# Chapter 1

Luke walked slowly across the smoking embers to the corridor outside the room. His shoes crunched softly on the charred wood and ash.

This was the fourth house they had burned this week. It was too full of infected to search for supplies. But it still had to be cleared of infected. After weeks of doing the same thing repeatedly, it was becoming monotonous and numbing. Checking these homes for any sick person or animal who might still be dangerous was the only thing that kept him alert.

“Luke, you still in there? It was Janice calling out to him. Her voice was cracked and scratchy from weeks of clearing out houses.

Luke opened his mouth to answer when a shadow caught his attention.

It was quick.

The thing was on him, tearing and biting ferociously. He was wearing full protective gear its teeth and claws were unable to penetrate, but the force took him off his feet. He kept his arm between the mangy creatures' teeth and his face as he felt for his knife, holstered on his thigh.

The thing, apparently a dog of some unknown breed, pushed closer to his face with its mouth, saliva dripping and sparkling faintly as it did with all the infected.

The “saliva sparkle”, a name that stuck from early news reports of upheaval around the globe, meant the creature’s spindly tentacles were soon to follow.

Finally, getting his knife out he jammed it quickly into the poor creature’s head. It fell limp on top of him.

Luke gazed up at the black ceiling, noticing the insulation revealed by the hanging boards.

“Luke?” “What’s the hold up?” Janice scratched out another yell. “Nothing!” Luke yelled back. “Be out soon!”

Luke cleaned off his knife on the dead animal’s hide, reminding himself mentally to give it a real cleaning later.

He rolled on to his side and slowly got to his feet.

It was already dark by the time he made his way outside the house. The slight trinkle of rain that was coming down when he entered the house twenty-five minutes earlier had turned into a steady drizzle.

Janice was waiting about fifteen feet away from what used to be the front door.

“Takin a nap in there?” Janice asked in a slightly mocking way. “Something like that.” Luke replied in a dull tone.

“Well now that you’re rested up, we can check the last house on this block and head on back to Hampton Flats so the rest of us can get some rest as well.” Janice remarked. “Yeah, okay.” Luke said with a slight laugh.

Luke liked working with Janice. She was gruff and rough, but she also never lost her sense of humor. That was a precious commodity nowadays.

They cleared the last burned house without incident and set out for Hampton Flats in their Ford Econo Van.

Search and Clear work wasn’t for everybody. Typically, there would be some new recruits out on each shift. It was usually two or three days on and then two or three days off, depending on infected activity and the latest infection risk reports.

On the way back to the Flats Luke was vaguely aware of one of the veterans explaining the whole purpose of this work to one of the newbies. All new recruits went through an orientation, explaining the whole purpose behind “Search and Clear” work, but the veteran kind of enjoyed hearing his own voice and being an expert on something.

His name was Ray, but everyone called him Bingo for some reason that Luke had never really understood. He was sure that if he ever asked, Bingo would be glad to tell the long and embellished story to him, probably over five or thirty beers.

The recruit was Lanisha. She was somewhat trying to seem interested in what Bingo was saying, but it was obvious she was exhausted and spent for the day.

Bingo was going on, “And then we mark off the exact area to be SaC’d before we ever move into to get a real look. We don’t want anyone wandering outside the mapped zone. It’s too dangerous.”

Lanisha would nod at various times as Bingo was imparting his wisdom to her and anyone else trapped in the van with him.

Some were tired enough to just fall asleep and not be concerned at all with Bingo’s droning narrative.

“We always make a lotta noise first, wait for sixty or so and then head on in. About half the time the crazy ones will come meanderin out lookin for somethin to bore into or sometimes they come out a runnin.” Bingo was now talking with a certain pride, as though about to impart some rare nugget.

“That’s the best way to get’em, but don’t ever let yer guard down when yer about to go in one o’them houses. Use that whistle, make a noise with it. Let em know yer a comin. It’s better’n gettin jumped on after bein in there for a bit.”

*And always mind the glitter spit*. Luke thought, knowing what came next in this particular speech.

“Don’t let’em get close to yer head, ever! That glitter spit means snack time on yer noggin!”

Bingo kept going, but Luke fell into his own thoughts after that.

He remembered his first time out for an S&C shift. He was a little scared, but more nervous. He didn’t want to make any mistakes or get one of the other squad members injured, or worse.

Through trial and error and from making lots of mistakes the procedures for conducting a Search and Clear had continued to be refined and updated. Luke appreciated that. It was dangerous work inherently, but many avoidable dangers had been recognized and addressed. S&C procedures were updated periodically through experiences on the front line as well.

Luke was thinking of his father and his first partner, Gavin when they pulled up to the gate leading into Hampton Flats.

This was also a refined procedure.

The guard approached the driver’s side.

“Howdy all!” the guard spoke cheerfully, but also with a hint of caution.

“Roster says six in your party this fine evening. Please state your name and present condition clearly for the record.” The guard said.

“Hi Jon,” Janice, who was driving, greeted the guard. “Janice, no symptoms today.”

Jon thanked her and looked on to the next occupant. “Luke, need chamber time.” Luke stated flatly.

Jon replied, “No problem, we’ll get that order in pronto!”

Jon went through the rest of the roster. Everyone was accounted for tonight, with only Luke needing chamber time.

Janice drove the van through the gate and into the warehouse for cleaning. This was also procedure for all vehicles taken out of the gate, regardless of distance driven or purpose for leaving.

After pulling into a bay, everyone slowly started piling out of the econo van, ready to get cleaned up. That was quite a process, but had also been refined over time for efficiency.

There were eight “tunnels” as they were called in the warehouse. This is where a person would head after exiting their vehicle. They were referred to as tunnels because that’s what they looked like.

Each tunnel had a slightly curved ceiling and multiple sections from start to finish.

In the first tunnel a person would undress completely, put his or her clothes in a plastic bag, seal it and head into the next section. Each section was sealed off from the other sections.

The second section was a chemical shower. A person would be blasted with warm, treated water in all directions for about thirty seconds.

Next, a door would open to the third section where one stood for about thirty seconds in UV lights shining on them from all directions.

In the fourth and second to last section a person could take a real shower, with shampoo, conditioner, soap, etc... People tended to spend the most time in this section as it was the most relaxing.

Finally, the last section was for getting dried off and dressed to get back to the civilized life of Hampton Flats.

Luke spent a little extra time in the shower this evening, trying to get some of the ache out of his body and mind. He had worked two shifts in a row, which meant he hadn’t slept for more than twenty minutes at a time for a little over four days now.

It was unusual to work a double shift due to fatigue causing slowed reflexes and that was dangerous, but Luke was covering for a squad member who had surgery earlier that week.

Luke finished getting dressed after leaving the shower section and made his way down the large ramp leading out of the warehouse on the far side, away from the bay where vehicles came in for cleaning.

He was headed straight for the Chamber House.

It was possible to walk everywhere inside Hampton Flats. From one side to the other was about a twenty-five-minute walk, but Luke was only going about a quarter of that distance this evening.

He spotted Sanders rushing up to meet him as he walked down the main street, about five minutes away from the Chamber House.

“Glad to see you tonight!” Sanders yelled in his usual overly friendly tone. “And you, Sanders.” Luke replied flatly.

Well, don’t get too excited to see me.” said Sanders, unfazed in his superficially warm tone.

“I really need to talk to you about this whole council vote coming up on the calendar next week. You know it’s important and your voice should be heard.” Sanders continued.

“You mean my voice on your behalf.” Luke spoke, again flatly.

“It’s not like that at all. People respect your views on things. Surely you can see that what I’m saying is clearly the best course of action. We should seriously talk about and consider opening talks with Jacksonville to plan a joint expedition to The Mountain.”

“I can’t see too much of anything at the moment Sanders. I’m tired and due for The Chamber in a few.” Luke continued his flat tone with Sanders.

Sanders stepped back a bit for just a second, barely noticeable. But Luke noticed.

Sanders was always working some political angle. His tone and mannerisms were that of a friendly guy who could be everybody’s friend, at least until you got to know him. He had a habit of using people to get what he wanted and was actually pretty effective at getting what he wanted at least half the time.

The thing that probably kept his influence in check more than anything else was his air of superiority that routinely showed itself off to anyone he interacted with on a regular basis.

Sanders looked down on the S&C crew. It was obvious in the way he kept his distance from crew members. He never said it directly, but let it be known in his body language that he thought them dirty and contagious.

“Don’t worry Sanders, I’m all sanitized for the evening.” Luke said with some amusement and a little disdain. He could tell Sanders was grossed out by him.

“Well, not until you’ve had Chamber time Luke.” Sanders responded.

“But don’t worry! We can talk about this after your treatment.” Sanders spoke quickly as he moved away, leaving Luke alone to finish his walk.

*I can’t wait*. Luke thought, not saying anything.

# Chapter 2

“There’s no polite way to say this Jensen, you might be fucked.”

*Roger has a way with words*. Jensen thought as he ran around the building and jumped over a fence. He quickly pulled out his sidearm and got ready to take a shot when the cow came around the corner. He quickly thought how once upon a time it would seem unbelievable and absurd to be chased by a mind sucking cow, but not in this day and age.

The cow wasn’t really what bothered him the most, however. It was the barn owl that made him nervous.

“I don’t suppose you could lend a hand with that owl Roger, while you’re out there having such a way with words.” Jensen quietly spoke into his walkie mic.

“No, I really can’t. I’m stuck in a huge mud bog about ten minutes away.” Roger shot back.

*Great.* Jensen thought.

Of course, the smart thing to do would be to wait for someone to show up and help him out of this predicament.

The cow he could probably handle, but the bird made him nervous. The infection amped up its hosts natural abilities. Of course, all infected were different levels of psychotic, but they could also be different levels of smart. Some were cunning and methodical, while others were simply amped up rage machines.

So, cows, not being typical predator animals, weren’t particularly crafty at stalking prey. Owls, however, were adept predators.

And since it was infected, the owl looked at anything not infected as its prey. It would be methodical and stealthy. The owl had already relied on the cow once to flush Jensen out of hiding before it silently dove at him the first time.

It had hit his helmet with a force that felt like being hit with a large stick. Not debilitating, but jarring just the same.

“That fucking owl.” Jensen whispered under his breath to no one in particular.

The cow came around the corner, snorting and panting. It was sniffing the air for him. All infected had an exceptional sense of smell.

Jensen could tell the cow hadn’t fed in a while, if ever actually, due to the wilted tentacles hanging out around its mouth. It’s sense of smell would be most acute now.

It was usually not too difficult to get around that, however, with some urine or scent cream. Really anything with a strong and persistent odor would work in a rush.

Jensen had brought some scent cream just in case. He had spread some on the side of the building just a few seconds before the cow/owl attack.

The cow sniffed for a few more seconds, mouth tentacles shivering gently, and started making its way toward the fence Jenson had jumped over a few minutes earlier.

*Watch for the owl*. Jensen told himself as he took his eyes off the cow to scan the sky and top of the building on his side.

The cow stopped about halfway to the fence, seemed to hear something in the opposite direction and turned around to walk in that direction.

Ten minutes or so had passed. The cow gone, Jensen slowly got up, first into a crouch and then a standing position. He quickly scanned up and around him for the owl. Nothing.

He climbed back over the fence as quietly as possible. Now he could see better down the side of the building, leading out into a large roundabout driveway.

The owl (and the cow) could be anywhere, but he wasn’t immediately concerned about being snuck up on by a cow.

He walked toward the driveway, pressing himself against the side of the building as he did so. He was about to the edge of the building, leading into the driveway when he heard a slight whoosh sound. He fell to the ground instantly. The owl missed his head but did manage to make contact with his back. It tried to sink its claws into his body armor, but the hard surface made it impossible.

The owl didn’t give up, however, it flapped maniacally and grabbed frantically all over his back, making its way up toward his neck.

Jensen rolled away quickly and punched at the owl, making some contact with one fist. The owl fell back on the ground and flew up again out of site.

Quickly, Jensen rolled himself up against the building, making himself as flat as possible.

As he was debating whether to make for the fence again or just stay put, the owl fell to the ground a few feet in front of him. It’s head was gone, but its body flopped around for several seconds.

“No need to thank me! Your smile is thanks enough.” Roger said in an announcer voice through his walkie earpiece.

A little rattled, Jensen managed a marginally witty retort and slowly got, once again, to his feet.

Roger was cocky and slightly sociopathic, but Jensen liked him just the same. With Roger it was, What You See Is What You Get. He wasn’t duplicitous in any way.

Roger wasn’t really mean, but he wasn’t gentle either.

“It looks like your cow wandered away, maybe next time.” Roger quipped. “I’ll be there to get you soon. Stay put.”

As Jensen waited for Roger he looked around the old farmhouse property. It was probably a very peaceful place once. Hell, it probably still was most days. Aside from the occasional psychotic farm animal, it would likely be relaxing to live here.

Roger pulled up in the flatbed truck and came to a stop. He got out not far from the owl corpse and examined his work briefly.

“I’m just a great shot. Go ahead, you can say it.” Roger said, waiting for Jensen to acknowledge his superior skills.

“Would never say any different.” Jensen replied.

“We got ourselves a new generator and freezer.” Roger beamed, waving is hand towards the back of the truck.

“Nothing much here, except for an old tractor missing an engine.” Jensen reported.

“Well, let’s get going. We got a few hours' drive back to Jacksonville.” Roger turned after speaking as he got back into the truck.

Jensen went around to the passenger side and climbed inside, closing the door swiftly behind him.

The owl had unnerved him a little.

“I hate birds.” Roger quipped. “They are nasty and disgusting.”

“I’m not too fond of them myself at the moment.” Jensen added.

Roger turned the truck around and began heading down the long driveway leading out to the main road.

As the truck kicked up dust behind them Jensen thought briefly again about living on this peaceful farm property and how that would be different from his life now. He tended to do that a lot during his trips outside Jacksonville. He supposed it entertained him in a way.

Turning onto the main road, Roger said, “Maybe we could check out a few of those convenience stores we passed on our way here earlier today. Might be something worth getting.”

“Yeah, we should.” Jensen replied.

Roger was probably about fifteen or twenty years older than Jensen. They got along well together though on these runs. They could talk about all sorts of things or just travel quietly along the back roads, lost in their own thoughts.

The road they were traveling on now was a side artery, off the highway about twenty miles ahead. It was also a dirt road, but wider than most of the side roads leading off it.

Jensen watched other farmhouses and fields float by as they drove.

“You ever think about what happened to the people who used to live in these houses?” Jensen asked Roger.

“Sometimes, but not too often.” Roger answered. “The lucky ones died quickly or found their way to a settlement like Jacksonville. The ones still left out here ain’t lucky at all.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jensen replied.

There were so many people from different places and backgrounds in Jacksonville. The settlement was called Jacksonville because one of the early residents there had once lived in Jacksonville, Florida and remembered it fondly.

Roger had been in the military “several lifetimes ago” as he liked to say on occasion. Jensen was a regular outlaw, spending time in and out of prison before everything changed. It seemed the dissolution of civilization had straightened him out a bit.

Roger and Jensen knew all about each other’s history. They had spent enough hours together scavenging on the road to fill each other in about their histories.

They were about to the turn off for the highway now. Roger handed the map to Jensen. “Probably should mark off the places we visited today so no one wastes time going there again.”

“Okay, will do.” Jensen replied.

Roger turned onto the highway and began picking up some speed. “I think that first store is up here about three or four miles.” He commented.

“mmmhm” Jensen replied absently as he looked at the map, marking off the spots they checked out today.

There were still a couple hours of daylight left as they drove.

Jensen was focused on the map when Roger got his attention. “Do you see that up ahead?”

Looking up ahead, Jensen could barely make out what appeared to be a car off to the side of the road a bit. It was smoking and the front door was open.

As they got closer, they could see someone lying on the ground, with one leg still in the car.

Roger slowed as they approached. “Better check this out, but stay alert. It could be a trap.”

Jensen nodded, acknowledging what Roger said. “I’ll keep watch. You go see what’s up.”

Both Roger and Jensen got out of the truck. Jensen walked around to the back to look up and down the road behind the truck before walking around to the front to cover Roger.

Roger walked up slowly to the smoking car. It had clearly hit the light post next to the road. From the looks of things, just recently.

The woman on the ground was still conscious, but dazed. As Roger looked in the car he could see a person sitting in the back, but he was dead. There was blood spatter and a large hole in the rear window. This person had been shot.

The woman looked up at Roger. “I had to. He was turning and attacked me.” She murmured to Roger.

Roger didn’t see the gun yet. Maybe it was in the car somewhere. He looked back at Jensen but didn’t get any warning signals so he looked back to the woman.

“Did it get into you, on your head…anywhere else?” he asked her before approaching any closer.

She didn’t respond the first time, so he asked again.

“N....No I’m not scrambled.” She replied.

“Okay, then you won’t mind if I check you out first.” Roger responded.

She nodded, so he did. He bent down to look her over more thoroughly.

She didn’t have any pink or blue bruises on her head or neck. There were no obvious bite or scratch marks on her or her clothes. She wasn’t cold either. She did have several cuts, however, and she was bleeding from her head.

Roger stood up again to look around the car and surroundings. He didn’t see anything alarming. It didn’t look like a trap.

“We could take you back with us. We are from a settlement called Jacksonville. Do you want our help?” Roger asked.

He didn’t want to waste time on someone who didn’t want his help. He had learned that lesson the hard way a few times. He had no problem leaving this woman or any other stranger to their own fate out on these roads.

“The case first.” She said weakly. “It’s in the trunk. Please get the case first.”

“You’re in rough shape lady. A case isn’t going to save you.” He replied.

“Please just get it. It could mean everything!” She blurted out the last part before falling silent.

Roger wasn’t sure she was still alive. He knew he had a few minutes before she might be dangerous if she was turning, so he felt her forehead. She wasn’t getting cool. She was still alive.

He picked her up slowly and headed back to Jensen.

“Open the side door. We’ll put her in the back.” Roger instructed.

Jensen did so and they put her in the back bench seat, lying down.

Jensen was moving to get back into his seat when Roger halted him.

“Hold up. Keep watch for another minute. She was going on about a case in the trunk. I’m going to check it out. Might be valuable.”

“Yeah, okay.” Jensen replied.

Roger went back over to the car to release the trunk latch. When he leaned in he saw the gun on the passenger side floor. He picked it up and put it in his belt.

He unlatched the trunk and went around to the back of the car. He lifted the trunk and inside was what appeared to be a cube shaped box. It was smooth on all sides. There didn’t appear to be any top or bottom. It looked solid.

He picked it up. It was slightly cool to the touch, maybe weighing about thirty pounds. It was heavy for its size, slightly bigger than ten inches on all sides.

Holding the cube shaped object, he headed back to the truck.

As he was walking toward the truck Jensen yelled at him to watch out.

About twenty yards away, a scrambler had come out of the field across the highway. It was facing Roger and began running at him full speed.

Roger was about to drop the case he was holding and run back to the truck, but Jensen got off a round, hitting this scrambler in the hip, slowing it down.

“Great shot Jensen!” Roger said in a slight mocking way. “Maybe next time try to get a little closer to the head man.”

“Roger that!” Jensen shot back. Roger hated it when Jensen said that to him. He hadn’t heard that enough times in his life.

Roger was moving over to the scrambler, getting ready to finish it off with his knife. As he got closer, it stopped moving suddenly, holding completely still.

Roger stopped moving as well, not quite believing what he was seeing.

“Jensen, you seeing this?” Roger yelled back towards the truck, keeping his eyes on the scrambler.

After a few seconds Jensen responded, “Yes, but it doesn’t make any sense. I’ve never seen that before.”

Roger agreed. It was odd, no doubt.

He backed a few steps away from the scrambler without really thinking. It started moving again, inching towards him.

When it got closer to him, it stopped moving suddenly just like the first time.

“Fucking weird!” Jensen yelled.

“Yeah, a bit.” Roger said quietly to himself.

“Hey, this lady could die anytime. We decided to help her so we should probably get her back to Jacksonville soon!” Jensen yelled to Roger.

Roger had forgotten about the lady he rescued from the car for a few brief moments. Holding the cube in one hand he walked over to the unmoving creature and jammed his knife into its skull.

It fell to the ground rigid; in the same position it had been standing.

“That’s something I’ve never seen before today.” Roger said, looking at Jensen. Jensen just nodded, staring at the rigid thing lying on the ground.

Roger looked down at the cube. *Very Strange*. He thought walking back to the truck

“Let’s get her back to Jacksonville. Maybe she knows something about all this.” Roger said waiving back to the scrambler on the ground.

He set the cube in the back seat next to their guest and they drove back to Jacksonville.

# Chapter 3

The Chamber was nobody’s favorite place to be on a Friday night, or any night for that matter.

“Hi Luke!” Patrice greeted him at the entrance to the chamber house. “Welcome back to the day spa.”

Luke chuckled wearily. “Thanks, I guess.”

“It’s not so terrible Luke! You get to hang out with me and these other fine people.” Patrice went on cheerfully.

“You should really develop a social life Patrice.” Luke replied.

“Social lives are overrated these days. I get to hang out with people all the time here.” said Patrice.

“It doesn’t seem like hanging out to me. The chamber is a pretty solitary experience.” Luke thought out loud.

“Well, think about what we’re doin now, huh? That’s socializing Luke. And...we get along great because we don’t spend too much time together.” Patrice answered.

“I guess there’s some merit to that Patrice. You win.” Luke relented.

“We’re all in this together man. We all win together.” Patrice said, mimicking something Sanders often said in public speeches.

Luke laughed out loud and shook his head. “I do enjoy your sense of humor Patrice.”

“Well before you change your mind and run off, let’s get you into some relaxing clothes so you can really enjoy your spa treatment tonight.” Patrice spoke as he motioned Luke into a changing room.

Luke went into the private changing room and exchanged his personal clothing for chamber garb. Once changed, he felt like he was getting ready to compete in some track and field event. He was wearing a skintight outfit, with no socks or footwear. The body forming neckline went all the way up to his chin.

Gina, a new technician, was shadowing Patrice this evening.

“Hey Luke. How are ya?” She greeted him as he stepped out into the hallway.

“No complaints, other than the obvious.” Luke responded.

“No worries, we’ll have you out of here in no time!” she said enthusiastically.

“Thanks Gina.” Luke forced a smile.

Luke followed Gina to the chamber room. It was a small room just off the main hallway. Luke opened the door and stepped inside.

He had spent many hours in the chamber over the past few years. His condition was treatable, but recurring. This meant he required regular sessions in the chamber, as did many others.

This plague that had wiped out, or altered, most of the living things on the planet affected people differently. It played with their DNA in ways that were still difficult to understand.

Inside the little room was a pod or chamber as it was called by everyone. It was shaped like a cocoon. The top half lifted, separating from the bottom as Luke approached it.

Luke could hear Patrice through the PA system feeding into the small room and the chamber itself.

“Just relax Luke. Let us handle all the driving tonight.” Patrice said in a friendly tone.

Luke stepped into the chamber and positioned himself in a semi-horizontal position on the padded area inside. It was similar to laying back in a fancy zero gravity chair.

Once he was situated, the top of the chamber lowered down, closing him in completely.

He allowed himself to relax. It wasn’t horrible, but it wasn’t exactly pleasant either.

Tones in the chamber acted like a countdown timer. They were soft and mellow tones, first at a high pitch, then progressively lower. Once the lowest tone sounded, the procedure would begin. The tonal countdown took about fifteen seconds.

Luke closed his eyes as the soft lights in the chamber dimmed and the countdown finished.

He felt a familiar warmth as the gas treatment mixture filled the chamber. He allowed himself to breath normally.

A small head piece lowered down to settle on his forehead. The chair was very relaxing and Luke soon drifted off to sleep.

Ascending chime tones brought Luke back to consciousness. It felt like no time had passed. But he knew he had been in the chamber for about thirty minutes.

“How are you feeling sleeping beauty?” Luke heard Patrice asking through the speakers.

“All better.” Luke said with his eyes still closed. He opened them slowly as the top part of the chamber began to rise. He pushed himself up and out of the chamber. He did actually feel pretty great. The chamber did its job splendidly.

“Well, thank you so much for your giving us your business. We know you have a lot of choices when it comes to spa treatments and its clients like you that make us the best!” Patrice announced in a radio advertisement voice.

“Of course, you do great work here. Now let me out.” Luke said in mocking irritation.

The door to the little room unlocked and Luke stepped out into the hallway.

Gina was waiting for him outside the room. “Let’s get you out of here silly. You probably got all kinds of wild things to do on a Friday night!” Gina said has she led him back to his changing room.

Luke thanked Gina and went inside to change back into his own clothes.

He didn’t think about it often, but tonight he found himself dwelling on his circumstances. These chamber treatments had become routine for him. The treatments kept the horrible sickness at bay for him and many others. Without the chamber he would be lost to madness.

He remembered early attempts at treating the infected. They were mostly hit or miss. There were many failures.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

It was out of desperation, ingenuity and determination that an effective treatment of sorts was developed.

The chamber didn’t work for everyone in the beginning. They were gone now of course.

The people remaining were the ones for whom it was successful.

Luke was one of the fortunate ones. He didn’t know why and neither did anyone else. There was no fairness or sense to it as far as he could make out. But he was still here, and he wanted to make a difference somehow.

Patrice was waiting for Luke by the exit door of the chamber house.

“Luke, you got a few? We gotta talk.”

“Of course, what’s up?”

Patrice motioned for Luke to follow him. He took Luke into the back section of the Chamber House where some private offices were located. Once inside the office, Patrice shut the door behind them.

“You’re not usually one for being secretive Patrice. Something got you spooked?”

Patrice took a few seconds before he spoke, which was not usual Patrice behavior.

“Dude....Patrice, what’s up man?”

Patrice began slowly, “Luke, you know the chamber works by mixing that nerve cell cocktail everyone enjoys so much, correct?”

“Yeah, I understand the basics of it all, but not nearly to the same level as you.”

“Well...” Patrice continued, “it’s a tried and tested recipe that is known for being stable and effective.”

“Yeah...okay. And?” Luke replied.

“Lately it hasn’t been.” Patrice turned away from Luke and went over to his desk as he spoke. “It’s not maintaining molecular stability upon mixing.”

Luke didn’t really know what that meant. Patrice continued, “It’s not happening all the time, in fact, it’s not happening most of the time, but it is happening more and more often. And…we have no idea why.”

“I don’t understand exactly what you are trying to say here Patrice. Just speak plainly.”

“We’ve been analyzing each incidence of instability and running some projections, trying to predict a future outcome for the stability matrix.”

“English Patrice, please.”

“It’s going to continue becoming unstable more often and eventually it won’t be stable at all.” Patrice said quickly. He was no longer hiding his frustration and alarm. “When it’s no longer stable, it won’t be effective. It won’t work anymore.”

Luke finally understood exactly what Patrice was implying, and why he was on edge.

“Then we’re fucked.” Luke heard himself saying before he had time to think.

“Yes, it will be devastating Luke, and I’m unable to figure out why this is happening. I feel powerless and I can’t stand this feeling.” Patrice sat down in the chair behind his desk like all the air had gone out of him.

For several seconds neither of them said anything. Luke had a bizarre sensation of seeing himself and Patrice in this little office like he was watching it on some screen from far away.

His mind was trying to think about the situation analytically, while also feeling the personal implications of no longer being able to receive treatments.

“What can we do about it?” Luke broke the silence.

“I don’t know Luke. I don’t know.” Patrice said, staring at the top of his desk.

Luke could see that Patrice was spinning into an abyss.

“Patrice you’re too smart for ‘I don’t know’ and you and I both know it. You must have an idea, something!”

“Luke I’m pretty arrogant. I’m a genius and it’s easy to be arrogant. I don’t need to impress anyone or defend my ideas, ever, to anyone. But this thing has stopped me solid still.”

Luke had never seen Patrice like this before. He was a genius. He could do anything as far as Luke was concerned. If Patrice was this worried, then they all had a serious problem.

“Patrice, did you hear what I said. You are too smart for ‘I don’t know’. Now tell me what you do know.”

“I know I haven’t felt like this in a very long time Luke. I know I hate feeling this way. I know the only possible thing we can do is a long shot, maybe at best.”

“Okay, what is this long shot maybe? We start there.” Luke was trying to keep Patrice from giving into despair completely.

“It’s just such an unknown and could likely be not helpful at all, and I...” “Patrice!” Luke interrupted him.

“Patrice, what is it?” Luke forced himself to speak calmly. “Focus and pull yourself together. Be in this room, here with me, now.”

“Yeah, okay. I’m here Luke.”

“Tell me about this long shot.”

# Chapter 4

“Where did you find this one?” Doc said to Roger as he stepped out of the recovery room. “She’s damn lucky you two happened upon her out there in the wild country.”

“Bringin in these strays seems to be your special hobby.” Doc continued.

Roger thought about that for a minute and was about to respond with some wise ass comment for Doc but stopped himself. He didn’t really think he had any kind of reputation for bringing in people from the outside on a regular basis, but there was no point to arguing about it with Doc.

“Is she gonna make it? Roger asked, deciding to keep it simple.

“Yeah, probably.” Doc responded while appearing to look over some notes he had on a clipboard.

“When do you think she’ll wake up?” Roger pressed.

Doc finished reading whatever was on the clipboard and looked up at Roger. “Maybe in ten minutes, maybe tomorrow. Does she owe you money or somethin?”

Doc didn’t wait for Roger to replay. “I’m just fuckin with ya. Whatever you got to ask her, you’ll have plenty of time for all that when she wakes up. You're welcome to stand here and keep lookin at her if that makes you feel better. I’ve got other shit to do. Any more questions for me?”

Roger just shook his head and Doc walked off, presumably to do his other shit.

There wasn’t really any benefit that he could see to standing here waiting for her to wake up. Doc was correct, he could ask her any questions later. And he certainly would when she was awake.

Like Doc, Roger also had other stuff he could be doing. So, he left the woman he had rescued to her recovery and headed out of the medical building.

Jacksonville was better than living on the outside, by a significant margin. Roger had lived outside, in the “wild country” as Doc had called it. There was no comparison. Being behind protected walls and some semblance of social order was preferrable to the uncertainty and danger of the outside.

Jacksonville was Roger’s home and it was relatively safe.

There was the occasional scrambler scare where it would be necessary to put down a resident who went cold and berserk. It was the only way to handle it effectively. There was no cure and no treatment options in Jacksonville. Neutralizing a scramble victim quick was the simplest and most effective way to maintain order.

Jacksonville was far from perfect, however. It had plenty of flaws. Corruption inside the walls was basically kept in minimal check by everyone’s fear of going back to living in chaos. That fear was a weak governor of the people, but it kept them in check for now.

There wasn’t any real central authority in Jacksonville. There was a council that met occasionally to discuss basic things like infrastructure issues, basic safety, maintaining supplies, etc... But that was about the limit of coordination that existed.

Roger thought that what really kept Jacksonville working was people agreeing to get along just enough to get some basic things done.

Outlaw types weren’t really tolerated at all. Anyone causing too much trouble was either shot on sight or run out of town in quick fashion. Everyone seemed to agree on that at least.

People tended to keep to themselves and socialize in small groups of a few friends or families. Larger groups would get together to do a job or fix something needing repair, like the wall surrounding Jacksonville for example.

There were a few places to hang out, eat and get drunk if a person was looking for something along those lines. Roger had been to those places a few times. He wasn’t above drinking himself into oblivion on occasion.

Most of the time, however, he kept to himself or hung out with a few people he could tolerate.

Jensen was a bit impulsive, but tolerable. This is why Roger agreed to go out scavenging with him on occasion.

And then there was Peter, the tinkerer and the deal maker. If you needed anything Peter was your guy.

Roger was going to find Peter soon actually. He needed some work done on his truck.

Peter was likely to be found in his shed, working on something or closing a deal with some shady character of one sort or another.

First, Roger needed to pick up a gift for Peter. It was his way of providing some compensation for Peter working on his truck.

And he had the perfect gift for Peter today.

He walked back to his little piece of Jacksonville to pick up the gift. Maybe Peter would also be able to figure out what the thing was or how it worked at least. He was thinking, of course, about the object he had picked up while rescuing the woman from her crashed car.

He met Claudia walking up the steps to his duplex. Claudia was an older woman, but she was quiet and shared the Duplex with Roger.

“Hey Claudia.” Roger greeted her.

“Roger, how ya doin this afternoon?” Claudia asked.

“Same old shit.” Roger answered.

“I cleaned up your clothes and set them on your table. Don’t mind the intrusion.” Claudia offered.

“No intrusion Claudia. I appreciate you lookin after me.” Roger said.

Roger looked after Claudia. Brought her food, water and other basic necessities. In return, Claudia watched over their duplex and did some basic chores for Roger. It was an agreeable arrangement between them.

Roger went inside to grab the object and headed back out to find Peter, saying farewell to Claudia on his way out the door.

Peter wasn’t far, about half a mile away.

As Roger approached Peter’s Shed he could hear music blaring out from the large opening.

Peter seemed to have his music blaring all the time. Roger wasn’t sure Peter ever slept.

Today Peter was listening to Blues music, which Roger actually enjoyed himself. It sounded like Willie Dixon.

“Hey Peter!.” Roger yelled over the music.

Peter looked up and waved at Roger. Then he held up a finger as he jogged over to his stereo system to turn down the music.

“Hey Roger! Great news, I got a new shipment of bug zappers! You can have first dibs if yer interested!”

“No thanks Peter.” Roger replied. “I’ve actually got something for you today.”

“Truck broke down again Roger?” Peter asked skeptically.

