The mysterious force she had felt at the facility returned. The one that had crippled her when attacking Simone was getting closer. She sensed, however, that it had no interest in her. She didn’t understand its purpose, but she didn’t need to.

Angelika’s body was remarkable in the way it could adapt to different circumstances. Still underpowered, it had become more efficient out of necessity.

Feeding on humans and the turned supplied different forms of sustenance. Those who had been turned offered Angelika energy to enhance and refine her mind. Humans catered to the more fundamental need for power, which allowed her body to perform as it must. Each energy source could do both, but not to the same degree as the other.

A few times, Angelika had seen small groups of berserkers during her flight from Elle and Dryden. She made quick work of them, not trying to bring them under her influence. She could not put in the time to strengthen the necessary connections and flee her pursuers simultaneously.

Humans were becoming scarcer. Angelika could sense larger groups of them but didn’t dare risk the time and energy it would take to subdue them.

She felt Elle and Dryden as pressure in her head. It came in the form of direction and intensity. One benefit of being fed on by Elle was that Angelika was more attuned to her. This also meant Elle was more attuned to Angelika as well.

That would make a surprise attack all but impossible. Elle would sense Angelika’s presence long before Angelika ever got close.

Angelika set a trajectory toward the mysterious force she recognized from the facility. To her, it behaved erratically, covering great distances with a speed even she could not match. Then halting, it sent out a burst of frequency garbled to Angelika and moving on again in haste.

It may not be possible to catch up to it in time, but this was the best strategy Angelika could devise. With certainty, Angelika knew this force, whatever it was, would incapacitate her again if she got too close. Still, it would do the same to Elle and Dryden.

Her plan was to use that to her advantage, perhaps eluding Elle’s tracking of her long enough to disappear behind the disruptive energy.

It wasn’t without risk.

Angelika had no way of knowing the future path of this mysterious energy. She could only sense where it was going at the moment.

If she could get close enough to it without being incapacitated and move around, there would be a brief time when Elle could not sense Angelika.

If she got too close, or the force moved toward her on a whim, it would immobilize her. Elle might just wait for it to pass on and then assail her with no resistance from Angelika.

In her weakened state, Angelika did not know how fast she could recover from being immobilized by this foreign energy. She would not be able to defend against Elle and Dryden combined.

It was desperate, but it was all she had of options.

Angelika needed this to work.

Chapter 45

It was becoming relentless. The attacks were increasing in rate and intensity.

Roger had expected to match wits with Jordan and his crew. This was nothing like that at all.

Herd after herd of scramblers fell upon the trailer park. These scramblers were ferocious, desperate.

Jordan had likely been killed or fled long ago. Well, at least a week ago.

The first wave came at dark following Jordan’s offensive with a freight truck. About twenty or so scramblers rushed the front gate.

It took over an hour to neutralize them. In the darkness, it became difficult to make out shapes. Headshots were nearly impossible. Much ammunition was wasted during that time.

The second herd showed up within hours of the first. As the scrambler attacks continued, no one slept that night or the next day.

“The side fence is ruined.” Hudson, one of the trailer park residents, wiped his forehead, smearing sweat and dirt into his hair. “They’ll be pourin through it next time.”

“We can’t stay here. We can’t protect this place anymore.” Roger threw a canteen of water at Hudson.

A brief lull in scrambler activity offered time to regroup, but it wouldn’t last long.

“Start gathering anybody who’ll listen. You can follow me out. We’re leaving in thirty minutes.” Roger didn’t wait for Hudson to reply as he ran to find Jesse.

“Just brace it as best you can. Hurry!” Jesse struggled to catch his breath, barking out instructions to the few remaining bodies still able to work.

Victims of scramblers were piled up in one corner of the trailer park. The mother and boy Roger had also killed were amongst them. Roger had shot both after they appeared from their trailer, turned and hungry.

The trailer park’s population had been reduced to twenty-two residents. Over fifty people were living here when Roger first arrived.

“Jesse, we have to abandon this place. Now.” Roger didn’t raise his voice. He wasn’t going to argue with Jesse. If Jesse wanted to stay. He could. Roger was leaving either way.

Jesse didn’t turn to look at Roger. He simply stood, watching three workers try to reinforce the front gate.

“I’m leaving in thirty minutes. This place is going to be a cemetery for anyone who stays here.” Roger started walking away again, not waiting for Jesse to reply.

“Okay!” Jesse’s voice, a mixture of fatigue and frustration, showed he was at the end of his endurance. “We’ll go too.”

Roger stopped and turned to face Jesse. “See you at the back fence in thirty minutes.”

Twenty-five minutes later, Roger was standing at the back gate, holding his shotgun and duffle bag. Six other people stood close by, anxious to get going. Roger was too.

Jesse and Arlene joined them a couple minutes later.

Roger had started a fire at the front gate to act as a deterrent if any scramblers showed up while leaving through the back of the trailer park.

“Let’s get moving. Keep your eyes open. Yell out if you see any of’em around.” Roger and Hudson removed the makeshift barrier to cover a new hole in the back fence, created when a larger group of scramblers had attacked a few days prior.

Arlene ran to catch up with Roger as he walked ahead of the group. “Where we headed?”

“Baseball stadium. If we don’t run into scramblers, it’ll take us about four hours to get there.” Roger continued to scan all around them. Roger, like everyone else, was running on fumes. There hadn’t been much eating or sleeping in the past week. This group of survivors was undernourished and sleep-deprived.

Roger knew he wasn’t anywhere near one hundred percent. The people following him weren’t either. Easy targets for scramblers or outlaws.

“They’ve always been terrible, but now they’re worse. I don’t get it.” Arlene rubbed her neck incessantly, trying to erase the hard knots.

“They’re hungry. Just like us.” Roger didn’t want to make small talk. He was too tired and too wired at the same time.

Arlene picked up the hint from Roger’s body language, staying silent as she walked next to him.

They had been walking for almost thirty minutes when Roger heard someone yell out behind him. “Scramblers!”

Roger spun around to see a large herd of them about fifty yards behind them, running toward the group at full speed.

Roger looked around in desperation. “That building! Go!”

Not waiting to see who was following him, Roger sprinted toward a strip mall on the right side of the street.

He began trying the doors, one after the other. The fourth door was unlocked. Roger opened it, turning to motion everyone inside.

The scramblers were almost to them. Roger waited as long as he could, slamming the door shut before the last group member could enter.

She screamed as the first scrambler jumped on her, quickly followed by several others pulling her to the ground.

Roger didn’t wait to watch the woman get taken down. He was already heading toward the back of the tiny hair salon, looking for a back room. The scramblers would be through the glass front of the store quickly.

A door in the back was unlocked. Roger entered, motioning for anyone behind him to quickly get through the door.

The sound of shattering glass caused a few people to scream as the last person ran through the door. Roger closed it, locking it afterward out of instinct.

A few seconds later, a loud thud echoed through the room as scramblers slammed into the door, trying to break through it.

This door was heavy aluminum, however, solidly placed within its frame. It wouldn’t budge easily.

Scramblers continued ramming into the door as Roger spotted an exit at the back of the room. “There.” He pointed to it.

Roger opened the door cautiously. The exit was clear outside. He headed through the door and continued scanning as the remaining survivors followed him into the small parking area behind the strip mall.

It wasn’t clear to Roger or anyone else how the scramblers were tracking them. Roger thought maybe it was a smell but wasn’t confident in that assessment. He wanted to get far away from the strip mall while most scramblers focused on the aluminum door inside the salon.

There was a wooded area farther back from the parking lot. Roger pointed toward it and started jogging in that direction. It took about five minutes to get through the trees and emerge onto a more prominent street on the other side. This road was like a freeway with a divider between the opposing lanes.

Roger ran onto the street. It was mainly surrounded by forested areas on both sides.

“We gotta put distance between us and them! You have to keep up. You fall behind, you die.” Roger started jogging, trying to set a manageable pace for the group.

Jesse quickly fell behind the rest. Arlene slowed, waiting for him to catch up to her. “Are you hurt?”

“No, just tired.” Jesse struggled to get the words out between breaths. “I’m not used to this much runnin.”

“Do your best. We gotta keep moving.” Arlene glanced behind them nervously.

“I know it.” Jesse picked up his pace a little.

This day would test everyone.

More would fall before they reached the baseball stadium.

Chapter 46

Gloria stepped out of her cabin, grimacing in pain as her leg protested.

“You’re up!” Lenard ran over to her, skipping up the short stairway to the front porch of Gloria’s cabin.

“Yeah, barely.” Gloria gritted her teeth as another stinging pain ran up her leg and into her back. “My leg wants me to head back to bed.”

“Take it easy. Cowboy said the wound wasn’t too bad, but you gotta let yourself heal.” Lenard approached Gloria, unsure if he should help her stand or not.

“I’m fine. Back off.” Gloria snapped at him, at once regretting her tone. “Ignore that. I didn’t mean to be short with you.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” Lenard backed away to give Gloria some space.

“Where is Cowboy?” Gloria looked passed Lenard, taking in the scene around her driveway.

“Said he would be back tonight to check on you.” Lenard joined Gloria in looking things over. “We’ve been cleaning up. No trailers destroyed, but several with multiple bullet holes.”

“How many did we lose?” Gloria began moving toward one of her rocking chairs on the porch.

“Fourteen altogether.” Lenard awkwardly shuffled his feet, hesitant to offer Gloria any aid. “We started digging holes for’em yesterday.”

“Fuck!” Gloria cried out from the throbbing in her leg and the number of dead.

“Yeah.” Lenard’s voice was low. He hadn’t stopped to think about the death toll until Gloria brought it up. “It was brutal.”

Before the bandits decided to turn Gloria’s refugee camp into a shooting gallery, she had offered shelter to sixty-four survivors. They ranged in age from one year old to eighty-two years old.

Almost twenty-two percent of them were dead.

“It could have been much worse.” Lenard wasn’t paying attention to Gloria anymore. He was lost in his own reflection of the carnage. “It doesn’t seem like it though.”

“What did you do before all this?” Gloria brought Lenard back to her with the question.

“Huh?” Lenard was too wrapped up in himself to hear Gloria the first time.

“Before…” Gloria waved her arms in front of her. “All this happened. What did you do?”

“It seems like another life.” Lenard chuckled dryly.

“For all of us.” Gloria laughed as well. “I was getting away from another life.”

“Another life?” Lenard perked up, curious.

“I asked you first.” Gloria frowned at Lenard. “I’m the boss here. You answer my questions first.”

Lenard smiled, nodding in agreement. “Yes Mam.”

Lenard kicked his boot against the beam supporting the roof over Gloria’s front porch. “I sold survival gear online.”

Gloria laughed loudly, shaking her head immediately. “No. No. I’m not laughing at you. I just didn’t expect that is all.”

Lenard smirked. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Not that, I guess.” Gloria winced in pain again from laughing.

“Clearly.” Lenard watched Gloria’s facial expression change abruptly.

“Fuck. Stop making me laugh.” Gloria closed her eyes tight, waiting for the intense pain to lessen.

“Yes Mam.” Lenard’s tone sounded sarcastic. He didn’t understand why Gloria had laughed, shrugging it off.

“Stop calling me Mam!” Gloria made her tone stern, winking at Lenard.

“Yes boss!” Lenard smirked, looking away from Gloria.

“Ass.” Gloria was enjoying giving Lenard a tough time. It gave them both a brief reprieve from the recent horror.

They shared several moments of silence together on the porch, contemplating what to do next.

“What about that girl you brought back?” Lenard broke the silence, turning back toward Gloria.

“I don’t know. Where is she?” Gloria hadn’t thought about the girl since waking up.

“I put her in my trailer.” Lenard shrugged. “Didn’t know what else to do with her.”

“Where are you sleeping then?” Gloria knew Lenard’s small trailer wasn’t big enough for two people.

“I put up my tent.”

Gloria nodded slowly. “Shit, I don’t know.”

Gloria thought about it a bit longer before speaking again. “Have her come to my cabin. I have a room she can stay in. You can have your trailer back.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I will handle her. Send her to me.” Gloria tried to stretch her leg. It felt like a horrible idea, but she knew it was necessary.

Okay, bo…” Lenard stopped himself. “Gloria.”

Lenard winked at Gloria this time, hopping off the porch. “I’ll send her up momentarily.”

“Lenard.” Gloria stopped him. “Did anyone leave after the attack?”

“No.” Lenard swung to face Gloria. “They’re more scared now than before the bandits showed up.” Lenard looked up at the sky, thinking of another detail. “I’ve had people come to me wanting shooting and knife lessons.”

“It’s a great idea.” Gloria replied. “I was hesitant to have more armed people, but I think the one’s here have been here long enough to show they’re not a threat to safety.”

“You didn’t trust any of us when we first got here.” Lenard squinted his eyes at Gloria as if catching her in a lie. “You did it for your protection.”

Before Gloria could get upset, Lenard waved one hand at her. “No, I get it. You didn’t know any of us before we got here. You were just being practical.”

“I was.” Gloria admitted. “I was looking out for myself.”

“And you still are.” Lenard pressed. “I’m not offended. I’m just glad you allowed me to stay. Didn’t mean it in a negative way. You made your conditions clear to everyone. But you did allow us to stay.”

Gloria said nothing. She felt odd for some reason she couldn’t quite understand. She was looking out for herself first. Was she starting to care about these people? That was unsettling.

“I’ll get the girl.” Lenard spun on his heels, moving away from Gloria.

“What’s her name?” Gloria called after him again.

“Mia!”

Gloria watched Lenard walk over to his trailer, lightly knocking on the small side door.

The girl she had seen the night she was shot opened the door, listened to Lenard briefly, and then turned her head toward Gloria.

*Fucking great*. Gloria watched the girl’s face. It held no expression. Gloria could see that the girl was several years younger than she had been when her parents died. Years of horrible memories suddenly flooded her mind of going through foster homes like a revolving door.

Gloria shuddered, then suddenly went rigid. She could feel herself shutting down emotionally again.

Gloria had learned to bury her feelings and be tough. It was a coping mechanism for a trauma beyond her ability to process effectively.

From what she could remember of her and Cowboy’s brief interaction with the girl before losing consciousness, Mia’s family life didn’t sound nurturing.

Gloria didn’t know if she was equipped to take on a parenting role. She lacked any confidence to do so.

The girl walking toward her showed no expression. No fear.

Gloria recognized the look. This was a child who had given up on feeling anything. Given up on any sort of self-value.

“Hello Mia.” Gloria greeted the girl as she stopped at the bottom of the porch stairs.

“Hello.” Mia held no inflection in her voice.

Gloria tried to stand up while keeping her groaning to a minimum. “I’m going to…” Gloria winced, unable to speak at that instant.

Mia rushed up the porch stairs and over to Gloria, trying to hold Gloria up with her shoulders.

“Thank you.” Gloria replied, getting her footing a little better. “You’re going to be staying with me for a while, okay?”

“Yes.” Mia’s tone was deadpan. She would do anything she was told without question.

“Let’s go inside.” Gloria had no idea how to interact with this girl. “I’ll show you where you’ll be staying.”

Mia said nothing as Gloria managed the distance between the rocking chair and her front door, walking behind Gloria into the cabin.

Gloria sighed as they entered the cabin. “Listen Mia. I don’t know how to do this. Be a parent kind of person. You’ll have to be patient with me about all this. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Mommy hit me a lot. You can do that.” Mia looked straight at Gloria, speaking as if she were reading a food label.

“Do you like being hit?” Gloria asked suddenly, unsure if this was an appropriate question.

“Like?” Mia asked. This was the first time Gloria thought she detected a change in Mia’s tone.

“Do you want to be hit?”

“It doesn’t feel good.” Mia seemed to struggle with words as if she didn’t know how to describe liking or wanting anything. “It’s just what she did a lot.”

“Well, I’m not going to hit you. I don’t want to.” Gloria realized she was only thinking of herself when making this statement, not Mia.

“Okay.” Mia replied, voice neutral.

Gloria sighed again.

She had no idea what to do next.

Chapter 47

Eight people with guns stood in front of vehicles, blocking the freeway. Luke and Gavin had stopped just behind Mitch's truck.

"We're far enough away. They see us. They probably can't get a clean shot on us from here." Mitch and Teena were already out of their truck before Luke and Gavin walked up to stand beside them.

"Bandits?" Gavin cupped his hands around his eyes to block out the sunlight, squinting for a better look.

"Maybe. Hard to tell." Teena answered.

"We should just back up and find another route." Luke tilted his head to sneak a peek at his father, waiting in the car.

"That's over thirty miles in the direction we just came." Mitch shook his head. "The scrambler herd is that way."

"Shit." Gavin lowered his hands, turning around to face the direction they had been driving.

"Exactly." Mitch continued surveying the group of armed strangers ahead of them. "Both ways are shit options."

"The herd might be more than thirty miles behind us." Luke joined Gavin in looking at the road behind them.

"Maybe. Probably." Teena looked over to Mitch. "We could try it. Just stop and turn around again if they aren't."

"That'll cost us a lot of gas." Mitch was doubtful. "Where we gonna get more?"

Luke hadn't thought of that but remembered a gas station they had passed by about twenty minutes ago. "There's a gas station back a ways. Might be able to get some there."

"I saw it." Mitch looked over at Teena. "There were people there too. They might be armed."

Luke didn't see the people Mitch was talking about but had no reason to doubt his claim. "You probably didn't have time to see how many though."

"No. I didn't." Mitch gritted his teeth, looking at the ground. "Might be worth a look."

A whistling sound got all their attention. It was coming from the direction of the armed strangers ahead.

Luke saw one of the strangers waving something white in the air. "What do they want?"

"No idea." Mitch picked up his binoculars from the hood of his truck. "One of them is walking forward, setting their gun on the ground."

Everyone could see that Mitch was correct. The unknown person walked ahead of where the gun sat on the ground, continuing to wave in the air. The blockade of vehicles spread apart, and another automobile drove through the opening.

The stranger, a woman Luke thought, turned toward the vehicle, appearing to tie the white shirt or whatever it was on the car's antenna that had driven through the blockade.

She waved a final time toward them. The person who had driven the car forward got out, disappearing again behind the people holding guns.

The woman got into the empty car and began driving slowly toward them.

"Stay sharp." Mitch continued viewing it all through his binoculars. "Could be a trap of some kind."

"Watch the side of the road. Maybe some of them are trying to go through the woods." Gavin stepped away a little, squinting again into the trees.

It took several minutes for the slow-moving car to reach them. The driver stopped about fifty feet away, getting out. She waved again. "Hello!"

Mitch waved in reply. "Howdy!"

"We're not bandits!" The woman continued. "Just cautious! Can I walk over to you?"

Mitch turned, setting his binoculars back on the truck's hood. "Yes! Just keep your hands where we can see them, please!"

"Will do!" the woman began walking toward them, finally stopping outside anyone's reach.

"I'm Dionne. Pleasure to meet you."

"Mitch. This is Teena." Mitch gestured to Teena. "That's Luke and over there is Gavin."

Dionne nodded to each of them as Mitch called out their names. "You all headed anywhere in particular?"

Mitch frowned at Dionne, not wanting to reveal any details.

Dionne smiled in return. "Too personal? No problem. I get it."

"Just being cautious is all. Bandits and other crazies about these days, you know." Mitch did his best to sound friendly.

"As are we." Dionne waved an arm back in the direction she had just come. "Can't be too careful these days."

"You tryin to catch anyone in particular?" Mitch put his hand on Teena's back, trying to appear relaxed.

"Just anything dangerous. We've been attacked by animals and bandits over the past week." Dionne seemed to get a kick from watching Gavin scout the tree line along the freeway behind her.

"You got a gun just in case we're sneakin up on ya?"

It took Gavin a few seconds to realize Dionne was talking to him. Finally, he froze, turning to face her. "Ah, no. Not yet."

Gavin's face showed slight panic at realizing he had left his gun behind in the car. Then his expression relaxed as he realized Dionne was teasing him.

Gavin shrugged as he pretended not to be interested in the trees any longer, slowly walking back to stand beside Mitch.

"There's a herd of scramblers behind us headed this way." Mitch kept his eyes on Dionne, still unwilling to let his guard down. "Might be a day until they reach here. You won't be able to hold them off. Too many."

It was Dionne's turn to look panicked, but only for a second. She quickly stole a look behind her, then directed her attention toward Mitch. "Too many?"

"Yeah." Teena answered. "Probably thousands. We took off in a hurry. Didn't get a specific count."

"Okay," Dionne spoke slowly, apparently deciding how worried she should be about this added information.

"You know anything about the people taking up residence at the gas station we passed a few miles back?" Luke brought himself into the conversation, stepping forward.

"They're not sharing." Dionne answered. "A few of us drove there two days ago, lookin to find some gas. They came out guns up. Told us to leave."

"How many?" Mitch asked.

"Five came out armed. At least four more inside. Probably a few elsewhere." Dionne pulled sunglasses out of her shirt, putting them on to block the sun.

"Don't suppose you would tell us if there's any gas stations up ahead?" Mitch looked at Teena, getting worried.

"Yeah, about forty miles or so, but that's the direction we've been attacked from recently. It's bandit land." Dionne sounded frustrated thinking about it.

"Well, this place won't be safe within a day's time, maybe two." Teena offered. "The scramblers will probably take out whoever is shackin up at the gas station."

As Teena talked, everyone could hear vehicles approaching from behind.

"I thought they were closer." Gavin kicked his feet together, feeling fidgety that they weren't moving away from the herd.

"Yeah." Mitch agreed.

"You know those vehicles?" Dionne interjected herself into the conversation.

"We were all parked at a rest area about sixty miles behind us." Mitch explained. "The few of us here had already decided to leave when we saw the big group of 'em coming as we got on the freeway."

"I went back to warn everyone." Luke added. "I didn't stick around to see who listened."

About twenty vehicles of different makes and models approached the spot where Mitch and company were parked on the freeway, coming to a stop close behind the little group.

"It looks like some didn't get out." Mitch surveyed the caravan, his tone grim.

"If that herd is like you say, we could have a real problem." Dionne joined Gavin in becoming fidgety, shifting back and forth on her feet.

"I'm gonna go talk to 'em. Let 'em know what's up." Mitch nodded to Dionne and headed back toward the caravan behind them.

Luke thought about squaring off with bandits versus facing a large herd of scramblers. Both could have been better-sounding options. As tough as it would be, the bandits were probably the easier choice.

"We're gonna need gas." Luke paused. "Would you help us with the gas station?" Luke directed the question to Dionne.

"Help you?" Dionne didn't quite understand Luke's question. "How?"

"We overpower them." Luke answered. "Get what we need and get back on the road, quickly."

Dionne hesitated, weighing her options. "I try to avoid gunfights personally."

"Yeah. Me too." Luke walked closer to Dionne. "But you probably need gas just like us."

Dionne looked back toward her people, then back to Luke. "We do, but it's not really a safe option."

"There are no safe options at the moment." Luke countered. "That herd will push us toward the bandits regardless."

"Damnit." Dionne swore quietly, barely loud enough for Luke to hear.

"You planning on just driving in there and demanding they share gas with us?" Dionne, clearly getting worried, pressed Luke for a plan.

Luke didn't answer directly, still running through options in his head.

"We could park away from the entrance half a mile or so and walk in to get behind 'em." Teena offered, apparently doing the same thing as Luke.

"Fuck." Dionne swore again, loud enough for all to hear this time. "I really don't want to get shot."

"Will you help us?" Luke asked again.

"I'm not enthusiastic about it, but yes we'll help." Dionne slapped her hands on her thighs in frustration.

"I'm not either." Teena agreed. "But, we're runnin out of time. We gotta do it if we're gonna do it."

Luke turned to watch Mitch talking to someone from the caravan behind them.

Confronting whoever was taking up residence at the gas station would be dangerous. Luke's father would be worried. This wasn't part of Luke's plan to make safer choices.

They had a day to get the gas and get back on the road. He didn't want the herd within seeing range as they moved into bandit country.

The next few hours and days were going to be treacherous. It was likely at least a few people wouldn't make it.

Luke suddenly felt overwhelmed, a sense of powerlessness threatening to overtake him.

He fought the sensation off, trying to empty his mind and focus on the moment. Luke wasn't willing to give up on looking for a way to stay alive. He could not afford indecisiveness.

"Let me head back. Update my friends on our situation. I'll be back in a bit." Dionne pulled Luke out of his internal conflict.

Luke and Teena nodded toward Dionne. Gavin kept his eyes on Mitch.

"This is gonna be dangerous Luke." Gavin was getting increasingly nervous. "People could die."

"People are gonna die either way." Teena held no emotion in her voice. "We just have to keep doing whatever we can to stay alive. Right now, it's all about getting some gas."

"Then scramblers and bandits." Luke added.

Gavin scoffed, shaking his head. "Shitty options all around."

Chapter 48

“It’s up to you only to survive this.” Baako kept his voice low, just loud enough for Teagan to hear.

Teagan lay on a bed, sweat from his body soaking the blankets and sheets beneath him. The throbbing pain bounced around his body, attacking his nerves with unrelenting tenacity.

Straps held him to the bed. Not to trap him but to prevent him from jerking out of it during a fit of agony.

“I…I can’t…” Teagan tried to speak. He couldn’t think straight. Words proved challenging because of the frequent body spasms robbing him of breath and seizing his vocal cords.

“You can if you choose to.” Baako placed his hand on Teagan’s forehead. “I know what you feel. It will kill you if you listen to it.”

Teagan couldn’t imagine how his body could take this any longer. He shuddered as another wave of agony spread from his torso to his extremities.

Shaking his head from side to side, sweat flying from his face and hair, Teagan felt himself giving up inside. He just couldn’t keep going. This was more than he could handle.

“Use the pain. Talk to it. Tell it you will defeat it.” Baako’s voice was loud enough to hear, but Teagan heard it through a fog of anguish.

Teagan wasn’t sure how he could still be conscious. He welcomed passing out. It sounded like the best idea of all time.

“The pain is energy. Turn it around. Conquer your tormentor.” Baako kept his hand on Teagan’s forehead, but he was in too much pain to register it.

Despite the thick fog crowding his mind, Teagan latched onto Baako’s voice. Shelter from the predator stalking his will to live.

The tactile sensation of Baako’s hand on his forehead registered first. Teagan set the force of his will against the storm raging within. This resolve not out of courage but desperation.

A fresh wave of agony began. Teagan focused on the pain, visualizing it as a wave of energy rushing toward him. He let the wave run into him, wash over him. As it did, Teagan focused the wave into himself, trying to see the pain in his mind as nourishment to be devoured.

His first attempt blunted but did not extinguish the torment as Teagan still spasmed. For the first time, however, it felt as though the pain was slowing down. Its force weakening.

“You took something from it. I can see.” Baako’s soft voice came through to Teagan this time. “You will get stronger as it gets weaker. Meet it again, deeper this time.”

The next surge of pain brought a lesser wave. It was intense but slower, not as sharp. Teagan repeated his technique, continuing to absorb energy from the pain.

The waves weakened, finally settling into a low, numb ache. Teagan’s breathing steadied. He could once again fill his lungs with air.

Baako removed his hand from Teagan’s forehead. “You chose to survive it. Many do not.”

“What? What do you mean?” Teagan found it much easier to speak, no longer in agony.

Baako said nothing, stepping aside and swinging his hand wide around the room. It was a small room with eight beds.

Teagan blinked several times, focusing on one bed across from him. A young man was lying in bed, looking around Teagan’s age.

Staring in confusion, understanding hit Teagan. The young man wasn’t moving. He was dead.

Teagan looked at the bed next to the dead man. Another young man occupied the bed. Also not moving. It was the same for the next bed as well.

“All of them?” Teagan could hear the numbness in his voice. He felt nothing.

“You and one other boy survived.” Baako pointed to a bed along the wall on Teagan’s side of the room. “Two of the nine who came into this room.”

“Why did you pick me to help?” Teagan surprised himself. He felt no sympathy or discomfort at seeing the bodies of those who had succumbed to the ravaging agony.

“They were already dead when I arrived.” Baako breathed heavily, revealing a mild disgust Teagan didn’t understand. “The other boy had already traveled through the worst of it.”

“Who are you?” Teagan didn’t know if he should feel thankful or simply relieved.

“You will find out.” Baako replied. “I may have brought you comfort today, but you will hate me soon.”

“Hate you? Why?”

“You have survived a horrible thing. Now, I must do other horrible things to you. Break your body and your mind.” Baako’s eyes rested on one of the dead across from Teagan.

Teagan felt exhaustion taking over his body. The brief euphoria of surviving pain more incredible than he had ever experienced was fading.

“Rest. You will find me waiting for you when you awake.” Baako lowered his head, staring at the floor. Then, turning to smile at Teagan, he left the room.

Teagan looked up at the ceiling, eyes closing. Without realizing it, he fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 49

"Alpena's always been pretty quiet." Ed's eyes were sharp, but his discomfort was evident as he shifted his position continuously behind the steering wheel.

"Maybe it will be today too." Charles surveyed the road ahead, and the scenery around them as Ed drove.

"Maybe." Ed sounded distracted, probably from the discomfort he was feeling throughout his body.

"Would you like one of us to drive Ed?" Charlene turned to watch Ed's face, seeing if she could decide his level of clarity.

"Ah, no. I'm fine. Really. Just a little stiff all around." Ed looked at Charlene briefly, producing a quick smile, before focusing back on the road.

"My doctor visits were in the hospital in town. Sometimes I would get my meds there. Sometimes at a place a little farther into town." Ed turned his mouth toward Charlene and Charles, keeping his eyes on the road.

"How much farther is it to town?" Charles asked, feeling his anxiety level rise again. He had been feeling anxious since leaving Ed's cabin.

"Just a few minutes." Ed slowed his truck slightly. "Might start seein people soon. I can't say how many might still be in town."

Charles clutched the revolver he was holding, squeezing it with both hands.

"There's somebody!"

Charles jumped a little, startled by Charlene speaking up.

Ed slowed more, getting the truck under thirty miles an hour. "I see 'em."

"Something's off about 'em." Charles raised his gun, rechecked the cylinder, and took a deep breath.

"A sick one?" Ed slowed to a stop. "Shit."

"Just keep driving, Ed." Charlene pulled up the shotgun she was holding, making it easier to point it in a hurry. "Maybe it'll ignore us in the truck.

Ed continued looking at the erratically moving woman meandering along the side of the road ahead, not at once stepping on the gas. Then, he nodded slowly and began driving forward.

The woman didn't seem to notice them at first. Ed, Charlene, and Charles watched as she appeared to look all around above her intently.

"Damn peculiar." Ed mumbled, fidgeting again in his seat.

Charles was almost relaxing a little, thinking the woman would ignore them. In an abrupt motion, the woman turned toward them and bolted for the truck.

"Step on it Ed!" Charles yelled, gripping the armrest of the door.

Charlene wrapped one arm around Charles as Ed pressed the gas pedal to the floor, and the truck's tires squeaked on the pavement.

Charlene screamed as the woman ran straight into the front of Ed's truck, flying up over the hood and slamming into the windshield.

Ed swerved wildly as the woman's body flopped off the truck and out of sight somewhere to the vehicle's right.

Charles heard himself yell out in surprise as Charlene clutched his left arm in a death grip.

Ed avoided running into the ditch, swerving back onto the middle of the road as he fought with the steering wheel.

Charles twisted his body around to look behind Ed's truck but couldn't see the woman's body.

"There she is!" Charlene pointed farther off to the left. "Crawling toward that building!"

Charles turned back toward Ed. "Just keep driving Ed."

Ed said nothing as he sped up again.

"Shit," Ed swore as less than a minute later, he slammed on the brakes again. "More of 'em."

"We can't drive through that." Charlene began quickly looking around for another way to go.

Before Ed or Charles could respond, they saw two other vehicles rapidly approaching the small group of infected. The two big trucks drove directly into the infected, running over two of them. Windows on all the trucks were going down at the same time.

Numerous semi-automatic rifles appeared inside both vehicles, quickly shooting the remaining infected. Bodies flopped to the ground, some continuing to crawl toward the trucks.

More shooting followed, and soon none of the infected were moving anymore.

Charles was about to say something when they all heard a vehicle behind them. Turning around, Charles saw another truck pulling close to Ed's tailgate.

"These fellas ain't the shy type." Ed scowled into his rearview mirror, repositioning himself in his seat.

"You think they're friendly?" Charlene had turned to watch the truck behind them, along with Charles.

The doors of the big truck swung open wide. Charles could see someone's feet hit the ground, standing in place for a moment.

"We're about to find out." Charles mumbled, straining to get a better view.

A woman stepped around the door, brandishing a smaller model semi-automatic rifle Charles didn't recognize.

"Got a lady comin' up on my side." Ed clutched the pistol between his seat and the driver's side door. "She's carryin' some kinda fancy rifle."

"Same on this side. A woman with a rifle too." Charles kept his eyes on the woman. She appeared to be inspecting Ed's truck. She had yet to make eye contact with Charles or anyone else in Ed's vehicle.

The woman on Ed's side began walking up toward the front of the truck. She moved cautiously, taking time to look around the immediate vicinity.

Finally, the woman on Charles's side looked up at him, her face expressionless. Charles stared back at her, trying to appear neutral in return.

"If you got any guns, drop 'em out the side of your vehicle!" The woman on Ed's side shouted toward the cab of Ed's truck. "I won't ask again. Do it now!"

"Shit." Charlene kept her voice low, trying not to move her mouth. "What do we do?"

"I don't think they're askin." Ed began rolling down his window. "We better do as she says."

Charles sighed, lowering his head for just a second. Then he nodded. "Fuck. Ed's right."

Charlene handed her gun to Charles as he rolled down the window on the passenger side. Ed dropped his gun just outside his window. Charles did the same on his side.

"Excellent!" The woman on Ed's side started moving forward again. The woman on Charles's side of the vehicle remained standing at the back of Ed's truck.

The two big trucks that had run into the infected group turned toward Ed's truck, slowly approaching from the front in the opposite direction.

"Where you headed today?" The woman came to a stop just beside Ed's window. She was tall, almost six feet, and big-boned. A little chubby but not soft looking in any way. Charles estimated her to be in her late forties or early fifties.

"I need meds for my arthritis. I ran out. Didn't have a chance to get more before all the hoopla started." Ed made direct eye contact with the woman, his voice calm.

"What's your name?" The woman asked.

"Ed Gilly. These are my friends Charlene and Charles." Ed gestured toward Charlene and Charles in turn.

"I'm Bridget. Keepin eyes on you over there is Micaela." Bridget inclined her head toward the back of Ed's truck.

"You thinking of tryin the hospital or the pharmacy?" Bridget gave Charlene and Charles a cursory once-over, returning her attention to Ed.

"Yeah, one or the other. We didn't really know what to expect in town." Ed nodded, watching a few people exit the trucks in front of him, spreading out to form a grid of sorts around the vicinity of the vehicles.

"We just led a bunch of 'em out of town, along thirty-two." Bridget broke eye contact with Ed to check around her briefly.

Returning her attention back to Ed, Bridget took on a sterner tone. "It was mostly the dumb ones that followed us out. Still some straggler's farther in. A few of the smarter types kept their distance and didn't follow the rest."

"Smarter types?" Charles needed help understanding Bridget's meaning.

"Not all the same, the grabbers." Bridget frowned at Charles. "Some are more dangerous. They can think. Plan out how to attack you."

"Damn." Ed couldn't help himself.

Charlene felt her anxiety level rising again. She squeezed Charles' leg without thinking about it. Charles placed his hand over hers, trying to offer comfort.

"You may be in luck today." Bridget began. "We ain't outlaws, but also ain't a charity. We spent resources and energy clearin out a big bunch of 'em. If you want your meds, you gotta contribute to the effort."

"Contribute?" Charlene's mind rushed through different scenarios of what that could mean, wondering to what extremes she was willing to go for Ed's medication.

"You want those meds, or at least a chance to see if you can find 'em?" Bridget bent to retrieve Ed's gun off the ground. "You gotta help clear out some grabbers."

Bridget handed Ed back his gun. Then she nodded to Mikaela, who walked forward to retrieve the weapons Charles had dropped out the passenger side door. Mikaela picked up the guns and handed them back to Charles through the window.

"A few of the smarter ones are probably watching us now." Bridget turned away from Ed, scanning the building close by. "They usually wait for night to attack. They can see better than we can in the dark."

Ed followed Bridget's gaze, squirming again in his seat as his arthritis continued to nag at him. "I'll be straight with ya. I'm not much able to get around well at the moment. Arthritis is getting to me."

"Can you shoot straight?" Bridget asked, still not looking back at Ed.

"Well, yeah. I'm a clear shot most days." Ed replied.

"Those two next to ya appear spry enough to do most of the leg work necessary." Bridget turned to grin at Charlene and Charles. "So you agreeable? If not, you can turn around here and head back the way you came."

"I can't ask these folks to risk their lives anymore than they already have for me." Ed looked over at Charlene and Charles. "Wouldn't be right of me."

Charlene saw that Ed was giving her a way out gracefully. Still, something inside her couldn't bear to let Ed continue suffering after what he had already done for her family.

"No Ed. We'll do it. We have to. I have to." Charlene looked into Ed's eyes, determined to finish what she had started.

Ed looked away, feeling guilty about putting the lives of others at risk because of his condition.

"She's right Ed. It's something we can do to repay you for saving our family. We owe you this much." Charles wasn't excited about hunting these "grabbers," as Bridget had called them. But this was a way to repay Ed for rescuing his family and him from outlaws weeks ago.

"We won't cut you loose without help." Bridget put a hand on the door beside Ed. "We'll be huntin 'em right along with ya."

"Are you trying to make this town safe again?" Charlene asked, suddenly curious about Bridget's more significant aim.

"Maybe. If we can." Bridget pointed to one man standing several feet ahead of Ed's truck, directing him toward the building to their left. "Our immediate objective is to clear the place out so we can collect supplies without gettin attacked at every turn."

"You fought any outlaws?" Charles asked.

"Yeah." Bridget sighed. "Groups of 'em been showin up from time to time. So far, they haven't been too aggressive. Grabbers are the real danger so far."

Charlene squeezed Ed's arm. "We can do this Ed. We'll get it done quickly. Get your meds and get back to the cabin."

Ed nodded, briefly bringing his eyes up to Charlene's to offer a weak smile.

"Hospitals not too far from here." Bridget's tone became serious again. "We'll drive a bit closer, then get out on foot. Wait here."

Bridget and her partner moved away from Ed's truck to talk with some people in their group. Charles let out another sigh, smiling at Ed and Charlene. Charlene shrugged, smiling in return.

"At least they're going to do it with us. That should make it easier at least." Charles tried to sound optimistic.

Charlene nodded, "Yeah, it should." She squeezed Ed's arm again, accepting the handgun she had been carrying back from Charles.

Charlene thought about her children. She worked to convince herself that she would see them again soon, that this would go smoothly and quickly.

She had almost convinced herself when Bridget returned to Ed's truck.

"A couple of my guys are gonna ride in the back of your truck. We'll have you drive behind us slow when we start walking, provide some cover fire if necessary and a quick escape option if things go sideways too fast." Bridget waived two men over, directing them to hop in the back of Ed's truck.

"Hoky dokey." Ed grinned at Bridget.

Charles watched the men get into the truck's bed, clutching the shotgun a little tighter. He hadn't faced any infected yet. He did not know what to expect.

Charles suddenly wished that only he and Ed were going for the meds. He couldn't bear the thought of losing Charlene. The kids needed her. He was expendable, but she wasn't.

"I'll drive behind you. Follow those trucks." Bridget ran back to her truck, hoping inside with Mikaela.

Ed nodded, starting his truck and moving forward as the big trucks ahead took off at a low speed.

*It'll be done soon. We'll be home in a few hours.* Charles gritted his teeth and kept his eyes squarely on the road ahead, placing one hand on Charlene's leg.

He needed this to go smoothly.

Chapter 50

"All kinds really. We just started a large project downtown when this whole thing hit." Brayden was catching Tobias up on his life before the collapse. "I've done a lot of grunt work so I know how to pound nails together pretty well, but the past few years I've been leading a crew of my own on most projects. It's a lot of managing people, supplies, etc…"

Tobias tried to nod at the proper times and appear interested. As they drove along the freeway, dodging vehicles abandoned on the road, Tobias found he was missing his BMW. It was difficult to leave it along the side of the road. It was his baby.

"How did you get in with this group?" Tobias waited for what seemed like a brief lull in Brayden's life story to try steering the conversation in another direction, maybe learn something about the dynamics of this new group of strangers.

"Two of 'em are buddies from work. Some others are people I knew outside of work. Some friends of a friend. The rest were stragglers like you we picked up along the way." Brayden pressed on the brakes suddenly to swerve around a public transit bus sprawled out over most of the road ahead.

As they drove by, Tobias saw berserkers inside, hands and faces pressed against the bus windows, scratching to get out.

"Such a shame man." Brayden glanced to look as well. "At least they ain't smart ones. Woulda already got out if they were."

"Yeah, fortunate for us." Tobias agreed, shivering a little at the thought.

"This place we're going, what do you know about it?" Tobias had learned a little from Brayden about their intended destination. Still, he found it challenging to keep Brayden focused on one topic at a time. He was pretty scattered in giving explanations.

"Some of the people we met up with were the ones who told the rest of us about it." Brayden began picking up speed again as soon as they had made it around the bus. "Camp Eriez, right along Lake Erie. Supposed to be secluded and easy to defend against the scramblers."

"The smart ones may be a challenge for a group this large holding up in one place." Tobias rubbed his temples briskly. He hadn't slept a lot in the past week. Nerves and uncomfortable sleeping arrangements made it difficult for him to get consistently restful slumber.

"Yeah, I agree. But we can't just keep driving around." Brayden frowned a little, considering Tobias' comment. "We'll deal with that when the time comes, I guess."

Tobias knew Brayden was correct. It didn't make it any easier to accept becoming a sitting target for any calculating infected who may happen across the camp while he was in it.

"It would be great to find a place with walls. A gated community. A stadium. Something with a fence around it." Tobias mainly was talking to himself, but he also wanted to get Brayden thinking about alternatives to Camp Eriez.