“No, not yet. I’m just paying in advance like usual.” Roger answered.

“Ah, Okay. Well, You always bring me decent shit so let’s see what you have today.” said Peter.

Roger walked over to the table in Peter’s shed and set a bag on it. He untied the bag and took out the object.

“I have no idea what this is Peter, but I thought you might find it valuable and may be able to figure out what it is and what it does.” Roger said as they both looked at the thing on the table.

“Where did you get it?” Peter asked.

“I was out scavenging with Jensen and we saw a woman nearly passed out after her car had struck a post on the side of the road. So we decided to bring her and this thing back with us.” said Roger. He added, “It did something strange as well. A scrambler surprised us while I was holding this thing and as it got closer to me it froze in mid step. It just stopped moving completely.”

Peter didn’t say anything. He turned around, went over to a chair and sat down. He sat their silently.

“Well, what do you think?” Roger asked, not expecting this behavior from Peter.

“I don’t know what to say about it yet. I’ve heard of something like this before.” Peter finally said quietly.

Roger noticed a change in Peter. He hadn’t seen this side of Peter before.

Roger didn’t know a lot about Peter’s history. He did know that Peter used to be a big-time project contractor or something of that sort. He had worked for the government and several large corporations before everything fell apart.

“Did you work on some project relating to this in the past?” Roger asked.

“No, at least not directly. But...I heard some things.” Peter responded.

Peter continued, “Some of the other contractors I knew who did similar work to me talked about some of the projects that were jointly run by private corporations and the government. It was real hush hush stuff. They weren’t supposed to be talking about it at all.”

“Okay,” Roger prodded, “Can you tell me how that relates to this thing here?”

“Well, I guess it won’t hurt anything to say now. It’s not like anybody’s gonna come lookin for me about it.” Peter said.

“One of the major bio research firms that used to be around was rumored to be working on a new DNA modifier that could do two completely different things. One thing it could do was enhance physical strength and mental acuity. The other thing it could do was destabilize a person physically and mentally. Could be very handy to the military if you see where I’m going with this.” Peter finished.

“And so that relates to this cube thing in some way?” Roger pressed.

“It looks like maybe a safety device used during the experiments.” Peter said as he looked at the object, shaped like a cube.

“Experiments?” Roger asked.

“It allowed researchers to get up close and take, ah, take samples I guess you could call it, from the test subjects.” Peter continued.

“So, you’re saying there is some truth to the rumor that this whole end of civilization thing was caused by government experiments?” Roger asked.

“Maybe...probably. Who do you think would or could cause a gigantic cluster fuck like this Roger?” Peter quipped.

“Huh. I guess that makes sense, but maybe we’ll never know for sure.” said Roger.

He looked at Peter for a moment, briefly wondering a little about Peter’s cloudy past. Roger wasn’t really the type to pry so he left it alone.

“Well, is it something you would be interested in keeping?” Roger finally asked.

“Who else knows about it?” Peter asked without answering.

“Jensen was with me. He saw what it did. I don’t know if he told anybody else yet.” Roger answered.

“Peter, do you want it or not?”

“Yeah, I’ll take it.” Peter said, still looking a bit distracted.

“Great. Maybe this covers a couple of repairs in the future for my truck then.” Roger said with some humor in his voice.

“There was a woman you found with it?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, she’s in the medical building recovering at the moment. She hasn’t said anything yet.” Roger replied.

“Don’t tell her about giving it to me. I’ll keep it, but I don’t want some crazy bitch hunting me down looking for it.” Peter said in a low voice.

“I won’t, I won’t.” Roger reassured him.

“Road rules apply. We get to keep anything we find. Strangers we rescue don’t get ownership priority when we decide to rescue them from outside the gates. I could have just left her out there so she owes me her life. I took this cube thing as payment.” Roger added.

“Why don’t you want to keep it?” Peter asked.

“I don’t know what it is exactly or how it works or doesn’t work, so I’m not going to start depending on it out there when I need my wits. I know how to use a knife and a gun. That’s all I need.” Roger answered.

“So I’m covered for a few repairs then?” Roger asked as he was getting ready to leave.

Peter looked up at him. “Yes, you’re covered for a bit. Just don’t overdo it with credit.”

“I won’t. I keep us squared up. You know that Peter.” Roger replied as he walked out of the shed.

“See ya soon Peter.”

“Yeah, see ya!” Peter yelled after Roger.

# Chapter 5

Carly opened her eyes.

She waited a few seconds for her vision to clear, the room coming into view. She was trying to remember what happened. How had she gotten here?

Then it all came back to her. Leaving with Ramirez, getting chased. Finding a place to sleep a few hours later, getting chased again. And finally, Ramirez going crazy. She remembered shooting him and crashing into something. Then it got very cloudy for her.

She couldn’t remember how she got here, but apparently, she had been rescued by someone and brought to this place, wherever this place was.

She took inventory of herself. Mild soreness, stiff muscles. She felt her head. There were some stitches on the top, left side. And that part of her head was quite sore. She knew she would heal quickly but didn’t want to bring any extra attention to herself on that front. Too many questions she didn’t want to answer.

The clothes she was wearing had been replaced by some sort of basic hospital looking attire, pants/shirt combination. She had also been cleaned up a little, but she still felt dirty.

What to do now?

*I need to find out where I am and get back the case. Maybe a shower too.*

She looked around the room. It contained some medical looking supplies but was basically just a bed and a room with a closed door possibly leading out into a hallway.

There was a small window up high on one wall, but it was too small for her to crawl through.

She thought she could hear something outside the room, possibly a radio or TV. She couldn’t be sure.

Carly decided to try sitting up. It took her several seconds, but she managed to get herself in a sitting position, feet hanging off the side of the bed.

“That’s a start.” She murmured to herself quietly.

She wasn’t wearing any shoes or socks. She looked around and saw some socks and her shoes sitting just under the end of the bed.

*New socks, same old shoes.*

She didn’t know anything about where she was or the people who brought her here. She would need to figure some of that out if she wanted to get the case back and get out of here soon.

Putting on her new socks and old shoes, Carly stood up, walked over to the door and listened again. She could tell it was night because of the window.

It sounded quiet except for that constant noise like a radio or TV.

She slowly turned the knob and opened the door. Looking out into the hallway she could see what appeared to be hotel room doors going off in both directions opposite the room she currently occupied. At least half the lights appeared to be turned off.

The noise got louder and she decided it was probably someone watching a show, maybe a nurse.

She stepped out into the hallway and saw a lit-up area down the hall to her left. She decided to go that way, wanting to find something out about this place and its people.

She walked up to what appeared to be a check in counter. There was an older looking lady and a younger looking man sitting behind the counter. She could hear them talking.

“After this show is over we’re changin the DVD Marlene.” the man said.

“Whatever Robert, you’re supposta be keepin watch round here. Get up and do yer rounds for I tell Doc what a lazy SOB you are anyway!”

Carly approached the counter slowly, trying not to sneak up on anyone.

“Excuse me.” She spoke. “Can one of you help me?”

Marlene and Robert both looked over at her, clearly not startled in the slightest. They looked too unmotivated to be startled in any case.

“Well she’s awake.” Marlene pronounced in a mock friendly voice.

“Hiya Miss. Welcome to the Jacksonville General.” Marlene finished.

“Thanks.” Carly replied. “How did I get here?”

“Apparently you was in some sort of accident out in the wild country. Got brought in by Roger. He don’t usually have a soft place for strangers, but for some reason decided you was maybe worth keepin alive for a while.” Marlene answered.

“I’m thankful for that.” said Carly.

“Doc will want to see you in the morning, first thing. Shouldn’t be too much longer from now. It’s around 3am now and Doc doesn’t sleep much. Usually, he gets on in here round four or five every morning. Does leave early most days though.” Marlene was looking past Carly to the main door outside as she spoke.

Suddenly, Marlene looked at Robert with renewed interest.

“Robert!” She said in a low, but harsh tone. “Get yer butt in gear!”

To this order Robert slowly got up from his chair, making a point not to hurry, and walked out the swinging door leading out of the enclosed counter area.

“You're a mean old bitch Marlene.” Robert stated flatly after he was out in the hallway with Carly. He didn’t look at Carly as he walked past her.

Carly watched Robert walk away briefly then looked back toward Marlene.

“Is there any way I could get a shower before the doc shows up?” She asked.

“Sure, you can grab a towel and change o’clothes if you want’em out of that closet cross the way.” Marlene directed Carly to look with her finger.

“The shower is two doors before the one you came outta. There’s a lock on the door so you can feel like you got privacy or somethin.” Marlene added.

“Okay, great. Thanks.” Carly replied.

The shower felt incredible. Carly couldn’t remember the last time feeling the water run over her felt this satisfying. It seemed as though dirt and grime was molded onto her skin. She didn’t know for sure, but it had probably been at least five or six days since she had showered.

The decision to leave with Ramirez wasn’t planned ahead too far in advance. She hadn’t actually trusted him completely when she agreed to leave with him. It didn’t matter now anyway. He wouldn’t be a problem moving forward.

She had it in the back of her head that she would ditch him sooner or later. His getting sick, going crazy and making it necessary to shoot him was in the past now. It wasn’t going to haunt her. She could be friendly, but she was cold inside. Calculating.

She would make sure she got what she wanted. People were just tools to achieve her ends.

Nobody here knew her reputation as a cold, calculating bitch and she would use that to her advantage.

Finishing in the shower, Carly put on her newly selected clothing. It was pretty much the same thing she had on before, except fresh and clean.

She was careful not to get her stitches wet in the shower, so her hair still felt a little dingy.

*Now to meet this doc person and get a sense of things. Put on a smile and be sweet Carly...for now.*

She went back to her room for the rest of what remained of the evening. She wouldn’t sleep.

Carly put one of the spare sheets over the bed for something clean to lay on and thought about her next moves in this new place.

# Chapter 6

“Watch out for...!” Lanisha jumped back just in time. A big arm swiped for her and missed. She was ready for what came next.

A huge man, probably weighing around 350 pounds and muscular, barreled towards her seemingly from nowhere.

*Damn! He's quick. She thought.*

She side stepped him, and he just kept lumbering past her, towards Morty.

“Gotcha big man!” Morty yelled as he swung his machete and took off the big man’s head in a clean sweep.

Big man’s body kept running forward for a few more steps and then fell clumsily to the ground with a noticeable thud.

“This isn’t gettin any easier for sure.” Morty sighed as he looked around towards Lanisha.

“You make it look pretty easy Morty.” Lanisha shot back.

“Maybe I’m a big ol faker then.” Morty replied.

Lanisha laughed out loud and looked around the room. “We better clear the rest of the house before someone thinks were in trouble or something.” She said, humor in her voice.

Morty was easy to work with. He complained a lot, but with a great sense of humor, so it wasn’t taxing in the slightest.

The work was hard and stressful no doubt. That’s what drew Lanisha to it. She liked the rush and the thrill. There were, of course, many hours of boredom too, but she couldn’t resist being out here in the action. She figured that was normal. Most people who weren’t adrenaline junkies of some sort didn’t last long out here. They washed out early.

SaC’D was dangerous work. Not everyone could handle it.

More than a few times Lanisha thought about how much of an impact SaC’D crews were making in trying to reduce the berserker population. She didn’t know for sure. She wasn’t sure anybody did.

She had asked Morty about it once a few weeks ago. She remembered his answer word for word. “We do it and it gets done.” he had answered. Simple.

They finished up clearing the house and looking for any supplies that might be useful.

Things like clothing, medical supplies, batteries, toiletries, electronics, etc... were high value items.

“Thanks Morty.” Lanisha said as she handed Morty the last box of supplies from the house. Morty took the box and headed over to the second van, the one used for hauling supplies.

As she turned to look at the next house on the block, Lanisha noticed something odd.

There was someone standing on the roof about two houses down from her. It was the house directly after the next house they were meant to clear.

She couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. It was getting a little dark at this time of the day and the lighting wasn’t optimal.

Lanisha looked back at Morty to get his attention, “Morty!” she yelled while also trying to remain quiet.

“Yeah?” Morty looked back at her, still holding the box.

“You see that?” Lanisha asked, trying to point at the roof two houses down while still looking at Morty.

“See what?” Morty asked, clearly confused.

“Up there.” Lanisha replied.

She turned to look back to where she had seen the person. There was no one there.

“Morty I swear someone was standing on that roof over there.” Lanisha kept pointing to the roof of the house.

“Huh?” Replied Morty.

Then he smiled a little. “Lanisha are you playin games with me? Tryin to get me back for somethin?”

“No Morty, I’m not. I saw someone. I’m being serious.” Lanisha answered.

“Okay, Okay...I can see you are serious.” Morty said.

“Let me get this box over to the van. You keep a look out and I’ll be back fast.” Morty continued.

“Okay, hurry up!” Lanisha sounded impatient.

Morty did as he was told. He was back in less than a minute.

“Saw someone huh?” Morty was still playing with the idea in his head.

“I guess we should follow protocol...get two other members of the squad to look this over with us.” Morty said to Lanisha.

“Yeah, agreed. I’ll get Tanya and Rick. There over by the van now, loading up some things.” Lanisha responded.

She ran over to Tanya and Rick.

“Hey guys, we need your help with lookin into something over by that house.” Lanisha pointed to the house in question.

“Sure thing! What’s up?” Tanya asked.

“I saw someone on the roof, couldn’t get a clear view of them though.” Lanisha answered.

Tanya was a big woman in her mid-forties. She was built like a tank, but she was nimble for her size and age.

Rick was tall and skinny. He didn’t talk too much except when it was necessary. He just nodded and gestured to Lanisha to lead the way.

Lanisha led them over to where Morty was standing.

Morty greeted them all, “Welcome gunslingers to the annual rodeo roundup.”

“You gonna ride the bull Morty?” Tanya asked.

“I might, just wait and see.” Morty answered with a huge smile on his face.

“Lanisha saw someone and we gotta check it out.” Morty added. “Let’s follow protocol. You and Rick take the front outside and Lanisha and I will head round back for a look. We’ll use the walkies to keep a check on each other. Any questions?”

There were none.

“Let’s do it.” Morty finished instructing and they took up their positions.

The house was an average one story structure with a garage, paved driveway and what used to be a lawn in the front yard. There was a fence around the backyard with a latched gate leading into that area.

Morty looked back at Tanya and Rick one last time before unlatching the gate and leading Lanisha into the backyard.

They moved slowly along the side of the house, along a weed infested path to the back.

Lanisha was trying to keep her nerves in check and was almost starting to think maybe she didn’t see anyone after all. Part of her wanted to tell Morty that maybe it wasn’t anything to worry about and they should just get back to work as usual.

Morty stopped suddenly. Lanisha stopped just behind him.

“Hear that?” Morty whispered to her in a barely audible voice.

Lanisha listened.

She did hear something.

A clicking sound she couldn’t quite place. It was even and continuous. She nodded to Morty, and instinctively moved her hand to her sidearm. Morty did the same.

Slowly Morty started moving forward again. Lanisha followed closely.

Suddenly, the clicking got louder. It felt like it was in her head. Lanisha could feel her body humming. She couldn’t move properly. Panic filled her. She tried to bring her gun out of its holster, but her arms wouldn’t obey her.

Her eyes were fixed on Morty in front of her. Her vision was vibrating. Morty was blurry now.

A shadow moved toward Morty. The shadow and Morty blurred together, then the blur began to move away. Morty was gone.

The humming subsided and Lanisha felt her body turn to jelly. She fell to the ground.

She couldn’t move for several seconds. She just lay there. Her head was cloudy and her body was all rubbery.

After what seemed like an eternity, she felt her body again and could move. She sat up and rolled over onto her knees. She squeezed her hands to see if they worked and slowly stood up. She still felt a little hazy, but her head was clearing up now.

She turned around to look at the spot where Morty had stood just a brief while ago.

“Morty?” She called out weakly. “Morty?” Stronger this time.

No answer. It was quiet. No clicking. No noise at all.

Lanisha cautiously walked around to the back of the house. Now her gun was drawn. She was on full adrenaline.

There was a child’s play area with a swing set, slide and bars for climbing. The lawn was overgrown with weeds.

There was a sliding glass door leading from the backyard into the house. It was closed and the blinds were drawn. She couldn’t see in the house.

Lanisha was the only person in the backyard.

Her brain was racing, trying to make any sense out of what had just happened. She was in shock and confused.

“What the fuck?” She said out loud without thinking or being aware of her voice.

“What the fuck!?”

# Chapter 7

More workers in the Chamber House were starting to notice the irregularities. Patrice knew that soon the secret would get out and everyone would know. It was going to be a disaster.

*I’m really not cut out for this shit*.

Patrice sat in his office for a few moments longer, contemplating his options. He knew he had to appear confident even if he did not feel that way at all inside.

Together with Luke he had discussed the problem and a possible solution that was anything but guaranteed to work.

“I don’t see how we have any other option, Patrice.” Luke had said before leaving that night. “Any of us here…all of us still alive, our survival was definitely a long shot when this whole thing started.”

Luke was correct. Patrice knew that. Nothing they had or did now was really guaranteed in this new world. It was time to act. Doing nothing was guaranteed to be a disaster.

But before anything else he needed to say something to the people who were close to him, the technicians and staff of the Chamber House.

He stood up and walked out of his office.

He had already scheduled a meeting that he was going to be leading. It would start in five minutes. He looked around for just a few minutes outside his office and headed to the meeting room.

Luke had just finished breakfast and was headed over meet with Lanisha in the building that housed supplies for the Search and Clear crew. He hadn’t spoken to her since she got back from her last shift. He had heard a little about what happened, but it left more questions than answers in his head. What he had heard didn’t make sense and he wanted to get a straight account from Lanisha.

“Luke!” “How ya doin?” Lanisha yelled over to him as soon as he entered the big main garage entrance to the building.

“Doin well. Can we talk somewhere for a few?” Luke asked.

“Sure, give me just a couple minutes to finish up this inventory sheet.”

“No problem. I’ll wait just outside the garage door. It’s a beautiful day.”

Lanisha nodded and returned to her work while Luke waited outside.

About ten minutes later she came walking outside to find him. He was watching one of the mechanics work on a van outside when she spotted him a ways of from the entrance.

“You get bored waitin for me?” She asked in a light tone.

“Bored, never. Just curious about things going on around here.” Luke replied with a smile.

Luke knew that Lanisha had not really said much of anything about what happened with Morty. It was not unheard of to lose people while on a shift outside the gates. Luke had been thinking of Gavin quite a bit since hearing about Morty.

He wanted to see what state of mind Lanisha was in and if she could clarify anything for him. Lanisha was adept at hiding her feelings. Luke had picked up at least that much about her since she started going out on shifts.

“Finish up the inventory?” he asked with a wide grin.

“Oh yeah, totally. It should never be a problem again.” She replied in a matter-a-fact and simultaneously sarcastic tone.

They both laughed a little. Inventory was never done completely.

Luke waited for a few seconds, looking around again outside before speaking.

“Tell me about what happened outside, with Morty.” He kept his tone even and gentle.

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing since that day. Every day and every night. Hell, every moment of the day.” She responded after looking away from Luke for several seconds.

“My analytical mind keeps telling me I couldn’t have done anything to prevent whatever happened. There’s no way I could have known what was going to happen.” She said, frustration in her voice.

Luke waited for her to say more.

“But…it really doesn’t feel that way. I keep replaying it. I should have not let Morty lead the way into the backyard. I should not have asked him to investigate what I saw.”

Luke could see conflict building up in Lanisha.

“I know that doesn’t make any real sense, but it’s how I feel.” She finally said.

Luke thought of Gavin again. He had never spoken to anyone about what happened or how he felt about it. He had just sort of pushed it off to the side and moved on as best he could. Maybe he would open up to someone about it someday, maybe Lanisha, but not now.

“People will be lost doing what we do out there. It’s not safe work. Nobody is forced to do it. Everyone accepts the risk to themselves. Morty’s choice to be out there is not on you.” Luke kept his eyes on Lanisha.

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying makes sense Luke. I do! It just keeps bothering me is all.”

“It will bother you, some days more than others. Don’t let it eat at you though. That doesn’t help anybody. Remember that when it sneaks up on you.” Luke softly advised.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Lanisha replied.

“Can you tell me what you remember about it?” Luke decided to press her a little further.

Lanisha recounted the details as best she could to Luke, starting from seeing something up on the roof a couple houses down.

“Morty took the lead heading through the gate into the backyard. It looked like any other run-down backyard. No special details there.”

“Morty heard it before I did. It was a clicking sound. Slow at first then faster. And stronger. It’s like the clicking sped up and started vibrating my body from the inside. I know that sounds absurd, but it’s how it felt.”

My eyes were vibrating and everything got hazy. It paralyzed me. I tried so hard to do something, but I couldn’t move! I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

“I could barely make out some shadowy thing moving towards where I thought Morty was standing, but he was all a blur too. The blurs joined together and then were gone.

“The vibrating stopped suddenly and I just fell on the ground. I couldn’t move for several seconds, maybe minutes, I don’t know. I lost any track of time.”

“I got up when I could and searched around for any signs of Morty. Tanya and Rick were watching out front. We looked everywhere outside and inside that house. Nothing!”

“That really is all I remember about any of it. It happened fast and I couldn’t see clearly at all. I can’t explain any of it really. Maybe that’s what frustrates me the most. What if it happens again?”

She stopped talking and Luke thought about everything he just heard.

He agreed with Lanisha. It was nothing like anything he had ever heard of or experienced. What if it did happen again?

Luke didn’t really know what to say. He was also thinking about his discussion with Patrice. Now this new problem was out there. It was something he couldn’t immediately understand or prepare for ahead of time. That was a bit unnerving.

All he could do was move forward.

“Lanisha, I want you for something that is coming up soon.”

He waited to see if she was back with him and not lost in her own thoughts.

“Okay…tell me what it is and I’ll let you know if I’m interested.” Lanisha responded in a hesitant tone.

“There is a problem at the Chamber House. The mixture that helps fellows like me stay copasetic is breaking down and Patrice can’t fix it.”

“Fuck, that’s terrible.” Lanisha replied.

“Yes and that’s an understatement.” Luke added.

Lanisha was focused on Luke now. “What do you want with me?”

“We need to get to Jacksonville and find some guy named Peter. He’s some kind of specialist that Patrice knows about from back in the day.”

“Jacksonville?” Lanisha said the word slowly, as if pronouncing it for the first time.

“But Sanders, that big asshole…” Lanisha opened her arms wide as she spoke.

“I know exactly how you feel.” Luke said with a smile.

“I really enjoyed watching him get his ass handed to him at the that council meeting. He’s such an ass!” Lanisha finished.

“And now it looks like he’s going to get his way after all. And, with me trying to push forward his idea.” Luke continued.

“What do you mean?” asked Lanisha.

“The whole reason he wanted to open talks with Jacksonville was to plan a joint expedition to The Mountain.” Luke answered.

“Wow!” blurted Lanisha.

“Yeah, I opposed his idea at the council and most people backed me up.” Luke reminded her.

“I know, I was there…remember.” Lanisha responded.

“Yeah, I remember.” Luke replied.

“I just hate giving in to that fucker’s ideas on anything. He’s a sleeze.” Lanisha thought out loud.

“You and me both Lanisha.”

“Does Sanders know about this Peter guy?” Lanisha asked.

Luke had never thought of that before.

“I don’t know. He said it was part of a larger strategy to establish long-term relations with other communities. I don’t know if his agenda went any deeper, but it probably did.” Luke answered.

He would run Lanisha’s question by Patrice later.

“Sanders will probably eat this up. Use it whatever way he can to build himself up.” Lanisha added.

“Maybe, but we’re going to keep him out of the loop for now. We don’t want it to look like he was involved in any of the planning. He’s got enough over-inflated self-importance as it is.” Luke replied.

“I like that idea. Keep him as far away from it as possible for as long as possible.” Lanisha agreed.

“So are you in?” Luke finally asked.

“Yeah, I’m in.”

“Great, I’m going to find a few other people I can rely on and give you the details soon. Keep this between us for now.” Luke’s face showed his relief.

He wanted Lanisha because she had quick reflexes, didn’t freeze up under pressure and wasn’t annoying to be around outside. Those would be great attributes for where they were going.

Now he needed the rest of his crew.

# Chapter 8

Carly liked Doc. He was gruff, but not mean. She may be able to use him later.

“Yer probably gonna heal up all right.” Doc gruffly told her as he looked over her scratches and dings.

Carly felt pretty confident about that but didn’t really want Doc to get too curious about her wounds healing quickly.

“Thanks Doc. I don’t think I’ll need any follow-up checks.” She politely said with a cheesy smile. Carly could really lay it on when necessary.

Doc huffed and looked at her. “That’s fine young lady. I got better shit to do anyway. If you have any problems I’m not too difficult to find.”

Carly nodded. “Thanks again Doc.”

Doc nodded and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Before she had too much time to strategize her next move she heard talking briefly in the hallway, followed by a knock at the door.

“Yes…come in.” She responded.

“Hi there, I’m Roger. I came to check in on ya.”

“Hello Roger. My name is Carly.”

Roger walked over and shook her hand.

“Doc says you will probably be okay.” He didn’t add that Doc also said, “If she’s not stupid enough to do anything like wander out those gates again.”

Carly smiled at Roger. She was sizing him up. He was an older man, stocky, but not flabby. Kind of rough looking, but not ugly. She could tell he had been through some tough times.

“Thank you, Roger.” She said.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much for doin what had to be done out there. If that guy in the backseat was goin rabid, you had to put him down.”

“I know…I know I did. It’s still not easy to think about.” She lied. She couldn’t give a damn about Ramirez. It was easier that he was dead.

“No sense given away your time worryin about it now.” Roger stated matter of factly.

“I came to find out about you. We like to know a little about the people we bring in here. We don’t let in most strays, so yer lucky in that sense I guess.”

“I’m so grateful to you. I really am! Thank you. You saved my life.” Carly was doing her best to sound sincere.

“You’re welcome. Can you tell me a little about yourself?”

“I’ve been trying to remember, but my memory is hazy. I guess I hit my head pretty hard. I think the man I shot was a colleague, but I don’t remember where we came from or where we were going.” Carly had been planning to use the amnesia excuse as long as she could. Then add fragmented details to keep anybody from learning too much about her.

“Amnesia huh?” Roger thought out loud.

“Well, I don’t think I’m dangerous or at least I don’t feel like I am.” Carly tried to sound as harmless as possible.

Roger looked at her for a few seconds, then said, “Well if and when you start rememberin stuff I want you to tell me. Can you do that?”

“Yes, of course. Anything I remember, even fragments, I will let you know.”

“Thank you. Before you passed out you were saying something about a case in the trunk. Do you remember anything about that?

“A case?” Carly tried to look quizzical.

“You seemed very intent that we get the case. It seemed just as important to you as yourself at the time.”

“Maybe if I saw it again it would jog my memory. Can you take me to it?”

“Not yet, we need to give you a few more days to see if you’re gonna turn and see if you are generally stable…okay to be in here. That’s part of the reason we don’t bring in too many strays. They can cause chaos in here. People want to be safe.”

“I understand. I do! No problem at all.” Carly answered, trying to sound as genuine as possible.

Apparently, it was going to take some time to find out the whereabouts of the case. She would need to play it cool for now.

“I don’t want to sit in here any longer. I need to get out, walk around. Could you show me around?”

Roger thought for a few more seconds, then said, “Sure, give me about an hour or so to finish some things up first. Then, I’ll come back and get you. We’ll see if we can find a place for you to stay for the time being.”

“Sounds great! Thank you again Roger. You saved my life. Carly reached for Roger’s hand as she spoke. She wanted to seem as sincere as possible.

Roger took her hand in a somewhat awkward way. She could tell he wasn’t comfortable with any kind of intimacy.

“Be back soon.” Roger spoke in a lower voice as he let go of her and then let himself out of the room.

*He’ll be a bit tougher to fool.* she thought. He doesn’t trust easy. She was glad she had decided to use the amnesia routine. She would use it as long as she could, remembering just enough to get more information out of the people in here.

At least until she could figure out a way to get out with the case.

Carly had time to shower and change into some new close again before Roger got back.

He came back about ninety minutes later, knocking again on her door.

“Please come in.” Carly answered.

“Ready to get out of here?” Roger asked.

Carly stood up from her sitting position on the bed and smiled. “Yes, lead the way.”

“I thought you might be hungry so let’s get some food first.”

“Sounds great! I’m starving!” Carly was quite hungry, so that didn’t take any acting.

Roger led her out of the hotel hospital building. She waved to the people behind the front desk on her way out. They seemed surprised but waved back hesitantly.

“People generally keep to themselves. They don’t mean to be rude. It’s just how people are around here.” Roger stated, noticing the hesitant waves on their way out.

“Where is here?” Carly asked.

“You are in Jacksonville. It’s called that because one of the fellows who started this place was from Jacksonville and liked it there. Not much more to it than that.”

“Huh, okay. Easy history there then.” Carly noted aloud, trying to sound conversational.

“There’s a few different places to eat here. Most people eat privately in their homes or wherever they live, but there is a restaurant of sorts here and a couple of smaller dives to explore if you are adventurous. Maybe you can try those out later.”

Roger led her to the “sort of” restaurant for her first meal in Jacksonville. He figured it would be safer food and people to be around. New people tended to attract attention and questions. Since he didn’t have any yet, he preferred to avoid that as much as possible.

It took them a little less than ten minutes to walk there.

“After we eat I’ll show you where you’ll be staying for now.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Roger led her through the old wooden double doors to what looked like it did actually used to be a restaurant.

“This place was one of them retro diners back in the day. It’s reasonably comfortable.”

Roger led her over to a booth. Like all the other booths it had deep red seats to slide into on each side. Roger took one side and motioned for her to take the bench across from him.

She did so, immediately noticing the comfortable seat beneath her. She expected it to be hard and dingy, but it was comfortable and looked reasonably clean.

The walls of the place had posters and pictures up of old movie stars, race car drivers and automobiles. There was a bar with stools stretching out along the front of the large room, opposite of what appeared to be a kitchen.

“It does have character.” Roger noted as he looked around with her at the place.

“Yeah, I forgot places like this existed.” Carly remarked.

“Well, that and a lot of other things apparently.” She added.

“Maybe getting some food in you will speed up your healin.”

“Yeah, I hope so! I’m starving.”

The lady who apparently ran the place came over and nodded to Roger. “Hey Rog, what’s crackin?”

“Hey Rhonda, same old whip as always.”

“Who you got with ya today?” Rhonda asked.

“This is Carly. She’s new round here. I wanted to show her the best place to eat in Jacksonville.”

Rhonda smiled wide and looked at Roger playfully. Carly thought she may have a bit of a crush on Roger.

“Well”, Rhonda answered, “The bar ain’t set too high in this place, but we make decent food. Glad to meet ya Carly.”

Carly nodded and smiled. Rhonda didn’t offer to shake her hand. “Same to you Rhonda.”

“The menu is pretty simple. Soup is vegetable beef, we got cheeseburgers, basic salad, pasta and chicken done up in a few different ways. We also got coffee and tea.”

“Soup sounds great. Maybe a little bit of chicken mixed with pasta. And just water for me today.” Carly replied.

“And you Roger, the usual?”

“Yep, thank you Rhonda.”

“What’s the usual?” Carly asked as Rhonda walked away.

“Cheeseburger and soup with a large cup of coffee. I order that about ninety percent of the time I come in here.”

“Is there anything I should know about the food?” Carly asked with a sly grin.

“Oh, no. It’s all pretty decent. That’s just my favorite is all.” Roger answered.

“So what about you Roger? Are you allowed to tell me anything about yourself or do I have to be here for a while first?”

“I got no secrets. I’m pretty simple. I was in the military a lifetime ago. Did various jobs after that. Everything went to shit and now I’m here.”

“It seems like you are skipping over maybe just a few details in your history.”

“Nothing interesting. Maybe after we get to know each other better, you’ll find out a few of those details, but I’m not really the openin up kind a guy.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. I’m supposed to tell you a bunch of stuff and you won’t tell me anything.”

“You’re new here. I’m not. It’s that simple.”

“I understand that, but I want to get to know the guy who saved my life.”

“What you see is what you get. Stick around here for a while and you’ll see that. I’m a simple guy, not complicated.”

Roger was easy to like. Carly could see he was a natural leader. He probably had a lot of influence in Jacksonville. She would need to cultivate this relationship.

“Any significant other in your life, girlfriend, boyfriend, friend with benefits?”

“You are trying to dig in aren’t you?” Roger attempted to sound a little gruff.

“Fine, you don’t have to tell me. I guess I’ll find out eventually if I stick around.” Carly smiled craftily as she spoke.

“Yeah, maybe. We’ll see.” Roger grinned a little.

Roger told her a few other things about Jacksonville, but nothing of any real importance as they waited for their meal.

Rhonda finally brought out their meals a while later.

To Carly’s surprise the food wasn’t horrible. It was tasty. She ate everything. Roger did too.

They finished eating, talking very little and then got up to leave.

Roger waived to Rhonda on the way out.

“You don’t pay here?” Carly asked.

“Not with money. I already paid for that meal and a few more by gettin supplies for Rhonda.”

“Barter system. I see.”

“Somethin like that. Let’s check out where you are staying.”

Roger led her again down one of the side streets. There were some vehicles, but not many parked along the way.

“We mostly walk everywhere here. Gas is a precious commodity.”

“Yeah, I bet. Not easy to find.”

“Nope, not at all.”