"I'm sure we'll keep looking. We get attacked a few times by them smart fuckers and the ole'camp will definitely lose it's appeal." Brayden smiled at his own twisted attempt at humor.

"No doubt." Tobias agreed.

A vehicle in front of them unexpectedly swerved off the road. It slid into an abandoned car on the freeway just as Brayden started singing a song to himself Tobias had never heard before.

"Whoa! Damn!" Brayden yelled out in surprise. "What the hell?"

Tobias clutched the door handle, staring ahead at the crashed member of their caravan. "Watch out. It could be a…"

Another vehicle ahead of them swerved over into the divided area between the freeway lanes before Tobias could finish his sentence.

Brayden slammed on the brakes. "Fucking outlaws. They're pickin us off one at a time."

"What are we gonna do?" Tobias did not hide his alarm. He knew he would be useless in a gunfight with outlaws.

"Get out! Head for the trees!" Brayden turned around in his seat, reaching to grab his two guns. "Take the forty-five!" Brayden shoved the handgun into Tobias' chest.

Brayden quickly opened his door, jumping out of the vehicle. Tobias froze for just a second, unable to make his body move.

Brayden banged on the side of the Forerunner. "Get moving man!"

Tobias heard more shooting ahead of them. Snapping out his paralysis, he opened his door and flopped to the ground, telling himself to keep moving.

Leading Tobias over the median and into the trees along the freeway, Brayden ran toward the vehicles following behind them. "We gotta regroup. Get more guns and go at 'em!"

Tobias said nothing, trying to keep close to Brayden on the uneven ground. He could see several people exiting their vehicles from the group of cars that had been driving behind him and Brayden.

Turning sharply, Brayden made a dash for the center of the group of vehicles. Several men and women greeted him as he and Tobias returned to the freeway.

"We're gettin' people armed. We'll head out in just a sec." A man Tobias didn't know addressed Brayden in a hurried tone.

"Yeah. Let's do it." Brayden looked around him, making eye contact with Tobias and nodding at him. "You know how to handle a gun?"

Tobias didn't want to appear cowardly but felt this was too dangerous to risk lying about. "Not really. I've never used one before."

"You stay back with the group. Try to keep everyone close together and out of sight." Brayden grabbed his handgun back from Tobias and was already looking away, moving to join the people armed for a confrontation.

"Will do." Tobias replied, but Brayden was already too far away to hear.

Less than a minute later, Brayden and several others headed back into the woods, moving to confront whoever had started the shooting contest.

Tobias watched them disappear out of sight. Then he turned toward the surrounding vehicles.

Most people had remained in their cars. There were a few who had got out trying to catch a view of the action farther ahead.

"Please return to your vehicles and stay low!" Tobias did his best to sound authoritative. "Please, hurry. It's not safe!"

The people outside their vehicles stared at Tobias for a moment. He wasn't sure anyone was going to listen to him at first. Then, one by one, everyone got back in their automobiles. Tobias could see that many of them were trying to slink down in their seats, getting as low as they could manage.

Tobias stood alone outside amongst the cars, uncertain of what to do. He tried not to appear worried, thinking about his public image always. He fought not to shuffle back and forth on his feet as the shooting sounds continued in the distance.

A couple minutes later, a woman opened her truck door and yelled out to him. "Hey Mister! You should get in. You need to be safe too!"

Tobias felt a wave of relief run over his body. "Thank you, Miss!"

Waving toward the woman, Tobias ran over to the passenger side of her truck.

"Get in the rear door on that side!" The woman leaned her head out to give Tobias instructions before slamming her door shut again.

Tobias opened the rear passenger door as quickly as he could. Looking into the vehicle, he frowned, then jumped into the back seat of the truck's crew cabin.

Two black labs greeted Tobias in the backseat with enthusiastic wagging and licking at his face.

"Pardon the puppies." The woman turned to push the dogs away from Tobias but was unsuccessful.

"It's no problem." Tobias tried to sound casual. "I appreciate you giving me shelter from the turmoil Ms…?"

"I'm Gabby. That's Preston." The woman held her hand out for Tobias to shake while also attempting to use it as a barrier between the dogs and Tobias.

Tobias took her hand, shaking it politely. He nodded toward the man in the passenger front seat.

"My name is Tobias. Thank you again."

"Damn outlaws." Gabby returned her attention to the road ahead. "I woulda gone with 'em to fight, but my damn knee got twisted up last time."

Tobias figured Gabby to be in her mid-fifties. Her truck was a late model Chevy Silverado dually with a long bed. The truck was pulling a medium-sized camper.

From the woman's clothing, Tobias thought her to be a ranch owner or possibly retired. Preston was similarly dressed in a long sleeve flannel shirt, complete with suspenders. He was a bit older than Gabby, perhaps in his sixties.

"You think the outlaws might sneak around to get the rest of us?" Tobias surprised himself by petting one of the dogs. He found it unexpectedly comforting.

"I'm keepin a watch for it." Gabby squeezed the gun sitting on her lap. "Always expect surprises."

"Yeah." Preston nodded in agreement. "We'll take a at least a few with us if they do."

Tobias wanted Gabby or Preston to say something more comforting. Their responses unsettled him.

The sounds of shooting up ahead continued at a steady pace.

"How long till it's over?" Tobias struggled not to sound panicky.

"There's no schedule for this sort of thing. Could take hours. Could be over in a few minutes." Gabby turned her head toward Tobias, offering him a smile that lacked happiness.

The closest dog licked Tobias's hand enthusiastically. He did not try to stop it, welcoming the distraction.

"You alone out here, Tobias?" Preston turned toward the view from his passenger window, squinting into the trees.

"Yes, I am. My wife…she…one of those things got her." Since accepting Brayden's invitation to join this group of survivors, Tobias had thought little about Jony.

"Shame. Sorry for your loss." Preston didn't take his eyes off the view outside, but he genuinely sounded sincere.

"Thank you. I'm trying to manage as best I can without her." Tobias didn't really feel sad about Jony. He had loved her, but she was not his soulmate. Tobias didn't believe in all that kind of stuff.

"We're thankful every day we still got each other." Gabby squeezed Preston's arm, this time smiling warmly.

"Do either of you…" Tobias heard what sounded like screaming from somewhere behind him. It was faint.

He turned to look through the truck's back window, but there was too much stuff in the back of Gabby's truck to see anything.

"Did you hear that?" Tobias pushed one dog's head away as he tried to see behind them.

"Hear what?" Gabby turned to look at Tobias.

"It sounded like screaming. I can't be sure. Sounded like it was coming from behind us." Tobias debated opening his door to get a better look.

"Preston, let's check." Gabby opened her door without waiting for Preston to reply. "We'll get a look at things. See what's what."

Tobias watched Gabby and Preston exit the vehicle, feeling anxious again. Anxiety seemed to be his most consistent feeling lately.

After about a minute, Tobias sighed loudly, causing both labs in the back to tilt their heads at him quizzically. Tobias scowled at the dogs, repeatedly putting his hand on the door handle.

He heard the unmistakable sound of a gunshot behind him. This one was much louder than the muffled sounds of gunfire ahead of the stalled caravan.

Gritting his teeth, Tobias opened the door and peeked his head outside to see behind the truck.

He could hear people yelling. Tobias thought he could make out Gabby's voice in the cacophony. The parked caravan obstructed his vision too much to get a clear view.

Tobias cursed. He had to know what was happening. Slowly he pushed the door open a little further and stepped down onto the pavement.

Stepping cautiously along the truck's bed, Tobias could now see what was causing the disturbance.

There were at least two berserkers. One appeared to be halfway inside a vehicle toward the back of the caravan. The other was darting between automobiles headed his way.

Tobias froze. His mind was telling him to get back in the truck. His body wouldn't move.

Gabby repeatedly shot into the berserker's body, wedged halfway inside one vehicle. It didn't seem to slow it down. Someone inside the car was yelling and screaming as the berserker wildly grabbed at them.

Tobias diverted his attention back to where he had last seen the other berserker. He couldn't see it anymore.

Then he heard another yelp closer to where he was standing. Tobias couldn't understand why, but he had to see if the berserker had attacked someone else.

He stepped around the back of the truck, ignoring his screaming instincts to get back inside. Moving around several vehicles, most with people still sitting inside, looking panicked, Tobias came around the front of a blue Hyundai SUV.

There it was. The berserker had grabbed a man who stepped out of his vehicle to see the commotion. The infected had its hands firmly clutched around the man's head.

Tobias watched the man's body spasm, his legs flailing about on the ground. His arms jerked up and down in the air.

He could hear the berserker. It growled and groaned in an inhuman tone, sending chills through Tobias.

Tobias's eyes locked on the scene in front of him. So much so that he jumped back uncontrollably when the berserker's head exploded in front of him.

It fell to the ground next to the man. Tobias looked up, seeing Preston just beyond, holding his gun up.

"Get back in the truck!" Preston yelled, waving his arm frantically at Tobias.

Tobias just looked at Preston for a second, then nodded his head, turning back toward the truck.

Inside the truck, Tobias felt suddenly overwhelmed. Seeing the man being attacked brought back the scene of Jony’s demise in vivid detail.

Something about it enthralled him both times. He found it horrifically fascinating. Perhaps this was his way of coping with the craziness of it all.

The need to watch on these two occasions wasn't something he could explain to himself rationally. Tobias shuddered, seeing goosebumps appear on his arm.

He needed to be cautious. Avoid getting anywhere near one of those things again. His lingering fascination would get him killed or worse.

Tobias chastised himself inwardly while waiting for Gabby and Preston to return from the berserker raid on their caravan.

He needed a dose of ordinary. These unending perils were warping his mind.

Chapter 51

"I ain't done yet." Jesse tried his best to sound reassuring. He felt sapped. The small group's flight out of the trailer park was the last of exhausting days and nights.

Arlene smiled as warmly as she could, feeling as rough as Jesse. "Never thought you were. This has all been more than any of us bargained for."

Jesse lowered his head. "Only fifteen of us made it here. I failed everybody."

"Letting Jordan in was a mistake, but the scrambler attacks weren't on you." Arlene didn't really know what to say. It did seem like their fortunes had turned after Jordan's visit, but that was probably just a coincidence.

Jesse continued staring into the concrete below him. Arlene looked up at Roger, standing several rows from Jesse and her.

"The sign is secure in that opening at the front gate. Should give us some protection at least." Hudson stood next to Roger, examining other fence areas around the stadium.

"It's better than nothing." Roger agreed. "But there's other places it wouldn't take long for scramblers or bandits to break though."

"Can we reinforce them somehow?" Hudson followed Roger's gaze to one area of particular concern.

"We gotta find food first." Roger directed his gaze toward Arlene and Jesse. "No one's eaten in over two days. We got running water for the moment, but that could dry up anytime. Doubt anyone's working to keep the city's pipes flowing."

"How long we gonna stay here?" Hudson was running on fumes. He felt the incessant hunger pangs getting stronger by the hour, just like everyone else around him.

"Food first. You probably saw those food markets on the way here." Roger wanted to keep Hudson focused.

"Yeah, they looked picked clean from the outside." Hudson sounded doubtful.

"We'll check 'em out anyway. May be something left. We'll widen our search after that." Roger did his best to show confidence, but he wasn't feeling it.

"Where else can we check after that?" Hudson didn't agree with Roger about checking places already appearing looted but wasn't confident about anywhere else either.

"Find two other people to go with us." Roger didn't want to linger around, waiting to get hungrier. "We'll head out as soon as you've rounded them up." He also wanted to avoid getting into a back-and-forth with Hudson about options for finding food. Better to keep him focused on the next step instead of five or sixteen steps beyond that.

Hudson nodded quickly, running off to gather a couple of other folks.

Roger bent to retrieve his shotgun from sitting on one of the stadium seats just below him. Looking back over to Arlene and Jesse, he could see they were heading toward the bathrooms, probably to get some water.

Hudson returned after about ten minutes. Bobby and Samantha, a married couple Roger was acquainted with but not well, joined him.

Roger had a few people at the stadium slide the sign barrier out of the way and then back into place after they had exited.

Roger was cautious, strolling at first, scanning for any movement. He thought they had managed to ditch the herd of scramblers pursuing them after abandoning the trailer park but could not be sure.

He hadn't seen any sign of them since the day before they arrived at the stadium. They probably would have already attacked if they were still pursuing the trailer park survivors.

"That's the closest one, I think." Hudson pointed to the right as they walked down the street. It was a wide street with trees planted between the two opposing lanes. A few smaller boutique stores and fast-food restaurants were closer to the road. More extensive shopping centers were in the back of oversized parking areas.

"Maybe we should try one of these fast-food joints first." Hudson nodded toward a Burger King just to the left of them. "Might have something."

Roger didn't have any objection but doubted they would find any edible food left at such a place. "Let's do it. You and I will go inside. Bobby, Samantha, you two cover the area outside."

Hudson walked up to the front door. Surprisingly the glass wasn't smashed in. The door was locked, however. Hudson just shrugged, smashing the butt of his rifle into the glass, shattering it. He picked off a few lingering pieces, creating an opening wide enough for him and Roger to get inside.

The Burger King looked abandoned. Hudson quickly found the freezer in the back. It was no longer functioning. He started gagging as he opened the door, quickly shutting it again.

Roger got a big whiff of the stink as well, trying to move away from it in the small kitchen and food prep area behind the front counter.

"Breads all molded and dried out too." Roger picked up a bag of misshapen, dried hamburger buns. He placed them back on the counter, frowning. He didn't expect to feel disappointed about not finding anything to eat there, but he was just the same. "Look around over there a little, then let's get moving again."

Hudson grabbed a couple packets of ketchup and mustard from underneath one counter, offering a few to Roger.

"Thanks." Roger accepted two packets, quickly sucking them down. It wasn't much, but it calmed his growing hunger a little. "Grab some for Bobby and Samantha. We might come back for the rest if we don't find anything else."

Hudson handed Bobby and Samantha a few packets of condiments as they exited Burger King.

"Damn. Thanks. I'll take anything." Bobby really sounded thankful.

Roger chuckled, despite feeling exhausted. "Go get some more if you want. Inside. In the back."

"You want a few more?" Bobby turned to Samantha.

"Yeah. Okay." She accepted another packet of ketchup from Bobby.

"Be back in a just a sec." Bobby ran through the opening, disappearing behind the counter.

Roger settled his gaze on the food market they intended to search next. Several windows were busted out along the front. Roger could see a few of the shelves. They were mostly empty, except for some knocked-over items scattered about haphazardly.

Bobby returned, handing a bunch of ketchup packets to Samantha. Roger started walking towards the food market without saying a word. The ketchup wasn't sitting well with him.

His stomach was gurgling loudly, and he could feel the acid building up. He needed real food and quickly.

Samantha covered the market's entrance while the other three surveyed the remaining inventory. No one bothered with checking the refrigerated area. The recent fowl experience with refrigeration storage was still fresh in Roger and Hudson’s mind.

"Score!" Bobby held up a can of dog food, beaming. "This'll do it for dinner." Bobby had brought one of the shopping carts sitting idle at the front of the store.

Hudson decided to check the flour and sugar aisle. There were a few bags of rice left and some almond flour. Hudson placed those items in his cart, spotting a couple bags of beans as well.

Roger headed over to the chips and crackers section. He found a box of saltine crackers and one bag of tortilla chips on the topmost shelf. Items were stored for adding to the lower shelves when supplies on those levels were diminished.

About twenty-five minutes later, Bobby, Hudson, and Roger met up at the front of the store.

"We'll pile it all in one cart and head back." Roger was keen to get a meal going as soon as possible.

"Found these." Hudson handed granola bars to Roger and Bobby. "There were only three left. We can each split off a bit for Samantha."

Roger and Hudson opened their granola bars, tearing off a section and handing it to Bobby. Bobby headed out to supply a little nourishment to his wife.

"We can start a fire and boil water back at the stadium. I'll need a pot or something to cook these beans." Hudson could feel his stomach grumbling, hunger becoming acute as he contemplated getting some real food.

"There's a shop a little way down. Looks like it sells cookware and eating utensils." Roger and Hudson finished combining all the food items into one cart.

"Great. I'll check it out with Bobby." Hudson walked out of the market ahead of Roger, who was pushing the cart.

"I'll wait outside with Samantha." Roger pushed the cart through the smashed glass door that once used to be the main entrance to the food market.

"You eat all that ketchup?" Roger stood next to Samantha just outside the small cookware boutique.

"No, I still have a few left." Samantha held her abdomen. "It was making me have an upset tummy.

"Yeah, I know the feeling." Roger turned to check on Hudson and Bobby.

They exited the boutique a few minutes later. Hudson held two pots in one hand. Bobby was holding some silverware and three knives.

"Thought these knives might be useful for cooking or self-defense." Hudson and Bobby placed their items atop the food packages in the cart.

"Well, let's get moving." Roger began pushing the cart out into the parking lot.

"There's some vehicles moving on the road. See?" Samantha pointed toward a line of several moving automobiles slowly weaving around abandoned cars on the street just beyond the parking area.

Roger stopped to examine the moving vehicles. "Yeah. Everybody just stay sharp."

The lead vehicle slowed as it got close to parallel with Roger and his group. It stopped beside the entrance to the parking lot where the market was situated.

"Just stay calm. Don't appear threatening. We don't know if they're dangerous yet." Roger kept his eyes on the vehicle. He could see a man behind the wheel, staring back at Roger.

The other vehicles came to a stop behind the car in front. The man in the lead vehicle held up his hand to Roger, then turned into the parking lot. The other cars followed him.

Roger and company remained still as the car drove over to them, stopping several feet away.

"You guys in trouble?" The man called out to Roger's group. "We're not bandits or nothin. We ain't here to rob ya."

Roger looked beyond the man who had just spoken. He could see a few people getting out of their vehicles, children too. Two younger kids started running around in the parking lot. Someone had a dog. These people weren't giving off the bandit vibe.

"We're staying close by. Got run off by scramblers where we were staying before." Roger turned his attention back to the man who had spoken to him first.

"Well, I know it's sudden." The man paused like he wasn't sure what words to use next. "But, ah, if you have enough room for us tonight, you are more than welcome to head out with us tomorrow."

Roger's first thought was to end this conversation and get away from these strangers. His recent experiences had made him weary of outsiders. But he decided there was a chance, however slight, that this may be their best way out of the city.

"Where you headed?" Roger decided to get some basic information before making up his mind.

"It's two days drive. Maybe three out of town. We are meeting up with some other folks who have taken over a plant next state over." The man wiped his forehead, clearing away sweat dripping from his face. "Damn. It's toasty out here today."

Roger looked again at the vehicles and people who had followed the man into the parking lot. They looked like ordinary people, but all the cars appeared full.

"What's your name?" Hudson stepped forward a little, getting the man in the car's attention.

"I'm Irwin. Unofficial guide of this little tour group you see in front of you." Irwin turned off his car, opening his door to step out. He walked over to where Hudson was standing, nodding to Roger, Bobby and Samantha.

Hudson stepped forward to shake the man's hand. "I'm Hudson. That's Roger, Bobby and Samantha."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance." Irwin smiled warmly, taking a turn and shaking everyone's hands.

"We may be interested in accepting your offer, Irwin." Roger moved around the cart he was pushing after shaking Irwin's hand. "But we'll need more vehicles to transport our people."

"Shouldn't be a problem." Irwin stood with his hands on his hips, watching the two young children chase the dog around in circles. "There's a car dealership just down the road. Probably an easy place to get a vehicle and some gas nowadays."

"You stop to help everyone you see out here?" Roger asked, still feeling skeptical about accepting Irwin's offer.

"Most of 'em run. A few have started shooting at us. Then there's the sick ones tryin to get at our heads." Irwin turned to face the road. "If someone looks like they could use our help and are willing to talk to me, then I usually stop to see if they want to join us."

"You sound very trusting." Hudson tried not to sound sarcastic, grinning at Irwin, still facing away from them.

"Trusting?” Irwin turned back to face Hudson. "Ah, not exactly. I sized you up before pulling in here. If you decided to try somethin', we woulda shot ya all pretty quick."

Hudson grinned wider, feeling less hesitant after hearing Irwin's candid response.

"Sides, there'll come a time soon when people aren't friendly at all. It's gonna get barbaric for folk goin it alone." Irwin waved toward one of the people in his caravan. "You all kindly give me a moment or two. Gonna see if we can squeeze you in for the short trip back to wherever you are stayin."

Roger tried not to get excited. Getting out of town safely and having a place to go sounded fantastic. It was better than any other choice he had available just an hour ago.

Irwin was right. People were going to get worse, not better, as resources became scarce. It was better to be in a larger group for safety.

Maybe this would go better than the trailer park.

Chapter 52

Genevieve crouched against the basswood tree, feeling its smooth bark cool against her arm. She sought to quiet her breathing, slowing her thinking and body.

Drainers, two of them, had struck the campground in the night. They were the calculating variety. One of them trained its attack on Genevieve.

Something awoke her out of sleep seconds before it crashed through the rear window of her Camry. This drainer used a crowbar to break the window before hurling itself into the vehicle, landing just inches from her.

Genevieve slept in the backseat of her car, gun on the floorboard next to her head. She had grabbed the gun, intending to shoot it as it entered her vehicle. It was too quick.