“You’re not too far away from here so it should be easy to find again if you get hungry. The restaurant is open most of the time, but it doesn’t have any specific open or close time. I recommend you eat there until you get more familiar with Jacksonville.”

“Noted. Will do.”

Roger was taking Carly to stay with Claudia. He could trust Claudia to help keep an eye on her still he figured out more about her. He would also be close just in case she wasn’t who she seemed to be on the surface. Roger didn’t trust people easily.

“You’ll be staying with my neighbor. Her name’s Claudia. There’s an extra bedroom for you at her place. She might seem a little rough, but she’s not once you get to know her.”

As they approached the duplex Claudia was sitting out front like usual.

“Hey Claudia. This is Carly, the one I told you about.”

“Nice to meet you Carly. Roger says you don’t seem crazy so I guess you can stay here for a while, less you act crazy. Then you can’t”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Claudia.” Carly extended her hand to Claudia and Claudia took it briefly.

“Make yourself at home. There’s some clothes that should fit you in your room. Let me show you around a little. It won’t take too long.”

Roger waved to both of them as Carly followed Claudia inside.

It didn’t take long to show Carly around and Claudia left her in her room to rest for a while. Carly wasn’t really tired but figured there would be no further tours of Jacksonville today. She decided to use the time to plan her next moves.

She needed to play nice long enough to get her bearings, figure out Jacksonville, get the case and get out of town.

# Chapter 9

It wasn’t hard to find people who didn’t like Sanders, but Luke also wanted people he could trust outside the gates.

“You can’t be serious!” blurted out Patrice.

Luke decided to start with the toughest recruit first.

“I don’t use guns, knives or anything else useful out there.” Patrice scolded the wall opposite where Luke was standing.

“You won’t need to do any of that. People like me will be around you the whole time.” Luke offered.

“Patrice, you can talk to this Peter guy and you have the skillset necessary to figure out what we are looking for at The Mountain. We need you!.”

Patrice looked down at the floor. Luke could tell he was calculating in his head. Figuring all the angles of the thing.

“Yeah, fuck…I know. That really does suck about now.” Patrice finally managed to say.

“I don’t want to go. I’m not cut out for that stuff out there. My talents…my abilities serve the community best in here.” Patrice was trying one last argument to get out of going, but mostly to himself this time.

Luke allowed Patrice to argue with himself without speaking. He knew Patrice would do what was necessary.

“Though, I suppose I will be significantly less useful if I can’t figure out how to keep The Chamber House running.”

“Well Patrice,” Luke offered, “You’ll be going behind Sander’s back if you do this with us.”

Luke knew Patrice would like that idea.

“That’s probably the only thing about all this that appeals to me, beyond getting things going around here of course.” Patrice responded.

“I’m going to round up a few other people, people I can trust in the field. You will be as safe as possible.” Luke added.

Patrice let out a long sigh and sat down in his chair for a moment.

“Okay Luke. I’ll go. But I’m not happy about it.”

“None of us are happy about going. It’s necessary and that’s why we’re doing it.” Luke replied.

“Well, go round up the rest of’em and give me a couple days’ notice before it’s time to head out.” Patrice instructed Luke.

“Will do. We’ll talk soon.”

Besides Lanisha, Luke had two other people in mind for this trip to Jacksonville and The Mountain.

He needed a mechanic.

Nathaniel or Nate as everyone called him was a big, burly man in his mid fifties. He had an unkept beard and always wore overalls. He fit the stereotype of a mechanic in his looks and attire.

Nate and Luke had been friends since Luke first arrived in an old pickup on its last legs, barely crawling in through the gates.

Nate had fixed up the old truck and it was still running as far as Luke knew.

“Afternoon slick, come to get whooped at cards again or just say hi?”

Nate greeted Luke as he walked in to see Nate in the repair shop. Nate fixed up all the van’s they used for Search and Clear runs. He also worked, together with a couple other mechanics, on anything else needing to be fixed.

“When I’m ready to give some money away I’ll play again Nate.” Luke smiled at Nate as he replied.

Nate laughed and took a big swig of something out of his thermos. Luke had found the thermos during one of his trips and brought it back for Nate.

“How are things going for the desperados these days?” That’s what Nate called those who went out on Search and Clear assignments.

“Pretty well generally, although you heard about Morty.”

“Yeah, eery shit what happened. Still doesn’t make sense to me.” Nate thought aloud.

“We’re still trying to figure it out, but we don’t know much at this point.” Luke added.

“It’s probably got a few of’em spooked though.” Nate continued.

“Yeah, we lost a few from the ranks. But most have held it together pretty well.” Luke admitted.

“Morty was a great guy. Hell of a card player too. Took my money more than a few times. Funny as hell. I’ll miss him.” Nate finally said.

Luke knew that Morty and Nate hung out a lot together. They had been close friends.

“I know you were two were close. It’s tough to lose a friend like that” Luke replied without looking at Nate.

“We were and I will miss him. But he wouldn’t want me to get all down about it so I won’t. Gotta keep on truckin!”

Luke grinned and let the silence hang between them for a few moments.

“Nate I need your help. It’s a big deal and I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t.”

“Okay, whatcha need?”

“The Chamber House is going to stop working soon and Patrice can only think of one way to fix it, but it’s a long shot, not guaranteed to work.”

“Well Luke, I’m not really that kind of mechanic. I don’t fix techno gadgetry shit like that.”

“No, I understand that Nate. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Well, what then?”

“We gotta go outside, first to Jacksonville, then to The Mountain. I need a guy who can fix things along the way and also maybe help out with getting things working once we get to our final destination. You understand how to get mechanical things working. You’re the best we got to do it.”

“Okay, I’m in.” Nate responded.

Luke had expected a little more coaxing and was surprised by Nate’s quick agreement.

“You are?” was all he could think to say.

“Okay, great! I was expecting you to take a little longer to convince.”

“Nah, I could use a break from this place and a little adventure. Plus, I know you need that chamber thingy to stay vertical and so do a lot of other people here.”

There was a pause, then Nate continued, “I’ve been a little more depressed than I care to admit about Morty disappearing. I need a distraction. This sounds like the ticket.”

“Oh, I forgot to add, “We are doing this without Sanders’s approval or knowledge. You okay with that? I need you to not let this get back to him on your end.”

Nate cough-laughed as he spoke, “That shouldn’t be a problem at all”

Luke smiled, not expecting that it would be a problem.

“Great. I’ll be in touch soon. I’ll give you a day or two notice before we head out. I’ve gotta round up one more person.”

“Sounds great. Keep me posted. You got time to hang out for a bit or you gotta run?”

Luke was glad to hang out with Nate for a while. They drank some whiskey together, Luke just a little, but Nate a lot, while Luke listened to Nate talk about Morty and life into the early morning.

Gloria Ruger was a stocky woman in her late thirties. She was tall as well. She didn’t look like one of the best scouts Luke had ever known. She was also retired from SaC work and mostly kept to herself nowadays.

Gloria had a rough life before Civilization fell and the scars to prove it. Once she admitted to Luke during a trip outside to find supplies that occasionally she made money as a cage fighter to get by.

She was born and grew up off the grid in Southern Alabama. Her family was killed in a hurricane when she was in her mid-teens and then she bounced around foster homes until she was nineteen. Nobody wanted to adopt a teenager with a sour attitude about life.

Luke had learned this much from working with Gloria on runs but didn’t know too much more about her history. He wasn’t the prying type, so he didn’t press her for details.

“Hey stranger!” Gloria yelled out to him from the garden.

“I’m looking for the person in charge around here!” Luke yelled back to her. He was trying to appear somewhat concerned.

“I ate some bitter radishes yesterday. Is that normal?”

“Radishes are supposed to be bitter!” Gloria responded with a big smile. “Maybe you should spend some time working with me in the garden and you would finally learn something for once in your life.”

Luke laughed and gave Gloria a hug.

“Yeah, I know. I should. I’ve got a pretty busy schedule being lazy though.” Luke responded after stepping back from Gloria.

“At least you’re putting some of your off-grid skills to work around here.” Luke added.

Gloria had basically taken over raising fresh crops in Hampton Flats since her retirement from S&C work. She was quite adept at gardening.

“It relaxes me, and I know how to do it.” She responded.

“I am glad to hear that. You deserve to be happy.” Luke told her.

“Let me show you around.” Gloria said as she began walking through the rows of crops. A few others were working in the garden as well. Gloria greeted them as she explained what was growing in various places to Luke.

Luke could see that Gloria was happy. He didn’t relish the idea of pulling her away from all this, but he knew he needed her.

After about thirty minutes or so they ended up back where they started.

“You’re doing a fantastic job here Gloria, I mean that.” Luke finally said.

“It’s something I can bring into the world from my childhood. All my memories aren’t horrible. I was happy as a young kid. I enjoyed living off the grid.”

With Luke Gloria was approachable and generally pleasant. But she wasn’t overly friendly toward most people. Luke appreciated that he got to see the side of her few others did.

Gloria went on, “I like the people who work with me in the garden. There’s not a lot of assholes in gardening and it’s quiet work. Not stressful.”

“Yeah, I can see that appealing side of it all here. It is something I should get into more often.” Luke responded.

“I know you’re busy Luke. You probably didn’t come here just to get a tour of the garden, but I couldn’t help myself and gave you one anyway. So…you gonna tell me what brings you this way, aside from my undeniable charm? Gloria was smiling again, but also looking a little weary.

She could sense something was up and Luke wouldn’t earn any points from her by beating around the bush about it.

“Yes, let’s walk a little.” Luke didn’t want to be within earshot of anyone.

“A lot of people around here, myself included, are grateful to you for providing these fresh crops. I hate to ask this of you, but I need you for something that will require you to leave this behind for a while.”

Gloria nodded, “Tell me what’s up Luke.”

“You know that I need The Chamber to stay upright and copasetic, just like some other people around here.”

“I know. A couple of the people who work in the garden do as well. Tasha and Gerald over there are regular customers at The Chamber House.”

Luke looked over to the garden, following Gloria’s gaze. “It helps a lot of people.” Luke answered.

“So what do you need from me about The Chamber House?” Gloria asked.

“Recently the mixture that provides the cocktail we rely on has become unstable. That means it won’t keep working for us and Patrice doesn’t know how to fix it. This could become a catastrophic problem for us all in Hampton Flats if we can’t figure out a solution. That’s why I need you.”

“Need me how?”

“It is a long shot, I won’t sugar coat that. It’s not guaranteed to work.

Luke waited a few seconds and continued, “Gloria I wouldn’t ask this of you if it wasn’t so important. I need you to go with us to Jacksonville and then to The Mountain. Patrice thinks he may be able to find something that will fix The Chamber there.”

Gloria looked down at the ground. “Fuck Luke, I never wanted to go back out there. I really didn’t.”

“I know and I hate to ask this of you, but you are the best scout we’ve got and we need the best chance of success.”

Gloria bit her lip and scowled. “Asking me to leave for a long shot huh?”

“I am. People who have a life because of The Chamber won’t have a life at all when it breaks down.”

Gloria looked again over to the garden, at Tasha and Gerald. Then she looked at Luke.

Gloria shook her head slowly. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

Luke let out a relieved breath he had been holding.

“Thank you.” Luke gently grasped Gloria’s shoulders and repeated, “Thank you.”

“We’ll leave in a couple days. Do whatever you have to do to be ready by then. We aren’t telling anyone about this so keep it between us. I’ll come get you when it’s time to go.”

Gloria looked back at Luke. She was about as tall as him. “Okay, I’ll keep it between us and I’ll be ready when you come for me.”

Luke smiled at Gloria, “I’ll see you soon.”

# Chapter 10

“You wanna bar Roger?” Jensen asked as he stuffed one into his mouth.

“Those things are nasty. Give me one.” Roger answered as he scooted out from under his truck.

“That should work for awhile.” Roger said out loud to no one in particular.

“You ready old man?” Jensen teased Roger.

“Been ready since before you were born.” Roger answered gruffly.

“Let’s get this party started then.” Jensen smiled as he brushed Roger’s gruff tone off.

“We got important shit to do.” Jensen added.

“Yeah as usual Jenson. Get in.” Roger got into the driver’s side without looking at Jensen for a reply.

They drove out of Jacksonville as Jensen asked, “What’s goin on with that chick we pulled out of the car? I haven’t heard you talk too much about her since we brought her back.”

“Nothin to tell. She’s claiming amnesia from hitting her head. Doesn’t know much about her past or why she was out there.”

“You buyin it?”

“Don’t know. She’s not any help with figuring out the cube thing or much else. We’ll see if she remembers anything I guess.”

“Huh, I guess.” Jensen replied.

Jensen surveyed their map as Roger drove. “There’s a few places we haven’t checked outside of the city yet. You know eventually we’ll probably have to head in there.”

“Probably, eventually. City’s dangerous. Narrow corners, blocked streets, more crazies.” Roger responded.

“Yeah, all the fun stuff. I know. Can’t wait.” Jensen smiled as he spoke.

He added, “Let’s take a side road a few miles down the road. Small town there we haven’t been through before. Might be somethin.”

Roger nodded. He was thinking of Carly at the moment. She seemed okay, but he still didn’t quite buy her amnesia story. It felt like she was hiding something.

She hadn’t really done anything to make him suspicious, but he still was all the same.

They turned onto the side road. Jensen was quiet now. They had spent many hours on the road in silence on many trips outside Jacksonville. It was nothing odd to spend hours not talking.

“Hold up Roger.” Jensen said quickly, pulling Roger out of his own thoughts.

“What is it?”

Jensen pointed across the field on the other side of the road.

Roger saw it now. There was a man standing on the dirt road, just off the road they were driving.

“The dude’s just standing there.” Jensen noted.

Roger was on his guard now. “Yeah, see if he’s got any buddies.”

Jensen was already doing so. “I don’t see anyone else, but that don’t mean nothin.”

Roger slowed his truck to a stop just before the road where the man was standing a ways down. He kept the truck in drive.

“You okay Mr.?” Roger called out to the man.

No response.

The man stared at him but didn’t move. Then suddenly, the man ran into the field. Faster than Roger had ever seen anyone run and was gone.

“Fuck!” yelled Jensen. “That dude took off quick!”

Roger and Jensen were looking behind them and all around now. There was no sign of anyone.

“That was fucking weird.” Jensen spoke in a slightly nervous tone. “That dude could be anywhere.”

Roger felt a little uneasy himself. “Yeah, it was strange. We better keep moving.” He started driving again.

“You think he was sick?” Jensen asked Roger.

“Something wasn’t right with the guy. You saw him just standin there staring at us. Then take of in a sprint, faster than I’ve ever seen anyone run.”

“Probably sick. Shit their getting faster Roger.” Jensen was still nervous. Roger was feeling a little edgy himself now.

“Let’s just get on with our business. Stay on your toes. How far to the town?”

“About ten miles now, not too far.”

“Keep an eye out. Let me know if you see anything at all. We’ve seen plenty of weird shit. We’re not gonna get spooked by another infected.”

Jensen did as told, keeping an eye out while Roger drove.

They arrived at the town a short while later, Preenville according to the welcome sign.

Roger parked at the beginning of the main street. The town wasn’t much more than the main street. The street sign had been hit and was damaged, but showed that they were indeed on Main Street.

“Like usual.” Roger said to Jensen as they both exited the vehicle.

“Yep.” Jensen replied.

Jensen took the right side of the street and Roger the left.

Jensen tried the first door to what looked like a hair dresser. It stuck a little, but eventually opened stubbornly. There was a large cabinet just behind the door. It looked like someone had used it to barricade the door a while ago. It had been pushed back from the door so Jensen figured someone else had been here before him.

“Figures” He said to himself. “Probably picked the place clean.”

Like he suspected there was nothing valuable to be found, aside from a few pairs of scissors, in the hair dresser shop.

He moved on to the next store, which was an animal feed store. He looked across the street but didn’t see any sign of Roger.

He tried him on the walkie, “Roger, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here, just lookin. Nothin yet.” Roger replied over the walkie.

“Me either. I’m headin into the feed store.”

“Keep your eyes open Jensen.”

“Roger that!” Jensen replied with a grin and put the walkie back on his belt.

The door to the feed store opened easily and Jensen entered without any trouble. There were some shelves with dog and cat toys just inside the door. These had been largely untouched.

There were a few rows between the inside walls of the store with various items. It looked like most of the rows had been picked over before, but there were some things still available. Jensen went over and looked at some canned dog food. People didn’t really have pets anymore. Maybe a few livestock animals, like in Jacksonville and a dog here and there.

Jensen picked up the dog food and put it in his bag. He kept looking around.

As he was scanning the next isle over he heard a click. He knew exactly what that meant instantly.

“Don’t turn around stranger. Drop the bag, slowly, then the walkie.”

Jensen emphasized dropping the bag long enough to flip the walkie on so that Roger could hear him. He then dropped the walkie on top of the bag.

The voice behind him continued, “move up against the wall, slowly.”

Jensen did as he was told.

“How many of ya are there out there?”

Jensen didn’t answer immediately.

“I won’t ask you again stranger.”

“There’s five of us.” Jensen finally replied.

“Funny, I only saw two of ya get outta that truck.”

“The other three came in from the other side of town.” Jensen lied.

“Bullshit!” the voice behind him replied.

Jensen heard someone moving behind him and then the voice was talking again. “I got your friend here all tied up. Go back to your truck and drive away now if you ever want to see him alive again.”

There was no response on the other end of the walkie, as Jensen expected.

Jensen heard the voice again, “He moves, shoot him.”

Someone moved over to the window across the way from Jensen.

“Don’t see your friend out there stranger. I guess he don’t care nothin about you.”

“He’s probably busy. Give’em a minute.” Jensen replied.

“He don’t get a minute, but you’ll get a bullet.”

Jensen closed his eyes and tried to think of something to stall them a little.

Just then he heard the sound of glass breaking and footsteps running across the floor above him.

“Marta! You okay? What’s happenin up there!?” The voice behind him called out.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” A woman’s voice called back. “Someone threw a brick through the window.”

“Get back from the window Marta!” the voice behind Jensen commanded.

Then Jensen heard scuffling behind him. He turned around to see Roger had grabbed one of the two men and was behind him, holding a gun to his head.

The man who had been speaking to him yelled at Roger. “Let him go mister or I’ll put one in your friend over there.

Roger replied, calmly, “Let my friend walk outside, put your gun down, kick it away from you and I’ll leave behind him.”

“No way dumb ass.” The guy who had been holding Jensen at gunpoint responded.

“Then I guess we stand here like this until one of us gets tired.” Roger answered.

“I knew there was only two of ya.” The guy replied.

“Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t.” Roger countered.

Just then they all heard a large thump sound outside, followed by a few banging sounds against the building and then more glass breaking above them.

Marta screamed and there was more thumping above them.

Jensen hit the floor as the man shot where he had been standing and then towards where Jensen had dove.

Roger wacked the man he was holding the gun to in the head, dropping him to the floor.

The guy who had just shot at Jensen turned to shoot at Roger. Roger fired at him at the same time and the man fell to the ground.

The man who had fallen to the ground looked stunned a little but was trying to scoot away from Roger.

Roger put his hand to his side, feeling blood.

Then he heard the sound of a door crashing open and something pounding down the stairs.

At the far end of the isles he could see someone running at full speed toward one of the isles. He rushed into one and sent the whole isle falling over.

Roger rushed toward where Jensen had been laying. Jensen was already getting to his feet.

Something or someone pounded into the next isle over and sent it crashing down as well.

The man on the floor screamed and someone was on him.

Roger recognized the man he and Jensen had seen earlier on the road.

Now he was covered in blood and moving quickly. He had a sharp object in his hands and was tearing away at the man on the floor, while also clawing at the man’s head.

Roger motioned to Jensen and they headed for the door as quickly as possible. Jensen was limping.

“He grazed me in the leg.” Jensen whispered as they headed out the door.

“looks like he got your worse.” Jensen added glancing at Roger’s side.

“I’ll be fine.” Was all Roger could get out as they made their way towards the truck as quickly as possible.

Jensen and Roger had just got into the truck and got it started when they heard a loud crash and the door to the feed store flew out into the street.

The man they had both seen earlier on the road, now all bloody, and with no expression on his face, looked directly at them and started running faster than Roger had ever seen anybody run toward the truck, still holding something sharp.

Roger put the truck in gear and pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

The man caught up to them quickly and jumped into the back of Roger’s truck. He ran up the bed and started beating on the top of the cab, making dents with his fists.

“Shoot him!” Roger yelled at Jensen as he pointed his own gun towards the top of the cab and started shooting.

Jensen was shooting too, both at the top of the cab and towards the back into the bed of the truck.

The pounding continued and the bullet holes grew bigger as Roger could see bloody hands tearing larger holes in the top of the cab.

Roger kept shooting. The pounding stopped suddenly, and Roger felt a jolt. He looked out the window on his side and barely caught a glimpse of something moving quickly into the trees to his side.

“Fucking hell!” Jensen yelled. He had fired all his rounds.

Roger kept driving fast.

“What the fuck was that!?” Jensen yelled.

Roger barely heard Jensen.

“Roger! Roger! You okay?”

The truck swerved and went off the side of the road into the ditch.

Jensen was still yelling, but Roger couldn’t hear him anymore.

# Chapter 11

“I’m really not cut out for this type of thing at all Luke.” Patrice said for probably the tenth time as they neared the vehicle servicing shed.

“It’s you or no one Patrice.” Luke replied, trying not to sound as repetitive as Patrice.

“We need your brain, not your tactical skills. Leave all that to Lanisha, Nate, Gloria and me.”

“Like it’ll really be that easy. I’ve heard too many stories about what happens out there not to be worried.”

Luke knew Patrice was making a valid point but did not want to encourage more doubt.

“You’ll be okay Patrice. Let us handle all the rough stuff. Which, by the way, we’ll do everything we can to avoid.”

They approached one of the vans where Nate was giving it one final check-up.

Nate smiled wide at Luke and Patrice, “Hey Patrice! Ready to get this party started?”

Patrice tried to smile but didn’t quite make it. “Hey Nate. Yeah, let’s do it.”

Gloria joined them by the van. “Hey Patrice. Don’t worry. We got your back, no matter what.”

Patrice tried to smile again. It was obvious he was quite nervous.

“I know you do. Thank you. I mean that. I’ll probably settle down after we get going.”

“Everything loaded up?” Luke asked, looking at both Gloria and Nate.

“Ready to rumble Luke!” Nate answered as Gloria nodded.

“Great! Let’s get ourselves loaded up and get out of here while we still can.” Luke half-joked, still wanting to get out of Hampton Flats without Sanders finding out.

“Lanisha’s meeting us at the gate.” Luke added as they piled in the van.

Nate volunteered himself as the driver and Gloria was riding shotgun. Gloria was the best at navigating and finding a way through anything.

Luke sat in the back, leaving the seat directly behind Nate and Gloria open for Patrice and Lanisha after they picked her up.

“There she is. I see her now.” Nate piped up as they approached the gate.

Lanisha was talking to the guard on duty as they drove up. She waived to them.

The guard, Thomas, also waived.

“Hey girl!” Gloria yelled as she rolled down the passenger side window. “You wanna go for a ride?”

“Hell yeah!” Lanisha answered, picking up her small bag and going around to the side of the van.

“Hey Thomas.” Gloria continued. “We’re checking outta here for awhile. Keep your nose clean till we get back!” Gloria enjoyed harassing people. Everyone liked her.

“Will do Mam.” Thomas answered as he opened the gate.

“And don’t go peepin to anyone you saw us leave!” Nate yelled over at Thomas from the driver’s seat.

“No sir!” Thomas replied.

Lanisha sat down next to Patrice and looked back at Luke. “Where we headed?”

“We gotta get to Jacksonville and find this Pete guy. See if he can tell us any details about The Mountain.”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult. Take us about six days to get there.” Gloria added.

Lanisha leaned forward and slapped Nate on the shoulder. “Hey old man!”

“Hey kid.” Nate grunted back with a slight grin.

“Hi Patrice. Glad to see you came.” She held out her hand and Patrice shook it gingerly.

“Thanks. I’m trying to be brave out here.” Patrice replied.

Lanisha let go of Patrice’s hand and looked back at Luke. “We goin to find this Pete guy?”

“That’s the plan.” Luke answered. “Him and Patrice knew each other. They worked together on a project or two back in the day.”

Patrice interjected himself. “We didn’t really work together closely, but we did interact a couple of times while working on the same project. It’s not like we are close or anything. I just know what he was working on and it may help us figure some things out about The Mountain.”

“What’s there that we need?” Lanisha asked.

Patrice sighed. “Maybe a way to fix The Chamber. A lot of the work The Chamber is based on started there and maybe there’s something there that will tell us how to fix our problem.”

“Maybe huh?” Lanisha hesitated for a moment then added, “It does sound like a long shot.”

Luke nodded. “It does and it is. We don’t know if we’ll find anything. But…we have to try. It’s all we’ve got at this point.”

“If Pete’s still alive, still living in Jacksonville and is willing to even help us.” Patrice added. “Like I said, we weren’t really friends and he may have no interest in our problem.”

“We gotta try Patrice.” Luke said, looking out the van window.

“I know we do. I’m just trying to set reasonable expectations.”

“Well, we’ve got something to offer and maybe Pete will like what we have.” Luke responded.

“Maybe.” It was Patrice’s turn to look out the window in thought.

“Let’s be positive guys.” Nate chimed in. “It’s all we’ve got at the moment.

“What can you tell us about Pete?” Luke asked Patrice after a few moments had passed in silence.

“He was a general contractor. Owned his own construction company. He’s a brilliant engineer. Built more than a few of the high level research facilities for big corporations and some government installations as well. He had high level security clearance and did his job well. All the big guys reached out to him first.”

Luke nodded and Patrice continued. “Last I heard he was in Jacksonville. That was just rumor passed around from a few people who wandered into Hampton Flats. He could be anywhere now…or dead.”

“If he’s alive and can be found, we’ll find him.” Luke sounded confident.

“Resourceful guys like him would’ve found a way to stay alive.” Nate added from the driver’s seat.

“Probably.” Patrice agreed.

Gloria had been surveying their map during their conversation. “It looks like we’ll be taking some back roads to connect to a few highways. Doin some back and forth between here and there.”

She moved the map closer to Nate and continued, “We gotta take this road in a few miles and stay on it for about forty miles or so.”

Nate nodded and kept driving.

Nate looked in the rearview mirror at Patrice. “What can this guy tell us about The Mountain?”

“Maybe a way to get in that doesn’t require a lot of explosions and breaking stuff. Also, where the information I need would most likely be in the facility.” Patrice replied.

“Gotcha.” Nate nodded.

Lanisha had been listening to the others converse. “Maybe this Pete guy would like to get some things for himself from The Mountain.”

Neither Patrice or Luke had thought of that before.

“He was the lead contractor and engineer. He oversaw the entire project of building the place.” Patrice thought out loud.

“That’s a great idea!” Luke grinned at Lanisha. “Maybe he will.”

“We’ll need to fill up a few times on our way there.” Gloria interrupted their conversation. “I mapped out a few places where we filled up before when I did S&C. I heard from a few people they’ve used them too within the past few months.”

“Yeah, they also got into a shootout at one of those places not too long ago. A bunch of nomad thugs tryin to do the same thing.” Luke commented.

“I heard about that too.” Gloria added.

Lanisha had heard about it as well. “A couple of our people got pretty banged up. One of them almost didn’t make it back. She’s still messed up from it. Can’t use her arm too well anymore.”

“Well, it’s a valuable location. Only gas supply for miles. We’ll be beyond running on fumes if we don’t stop and fill up there.” Gloria replied.

“That all sounds terrible.” Patrice chimed in. He shook his head again. “I can’t believe I agreed to do this.”

“We’ll be cautious and not take any risks we don’t have to out here. That’s how it works.” Luke tried to sound reassuring.

“We’ll check it out on foot before driving the van in there.” Lanisha added, nodding to Gloria.

“Agreed. Generally, nomads like that don’t settle down for too long. But we’ll be on the safe side just in case.” Luke was looking towards Patrice as he spoke. Patrice was listening but had focused on the scenery outside again.

“These folks will look after you Patrice. You’re in the best hands out here.” Nate said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I’ll settle down. I knew the risks too. I agreed to come. I need to find my own acceptance with that.” Patrice replied.

“I figure we’ll get there by the third day. It’s a little closer to Jacksonville than The Flats. There’s another place we’ll fill up before that. Shouldn’t be dangerous.” Gloria added.

Luke knew he was on borrowed time now. He was starting to feel the slight tingling that would get more severe over time. Patrice had told him he could probably go for two or three weeks without treatment before things got too uncomfortable. And probably a month or two after that before he started to lose his sanity.

Patrice had said these things in such a calm and reassuring tone. It was odd to see him so unsettled outside the gates. But that was his comfort zone. His safe place. Out here was not safe or comfortable for Patrice. Luke thought Patrice might be feeling something like what he felt, not knowing if he would be okay in the near future.

All they could do was move forward. If this was the only shot at a solution, they had to take it, whatever the risks. Patrice understood that, but it didn’t make it any easier for him.

Luke suspected it wasn’t going to be easy for any of them before it was all over.

# Chapter 12

Morty, or what had been Morty, was no more.

A consciousness came into being that only glimpsed fragments of its former self.

What had been Morty understood vibrations and sounds before incomprehensible to the man everyone knew as Morty.

It was this different being that existed now. It knew of itself and others like itself but did not think in terms of individual or group.

It understood reality in frequencies and sounds. Thoughts were patterns of vibrations and light.

Resonating frequencies moved into and out of awareness in oscillating waves. These were the other beings in the direct vicinity.

Each felt a little different, yet all shared a standard base frequency. This allowed for identifying the group members and distinguishing between them.

Meaning and intent were achieved through a limitless array of low and high-pitched sounds, mostly inaudible to the human ear.

These beings could move with absolute stealth and communicate clearly without making any sounds a person would be able to hear.

Morty had been taken about two weeks ago, and now he was almost a new being, utterly foreign to what he had been in every way.

In reality, he was not a “he” any longer. Nor a “She.” It was different entirely. Sexual identification was unnecessary since these beings did not reproduce. There was no lust or desire for copulation. No emotions. No jealousy.

Energy for existence came from surrounding light and sound. There was no need to eat or drink.

Somehow the new being understood its purpose and knew it must be here, amongst the others. It knew that it always was supposed to be here.

The beings around it were supposed to be there as well. But, there were a few others who must join them.

All of them felt the pull to complete their numbers to begin what was necessary.

Day or night no longer held any meaning. They could move just as quickly in either environment, undetected and without interruption.

Now that the transformation into a new being from what had been was complete, it was time to move out again and find the others who belonged with them.

They moved out into the day, silent to any human ear, and made their way toward the strongest pull. It would lead them directly to a new one who must come together with their energy and purpose.

# Chapter 13

Roger awoke.

At first, he saw nothing, then faint lights appeared. He heard a deep, gruff voice in the distance.

“Looks like this feller might pull through, just barely. Crazy fucker lost a lot of blood. I’ve seen a lot of men and women die after losing less. We’ll see if he comes back all the way or not, I suppose.”

Roger mumbled. “Doc? You here?”

“Yeah, it’s me, you stupid bastard. Can you see me yet?”

Roger blinked several times, and things cleared up a bit, but not completely. He could mostly make out Doc’s face but wasn’t awake enough to pay much attention to anything or anyone else. His mouth was parched.

“Can I get some water? Roger tried to swallow but failed. His mouth was dry, and he felt painful scratches on his throat.

“Just a little bit,” Doc answered. “We’ve had you on IVs for days, and you haven’t really been taken in too many liquids by mouth.”

Doc held Roger’s head in one hand and poured a small cup of water into Roger’s mouth with the other hand.

Roger coughed and spit the water out. He couldn’t get it down his throat.

“Let’s try again.” Doc commented quietly.

This time Roger was able to swallow the water.

*That’s such a fuckin relief*. He thought to himself.

“We’ll try some more in a while.” Doc said, putting the cup down on a table beside the bed.

“You able to talk? Can you tell how you're feelin?

After several seconds Roger answered. “I feel dried out and weak. I can’t think straight.”

“That’s a start at least. If you had brain damage, you probably wouldn’t realize that you couldn’t think straight.” Doc replied with a grin. “But you ain’t out of the woods yet, young man. We need to keep the IVs runnin for a while and you need plenty of rest.”

“Jenson!” Roger yelled out lout. Suddenly starting to remember some of what happened.

“Relax, he’s a hell of a lot better off than you.” Doc answered quickly.

Roger settled a bit and tried to make his brain work. He wasn’t having much success.

“You worry about you for the time being and don’t give me no shit about it.” Doc spoke in his usual gruff tone.

Roger nodded, not really able to do anything else at the moment.

“I’ll be back to check on ya in a bit. You might make it if you don’t die between now and then.”

Roger was too weak to say anything else. Doc got up and left. Roger fell back asleep.

Doc closed the door behind him and found Carly waiting outside in the hall.

“How’s he doin Doc? She asked.

“He might make it. He was awake for a few and we talked a little. Doesn’t seem to have any brain damage at least. I have no idea if he’ll get back to his usual self, but we’ll know a lot more in a few days. He’s resting now. Leave him alone.” Without saying anything else Doc continued waking down the hall.

Carly looked toward the room but decided against crossing Doc on this matter.

She also turned and headed in the same direction as Doc.

Once outside she headed over the restaurant where Jensen was taking a break from watching over Roger. She had actually talked him into getting a bite to eat and now intended to join him and give an update.

Jensen hadn’t slept much in the past week since he had brought Roger into the hospital, barely breathing.