Still holding the crowbar, the drainer swiped at the gun. Genevieve’s shot went wide. She didn’t have time to get off another.

Genevieve kicked at the creature as she fumbled for the door latch. The drainer swiped at her again, knocking the gun out of her hand and spraining her wrist.

Genevieve fell out of the car onto the ground, slamming the door shut with her foot before it could climb out after her.

She could hear shouting from somewhere else in the camp. That’s how she knew there was more than one of them. The sound of gunfire interrupted panicked yells.

She didn’t wait to survey the carnage, working its way through the other vehicles in the campground with her.

Genevieve ran as fast as possible into the thicker vegetation surrounding the campsites. She could hear more glass shattering behind her. This drainer either wasn’t smart enough to use door handles or felt overwhelmed with hunger, not taking the time.

She stopped running, listening for any sound of pursuit. She could hear it grunting in that same way the woman had done so in the facility. A sound not quite human. It was getting closer.

She had figured out the infected hunted by tracking light tethers only they could see. That meant she couldn’t rely on obstructions or foliage to conceal her. It would find her soon.

Genevieve tried to zigzag, running in multiple directions to confuse the drainer. That would buy her time, but she needed to neutralize it.

Any sense of direction or time had abandoned her in the woods. Still leaning against the basswood, Genevieve strained to hear any sounds. People were still yelling somewhere off in the distance. She couldn’t hear any shooting.

No grunting sounds. Maybe the drainer had lost interest or became confused.

Genevieve was ready to step out when something grabbed the back of her head, yanking her to the ground with enough force to pull her feet out from under her.

Fingers pressed into her skull before she landed hard on the forest floor. Tentacles dug into her head a split second later, invading her body with that unbearable cold electricity.

Genevieve flailed about, hands clawing and grasping for anything vulnerable to rip away.

The drainer’s strength overwhelmed her. Her fingers were clumsy and slow, her mind slipping. Genevieve felt awareness dissolving, fading away.

In a jolt, her consciousness returned. The sudden absence of icy electricity running through her body caused her to spasm for several seconds. Then, she leaped to her feet, adrenaline and something else prompting her to action.

With no conscious thought guiding her, Genevieve spun around in her standing position to zero in on the drainer. In a haze, she registered it was engaged with someone else, overpowering them as it had done to her.

A knife handle stuck out of its neck, driven deep into the creature’s shoulder. Genevieve didn’t bother with trying to use the knife on it again.

Closing the distance with the drainer in just a few steps, Genevieve jumped on top of it and its new victim, ripping into its skull with her fingertips. Genevieve delivered the same stunning shock to the drainer it had used to subdue her just a moment before.

She ripped into its mind, sucking out energy in a mad rush. Genevieve felt wave after wave of essence flooding her body like she had never felt. It was beyond the satisfaction of all earlier feedings combined.

The flow snapped shut instantly. The pain of it paralyzing. She had fed too fast. A mistake. A debilitating one at that.

Genevieve shuddered and crumpled down on the lifeless drainer and the person stuck below it.

Nothing. No sensations. No ability to form thoughts.

Then, a faint sound. A voice.

“Erin!” A name. “Erin!”

Whose name?

“What was that!, Erin?” And again.

“What did you do?!” Erin? That was the name Genevieve had used to conceal her identity.

“Chloe?” Genevieve heard another person speaking far away. Her mind worked to reconcile her own voice with the sound. Genevieve lingered in the fog of a severe power crash. But the confusion lifted.

“Erin, what…what are you?”

Genevieve could hear Chloe’s voice. Her mind stabilized.

Chloe saw what Genevieve did to the drainer. She needed to be neutralized.

“Can you get off me?” Chloe was still lying under the dead drainer and Genevieve. “I’m getting crushed here. This whole thing is freaking me out.”

Opening her eyes, Genevieve looked straight into Chloe’s eyes. Chloe was frightened.

“Yes, okay.” Genevieve mumbled, wanting to avoid Chloe yelling out for help. “I will.”

Genevieve brought her hands up, preparing to do to Chloe what she had just done to the drainer. Then she heard it. The sound of footsteps approaching.

“Are you two okay?” It was a man’s voice. Genevieve couldn’t remember his name.

Genevieve rolled off the drainer, landing on the ground next to Chloe.

“Yes. I think so.” Chloe still sounded panicked. “This scrambler attacked Erin and me. We killed it.”

“Fuck, I’m so glad you two survived. We killed another one in camp. It got three people before we could though.” The man sputtered, still amped up on adrenaline.

The man bent to pull the dead scrambler off Chloe. “Thank you Devin.”

Genevieve ran through scenarios in her head, trying to figure out how to eliminate Devin and Chloe without making a lot of noise. Then she heard more footsteps.

“Damn.” It was Mindy. “You girls okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine.” Chloe sat up, looking over at Genevieve. “Erin was getting attacked. I stabbed it while it was on her. Then she hit it in the head when it turned on me.”

“I was in a panic.” Mindy knelt beside Genevieve and Chloe. “It was fucking crazy back in camp. We did a head count and noticed you were both missing. Devin thought he heard something this way.”

Mindy held out a hand for Chloe, helping her to her feet. Devin did the same for Genevieve.

“Let’s get back to camp. Could be more of those fuckers busy tonight.” Devin began walking toward the huddled vehicles.

Mindy waited a second longer, checking that Chloe and Genevieve were uninjured. Satisfied, Mindy nodded, waving Chloe and Genevieve forward to camp. “Let’s get out of these creepy woods.”

Genevieve was confused. Chloe hadn’t ratted her out to the others. Why?

What would she say to Chloe? How could she explain what had happened? Did Chloe have an agenda?

With so many thoughts circling through her head, Genevieve remained silent, following the others and keeping alert for more drainers.

Chloe would want answers. Genevieve would need to come up with something.

Or get rid of Chloe.

Chapter 53

"You're a sad lookin specimen." Cowboy crouched next to a headsucker he had paralyzed by severing its spinal column.

He immobilized the creature, but it remained alive. This one had been a woman before turning. Long hair hung in ragged sheets across its face. Strands caked in dirt and sweat clung to her forehead.

Touching its arm, Cowboy felt the signature cool skin of the infected.

The eyes of the headsucker looked straight at Cowboy, expressing desperation.

Cowboy knew it wanted to feed on him but wouldn't be able to even if it could move. That was how he had caught it.

Backing it into a corner, Cowboy rushed the headsucker. He forced it to the ground, running the blade of his long knife across the back of its neck.

His purpose was not cruel or deviant. Cowboy wanted to see if he could learn anything about these things with an up-close examination.

This headsucker didn't represent the higher-functioning variety. It was primitive, unthinking.

Cowboy concluded this by observing its behavior. The creature's movements were not calculating but reactionary. It could not get closer than twenty feet to him like the others. However, this reality didn't appear to register as it clawed at him from a distance.

Something else odd had occurred. Something Cowboy had not noted before.

As the headsucker clawed at him, tentacles shot out from the tips of its fingers. Cowboy had heard news reports on his radio detailing these tentacles that would extend from the fingertips but had yet to see them for himself.

None of the infected he had seen while with Lenard or Gloria displayed tentacles. What was different about this one?

Cowboy wasn't confident, but this headsucker looked beyond hungry, perhaps starving. Maybe dying of hunger.

Looking again into the eyes of this creature, Cowboy directed his attention to its fingers. No tentacles were visible.

Sighing, Cowboy used his knife to cut away part of one finger on the left hand. No blood seeped from the cut. A faint odor, however, was noticeable. A mixture of decay and iron. The smell was light, not overpowering.

Cowboy also noted a slight sparkle in the clear, viscous liquid dripping from the cut fingertip.

Looking closer, he could see a minuscule pink strand running just beneath the cut-away section of bone. This feature was not part of normal human anatomy. This was some type of mutation occurring after infection.

That must be where the tentacles emerged when a headsucker fed on its victim.

Cowboy picked up the piece of finger he had removed from the headsucker. It was still much colder than the ambient air around it. Examining the tip of the finger, Cowboy could see a shriveled, round bump concealed halfway under the fingernail.

Cowboy tossed the tip of finger on top of the headsucker. It continued watching him, eyes desperate and hungry.

After taking his knife in hand, Cowboy shoved it into the thing's head. It went limp.

How useful any of this information would be remained to be seen. If this headsucker was hungry, it probably wasn't alone.

The infected may get desperate as easy access to victims dried up. Perhaps their senses were heightened under these circumstances. That could mean being able to detect the uninfected from a greater distance.

He should inform Gloria without delay. Headsuckers may already be en route to the refugee camp.

Cowboy had sensed this one before meeting it behind his barn. It approached from the north. North held a low population density.

Standing beside the dead headsucker, Cowboy realized he could sense more nearby. He couldn't tell how far away, but it wasn't a great distance.

He could sense them in multiple directions. They were converging.

Cowboy rushed back to his bunker. The door was already open. It didn't take him long to reach his walkie and call for Gloria.

"Yeah. What's up?" Gloria sounded crisp and energetic today. Cowboy was glad to hear strength in her voice.

"Caught one of the infected out behind my barn." Cowboy turned to examine his open hatchway, feeling exposed. "I can feel more of them headed this way from multiple directions. I think they're hungry and desperate."

"Shit." Gloria seemed uncertain, still not entirely buying into Cowboy's professed abilities. "Do you know how far away?"

"Not far." Cowboy didn't allow Gloria's doubt to bother him. He didn't understand his abilities either. "Maybe a few hours. Maybe a few minutes. I can't sense specific distance."

"Understood," Gloria spoke to someone else for a few seconds before returning to Cowboy. "I'll get everyone ready just in case they stop by our place."

"Okay." Cowboy felt his body amping up. "Hurry. I don't know how much time you have before they do."

Not waiting for a reply, Cowboy sat his walkie on a workbench.

He retrieved two large duffle bags from a closet a few feet away. Setting them next to the walkie, Cowboy began piling weaponry into them.

He would need heavier artillery than usual if this was a large group of headsuckers. Cowboy placed two grenade launchers into one duffle bag, following up with a dozen grenades.

In the other duffle, he placed two fully automatic .223 short-stock rifles and two forty-five semi-automatic handguns. Adding a couple of revolvers for insurance, Cowboy filled the remaining space with bullets for all the different guns.

He tied a machete to each duffle after zipping them up tight. Cowboy hauled both duffle bags out to the bed of his truck, then rushed back to his bunker to retrieve a 308 rifle and forty-four magnum handgun for his belt holster and the walkie.

Leaving the door below open, Cowboy concealed the top opening before getting into his truck and heading to Gloria.

The pressure in his body was getting more intense. The headsuckers were getting closer, much closer. A confrontation felt inevitable.

"You were right." Gloria's voice came over the walkie. It was rushed, but not afraid. "An enormous group of them just started walking out of the trees. I don't know how many. It's a lot."

"Copy." Cowboy replied. "I'm on my way. Get everyone together. In your cabin if you can."

"Already done." Gloria's tone became derisive. "I wasn't born yesterday screwball."

Cowboy chuckled, despite the looming threat. "See ya soon."

Gloria watched as headsuckers continued to appear, moving out of the trees in clumps across an area of what must have been fifty yards wide.

"Fucking hell." Lenard stood next to Gloria on the second-story deck of her cabin. "I've never seen anything like that."

Gloria could tell Lenard was scared. He didn't think they could hold off this many of them.

"Stay cool." Gloria squeezed Lenard's arm. "Don't lose your head."

Lenard looked from the growing herd of infected to Gloria, his eyes gazing into hers. "I won't."

"Remember, don't start any shooting till we have to." Gloria continued watching as the herd crawled toward the mass of campers, motorhomes, and other vehicles parked around her wide driveway and beyond.

Fourteen armed members of Gloria's refugee camp stood on the deck with her and Lenard. They grabbed as many guns and ammo as possible before taking up the elevated position.

They boarded the downstairs windows up from the outside. Gloria's front and back doors were constructed of heavy oak and steel, with only narrow windows on the top and bottom. It would take a while for the headsuckers to get in that way.

Gloria's second-level deck stretched almost entirely around her cabin. Men and women with guns were positioned all around to keep watch.

What none of them could see, however, were the other headsuckers hanging back, just out of sight, hidden by the thick forest boundary.

These were the higher-functioning ones, working together in a pack. They had learned to hunt as a team, often using the more primitive infected as a distraction to surprise their prey.

Relying on the humans to focus on the large herd approaching them, these adaptable pursuers took time to analyze their target, searching for weaknesses and flaws in the defense.

The first headsuckers approached a fifth wheel on the edge of vehicles. They paused, appearing to search the sky around them for something. Gloria found this behavior curious, not understanding its significance.

More of the herd caught up to the first headsuckers, slowing as they moved around the fifth wheel, spreading out into the middle of the encampment.

"What are they looking for?" A voice spoke up from somewhere to Gloria's right. "They keep looking up at the sky."

"Fucking creepy." Another voice answered.

Gloria clenched her rifle, feeling the rush preceding imminent violence. She looked at her hand, taking a moment to study the whitening of her fingers as they pressed into the metal of her weapon.

Looking back to her driveway, Gloria could see the herd moving toward her cabin in a lazy arc pattern, still searching the sky for some unknown thing.

"Are we putting off a signal or something?" Lenard quipped, his voice a mixture of curiosity and worry. "Only they can see it?"

"Maybe." Gloria hadn't considered that possibility. It was conceivable, like Cowboy being able to sense headsuckers from a distance. Very Disturbing.

"Keep your heads clear. Cowboy thinks they learn from interacting with us. Let's try to learn from them as well." Gloria made her volume just loud enough for those in her direct vicinity to hear.

*If we survive*. Gloria kept that last thought to herself. She looked beyond the headsuckers heading toward her cabin. More were still coming out of the woods. There had to be at least a thousand of them. She needed help to get a correct count. This was insane. How many could there be?

Gloria's walkie chirped. She had set it to low volume. "I'm nearing your cabin. I can see a bunch of them between me and you."

Gloria looked toward where Cowboy would arrive from, but tall trees obscured the view. She thought she could make out some shapes moving on the road.

She held the walkie up to her mouth, speaking above a whisper. "They're still coming out of woods on the other side. Maybe over a thousand. They just keep appearing."

"Damn." Cowboy didn't sound alarmed, but Gloria thought she could sense a subtle shift in his tone.

"I'm gonna drive straight into your camp. Try to push 'em back."

Gloria could hear a faint groaning sound, and it was getting louder. The noise was inhuman and unsettling.

A woman bumped into Gloria on the left, shivering. The woman cast an apologetic glance at Gloria. "Sorry. That sound freaked me out a little."

"Shut that crap down. Do it quickly. You gotta stay sharp." Her voice sounded harsher than Gloria had intended, but she wasn't in the mood to hold anyone's hand through this engagement.

The woman nodded, backing away from Gloria. "Yep, Okay. I will."

Gloria heard Cowboy's truck just seconds before it appeared on the edge of her vision. The truck drove straight into the middle of the refugee camp, stopping beside the communal firepit.

Most people standing with Gloria and Lenard gasped in astonishment as Cowboy hopped out of his truck, walking straight toward the headsuckers nearing Gloria's cabin.

Several headsuckers moved closer to the cabin as Cowboy pushed them forward. A few ran onto the porch and out of sight.

"Hold your fire. No shooting." Gloria repeated, feeling less confident in her squad after one of them had bumped into her, shivering with fear.

Cowboy walked up on the porch, glancing upward at Gloria and the others before disappearing.

A moment later, several headsuckers reappeared on the left of the cabin, Cowboy a few steps behind them.

"He's herding them away." Lenard grabbed the rail around the deck, leaning over to get a better view. "Fucking crazy. How the hell?"

Gloria felt relief and then concern. Hearing Cowboy describe what he could do was not like seeing it. Indeed, how the hell?

Cowboy made a zigzag pattern around the camp, pushing headsuckers away as he moved around the open area between all the vehicles.

"They're still coming." Lenard pointed to where they had first noticed headsuckers coming out of the trees. "So many of them."

A dense wall of headsuckers was forming beyond where Cowboy walked back and forth between them and Gloria's cabin.

Gloria looked all around below. She could see headsuckers moving out of the trees on both sides. They massed around the house in a wide circle.

"They're coming around us on all sides." Gloria held the walkie up to her mouth, not trying to keep her voice low any longer. "To the side and back of the cabin."

The groaning, dim before, was becoming a deafening chorus of creepy harmony.

"I'll move that way." Cowboy replied, his voice muffled by the headsucker choir.

"What are we gonna do? We can't shoot this many of them." Gloria spoke into the walkie again.

"I'm working on it." Cowboy's voice was almost a yell. "Give me a few."

"I don't think they can get us up here, but I don't know how long you can keep at it." Gloria felt Lenard's eyes on her. He was thinking the same thing.

"I can do this all day and all night." Cowboy's tone was cocky, catching Gloria by surprise. Didn't he realize the severity of this nightmare?

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Gloria heard the yelling behind her. Turning, she saw a man staggering backward, trying to get his gun up and pointing at something out of sight.

It appeared in front of the man in a flash as he was preparing to squeeze his trigger.

Gloria had just enough time to make out the shape of a figure appearing in front of the man. She reached for her pistol when the creature grabbed the man and jumped off the deck, disappearing in a blur.

Panic overtook those standing close by. People backed away, taking their attention off the growing crowd of headsuckers below.

"We gotta get inside!" A woman called out, rushing toward the door leading inside from the deck.

"Hold your ground!" Gloria felt regret for taking in these worthless refugees. Scatterbrained and useless, these people were going to get her killed. Then, a split second later, she thought of Lenard and Mia. They were capable. Valuable.

Lenard had already positioned himself between the door and the panicked woman. "We have to stand our ground. Get disciplined. Get smart." Lenard did not yell, keeping his voice above the groaning headsuckers below.

"He's right!" Gloria fed on Lenard's momentum. "Have your guns up and ready. Be ready to pull the trigger. Panic will get you killed."

The woman stared at Lenard, her eyes glinting with anger. She almost raised her gun to force the issue with Lenard but caught herself.

Gloria sighed, seeing the woman's twitchy arm.

Gloria was prepared to shoot the woman if necessary. She felt relief, but there was no time for reflection.

"Back up to the wall of the cabin. Keep your guns pointed out. See any flicker or shadow, you shoot it. No hesitation." Gloria was already backing up herself. Everyone else followed her lead.

"One of them jumped up here and grabbed someone. It was fucking fast." Gloria held her walkie close to her mouth, feeling it touch her lips as she spoke.

"A smart one. There may be more. Keep your guns up." Cowboy's reply came through garbled, mixed into the groaning hum around them.

"Have you come up with anything?" Gloria felt trapped and helpless. Knowing herself, she couldn't tolerate this for long.

A shot rang out from Gloria's left. She swung her gun around, ready to fire. A man, Bill, Gloria knew his name to be, stood frozen with his gun up.

"It was just a blur. It flew right past me." Bill stood, arms out in confusion and fear. "I didn't see…"

Gloria looked up to her left. She edged out to see around the overhang of her second-story roof. A few others did the same.

It was a woman, or what used to be a woman, standing motionless just a few feet above her. Its eyes were clear but dark and inhuman, and its face lacked expression.

Gloria recognized the severe danger this thinking headsucker presented to everyone.

She also realized her mistake. Too late.

Gloria heard a yelp from somewhere to her right. She swung around again in that direction. A split second later, another cry came from her left.

The thing on the roof was a distraction. Another one had swooped up, grabbing someone. In the time it took for Gloria to look over, the headsucker on the roof made off with another person.

That was three people in less than five minutes.

"Everyone Inside!" Gloria didn't think. There was no time. "Quickly!"

"Two more taken up here. We're heading inside. It's too dangerous." Gloria didn't wait to hear Cowboy's reply as she ushered everyone inside.

She pulled the door shut hard, feeling her body stiffen in anticipation of something slamming into it from the other side.

The groaning hum was muffled but still noticeable.

"What are we gonna do?" Desiree, one of Lenard's trained sentries, asked, her tone resigned, dull.

Gloria kept her eyes on the door.

"We're gonna do whatever it takes to stay alive."

Chapter 54

Angelika sensed the mysterious beings as an weight pressing against and into her.

This force moved through her body. It manifested as a tingle growing more intense as she got closer. The tingling numbed, slowing her speed.

Her ability to sense Elle and Dryden diminished with each step. Angelika took comfort in knowing it must also have the same effect on them. She felt confident she could get away from her pursuers if she could avoid becoming incapacitated.

She played this uncertain game at significant risk.

A purple hue enveloped Angelika. She could no longer hear anything. Still able to move, Angelika fought through the debilitating fog of pressure settling over her body as a steady hum only her mind could sense from within.

All sense of Elle and Dryden vanished. Angelika’s ability to think slowed, becoming clunky and disjointed. She pressed forward.

Within the throbbing purple aura around her, Angelika could see a focal point. It manifested as a thicker concentration of strange violet hues coalescing around radiant white, green, and yellow bursts.

The unknown beings were congregating, unmoving. The force of pressure on Angelika changed as she continued moving toward the stationary things still unknown to her. A bright arc of energy moved toward her. Her physiology became disrupted, and Angelika could not move away from this stream of brilliance headed for her.