The restaurant was hopping today. It took her a few seconds to spot Jensen in a small corner booth. She navigated around several standing patrons, smiled at Rhonda who was quite distracted, and finally made it over to Jensen.

He looked up from playing with his fries and smiled weakly. “Hey Carly. Any update?”

“Yes actually.” She replied. “I met up with Doc outside Roger’s room. He said he was awake for a few minutes and they spoke, but I’m not allowed to see him just yet. Doc wants him to rest.”

“That’s great news!” Jensen smiled as he spoke. “We’ll let him rest and see when Doc will let us in there I guess.”

Jensen had already related the entire story of their mishap to Carly on more than a few occasions.

The crazed activity and strength of the man Jensen and Roger encountered was familiar to Carly. She had seen it before, up close, but was not about to give any more information than was necessary, and she kept what she knew to herself.

She wasn’t here to make friends with anyone, just play along until she got what she wanted. She knew, however, that she needed Roger.

That’s why she had done to him what she did shortly after they brought him into the hospital. She knew he probably would be dead if she hadn’t. But it wasn’t out of any compassion. Only self-interest.

“That thing that attacked us was the craziest shit I’ve ever seen.” Jensen remarked again as Carly set down.

“I don’t know how we made it out of that nightmare alive.”

“You were very lucky.” Carly answered.

“Yeah…yeah I guess.” Jensen thought out loud as he looked out the window only half replying to Carly.

“Did you eat anything at least?” Carly asked, looking down at Jensen’s plate. She could see that he hadn’t really eaten anything. She didn’t really care but was acting concerned like how people are supposed to when making conversation.

Jensen looked down at his plate. “No, you caught me. I just don’t feel hungry.”

“Take some food in your hands, put it in your mouth, chew and swallow. Just go through the motions until you get your appetite back.”

“I have nightmares about that thing every night. I don’t know how we would stop it if it came to Jacksonville. It moves fast and can punch or rip through just about anything.”

“Well you won’t do anything at all if you’re too weak to walk Jensen. Eat up!”

Carly managed to get Rhonda’s attention and ordered some soup and fresh vegetables on the side.

She kept encouraging Jensen to eat with meager success as she ate her meal and drank her water.

“You’ll be able to talk to Roger soon. Then you feel a little better. Maybe the two of you can figure something out. Maybe you won’t see that thing again. Nobody’s gone out for any supplies since you two got back.”

“Yeah, I’m stressing about that too.” Jensen replied. “Everybody’s freaked out about it, but we gotta get supplies. The garden and few livestock we have can’t do it all. Plus we need medical supplies and shit like that.”

“Wait till you can talk to Roger. You guys will figure something out.” Carly tried to sound more sure than she felt.

She knew how desperate and irrational people could become when supplies dwindled. She didn’t want to be here if and/or when that happened.

She needed Roger’s help to find The Cube and get her out of here as soon as possible.

She needed to get to The Mountain.

# Chapter 14

“Get some well you can!” Lanisha yelled to the rest of the group.

“I heard that.” Replied Nate looking over toward where Lanisha stood.

They had settled in for their second night of rest since leaving Hampton Flats. So far, the trip had been uneventful.

“Gloria, you found us a great place to stay this evening. Your skills are superb.” Remarked Luke.

Even Patrice was impressed. “This is not what I expected during a road trip.

Gloria, renowned for her scouting (and gardening) skills, had led them to an abandoned hotel along their travel route. It would have easily been a four- or possibly five-star hotel when it was up and running.

Now it was abandoned but still remarkably clean inside, despite a bit of dust and no water in the pool.

“Don’t get too used to it, guys. On our trip, we won’t be enjoying comfortable beds and clean sheets again. Enjoy it while you can.” Gloria said aloud to the whole group.

They had taken some food from a stash hidden nearby for the SaC crew when they were out on long trips.

Lanisha had set up and cooked their meal on a propane stove hidden with the stash.

Everyone sat close together at the tables in the hotel’s breakfast area. Large windows faced the afternoon sun, and they provided ample natural lighting.

“This place is well off the radar and not at all visible from any major roads, so I think we’ll be pretty safe here tonight,” Gloria commented as they ate.

“Don’t worry, Patrice. We’ll still rotate watch duties during the evening to keep everyone safe.” Luke added.

“We’ll make an adventurer out of you yet, Patrice.” Nate joked as he patted Patrice on the back.

Patrice smiled faintly and tried to look comfortable. He didn’t see how becoming an “adventurer” would ever be possible.

They finished dinner and went to their rooms situated close to one another.

“Patrice, hold on a sec.” Luke said quietly as everyone was heading to bed.

“Yeah, Luke? What’s going on? Are you feeling symptoms?” Patrice looked concerned.

“No, not yet. But I’ll let you know if I do.”

Luke continued. “I need to ask you if there’s any way Sanders could know about Peter in Jacksonville.”

Patrice thought for several seconds before answering. “Not that I know of. I didn’t say anything to him. I don’t know of anyone else in The Flats that knows Peter. But…I guess it’s possible.

Patrice looked away and then back to Luke. “Why do you ask?”

“Lanisha and I were talking about Sanders wanting to reach out to Jacksonville. I had already told her our basic plan, and she asked if Sanders might know Peter. If that was why he wanted to reach out to Jacksonville.” Luke answered.

“I can’t think of any way he could know of Peter. Sanders probably has other interests that don’t have anything to do with what we’re doing.” Offered Patrice.

“Yeah, probably.” Luke finally said.

“Well, I have first watch tonight. You get some rest and we’ll head out bright and early tomorrow.” Luke added.

“OK will do.” Patrice said as he tapped Luke on the shoulder.

Luke nodded as Patrice wandered to his room.

Patrice was of course correct thought Luke. It was much more likely that Sanders had other interests. Likely wanting to build on his grand plan of building a network of communities working together for some new kind of civilization to emerge.

No doubt Sanders saw himself as the probable leader of this new civilization. He had quite the ego.

Luke let it go for now and started his watch by checking all the exit doors from the inside before setting up shop at the back of the breakfast area. He sat where he could see both the main entrance and the rear entrance leading into the breakfast area.

*This really is a beautiful place.* Luke allowed himself a few minutes to just sit and enjoy his surroundings.

# Chapter 15

“And you didn’t see anyone leave while you were on shift?” Sanders asked again.

“No, no one came in or out during my shift.” Answered Thomas looking directly at Sanders.

“That’s so bizarre because I talked with a few people who saw Luke and Patrice headed over to the vehicle maintenance area during your shift, and now they’re both gone.” Sanders continued.

Thomas didn’t say anything.

“Can you explain that?” prodded Sanders.

“We can’t see the vehicle maintenance building directly from the gate. Maybe they were just going for a walk. I didn’t speak with them that day.” Thomas explained.

“So, they are just hiding somewhere in Hampton Flats? Or maybe they left through another exit?” Sanders kept pressing. He apparently wanted Thomas to either take the blame or help figure out where five people disappeared without telling him.

Thomas held his hands up and shook his head. “They didn’t say anything to me and I didn’t see them.”

“Huh!” Sanders blurted out exaggeratedly.

“Get a couple of people together and search Hampton Flats. I want you to look everywhere. Talk to as many people as you can. Find out where they went.” Sanders instructed Thomas.

“I’ll get on it immediately.” Thomas responded and moved toward the door.

“Hold on.” Sanders spoke slowly.

Thomas turned back toward Sanders. “If I find out you are holding something back from me I’ll have you exiled from Hampton Flats.” Sanders threatened Thomas.

Thomas nodded and went out the door.

Sanders sat and looked at the door Thomas had just exited for several minutes. He hated not to be in control of things, and Sanders knew Luke was up to something, and he had to delicately balance things with Luke.

Luke was well respected in Hampton Flats. This meant Sanders couldn’t go after him directly. He would prefer to have Luke out of the way entirely but could never get close to a way to make that happen.

*If Luke fucks up my plans with Jacksonville, I’ll use that to get rid of him*.

He knew he would have to pick up the pace of sending a group to meet with Jacksonville. Maybe with Luke gone, it would be easier to succeed in making that happen.

Sanders felt uneasy but decided to move ahead, and quickly.

# Chapter 16

“You’re doin great old man.” Jensen commented as he walked beside Roger in the hallway outside his room.

Roger grunted a little and smiled at Jensen. “And you’re full of shit.”

Jensen laughed then said, “I guess if you know I’m full of shit you don’t got any brain damage then.”

Now Roger laughed. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Roger was recovering quickly. Doc commented that he didn’t expect Roger to be up and around so fast.

“Hey man. I gotta tell ya. In all seriousness. I didn’t know if you were gonna make it.” Jensen said as Roger finally made it over to a chair in his room.

“I’m really glad to see you upright.”

Roger knew Jensen was sincere, but he wasn’t great at being vulnerable or getting close to people.

“Thanks Jensen.” He managed to say finally.

Roger was also surprised by how fast he was getting better. He didn’t admit that to anyone, but it was a faster recovery than even he expected. It was strange, but something about that was actually bothering him.

“Anyone else gone out yet?” He asked Jensen.

“Yeah, Parker and Ellie went out yesterday. First time in almost two weeks anyone’s done it.” Jensen replied.

“Well, I guess we got fresh vegetables and chickens to keep us going for a while.” Roger commented.

“You worried?” Jensen asked.

“No.” Roger lied. “You and I will get back to it soon enough.”

Roger was a little worried. Like Carly, he knew what people could be like when they got desperate. He didn’t want to see that happen in Jacksonville.

“Listen old man. I’m not your mother or nothin but take it easy on yourself till you’re better. You push yourself too hard and you’ll be lucky to ever get out of here in a vertical way.”

Roger thought of snapping back at Jensen but decided Jensen was just trying to be helpful.

“I’m gonna rest for a while. Get out of here so I can relax and get some sleep.” Roger said.

“Will do! I’ll stop by tomorrow and harass you some more.” Jensen smiled as he got up and left Roger’s room.

Roger got into bed and again thought about how fast he was recovering. Still, sleep soon overtook him, and he was off in dreamland before Jensen made it out of the hospital.

# Chapter 17

Carly knew people around the hospital, including Doc, were already a little curious about Roger's fast recovery. She didn't want to raise too much suspicion, but she needed to get out of Jacksonville sooner rather than later.

She had already put together a plan for getting Roger to help her get to The Mountain. She knew he was always interested in where he could find supplies for Jacksonville, and she would use that as bait to get him to do what she wanted.

But first, he would need one more transfusion to recover fully and probably be in better shape than before he got injured. The sort of thing she was doing to Roger had never been done in the lab before, at least as far as she knew.

She didn't know if it would actually work, but it was the only thing she could think of at the time.

She was on her way to see Roger now.

It was night, and she intended to sneak in through the hospital's back door and go unnoticed. There weren't very many people around the hospital at night. There weren't actually too many people available with any medical training period. She could quickly get around the little building without being seen.

Carly quietly snuck in the back door and looked around once inside to verify she wasn't seen.

Days before, she had nonchalantly taken a little tour of the place to get its layout. She procured some numbing agent from the supply room that could be rubbed on the skin.

The first time she injected Roger was easy enough. He was a heavy sleeper, probably more so as his body was trying to heal itself.

As she entered his room, she looked around his door again to see if anyone had spotted her. No one did.

Roger was sleeping like she expected. She could hear him snoring lightly.

This second treatment should get him fully recovered in days instead of weeks if it worked like she thought it would.

She had put together a little concoction in a syringe using supplies she had lifted from the hospital during numerous visits. It was composed of mostly her blood and some biomatter she had extracted from her bone marrow using another syringe. The mixture couldn't sit for long, so she had put it together a few hours prior. Her arm, where she extracted the marrow, would heal up quickly.

Carly rubbed some of the numbing agent on the top of Roger's exposed foot. She was going for a spot on the top of his foot where it was less sensitive.

She waited a few moments, allowing the numbing agent to do its job, then delicately pressed the syringe into Roger's foot. It didn't need to all go into his vein. It just needed to get into his body to do its work.

After the syringe was emptied, she looked again at Roger, but he appeared undisturbed.

She quickly placed the syringe back in her coat pocket and went to the door, cracking it open slightly to check the hallway.

"Carly?" She heard a whisper behind her. It was Roger.

She turned to look at him. "Roger? Are you awake? She asked in a surprised tone.

"Yeah…I guess. What are you doing here?"

"I had a nightmare about you and I had to come check on you. I didn't mean to disturb you. Please don't be mad at me." Carly was a fast thinker.

"I'm okay. I just got a little too hot I guess. I saw a light." Roger said.

"That's just light from the hallway. I really didn't mean to disturb you. I just had to come check on you. I was worried." Carly reiterated.

"I'm not mad. Just not used to people sneaking into my room at night. I think it's getting a little warm in here. Would you mind opening the window?" Roger asked.

"No…not at all." Carly moved over to the window and opened it halfway. As she was doing so, it occurred to her that she wasn't warm at all. The room actually felt a little cool to her.

Roger kicked off his covers and stretched a little.

"I'll get you some water. You're probably thirsty." Carly offered as she went over to the sink. She waited for the water to get cold and filled a cup halfway.

"Here you go. Drink this." She offered the cup to Roger.

"Thanks." He drank all of it and asked for another. Carly got him some more water.

"I'll let you sleep. I didn't mean to bother you." She said again.

Roger was feeling tired but also hot.

"I'm okay. Nothin to worry about here." He told Carly.

"I'll come by tomorrow to check on you again, okay?" Carly asked.

"Sure." Roger answered.

"Great. See you tomorrow." Carly tried to look calm and walked out of Roger's room.

She couldn't really sneak out because Roger might think that looked odd. Once outside, she was relieved to find the hallway empty.

She made her way to the back door again and slipped outside.

She had left the window to her room open so she could crawl back through it and not make any noises in the rest of the duplex where she was staying with Claudia.

She had succeeded, just barely.

She was a little worried about Roger getting hot so quickly. Still, She knew the fever would set in following her second transfusion.

Based on her previous laboratory experience, the fever would claim about thirty percent of the trial subjects. She had no idea what would happen here outside the lab, and not observing mixture protocols.

However, she knew a way to stack the odds in her favor, but it would have to wait until the fever had fully presented itself.

If it worked, it would give her much-needed leverage for getting Roger to go with her to The Mountain.

There was nothing she could do about it now but wait and see him in the morning.

Carly wasn't much of a sound sleeper under normal circumstances. Tonight, she wouldn't sleep at all.

She made herself lie on her bed and wait for the day to appear.

# Chapter 18

Gloria spotted them from about half a mile away, leading into the small truck stop gas station way off the main road.

Lanisha crouched beside her next to a sign hanging on a fence. The sign read *Harmington Diesel Engine Repair and Services* and promised “The Best Service for the Best Price in a Hundred Miles!”

The sign was big enough they could both crouch behind it without being seen by anyone on the other side.

Gloria had superb eyesight, day or night. However, today, she and Lanisha relied on binoculars to recon the area. Gloria could make out three men and one woman. She spoke to Lanisha in a hushed voice.

“I can see three men and a woman. So that makes at least four of’em.”

“It looks like there are skulls on the front of their truck, but I can’t tell of what.” Lanish commented.

“We’ll watch them for a bit longer and see if anyone else is with them. They might just be filling up and moving on soon.” Gloria replied.

“Here is as decent a vantage point as anywhere else to do that so let’s just stay put for now.” Gloria added.

Lanisha nodded, watching the four strangers hanging out in front of the *Trucker’s Gear and Grocery* entrance.

After about forty-five minutes, the four strangers piled into their truck. They drove off in the direction opposite Gloria and Lanisha.

“Okay, let’s get closer and check the place out. Stay sharp.” Gloria instructed.

Lanisha liked working with Gloria. She was seasoned in this sort of thing and meticulous as well. Gloria had great instincts and intuition.

“Lead the way,” Lanisha said quietly as she followed Gloria along the fence cautiously.

They didn’t see anyone else as they walked towards the back of the store.

“I found the keys for the doors to this place when I was out still doin SaC patrols. I hid them close by the store in back.” Gloria offered as they were a few yards from the back entrance.

Gloria walked around to an old shipping container that was rusted with its doors bent open. Lanisha followed her but kept watch of their surroundings.

Gloria bent down next to an old commercial cooking stove lying on its side. Grass and other nondescript rusted objects were also littered all around. She briefly wrestled the old stove door open. It creaked loudly in protest and opened halfway. She felt around the stove for a few seconds and emerged with one key.

She held it out for Lanisha to see. “The other one is hidden on the other side of this shipping container, just in case.” Gloria commented. “We’ll put it back when were done checking out the place. Going in the back is less likely to be noticed by anyone passing by.”

Lanisha smiled and nodded. “Great thinking Lady.”

Gloria winked back at her, and they went over to unlock the door.

“We’ll clear the place first then check out the pumps outside. We would hold up inside sometimes in case of bad weather or bein out late on a run.” Gloria informed Lanisha.

Gloria unlocked and opened the door as quietly as possible. She motioned for Lanisha to go inside and followed behind her, shutting the door as she did.

Lanisha turned on her flashlight, as did Gloria. The back room they entered was actually quite large. It had rows of metal shelves looted over the years, and some dusty objects were still sitting on the shelves.

There were also a couple of recliners and a table. It looked like some sort of break area in front of the shelves.

“We and likely others have picked this place pretty clean. Not much left here of value.” Gloria said as she moved her light over the shelves.

“How many times have you been here?” Lanisha asked.

“Probably over a dozen. It was a convenient place to stop when we would go out on longer SaC patrols.” Gloria answered. “I don’t think it’s well known because it never looked like too many other people used it like we did.” She added after a few seconds.

“So…seeing those people today was not routine?” Lanisha questioned.

“No, not really. It did happen a few times. Usually there was no trouble. We would either wait for them to leave or politely say hello.” Gloria answered.

“After what happened to those folks with those nomads though, I’m being extra cautious.”

“Yeah, me too.” Lanisha agreed.

“Let’s check the rest of the place out and get back to the group before it gets dark.” Said Gloria.

Lanisha nodded and headed for the door between the shelves, presumably leading into the front part of the store. Gloria followed.

Lanisha opened the door and stepped into a small hallway. On one side were two doors spaced several feet apart. One read *Guys* and the other *Girls*. Opposite the restrooms was a small office with a window facing the hallway. The door to this office was closed, and it was almost completely dark inside.

Lanisha looked at Gloria and then edged over to the window, looking out into the hallway from the office.

She tried to peek in from the side, but it was too dark to see anything.

She whispered to Gloria, “I’m gonna go under the window and see if I can open the door.”

Gloria nodded, and Lanisha crawled under the window and made her way to the door.

She tried the handle. It opened with a slight creaking sound. Lanisha looked inside from her crouched position, but it was too dark to see anything.

She turned on her flashlight and pointed it into the room.

A big desk was inside, and a couple of chairs were against the wall. Lanisha also noticed a few backpacks and some blankets.

Lanisha stood up and walked into the room. Gloria waited by the door, looking out into the central part of the store.

Lanisha walked around to the back of the desk. Some blankets and an old cushion were laid out behind the desk. She also noticed some clothes and a water bottle, half full of water.

She walked over the Gloria. “It looks like someone was sleeping here recently, but it’s clear.”

Gloria nodded and motioned toward the front of the store.

Lanisha followed behind her.

They split up and took opposite directions, checking the isles as they walked. Lanisha made it around first and walked behind the store counter. Gloria came around the corner and gave her a thumbs up.

As she did, Lanisha looked at the front entrance and saw a dog sitting next to the door, staring at her mouth open and looking relaxed.

“Gloria look.” She pointed at the dog.

Gloria slowly walked over to the dog. It went up and down on its paws like it was waiting for her to come over and pet it.

Gloria did, and the dog wagged its tail excitedly.

“Wow, didn’t expect to find a friendly dog in here, but I guess that means someone will be back here soon.” Gloria said as she petted the dog.

Lanisha agreed. “I suppose we should go back and tell the others. We’ll still need gas though.”

“Yeah, we do. We’ll go back. Tell the others and decide how to proceed.” Gloria responded. “Let’s get going. We got about an hour or so of daylight remaining.”

Gloria took out her walkie and radioed Luke. “We checked the place out and are heading back. See you soon.”

“Great, see you soon.” Luke replied.

As they left the store, Lanisha and Gloria were a little nervous. What had happened with the nomads was front and center in both their minds. Lanisha knew it was not logical, but she couldn’t believe that violent nomads would have a friendly dog.

It didn’t look like whoever was using the place would be packing up and leaving before they stopped here for gas.

*Maybe we’ll find out soon enough*. Lanisha kept her thought to herself.

# Chapter 19

Nate was nodding and asking a few questions as Lanisha and Gloria reported on the gas station.

Luke was thinking about what to do next.

“We’ll need to stop there regardless. We need the gas to make this trip.” Nate finally stated after Lanisha and Gloria finished talking and answering questions.

Everyone knew that, of course. It was up to Luke to make the final decision.

“Yeah, we’ll drive in there tomorrow morning and check the place out. Gloria and I will get out by that Diesel repair place and walk in to see if anyone’s home. We’ll radio back to give you the all clear.” Luke instructed the group.

Nate cooked their meal that evening. He referred to it as a delicacy of tasty delights. It consisted of canned peas, beef jerky, and some instant potatoes.

“Here ya go Patrice! Eat up man.” Nate instructed as he served Patrice a plate of food.

“Thanks Nate.” Patrice replied, smiling briefly.

Patrice went over and sat next to Luke. They were staying in an empty house tonight. It was located off a side road and not visible from the main highway.

“Do you think we’ll have any problems tomorrow, Luke?” Patrice asked as he poked his fork in the peas and potatoes, not putting any up to his mouth.

“You really should eat Patrice.” Luke began his answer. “I really don’t know what to expect tomorrow. We don’t usually encounter problems. Most people don’t want problems and just keep to themselves. What happened with those nomads wasn’t the norm.”

“I guess that makes me feel a little better.” Patrice replied. He started eating his peas.

“Nate’s a great guy. He’s always cheerful and positive.” Patrice finally spoke after a few minutes.

Luke followed Patrice’s gaze to where Nate was evidently recounting a humorous story to Lanisha and Gloria.

“Yeah, he’s cheered me up a few times before when I wasn’t in the best of places mentally.” Luke agreed.

“Nate’s had it about as rough a past as anyone you’ll meet. He lost his family like a lot of people back when this whole thing started. Two kids and a wife. Also, he was close to Morty. But, he doesn’t let stuff get him down. He’s just a positive guy.”

Patrice nodded after Luke had finished talking.

“I really didn’t know that much about him.” Patrice admitted. “I really just immerse myself in work and don’t socialize with people much.”

“Maybe you’ll start finding time to change that once we get back.” Luke smiled and patted Patrice on the back.

Luke stood up. “Let’s go hang out with the gang.”

Patrice nodded and followed Luke over to the rest of the group.

# Chapter 20

“He’s got a damn fever!” Doc growled to Jensen and Carly at the same time. “That’s just before he goes cold if he’s scrambled.”

They stood in Roger’s room, looking at his sweat drenched body. Roger was awake but a little out of it.

“I don’t understand it. It was a long shot for him to recover at all. There’s not much we can do but keep giving him fluids and keep him cool. I can’t tell you if he’s got an infection or some other kind of bullshit.” Doc continued.

“Roger, can you hear me?” Carly looked at Roger.

“Yeah, I’m not that out of it. Things are just a little blurry and fuzzy around the edges.” Roger answered.

Roger also had a splitting headache but kept that to himself.

Jensen was rubbing his temples, visibly worried.

“I just checked all his vitals. His heart rate and blood pressure are elevated. His breathing is a little shallow and his pupils are slightly dilated.” Doc informed the group.

“Maybe he’s been fighting an infection or something nasty inside of one of them crazies finally got to him.” Doc continued.

“Doc, can I talk to you just a moment out in the hall?” Carly asked. This was her moment, and she needed it to be known that she helped Roger, regardless of what questions might come of it later.

Doc looked at her quizzically. “Sure. Hell, I guess.”

Carly followed Doc out into the hallway while Jensen tried to make some small talk with Roger.

Doc turned around outside in the hallway and looked at Carly. “Speak young lady.”

“I know something that might help Roger. It’s not a guarantee, but it could save his life.” Carly had practiced this dialogue during the previous night.

“Did you just suddenly remember it?” Doc responded in a suspicious tone. “Why didn’t you bring it up sooner?”

“My memory is choppy. It comes back in bits and pieces. I don’t trust it yet and I’m not sure enough of the details. But, when you said Roger may have been infected by someone on the outside it jogged something in me.” Carly explained. “I only want to help Roger.”

“Go on.” Doc said.

“If it’s the same thing I’ve seen before, then the fever is going to get worse, not better.” Carly replied. She knew this wasn’t entirely accurate but needed to play out this narrative for her plan to work.

She continued. “We don’t have time for me to go over the entire history of what I want to do. We need to work fast. Roger may not have much time. Please Doc.”

Doc looked past Carly for a few long seconds. Then as Carly predicted he would, Doc nodded. “Fuck, okay. We’ll try it. I’m telling you know though, if you do this shit and it kills Roger you won’t be Ms. Popular around here with anyone.”

Carly had already thought of that. Her idea was a risk, but one she had calculated and predicted would go her way.

“When Roger found me I had a case with me. It’s shaped like a cube. Roger brought it back to Jacksonville when he brought me here.”

“Never heard of it.” Doc spoke to her in his usual gruff tone.

“Roger has. If he’s still coherent enough he might remember what he did with it after we arrived here.”

“We’ll see. Tell me first what you want with it.” Doc responded.

“We need to bring the case close to Roger. Put him in ice to rapidly cool his body. The case, along with the ice will cause his body to fight off the infection.” Carly explained.

“How…?” Doc stopped himself. “This seems like a pretty specific memory for someone who claimed not to remember anything.”

“I will tell you everything I can remember, but after we help Roger. The sooner we can beat this fever the better.” Carly was trying to add urgency to her voice.

Doc shook his head. “You sure as shit will tell me what you remember. I’ve never heard of anything this bizarre. The ice thing sure, but this case somehow combating an infection?” Doc looked directly at Carly for several seconds, then relented.

Doc sighed and said, “Let’s talk to Roger. See if he can tell us where this mystery case thing is located.”

They walked back into the room together.

Jensen looked over to them both expectedly.

“Roger you coherent?” Doc asked

“Yeah Doc, what’s up?” Roger replied.

“Carly will explain.” Doc answered. He looked over at Carly. So did Jensen.

“Roger, seeing you with this fever brought back a memory of something I’ve seen before. I don’t have time to explain everything, but I promise I’ll tell you and Doc what I can remember afterwards. I know it doesn’t come easy for you, but you have to trust me.” Carly spoke in an even and confident tone.

“Trust you about what?” Roger asked.

“I’ve seen this before Roger. I worked with a research group. I remember bits and pieces of it. We attempted to treat people who had been infected. The fever was a classic symptom. Nearly everyone who became feverish died, at least at first.” Carly paused, trying to keep her plan clear as she spoke.

“We were working frantically, day and night, for months. Another research department had also been working on something and they needed to test its effectiveness. So they brought it to us to test on the infected we were treating.”

“You are remembering all this now?” Roger asked, sounding somewhat dazed and doubtful at the same time.

“Just hear me out. We don’t have much time. Please.” Carly tried to put a hint of pleading in her voice.

Roger didn’t say anything, so Carly continued. “We had been putting people in ice baths in an attempt to bring down their fever. It would bring down their fever a little, but not much. Antivirals and antibiotics wouldn’t work either. Nothing we tried was working.”

“Okay, so?” Roger asked, still sounding skeptical.

“So the other team came to us with something they thought might make the difference. We were desperate, and nothing else was working, so we agreed to try it.” Carly continued. “Without going into all the details, we figured out through trial and error that together with an ice bath, this device could alleviate the fever, and people would recover completely from whatever was attacking their body.”

“How does any of that relate to me?” Roger asked.

“If you have been infected by someone or something on the outside, then nothing Doc has at his disposal will be able to help you. But, you do have one thing that can help you. The case you brought in when you found me. That’s what we were using on the infected. We were saving them with it. I think that’s why it was so important to me.”

Roger’s mind, hazy and unfocused, was swirling in a thousand different directions. It didn’t escape his thoughts that Carly was using this moment to find out where the case was located and possibly gain possession of it. After his talk with Peter, he had a more potent than ever suspicion that Carly wasn’t being transparent with him.

Added to that, he also realized he was in a compromised position. He didn’t know what was happening to him, and he didn’t know if he would recover.

“Doc, what are you thinking about all this?” Roger looked at Carly as he spoke.

“We already know traditional medicine doesn’t work against infection. Carly claims your fever may get worse if you have been infected. Fever comes just before going cold. It’s a crap shoot Roger. If you have been infected, I can’t do anything for you.” Doc replied.

He added, “I’ve got all sorts of questions about this too. I’m skeptical about the whole damn thing. I also don’t know what else to do for you.”

Roger closed his eyes and tried to contemplate all the angles. His brain wouldn’t focus as much as he needed it to at the moment. What if his fever did get worse?

“Roger,” Carly spoke reassuringly, “I am trying to keep you from dying, not take advantage of you. I will tell you as much as I can remember after we get you over this fever. I promise you. Please let me try.”

“Is this guaranteed to work?” Roger prodded.

“No, it isn’t. After we developed the new protocols using The case, we had an eighty-five percent success rate. Before that, it was zero.” Carly admitted. Carly figured this made-up statistic would lend credibility to her reassurances. She thought this was one way to make her idea seem realistic, not miraculous.

Roger could tell his body was feeling achier by the hour, and his headache was getting worse. He hadn’t admitted this to anyone yet.

Doc was a keen observer, however, and spoke up. “Roger, I can tell you’re feelin worse just by lookin at ya. Don’t try lyin to me about it either. I’ll see through that bullshit.”

“Yeah, I am…a little.” Roger lied. He was actually feeling quite a bit worse since this morning.

“Well you’ll run the risk of brain damage if you get up to a hundred and four or higher.” Doc added. “It’s up to you though. It’s your funeral either way.”

Roger usually liked that Doc didn’t sugarcoat things. Now, however, he was irritated that he couldn’t think straight. He knew he was at a real disadvantage.

“Damn…okay. We’ll try it. Doc, go find Peter. Bring him here. I need to talk to him privately.” Roger spoke with pauses and between punctuated breaths. This was as much out of frustration with the situation as feeling ill.

“I will Roger. Jensen you stay here. Keep an eye on Carly and Roger till I get back.” Doc spoke as he looked back at Carly.

Without another word, he left the room.

# Chapter 21

Petesboro was a small settlement of survivors almost a thousand miles from Jacksonville and The Hamptons.

The nameless ones moved silently toward the pulling force, drawing them closer to its origin.

It was the time of the day when the sun was low in the sky, barely casting its light over the land.

A few men and women were digging post holes around what would be a more robust fence to defend their little settlement.

A few children were playing cheerfully several meters back from the working adults. Small wood buildings were spaced evenly in a few rows inside the fenced area.

There was nothing of any significance or note about this place. Only that Brianne lived there.

She was a young teen, fourteen years old. She still had memories of life before everything changed, only bits and pieces that were getting fainter by the day.

With her three siblings and father, she had been enjoying some semblance of an uneventful life in this small settlement. She remembered bits and pieces of the chaos from her younger years. Her mother dying slowly and painfully from disease, and her oldest brother shot to death by looters.

She had more explicit memories of running and hiding daily as what was left of her family scavenged for food and a safe place to sleep at night.

There were occasional run-ins with outlaws from the outside, but it was generally quiet. She felt some measure of safety in this place.

She looked up from reading an old book to see her father and youngest sister carrying water over to their house and then to where the new post holes were being dug.

She was about to put her book away and join her father and the rest of her siblings for dinner.

As she stood up and began walking toward the house, she felt a slight vibration in the ground. No, that wasn’t entirely accurate. She felt a slight vibration in her feet, moving up her body.

She looked down at the ground and then around her. She couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

She looked over at her father. He was stopping to look at a frog with her sister. He looked over at her. Then a smile turned to a frown.

Loud clicking filled her ears and what felt like her body simultaneously.

Standing next to her father, her sister put her hands over her ears and began screaming.

Brianne tried to start running toward her sister and father, but her body wouldn’t move correctly.

She saw her father move in what looked like slow motion towards her sister. Brianne couldn’t understand what was happening, but she felt panic.

Everything became hazy. Where she had seen her father and sister standing became a jumble of blurriness.

She couldn’t move her body at all. The clicking was overwhelming. Brianne felt her body becoming unstable inside and out. She lost all sense of time and orientation.

The clicking stopped all at once.

Brianne fell to the ground. She couldn’t move.

Finally, she didn’t know how long it took, Brianne could roll over on her side and get on her hands and knees.

She vomited intensely and almost fell into her own puke as she finished.

Stopping herself, she got back up on her hands and knees and looked in the direction of her father and sister.

Her father was trying to sit up like she had done.

Her sister was gone.

Brianne forced herself to her feet and tried to make her legs run toward her father. Instead, she clumsily shuffled toward him before her body started listening to her again about halfway there.

“Daddy! Where’s Sandra?!” She looked around frantically and then kneeled beside her father.

He looked around, confused and alarmed. “She was just next to me. What happened?”

Both Brianne and her father got up and started yelling for Sandra. Others in the settlement were also getting to their feet and looking around, confused.

Sandra was nowhere in sight.

# Chapter 22

Patrice was used to getting up early, and he wasn't used to sleeping in strange places. The bed he had slept in was not comfortable, although he supposed it was better than sleeping on the floor.

As he sat in the van waiting for Luke and Gloria to report back, he determined not to complain about feeling sore or tired during this trip. He didn't want to appear any wimpier than he already thought amongst this group.

Nate, who was driving, looked over at Lanisha and made some kind of a joke about eating old twinkies. Lanisha chuckled, and so did Patrice, despite himself.

"Won't be long now Patrice." Nate said, looking in the rear-view mirror. He winked at Patrice.

Patrice smiled and looked out the side window. He briefly wondered what it was like to be a diesel mechanic as he looked at the old sign on the fence.

After about thirty minutes or so, Luke radioed back to Lanisha. "It's all clear here. Come on up!"

"Copy that." Lanisha responded.

Nate put the van in gear and pulled out onto the road, heading toward the gas station.

"This should get us set for a couple of days. Then we're almost there!" Nate spoke cheerfully.

They drove up next to one of the openings for the underground tanks where gasoline was stored for the pumps. The pumps were no longer operational.

Nate and Lanisha got out and walked over to Luke and Gloria. They spoke for a moment. Nate wandered back to get some things from the van's rear, and Gloria opened the side door, grinning at Patrice.

"Hey Patrice, wanna pet the dog?" She asked.

Patrice laughed. It seemed like such an absurd and unexpected question out here in a dangerous place.

"Yeah, why not." Patrice surprised himself with his answer.

He got out and followed Gloria into the store.

The dog was sitting beside a water bowl with its tongue hanging out.

"We gave him some new water. His bowl was dry. I don't know how long he's been in here, but it looks like a while. We cleaned up some of his pee and poo before you drove up." Gloria informed Patrice.

Patrice knelt down and petted the dog. It felt unexpectedly calming to him for some reason he couldn't figure out.

"He might starve. Should we just leave him here" Patrice asked Gloria. He couldn't believe how concerned his voice sounded. What was happening to him?

Gloria frowned. "I don't know if we can take a dog with us. I don't really want to let this poor thing starve to death either."

"I think we should." Patrice responded, suddenly feeling a strong urge to bring the dog with them.

"We'll talk to Luke and the others about it. I don't know Patrice." Gloria commented with a bit of surprise in her voice. "You gettin attached that fast?"

"I just can't stand the idea of leaving him here to starve to death. That sounds horrible." Patrice answered.

"The people who left him might come back anytime. Maybe they like this dog too. Did you think of that?"

Patrice hadn't. "No…no, I guess not. Maybe you're right."

Patrice hated leaving the dog, but it didn't look abused. Its owners might like this dog, and maybe they left it here to keep it safe for a while.

"I guess it wouldn't be right to just snatch him. We can at least give him plenty of food and water before we leave." Patrice finally said.

"Plenty of water, sure. But we don't really have plenty of food. Maybe we can spare a little though." Gloria replied.

Gloria and Patrice tended to the dog while the others handled refueling the van.

When they were ready to get back on the road, Patrice petted the dog and joined the others in the van.

"Find a new friend Patrice?" Nate asked.

"Yeah, maybe. I want him to be okay is all." Patrice answered.

"That's very sweet Patrice." Lanisha added.

Nate patted Patrice on the back gently but didn't say anything.

"Where to next?" Nate asked as they started down the highway.

Gloria was looking over the map. "Well, we're a little over halfway there at this point. I'm not too familiar with the areas beyond here so we need to take it cautiously."

"I hear that." Nate replied.

Gloria continued, "I know of one other place we may be able to get some fuel, but I've only been to it once. We'll turn off this road and hit this county road in about fifteen miles." Gloria stated.

"Same road we looked at last night?" Nate asked.

"That's the one." Gloria confirmed.

"Let's keep our eyes sharp so we don't get surprised out here." Luke spoke to the whole group.

They had been driving on the county road for a few minutes when Nate slowed down. He and Gloria both saw it at about the same time.

"Smoke up ahead." Gloria said.

Nate stopped completely, and they all tried to get a better view from inside the van.

"It's too far away to make out clearly from here." Gloria continued. "It looks like a vehicle on its side."

"Lanisha and I will check it out on foot from here." Luke instructed. "Keep your walkie on and wait for all clear from me."

"Gotcha." Nate responded.

Lanisha and Luke got out of the van and moved off to the tree line along the road.

Patrice could feel his anxiety going up as they waited. He felt trapped and vulnerable in the van.

After a few minutes, Luke radioed back to Nate. "It's clear. Come on up but keep your eyes scanning."

"Copy." Nate replied and began driving toward the smoke.

They drove up to where the vehicle was overturned and partially off the road. It was burned out and still smoking. As the van slowed to a stop, Luke motioned for Nate and Lanisha to come over to him.

Nate turned off the ignition and, together with Gloria, walked over to where Luke was standing. Gloria said something to Luke and then walked away to look at something that caught her attention.

Patrice watched them speak to each other while looking towards the ground on the other side of the burned vehicle. It was obstructed from Patrice's view.

Patrice watched Luke finish talking to Nate and Lanisha. Then he went after Gloria, who was several yards off by this time.

After a few more minutes, Nate and Lanisha returned to the van and got inside.

"What happened out there?" Patrice asked.

Nate looked over at Lanisha, then at Patrice. "It's pretty ugly, Patrice." He said quietly. "It looks like the people Gloria and Lanisha spotted a couple of days ago at the gas station were ambushed."

To his surprise, Patrice suddenly thought of the dog back at the gas station. "How can you tell it's them?" he asked.

Lanisha spoke up now, speaking somberly. "Because I recognized one of them and Gloria recognized the truck."

"Recognized one of them?" Patrice sounded confused.

Lanisha clarified her response. "I recognized her face. The rest of her was…mutilated."

"You don't wanna see any of that Patrice." Nate added.

Patrice was already scooting toward the door. He felt compelled to see it for himself, as terrible as it might be.

Lanisha reached out her arm, trying to stop him. "You really don't want to see it, Patrice." She held him for a second, but Patrice pushed her arm aside.

"I have to see." He said, opening the door and getting out of the van.

As he shut the door, Luke and Gloria squatted over a place on the ground, away from the van. Luke looked up and noticed Patrice walking toward the other side of the burnt truck.

"Hey! Patrice! You don't need to get out! You don't need to see any of that!" He wasn't quite yelling, but it was apparent he didn't want Patrice to see it.

Patrice kept walking, finally making his way around the vehicle lying on its side.

He finally saw it too. An almost wholly burned corpse stuck halfway out of the window and another body. It appeared to be ripped in several pieces. One leg was missing, and the head had been entirely pulled or cut off at the shoulders.

Patrice hadn't seen anything remotely this graphic since the early days of the fall, and even then, nothing quite like this.

His mind couldn't entirely take in the information his eyes were sending. He found himself transfixed by the image he was seeing.

Suddenly he felt Luke's hand on his shoulder. That snapped him back to reality.

"Patrice, you okay? I was calling your name several times." Luke said.

"Huh? Yeah. Ahh. What happened?" Patrice asked Luke.

"We don't know. It looks like these people were attacked brutally. These appear to be the people Gloria and Lanisha spotted at the gas station. Two of them are here." Luke waived toward the bodies next to the truck. "Two of them are not. But Gloria found prints and what looks like dried blood heading off into the trees."

"Patrice? You with me?" Luke turned to stand directly in front of Patrice.

Patrice hadn't been paying any attention to Luke's brief report.

He looked at Luke.

"We gotta save that dog," was all Patrice could say.

# Chapter 23

Doc knew of Peter, but they had never really had a conversation. This would be a little awkward, but Doc pushed all that aside. He knew Roger's situation was urgent.

He could hear the music blaring before he rounded the building. It was some sort of Jazz music, as best Doc could make out. The area around the building was littered with old cars, various appliances, and storage containers.

Peter was actually returning to his shop as Doc was approaching and noticed Doc first. He got into Doc's field of vision and waved at him. Peter started walking toward Doc.

When he got close enough to be heard, Peter began talking, "Ah…Doc? Can I do something for you?"

Peter was more than a little surprised to be having a conversation with Doc outside his shop. Doc had only had enough time to get used to the idea while walking over to Peter's place, so it was slightly less surprising for him.

"Yeah, you can. Roger sent me over here." Doc replied.

"Roger? What for?" Peter asked.

"You know he's in our hospital, trying to recover and all that." Doc replied, and Peter nodded. "Well, he needs to talk to you there privately and he needs to see you immediately."

"Is he dying?" Peter didn't know what else to say.

"Not yet, maybe not yet anyway." Doc answered. "But it has to be now. He insists."

"Yeah okay. I'll go see him." Peter responded. It was evident that Peter was put off balance about the whole thing.

"You have any idea why?" Peter asked Doc as they turned around together to head toward the hospital.

"Kind of, but I think he can explain it better than me." Doc informed Peter. "Just let him tell you what he wants."

Peter and Doc walked into Roger's room together at the hospital.

Peter knew Jensen quite well but was not expecting to see Carly.

"We'll leave you two alone to speak privately," Doc said after bringing Peter back with him. Doc motioned Carly and Jensen to follow him out of the room.

"Hey Roger. This is unexpected. How are you feeling?" Peter asked.

"About as great as I look I guess." Roger replied.

"What can I do for ya in here?" Peter spoke as he looked at Roger sweating in bed.

"I've got a fever that looks like it's gonna keep getting worse until it kills me. Carly says the cube thing I gave you is the only way to get over whatever's got me." Roger explained.

"That cube thing? How?" Peter asked.

"I don't really understand it myself. I don't really trust her, but it might be the only option I have at the moment. Doc says he can't do anything for me." Roger continued.

"Can you get it and bring it here?" Roger finally asked.

"Ah, yeah, no problem. I can do that. I get it back afterwards though right?" Peter replied.

"Yeah Peter, you can have it back after." Roger said.

"Okay, give me about thirty minutes and I'll have it here." Peter scratched his head as he spoke and turned to leave.

He nodded at Doc and Jensen in the hall outside. He didn't look at Carly.

Doc said something to Jensen and then came back into the room.

"Well? What did he say?" Doc asked.

"He's gone to get it and he'll be back in about thirty minutes." Roger told Doc.

"I won't pretend to know in any way if this will work for you Roger. If it does…great! If you are infected I really can't do anything else for you." Doc sighed as he spoke.

"Yeah, I guess we'll see. I don't know either. If it does work, I guess I owe my thanks to Carly. But, I still don't trust her and I'm going to get some answers from her." Roger spoke quietly, trying to prevent any of his words from making it out of the room.

"Yeah, sure as shit we'll get some answers. It seems more than a little suspicious that seeing you here suddenly jogged her memory. I think that's a load of shit personally." Doc also spoke quietly.

Doc turned around and motioned for Jensen and Carly to come back into the room.

"What do we gotta do from here?" Doc asked Carly.

"If you could get the ice bath ready when that Peter guy gets back that would be great." Carly replied. "Then I'll set up The Case to use on Roger."

"Set up The Case?" Doc spoke the question primarily to himself. "Okay, I'll have the ice bath ready, and we'll go from there." Doc finished speaking to Carly directly.

Peter returned after twenty-five minutes with a medium size cardboard box. He sat the box down, opened it, and lifted out The Cube.

Carly was glad to finally lay eyes on it again. She was one step closer to getting The Cube and getting out of here. But first things first. She needed Roger. She required his skills outside Jacksonville to get to The Mountain.

"Excellent." She said matter-of-factly. "Doc, please get the ice bath ready, and then we can take Roger there and that as well," Carly said, pointing to The Cube.

Doc left to get some ice. There was a bathtub in Roger's room that he could use.

"Will this really work?" Jensen, who had been silent till now, finally spoke.

"I think so or I wouldn't have brought it up." Carly replied.

Carly knew that Roger would feel a little worse and then start feeling better in a few hours, regardless of the ice bath or The Cube. Still, now she had at least laid eyes on it, and her ruse would make Roger and the others think she had done something unprecedented to save his life.

Doc and a couple of other hospital employees returned with half a dozen buckets of ice. He led them into the bathroom, and they filled up the bathtub.

"Okay, we're ready in here." Doc informed them as he stepped out of the bathroom and the other employees left the room.

"Take him into the bathroom and help him get into the tub." Carly instructed Jensen and Peter.

Peter, who had not been expecting to do anything else, hesitated for a second, then complied.

Roger could still walk, just barely. He leaned on Jensen and Peter as they helped him get into the bathtub.

As Carly instructed, Doc poured the remaining buckets of ice on top of Roger and moved out of the way.

At first, the ice felt soothing to Roger. It was refreshing. He had been uncomfortably hot since the previous night and felt burning hot for the past few hours.

"Now hand me The Cube." Carly instructed Doc.

Doc looked at Peter, who went to grab The Cube from where he had sat it down. Peter brought it over to Carly.

"Here you go, but don't get too attached." Peter said, handing it to Carly.

Carly felt herself frown for just a second but quickly recovered and thanked Peter.

She sat The Cube on top of the ice and shook it around a little to settle it.

"What happens now?" Doc asked.

"Now we wait." Carly replied. "We have to wait for his body to get cooled down. He will start to feel chilled and quite cold before we can take him out."

Roger could feel his body cooling down. What was soothing initially was now starting to feel uncomfortable and a little painful.

After several more minutes, he was starting to shiver.

"Just a little while longer." Carly spoke up. She wanted this little scene to be a little dramatic for her onlookers.

"Won't he get too cold in there?" Jensen asked.

"He'll be okay. You have to trust me." Carly insisted.

Roger's extremities were already numb, and the bitter chill was taking over his body.

"Just a few more minutes." Carly chimed in. "We can't take him out too early."

It was now going on a little longer than Doc thought would be necessary, but he kept silent. There wasn't anything else he could do for Roger anyway.

Finally, Carly spoke up. "Okay, lift him out slowly. He won't be able to move too well after getting that cold."

Carly continued, "He needs to be dried off and laid on the bed under several blankets."

Jensen and Peter had been ushered out of the room. A couple of other workers, together with Doc, dried Roger off and got him into the bed.

Standing outside the bathroom while Roger was dried off, Carly watched the two people with Doc get Roger into bed and covered up. Roger was shivering quite noticeably.

Doc looked over at Carly. "How long does it take to know if he'll recover?"

"We should know by morning," Carly answered.

Jensen and Peter re-entered the room. Both looked at Roger.

"He gonna make it now Doc?" Peter asked.

"Shit if I know." Doc replied.

"We should know by morning." Carly said again to the room.

"Well, I'll take my property back if you don't mind." Peter said as he went to retrieve The Cube from the bathroom.

Carly hadn't expected this wrinkle.

"Your property?" She asked as Peter came out of the bathroom with The Cube.

"Yeah, Roger gave it to me. We traded for it. I'm still trying to figure out what it is and what it does." Peter replied. He was already apprehensive about Carly wanting the thing back.

"Well, you saw what it does." Carly responded.

Carly recognized Peter but couldn't let on about it, at least not yet. Nor did she know the details of Roger and Peter's previous discussion regarding The Cube. That was putting her at a disadvantage in this discussion with Peter.

"It does more than that. I've heard about tech like this from my previous life. Any ways, it doesn't concern you. Roger saved you outside the gates, brought you in here to safety and gave this to me. According to our laws it's mine until or unless I give it someone else or die." Peter explained in a tone of authority as he placed The Cube back in its box and started to head out of the room.

Carly was thinking quickly and realized she didn't want to risk saying anything more, at least not yet. Peter might be a problem.

Carly remained silent, and Peter left the hospital.

# Chapter 24

“You want us to leave today?” Ray (Bingo) asked again, looking confused and a bit frustrated. “Did you have a secret meeting with your counsel cronies none of us knew about?”

“No secret meetings, Ray. Listen, this is important. This is part of a bigger strategy. Think about it. An alliance with other communities, building back up society and civilization. Big picture stuff.” Sanders was trying to sound magnificent and grand rather than frustrated with the two people sitting in front of him.

“Shouldn’t Luke be part of this team?” Janice inquired, speaking up for the first time since the meeting started twenty minutes ago.

Sanders grimaced a little but recovered quickly. “Luke is currently heading up another venture. He’s unavailable for this at the moment.”

Janice and Bingo looked at each other, showing doubt, then back at Sanders.

Sanders continued as if not noticing. “You need to leave today. That’s why we are having this meeting so early in the day. You two are in charge of finding two or three others to join you and head out ASAP.”

“Do you have any other questions?” Sanders asked before Janice or Bingo could speak.

They both shook their heads.

“Great, get to it then. You are going to be part of this gigantic first step towards rebuilding what was lost.” Sanders smiled wide as he finished speaking.

Janice and Bingo got up and quickly exited the room to make preparations, with Sanders waving them on to action.

Once they had left, Sanders let out a big sigh.

*These idiots genuinely try my patience.*He thought to himself.

Tobias Sanders was not a simple man. He was intelligent and calculating. Before putting anything into motion, he had thought about this grand strategy for years.

The council was full of his puppets, with a couple of mild dissenters. But they were nothing he couldn’t handle with a bit of extra coaxing and prodding.

Luke’s supporters had shut him down when he first proposed the Jacksonville idea and a joint expedition to The Mountain. Still, Luke was out of the picture, at least for the moment.

He needed to turn this to his advantage.

He saw himself as the future leader in putting it all back together. He just needed a few key players to follow his lead. He would get the eventual recognition and glory for his years of effort.

Sanders had been an advisor to several senators and governors in another life, consulting on policy and campaign strategy. He knew how to play the long game and also when to strike quickly for maximum effect.

First, it would be about trading and protection, then it would be about expansion and unity. He could easily be the best choice as a leader of the new society, putting together alliances between once separated communities.

After this first trip, he would set out with a few others to Jacksonville himself. He wanted to make his presence known to others before that.

The items Janice and Bingo were bringing with them, like medical supplies and technology, would surely be of interest to the residents of Jacksonville. There would also be promises of more to follow after and mutual economic benefits.

Luke taking off without prior knowledge motivated Tobias to speed things up just a bit. He couldn’t think of any reason Luke would go to Jacksonville, but he didn’t want to chance it.

Sanders wanted to control the narrative, not have it interrupted by divergent agendas.

He also wanted to see if Peter Oskam was still around. He had heard rumors of Oskam living in Jacksonville.

Tobias had worked with politicians who approved budgets for major projects for which Oskam was a lead building contractor, including The Mountain facility.

Oskam was sharp and knew technical details of some pretty advanced technology, including what Tobias wanted at The Mountain.

Sanders recalled his first meeting with Peter Oskam to discuss overseeing the design and construction of The Mountain. After the initial meetings, Oskam was handed off to the primary investors, taking Sanders out of the loop on that project.

If Peter was still alive, Tobias would need Oskam’s knowledge to build his vision into reality and get it done quickly.

Tobias was confident he could manipulate Oskam to do his bidding with the proper incentives.

One of the things he was sending along with Janice and Bingo should whet Oskam’s appetite.

Sanders leaned back in his chair with his arms behind his head and contemplated the future he would create…

…and the key people he would need to set it all in motion.

# Chapter 25

“Patrice is obviously in shock Luke.” Lanisha remarked as they stood outside, several feet away from the van, looking into the tree line.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not sure a dog is going to fix that problem.” Luke responded.

“Probably not, but it’ll take the edge off of it a little, at least for now.” Lanisha spoke while standing next to Luke but not looking at him directly.

Gloria approached before they could continue their discussion. “It looks like more than two tracks heading off into the trees. I would say at least half a dozen and some of them were barefoot.”

“So you think the other two were taken?” Luke asked.

“Maybe, someone was bleeding pretty bad. Whoever it was isn’t going to last long without some serious medical attention.” Gloria answered.

“People who do that to someone else aren’t generally interested in providing medical attention.” Lanisha remarked.

“Agreed.” Luke stated matter-of-factly. “We don’t have time or resources to get involved in this any further. We gotta make tracks to Jacksonville.”

“Luke?” Lanisha spoke quietly, just loud enough for him and Gloria to hear. “The dog?”

Luke looked over at the van and inside at Patrice sitting in the backseat, staring at something on the floorboard.

He hesitated, then sighed. “Fine, we’ll go back and get the damn dog.” He paused, then added. “I’m only doing this for Patrice. We need him to not go off the edge on us.”

Lanisha and Gloria both nodded and headed back to the van.

Luke stood outside for just a moment longer. He thought about what threat these unknown attackers might present to his group. Luke thought about taking in a dog he didn’t want to keep Patrice sane.

Then he turned around and headed back to the van himself.

# Chapter 26

“I can’t believe that bullshit worked.” Doc was shaking his head and looking at Roger as Roger finished putting on his own clothes for the first time in a while.

“Me either Doc.” Roger looked at himself in the mirror. He was full of questions and lingering doubts about what had happened to him and about Carly.

“Well, hell Roger. Whatever happened to you out there and this whole thing with Miss Miracle Worker has got me puzzled and suspicious.” Doc continued. “Don’t get me wrong! I’m glad you are vertical and all that. I guess she may’of saved your ass in spite of the cooky shit.”

Roger agreed with Doc, but something about it all was hovering around in his mind and wouldn’t let up.

“Yeah, I guess I should be thankful. Fuck, I am thankful. I just think we aren’t seeing the whole picture with Carly. And, I’m more than a little concerned about what we ran into out there. That thing could still be around and there may be more of them.” Roger looked out the window as he spoke to Doc.

“I need to get a read on Carly. See if I can get a better idea of what she’s hiding if anything.” Roger said after a few more long seconds of staring out the window.

“I got no reason to keep ya hear any longer. Try to stay outta hear in the future. Don’t do any stupid shit.” Doc instructed, waving at the bed Roger had recently occupied.

“I’ll do my best.” Roger smiled and made his way out of the room and out of the hospital.

His first stop was going to be the duplex. He hadn’t seen Claudia in a couple days. She had come to check on him while he was in the hospital. He wanted to know if she was okay and if she needed anything.

Then he would have a sit down with Carly. See what he could figure out.

“Hey young lady.” Roger greeted Claudia. She was sitting out front enjoying the mild weather as usual.

“Hello, Roger!” Claudia looked relieved and happy to see him walking toward her. “Are you feeling well again?”

“Best I’ve ever felt.” Roger hadn’t actually thought about how great he felt until just now.

“I’m so glad Roger. I was pretty worried about you.” Claudia frowned, then smiled again. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you. I actually came to ask you the same question.” Roger answered.

“I’m content Roger. You don’t need to do anything for me today. You’ve done so much for me already.” Claudia responded, smiling wide now.

“Okay, but you’ll let me know if you do need anything?” Roger asked, smiling back at Claudia.

“Yes, of course. Thank you dear.” Claudia answered.

“You seen Carly around recently?” Roger switched gears, satisfied Claudia was okay.

“Just a bit ago, actually. She was here. She left. Said something about getting a few things to make dinner tonight. I think she’ll be back before too much longer.” Claudia looked like she was trying to remember other details as she spoke.

“Great, I’ll wait for her hear then. Mind if I sit with you for a bit?” Roger asked, smiling softly.

“Of course not. You are always welcome to enjoy a few minutes of the day with me.” Claudia answered, clearly glad to have Roger’s company for a while.

About forty-five minutes later, they saw Carly walking along the street in front of the duplex. She was carrying a couple of bags, presumably groceries for dinner.

Carly saw them sitting outside a few seconds later and waved enthusiastically at them.

As Carly approached Roger and Claudia, she was silently relieved that her first interaction with Roger outside of the hospital would be with Claudia attending. That would make the whole thing less inquisitive.

She would make them a delicious dinner and express how relieved she and Claudia were that Roger had recovered.

This situation couldn’t have worked out any better for her. This would take some steam out of Roger’s questions and suspicions.

Roger stood up as Carly approached them, and Claudia smiled at Carly.

“Roger! I’m so glad to see you here! You look well!” Carly spoke in a reserved, cheerful voice. She sat the bags down and hugged Roger tightly.

Roger returned the hug, but in a much less enthusiastic way. Claudia didn’t seem to notice.

“How are you feeling?” Carly held Roger’s arms as she asked.

“I’m feeling better than I can ever remember feeling actually.” Roger answered, trying to not sound suspicious.

Carly finally let go of Roger. “I’m so glad to hear that. You look well. We were so worried about you.” Carly motioned toward Claudia and looked in her direction as she spoke.

“I guess I’m lucky you were there to get me through it. I might not have made it without you.” Roger looked directly into Carly’s eyes, trying to determine if he could see any deception there.

“I’m glad too. You are a lifesaver.” Claudia interjected. She reached out to take Roger’s hand, and Roger took it.

“Help me up Roger. Let’s get these things into the kitchen and enjoy a warm meal together tonight.” Claudia politely instructed Roger.

Roger bent down to pick up the bags.

“Thank you kind sir.” Carly bowed jokingly. “Lead the way.” Carly followed Roger and Claudia into the duplex.

Roger sat the bags on the center island in the kitchen and moved out of the way.

“Roger you go get yourself cleaned up and put some fresh clothes on. Let this young lady and I get dinner ready for you tonight.” Claudia instructed.

Roger was feeling more than a little grimy after his extended hospital stay. A shower and fresh clothes sounded excellent to him.

“Yes, mam. I will.” Roger obeyed and left the kitchen.

As he showered, Roger let all the sweat and dirt run off his body and into the drain. He ran his fingers through his hair, slowly enjoying the feeling of getting cleaner by the minute.

He wanted to talk to Carly alone, but that would have to wait until after dinner. Maybe later tonight or tomorrow, he could press her more directly for answers.

He tried to let go of his doubts about Carly and the new threat outside Jacksonville for a little while as he finished his shower and got into some clean clothes.

He almost managed to do so.

# Chapter 27

Luke didn't really like dogs, and he thought he might be allergic to them but had never had that confirmed by any testing.

It was a minor annoyance he could tolerate for now. It would be worth it if it kept Patrice from spiraling.

"I'm glad you talked him into taking the dog Patrice." Nate commented from the passenger side front seat, turning his head to the side so his voice would project toward the occupants behind him.

Gloria, now driving, also commented. "Me too Patrice." She was smiling a little.

Patrice sat in the very back of the van with the dog. He was petting its head softly and looking outside at the passing countryside.

Luke and Lanisha sat two rows ahead, directly behind Gloria and Nate.

Luke just smiled and shook his head. "You are all a bunch of pushovers." He said with a subtle smile and slight irritation in his voice.

Patrice was having a little back and forth in his head. His rational brain was trying to hold sway, while his reptilian brain wanted to get out and run back to Hampton Flats to safety.

"How much farther we got now?" Lanisha asked Gloria.

"About two days, give or take a few hours." Gloria answered.

"Let's just all stay sharp." Luke interjected. "I don't want us to get surprised by whatever or whoever may have ruined those people's day."

"Yeah, me either." Nate added.

The countryside had gotten much denser with tress. They were heading into a mountainous area now.

"These windy roads we got into are keeping me alert." Nate continued.

"It'll be like this for most of the rest of today, then it'll flatten out for the end of our journey," Gloria commented.

"Hey Patrice," Lanisha decided to engage him in some conversation. Maybe it would pull him back to them a little closer. "Can you tell me what you think this Pete guy can do for us and how it relates to going to this place called 'The Mountain?'"

Patrice looked forward to Lanisha. He had a slightly surprised look on his face like he had been pulled out of a daydream.

"Uh…yeah." Patrice paused for a few seconds, clearly trying to put his thoughts in order and focus on Lanisha's question.

"I suspect Peter knew at least one or two people who were involved in the technology I eventually used to build The Chamber. I need Peter's engineering know-how and possible familiarity with construction of The Mountain facility to find some key components that could solve our Chamber House issue."

Patrice paused for a few seconds, then added, "That is if we're fortunate and Peter knows what I suspect he might."

"Huh, I see." Lanisha responded. "Wow, this does sound like kind of a long-shot. But I'm optimistic! I think we'll get what we need from Peter and The Mountain."

"I'm glad you think so." Luke was looking out at the countryside as he spoke. He didn't share Lanisha's blind optimism but was trying to get on the same page with her in his head. It was all he could do at the moment.

Nate slammed on the breaks and startled everybody inside the van.

"Someone just ran across the road!" Nate blurted out before anyone could ask questions.

Gloria got out her binoculars and started scanning along the side of the road ahead of them.

"I don't see anything, but I'll keep looking." She said, moving her gaze up and down both sides of the road.

There was a loud crashing sound on the van's back window, shattering glass inward. Patrice let out a yell. The dog started barking frantically. Luke caught a glimpse of an arm holding something smoking, then the person connected to the arm came into view.

They were wearing a mask. Luke reached for his sidearm, but before he could react, the smoking object was tossed in through the now broken window. Patrice was yelling something, but Luke couldn't make it out.

The van quickly filled with smoke.

Lanisha opened the side door. "Everyone out! Hurry!" She yelled. "Patrice take my hand!"

Before Patrice could take Lanisha's hand, arms reached into the van and yanked her out.

Luke now had his gun out but couldn't see clearly enough outside the van to take a shot.

"Lanisha!" He yelled and jumped out after her.

He saw a baseball bat heading straight for his head and ducked. He managed to get off one round in the center mass of the person swinging the bat. They curled over, clearly hit.

Another attacker grabbed Luke around the neck from behind, and he felt a hand yank his shooting arm.

Still, another lunged for his legs and knocked him off balance. Luke tried to pivot away but fell to the ground. His attackers were powerful and fast. He could hear Nate and Gloria yelling and fighting with their attackers, but they were out of his field of vision.

Then Gloria came into his view. She was being held from behind with a knife to her neck.

"You keep fighting. I kill her now." The person speaking was also wearing a mask. Luke could see it was made out of some kind of animal hide.

Luke stopped fighting. He was out of options.

"Yeah, you listen to me good now." The strange figure holding a knife to Gloria's neck spoke in a cracked and deep voice. "I don't keep you awake now troublemaker man."

Luke saw the butt of the baseball bat in his vision briefly.

Then he saw nothing.

# Chapter 28

Neither Janice nor Bingo particularly liked Sanders personally.

They did, however, respect him as a leader, and this is why they would follow his orders.

Sanders was decent at reading people and keeping a mental log of people he could get to do what he wanted. That's why he specifically chose Janice and Bingo for this trip. They had skills on the outside, and they followed orders for the most part.

They traveled in two separate vehicles, a lead car and another Econo line van. Sanders instructed them to travel this way for security. He wanted to ensure they and their shipment arrived safely and on time.

They were purposely taking a longer route that was less well traveled. This was meant to reduce the chances of encountering unknown threats.

It would take them an extra day or two to arrive at Jacksonville compared to the route Gloria had decided on with Luke earlier.

"I mean, I can see this whole 'let's make friends with other communities bullshit to make a better world'." Bingo was in the middle of rattling on to his companion in the lead car. "And I respect that. It makes sense. But, I'm not excited about being part of this first contact group. Know what I'm sayin?"

"Yeah, man, I get that." Ralph, the other person in the car, assented.

Janice followed along in the van with two others they had picked to go with them.

"But maybe we'll get some new chicks to screw and get more business too." Ralph was smiling as he thought out loud about it.

"Ha! That'd be great." Bingo agreed.

"I wouldn't mind getting me some new pussy man." Ralph continued. "Maybe there's some fine ass bitches in Jacksonville."

Bingo didn't mind getting some new action in that regard, but he was more interested in possible new business opportunities.

"Well let's stay focused Ralph. Jacksonville's sure to be a market for us. Let's be smart and keep our eyes open. Keep your pants on till we get a feel of things." Bingo cautioned.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm also gonna be lookin at the pussy though. Can't blame me for that." Ralph shot back.

"No, I don't. Not at all. Let's just stay focused. We'll have plenty of time for pussy if this all works out." Bingo was grinning wide to himself.

"Everyone likes to feel good. We'll see who we can work with once we get there."

Bingo and Ralph ran a decent drug trade in Hampton Flats for several years. It was a pressure relief valve for folks into that sort of thing.

They got away with it because Bingo generally went along with Sanders enough to keep Sanders looking the other way most of the time.

If Ralph or Bingo ever did get into a little more trouble than they could get out of, Sanders had been able to smooth things over for them with the law enforcement of Hampton Flats.

It was an arrangement that kept them in Sander's debt but also tended to keep them doing well financially.

A few favors here and there for Sanders was a price they were both willing to pay as long as it kept working to their liking.

Janice knew all about Bingo and Ralph. She didn't agree with or participate in their off-the-books drug business. Still, she tolerated it because they were solid S&C guys she could trust outside the gates.

They were far from perfect, but so was Janice. She didn't judge and didn't get involved in any of their personal business.

"Janice, you think Sanders will pull this whole thing off?" Barbara asked. Barbara was driving, and Janice was in the van's front passenger seat.

Bob, their other companion, was sitting on the bench seat behind them. The rest of the van was filled with stuff they planned to offer the residents of Jacksonville once they arrived.

"He could do it if anybody could." Janice answered. "He's kind of a sleaze, but he knows how to get things done. I think he really wants to create a larger order to things. I agree with him on that."

"Yeah, me too, I guess." Barbara replied.

"You think they'll want to trade with us…be open to it?" Barbara asked, clearly still questioning their task at hand.

"Well, all this shit we're bringing with us should tip the scales in favor of that." Said Janice. "Plus Sanders thinks this Peter Oskam guy he wants us to make contact with will like what we have to offer."

"The Chamber House has definitely kept so many people alive and well. I can see how that would be a big hook." Barbara added.