She had no desire to avoid the light, finding its hum, its rhythm soothing. Her mind wanted the calm it promised.

As the stream of light enveloped Angelika, it filled her with fresh energy. It was unlike anything before experienced when feeding on humans or the infected.

At once, Angelika knew The Nameless. She knew its purpose. She became aware of The Conduit. The certainty of it coming into existence. Angelika’s mind glimpsed the ancient beings waiting to pass through this portal The Nameless would create.

The Nameless moved to Angelika. She felt no fear or weakness as her entire body became immersed in luminous energy.

The Nameless moved around and into Angelika, a hazy blur of cascading light dancing in a steady rhythm. This was her destiny. Angelika knew it was always meant to be this way.

The ancient ones soon to arrive were to join Angelika. She would become one with their being. They would blend into her consciousness and Angelika into theirs.

As The Nameless pulsed around and into Angelika, she also sensed the approach of Elle and Dryden. They had closed the distance to her faster than she expected.

They, too, were slowing under pressure created by The Nameless. Angelika had predicted this correctly, but it did not matter. All destinies were aligning.

The Nameless parted from Angelika, moving in a shadowy blur to envelop Elle and Dryden. The physical forms that currently existed as Elle and Dryden dissipated in thin lines of light and fog, flowing into The Nameless. Within seconds, Elle and Dryden’s physical bodies were gone.

Returning to Angelika, The Nameless moved around and into her as they had done before. Thin lines of light and fog identical to the ones that had flowed from Elle and Dryden traveled from The Nameless into Angelika.

Three beings of independent thought and identity were blending into one. Knowledge, experience, adaptation, and power intermingled. A new being came into existence.

An instant agreement of harmonized awareness gave a new identity. Vodyre.

The Nameless vanished again, moving with haste, no longer contemplating this brief interaction with three advanced mutations of accidental yet unavoidable design.

Vodyre sank into the earth, entering a final stage of metamorphosis.

This changed being would soon rise again.

Chapter 55

"What's the hold up?" Gavin slapped his thighs in frustration. He was getting soaked, despite sheltering under a tree next to Luke.

Thick clouds appeared in a matter of hours, letting loose an unrelenting downpour Luke could not recall ever experiencing.

Nobody liked their options when it was dry. The rain made it even more challenging.

Luke leaned into a tall tree across from Gavin, just twenty-five yards from the gas station. Mitch, Teena, and a few from the caravan evacuating the rest area crouched behind a small shed just beyond the rear gas pumps.

Dionne and her people were taking up position to the side of the gas station, preparing to start the surprise attack.

The heavy rain fell loudly on leaves and other foliage in the trees just beyond the gas station's parking area. Luke could hear the rain falling on the covered carports where the pumps were located. Puddles had formed all around the paved area surrounding the gas station on all sides. Water had crept into all the covered areas as well.

They were going to get wet regardless of where and how they approached.

Gavin and Luke were getting soaked. Luke figured everyone else must be as well.

The attack plan included a distraction off to the left side of the building to get people out of the gas station. The distraction would be a burning tire rolling across the front of the building where the entrance doors were located.

Once ignited, the rubber of a tire could burn in almost any weather. Getting it lit, however, may prove challenging in the rain.

Dionne initially balked at shooting the people guarding the gas station on sight. Mitch and Teena convinced her because of the pressing issue of scramblers fast approaching their location.

"Probably having trouble getting the tire lit on fire. Look around you. It's raining." Luke didn't hide the sarcasm.

"You're quite the observant asshole." Gavin snickered, grinning a little. "I was wondering why my clothes were so wet."

"We'll move as soon as we hear shooting." Luke became abruptly serious, remembering the danger soon to come. "Keep your eyes open. Ignore the rain."

"Easier said than done." Gavin sighed loudly. "Maybe getting shot at will help with that."

"Keep your head clear. Don't be an easy target." Luke addressed himself as much as Gavin.

"Yeah, okay. No problem." It was Gavin's turn at sarcasm. "You too soldier."

There were a few moments of silence as Luke and Gavin tried to not let anticipation drive them crazy in the soaking rain, waiting for the imminent gunfight. Luke realized he was holding his breath. He forced himself to breathe normally.

Popping sounds, muffled by the rain, echoed across the rear parking area.

"Let's go." Luke broke from behind the trees, Gavin just behind him.

Luke turned to see Mitch and the others crossing to his right in front of the shed. Mitch nodded quickly in Luke's direction, waving his group on toward the rear door of the gas station. It was a solid steel door with no windows.

Mitch held a few M80 firecrackers he intended to ignite in front of the door. His group would wait next to the door, shooting whoever opened it, rushing inside to subdue anyone else they encountered.

Luke and Gavin were to run around Dionne's opposite side, neutralizing opposition from their end.

Half of Dionne's group would break off, following Mitch in the back door. Everyone would meet at the gas station entrance when it was all done.

"At least none of them are outside in this shit." Gavin leaned against the back wall on the edge of the building's left side as they waited for Mitch to set off his attention-getters by the door.

"Also means they're huddled together inside. More people. More guns." Luke murmured, watching Mitch set off the first M80. He lit them all in rapid succession.

Mitch and his group backed off a little as the deafening explosions echoed loudly against the gas station's back wall.

Less than a minute later, the rear door opened, and two people with guns exited quickly. Mitch shot them before either had time to react. He entered through the partially open door in a flash.

Luke could hear more gunfire from inside the building as he peeked around the side, then took off running for the front of the store.

A woman stepped around the corner in front of Luke.

"Damnit!" Gavin shouted, firing off a round before Luke could react.

The woman curled over, holding her stomach. Luke quickly brought up his gun, finishing her with a headshot.

Luke paused, gun up, waiting for anyone else to round the corner. Slowly, he started moving forward again. "Great teamwork."

"Yeah, we're a killer team." There was no humor in Gavin's voice.

Luke stopped as the sound of shooting came around from the front of the building. Gavin bumped into him, knocking him off balance.

Luke brought his hand up to steady himself on the wall. As he did, a man jumped out in front of them, eyes focused on something in the front parking lot.

The man turned in Luke and Gavin's direction, stunned by their presence.

Gavin shot the man as he moved his arm around to shoot at Gavin and Luke. This time Gavin's shot hit the man in the chest. The man flailed about, turning full circle and falling to the ground.

Luke waited again, expecting someone else to appear any second. There was more shooting in front, but he couldn't see anybody.

Gavin put his hand on Luke's shoulder, patting it once to get Luke moving.

Luke came up to the corner separating the side of the building from the front. He took two deep breaths, then darted out and back to get a read on things.

He saw two people shooting in the opposite direction at the front entrance. He nodded to Gavin once, then turned the corner, gun up, already shooting.

Gavin ran around wide to get a different angle. He ran slower than Luke, trying to get a better shot.

The two people at the door retreated inside. One of them fell back through the door before it closed, glass shattering as he fell to the pavement. The man lay wounded but not dead.

The man reached over to retrieve his gun that had fallen out of his hands as he fell. Luke pulled his trigger twice, hitting the target both times. He stopped moving.

Luke realized his gun was empty. He waved at Gavin, pointing to his gun.

Gavin nodded, returning his attention to the front door.

"Shit!" Fumbling for bullets in his front pocket, Luke dropped several to the pavement as he rushed to load his revolver.

Gunfire continued inside the building. Several of the glass windows had already been blown out. Luke noticed pieces of glass littering the area beneath his feet where his dropped bullets had fallen.

He looked again at the front door, kneeling below the window line as he scooted along the wall to the entrance.

Gavin walked sideways across the front parking lot, gun trained on the door. A few of Dionne's people ran up to the front of the building opposite Luke.

Dionne was not with them, but Luke recognized the two men and one woman from an earlier introduction.

The shooting inside ceased. Several seconds passed in silence as Luke looked from the door to Dionne's people, unsure of what to do next.

Teena appeared at the entrance, stepping through the shattered glass door and onto the raised pavement. She was holding her left side, limping. Luke could see blood under where Teena was holding her abdomen.

Luke ran up to her, as did Gavin and the others. "Are you hurt?" Luke could tell that Teena was injured but couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yeah, a little. I've been shot." Teena's breath was shallow. "And I broke a couple ribs. Guy kicked me in the chest."

"Is everyone else okay?" One of Dionne's people asked, looking past Teena into the store.

"They got Kendra. She's dead. And Patrick too." Teena wheezed, grimacing. "Go in and check on the others. I'm gonna hang here for a sec."

Luke turned his gaze to the parking lot in front, seeing three bodies lying on the pavement. They were Dionne's people.

Then he saw Dionne. She was sitting up on the ground. She was alive but apparently injured as well.

"You check Dionne." Luke turned his attention to the three people across from him. "Gavin and I will go inside."

"Will do!" One man answered. "But we gotta hurry. Our scout said the herd was only a few hours away at best."

Luke felt panic rising inside again. He nodded to the man, taking a deep breath, trying to shut the alarm off in his head. He only partially succeeded.

There was no time to mourn the dead or even bury them.

They wouldn't outrun the scramblers if they didn't get the gas and return to the road.

Bandit country beckoned them onward.

Chapter 56

“Feeling better? You needed that.”

Ramirez crawled across the floor a few feet, falling on his stomach, then rolling over onto his back. Breathing fast and deep, he felt the warm, euphoric energy move through his body.

Glancing to his side, Ramirez studied the body lying to his right.

This woman. The woman on whom he had just fed. Her eyes rolled up. Her tongue sticking out. Foamy saliva still dripping from her mouth to the floor. Dead.

“Don’t worry about her. You had to feed. You are important to me.” Sebridge grinned as he watched Ramirez through the one-way glass. Ramirez was his pet project and one of only two he managed to retrieve from the facility in Belgium.

Ramirez could barely hear Sebridge speaking to him over the intercom. He drifted in euphoria for several moments longer. This feeling. This rush. It had no equal.

“Give him a few moments, then send him back to his quarters.” Sebridge kept his eyes on Ramirez as he instructed the nurse standing next to him.

“Yes of course, Sir.” The man nodded once, also examining Ramirez through the glass. “We replenished the inventory as you requested. Should be enough to keep him fed up for two months.”

“Has the feeding schedule remained constant?” Sebridge turned to face the nurse this time.

“It has slowed since he first arrived. We think he may have been starving…” The nurse hesitated, uncertain of how to describe Ramirez or his condition. “…If that’s the proper word for it.”

“Indeed.” Sebridge rubbed his chin, thinking through how to proceed with Ramirez. “I want him in the dining room with Carly and Marik again today, lunch or dinner, doesn’t matter. Fake a power outage. See what they do. Also bring in Justine to eat with them.”

The nurse turned away from Sebridge, nodding to a tech seated behind them at a workstation. “We’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Excellent.” Sebridge began moving toward the door. “I’m off to visit our other guest from the facility. See that she is made ready for me.”

Marik lay on his mattress atop the covers, head resting on his pillow.

For the past week, he had been keeping track of timing within the facility. For example, how long it took to walk to the dining room from his sleeping quarters. How long did it take to walk outside?

Marik also asked Carly how long it took her to walk to the dining room. He did so in subtle ways, trying not to be noticeable, as he knew their conversations were monitored.

His light flickered twice, indicating the door to his quarters would open for breakfast in sixty seconds.

So far, there had only been three people in the dining room at one time with Marik. Carly was always there. Ramirez had been off and on for the past three weeks. Marik still wasn’t confident about what game Sebridge was playing with Ramirez, but it had to be something. Ramirez was odd, screwy, and unstable.

Marik pretended not to give Ramirez much consideration beyond occasionally commenting on his instability.

Carly seemed to share Marik’s viewpoint concerning Ramirez. She refrained, however, from ever saying anything critical of his behavior. Marik would press the issue a little with Carly today.

Carly sat at her usual place in the dining room for breakfast. Marik entered about a minute after she sat down.

“Just the two of us again today?” Marik sounded arrogant. Carly knew that meant he intended to try pushing her buttons. Subtlety did not become him.

“Yes, it appears so.” Carly did her best to always speak to Marik and anyone else in a neutral tone. She didn’t want anyone to think they could influence her mood.

“You miss the nutty man.” Marik started in on Carly while still retrieving his food. “He entertains you just as he does me.”

“No more or less than you. I am cooperative to anyone I meet here.” Carly took another bite of oatmeal, keeping her eyes on her tray.

“I can tell you like him.” Marik took his usual seat opposite Carly at the same table. “It’s okay. Nutty people can entertain. Be funny.”

“I’m not looking for entertainment. I’m surviving. That’s all.” Carly finished the oatmeal, not once looking at Marik.

“The nutty man is some game they play with us, huh?” Marik changed tactics, trying to get Carly to bite at something.

“Maybe. Maybe we all are for each other.” Carly put her fingers around the apple on her tray, turning it around a few times before bringing it to her mouth.

“You. Me.” Marik pointed at Carly and then at himself. “We are just here. That’s it.”

Carly nodded toward Marik, looking at him for the first time. Her facial expression showed doubt but not disagreement.

“Come on. Admit it.” Marik’s voice lowered, sounding conspiratorial. “You think he is here for some game they play with us.”

“I really don’t see the point.” Carly looked away from Marik, setting the apple on her tray and picking up a piece of sausage. “They can just ask us anything they want to know.”

“They don’t think we are telling them everything. If they did, we wouldn’t be alive.” Marik huffed in frustration.

“Maybe they need us for something else.” Carly resisted taking pleasure in Marik’s apparent frustration, but she found it challenging. Marik annoyed her regularly.

“I’ve thought that too. Maybe they need us. Maybe to build something or get someone.” Marik began devouring his food, suddenly realizing they had little time left in the dining room.

Carly finished her apple, looking at her empty tray, still feeling hungry.

Marik continued gobbling up his food enthusiastically as the announcement to return to their quarters came over the intercom.

Carly got up, ignoring Marik. She exited the dining room without another word.

Marik grunted, still chewing his food as he stood to leave as well.

Chapter 57

"Damn, scrambler's a quick bastard." Ed pointed in the direction of a shape that had disappeared behind the medical center in a blur. "

Charles and Charlene had gotten out of Ed's truck, along with Bridget's crew riding in the back.

"Maybe it's running away and won't be a problem for us." Charles tried to sound optimistic as he walked next to Ed's driver's side window.

Ed snorted but said nothing. Charles could tell Ed wasn't convinced.

Keeping his attention on the medical center, trying to spot scramblers, Charles was surprised when Bridget yelled out to everyone, pointing somewhere behind Charles.

"Damnit!" Charlene cursed, beating Charles around to see what had Bridget so excited. "So many of them."

The men riding in the back of Ed's truck opened up on the scramblers without hesitation, taking out several in front within seconds. The ones behind them kept moving closer, picking up speed.

"They're cutting us off from behind!" Bridget called out, trying to be heard over the gunfire. "Keep shooting!"

Charles and Charlene took positions behind Ed's truck, picking off scramblers as fast as possible. Bridget's people did the same.

The group took turns reloading several times as the scramblers moved closer. Charles could see bodies lying on the road, but many were still coming their way.

"Pile in the trucks!" Bridget ran to the back of Ed's truck. "We'll drive around the back of the medical center. We'll cut over to Johnson Street if we have to."

Everyone behind Ed's truck got into whatever vehicle they could. Charlene jumped in Ed's cab on the passenger side. Charles jumped in the back with several of Bridget's people.

Bridget led the vehicles to the last turn for the hospital before a small bridge leading into Alpena. She drove to the back of the medical center, turning into the rear parking lot.

Bridget's truck stopped about halfway along the back of the building. She jumped out, running along the other vehicles to get a better view behind them.

Charles stood up to get a better look as well. He could only hear truck motors idling for what seemed like forever. Bridget kept her gaze focused on the corner of the hospital.

A sudden crash behind them got everyone's attention. Charles swung around to see what had caused the loud noise.

It was Bridget's truck. A scrambler had jumped on the hood, punching through the windshield. A few shots rang out from inside the vehicle as the scrambler grabbed at the passenger inside.

Charles could hear screaming.

Bridget took off running for her truck, gun already out. "Hold on Micaela!"

As Bridget rushed to help Micaela, two more scramblers darted out from cars still parked in the rear parking lot, close to where the trucks were idling.

Several of Bridget's people, together with Charles and Charlene, took aim and fired in their direction. These scramblers were fast, moving in a zigzag pattern and bobbing their heads. It was impossible to get a clean shot at their heads.

"Fuck!" A woman standing next to Charles cussed as the first of the two scramblers dove into the truck's passenger window just behind Bridget's truck. The man on the passenger side had his window down to shoot at scramblers they may stumble upon.

The scrambler disappeared inside the truck's cab. Charles could hear gunshots as holes appeared on the roof of the vehicle.

The second scrambler fell to the ground near Ed's truck as someone hit its legs several times. Two people leaned over to shoot it after it fell, but the thing rolled under the back of the vehicle before they could get a shot off.

Everyone in the bed of Ed's truck began looking over the side, trying to see where the scrambler might reemerge.

"No!" Charles heard Bridget's voice as a shrill cry. "Fuck! No!"

Charles turned to see Bridget aim her gun inside the cab of her truck, taking a shot. Then, she disappeared into the cab herself.

"They're comin'!" A woman cried out next to Charles. He turned back to see a large group of scramblers picking up speed as they rounded the corner of the hospital into the back parking area.

Charles knew the scramblers would reach the trucks in mere seconds. "We gotta move! Get the trucks going!"

Someone jumped out, running up to Bridget's truck. Charles watched as the man leaped inside Bridget's truck, and it started moving forward with a lurch.

Ed started driving again too, just as soon as the truck in front of him got moving. Charles looked around but could not see the scrambler that had taken refuge under Ed's truck.

*Where the fuck did it go*? Charles watched the scramblers running toward them close in briefly as the vehicles picked up speed, once again gaining distance from their pursuers.

Bridget's truck veered off to the right, headed for Johnson Street to make a wide pattern back to route twenty-three.

Charles felt exasperated and grateful. This was more than he bargained for when agreeing to help get Ed's medication. He was thankful, however, that they had run into Bridget. Doing this all by themselves would have been a fatal decision.

As Ed's truck made the sharp turn left onto Johnson Street, the passenger door flew open. Charles glimpsed a hand, reaching in and grabbing Charlene.

Before Charles or anyone else could react, the hiding scrambler pulled Charlene out of the truck. Charlene flew off to the left, hitting the pavement hard along with the injured scrambler.

Ed slammed on the brakes. Charles swung his legs over the side of the truck's bed, as did two others. He almost made it to the scrambler before it crawled over to where Charlene lay on the ground, unmoving.

The scrambler got its hands around Charlene's head for a few seconds before Charles reached it. Without thinking, he kicked it in the side as hard as he could several times, not wanting to shoot it that close to Charlene.

Someone came up behind Charles, grabbing the scrambler's legs and attempting to pull it off Charlene. Another one of Bridget's people grabbed its other leg. Charles turned to help remove it as well.

They held the scrambler suspended, stretching it out in the air as it continued clutching Charlene's head.

Charles heard a shot somewhere from his left side. The scrambler fell limp, causing Charles and the two others pulling on its legs to fall backward onto the ground.

"Charlene!" Charles crawled over to his wife, flashing back in his mind to Casey. "Please!"

He cradled her head, petting her hair, trying to shake her awake.

"Pick her up! We gotta keep moving!" A woman ran over to Charles, already moving to lift up Charlene.

Charles looked over at her, remembering their situation. "Yes, Okay."

With the woman's help, Charles got Charlene back into the cab of Ed's truck. He hopped inside with her.

"Drive Ed. I got'er." Charles tried to rouse Charlene. "Please baby. Wake up."

Charles felt the bottom falling out of him inside. This was the exact thing he had feared.

This was his nightmare.

Chapter 58

"You're a right old boy!" Jesse slapped Irwin on the shoulder a couple times. "Shame we didn't meet before this shit happened."

Roger stood by Irwin's car, taking turns watching the road and frowning at Jesse and Irwin. Roger found Jesse trying his patience of late.

"Are we there yet?" Arlene did her best to imitate a child's voice.

Irwin put his hand on Jesse's shoulder, glaring at Arlene. "None of that, little lady. Didn't your parents teach you any manners?"

Roger didn't feel jovial, but he had the same question as Arlene.

"I figure we'll be there by this time tomorrow at the latest." Irwin winked at Roger as if he sensed Roger's question too.

Arlene walked up beside Jesse and Irwin, grinning. "You're lookin' better old man. A day of scenic driving did you good."

Jesse grinned. "Yeah, I am. It did at that."

"It looks like everyone is settled back in their vehicles." Roger didn't enjoy sitting by the side of the road any longer than necessary. It felt too vulnerable.

"I guess so. Yes. Let's get moving." Irwin gave Jesse another pat on the shoulder, heading to his car. Jesse followed, getting in the passenger side.

"They've sure become fast friends." Arlene lingered a moment next to Roger.

"Yep." Roger nodded once, not sounding enthusiastic in the least.

"Lighten up on Jesse a little." Arlene's tone became less buoyant. "Standing up to his son. Running him off like that. Losing all those people back at the trailer park. Abandoning it all. It was a lot for him to take."

"We've all given up a lot." Roger allowed his frustration to show. "Jesse doesn't deserve to be treated like some kind of fragile thing everybody tiptoes around."

"Why are you so angry with him?" Arlene looked at Roger, a challenging look on her face.

"Jesse's slow decision-making and inability to make the necessary choices cost us all. Quite a bit. I’m waiting for it to happen again." Roger met Arlene's gaze without flinching.

Arlene sighed, looking away from Roger. "He's got a gentle heart. He doesn't like conflict or being mean to people. It tears him up inside."

"His gentle heart costs lives." Roger walked away from Arlene without waiting for a reply, getting into the driver's side of a truck they had requisitioned from a used car lot a couple of days before.

Arlene knew Roger spoke the truth but couldn't help feeling sorry for Jesse. She sighed again, getting into the passenger side of Roger's truck.

They drove on without speaking.

"This should be interesting." Arlene broke the silence hovering around her and Roger since they started driving again several hours earlier.

"Be ready for anything." Roger slowed his truck to a stop. "These could just be outlaws in fancy uniforms."

Roger watched as Irwin and Jesse exited the lead car, walking forward to address who appeared to be a man in combat fatigues.

Behind the man, blocking the highway, were four armored personnel carriers and several other military vehicles just beyond them. On several smaller transports, mini guns sat mounted on turrets.

Roger could also see at least twenty to thirty added personnel in between the troop carriers. They were all armed with assault rifles.

"We can't really do much about it if they are." Arlene aired aloud what Roger was thinking.

Despite the overwhelming firepower staring down at them, Roger's mind began devising escape options, futility be damned.

Irwin and Jesse spoke with the man standing in front of the blockade for almost thirty minutes before turning to give everyone an update. Several people in vehicles behind Roger had stepped out onto the road, fidgety and anxious.

Irwin stopped by Roger's truck first. "These fellas seem legit. Say they are put together from a few different outfits."

"What do they want with us?" Roger wasn't ready to grant legitimacy just yet.

"Apparently they are part of a larger group of military folks who've set up a community of sorts between the plant where we were headed and a nearby prison. Converted the damn thing into living quarters for civilians and military alike." Irwin sounded excited at the thought.

"Are they demanding we go to this converted prison or the plant?" Roger remained skeptical.

"No. They aren't." Jesse broke into the conversation. "Just offered it would be a lot safer than stayin out here as easy pickens for bandits." Jesse squinted, then added. "Sides, we was headed to that plant already."

Roger looked ahead to the blockade again, unsatisfied and without any favorable alternatives. "Okay, I guess we'll go along with it unless or until things go sideways."

"Have some faith in humanity young man." Irwin grinned slyly at Roger. "These good people are tryin to salvage what they can from the disaster that's befallen us all."

Jesse remained silent, shaking his head, looking past Roger at Arlene.

"Let's at least check it out Roger. This may be our only best option." Arlene nodded toward Jesse, trying to nudge Roger with a gentle tone.

Roger raised his hands from the steering wheel. "I already said let's go. I'm ready when you are."

Irwin smiled again, mystified by Roger's reluctance. "Okay. I'm gonna give the rest of these pilgrims an update. Give me a few and we'll head out."

Roger nodded once as Irwin and Jesse walked on past his truck.

"It'll probably work out great, Roger." Arlene forced a smile, resisting Roger's sour mood. "We'll be well protected from scramblers and bandits with guns like that." Arlene waved her finger toward the armed soldiers.

"Remember you thought that when you get branded with a number and forced into slave labor." Roger grinned slightly, only half kidding.

"Fucking ridiculous." Arlene laughed, choosing to interpret Roger’s comment as a joke.

Chapter 59

“You will be broken.” Baako spoke into Teagan’s ear, his mouth inches away as Teagan held a plank position, hands buried above his wrists in thick mud.

Teagan’s muscles screamed for relief. The small squad of trainees had been holding this position for what seemed like forever.

“Down.” Baako backed away from Teagan, voice gruff but not loud.

Teagan lowered himself to the mud, feeling the wet muck press into his chin, his body straining as he resisted collapsing.

Teagan heard Baako move away from him, granting his intimacy to another trainee.

“Your body is weak. You are weak. Your mind is soft. You will fail.” Baako spoke with such certainty. It was at once intimidating and annoying.

“Up.” Baako leaned in close to the young woman beside Teagan. “Fucking girls are even weaker. You will get tortured and raped by savage men.” Baako’s tranquil tone was enough to play games with a person’s mind. The content of his words was just icing on top.

“At ease.” Baako stood up again, moving to the front as the squad dropped to the ground in unison, in no way concerned about falling into the mud.

“Clean up. Feed your pathetic bodies. Go to sleep. We start this all again tomorrow.” Baako walked away from the group without another word.

Teagan allowed himself to lay a few more seconds, not moving, his muscles burning from head to toe.

Finally, he rolled over onto his back, sitting up.

One by one, the cadets got up, heading for the showers.

Teagan also stood, too tired to care about washing away the mud. Merely going through the motions. He thought fighting whatever they had done to him in the infirmary was difficult. This was a whole different kind of torment.

No one spoke as the cadets showered together, men and women. Any sense of modesty long ago burned away by utter exhaustion.

By the time they made their way to the mess hall, some trainees were feeling more energetic. Teagan was as well. He always forgot how hungry he was until just before dinner.

“Baako is a fucking maniac.” Ricardo, the most animated of the trainees usually started the conversation during mealtime.

“We’ve got to get through this. Show that bastard we aren’t fucking losers.” Another trainee spoke up between mouthfuls of macaroni and sausage.

Teagan said nothing, just eating in silence as the others made small talk.

On his way to the barracks, Teagan caught site of a veteran squad heading out for night drills. Baako was with them.

Teagan lingered only for a second, but it was enough to get Baako’s attention. The man had an uncanny sense about him.

Baako made direct eye contact with Teagan, waving him over with a single gesture.

“You come with us curious boy. We are hunting the undead tonight.” Baako grinned, but his expression showed no joy or humor.

Teagan felt all the exhaustion from his day of physical abuse weighing down but knew better than to show reluctance to his superior.

In line behind Baako, Teagan watched the veterans ahead move into the thick forest beyond the training camp. All of them, including Baako, were armed. Teagan was not. He felt awkward, vulnerable, and unworthy all at the same time.

“This one gets us every time. We fail, but we learn.” Baako’s tone shifted, quiet but with resolve. The voice of a seasoned hunter.

After hiking over uneven terrain and unforgiving underbrush for about forty-five minutes, the soldier on point halted, raising one hand.

Teagan froze. He didn’t want to embarrass himself amongst these battle-hardened warriors.

Baako touched Teagan on the shoulder, pointing up into the branches. Teagan looked but couldn’t see anything. They were out in the middle of nowhere, relying on nothing but their natural senses to navigate and match wits with this mysterious opponent.

Squinting at first, Teagan saw nothing. Darkness enveloped all shapes and sizes around him.

“Push your eyes.” Baako’s voice, a whisper, registered somewhere to Teagan’s left.

Teagan shook his head in frustration and tightened his eyes shut, squinting even harder.

*How do I push my eyes*?

There was rustling ahead. Teagan opened his eyes to find one soldier had vanished.

Whatever they were hunting had swept in, grabbing one of Baako’s people and disappearing in a hurry. The remaining soldiers swiveled around, trying to spot something. The forest gave nothing away. Only the sounds of insects.

Teagan realized he could see better. He could make out the shapes of taller trees and branches farther away. His eyesight had adapted to the night.

 A shot rang out; a soldier sprinted to the target area, followed by the others. Teagan could see (and smell) the splattered blood. A faint odor. He couldn’t remember smelling blood before. Teagan didn’t understand how this was possible.

“He’s taken another.” Baako’s voice was louder, not a yell, but not a whisper. The element of surprise had passed.

Teagan looked around. Indeed, another member of their team was missing.

“What is it?” Teagan asked without thinking.

Baako put up a hand to silence his cadet. Teagan chided himself. If Baako wanted him to know, he would have provided that information.

The team pressed together closer, thinking this strategy would make picking them off more problematic.

This time Teagan glimpsed it as the mysterious creature dropped from the sky, hauling another soldier away into the air.

No one fired in response.

Teagan noted the discipline of these soldiers at that moment. A panicked squadron would shoot in all directions at this point.

“Close your eyes. Feel everything around you. Don’t trust your sight.” Baako addressed everyone at regular volume.

Teagan closed his eyes. He noticed insects first, clicking and chirping. He could make out the distinct sound of crickets, followed by another unique noise he couldn’t identify. Another insect, perhaps.

“Got him!” A soldier’s yell got Teagan’s eyes open again. He saw the shape of someone caught between two soldiers attempting to wrestle them to the ground.

Baako moved quickly to assist. The mysterious escape artist disappeared again before he reached his struggling comrades.

Baako laughed out loud, throwing his gun to the ground. Then he started clapping.

“Splendid showing again tonight my friend!” Baako looked back to the remaining members of his squad. “You have bested us once more!”

Teagan was confused and curious. What sort of training exercise was this?

“I serve at your pleasure Commander.” A muted reply from behind him startled Teagan. He twitched in response.

“Ha!” Baako clapped once more. “You have spooked our cadet as well.”

Teagan turned to see a man dressed in plain-looking clothes standing less than five feet away from him.

“Boy, meet Cormac.” Baako held one hand out to the stranger. “Cormac, our young cadet is called Teagan.”

Cormac bowed his head to Teagan. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance Mr. Teagan.”

Teagan realized his mouth was hanging open. He closed it, clearing his brain enough to say something intelligible. “And yours, Cormac.”

“Cormac is The Undead.” Baako’s face took on a sinister expression. “The only one to ever die and come back to life amongst us.”

“Come back to life?” Teagan asked, unsure if he could speak up again.

“The serum. You felt it. It almost took you too.” Baako answered. “It did take Cormac. But he came back to us.”

Teagan thought he understood “The Undead” better now.

“You are a foolish brave one to follow this madman into the forest at night.” Cormac studied Teagan, giving him a thorough visual inspection. “American Cowboy, is that it?”

Teagan felt vulnerable and intimidated by this specimen of a man who could move on the ground and through the trees unheard. He didn’t know how to respond.

Cormac approached Teagan, placing one hand on his shoulder. Teagan could feel the fierce energy of this man in that simple touch. “I will call you Cowboy. Foolish and brave. Maybe you catch me one day.”

Cormac removed his hand from Teagan’s shoulder. Being touched by Cormac, Teagan somehow knew him to differ from everyone else. He embodied a supremacy beyond all others at this place, this training facility of sorts.

“Patience Cormac. The boy will not be taking command today.” Baako counted his team, seeing that everyone was back and on their feet.

Cormac nodded to Baako’s team. “Come see me again when you feel lonely.”

Teagan watched some of Baako’s team shake their heads, grinning. Others frowned, frustrated at being bested again.

Baako offered Cormac a last nod, leading the way back to camp.

Walking behind Baako, uncertain of his status with these veterans, Teagan contemplated his future and subsequent encounter with Cormac.

Chapter 60

“I know you’re a killer.” Chloe said the words so matter-of-factly. Genevieve didn’t know how to react at first.

“I saw it in your eyes at the river. You kill without remorse. You are thinking about killing me.” Chloe kept her eyes on Genevieve for several seconds, turning away to watch people walking around their vehicles in the distance.

“You want something from me.” Genevieve said it not as a question, figuring she could be direct with Chloe and still not admit to anything.

“I want to go with you. Wherever you are going.” Chloe kept her eyes on the people she had been watching. “You know how to survive. I can be an asset to you.”

“I don’t know who you think I am…” Genevieve began, but Chloe cut her off.

“It doesn’t matter. I know enough. You are a cold-blooded survivor. So am I. We’ll be stronger together.”

Genevieve ran through options in her head. She could still kill Chloe. Just agree to bring her along and eliminate her before arriving at The Mountain. It would be easier to do away from all these well-intentioned civilians.

But Genevieve also played through another possibility. She didn’t want to be solitary indefinitely. The Mountain might get lonely.

Perhaps she could put Chloe on probation.

“Talk to no one about what we have discussed here.” Genevieve would give Chloe a chance to prove herself. “We’ll be moving on in a few days. I intend to split off soon afterward, maybe a day or two.”

“You got it. Understood.” Chloe faced Genevieve, grinning slyly. “Giving me a trial run.”

“Just do what I say, we won’t have any problems.” Genevieve turned away from Chloe, moving around her car to the driver’s side. “I’m going to wash off. You can join me if you like.”

It was almost the evening of their first day back on the road when Genevieve and Chloe broke off from the caravan.

“Good people. They’ll probably get picked off one-by-one eventually.” Chloe offered as she and Genevieve finished siphoning gas from Chloe’s car into Genevieve’s Camry.

“No doubt.” Genevieve rubbed her hands in the grass along the highway to remove residual gasoline. Chloe did the same.

“You gave me a gun.” Chloe’s eyes darted toward the passenger side of Genevieve’s vehicle. “Guess you don’t intend to kill me today.”

Genevieve ignored Chloe’s remark. “You didn’t ask me to explain what happened that night with the thing that attacked me.”

“I figure you’ll tell me if you feel like it.” Chloe didn’t seem too curious. Genevieve was almost willing to accept that, but not quite.

“I’ll tell you now if you want to know.” Genevieve leaned against the side of her car, facing the setting sun.

“You can say what you think is necessary for me to hear. I’m not interested in judging either way.” Chloe stood facing Genevieve, away from the sun.

“I was attacked by one of them months ago.” Genevieve had already rehearsed this explanation a few times. “I woke up with a new hunger. That’s how I satisfy it.”

“You know how they track us.” Chloe had noticed, but Genevieve didn’t know how or when she did.

“The uninfected give off light only the infected can see. It doesn’t matter if you are behind something. Infected can still see your light.” Genevieve figured this was the most straightforward explanation she could give.

“Or if its dark apparently.” Chloe added.

“Correct.” Genevieve realized Chloe must have watched the one tracking her before it attacked. This gave her a new insight she hadn’t considered before.

“You watched it stalking me. You wanted to see it attack me.” Genevieve wasn’t angry. She felt no betrayal. Her relationship with Chloe changed after that event.

“At first, yes.” Chloe admitted. “It was fascinating.”

“Something changed.” Genevieve watched as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

“I was going to kill you both.” Chloe sighed. “Then I changed my mind about you, but the thing attacked me anyway before I would have been able to stab you as well.”

“You’ve stabbed someone to death before then.” Genevieve understood. Chloe was like her.

“A few people actually.” Chloe had no emotion in her voice. “My last serious boyfriend. Just to watch him die. Then a couple people I met on the road.”

“But you won’t kill me.” Genevieve felt a certainty about it.

“No. We understand each other. Both of us have needs. We can support each other’s hunger for things normal people would not accept.” Chloe moved closer, putting her hands around Genevieve’s waist. “I also enjoy seeing you naked.”

Genevieve smiled, pulling Chloe in tight. “And I you.”

At that moment, Genevieve knew Chloe would accompany her to The Mountain.

They understood each other. Together was better than alone.

Chapter 61

Cowboy made two full sweeps around Gloria’s cabin but couldn’t see any movement up top. The hum outside grew in intensity. Something was getting these headsuckers motivated.

“Are you all in?” Cowboy held the walkie close to his mouth, continuing to scan the trees and ground most proximate to the cabin.

“Yeah. I’m waiting for something to bang into the door up here.” Gloria didn’t sound nervous. Cowboy’s respect for her grew at that moment. She didn’t rattle. He liked that.

“Keep me posted. I’m putting together a plan.” Cowboy placed the walkie in his belt without looking down.

He needed to lead these things away from the area. The only way to do that effectively involved using live bait. Who was going to volunteer for that assignment? Somebody would need to, or these headsuckers wouldn’t be leaving.

“I’m coming inside. Have someone open the door when I knock.” Cowboy was already moving toward the front door before Gloria replied.

“I’ll meet you there.” Gloria’s voice came through a few seconds later.

Cowboy stood with his back to the door after knocking. He didn’t want the smart ones sneaking in behind him. He was pretty sure he affected them, similar to the dumber ones but hadn’t tested that theory yet.

“I’m here.” Gloria stood behind the slightly cracked open door. “Come on in.”

Cowboy walked into the house, still facing away from the door, shutting it quickly as he entered.

“I’m gonna need volunteers.” Cowboy didn’t see any benefit to beating around the bush about it.

“Volunteers for what?” Gloria knew she sounded skeptical but tried to keep it out of her voice as much as possible.

“We need to lead them away, but I need live bait to do it. They won’t follow me.” Cowboy explained.

“Yeah, you’re sour milk for these things.” Gloria thought she sounded less skeptical this time. “Whoever goes with you will have to stay close.”

Cowboy noticed Mia sitting in a chair, reading a book, while everyone else stood, looking anxious.

Gloria looked over at Mia as well. “Nerves of steel. She came by’em honest.”

Cowboy nodded, taking her meaning by what he knew of Gloria’s past.

“She’ll need them to survive in this.” Cowboy looked around at the other people in the room. “Some of these people won’t.”

Cowboy didn’t lower his voice. A few people closest to him gasped, shocked by his blunt statement.

Gloria ignored them, irritated by Cowboy’s dismissal of her refugees. She kept it to herself.

Turning to address the room, Gloria took a deep breath. “We’re gonna need a few volunteers to go with Cowboy outside. You’ll lead the herd away with him.”

No one stepped forward. Gloria half expected that no one would. Then Lenard strode into view.

“I’ll do it.” He looked to Gloria, then at Cowboy. “If it’ll keep us all safe. I’ll do it.”

“Me too.” Desiree came forward next, followed by three others who remained silent.

Gloria could tell none of them were enthusiastic about this option. Still, they would do it for the benefit of the group.

“Will five be enough?” Gloria didn’t look at Cowboy, eager he would say yes.

“It’ll have to do.” Cowboy scrutinized the volunteers, trying to decide their resolve under pressure.

“You all gotta hold it together out there. It won’t be easy.” Gloria didn’t really know how to give a pep talk. “You understand?”

The five volunteers nodded together. Only Lenard didn’t look nervous.

*Fantastic. Most look scared shitless*. Gloria said nothing as she stepped aside for Cowboy to address her bravest refugees.

“Tell us your plan.” Gloria signaled for Cowboy to speak.

“We’ll go out. Stay as close to me as you can. They won’t come any closer than about twenty feet to me.” Cowboy addressed the five volunteers specifically but spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“Why won’t they attack you?” Like everyone else in the room aside from Gloria, Desiree seemed curious.

Lenard simply looked at the floor, smirking faintly, as if some secret theory found validation. Gloria made a mental note to ask him about it later. That is if he survived this second outing with Cowboy.

“I don’t know.” Cowboy didn’t know what made him special, so he wasn’t lying. “They just don’t.”

“Fucking crazy.” Someone else in the room, someone who hadn’t volunteered, spoke up. Skeptical of Cowboy. Perhaps scared of him as well.

“Listen.” Gloria broke into the discussion, not wanting to get sidetracked. “This is our best chance to get rid of these things. That’s it.”

“Yeah, okay.” Lenard offered. “Let’s get to it then.”

“I’ll lead you over to my truck. You all climb in the bed and I’ll drive us out slow. They’ll follow us.” Cowboy laid out the rest of his plan.

“That’s it?” Desiree expected something more complex.

“We’ll drive for several hours. Get’em well away, then circle back from another direction.” Cowboy added, wanting everyone to understand they might be gone for a while.

“Any more questions?” Gloria looked around at the windows, expecting the smart ones to resume their attack at any moment.

“What about the ones that attacked us on the deck?” A man asked. Cowboy didn’t know his name.

“There’s a chance they’ll follow us out.” Cowboy watched Gloria scan the windows around the cabin, seeing she shared the same concern. “It might be better if we had a few more volunteers, but that’s up to you all here.”

“I’ll go too.” Mia stood up, put her book in the chair, and walked to stand next to Cowboy.

“Fuck it. So will I.” Another woman, Cassie, Cowboy thought her name was, also moved forward. Another man across the room raised his hand, walking toward the five volunteers.

“Great. That’s eight altogether.” Cowboy did his best to sound positive, but he didn’t really feel one way or another about the whole thing.

Gloria did not try to talk Mia out of volunteering. She knew Mia was tough. But she also thought Mia would be less likely to get attacked with Cowboy. It was the safer choice. Gloria would have gone as well, but she was the steadiest gun this group had with Cowboy away.

“Get ready. Arm up. Stay close.” Cowboy walked over to the door, waiting for his eight volunteers to fall in line behind him. “It’s loud out there. Don’t let it get to you.”

Cowboy opened the door cautiously. The headsuckers had moved closer. They began backing away again as he stepped onto the porch. Gloria waited at the entrance to shut it as soon as everyone was out.

“The one closest to me keep your hand on my shoulder. Everyone else do the same to the person in front of you.” Cowboy raised his voice to be heard over the incessant hum.

Cowboy made his way over to the truck with the group of connected volunteers.

He could see the headsuckers following along with them. The plan was working.

As Cowboy was almost to the truck, something odd caught his attention. One headsucker stepped out from the group. This one did not quiver strangely like the rest. It stood upright like an average person, just staring at him.

As Cowboy watched, the odd headsucker looked from him to the cabin as if trying to figure out his strategy.