"Sanders insists Oskam will understand its potential. Jacksonville probably deals with the same issue. If they haven't figured out a way to help their people, they'll be glad to get their hands on this tech for sure." Janice nodded to Barbara as she spoke.

Neither Janice nor Bingo nor any other people along with them knew Sanders had decided to share The Chamber House with residents of Jacksonville without telling Patrice. That knowledge may have been enough to keep them from agreeing to go.

Patrice wasn't well-known by any of them, but he was well-liked and respected.

Sanders might have convinced Patrice that sharing The Chamber House with other communities would benefit everyone if he had more time.

However, with Luke and the others who had gone missing, Patrice's mysterious absence encouraged Sanders to move forward without consulting Patrice or anyone else working in The Chamber House.

It was a calculated bet Sanders was willing to make. He was confident he could get Patrice to fall in line if he saw him again. And if he didn't, well, that just made his need for Peter Oskam all the more significant.

Either way, Sanders was driven to get his way.

He would sacrifice whoever he needed to get it.

# Chapter 29

“It was the first thing that actually worked for us. Seeing you feverish in that bed brought it all back to me. I had to do something. You could have been dying. I had to try.” Carly was recounting the details she had rehearsed over and over for Roger’s eventual interrogation she knew must be coming.

“You were a doctor?” Roger asked, still looking suspicious.

“No, not at all. After everything collapsed a bunch of people from different specialties were kind of thrown together. There wasn’t much order to it. We just happened to be the people those who still had some control over things could manage to get their hands on.” Carly answered.

“So, not a doctor. What then?” Roger continued his questioning.

“My specialty was using implants to deliver targeted doses of pharmaceutical drugs to chronically ill patients. I was on the faculty at a university receiving private funding from corporations and venture capital firms.” Carly responded. She had put together a few half-truths to make her backstory sound plausible.

Roger rubbed his hands on his temples. “Hmm, okay so you were in charge of this project?”

“No, I was a lead tech. I worked with about a dozen others in the same position as me. We did the more menial tasks while the big shots in our department put all our research together and planned out what to do next.” Carly clarified.

“How did you end up where you were when this cube thing came into the picture?” Roger followed up.

“When everything went to shit it was chaos. I was driving home from work when it started falling apart in my area of the country. An emergency broadcast came on over my subscription service podcast and instructed everyone to get off the road and find a safe place to shelter immediately. It just kept repeating. So, I drove back to the university. That’s the safest place I could think to go.” Carly responded.

“Go on.” Roger prompted.

“I parked in my usual place on campus and headed straight to the R&D building where I worked. Others, including some of the big-name scientists, had done the same. We locked ourselves in and waited for further instructions. There were about twenty-five of us at first. We all stayed locked in and watched updates on the news for about a day and a half. Several people in the group panicked and left, saying they needed to find their families and see if they were safe.” Carly added.

Carly looked at Roger. He was clearly expecting her to continue.

“Any ways, long story short. We were there for about a week. It was mostly quiet, but we did hear a few sounds that sounded like gunshots and screaming off in the distance on a few occasions. Finally, a military helicopter showed up. Some men got out, and came into the building. They had their own access cards…and spoke with the science heads there.”

“There were eight of us remaining. The rest had fled days before. They never came back. One of the head scientists on our project informed us we would be heading out in a few hours, going to a safe place. Two people who were still among the eight of us decided to stay behind. The rest of us got in the transport vehicle that eventually arrived. We were in the back. It was an armored vehicle with no windows. We could hear a few loud yells and more gunshots, but it was mostly quiet.”

“Eventually we got to our destination. It was a huge military like base, but it looked more private, not official military. I couldn’t see much of the outside when we got out of the vehicle. It wasn’t long before we were back to work on a different project. There were others working with us from all sorts of different backgrounds. I didn’t know a lot about them. We were frantically working on something that would stop the infection. I was extremely sleep-deprived like everyone else around me. Nothing was working and we could tell the guards inside the building were becoming more uneasy about whatever was happening on the outside.”

“So, you didn’t really know what was going on outside?” Roger asked.

Carly didn’t say anything for a few seconds, then spoke. “No, not at all, but we could feel the tension getting higher around us. Finally, another group brought in The Cube and we tested it on one of the subjects. Symptoms just like yours. Nothing else had worked. Our subject’s vitals were slipping and so we tried using The Cube on her. Just like we did with you. Ice bath, sat The Cube in with her. It worked! That’s all I can say. I don’t know how, but it worked.”

Carly waited for more questions from Roger, but none were forthcoming.

“What else do you want to know?” She finally prompted him.

“How did you end up out on that road where we found you?” Roger inquired.

“One night, actually it was very early in the morning, I heard some explosions. They were loud and close. There was a lot of yelling and gunfire. Emergency lighting came on all over inside the building where I worked and slept. It was panic and chaos. I left my room to see what was going on. I heard gunshots down the hall and more yelling. I ran away from the sound of the gunshots and that was toward the area where The Cube was located. Another coworker, Ramirez, had also headed in that direction.”

Carly paused. She had practiced this part several times. She forced her eyes to tear up and finished her story, doing her best to sound like she was trying not to cry.

“We didn’t have time to come up with any type of plan. I thought The Cube could be our only way to possibly end whatever was happening. I told Ramirez to grab it and we managed to find an exit out of the building. It was just below ground level in a parking garage sort of area. There was a car not too far from the exit with the engine already running and the door open. We got in and drove, crashed through the stop sign bar leading out of the parking garage and found an open exit near what looked like the opposite side I originally came in on several weeks before.”

“It was pandemonium as we drove towards the exit. I was driving but had to turn and swerve several times. Once I slowed down, someone crashed through the rear window and grabbed Ramirez. They were screaming at him. I didn’t notice him getting head sucked or drooled on, but obviously, he got infected somehow. The place where we had been was remote.

No one was around for miles. We drove all night. Ramirez was starting to lose consciousness. I had no idea what was going on with him. One second, he was slipping in and out, and the next, he was going crazy. He attacked me from the backseat. We crashed into that pole while he was striking me. I found the gun on the floorboard of the car. I wasn’t thinking. Just acting out of instinct. I managed to grab it while he was trying to get his fingers around my head and shot him as he tried to climb over the back seat. It happened so fast. I guess I hit my head when we crashed because I passed out soon after.”

Roger had been sitting across from Carly at the small table in the backyard of his duplex. He stood up and walked over to the fence for a moment. Carly remained seated.

He supposed Carly’s story seemed plausible compared to everything else. He could verify the last part of the story from how he found her so many days ago.

Roger walked back over to Carly at the table and sat down again.

“I thank you for what you did for me.” He started. “I won’t say I trust you completely yet, but today was a positive step in that direction. Thank you for answering my questions. I do appreciate it.”

“Of course.” Replied Carly. She fought to hold back a smile.

Her concocted and well-rehearsed story had managed to soothe Roger’s doubts.

At least for now.

# Chapter 30

“Ahhhhh!”

Luke heard the screaming first.

He opened his eyes and grimaced audibly as the screaming continued somewhere in the distance.

“Luke! Are you awake?” It was Gloria’s voice.

“Yeah, I’m here.” Luke answered to the darkness around him. “Where are we?”

“They put bags over our heads and threw us in this room. I’m tied up too! I didn’t see where we were going, but it was about an hour walk from the van. It was through the woods mostly.” Janice spoke quietly and quickly.

“Is everybody in here?” Luke called out, trying to look around, despite the utter darkness swallowing him up.

“No, it’s just you and me in here.” Gloria responded. “Patrice, Lanisha and Nate are somewhere else. I don’t know what happened to the dog.”

“That fucking dog.” Luke laughed aloud despite their circumstances. “I don’t give a fuck about that dog at the moment Gloria.”

“Easy dude, I was just tellin you what’s up.” Gloria chided Luke.

“I didn’t mean to be short with you Gloria. I’m just trying to get a feel for our situation.” Luke replied, regretting his comment.

“You fucks!” a voice outside yelled. Then more screaming.

“That’s Nate.” Luke spoke up first. “Is that him screaming?”

“I think so.” Gloria answered. “I don’t know what’s happening to him.”

“We gotta get out of here.” Luke spoke up after several seconds of them listening to Nate scream and curse at whoever was torturing him.

“Yeah, agreed, but we’re tied up pretty damn snug here.” Gloria responded.

Luke felt around as best he could. He was tied very tightly to a large pole behind him. He presumed Gloria was similarly situated but asked anyway.

“How are you tied up?”

“My hands are tied to a pole behind me. It fucking smells in here. Like rotten meat and shit.” Gloria answered.

Luke hadn’t noticed the smell until now, but Gloria was correct.

“Yeah, that’s foul.” Luke replied.

“I can’t stand listening to Nate screaming and yelling like that much longer. I’m going to lose it Luke!” Gloria spoke with a distinct note of panic in her voice.

Luke pulled as hard as he could against his restraints, but there was no give to them.

“Do you have a knife or anything sharp on you?” He asked after struggling some more.

“No, they searched us all over before putting us in here. I’ve been feeling around on the floor for a nail or something. No luck so far.” She spoke now with both panic and frustration.

“Gloria, you need to stay sharp. I need you to stay with me. I know it’s hard, but you got to.” His words came out a little harsher than he intended, but he was feeling stressed too.

“I’m trying Luke. I am.” She spoke faintly, as though fighting her thoughts to speak clearly.

They could hear voices speaking outside but couldn’t make out all the words. Only parts were intelligible. There was also laughter. Luke felt his stomach churning.

After what seemed like hours of waiting and listening to periodic screaming from Nate outside, the door opened.

A figure entered the room, but it was dark outside as well. A light was pointed in Luke and Gloria’s direction. Luke saw that He and Gloria were facing each other, about ten feet apart. His back was to the person shining the light and to the door.

“You awake meaty mama?” It was a man’s voice.

“Fuck you!” Gloria yelled, barely holding back from being totally enraged and irrational.

The man walked over to Gloria, past Luke. He squatted next to her and started squeezing her arms, stomach, and thighs.

Gloria writhed and tried to turn away, but she could only manage to scoot away slightly from the man.

“ha ha! Savory mama. Good meat.” The man spoke cheerfully as he stood up. “We get you cookin soon. After we make our fun wit you mama.”

He turned to face Luke, but Luke could now see that he was wearing a mask.

“Trouble man come back to us now too.” The man spoke softly as he approached Luke and knelt down behind him.

“We make you holler for us soon, trouble man.” Luke heard the voice just behind him. The man used the pole to create distance between himself and Luke.

*Smart fucker*. Thought Luke.

“Let us go!” Luke tried to sound as calm as possible. “We can trade with you, bring you things you can use.”

“Ohhh, we got you trouble man. We use you. That’s what we wantin.” The man replied.

“We show you now. You see your buddy make us strong tonight. We gettin him ready. You come see!” The man spoke with pride and energy in his voice. It made Luke feel absolutely sick inside.

The man stood up. Others came into the room.

“We take you out now and you give us no trouble. If do, then we gut her now and you can watch.” The man said with no inflection or emotion in his voice.

Two people wearing masks moved over behind Gloria and began untying her. Another stood behind her with a gun pointed at the back of her head.

“No fuss meaty mama or we blow up your head now.” The man spoke, remaining in his position behind Luke.

Gloria didn’t resist, and the two people who untied her from the pole stood up and retied her hands behind her back. They guided her out the door, each holding one of her arms.

“She wait for you outside. Come see!” The man said, and Luke could hear him turn around and leave the little room.

One person knelt behind him and untied his bindings, getting him to his feet and then retying his hands again. Luke had to remind himself not to try anything, or Gloria could end up dead. Luke was also led out into the night.

Once outside, Luke could see several other small buildings and roped-off paths. Some torches were burning along a few of the roped tracks.

Luke and Gloria were guided along one path into a larger open area. Several people were standing in the empty space, and only a few others were wearing masks. Luke could see men, women, and children standing in a semi-circle.

He couldn’t determine what was in the middle but could see a fire burning from the flickering light.

As they got closer, he heard Gloria gasp and soon saw what caused her reaction.

At first, Luke’s brain refused to accept what he saw.

Nate was bound, gagged, and bleeding from open gashes all over his naked body.

“You see. He almost ready.” The man said, coming around in front of Luke. He removed his mask as he spoke.

Luke saw sharp eyes and distinct facial features. This was the face of an efficient killer, was his first thought.

“I’m Jor.” The man introduced himself to Luke and Gloria.

Gloria began dry heaving and almost fell to her knees, but the two men guiding her held her up.

“She’s sick!” Luke was speaking before he knew what he was saying.

“She’s dying from her insides going rotten.” Luke continued.

Jor looked slightly confused and upset for a few seconds but soon regained composure. “We get her checked up soon. We find out sure.” Jor spoke with confidence and control.

“Luke, oh god Luke, they’re going to kill him…then.” Gloria shook her head and started whimpering. She sagged in her captors’ arms but remained standing just barely.

“We have people. They will come looking for us and soon!” Luke tried to sound as confident as Jor but didn’t quite get there.

Jor smiled, just enough to show his teeth, which were mostly still intact. “We know your people. We see them. We take them just like you. Easy hunting.”

“Let us trade with you. We can give you many things. Many things you like.” Luke replied. “We have many valuable things you can have. Let them go and I’ll stay with you till they bring it back for you.”

“We take what we want when we want. You are weak and nothing.” Jor got close to Luke’s face as he spoke, almost daring Luke to prove him wrong.

“Then I’ll fight you for them. If I win we leave. If you win you keep us all.” Luke looked directly into Jor’s eyes as he offered the challenge, no quiver in his voice

Jor stepped back from Luke but remained locked into eye contact with him.

“Yes, I fight you. But not yet. I provide first, then we fight. You eat too or no deal.” Jor spoke loud enough for everyone around to hear his words.

“Luke, no Luke. We can’t. I can’t. No!” Gloria spoke up, absolute desperation and hopelessness in her voice.

Before Luke could say anything to Gloria, Jor spoke again. “Bring them who we caught others too!” He motioned to three men standing around him, and they moved away, heading toward one of the lighted paths leading out of the open area.

He turned back toward Luke. “You all eat! Jor was smiling now. He added. “You stay good, or I let the bitches cut you to death in front of you people can watch. Get that trouble man?!”

Luke nodded, holding Jor’s gaze a second longer. “Then I fight you.” He replied, not trying to hold back any of his anger now.

Jor turned and motioned toward the others standing around the fire. Drums began beating, and Jor’s people started chanting in rhythm with the drums.

“Gloria.” Luke spoke while looking at the ground. “You’ve got to make it through this. I will kill this fucker. He’s dead.”

“I can’t do it Luke. I can’t” Gloria just shook her head over and over again. “There’s no fucking way I can do this.” Gloria was openly sobbing now.

“You can and you will! You have to!” Luke was pretty sure Gloria would never be okay again, even if he did manage to kill Jor in combat.

“Their cannibals Luke! They’re…going to… eat Nate!” Gloria tried to get her words out as she shivered and cried.

Luke looked over and saw Patrice and Lanisha being led into the open area. Patrice collapsed as soon as he saw Nate and understood what was happening. Lanisha let out a scream and started struggling wildly.

“Lanisha! Stop! No, don’t!” Luke cried out to her.

Lanisha looked at Luke, confused and panicked. Luke continued speaking directly to her. “You have to listen to me. It’s our only chance. Please listen to me!”

Lanisha stopped struggling and allowed herself to be led closer to where Luke was standing.

Three men picked up Patrice and carried him next to Lanisha, dropping him to the ground. Patrice curled up in a fetal position. He was rocking back and forth slowly, but his hands were also tied behind his back.

“Patrice! Say something. Talk to me!” Luke tried to sound calm, but his words came out more as a bark.

Patrice didn’t respond. He only turned more away from them and continued rocking. He was slowly moving away. One of the men who threw him on the ground noticed and kicked him hard in the stomach. Patrice rolled the other way and curled in more from the pain.

The man who kicked Patrice looked down at him and then up at Luke and smiled.

Luke ignored him and tried to reach Patrice with his voice again. “Patrice just listen to me. Don’t fight them. Don’t move. Just stay there. Just stay there Patrice.”

Jor walked over to where Nate was hanging by his arms, barely conscious. He put his hands on Nate’s cheeks and rubbed them gently. “You make us strong tonight.” Jor smiled again as he spoke loud enough for all to hear him.

Jor moved back from Nate, and five others moved over to bind Nate to a longer piece of wood by his hands and feet. They carried Nate over and set him above the now glowing coals of the fire.

“No, no, no, no….” Gloria kept repeating to herself, shutting her eyes as tight as she could.

Two men approached Nate. Each held a long knife in his hands. Two women followed behind each of the men.

One of them walked around the other side of Nate. Luke could see that Nate was still conscious.

The man who had walked around Nate’s other side took his knife and cut it long across Nate’s leg. Nate cried out in agony, and his body convulsed. The women behind the man quickly put their bowls under where the man had cut to collect the dripping blood.

The other man stood by Nate’s head. He turned and held up the knife as the drums beat faster. The crowd of onlookers started chanting louder and gyrating their bodies.

The man turned back toward Nate and slowly slid the knife across his throat. Nate made a gurgling sound as blood flowed out quickly, and two women held bowls under his throat.

Both groups of women came around and held their bowls for the crowd, causing the onlookers to make piercing sounds.

Nate stopped moving, but his eyes were fixed as a few of Jor’s people placed more logs on the smoldering embers. The fire started getting higher again.

Soon the smells of cooking meat reached Luke, Gloria, and the others.

Lanisha cried out in uncontrolled horror and disgust.

Gloria just sagged, and the men holding her let her fall to the ground.

Patrice remained curled up as he had been.

Luke looked at Nate’s eyes, unmoving and open, staring off in no particular direction.

After a few minutes had passed, the two men who had cut Nate began slicing off sections of his body and laying them on flat rocks next to the fire. Luke could hear them sizzling.

Jor walked over to the flat rocks and collected the cooking strips of Nate’s body with his own knife. He placed them on a tray and walked to Luke and the others.

“Now you eat this that keeps us alive today and your people eat too. You do or we not fight.” Jor instructed as he cut off small sections for each of them.

Jor picked up the first cut piece with the tip of his knife and held it directly in front of Luke’s mouth.

Luke bent forward to take the offered piece in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed for Jor to see.

Jor next walked over to Gloria and did the same. “I can’t Luke. I can’t.” She was sobbing again.

“Gloria! He’ll kills us all if you don’t.” Luke pleaded with her.

Jor held the piece next to Gloria’s face as she sat on the ground, patiently waiting for her to open her mouth and take it. Finally, she did.

Now it was Lanisha’s turn. She didn’t argue or resist. She took the piece and did as Luke had done, saying nothing.

Jor turned toward Patrice last. He actually had a genuine look of affection as he knelt close to Patrice. He gently took Patrice’s head in his hands and spoke quietly to him. Luke couldn’t hear what Jore was saying.

Jor gently placed Patrice’s head back on the ground. He stood up, not offering anything to Patrice.

Jor looked at Luke. “The fat shitty man will not eat. It is enough who did. We still fight.”

Luke looked back at Patrice. He could see that Patrice had soiled himself while lying on the ground.

Luke and Lanisha stood silent, looking at the ground as Jor’s people feasted and danced for the next hour.

Drumming fell silent as Jor walked to the center and stood next to the fire and what remained of Nate.

“Trouble man challenge me tonight! I will kill him in battle. You watch!”

Jor’s people shrieked and hollered with excitement.

Jor moved aside as more wood was placed on the fire. The flames rose higher and higher, completely engulfing Nate’s remains and burning them to ash.

When the fire was blazing wildly, Jor approached Luke again.

“You fight me now. You die or I die. Only one comes out of circle.”

Jor waived his arm and stepped aside as he did so. Luke could see armed men standing in a circle, just a little smaller than the clearing with the fire in the middle. Everyone else moved behind the armed men. Lanisha, Gloria, and Patrice were also taken outside the circle.

Jor walked to the other side of the circle, putting the fire between himself and Luke. He nodded to one of his men, and they dropped a knife next to Luke’s feet.

Luke retrieved the weapon, feeling its edge. The blade balanced perfectly in his grip.

“We fight!” Jor called out. The armed men shrieked in assent, and the drums started beating again.

Luke and Jor circled around each other with the fire between them. Luke was using the time to clear his head and not let anger about Nate cloud his thinking.

Jor smiled at Luke, seeming to read his thoughts, and ran toward him…closing the distance between them deceptively fast.

Jor feigned a swipe to Luke’s midsection. Luke moved to dodge the swipe, and Jor lept up to kick Luke in the head.

Jor’s foot made contact with the space between Luke’s cheek and ear, knocking Luke off balance and into one of the armed men behind him. The man shoved Luke back toward Jor.

Jor rolled on the ground to close the gap between himself and Luke, swinging his knife at Luke’s knees.

Luke felt the knife dig into his right knee and cried out in pain.

Jor rolled away from Luke, remaining crouched on the ground.

Luke got his balance and squared up with Jor. He recognized Jor’s fighting style.

As Jor rolled back toward Luke, he waited until just before Jor finished his move to jump out to his side and swipe the knife at his face.

Jor was quick, however, and leaned out of the way as he was coming up to lunge at Luke. Luke did manage to drag part of his blade across Jor’s shoulder, ripping one strap off his coverall-type clothing and drawing blood.

Jor rolled around and kicked Luke’s feet out from under him.

Jumping on him with quickness and strength that Luke wouldn’t have thought possible, Jor lunged with the knife at Luke’s head, barely missing him and driving his knife into the ground.

Luke wrapped one arm around Jor’s knife hand and used his other hand to punch Jor square across his nose.

Jor’s nose began bleeding profusely.

Luke pushed Jor off of him and quickly got to his feet. He intended to lung at Jor’s side and stick the knife under his rib cage before Jor could get his senses about him.

As Luke was lunging for him, Jor rolled onto his back away from Luke’s jab and brought his knife up the back of Luke’s leg, drawing a big gash across his hamstring.

Luke felt a warm sting but was high on adrenaline and barely registered the pain.

Jor quickly brought the knife down to jab it through Luke’s foot.

Luke moved his foot away just barely. Then he jammed his foot over Jor’s arm while the knife was stuck in the dirt.

Luke rammed his knife through Jor’s hand and grabbed Jor’s knife as it fell away from his stabbed hand.

A booming roar came from outside the circle as he landed on his knees to plunge the knife deep into Jor’s ribcage. It was quickly followed by a woman’s scream.

A second later, he heard gunfire and people running everywhere.

Getting back to his feet, Luke quickly looked around for what remained of his group.

He could see Patrice lying on the ground a short distance away, and Lanisha and Gloria crouched beside him.

Men were guarding them, but they looked nervous and weren’t paying attention to their captives.

Now Luke heard more roaring and men crying out in agony. More gunfire followed.

Luke tossed one of the knives toward Gloria’s back.

People were yelling in a panic. It was pandemonium.

Using this to his advantage, Luke ran over to his little group huddled. He punched one of the men in the face as Lanisha and Gloria tackled and subdued the other guard.

“Let’s get out of here now!” Luke yelled to Gloria and Lanisha. “Gloria help me with Patrice. Lanisha! You lead.”

Luke and Gloria each took an arm and got Patrice to his feet. Lanisha started leading them away from the sound of roaring and gunfire.

As they were leaving, Luke looked around, trying to spot Jor, but there was no sign of him in the commotion.

They made their way out of the small settlement area and into the thick trees. “Keep moving. Don’t stop.” Luke commanded Lanisha.

The vegetation was thick, and carrying Patrice made their progress tedious.

Screaming and an occasional roar that sounded unlike anything Luke had heard before was still very clear in the night.

“Luke, we can’t go much further into this carrying Patrice. It’s too thick.” Gloria spoke in a hushed voice as they navigated around a fallen tree.

“Just a little more. I want to put some distance between us and whatever the fuck is happening back there.” Luke replied.

After about thirty minutes or so of struggling through dark, thick forest Lanisha spotted something. “Over there.”

Luke looked to where Lanisha was pointing, spotting the large tree trunk. “Yeah, that’ll have to do for now.”

They settled in as best they could inside and around the trunk to wait out the night. It was not wet or cold, but Luke was injured, and the mosquitos were already overwhelming.

It was going to be a very long night.

# Chapter 31

Janice didn’t like negotiating with bandits, but this wasn’t her first rodeo.

“Janice! What a rare treat. I do so enjoy seeing your lovely face out here in God’s country.” Jacob, the leader, grinned wide as he addressed Janice in front of his gang.

“Jacob, always a pleasure.” Janice faked a broad smile in return as she answered Jacob.

“What brings you gentle folk out on such a beautiful day.?” Jacob swept his arm wide as he spoke, gesturing all around him.

“The usual, just scouting and gathering supplies.” She had dealt with Jacob a few times before but knew better than to give him any more details than were necessary.

Jacob’s crew fancied itself some sort of modern-day police force but were really just glorified bandits. This group had organized itself on the premise of peacekeeping, claiming a toll for their excellent work from anyone they came across.

Going along with them was more manageable than starting any trouble, so expeditions from Hampton Flats always carried some “toll” items to get around groups like Jacob’s safely.

Janice also knew that Hampton Flats had occasionally used Jacob’s crew for small jobs chasing out worse bandits.

“Bingo! You old rascal! How you doin?” Jacob smiled even wider as he and Bingo shook hands and hugged each other warmly.

“Just chuggin along brother.” Bingo replied, also smiling.

Janice knew that Bingo liked Jacob, and they had occasionally hung out together. Jacob also helped Bingo out with his business supply chain from time to time. Drugs to escape reality weren’t regularly available for direct distribution to customers within the walls of Hampton Flats.

Bingo could bullshit with the best, but he wouldn’t jeopardize their objective. Bingo knew how to prioritize and compartmentalize between doing his job and running his business.

“Y’all hungry, thirsty?” Jacob continued after greeting Barbara, Ralph, and Bob in turn. “We got more than enough for every one o’ya.”

Because this interaction was not unusual, Jacob would not ask directly for a toll. Janice would offer it. Jacob would accept, of course, thanking her kindly, like a gentleman.

“Yes, please and thank you!” Bingo replied before Janice could say anything.

“Fantastic!” Follow me, everyone” Jacob waved with his arm and started walking back toward their cluster of vehicles.

Janice would have agreed to some food and drinks anyway but didn’t like Bingo taking the lead. She supposed Bingo and Jacob being friends was why he stepped on her toes and didn’t let it bother her too much.

Making nice with Jacob and his crew was just a way to keep the peace and maintain their mutually beneficial relationship with Hampton Flats and its people.

*Sanders probably already had a place in his grand scheme for someone like Jacob*, Janice thought to herself as she followed Jacob to his lead vehicle.

It was a decked-out F250 with the tailgate down. Inside the bed were numerous supplies, including food and drinks.

“You gotta beautiful rig here Jacob.” Janice knew how to butter Jacob up properly.

“Thanks kind lady.” Jacob replied. “She’s a gasoholic, but I love’er.”

A couple of Jacob’s men handed out some food and drinks to Janice and her group.

“Gatorade!?” “I haven’t had one of these in I don’t know how long.” Ralph smiled as he held the bottle up to his lips.

“Drink up, buddy. Enjoy.” Jacob commented as Ralph drank over three-quarters of the bottle in one swig.

“You are gracious as always Jacob.” Janice remarked as she opened her Gatorade and took a small drink.

“Well, I gotta confess. I knew you would be comin this a’way.” Jacob addressed Janice directly. “Yer buddy Sanders wants me and my boys to accompany you part o’the way to yer destination.”

Janice was clearly surprised by this information. “Sanders told you we would be coming this way?”

“Yeah, he told me all about it. Don’t worry about lyin to me back there at your van. I know it’s important and on a need-to-know only kinda basis.” Jacob answered, smiling again and adding a wink this time. “It’s no hard feelings pretty lady.”

“I keep up with Sanders on the regular. He’s got big plans.” Jacob continued. “He tells me stuff and I kinda like where that fella’s thinkin is headed.”

*Of course, you do*. Janice thought but only nodded in return.

“Truth is things are a little more dangerous than usual out here lately. I’ve heard some rumors and seen some wreckage that would make your stomach turn inside out.” Jacob added as Janice took another sip of her drink.

“Some new kinda crazies out here huntin people and animals alike.” Jacob finished, taking a bite of his sandwich and looking down the road.

“New kinda crazies?” Bob spoke up for the first time.

Jacob looked back from the road to Bob as if surprised to hear his voice.

“Yeah! Bob is it?” Jacob asked. Bob nodded.

Jacob moved his gaze between Bob, Bingo, and the rest of them as he spoke.

“I’ve heard it’s just one man, but he’s all amped up like outta the comics or somthin. Can practically throw a car at ya. Crazy shit like that. Rippin people and deer in half too.”

“I haven’t heard anything about that at all.” Janice countered.

“Well, I woudn’t have believed any of it either, cept I saw some o’the wreckage.” Jacob responded.

Janice knew Jacob was a gloried bandit but had never known him to exaggerate anything except his gentleman status.

Jacob continued, “I ain’t laid eyes on this mythic fella myself, but I’ve seen enough to give the stories I’ve been hearin some credence.”

“Shit, that puts a new wrinkle in things,” Bingo commented after thinking it over for several seconds.

“No kidding.” Janice added.

“Well, I’ll do what I can to assist in keeping y’all safe for most of the way to Jacksonville. And don’t worry, Sanders already compensated me handsomely for the task.” Jacob finally said afterward.

As they finished up their meal and drinks together, Jacob made ready to get back on the road.

“Neil and Susie’ll take the lead up front. We’ll have two cars behind them. You decent folks in yer cars in the middle and me in the back with the rest o’my posse.” Jacob instructed. “We best get movin.”

Janice and her group headed back to their vehicles. She hadn’t expected this at all.

Clearly, Jacob had met with Sanders because he already knew where they were headed and didn’t expect any toll from them today.

“I don’t like this new threat we’re facin out here. If this is just one amped up dude doin all what Jacob said, we could be in serious trouble.” Bob commented after they were back in the van.

“I don’t like it either. Not one bit.” Janice replied. “Let’s stay focused on what we gotta do for now.”

Bob nodded in agreement.

Janice started the van and waited for the other vehicles to get in position before putting it in drive and starting down the road.

She had many thoughts swirling in her head about Jacob, Sanders, and this new threat.

She tried to push all the distracting thoughts aside and focus on driving and staying alert.

Barbara and Bob started their own conversation, speculating on the trip ahead and what they might face.

Janice tuned them out as she focused on the road and her surroundings.

She didn’t know what they were facing but wanted to be ready for whatever they might find ahead.

# Chapter 32

“You gotta get up daddy.” Brianne pleaded again with her father.

He only turned away from her in his bed and curled up under the covers.

Since Sandra had disappeared, her father had seemed to lose all interest in functioning. He lay in bed all day, sometimes not even getting up to relieve himself.

“Daddy, you can’t stay like this. We need you!” Brianne begged him as she shook his leg.

After trying a few more times and getting no response, she went out of his room and into their kitchen/living room area to check on her younger brother and sister. She was the oldest of four kids.

“Is daddy getting up today?” Lyla, only eight, asked with palpable fear in her voice.

They had lost their oldest brother Casey and then their mother in a traumatic way. Then Sandra, in some way they couldn’t explain, and now their father was slipping away a little each day.

“I don’t know Lyla. I don’t know.” Brianne answered, petting Lyla’s head gently.

Their father hadn’t eaten in over a week, and Brianne could barely get him to drink water. He was wasting away. They had made it through losing their mother and numerous other dangers, but apparently, losing Sandra had pushed him over the edge.

Brianne was only thirteen, but she had grown up fast in a dangerous world full of terror and instability.

Petesboro was a welcome relief from the dangers outside, but now it didn’t seem safe to her anymore.

Brianne had done things no thirteen-year-old should ever be required to do to protect herself and her family.

“Get your brother. I’m taking you to Bebe’s house,” Brianne instructed Lyla.

Lyla looked sad but did as she was told.

Bebe was their neighbor. An older lady, Brianne guessed, was in her fifties. She had lost her entire family to the outside before finding Petesboro. She was a kind person who was quite fond of Lyla and Charlie, Brianne’s younger brother.

Brianne thought they might remind her of her own children in some way. Bebe spoke of them often, routinely getting sad when she described them to her but sometimes also happy.

Bebe opened the door, smiled as she met Brianne’s eyes, and looked down to see Lyla and Charlie with her.

“Daddy still won’t get up?” Bebe asked. Brianne shook her head.

“Come in and let me give you some love.” Bebe gave the little ones a hug as she stepped inside.

“You two little bugs go sit on Bebe’s couch. I got some books you might like on the table.” Bebe smiled as Lyla and Charlie each picked up a book and sat on the couch.

“They look so sad today. It makes my heart hurt.” Bebe kept watching the children as she spoke. “How are you dear?”

“I’m okay, Bebe.” Then Brianne started crying and buried her head in Bebe’s arms. She didn’t know why she was crying but couldn’t stop herself.

“It’s okay baby. You cry all you want. I’m here.” Bebe’s gentle tone felt so welcoming to Brianne.

“I can’t lose daddy too!” Brianne heard her voice talking into Bebe’s arm. She didn’t know why she was saying these words.

“I know you’re scared. I know. It’s okay.” Bebe reassured Brianne as she wept.

“I gotta do something Bebe. I gotta!” Brianne realized she was making up her mind as she spoke.

“What do you mean dear?” Bebe asked, still holding Brianne close.

“I gotta find Sandra.” Brianne was crying less now and starting to sound more resolved.