Pulling out his gun, Cowboy tried to do so nonchalantly. He wanted to get this obviously intelligent headsucker out of the picture.

Before he could bring it up to aim, the thing disappeared back into the throng of circling headsuckers. It knew his intentions. Damn things were quick.

Cowboy exhaled slowly, keeping his gun trained on the herd just in case he caught sight of it again. The smart one had gone from view.

“Get in.” Cowboy waited by the side of the truck as his volunteers climbed into it.

He watched the circling horde as he inched toward the driver’s door.

“I saw a smart one out here. Got away before I could shoot it.”

“Copy.” Gloria answered.

Cowboy got into his truck, started it up, and drove ahead gently. The herd moved out of the way as he expected, keeping the usual distance until he was out of the circle entirely. Progress was slow as Cowboy kept his truck just above an idle at five miles per hour. He increased speed slightly to get the herd moving at a faster pace.

A few minutes into the drive, Cowboy again saw the smart headsucker standing off the road ahead. It kept close to the trees, apparently not wanting to give Cowboy an easy shot.

“Smart headsucker is ahead of me on the road. It took the bait and is staying with us. Don’t know about any others.” Holding his walkie, Cowboy waited for Gloria to reply.

“Gotcha.” Gloria sounded distracted. “We got a few that hung around still lingering outside the cabin.”

Cowboy knew Gloria could handle a few headsuckers if none of the smart ones had hung back.

“Keep me updated. Should have range on the walkies for at least twenty miles, maybe more.” Cowboy sat the walkie in the seat next to him, keeping his truck between five and ten miles an hour.

The smart headsucker retreated into the woods and out of sight as Cowboy approached its position. No one in the truck could get a clear shot.

Cowboy heard the steady hum of the headsuckers behind him. Checking, he could see too many to count following his truck. If these things were getting hungry, like he suspected, keeping them on his tail would be easy.

He wasn’t sure where he was going to ditch this massive herd. He considered driving all the way back to Ponderay. Such a large herd might keep outlaws at bay, but that wasn’t guaranteed. Ponderay did, however, offer easy options for doubling back to the cabin later.

If these headsuckers were as hungry as Cowboy suspected, they would follow him to Mexico if they didn’t starve first.

Chapter 62

“Burnin’em is the best we can do.” Mitch limped over to Dionne, injured from assaulting the gas station. “Herd’ll be here any time. We gotta move out.”

Dionne just nodded. Visibly shaken by the fatalities of her people and nursing a gunshot to the shoulder, her general enthusiasm for life diminished this afternoon.

Luke, Gavin, and Minjun also stood by as a few people poured gasoline over the dead and set them on fire. The smell of burning flesh filled the air. Several spectators moved away from the heap of smoldering corpses.

“You do dangerous thing today. Thank you.” Minjun did not sound angry or disappointed. Luke knew he had broken his promise to his father soon after making it. His father seemed to accept that someone needed to do the tough jobs. He was doing his best to cope.

“Scramblers comin over the hill!” someone yelled out from the road. “We gotta make tracks!”

“Our tour of bandit land. Great.” Gavin, as usual, did not hide his sarcasm. Luke found it oddly comforting. It was like having a sense of humor.

“Using the scramblers as partial cover should lessen our chances of encountering any serious resistance from desperados.” Luke slapped Gavin on the shoulder, grinning. “Let’s get going.”

Luke, Minjun, and everyone else piled into their vehicles, and the convoy started moving within minutes. Luke could see the wall of scramblers fast approaching.

“We need to keep them in sight of us at all times, but not too close.” Mitch had addressed the entire group, including Dionne’s people. He was fast becoming a person people relied on for guidance and inspiration. “I know you’ll feel the need to get as far away from them things as fast as you can, but don’t. Criminals are lurking beyond. Keep your eyes and ears open for anything.”

“Damn. Already?” Mitch frowned at the roadblock ahead. These bandits had set up their checkpoint around a turn on the freeway. From their vantage point, this group of outlaws would not see the herd till it came around the corner behind the large grouping of vehicles.

“Just stick to the plan.” Teena reminded him. “They’ll get nervous when that huge clusterfuck shows up behind us.”

“Me too.” Mitch shook his head. “I tried to sound convincing to everyone, but that many of’em makes me nervous.”

Mitch’s truck took the lead, followed by Dionne. Luke and Minjun were three cars behind Dionne. Gavin was just behind Luke. Mitch slowed his vehicle to a crawl, trying to keep the line moving. He knew the cars in the back would get skittish when all those scramblers appeared just behind them.

Mitch looked ahead with his binoculars. Two of the bandit gang had taken up firing positions with what looked like large caliber hunting rifles in the beds of two four-by-fours. Mitch realized he may already be in range of their rifles but couldn’t resist the urge to keep driving.

“We really need some walkies.” Mitch echoed something Luke had mentioned days before.

“Add it to our list of necessities.” Teena’s mocking tone usually got a smile from Mitch, but his nerves were too frayed. He gritted his teeth, avoiding a snide comment in return.

“Here they come.” Teena continued looking in the rearview mirror as the first scramblers appeared. It didn’t take long for more to appear as well.

Mitch waited for the sign he wanted to see ahead. It only took a few seconds before the rifles pointed at him shifted their aim. “The banditos seem’em too. Now we just need them to beat it.”

“What the hell is that?” Teena pointed toward the outlaws. A second later, Mitch noticed the two rifle-toting highwaymen suddenly adjusting position. They looked startled.

Mitch scanned with his binoculars, seeing what had gotten their attention. A scrambler had snuck up on them from the side. It had already taken a person down. He heard a couple of shots ring out in the distance, but the scrambler wasn’t slowing down.

“Fuck, another one!” Teena yelled this time, startling Mitch. He lowered his binoculars to get a broader view of the scene.

“Where?” Mitch couldn’t see anything, but the man holding a hunting rifle in the back of one large truck was gone. A few people were running over to the other side of that truck, out of view.

“I saw it jump in that truck and just pull the guy out. He disappeared along with it.” Teena sounded impressed and nervous at the same time. “I’ve heard about the thinking ones, but never seen any.”

“Me either. Maybe that’s two of them.” Mitch watched as the people who had run towards the large truck began shooting somewhere out of sight.

“They’re pointing at the herd behind us.” Teena directed Mitch’s attention again to the middle of the blockade ahead. “Looks like they’re gonna pull up stakes.”

As Teena predicted, Mitch watched as some outlaws seemed to yell in all directions around them. People began piling into the different vehicles forming the roadblock.

The blockade dispersed quickly as the outlaws made their getaway, heading away from Mitch and the herd behind him.

“Fuck!” Mitch checked his rearview. “Herd’s almost on our last car.”

Mitch waited a few more seconds, then began picking up speed. The herd was too close for comfort, but he didn’t want to tailgate the bandits either.

As they drove by where the blockade had been, Mitch and Teena could see two bodies lying on opposite sides of the two-lane freeway. There was no sign of the scramblers.

“Looks like the brainiacs got away.” Teena turned around in her seat to look along the side of the freeway. This section was closed in by concrete walls on both sides, obstructing the thick undergrowth beyond.

“Fantastic.” Mitch looked around as well. “Another bunch of shit to watch out for.”

“Take a few deep breaths baby.” Teena put a hand on Mitch. He forced himself not to recoil from her. “Bring yourself down a little.”

Mitch knew Teena’s advice was sound, but he found it difficult to accept. He gave himself another second or two to indulge the frustration within. He sucked in a deep air volume through his nose. Mitch tried to repeat the process slower the second and third times.

“There. A little better?” Teena gently brushed her hand along Mitch’s arm, trying to encourage his slow breathing.

“Yeah. Damnit.” Mitch could feel his lips forming a grin. He tried to resist it. “Sometimes, my body just wants to feel frustrated.”

“I know sweetie. That’s why I’m here. Keep you from blowin a gasket.” Teena squeezed Mitch’s arm, then pulled her hand away.

“Whatever.” Mitch chuckled, despite himself. “Thank you.”

Teena resumed scanning the side of the road again. Witnessing the surgical attack on those unfortunate outlaws just a few minutes prior had her spooked too. Mitch was feeling better, but it occurred to him the anxiety had just transferred to his wife.

“Did you put walkies on the list?” Mitch tried joking with his wife to distract her.

“Huh?” Teena turned to him, confused. “Oh. Yeah. Of course.” She smiled, but it wasn’t genuine, Mitch knew. She felt scared. He found it best not to give his wife the same advice she had just given him from being married to her for several years. Women were odd that way. Could dish it out, but they couldn’t take it.

“The roadblock gang is gone outta sight.” Mitch tried changing the subject again.

“For now.” Teena agreed, still casting glances to the side of the freeway, trying not to be obvious about it.

“I’m wagering the brainiac attack spooked’em enough to lose interest in us.” Mitch felt confident about it. That’s how he would feel if their group had just come under attack by thinking scramblers.

Teena said nothing, trying to keep her eyes on the road ahead.

“I’m gonna give them a bit longer to get farther ahead of us. Then I want to put a little more distance between our group and that herd.” Mitch knew it was all guesswork about how far ahead the outlaws would go before stopping. “They know about the throng of scramblers, and they’ll be worried. Probably more than us for a while yet.”

“You’re probably right.” Teena agreed. “This is just a really shitty situation to be in. We got threats on all sides of us and no real plan for what to do next.”

“Let’s put our heads together and figure it out, just like we always do.” Mitch couldn’t let Teena start a pity party just yet. “I need you here with me, in your head and your body.”

Teena nodded abruptly. “You’re not lettin me have any time for it are ya?” This time Teena grinned despite herself. “I guess it’s fair play. I did the same to you.”

Mitch prodded Teena a little further.

“So let’s get to it. What are our options? Nothing is too crazy until it is.”

Chapter 63

"Excuse me." Marik waited for a second, then brushed past Carly in a huff, heading over to grab his food tray.

Carly couldn't believe what she was seeing. A woman, the woman she had met in the restaurant a lifetime ago. The woman who had stepped aside so a man could shoot her was sitting in Carly's usual spot where she ate.

Marik didn't take note of the woman until he gathered his tray and turned to sit in his usual spot.

Then, he froze as well. Marik couldn't quite register what he saw either. This was his former master, to whom he had vowed undying loyalty many years ago.

"Yǔ xī." Marik's voice was barely audible. "Is it you?"

"Yes Marik. I am here. I am called Justine now. You must use that name." Justine's voice was barren of any emotion or inflection, just as Carly remembered her.

Justine then turned to Carly. "Ms. Hennington, I was told you were here. I thought it must be a mistake."

"Not a mistake. Your assassin didn't succeed." Carly heard her own voice but still felt numb at seeing this woman.

"No, apparently not." Justine examined her food tray, selected a piece of bread, and began eating without another word.

Carly forced herself to walk forward. She collected her tray and sat at the table farthest from Justine's seat.

Marik moved cautiously, sitting in his usual spot across from Justine.

"How did they get you?" Marik didn't know where he stood with Justine. The world had changed. He wasn't the same. Sebridge could have that kind of effect on people.

"Easily." Justine set the uneaten portion of bread on her tray. "Snuck in at night. Took out my security without much difficulty and broke into the home I thought was well protected and away from everything."

Marik looked at his food, picked up his plastic fork, and began eating the main course of chicken alfredo.

"You were a sitting member of The Group." Carly felt a mixture of anger and betrayal growing within. "I didn't realize until now."

"And you failed at your duties. You should be dead." Justine's voice was still calm.

"Well I'm not. What happened at the facility wasn't my fault. You know that." Carly began eating as well, pushing her anger away. There was no benefit to it.

"It happened while you were in charge. That makes it your fault." Justine picked up her bread and took a bite.

"No Justine. It doesn't." Carly stopped chewing long enough to reply.

Just then, Ramirez entered the cafeteria. He stopped, noticing Carly sitting in a different place. Then a new occupant in their midst.

"Uh, Hello." Ramirez was his usual awkwardly cheerful self. "I'm Ramirez." Ramirez grabbed his tray and headed to the table between Carly and Marik.

"This is the nutty man." Marik tilted his head toward Justine. "You'll see. He's nutty."

Ramirez appeared to ignore Marik. "What's your name?"

"Justine. You shouldn't be this happy."

Ramirez frowned, directing his attention to eating without saying anything further.

Sebridge continued watching the cafeteria monitor for another minute. "Yes, fantastic. There is tension. As I expected. I can use that."

"What about our other guest?" A woman next to Sebridge waited impatiently as he smiled at the screen.

"We'll bring her in to the mix eventually." Sebridge shot a glance at the woman. "She's a little stronger willed than the others. I need a few more sessions with her."

"Very well." The woman turned away from Sebridge. "You know where to find me if you need anything else."

Sebridge was left alone.

He contemplated giving one of the three individuals sitting in the cafeteria to Ramirez as a snack while the other two watched. Then he would send them all to eat together like nothing happened. See what new dynamic might result.

He pushed the idea aside, at least for the time being. He still needed some of them to work on the artifact. He hadn’t determined who would prove most helpful, but he would find out soon enough.

Things on the outside were getting chaotic. It was likely this remote location wouldn't be safe long-term. The artifact seemed to attract the infected. They were getting better at testing the compound's defenses.

The advanced ones were of particular concern. In a coordinated effort, they had already breached the main fence on one occasion. It was only a matter of time.

This place would succumb to the infected.

Chapter 64

Arlene yanked her knife out of one scrambler's head as another drew near. Roger grinded his teeth, unable to assist as she turned to face it, crouching in anticipation. He saw her waging a losing battle. Arlene backed into a corner. They would overwhelm her soon.

Jesse's body shuddered with one infected feeding on him a few feet away from Arlene.

Roger backstepped as a scrambler crawled over the wall separating him from Arlene. Another crawled over after it. He had to run, or he would die. His gun was empty, and he had no other weapons. He saw nothing to grab nearby for protection.

"Hang on!" Roger called out. "I'll come back for you!"

The first scrambler over dropped to the ground, getting to its feet as Roger turned to run in the opposite direction as fast as he could.

Arlene didn't have much time. Neither did Roger.

A surprise attack by scramblers caught everyone off guard. That wasn't the worst of it. Outlaws had brought them to the area, picking off the prison's occupants as they tried to flee.

The military couldn't hold off the vast numbers of infected as they smashed into the outer fence, collapsing it and moving inside the prison. This penitentiary was not maximum security by any means. Surrounded only by metal wire fences with minimal barbwire atop them and a couple medium-sized walls, it wasn't meant to house the most dangerous criminals.

Roger ran around the corner of the main building and into another group of scramblers. One of them lunged for him. He ducked, kicking it in the side as he turned away from the building. A bullet ricocheted off the ground near his feet.

Roger swerved as he ran, trying to get away from the infected and avoid being shot by the outlaws beyond.

Another bullet bounced off the ground, missing Roger by inches. These outlaws were toying with him. The scramblers kept coming, limiting his options.

He dove between two personnel carriers parked to the side of the front entrance, inside the main gate. The outlaws couldn't shoot him from there, but the scramblers could still get to him.

Roger rolled under one of the vehicles. He felt himself bump into something. Correction, someone.

A soldier hid under the vehicle as well. A scared young man stared at Roger, still holding his gun.

Roger looked at the young soldier for a second. Then, without saying anything, he grabbed the soldier's gun. The young soldier did not resist, allowing Roger to take the gun.

They lay together without moving or speaking under the large vehicle as three scramblers rushed up to the transport truck. Roger could see their feet turning around in place, searching. Roger brought the gun into position, ready to shoot as soon as they moved between the two massive trucks.

Their feet turned away from the truck, heading toward the gate entrance. This was Roger's chance to make a break for it. Try to get back to Arlene.

"You can come with me or stay here. I'm leaving." Roger didn't look at the soldier as he glanced around before rolling over to the other truck.

"I'm not moving." The young man's voice faltered, not quite making it to the end.

He rolled over to the next truck and gave the soldier one last look. It might already be too late for Arlene.

Roger scanned along the front of the building, at least as much of it as he could see. There was a constant echoing of screaming and gunfire from what seemed like every direction.

Streetlights illuminated the prison’s front, running along both sides of the wide drive leading to the primary drop-off point next to the main building.

Choosing the path offering the most negligible visibility to anyone outside the front gate, Roger scooted out from the truck, rushing to his feet. He tried to keep the vehicles between himself and whoever picked people off from outside.

It occurred to Roger he might blend in better by mimicking a scrambler. The shooters couldn't tell the difference in the dark. They didn't take down any infected herded toward the prison.

Resisting his every instinct, Roger set the gun over his shoulder using the connected strap. He couldn't go any further without exposing himself. Getting to Arlene would require running across the front of the building again. That would make him an easy target.

Cursing to himself, he tried emulating the movements of a scrambler out in the open. A couple of shots rang out as he made his way to the corner of the prison's front side. At least he would be safe from the shooters if he could only make it there. Someone else had grabbed the sadistic outlaws' attention. Roger didn't hear any bullets hitting nearby.

Roger made it around the corner. He could see civilians running across the field far to his left. Seconds later, Roger spotted the scramblers pursuing them. They didn't seem to notice Roger, so he kept moving, no longer mimicking the infected.

Upon reaching where he had last seen Arlene, Roger found no sign of her. He didn't see her body anywhere. That meant she must have gotten away. Several dead scramblers lay on the ground where Arlene had been. And Jesse, his body unmoving.

Roger could do nothing for Jesse or Arlene wherever she had gone. Maybe she was safe.

Trying to get out of the front was a death sentence. That left only the back entrance of the prison as a route of escape.

He ran again, calculating his shortest route away from the prison.

Two scramblers appeared out of nowhere as Roger was halfway to his goal. The first jumped in front of him. Roger got his gun between it and himself long enough to twist his body around and shove it to the ground.

The remaining scrambler had followed him around in a circle as he struggled with the first. Roger checked the safety of his gun with one finger, then pulled the trigger. He ran as the scrambler fell.

Almost there.

Two cars sped along the road, entering the rear parking lot as Roger was almost to it. He stopped, dropping into a low crouch as the vehicles came to a stop.

Five people darted out of the vehicle as Roger hid. They were armed, and he didn't recognize them. That didn't mean they were outlaws, but Roger wasn't taking any chances.

The group of five ran along the parking lot, disappearing behind a smaller building.

Roger looked back to the vehicles they had just exited. One of the driver's doors had been left open. He looked around again, seeing no movement.

Getting to his feet, Roger made a b-line for the car's open door. Jumping into the driver's seat, he pulled the door shut hard. The keys were still in the ignition, and the engine started on the first try. Roger put the car in gear, flooring the gas pedal as he yanked on the steering wheel to head out in the same direction the vehicles had come.

Time to leave this place behind. Roger thought of trying to find Arlene but decided against it, unwilling to die trying to find a needle in a haystack. She could be anywhere or dead, simple as that.

Once again, Roger found himself alone and on the run.

Chapter 65

“Father! Run!” It was all Luke could say. They struck without warning. Scramblers bolted for the caravan as it encountered the same group of bandits a second time.

“They’re using them against us!” Gavin shouted to people in the vehicles behind him. “Get out!”

Luke was confident Minjun had been close behind him as he and Gavin pleaded with everyone to abandon their vehicles and flee for cover in the forest.

The outlaws had begun firing into the caravan. Luke saw a few people fall, some only appeared wounded, but it may as well have been a kill shot. The scramblers would get them without difficulty.

Luke turned to check on his father once, but Minjun was nowhere in sight.

Luke froze. “Father?!”

Gavin almost ran into Luke from behind. “We gotta go!”

“I can’t! Luke tried to dart around Gavin, but Gavin put out an arm to stop him.

“You’ll get shot or overwhelmed. He probably ran the other way.” Gavin turned to look behind them. The scramblers were moving through the caravan, tackling those who hesitated a few seconds too long.

A bullet whizzed past Luke’s head. Gavin yanked Luke to the ground. “Come on!” Gavin grabbed a fistful of Luke’s shirt. “There’s no time.”

Luke relented, chasing after Gavin into the emerald curtain of vegetation beyond the freeway. They could hear shouting and screaming as they ran.

Gavin sprinted between trees, Luke close behind. Their pace didn’t let up.

Ten minutes into their mad dash, Gavin slowed, coming to a stop. He rested his hands on his thighs, catching his breath.

“I have to go back. I can’t leave him there.” Luke choked as he fought for a gasp between words. “I can’t.”

“Listen to me.” Gavin tried to suck in air long enough to speak. “It’s too dangerous. You know that. He wouldn’t forgive you for getting killed trying to find him.”

Luke knew Gavin was right. It didn’t make it any easier.

“We have to be smart. Stay alive.” Gavin’s breathing slowed. “Think.”

“Those fucking bastards!” Luke glanced back in the direction they had been. “Using them against us. We should’ve seen that coming.”

Gavin cleared his throat, spitting on the ground. “Yeah. Maybe. Let’s just focus on what’s happening now.”

“We’re lost and alone.” Luke could feel helplessness getting the best of him. He knew it wasn’t productive but was too angry to resist it.

“We’re…” Gavin pointed to himself, then back to Luke. “…not alone.”

Luke sighed, still too angry to say anything.