“I know you want to find Sandra dear. I do. It’s so hard and it doesn’t make any sense.” Bebe was trying to sound reassuring.

“No, I have to find her Bebe. I’m going to find her, no matter what.” Now Brianne had stopped crying entirely. There was anger growing in her voice. “I can’t lose Daddy and Sandra. Daddy’s going to die if I don’t bring Sandra back.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault. None of this is. You didn’t make Sandra disappear and you’re doing all you can for your father dear.” Bebe replied. “You gotta stay strong for your brother and sister. They need you.”

“They need their daddy and their mommy. They only have Daddy left. I’m not their parent. I’m their sister.” Brianne was getting angrier as she spoke.

“Oh dear.” Bebe tried to hug Brianne tighter, but Brianne pushed away from her.

“Bebe, will you take care of Lyla and Charlie if I leave?” Brianne asked suddenly.

“If you leave? What are you saying?” Bebe asked with shocked surprise.

“Will you Bebe?” Brianne asked again.

“Where do you want to go? Why?” Bebe was clearly a little flustered.

“To find Sandra!” Brianne answered louder than she intended. Lyla and Charlie both looked up.

Bebe looked over towards them. “It’s okay dears. Let me get you something to drink.” Bebe moved toward her kitchen.

Brianne went over to sit next to Lyla and Charlie Jr.

“Why were you yelling about Sandra?” Charlie Jr asked as she sat down.

“Don’t worry. It’s okay Charlie.” Brianne answered, giving him a quick hug and a kiss on his forehead.

Brianne knew that Bebe was saying things to her that sounded rational and made sense. Her siblings needed her. But, she also knew that Bebe could take care of them if she went to look for Sandra.

Brianne had the fortune of being young and optimistic but also the misfortune of being young and inexperienced.

She had no practical idea how to start looking for Sandra or the dangers she would face doing so alone.

Brianne didn’t care about being rational or prudent.

Her mind was made up, and she was going to find Sandra.

# Chapter 33

"You buy it?" Doc asked, looking skeptical as usual.

"I don't know, but she did possibly save my life," Roger answered, still not entirely convinced himself.

"Well, something doesn't sit well with me," Doc added, still shaking his head.

"What do you mean?" queried Roger.

"I was desperate and out of options. I mean I didn't know what else do to for ya." Doc started, "It all seemed a bit dog and pony for me, but I just don't know."

Roger looked down at the floor in Doc's office but didn't say anything.

Doc spoke again after several seconds had passed. "You do what you think is best. She may'ah saved your life and all, but I still got an uneasy feelin about that gal."

"Yeah, I can't say I entirely disagree with you Doc. She hasn't really done anything that stands out as questionable up to this point, but I'll keep an eye on her for sure." Roger finally said.

"You hear about the bandits tried to sneak in here last night?" Doc changed the subject.

"Yeah, Jensen told me all about it." Roger replied. "They all got shot up to hell. I guess they tried to pull some guns they had hidden after they got through the gate and weren't expecting much resistance."

"We haven't had anyone try that in quite a while. Maybe there's desperation in the air outside again." Doc thought aloud to himself.

"Personally, I'm more worried about whatever attacked Jensen and me when I was injured. It could still be out there causing all kinds of terror. It might show up at our gates sooner or later." Roger countered.

"You think?" Doc asked, suddenly looking genuinely concerned.

"Maybe, I don't know if we could stop it. This thing or man, or whatever it was…could practically rip through metal with its bare hands." Roger added.

Doc shook his head again, and Roger continued, "I'm sure both Jensen and I hit it a few times straight on with bullets, and they didn't slow it down a bit."

"Damn." Doc was clearly looking more worried now.

"We'll need to be ready with bigger artillery if it shows up. I've already spoken with the guys at the gate and around the wall about it. That's probably why they were more prepared than usual for the bandits last night." Roger explained.

The mini-guns and rocket launchers?" Doc asked.

"We got 'em out and set up just in case. Double watch shifts too, at least for now." Roger responded.

Roger didn't add details about how fast this thing could move, and he wasn't sure anybody would have time to get it in their sights with bigger artillery.

"I'm heading out again for the first time since with Jensen today. We're going to scout and look over the area around us. See if there's any evidence of that thing around here closer to Jacksonville." Roger stood up as he spoke and stretched a little.

"How are you feelin?" Doc asked as Roger turned toward the door.

"Better than I've ever felt before, at least as far as I can remember." Roger replied.

"I'm glad to hear it. I really am." Doc commented, still looking worried.

Roger walked over to Doc and patted him on the shoulder. "We'll take it all one day at a time Doc, Carly and that thing outside. It's all I know to do."

Doc nodded his head and smiled. Roger turned around and left Doc's office.

Roger wanted to see Carly one more time before heading out with Jensen. Partly he wanted to let her know he was leaving for a while, and partly because something within him still doubted her in a way he couldn't explain.

She wasn't at the duplex or the restaurant. This wasn't immediately alarming, but Roger's internal alert level went up just the same.

He decided to leave it alone for now.

"Ready old man?" Jensen asked, as Roger approached his truck, recently restored to operation by Peter.

"I'll run circles around you jackass." Roger quipped back, grinning a little.

"Can't wait to see that." Jensen shot back as he climbed into the passenger seat.

Carly watched them leave from a distance, doing her best to remain hidden.

Jensen had told her a few hours before that he and Roger were heading out today. She would use the time productively.

Finding Peter's whereabouts was at the top of her day's agenda. She wanted to discover where Peter kept The Cube without raising his suspicions. That way, she could return and get it when she figured out how to convince Roger to go to The Mountain with her.

She had been working on a plan already. Still, She needed to finesse the wrinkles to not further raise Roger's suspicions.

Carly could sense that Roger still harbored doubts about her, despite not having yet verbalized anything of the sort.

Of course, she knew she was deceiving him but still couldn't figure out why he doubted her.

Roger needed a solid reason to take her to The Mountain, and maybe this new threat would suffice. Carly wasn't just relying on that, however. She also wanted to get Peter interested in going to The Mountain.

First, she needed to bump into him and start a conversation that didn't get his guard up about her. She needed to seem less concerned about The Cube than she was. That would help lower his suspicions.

"He's some kind of genius engineer from back in the day." Jensen had told her when she spoke with him, bringing Peter up as a passing comment, trying not to look too interested.

Carly, of course, could not admit that she had been familiar with some of Peter Oskam's work from before the outbreak occurred. She did not know anything about him personally.

Jensen had given her bits and pieces, but she needed to start a conversation with Peter directly to get details about what he had done and the kind of stuff he did now in Jacksonville.

Jensen had let slip where Peter lived in Jacksonville and when He liked to get over to the restaurant for dinner. She planned to bump into him during his dinner time and see where it went from there.

As she was rounding the corner about a block away from Peter's place, she was surprised by Peter walking toward her.

Peter was looking in her direction and noticed her immediately. "Uh, hello. You lost?"

"No, no…just out for a walk. How are you?" Carly knew she sounded awkward and needed to get focused quick.

"Doin fine." Peter replied. He started to walk past her, but Carly stopped him with a question before he could continue walking.

"Hey! Peter, is it?" Carly started. "I really wanted to thank you for helping with Roger. Without you we might have lost him. So, really, thank you Peter."

"Yeah, sure. Roger's a solid guy. I'm glad I could help him when he needed it." Peter replied, clearly uncomfortable.

"You gotta let me do something for you. It's not much, but would you let me buy you dinner? It would really be my pleasure." Carly spoke before Peter had too much time to reset himself.

Carly held out her hand for Peter to shake. This gesture was meant to further throw him off and get him to say yes.

"Uh, I…I guess. Yeah, that would be okay." Peter replied, obviously thrown off. He took her hand and shook it awkwardly as he answered.

"Great! Thank you. What time works for you tonight?" Carly followed up quickly with another question.

"Uh, around six I suppose. I eat around six in the evening." Peter was shuffling from one foot to another now.

"I'll see you then. Thanks Peter." Carly smiled wide and did her best to look sincere and innocent.

"Yeah, okay. See you then." Peter did a brief courtesy smile and turned around to walk away, clearly relieved that this short interaction was over.

Carly watched him walk away. She then turned around to finish her "walk."

This wasn't quite how she had planned to meet Peter, but she improvised as best she could.

She thought he was uncomfortable enough now not to worry about her scouting out his place. Peter would probably stay a little longer where he was going just to avoid running into her again.

Carly could tell immediately that Peter was socially awkward with new people. He was likely a loner who mostly kept to himself.

*He has that in common with Roger*. Carly thought to herself.

As Carly approached Peter's shed, she noticed it looked like an oversized garage with a big door in front. She could see that the door was closed and double locked. It also appeared to have at least one camera facing the area leading up to the door.

She wasn't getting in there today.

She needed to figure out how Peter would let her in himself.

Jensen mentioned that he was the local "fixer-upper" of various things, commenting that Peter had just finished repairing Roger's old truck from the attack.

She would figure out something she could get from Peter between now and dinner, casually bring it up in conversation, and take it from there.

Carly had another motivation for wanting to leave Jacksonville now as well. She knew more about the thing that attacked Roger and Jensen than everyone else.

She had seen it in action before and knew what it could do.

She didn't want to be around when this place's noises and commotion focused its attention on Jacksonville.

# Chapter 34

"It's carnage. There are body parts everywhere, structures destroyed or burned and the place is abandoned." Gloria paused after speaking, then added,

"I don't know what could have done something like that."

Luke grimaced and tightened his teeth before speaking, "Well, whatever it was, it doesn't seem to be around anymore, and we have to get moving."

"Luke, you can't be serious." Lanisha scolded. "You're in no condition to walk anywhere."

Lanisha had tended to Luke's wounded leg as best she could, but it was clear the damage was severe. Luke would need medical attention soon.

"I'll be fine." Luke lied. He didn't know if he would make it through this.

There was quiet for a minute, and Gloria filled the silence.

"If we want any chance of getting out of here alive, we have to go back the way we came and get to our van. If it's still in working condition, we can drive on to Jacksonville."

Lanisha looked at Gloria, surprised. "Jacksonville? Why not go back to Hampton Flats?"

"It's farther away, plus I've heard Jacksonville has a doctor. Luke needs help. We gotta shoot for the shortest distance and the best chance here." Gloria answered, tone matter of fact and void of emotion.

Luke looked over at Patrice. He hadn't spoken since before they were abducted. He briefly surprised himself, wondering about the dog too.

"Let's get moving, back through the camp and on to our van." Luke finally said.

"What are we going to do about…?" Gloria didn't finish speaking but waved her hand toward Patrice.

"We get him up and get him moving with us." Now it was Luke's turn to be matter of fact.

"Lanisha, you and Gloria get Patrice upright. Then Gloria will lead and the rest of us will follow." Luke instructed.

Lanisha and Gloria did as they were instructed. Then Gloria slowly led the small group back through the thick foliage toward the camp.

Returning to the camp seemed to take three times longer than their previous escape.

Luke did his best to help Lanisha lead Patrice through the underbrush. Patrice fell several times and was not enthusiastic about getting back up. He was utterly out of it mentally.

Gloria held up her hand a few times to stop the group while she listened. No one spoke.

Finally, they entered one of the paths connected to Jor's camp.

Luke could immediately see chaos and destruction everywhere.

"This is unbelievable." Lanisha gasped.

Luke and Lanisha both stopped and stood in shock at what they saw. Gloria had kept walking, seemingly oblivious to the devastation around her.

Realizing Luke and Lanisha had stopped, she turned to get their attention. "Guys, we gotta keep moving. Let's go!" She spoke the last words sharply to regain their focus.

Luke nodded, and Lanisha glanced away from the scattered body parts littering the path around them.

"What the fuck could do this to an entire camp of armed people?" Lanisha voiced her thoughts aloud. It was clear she was nervous.

"Something terrible. Something we don't want to see." Luke responded quickly and with a harshness, he did not intend, but the pain in his leg throughout the night and today had all but drained his patience.

Lanisha kept shaking her head but didn't say anything as they crossed the camp and headed back toward their van.

Gloria suddenly stopped again as they were about to leave the abandoned camp for the trees beyond. "Do you hear that?"

Luke and Lanisha listened closely.

"I do, yes." Lanisha spoke up first.

Now Luke could hear it too. "That fuckin dog." He said aloud.

The barking was becoming more apparent now, and soon the dog was running toward them from the opposite direction.

Patrice actually turned around now to see the dog. To everyone's surprise, he bent down as the dog caught up to them and started petting its head slowly.

"Damn," Lanisha commented, amazed to see Patrice acting like an average person again.

"Hey, boy," Patrice spoke softly. "Hey boy, you okay? It's okay. It's okay." Patrice repeated the exact phrase several times as he continued petting the dog.

"Patrice, we gotta keep moving. Bring the dog." Luke tried to sound as normal as possible. He wanted to act like they hadn't been through a terrible nightmare together, and Patrice hadn't completely lost it.

Gloria started walking again, and the rest followed her. Patrice didn't speak but walked on his own next to the dog.

Lanisha resisted the strong urge to ask Patrice how he was feeling. Instead, she tried to focus on the trees around them and be watchful of possible threats.

It took them about four hours to find a road. Gloria had stopped them several times to listen before moving again. Luke was thankful for the breaks.

"Auh." Luke couldn't hold back a grunt of pain as they all finally walked onto the road.

"Luke. You look terrible, and we need to rest." Lanisha was clearly worried, and nervousness was evident in her voice.

"No. No, let's keep moving. We gotta find the van. Gloria?" Luke looked away from Lanisha and directly at Gloria.

"I think it's this way. Come on." Gloria turned and began walking toward the east.

Luke was in incredible pain and limping with each step. Still, something else was also happening he couldn't explain, making him feel nervous for an entirely different reason from Lanisha.

Despite the excruciating pain, Luke felt charged up inside. He needed to rest a few times while they were in the woods, but slowly he started feeling stronger and stronger.

Some part of his brain kept bringing his attention back to his infection. *Could that be giving me energy? Strength?*

Luke kept these thoughts to himself. He didn't want to add another uncertainty to their predicament. He wanted Patrice to pull himself together so he could talk about it.

Luke chided himself for thinking that way. They had been through beyond any trauma he had expected on this trip and entirely out of Patrice's frame of reference.

Maybe Patrice would figure out a way to deal with it. Perhaps he wouldn't. Luke wasn't sure either way.

It took about thirty minutes of walking for Gloria to lead them back to the van.

Even before they got there, they could clearly see that it had been set on fire, just like the truck they had found before.

"That's fucking great." Lanisha commented. "Shit."

Before they reached the van, Gloria spoke up. "We need another vehicle. I might know where to find one. You all get back in the trees, just off the road. Wait for me. I can move faster without you."

Without waiting for any discussion on the matter, Gloria headed off quickly.

Luke didn't say anything. He watched her move away and pointed toward the trees on one side of the road.

"Over there. Let's go." He instructed and started in that direction.

Lanisha looked back and forth between Gloria and where Luke was heading now.

Patrice was already following behind Luke with the dog. Lanisha sighed and followed after them.

# Chapter 35

“I ain’t never seen that fucker be this cautious,” Bingo spoke with evident frustration regarding their slow progress toward Jacksonville.

“Seems he has to stop and scout up ahead or go talk to someone every twenty minutes. It’ll take us months to reach Jacksonville at this rate.”

Ralph laughed. “Shit dude, just chill. We got an escort. It might take us an extra day or two. He’s movin along at a decent pace.”

“I hate this slow shit man. I really do.” Bingo shot back. “I don’t mind the extra safety. But how cautious we gotta be here?”

Jacob stopped the caravan again as Bingo finished speaking.

“See, here we go again!” Bingo hit both hands on the steering wheel as he spoke.

“See what’s up.” Bingo ordered Ralph.

Ralph did as Bingo said and got out of the car to see what was happening.

After a few seconds of speaking with Jacob, Ralph turned and waived for Bingo, Janice, Barbara, and Bob to come to join them.

“Fuckin hell.” Bingo swore in a low voice to himself as he exited the vehicle.

He looked back at Janice and the rest as they followed behind him. “What now?” He asked them, despite knowing they also had no idea.

“Hey all!” Jacob greeted them with a warm smile as they got closer to him.

“We’re gonna actually have to change our route a little bit. The road up ahead apparently caved in and it’s a mud mess, impassable.”

“Shit!” Bingo spouted aloud.

“Well, It’s good news, bad news actually.” Jacob added. “We’re going to make it to Jacksonville a little faster than we planned, but the route’s a smidge more dangerous.”

“Dangerous? How?” Janice asked, alarmed by the idea of any danger already known and moving toward it anyway.

“Well, we were stayin this way cause that damn thing that’s been terrorizing the countryside has been most recently seen hangin out along the route we gotta take now.” Jacob responded.

Janice was about to say something else, but Jacob held up a hand to stop her. “I personally haven’t laid eyes on this mystery monster myself, but I can’t imagine it could survive all my boys openin up on it.”

Janice looked around at the well-armed men and women in Jacob’s crew and felt genuine relief for the first time that Sanders had thought to provide an escort.

“It’s gettin late in the day. We’ll drive down that side road a bit.” Everyone followed Jacob’s hand gesture toward the road a little down and to their left. “Then we’ll set up camp and wait till mornin to get a move on again.”

Jacob smiled warmly again. “Y’all good with that?” It wasn’t really a question.

Bingo tried to fake a smile, and the rest just nodded.

Jacob turned and clapped his hands together one time. “Let’s get back to it!” He yelled to his crew and headed to his vehicle.

Janice felt relieved and worried at the same time.

A change in the route agitated her sense of orderliness, but she knew how to be flexible outside the gates of Hampton Flats.

Whatever this thing was that could rip people and animals in half set her internal alarm bells off.

Now they were headed in the direction it had most recently been seen, or so Jacob said.

*Can Jacob and his guns kill it if it attacks us?*She was thinking this to herself as Barbara spoke up.

“You think Jacob and his crew can handle whatever’s out there?” Barbara couldn’t hide the worry in her voice either.

Janice shook her head and sighed. “Shit, I don’t know. I’d prefer we don’t find out.”

“Yeah, me either.” Barbara agreed. “I’m a little nervous. I don’t usually get this way.”

“You’re not the only one, Barbara.” Now Bob spoke up. “Let’s just keep our wits about us and stay alert.

“Sound advice any time.” Janice tried not to sound sarcastic.

“I didn’t mean to sound mean Bob. I’m just a little on edge.” She added quickly.

“No problem. I get it. No offense taken.” Bob replied, smiling a little.

“Although I doubt we’ll sleep well tonight.” Bob commented after a few seconds had passed.

“Probably not.” Barbara agreed.

*No, we probably won’t*. Janice frowned, remaining silent.

# Chapter 36

"Here ya go young lady and you sir, here's yours." Rhonda handed Carly and Peter their drinks.

"Dinner'll be out soon. Just waive me over if ya need anything else." Rhonda spun around as she spoke and walked off.

"Thanks for letting me take you to dinner tonight Peter." Carly put on her best sincere smile as she spoke.

"Yeah, ah, thanks for inviting me." Peter replied, almost making it sound like a question.

Peter grabbed his drink and quickly took a long swig to avoid talking further, at least for a few seconds.

*This guy will be a cakewalk.* Carly thought to herself.

"I know people don't really buy dinner anymore in the traditional sense so thank you for humoring me Peter." Carly commented in a casual tone.

Peter held his drink close to his mouth but pulled it away slightly to speak before taking another sip. "Yeah, uh, no problem."

"Roger only showed me this place so I didn't really know anywhere else in Jacksonville to meet you for dinner." Carly added, then continued. "Is there anywhere else to eat?"

"Yeah, a couple…I think." Peter looked around as if he was trying to see the places he was describing. "One's down the road. I… I've been there once before. It's much more low key than this place. Not really a restaurant at all. Just a place where someone cooks on a grill and outdoor stove under an open roofed area. A few tables to sit."

Carly smiled as she replied. "Maybe I'll get a chance to check it out sometime."

"It's pretty tasty food. I don't really eat out much. I like to eat at my place most of the time." Peter added.

"And there's another place besides that?" Carly asked.

Before Peter could answer, Rhonda brought over their meals.

"Here ya go Lady and Gentleman!" Rhonda announced cheerfully as she sat the meals down in front of them.

"Thank you." Carly and Peter responded at the same time.

"Do you need anything else?" Rhonda asked.

"Umm, I don't think so." Carly replied.

Peter just shook his head and forced a smile.

"Great! I'll check up on ya in a while." Rhonda smiled wide at them and left their table.

"That looks delicious Peter." Carly spoke up as Rhonda was walking away.

"Yeah, it's what I usually get here for dinner…when I come here I mean." Peter responded.

Peter had ordered chicken alfredo with homemade white sauce and freshly cooked vegetables.

"This may sound awkward, but can I please try a bite of it?" Carly asked, trying to sound sheepish.

Peter looked down at his meal and then up at Carly, clearly confused.

"Uh, I mean, I guess that's okay. Yeah okay." Peter replied.

Carly reached over, poked a piece of chicken with her fork, and twirled it around to get a few noodles.

"Mmmmm. That is so juicy and full of flavor." Carly covered her mouth as she spoke. "Thank you Peter."

Peter smiled. Carly thought it actually looked genuine, and she wanted to flatter him. Complementing his dinner choice seemed like an easy way to start.

Neither spoke for the next few minutes as they ate their meals.

Carly was pacing herself, not wanting to seem too rushed or eager.

"Peter, I have a confession to make. I need your help with something." Carly finally spoke up after taking a drink.

"My help? Ah, what for?" Peter looked worried and confused again.

"Well, this is gonna sound totally lame to you probably, I'm sure, but I want to fix up an old radio in the room where I'm staying at Roger's house." Carly tried to sound hesitant and excited at the same time.

"An old radio?" Peter asked.

"Yeah. Jensen told me you are quite the handyman and know all about gizmos and stuff. I thought you might be able to help me." Carly answered.

Peter appeared to be thinking it over, but Carly could tell he was getting uncomfortable.

"There's more to it actually. I worked in a lab before all this." Carly waived her hands around her as she spoke. "I'm used to being busy and I haven't had much to do lately. I really want a project to work on…something to do. It would mean so much to me if you would show me how to fix the radio."

Peter took a sip from his drink before speaking. "Umm, I mean, Yeah I guess I could do that for you."

"Really?!" Carly put an excited tone in her voice. She was smiling wide now to show Peter how much his agreeing to help her meant.

"Yeah, sure no problem." Peter was smiling sheepishly as he spoke.

"Thank you so much Peter!" Carly put her hands together like she was cherishing the moment. "That's wonderful."

They finished their meal and got up to leave.

Rhonda spoke up from the front of the restaurant as they stood and turned toward her.

"You are set here lady!" Rhonda called over to them. "Roger said he would cover any meals you had here. I don't think he'll be too upset about covering Peter for one night."

Peter looked around for just a few seconds, unsure whether to accept Rhonda's information.

"Thanks Rhonda!" Carly replied before Peter could say anything.

Peter nodded, apparently having decided to go along with Rhonda and Carly.

Carly touched Peter's arm gently. "Let's get out of there while she's still smiling." Carly turned and winked at Peter as she spoke.

Peter followed Carly out of the restaurant.

Peter stopped a few steps from the door, and Carly followed his gaze. Roger and Jensen were walking down the sidewalk toward the restaurant.

Roger was looking directly at them.

"Uh, hey, Hi Roger." Peter fumbled with his words.

"Hey Roger. Hey Jensen." Carly greeted them both with a smile.

"I invited Peter to dinner as a thank you for helping me save your life." Carly was talking in an excited tone. "And, he's agreed to help me fix the broken radio in my room."

"Has he?" Roger was clearly surprised to see them together and scrambling to organize his thoughts.

"That's pretty cool." Jensen was smiling. He elbowed Roger. "Way to go Peter!"

Peter was clearly embarrassed at Jensen's insinuation. "Umm, well, yeah, it's no big deal. Just being polite."

Peter stiffened up and looked around nervously. Carly noticed his posture changed.

"Oh, he's teasing you Peter. He's probably jealous because no girls pay attention to him." Carly commented playfully.

Peter laughed nervously, and Jensen put on a mock offended facial expression. "Ouch!" Jensen quipped. "hit me where it hurts."

Carly punched Jensen on the arm. "Don't dish it out if you can't take it." Carly smiled as Jensen rubbed the spot where Carly had punched him. He was smiling as she spoke.

"You okay Peter?" Roger asked in a serious tone.

"Me?" Peter looked at Roger, seeming to center himself. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

Peter wanted to quickly change the subject. "Did you guys find anything out there?"

Jensen whistled. "Yeah, a few mutilated animals and some busted up buildings. Looks like something crazier than usual is going on for sure."

"Should we be worried?" Peter asked, a little alarmed but also very relieved the direction of the conversation had shifted.

"Maybe. I don't know for sure. I haven't seen anything like this before. We saw the thing up close before. Obviously, it's dangerous, but I don't know what, if any danger, we face in here." Roger answered as he watched Carly cautiously.

"It does sound dangerous." Carly could feel Roger watching her as she spoke. She was mindful to keep her eyes moving between Roger and Jensen so as not to let on that she noticed Roger's apprehension at seeing her and Peter together.

"Well, you two must be hungry. Don't let us keep you from dinner. Get in there while there's still food left in the kitchen." Carly tried to move this social interaction along before Roger started asking more questions.

"I am!" Jensen piped up. "Let's get some grub Roger." He started walking toward the entrance as he spoke.

Roger hesitated for a few seconds. Then he nodded to Peter and started following after Jensen.

"I'll catch up with you tomorrow Peter." Roger said as he walked past them toward the entrance himself.

"Yeah, sure thing." Peter replied.

"Bye guys. See you soon." Carly waived at them both.

She waited for them to go inside, then turned back to Peter.

"That thing out there sounds really dangerous Peter." She spoke in a low tone.

"Yeah, it sure does." Peter agreed.

"I really hope it doesn't attack Jacksonville." Carly tried to look worried, and she actually was concerned, so it didn't require much effort.

"Me too. That could be a real problem." Peter commented.

"Well, thanks again for having dinner with me Peter. Can I come by your place tomorrow, say around eleven?" Carly asked.

"Eleven? Ah, sure. I mean, actually I have plans until around one. Can you meet me at two?" Peter was flustered again.

"Of course, no problem." Carly touched Peter's arm gently again. "Really, thank you for agreeing to help me Peter. It means a lot to me." Carly leaned over to Peter and kissed him on the cheek. "You're very kind."

"Yes, of course. Anytime. See you then." Peter stepped away from her as he spoke.

Carly had enough experience with men to know that Peter was attracted to her, but he was incredibly awkward.

She could use his attraction to her and his awkwardness to her advantage.

She just smiled gently at him and waived. Peter waived back quickly and turned down the street away from her.

Carly turned and started walking away as well.

Roger and Jensen's brief description of what they saw outside Jacksonville worried her more than she let on earlier.

She knew this mutated thing out there somewhere was violent and powerful. She also knew it was attracted to power sources.

It would eventually be attracted directly to Jacksonville to satisfy its hunger.

She may have to move up her plans. She wasn't sure she would be safe if she was still here when it decided to raid this place.

Carly also needed to keep Roger's concerns about her in check while trying to figure out how to get him to take her to The Mountain.

It was a lot to do in a short amount of time.

# Chapter 37

“You’re such a good boy, Yes, such a good boy.” Patrice was enthusiastically petting the dog and talking in a silly voice.

Luke found it nauseating but knew the dog was Patrice’s lifeline to sanity at the moment.

Lanisha sat next to Patrice and laughed as he talked to the dog.

“I’m glad you got him back Patrice.” She commented.

Patrice smiled. “He’s smart. He found us to let us know it was safe again.”

*More like ran off when it was dangerous*. Luke thought to himself. *Apparently, Jor and his gang don’t eat dog.*

This second thought made Luke’s stomach turn as he was suddenly flooded with memories of what they had recently endured.

He made himself push them away and get his focus back. It was more difficult than he expected.

“Lanisha.” He needed to refocus. “Check yourself and Patrice for injuries. We don’t want to be surprised by one of you falling over all the sudden.”

“Yeah, okay, will do.” Lanisha replied and did as Luke had instructed.

Luke looked around where they were waiting for Gloria in the meantime. He didn’t see any sign of danger, but that wasn’t making him feel any calmer.

He decided to check his leg.

He pulled back the makeshift bandage Gloria had wrapped around it. *What the fuck?* He thought to himself.

“How you lookin Luke?” Lanisha was glancing over his way.

“I’ll be okay. Let me know when you are done checking Patrice.” Luke answered.

Luke was stunned by what he seeing was under the bandage.

The wound appeared to be healing much faster than he expected. Luke hadn’t known if it would heal at all. It had crossed his mind that he might be facing amputation or death from infection.

Now, it looked like he didn’t need to worry about either of those things.

He hadn’t noticed until now that his leg felt much better, and he wasn’t limping anymore.

“Patrice and I are all clear. You should let me look at you though.” Lanisha spoke up again.

Luke thought about hiding the status of his leg from Lanisha but couldn’t really come up with a decent reason to keep it from her.

“Yeah, okay. Come take a look.” He replied.

Lanisha left Patrice’s side and walked over to Luke.

She bent down to partially unwrap the bandage.

“Well, damn.” She commented. “It looks way better. I didn’t expect that.”

She looked up at Luke. “I thought Jor cut you pretty deep.”

“He did.” Luke confirmed.

“How could it heal so fast then?” Lanisha stood up and wiped her hands on her pants.

“I have no idea. Maybe it’s some kind of side effect of my infection.” Luke guessed.

“That’s a pretty damn handy side-effect.” Lanisha replied.

“I guess. I don’t really know if that’s it at all. I’m just guessing.” Luke looked over at Patrice as he spoke. “Maybe Patrice would know.”

“Maybe.” Lanisha agreed. “Maybe he’s together enough to give you an answer.”

“We’ll see.” Luke walked towards Patrice as he was talking.

“Patrice, how’s the dog?” Luke figured this would be easier to start a conversation with Patrice.

“He’s doin just fine. Aren’t ya boy?” Patrice laughed a little as he replied.

“Patrice, my leg wound is healing much faster than it should normally. Do you have any idea why that could be?”

Patrice kept petting and talking to the dog. Luke wasn’t sure if Patrice heard him or had tuned him out. He was about to rephrase the question when Patrice stopped petting the dog and looked up into the sky, saying nothing for a while.

“It could be your body’s amped-up adrenaline coupled with your infection has somehow made you prone to recover faster from injuries.” Patrice paused, then added. “I really wouldn’t know without running some diagnostics on you.

Patrice seemed a little puzzled by his own statement. “I can’t really do that here though.” Patrice threw up his arms and then shrugged before returning his attention to the dog.

*So, not entirely back to normal yet.* Luke thought as he watched Patrice. *Maybe he’ll never come back completely at all.*

Luke was forcing himself to stay focused and pushing aside thoughts about what had happened to them. If it was difficult for him to push it aside, he couldn’t imagine how Patrice was managing it.

*That fuckin dog better not run off again.*

“Do you know where Gloria went to find another vehicle?” Lanisha asked, interrupting his thoughts about Patrice and the dog.

“Maybe, not sure. There used to be a used car lot somewhere in this area. I don’t remember exactly where it is, though.

Luke was surprised that Lanisha’s question brought up Gavin in his mind again. He and Gavin had requisitioned a vehicle from that same lot many years ago.

“Huh, okay. Should I maybe go look for her?” Lanisha was getting increasingly worried about Gloria as more time passed.

“No, not yet. If she’s not back in a couple of hours, I’ll look for her. I am more familiar with this area, and you are better with Patrice. Luke answered”, now trying to not think about Gavin either.

“Whatever you say.” Lanisha was going along with Luke, but he could tell she was irritated by his answer.

“Lanisha, I know you are fully capable of handling yourself out here. I’m not trying to protect you. I’m trying to protect Patrice. And you are the only one he seems most comfortable around for now. I need you to do this for all of us.” Luke thought being blunt with her would lessen her irritation.

“Yeah, okay. I get that. No problem Luke.” Luke thought there was less irritation in her voice this time.

They sat quietly for a while, waiting for Gloria.

Patrice had sat on the ground, and the dog had laid its head on one of his legs. He was still petting it absently as he sat there.

“I hear something.” Luke broke the silence. “It sounds like a vehicle getting closer.”

“I’ll stay with Patrice Luke. You go check it out.” It was Lanisha’s turn to give instructions.

Luke didn’t argue. He made his way out of the treeline slowly.

A few seconds after getting clear of the trees, Luke could see an orange car approaching them from where Gloria had been walking earlier.

Soon after, he could make out Gloria in the driver’s seat.

He stepped out further from the side of the road and waved at her.

She waved back, and he waited for her to reach his position.

“Sweet ride.” Luke commented as Gloria pulled up with the window down.

“It was the best one available, and we can’t afford to be picky this afternoon,” Gloria replied with a slightly defensive tone.

“Understood…that is…unless someone stops us to see if we are available for a free quote.” Luke couldn’t help himself.

Luke was referring to the business slogan wrapped around the vehicle. It promised a “Free quote on any plumbing repair job! – Just call Jack and Buck” and gave a toll-free number.

Gloria sighed and laughed. “Yeah, well, if they do. I’m Jack, and you’re Buck. Got it mister!” She pointed a finger at him, feigning a severe expression.

“Understood.” Luke smiled and laughed himself.

No matter the situation, Gloria didn’t lose her sense of humor. Luke really appreciated that about her.

“Wait here. I’ll round’em up.” Luke headed back into the treeline to collect Lanisha, Patrice, and the dog.