“We might be a little lost, though.” Gavin took a brief look around them. All trees, leaves, and more of the same after that.

Luke’s only thoughts were of his father and getting outsmarted by these outlaws. He thought of just running back to the freeway without another word. It would be reckless, but he might find his father. Be able to help him.

It was an absurd thought. Luke recognized that. Still, it seemed so much like what he should do. The urge threatened to overwhelm him.

“Promise me we’ll go back and look for him.” Luke couldn’t believe what he heard himself say next. “I have to see if I can find his body at least.”

Gavin muttered, trying to sort his own thoughts. “No. I won’t do that.”

“No?” A look of profound confusion grew on Luke’s face. “How can you say no?”

“Listen.” Gavin pointed toward the freeway.

Luke realized he could still hear gunshots.

“I’ll say it one more time.” Gavin heard himself getting angrier. “It’s too dangerous. Going back probably means getting killed. I know your father. He couldn’t bear you getting killed trying to find him. Think about it.”

Luke shook his head in denial. He didn’t want to hear sound advice from Gavin or anybody.

“You go ahead. If you really think it’s worth it. I won’t stop you.” Gavin moved away from Luke, diverting his attention in the opposite direction as the freeway. “You gotta decide for yourself to live or die today.”

“We could wait for a while, then go back. We could be careful…” Luke’s tone was desperate, pleading.

“It’ll take that herd hours, probably, to pass by.” Gavin kept his back to Luke. “People from the caravan will likely be turned into scramblers. Maybe your father too.”

Luke lowered his head, body shaking from fury and grief. “I fucking hate this!” He was almost crying.

Gavin turned back toward Luke. “Me too.”

Gavin walked over to Luke, embracing him. “This really does suck.”

Luke allowed Gavin the hug, but he didn’t want to be comforted. It felt somehow like betraying his father. It didn’t make sense, but Luke couldn’t help it.

“Okay. Okay.” Luke found his voice again after some time had passed. “We’ll be smart. Stay alive.”

Gavin said nothing, stepping away from Luke. He looked around again.

“What should we do first?” Luke could feel his body relaxing, but his guilt remained.

“Maybe follow the freeway in the opposite direction we were driving. Stay in the woods, but close enough to have it as reference.” Gavin leaned over to pick up a small stick, twirling it in his hands.

“That’s probably smart. It’ll put us going away from where the herd is moving.” Luke rubbed his eyes. They felt dehydrated.

“Yeah, and the outlaws if they survived.” Gavin threw the stick at Luke playfully.

Luke jumped, feeling something hit his leg. “Hey.” Luke glanced at Gavin, frowning, then relaxed his expression. “Keep your stick to yourself.”

“I almost want to say that’s what she said.” Gavin smirked, then chuckled. “But that would be too corny,”

“Yeah, it would.” Luke couldn’t help grinning. It was so unfair of Gavin to make him smile when he still wanted to be angry.

“Let’s get moving.” Luke rubbed his hands together. “I have no idea what time it is, but it looks like we don’t have a ton of daylight left.”

“Me either.” Gavin replied. “I’m terrible with using the sun to tell time.”

“Or direction, probably.” Luke couldn’t help it. He wanted to get Gavin back for throwing the stick at him.

“Start walking smartass.” Gavin picked up another small stick, threatening to throw it at Luke again.

“Practice stick to self.” Luke started walking without looking at Gavin.

Luke felt much better, but he still thought of his father nonstop. He didn’t think he would ever get over not going back to check on him. He knew his father wouldn’t want him to risk his life doing so, but that didn’t make it any less difficult.

Minjun would want his son to survive. Find a way to keep going, no matter what.

Luke felt an overwhelming obligation to do so. It was the best way to honor his father.

That meant making tough choices. This was one of them. Probably the first of many.

Luke cleared his head, allowing thoughts of his father to recede into the background. He and Gavin needed to avoid getting lost and find a place to sleep for the night.

Under a tree might be their only choice.

Chapter 66

"It's going to get in." Neesha shrank back from the boarded window.

Gloria knew she only had seconds before the thing broke through.

"Shoot again the instant you hear it hit the plywood." Gloria held her gun up, ready to fire.

Gloria and her cabin guests had shot up the plywood by this point. They could all see through the bullet-riddled covering into the trees beyond. A few more shots, and it wouldn't be much of a barricade at all.

"I think there's only one of them out there." A man Gloria had met a few times, but didn't know well, crept forward, trying to get a better view through the bullet holes. "We can take it out."

Another slam. Gunshots rang out at once. This time the headsucker broke through, landing in front of the man moving closer to the window.

The man yelled as the headsucker grabbed him, throwing him into another person. Both people fell onto the floor in a heap.

A few more shots rang out as the headsucker darted behind a woman. One bullet hit her in the abdomen. She cried out as the headsucker dug its fingers into her skull, holding her up in front of it as it began feeding on her.

"Oh no!" The man who shot the woman in the abdomen cried out, pointing his gun at the woman and the headsucker, unsure what to do.

"Keep shooting!" Gloria took a shot without waiting. "She's already dead!"

Several people joined in. Two shots hit the woman in the head, and several more passed through her into the headsucker standing behind her.

In a whirl, the headsucker threw the woman's body toward two of the people shooting at it as it jumped onto another person holding a gun. The man dropped his weapon as he tried to put up his hands in defense.

The thinking mutant grabbed the man, but instead of feeding on him, it held him up as it ran into another person standing a few feet away.

Several people bolted upstairs in a panic. Gloria tried to get a lock on the headsucker, but there were too many people obstructing the target.

The headsucker turned toward Gloria, holding two people in front of it. It did not begin feeding on them. Instead, the headsucker clutched them above the floor. The man in its left hand started hyperventilating. The man in its right hand hung there, catatonic with fear.

Gloria lowered her aim, trying to get a view of the headsucker's feet. She could cripple it, then take it out as it attempted to flee.

It seemed to sense Gloria's intention. Not waiting for Gloria, the headsucker flung the two people it held at her.

Gloria dove out of the way, bumping into a wall with sudden force. She stumbled, trying to get her gun up again.

The intruder leaped for her before she could reorient, pushing her to the floor. Gloria managed to keep hold of her gun. She jammed it into the headsucker's chest and fired one shot after the other.

Holding one arm over her head, Gloria slowed the headsucker but it kept advancing. It grabbed some of her hair, yanking on it with enough force to rip off a tiny section of her scalp.

Gloria yelled out in pain. The headsucker held the torn piece of Gloria's scalp in its hand for a second, flinging it off to its right.

Gloria heard someone scream as the headsucker reached for her again. Her revolver was out of bullets. The headsucker had lost some of its strength. Only spatters of blood appeared where Gloria had shot it in the chest. It wobbled, however, weakened by her efforts.

There was another scream somewhere in the room. Gloria caught a blur of something forcing the headsucker off her and away.

She pushed herself back across the floor. It took Gloria several seconds to register what she was seeing.

There was a mountain lion in her cabin. She knew something was off when she saw it on top of the headsucker.

"It's infected too!" A woman yelled from behind Gloria.

"Don't shoot it!" Gloria heard her voice before she realized what she was saying. Then her mind caught up. "Let 'em fight! Everybody upstairs!"

Gloria didn't wait to see who was listening to her. She rolled onto her knees, straining to gain her footing.

She could see people running up the small staircase to the second floor.

"They locked us out!" A woman called out as soon as Gloria reached the stairs.

"Out of my way." Gloria pushed people aside, reaching for a small board in the wall at the bottom of the door leading into the second story of her cabin.

Ripping the board off the wall, Gloria pulled on a piece of twine hanging by a string on one nail. There was a key at the end.

Gloria stood, jabbing the key into the lock for the door. The locking mechanism disengaged, and she forced the door open with all her strength.

Gloria leaned on the door for support as people rushed in behind her. She shut the door again as soon as the last person entered.

Gloria sagged against the other side of the door, using it for support as she listened to the chaos on the other side.

The mountain lion bellowed out a gut-curdling snarl downstairs. Gloria realized she had been hearing this sound for several seconds but tuned it out in her mad attempt to get upstairs.

"Will it come up here?" Geno, one of the newest residents, spoke up from behind Gloria.

"I have no fucking clue. Shut up." Gloria didn't have the energy to yell. She tried to compensate by sounding mean instead.

The man said nothing else.

Bone-chilling animal sounds continued to emanate from downstairs. Gloria couldn't hear any other sounds.

Recalling her outing in the woods with Cowboy, Gloria was fascinated and terrified by the mountain lion.

Being an adept predator under normal circumstances, she couldn't imagine what heightened abilities it might have as one of the infected.

The cringe-worthy animal screams ceased. Silence followed.

Gloria held her breath but could hear nothing. The silence was deafening.

Hearing a creak in the floor, Gloria spun around, bringing her hands up in a defensive posture.

A woman had been tiptoeing over to Gloria. She stopped mid-step, a terrible fear showing on her face.

Gloria lowered one hand, using the other to let the woman know to remain still.

Several moments passed in silence, with everyone frozen in place, exchanging looks of panic and fear.

"I'm going to check it out." Gloria's voice cracked. Thick mucus hung at the back of her throat. She refrained from clearing her throat, not wanting to draw the attention of anything waiting on the other side of the door.

She turned the knob, cracking the door open a hair. The stairs were empty. Gloria couldn't see anything beyond.

Waiting a few more seconds, Gloria pulled the door open further. She paused again, ready to slam the door shut.

Nothing happened. Gloria took a step, hesitated, then stepped down the first row of stairs. Still nothing.

Stepping down another row of stairs, Gloria could see sections of the floor through the wooden railings lining the stairs.

Two bodies lay in a heap on one side. Two of her refugees.

Stepping down again, Gloria could see the bottom half of someone she didn't recognize. This was the headsucker.

It wasn't moving.

Gloria took two more steps. She was near the bottom of the stairway.

It was quiet. No sounds.

Gloria descended the stairs, coming to a stop on the bottom level.

There was a strange sound from beyond the window. A sound she didn't recognize.

Gloria glanced back at the stairs. Everyone remained upstairs, too frightened.

She glanced over at the broken plywood covering the shattered window behind it.

Stepping closer, Gloria could hear the sound with greater clarity.

Stepping to the side, she caught a glimpse of the mountain lion's back legs. The leg muscles flexed in a way that almost seemed rhythmic.

Gloria moved closer to the plywood. More of the mountain lion's body came into view. Gloria could also see part of a body underneath the wild cat.

Up against the plywood, Gloria strained to get a better view of the scene.

The mountain lion had attacked one of the scramblers outside. A dumb one.

Gloria couldn't see the body's upper half or the mountain lion's top half. She could only see the bottom half of the animal flexing and spasming.

*What the fuck is it doing?* Gloria realized she was rubbing her temples. She forced her hands to her side.

The animal’s hind legs ceased spasming. It backed away, coming into view.

Gloria froze as the cat looked straight at her. Its eyes were unlike any she had seen before. They sparkled. Gloria thought she noticed a purple glow as well.

Running its tongue across its lips one time, the mountain lion bolted from her sight into the trees. It was gone.

Gloria stepped away from the plywood. She bumped into a chair as she did so. Gloria looked at the chair, then to the bodies strewn about her cabin.

The scene was horrific. But Gloria had survived.

Feeling too tired to sit or move, Gloria thought about Cowboy and Mia.

Were they still alive?

Chapter 67

"Tobias Sanders! Hot damn!" The pudgy man waddled over to shake hands with his longtime professional acquaintance.

"Hello Samson." Tobias accepted the handshake, relieved to see Samson upright and copesetic.

"It's so good to see you, my friend." Samson let go of Tobias' hand, stepping back. "Where's your lovely wife?"

Tobias pursed his lips, looking away. "She umm. She didn't make it."

"Oh…no. That's terrible. Condolences. Truly." Samson shook his head. Tobias could see that Samson meant what he was saying.

"Thank you." Tobias adopted a faint smile. "I'm doing my best to go on without her."

"Glad to hear it." Samson formed a smile as well. "Looks like you fell in with some decent folks somewhere along the line."

"Fortunately, yes." Tobias gestured toward Gabby and Preston as they exited a garage-looking building near the entrance to Camp Eriez. "The couple you see over there were real lifesavers."

There was an area just left of the building for parking large vehicles. Gabby had parked her Silverado, with camper still attached, nearby in an overgrown grassy area.

"I'm so glad to hear it." Samson scratched the side of his head. "And I'm so glad you are here."

Tobias sensed Samson wanted to ask him something but was uncertain how to proceed.

"You troubled about something Samson?" Tobias did his best to sound comforting. He found himself getting into politician mode again. It felt refreshing, like tasting normal.

"I know you just got here Tobias…" Samson looked around, hesitating.

"Spill Samson." Tobias tried not to show his excitement at maybe being able to solve some sort of civil issue so soon after arriving.

"Okay. Well, here goes." Samson cleared his breath. "We got folks from all over in camp and all sorts of different ideas about how to do things."

"You're putting together some type of council?" Tobias had forgotten how indecisive Samson could be about things. He resumed his old habit of coaxing Samson to get through a conversation.

"Sort of. We're trying to. It seems we're stuck on how to do that too." Samson sighed again. "No one can agree on what rules we should use to put together a council."

"I can help with that." Eyes lighting up, a broad grin appeared on Tobias' face. "We can have a council appointed by the end of the day."

"What?!" The look of confusion on Samson's face was something Tobias had seen so many times before, back when Tobias had been a policy advisor to one of the senators from West Virginia.

"By the end of the day? How in the world are you going to do that?" Samson squished his face inward like he had just eaten a whole lemon.

"Just introduce me to the key players and I'll handle the rest." Tobias moved closer to Samson, putting his hand on Samson's shoulder. "You've seen me do it before, haven't you?"

Samson stared at Tobias for another couple of seconds, showing doubt, then relaxed his expression. "Yeah. I guess I have at that."

"Great." Tobias removed his hand from Samson's shoulder, rubbing his hands together briskly. "Let me work my magic. Let's do this."

Samson shook his head, looking at Tobias one last time, still not believing there was any way Tobias would succeed.

"Okay, but it's your funeral." Samson began walking toward the wide road, leading into the main campground and Lake Erie.

"No funerals today, Samson." Tobias felt a spring in his step for the first time in weeks.

Camp Eriez could be a haven of ordinary for Tobias. An oasis from the chaos beyond.

Tobias tried to force down anxiety about the outside world.

He had a chance to be helpful. Do something productive.

Tobias intended to enjoy every minute of it.

Book Four Preview

“We’ve been set up,” Baako whispered into his earpiece. “Clear out. Now.”

“Where’s Cormac?” Silas glanced behind Baako. “I didn’t see him get clear.”

“Unknown.” Baako waved his arm in a vast arc, motioning in the opposite direction. “Evac.”

Teagan heard the all-to-familiar whistle of incoming artillery. The ground to his left exploded, lifting him several feet into the air.

Landing with enough force to knock the air out of him, Teagan rolled onto his side, already working on relaxing his diaphragm and getting his breath back.

Before the dust cleared, Teagan heard a second whistle above, feeling the concussion of another explosion.

Teagan felt his body shift into another gear, eyes burning and ears ringing. It felt like something inside sprang to life.

Baako yelled for everyone to get up and move. Despite the colossal dust cloud all around him, Teagan’s vision cleared.

He could make out the shapes of two people standing about ten feet away. It was Silas and Jenna. Baako appeared a second later.

“Teagan.” Baako’s voice came through the smoke and dust, calm and clear. “Let’s go.”

To his feet, before Baako came into view, Teagan joined what remained of his squad as they sprinted out of the haze.

Safety of cover lay just ahead, a thick blanket of tropical greenery. It was so close yet seemed a lifetime away in the moment.

“They are like us. It’s another team.” Baako looked straight ahead, offering a bit of intel on their mysterious enemy. “They were sent to take us out.”

“That’s absurd. Why?” Jenna aired aloud Teagan’s thoughts. Silas’s as well.

“It’s happened before. I’ve never had proof before today.” Baako checked his gun mid-stride, wiping the nozzle with one hand.

There was no sound. The back of Silas’s head exploded, and he fell to the ground.

Jumping over his body without slowing, Teagan knew Silas was beyond help.

Baako entered the tall grass first, followed by Jenna and Teagan. Only three left. This Op started with nine soldiers.

They ran with haste, darting between the exotic plants and ancient trees of the dense rainforest. Their attackers would be in pursuit. If Baako was correct, they wouldn’t be far behind.

The ground sloped downward. At first, it wasn’t easy to tell as several large trees had fallen along their descent path. Baako jumped over the first, but the next proved too cumbersome. New growth had taken over the sides and top of the trunk.

Grabbing a thick branch, Baako hoisted himself up, reaching to assist Jenna and Teagan.

As Jenna reached for Baako, he went still, then jumped into the tall ferns and grass growing up against the trunk. Jenna and Teagan crouched beside Baako, waiting, listening.

Baako motioned in the direction they had come with one hand, indicating a noise.

At first, Teagan heard nothing. Seconds passed before Teagan heard it too. Footsteps. Light and quick. These were adept hunters. Teagan already knew they were dangerous. Hearing their gentle footfalls over uncertain terrain sent a tingle up his spine.

The footsteps became louder. Their foe had almost reached where the three were hiding. Baako remained still, eyes closed, gun aimed toward the sound of disturbed underbrush. Teagan and Jenna held their weapons up as well, eyes open.

The footsteps fell silent. Baako tapped his finger one time against the foregrip of his rifle. Teagan knew the signal well.

Adjusting the rifle to the left and upward, Baako squeezed the trigger. Jenna and Teagan held their fire a few seconds longer.

Two shots rang out several meters away, impacting the tree and shattering its bark just inches from Baako and Teagan’s heads.

Jenna and Teagan relied on their heightened senses, not as proficient as Baako’s, to figure out the shooter’s origin and squeezed their triggers. Baako joined them, firing again.

They heard nothing at first. Teagan briefly pondered how these mysterious attackers could quickly pinpoint their position in the woods. He forced the thought out of his mind, focusing again on the surrounding stillness.

Baako held two fingers out for Teagan and Jenna to see. That meant their shooting had neutralized two targets. They did not know the total number of soldiers pursuing them.

Teagan caught a brief glimpse of the explosion just before it again threw him upward and away from the tree’s trunk. The shock was more severe this time.

Coming to, he did not know how much time had passed, but Teagan heard footsteps approaching him.

Gritting his teeth, Teagan moved his hand toward the knife on his hip, unlatching the clip holding it. He gripped the knife tight in one hand, ready to roll over and lunge at his target in one smooth motion.

He forced his eyes open, despite the overwhelming pressure in his cranium. All he could see was tall grass and palm leaves next to his face.

Using his hands, Teagan pushed himself up and around, reaching a crouched position with his head below the surrounding vegetation. He did so as a man emerged from the wall of high grass, running straight into the blade of Teagan’s knife.

Teagan jabbed his knife deep into the man’s sternum, twisting it as he held his hand over the man’s mouth. Pulling out his blade as he brought the man to the ground, Teagan stood up again, listening.

He could hear nothing, as he expected.

Several minutes passed with only the sounds of the rainforest in his ears. Teagan was about to venture forward through the wall of grass when he heard a yelp from somewhere close by. Then he heard shooting, round after round. That meant panic.

Using the distraction, Teagan moved forward through the grass. Finding Jenna, or at least part of her, didn’t take more than a few steps.

The top half of Jenna lay at his feet, bloody flesh and body parts nearby. Jenna’s eyes were open. Teagan had seen many dead bodies. He didn’t stop for Jenna. Like Silas, she was beyond any aid.

Teagan heard someone else yelling out in surprise and pain, then more gunfire.

He kept moving.

His head started ringing again, causing Teagan to drop to his knees. Being thrown had affected him worse this time. He forced himself to his feet, gritting his teeth almost tight enough to shatter them in his skull.

Teagan took a few more steps. He could see Baako.

His commander was still breathing, but he wouldn’t be for much longer. Baako was missing an arm and half of his face. Teagan found him sitting in a different place against the same tree trunk.

A dead soldier lay on Baako’s lap. The soldier wore a uniform Teagan didn’t recognize. Baako had taken one of them out, despite his condition.

Baako noticed Teagan as soon as Teagan saw him.

“Run.”

Baako mouthed the word to Teagan. Gunfire continued around them in all directions.

*Cormac.* Teagan thought as he obeyed his commander’s last order and took off, running as fast as he could away from the surrounding commotion.

What was he going to do? Teagan had no idea.

If this was a setup, he couldn’t report back to HQ. That would be suicide.

The sound of gunfire receded, fading a few moments later.

Holding all questions at bay, Teagan moved through the jungle at lightning speed, not slowing for hours.

Leaving Baako behind had taken more effort than anything else Teagan had ever done, including the experiments and his training. But he followed his commander’s orders without hesitation. Baako’s training was absolute. No command ever disobeyed.

Teagan didn’t know how Baako commanded such loyalty with his unnervingly quiet personality. He just did.

Something must have given Baako a notion that his squad faced a threat from the inside. He had prepared every member of his team for this eventuality. No one questioned it, however much they may have found it dubious.

Baako’s soldiers knew how to adapt and survive if caught in a trap, then escape it.

Teagan would do just that. Disappear. Become a ghost.

Get a new name.