Gloria looked around cautiously while she waited.

Like Luke, she would not allow herself to think about the horror they had experienced at Jor’s camp. Unlike Luke, she didn’t have to struggle to push thoughts of trauma aside. It was something she could do easily.

She didn’t know if that ease should bother her or not. It was a skill she had learned from numerous traumas in her own life.

Luke returned quickly with what remained of their group.

“Hey.” Gloria piped up as they approached the car. “You’re not limping buddy. That’s great, but also weird. What’s up with that?”

“I really don’t know.” Luke replied. “Maybe something to do with my infection.”

“Hmm. Add that to our list of questions for the day, I guess.” Gloria added as she got into the driver’s seat.”

Luke could tell Gloria was not satisfied with his answer, but he couldn’t do anything about that now.

“We still headed to Jacksonville?” Gloria asked as they all settled in. Lanisha sat in the back with Patrice and the dog. Luke sat up front with Gloria.

“Yeah. It’s our best bet. I don’t want to head back the way we came. It’s longer and we don’t know how much gas is in this orange hot rod.” Luke seemed determined as he spoke.

Gloria didn’t really have any counterarguments to offer. Luke was correct.

“I guess we’re off then.” She said and started driving. “If we have enough gas, we’ll be to Jacksonville in about a day and half, maybe two, depending on the roads and all.”

Luke nodded and looked back at Lanisha, Patrice, and the dog.

He felt suddenly grateful they were all there, alive.

Things could have gone so much worse. They had already gone horribly enough.

Losing Nate the way they did was beyond tragic. Still, many others, including himself, were relying on them succeeding in their efforts.

They needed to see this through.

He pushed down any thoughts of Nate once again and put his attention on the road ahead of them.

# Chapter 38

Sound and frequency guided them along a clear path.

Now that they had nearly reached capacity, the sound and frequency were changing, giving way to new understanding.

The undeniable force that drove them to find those who must be with them reformed anew. It was becoming a new light, a new frequency.

Soon they would have all the members needed to move into the new purpose completely.

If these beings felt anything like desire, they desired to share this new purpose.

Sensing this new intent forming now amongst them, a more vital still urgency to gather those who remained outside their frequency motivated them to carry out the task.

The one who had been Sandra was now nameless and ultimately unified to this new purpose.

Together they could traverse hundreds of miles in hours instead of days or weeks. They became faster and more potent as others joined with them.

Now the nameless ones moved across the land with perfect synchronicity, following the pull that drove them.

This new frequency became increasingly dominant along the path, like a gradual awareness of what must occur after joining together.

They would become the Conduit together and, yet again, cease to be what they were now and exist as different beings.

Nothing could stand in their way. The goal and their ability to complete it made comprehension of resistance impossible.

Like each one they had taken, the next one and the one after that emitted an audible hum only the nameless ones could hear.

Morty, like Sandra, had known something was different about him days before being taken.

Neither could put words to it, as their minds were incapable of understanding.

As the time of joining drew imminently closer, the feeling intensified.

Morty and Sandra had thought of telling someone around them about their strange sensations.

They were stopped only by an inability to define, in any way, these sensations. So, both kept silent, just as all the others had done before they became nameless.

No force would have been able to oppose it anyway.

The nameless, just as they had done before, moved in unison.

Bernadette rode with a gang of nomads.

They pillaged, stole, and killed without hesitation or remorse.

These nomads were fierce and they were powerful. They had succeeded more often than they had failed to achieve their aims.

Still, they could do nothing as they were paralyzed and incapacitated.

It passed nearly as quickly as it had started.

When they returned to their senses, it took only seconds to realize Bernadette was no longer with them.

Despite being savages, these nomads could experience fear and anger like anybody else.

It was these feelings that soon overcame them.

In the days following, they would search for Bernadette along their path of general destruction.

They would fail in finding her.

Like all the others, there was no longer any Bernadette to find.

# Chapter 39

"It's such a beautiful day my dear." Peter looked down at the dirt beneath him as he spoke. Then he looked up to examine the rose bush he had planted.

Beneath this rose bush, he had buried the remains of his wife.

"Your roses are going to be lovely this year. I so wish you could see them."

Peter never spoke regarding his wife to anyone in Jacksonville, except on two occasions when he and Roger drank too much whiskey together.

More often than not, Peter was beginning to remember things about his wife that made him smile. The pain of her death eased with time.

At first, he could only remember the tragedy of her deterioration and demise.

Today he also felt something that he hadn't in quite some time.

Peter felt guilty and excited.

He knew it was silly to feel these things, but he did nonetheless.

Peter had actually allowed himself to be attracted to another woman. Before meeting Carly, he would have not fathomed ever being attracted to another woman.

Peter, by all accounts, was not a lady's man. He didn't have a great personality, and he wasn't outgoing.

Tanya had pursued him after they met. She was so full of energy and spontaneous. The complete opposite of Peter in nearly every way.

Peter thought of their trip to South America a lifetime ago. Spelunking off the side of a waterfall in a remote section along the Amazon.

She could talk him into doing things he would never imagine doing himself.

What made her want him remained a mystery to this day.

To himself, Peter could not explain why he was attracted to Carly.

She was obviously brilliant, but he had known many intelligent men and women in his time.

Maybe he was just lonely. Peter lived by himself and kept to himself.

Maybe he didn't want to do that anymore.

"I'm helping a woman fix her radio today. I know you always wanted me to be content, and I'm being ridiculous feeling guilty about it." Peter spoke to the rose bush as if it were another person, and they were chatting casually.

"Anyway, I'll let you know how it goes. You know me. I'll probably be my awkward self and she'll realize I'm not a fun person to be around."

"I'll let you know how it goes either way."

"I love you always and forever."

Peter turned away from the rose bush and headed back to his workshop.

It was nearly two in the afternoon, and Carly would probably be waiting for him.

He felt a rush of jumbled thoughts and feelings threaten to overtake him.

He tried to push them away and reassure himself that he was being absurd.

Part of him wanted to avoid the whole thing altogether. He thought of not showing up and making excuses like maybe he fell and broke his leg or something.

He was half trying to figure out an acceptable way to break his leg when he arrived back at his shop and found Carly waiting for him, as he had predicted.

Peter's first thought upon seeing Carly was that this walk back to his shop went by without him noticing how fast he had been walking.

"Hi, Peter!" Carly waived and smiled warmly at him.

"Hello, Carly." Peter had promised himself he wouldn't sound so indecisive as he had at dinner. His reply to Carly sounded very formal, even to Peter.

*Well, I should have promised myself I would also not be awkward*.

Peter started shaking his head but quickly stopped himself, realizing that would look awkward.

Carly acted like she didn't notice, but she had. She studied Peter closely to learn as much about him as possible.

"I realized on the way over here I don't know anything about you, other than your name's Peter and you're a handyman of sorts." Carly talked with mock irritation in her voice, trying to be playful.

She also omitted any mention of The Cube and what had happened with Roger at the hospital. She didn't want to get Peter's defenses up.

Another thing Carly didn't mention was that she knew quite a bit more about Peter's past than anyone suspected.

"Oh yeah? He he." Peter laughed lightly in response.

"Well, with me you pretty much get what you see here." Peter continued. "I'm not a complicated guy. I just keep to myself is all…well most of the time anyway."

"I see you brought your radio in for a tune-up." Peter pointed to the object Carly was holding, thinking maybe he could change the direction of this conversation a little.

"Yes I did." She looked proudly down at the radio. "And you're going to teach me how to fix it."

Peter nodded as he went around Carly to unlock his shop. As a bachelor, Peter didn't need or want much space for domestic living, and he spent most of his time tinkering with various things to keep his mind busy.

"Let's have a look at it." Peter motioned for Carly to follow him inside. "I'll give you the five-dime tour first."

Peter walked Carly around the shop, explaining his various projects, each in a different stage of completion.

As she listened to and watched Peter, it occurred to Carly that he was trying not to complete anything.

*Maybe he's afraid he'll run out of things to do if he does.*

"I have a small area for cooking, sleeping, etc… through that door over there." Peter hesitated briefly, almost as though he didn't want to admit the next part. "But the truth is I live my life out here, tinkering around with all this stuff you just saw."

"So you're basically a dirty bachelor who doesn't want to show me all his unwashed dishes and dirty clothes laying around everywhere." Carly spoke in a playful matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, I, uh, I mean…." Peter tried to put together a sentence, but Carly interrupted him by bumping herself into his side.

"I'm teasing you Peter!" She stepped back from him again and smiled warmly as she tried to hold his eyes to hers. "I just feel comfortable around you and I'm enjoying getting to know you. Take it as a compliment."

*Is she flirting with me? I can't do this!* Peter panicked in his mind but commanded himself to not stammer again.

"Well, okay. I will. Thank you." *One complete sentence. Now maybe you can manage two back-to-back.* He thought after speaking.

"Can I get you something to drink? Water, soda, whiskey?" *Whiskey?* Peter had no idea why he had just offered Carly whiskey.

Carly laughed loudly. "Whiskey? Maybe later. How about some water for now?"

"Yeah, that might be better for now." Peter agreed. Not trusting his mouth to agree with his brain anymore. "I'll be back in just a minute." Peter disappeared into his bachelor area through the door.

Carly quickly scanned the shop, looking for any sign of The Cube. She didn't see it.

Manipulating Peter to get what she wanted was going pretty well so far. If she could, she needed to figure out where he was keeping it during this visit.

Peter emerged a couple of minutes later, holding two glasses of water.

"You can set your radio on that empty table. We'll get to work on it." Peter commented as he handed Carly one of the glasses.

She pretended to examine it closely before taking a sip. "Hmmm, this looks pretty clean Peter. Are you actually a neat freak and you don't want me to find out?"

"Umm, I am actually, yes," Peter replied sheepishly, not knowing what to say other than agree with her.

Carly already suspected that about Peter but pretended to just realize it as she spoke the words.

"Well, I guess there's much worse things you could be." She winked at him as she replied, and Peter blushed a little.

"Okay, the radio." Peter desperately wanted to change the subject. That seemed to be a pattern between them, but he was enjoying the back and forth between them, despite himself.

Peter motioned for Carly to take a seat and sat in the chair next to her, facing the table.

"First, I plug things in if there's a cord just to see if anything works." Peter was doing his best to sound knowledgeable and informative rather than nervous and excited simultaneously.

Peter plugged in the radio and turned the knob. Nothing happened.

"You realize, of course, you probably won't find anything to listen to nowadays." Peter said as he fiddled with the controls on the radio.

"Yeah, I know, but I still enjoy trying. You never know. I might find something."

Peter thought about informing her that he had tried several times with several different radios and had no luck.

Then he had another thought.

"Well, maybe we could hardwire a CD or MP3 or old cell phone to this thing and you could listen to music that way." He didn't look at Carly as he spoke, preferring to avoid her eyes at the moment. He didn't want her to somehow realize he was attracted to her.

"Oh, that would be spectacular." Carly replied. "I suppose you probably have some of those if anybody does around here."

"Yep, we'll find one for you if we can't find any stations." Peter was allowing himself to feel helpful and liked by Carly. He was surprised he wanted more of this feeling.

"I guess we'll have to dig deeper into it and see what's going on inside." Peter talked as he got up and went to another table full of various tools.

Carly took a sip from the glass, about to scan the shop, when they both heard a loud bang outside.

Peter froze in midstep, and Carly flinched in her chair.

Now they could both hear yelling from outside, followed by another bang and gunfire.

Carly got up from her chair quickly. "Peter, we have to get out of here…Now!"

"What?! Why?" Peter was clearly shocked into inaction. Carly ran over to him and grabbed his arms to make him look directly at her.

"Peter, it's that thing that attacked Roger. It's here!" Carly's words were urgent and pleading. She felt real fear inside her.

"How?...Where will we go?" Peter was still a few steps away from thinking clearly.

"Do you have a car or some vehicle?" Carly shook Peter now, willing him to come out of the fog. "We have to move!"

"Yes, I do. It's in back. I don't drive it much." Peter was starting to move now, aligning himself with the urgency Carly was feeling.

"I'll drive." Carly was taking charge now. "Get the keys and let's go!"

Carly was afraid, but she wasn't letting panic jumble her thoughts. She had been in situations like this before, and panic fostered dangerous hesitation that could get a person killed. She was a survivor.

"Peter, get The Cube. We're gonna need it." Carly spoke with authority and urgency. "Don't ask questions. We're getting out of here alive."

"The Cube?" Peter briefly considered refusing. He suddenly felt doubtful of Carly, but it wasn't enough to overcome his concern for whatever was happening outside his shop.

A sound like a roar but not quite reached both their ears. It was terrifying.

"Peter, no questions. You have to trust me. Get it! Let's go!" Carly was starting to panic a little now, struggling to not let it take over.

"Okay, I'll get them." Peter returned to his sleeping area and emerged a second later with keys and The Cube.

Carly followed him to the back of his shop, where she could see a car parked several feet away.

"Go out the back! I'll show you. It's not far." Peter handed Carly the keys after they had entered the vehicle.

He sat The Cube in the backseat.

She followed his direction and turned onto a road behind Peter's shop.

"It's just that way, one more turn to your right and straight ahead out the back." Peter informed her.

They could see people running everywhere. It was chaos. Then louder gunfire and also screaming.

As she turned right and saw the gate in front of them, Peter spoke up again.

"I'll open it. Pull up just in front. I'll only be a minute."

Carly did so, and Peter jumped out of the car to push the large, reinforced gate open.

Carly got out to help him. As she did, she heard more screaming and the terrifying roar. More gunfire followed.

Nobody was guarding this gate.

Together they pushed open one side with more than a little effort. Carly was glad she got out to help, doubting Peter would have been able to do it himself.

As they were running back to the car, there was an explosion a few streets away.

They stopped running briefly as a fireball shot up in the air, followed by smoke.

"Hurry!" Carly yelled, and they started running again.

They sped through the now open side of the gate and headed away from Jacksonville as fast as the vehicle would take them.

Neither spoke for several minutes.

Finally, Peter broke the silence. "Carly, what happened?"

"That thing happened. We're lucky we got out alive." Carly answered.

"What is it?" Peter was clearly trying to make desperate sense of the past few moments.

"Let's just drive now. We'll talk when we're safe." Carly tried not to sound harsh in her reply.

Peter fell silent, and she kept driving.

Carly could tell she was headed East from the sun's position in the sky, but that was about it.

She would drive for a while to gain some distance between them and Jacksonville, between them and that thing.

Then she would figure out exactly where they were and where they needed to go.

She knew her timeline would need to speed up after Roger was attacked. She felt that more urgently after Roger described what he and Jensen had seen on their latest scouting expedition.

Her carefully laid plans had been turned upside down entirely.

She was already formulating a new plan.

She just needed to take it one step at a time until it fell into place.

Now she had Peter and The Cube. She wanted Roger and The Cube to accompany her to The Mountain.

Peter would be more difficult to deceive due to his knowledge of The Mountain.

She would figure that out later.

For now, she was safe, and she had the most important thing. She had The Cube.

She would get what she wanted, and nothing, not that nightmare mutation currently destroying Jacksonville, nor anything else would stand in her way.

*I was chosen. I have to make it.* Carly thought to herself.

As they drove into the night, the sun went down on a deceivingly quiet landscape.

# Chapter 40

“We’re gonna need water and food before too long. I know a place a little bit off the road ahead.” Gloria broke the silence that had been with them for several hours.

Luke was musing about the same thing but was relying on optimism that they would just come across something on the way. Besides, he felt unexpectedly full of energy at the moment.

He also thought for the first time about getting Patrice cleaned up a little if they could.

“Yeah, I agree. Take us there. Stay sharp though.” Luke conceded to Gloria.

Gloria just nodded and kept driving. She wouldn’t admit this to anybody, but she had lost some of her confidence following their abduction by Jor’s people.

She kept thinking she should have seen it coming, should have been prepared. That was irrational, but it didn’t matter. Perhaps this was her coping mechanism for trauma. Instead of breaking down emotionally, she experienced guilt about her inability to prevent it from happening.

No amount of reason could get through to her when she felt like this inside. It would just take time. The guilt might never leave, but she would somehow figure out how to move on from it.

Lanisha’s experience with Morty had also given her a sort of callousness. She hadn’t welcomed it but did recognize it. Strangely, she felt grateful for it now.

“Patrice, you gonna name that dog?” Lanisha found herself in charge of Patrice. Luke was correct. She was better able to get him talking than anyone else there.

“Name him?” Patrice responded as though the thought had never occurred to him.

“Is He my dog?” The question was so simple and child-like that it caught Lanisha off guard.

“He is now.” Luke chimed in from the front seat.

“Make it official Patrice. Give him a name.” Lanisha added.

Patrice looked at the dog sitting across his lap as though he couldn’t fathom the responsibility.

“I guess so. I couldn’t bear to leave him somewhere.” Patrice spoke thoughtfully. “I’ve always liked the name Cooper for a dog. I never told anyone that before.”

“Cooper it is then!” Gloria finally broke into the discussion.

“Hey Cooper, you’re such a good dog.” Patrice rubbed his hands gently across Cooper’s ears as he tried out the name for the first time.

Cooper squinted a little but kept his eyes closed.

“We’ll be turning in just a bit. The place where we can find some water is down a ways. We’ll probably lose about a day to get to it.” Gloria informed the passengers as she drove.

Luke didn’t like that but couldn’t really think of a viable alternative.

“We’ll do what we have to do.” He replied.

Gloria needed a distraction, so she put Luke on the spot to get outside her own head.

“Patrice? What do you think about Luke’s leg? Any ideas there?”

Luke wasn’t expecting this at all. He looked at Gloria with something close to anger but quickly caught himself and turned to watch the road instead.

“I don’t know if anybody understands this disease that turned the world upside down, or if anyone ever will. Maybe it’s natures way of cleaning house. I don’t really know.” Patrice replied.

“Wow, Patrice. I wasn’t expecting that answer from you.” Gloria commented.

Luke wasn’t either, but he remained silent.

“Can you speculate at least?” Lanisha wanted to see if Patrice could also shed light on Luke’s rapid recovery.

“It could be a thousand…a million different things, or some combination of them all put together.” Patrice hesitated, thinking….”My best guess off the top of my head, without any evidence to back it up, and I wouldn’t ever just spout out guesses. That’s not respectable inquiry. I really need a lab and samples to even begin to….”

“Patrice, just tell us your guess.” Lanisha interrupted him, immediately regretting it, remembering as soon as she spoke about Patrice’s delicate situation.

Patrice took a deep breath, and Lanisha briefly thought he may be shutting down again, suddenly remembering his trauma.

“It could be some combination of Luke’s infection and his body’s reaction to stress. There have been numerous studies on how different stressors can affect illnesses.” Patrice seemed to be mentally shifting, getting closer to his old self.

Patrice continued, “People usually think stress hurts a person’s immune system, and it certainly can if the stress is long-term, but acute stress can have the opposite effect. It can make the immune system stronger.”

“Huh.” Lanisha said. “Will it last if that is what’s happening to him?”

“Ah, it could. But maybe not, and only time will tell. Of course, if I could run some tests….” Patrice didn’t finish the sentence.

“Could it also speed up the infection’s progress?” Luke finally spoke up since being blind-sided by Gloria.

“Yes, maybe.” Patrice admitted. “I didn’t want to speculate on that.”

“Me either.” Luke confessed. “But it occurred to me already. I wanted your opinion.”

“As I said Luke, I really have no idea at this point. It’s all speculation.” Patrice added, perhaps trying to provide comfort in his own way.

Gloria turned on to the other road she had described earlier and sped up again.

“I think it’s about three hours from here. I’ll recognize the area when I see it. We may find some gas there as well.” Gloria informed them after a few minutes.

“Maybe there’ll be a place for us to get cleaned up a bit.” Lanisha added.

Luke was thankful someone else brought it up. He didn’t want to single Patrice out. She was correct, though. They could all use a little cleaning up.

“Yeah, we can get cleaned up. We’re going to a river.” We can boil water, and all enjoy some cold freshness in our birthday suits.” Gloria smiled at Lanisha in the rearview mirror.

“Better than a cup of coffee.” Luke chimed in.

Lanisha laughed. She hated cold water but welcomed the idea of washing away the past few days.

Luke saw it first. “Hold up Gloria.”

Gloria stopped the car and then she saw it too. “That’s a lot of cars. Should we turn around?”

“No, I recognize a couple of the vehicles. That’s Jacob’s crew. Normally I wouldn’t go out of my way to run into the guy. He’s tight with Sanders. There’s also a car from The Flats with them.” Luke informed her.

“Jacob’s crew?” Gloria replied. “I’ve met him a couple of times. He helped us out on a few S&C jobs back in the day.”

“I’ve heard of him.” Lanisha leaned forward between the back seats to get a better look. “He’s got some kind of deal with Hampton Flats. I’ve never met him, though.”

“It’s easier than trying to get in gunfights with him every time we cross his path out here.” Luke added.

“Yeah, I guess.” Lanisha agreed.

Jacob’s people evidently noticed their orange car now because the caravan came to a stop. Luke could see a couple of people getting out of their vehicles and using binoculars to better view them.

“You all stay here. I’m getting out so they can see who it is. Jacob knows me.” Luke opened the door and stepped out as he spoke.

Luke walked to the front of the vehicle and waved at the caravan. It was a way off, but he thought he could make out Jacob’s hat from where he stood.

He saw a hand waiving back and turned to get back into the vehicle.

“Drive to them. Jacob will probably be willing to give us food and water. He might have gas too. Maybe I can negotiate with him for some.” Luke said after getting back in the passenger seat.

Gloria nodded and began driving again.

“Why are people from The Flats with them?” Lanisha asked.

“Don’t know, but we’ll probably find out soon.” Luke answered.

It wasn’t unusual for Jacob to go in on some jobs with The Flats on occasion, so that didn’t immediately bother Luke. However, he thought it was odd they would be this far away together.

Regardless, Luke and his group were in a tough spot and could use Jacob’s help. Based on their recent experiences, he didn’t know if there was any safety in numbers, but it felt a little safer than being in one car out on the road alone.

“Let me do the talking at first. I’m gonna try to find out what they are doing out here before we tell them anything about what we’re doing.” Luke instructed.

Gloria stopped the car as they pulled up to the lead vehicle from Jacob’s caravan.

“Stay put till I give you a signal.” Luke once again exited the vehicle as he spoke.

Now Luke could see Jacob clearly walking to the front to meet him.

“Luke! How are ya boy? Been a damn long time.” Jacob was smiling wide as usual and speaking in that folksy tone, Luke remembered.

Luke smiled in return. “Hey Jacob. Yes it has. I’m genuinely glad to see you old man.”

Jacob laughed. “I get sweeter with each passing day, and wiser too.” Jacob finished with a wink.

Luke nodded and kept smiling.

“We got a few o’your people along with us.” Jacob began. “We’re takin’em along to Jacksonville for some negotiating.”

“Jacksonville?” Luke asked. He didn’t hide his surprise at this information.

“Yeah, I figured a fella gets around as much as you would be in the know already bout that.” Jacob continued. “Maybe yer just playin dumb about it out of caution.”

Luke wasn’t sure how to respond to that. He was about to offer a reply when Jacob held up his hand.

“No worry. Sanders already told me all about it. I’m escortin’em for protection. Things been gettin more dangerous out here of late.”

Luke didn’t know if Jacob was referring to the thing that attacked Jor’s camp or something else.

“Dangerous how?” Luke asked.

“Somethin’s been terrin up animals, people, buildings, cars, everything. I ain’t never seen this craziness since it all went to shit.” Jacob answered.

“We had an encounter with what you’re describing I think.” Luke replied.

“And you’re still alive?” Jacob countered, a look of genuine puzzlement on his face.

“It was distracted by some other folks at the time. We used the opportunity to get away.” Luke informed him.

“They all dead?” Jacob asked.

“I wouldn’t complain if they were. They were a group of cannibals. They took us prisoner and ate one of us.” Luke surprised himself with his candid response.

“Shit! That’s a rough day for sure.” Jacob shook his head.

“Yeah, for sure.” Luke agreed.

“Everybody okay with your group?” Jacob finally asked.

“We could use some food and water. I was going to see if we could negotiate for some gas. We’re headed to Jacksonville as well.” Luke informed him.

“You had a run-in with cannibals and that thing out there….” Jacob paused, shaking his head again. “If yer headed ta Jacksonville, you may’s well join up with us.

Luke was thinking through all the angles, speculating on Sander’s motives.

“Yeah, okay that sounds great. Thank you Jacob.” He replied.

“We’ll get ya’ll squared away with some food and drink. Maybe a change o’clothes too. You look a bit tattered there.” Jacob commented.

Luke nodded and turned to waive the others out of the car.

Jacob welcomed them and hugged Gloria as Luke listened and thought about what to do next.

Luke wanted to find out what Sanders was up to now.

“Mind if I check in with the people from The Flats you brought with you?” He asked Jacob after a few minutes of small talk.

“No, suit yerself. Get back here for some grub though.” Jacob answered.

Luke nodded and headed around the group toward the vehicles behind Jacob.

He noticed Janice almost immediately. She opened her door and stepped out to meet him as soon as she saw it was him heading toward her.

He also noticed Barbara and Bob in the vehicle she had just exited.

Then Luke saw Bingo and Ralph get out of the car behind them.

“Luke! What are you doing out here? What happened to you?” Janice spoke up immediately as she walked quickly to where Luke was standing.

Barbara and all the others soon joined them in a small huddle.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it in a bit.” Luke replied. “Jacob told me you are headed to Jacksonville. Tell me about that.”

Bingo spoke up before Janice could respond. “Sanders got us on the way to Jacksonville so we could start those negotiations he always goes on about. We’re gonna offer’em The Chamber tech as a carrot.”

“The Chamber’s broken.” Luke replied. “It won’t be working for anyone soon. That’s why we were headed to Jacksonville as well. We’re looking for a guy there who might be able to help us fix it.”

“It’s broken? Shit.” Bingo’s shock was apparent in his voice.

“That really complicates things then.” Janice added.

“Sanders didn’t know it was broken?” Bingo was thinking out loud and didn’t really direct his question to anyone specifically.

“No, he didn’t.” I don’t trust him. That’s not really a big secret.” Luke replied.

“What are we gonna do now?” Janice was clearly getting worried.

“We’re going to Jacksonville as planned.” Luke quickly took charge to not let doubt creep in any further amongst them. “We’re going to find the guy who Patrice thinks may be able to help us fix it.”

“Patrice is with you?” Janice asked.

“Yes, He is. He’s been through some serious hell out here. We all have. I’ll tell you about it later.” Luke reassured her.

“Now, let’s all get some food and drink….” Luke thought for a moment….”and maybe a change of clothes for me and Patrice.”

Janice nodded along with the rest of them.

Luke turned and headed back toward Jacob, Gloria, and the others.

Again, Luke’s mind was trying to run off in different directions. It was more than he could entertain at the moment.

Luke pushed aside all distracting thoughts and focused only on getting to Jacksonville.

He hadn’t expected Sanders to move ahead like this, but maybe his mysterious absence had motivated Sanders to behave unpredictably.

Whatever the case, Luke was here. Sanders wasn’t. Luke had the advantage for now.

The immediate concern was getting to Jacksonville in one piece.

That thing, whatever it was, could be anywhere along the way.

If it got them, then fixing The Chamber House wouldn’t matter much.

Luke set his priorities and determined to move ahead one step at a time.

First nourishment, then clean clothes, then strategy.

A lot could still happen on the road to Jacksonville.

# Chapter 41

“They actually make great pets. I’m tellin you man. Get some chickens!” Jensen laughed after putting on his short sales pitch.

Roger just shook his head. “Maybe someday. I’ve got a few things to sort out first around here.”

“It’ll never be the perfect moment old man.” Jensen wasn’t quite ready to let up.

“Uh-huh,” Roger responded but wasn’t entirely paying attention. He wanted to catch up with Peter and see what He and Carly had discussed at dinner. Something gnawed at him about her. He couldn’t quite clear it up in his own mind.

“Dude, what’s on your mind? I can tell when you’re somewhere else.” Jensen had noticed Roger’s attention wasn’t really directed towards chickens.

“It’s nothing, just a gut feeling. I don’t quite trust Carly. I feel like she’s up to something but can’t figure out what.” Roger answered.

“Maybe you just need to get laid or something. She’s not too hard on the eyes.” Jensen quipped, smiling slyly.

“You noticed huh?” Roger directed Jensen’s insinuation back toward him.

“Shit man. I got eyes.” Jensen replied.

“Yeah? Keep’em open then. We gotta head out again today and see what we can find.” Roger was ready to change the subject.

“Damn!” Jensen blurted out. “I think you might like her a little.”

Roger was getting ready to shoot back a witty retort when they both heard it simultaneously.

BANG!

It was loud. Not an explosion. Something, or somebody, hit the wall…hard.

“Who’s on the side wall?” Roger asked as he shot up and headed toward the sound.

Jensen didn’t have time to reply.

Others were running in that direction now as well.

“Check the wall. Where’s Dean?” Roger heard Kal, the watch lead this time of day, yell out to some of the others running in the same direction as Him.

“He should be on the platform! I don’t see him!” yelled back one of the wall guards.

Another bang, and this time one of the support beams cracked.

*Shit.*Roger thought. *It’s him!*

A loud roar, not quite like an animal, stopped everyone in their tracks. It was terrifying and primal, full of pure rage.

“Roger, it’s here!” Jensen yelled and took off running again.

Roger hesitated a minute longer, almost letting fear creep into him. He pushed it down quickly and headed off after Jensen.

They could hear yelling and banging, which seemed to be coming from another area along the wall.

Jensen was already grabbing one of the fifty-caliber rifles from the munitions shed. Roger grabbed the other one and began loading it beside Jensen.

“You take one side. I’ll take the other. We’ll tear that thing up.” Roger instructed as they finished loading the guns.

Jensen nodded, and they both turned to head out of the shed.

They heard more yelling and a crashing sound.

“The gate’s down!” someone yelled, and they heard screaming.

Roger ran toward the sound and could soon see what was happening.

The savage that had attacked them had just ripped one of the wall guards in two and had jumped on two more, quickly clawing through their heads just like it had attempted to rip through Roger’s truck roof.

Roger stopped. He took aim and fired directly into its center mass.

The bullet entered the thing’s midsection but didn’t appear to have any effect. Roger aimed and fired again in the same spot as before.

This time the creature slumped forward slightly and turned its head back and forth quickly, trying to figure out where the threat originated.

Before Roger could get off another shot, it jumped up and started running.

Roger couldn’t get a clear shot this time. There were too many people in the way, running chaotically in all directions.

The man-beast, whatever it was, jumped on one of the support beams for the fuel storage tanks, apparently trying to get away from whatever was hurting it.

Roger heard the shot just seconds before the tank exploded.

He felt a sudden pressure and was knocked to the ground.

Roger opened his eyes. Blurriness and pain greeted him in a rush. He winced and tried to remember where he was and what was happening.

It took him several seconds to come out of the fog.

Quickly pushing himself up, Roger could see the enormous fire and billowing smoke. The heat nearly pushed him back where he stood.

He bent down and retrieved his gun.

Flames were crawling up the inside of the wall closest to where the large fuel tank had been. A building some thirty feet away was also on fire.

More screaming.

Roger turned and ran in the direction of the screaming.

He could see the thing running at anyone who dared shoot at it and tearing them to pieces, like slices of bread. It was unbelievable carnage.

It moved with such a speed that he couldn’t fathom.

Roger could also see that the creature was burned all over. It couldn’t surely still be alive. Nothing could survive that.

This beast could and did. It appeared only enraged more and not in the slightest bit hampered by its disfigured condition.

The grotesque scene before him of a charred and flesh-dripping thing tearing others apart around it entranced Roger. He lost himself in the surrealness of it all.

Finally, the screaming man being torn up the middle by this charred monster brought him back to action.

Roger took aim to fire again, this time aiming for its shoulders. Nothing. The gun was jammed.

Roger fiddled with it hurriedly, looking up to retake aim, but the thing was gone.

More screaming, followed by crashing sounds. It was breaking into buildings now, seeking victims inside.

Roger heard people desperately yelling inside one of the buildings. He turned around to watch the building that had been burning. The fire was spreading now, moving on to other structures around it.

*Fucking hell!* Roger thought as he heard more crashing sounds from behind him.

He heard another shot in the distance. It sounded like the other fifty cal.

Roger took off running again. This time he was going to kill it, no matter what.

The beast had moved two streets over by now. Roger followed the mutilated bodies in its wake.

Another shot. *Jensen’s gotta be hitting that thing.* Roger thought as he rounded the corner and caught up to the creature.

He could see Jensen now.

One of the creature’s arms was lying on the ground, apparently shot off by one of Jensen’s bullets.

Jensen was trying to get a clear shot and avoid the people scrambling in front of the food market as they desperately fled the thing tearing them to shreds one by one.

“Just shoot it! Shoot it!” Roger yelled, seeing that Jensen had a better vantage point than him.

“Fuck!” Jensen yelled and took the shot.

A man’s head, Earl, Roger thought his name was, flew off his shoulders, and an entire side of the creature’s face flew off after it.

The beast spun towards Jensen and punched through a helpless woman running past it simultaneously.

It jumped again and bounded toward Jensen.

Jensen fired another shot, but this one missed entirely.

There was no time to cry out.

The beast closed the distance between itself and Jensen so quickly that Roger didn’t have time to yell or react.

It swiped its one charred arm at the space in front of Jensen’s shoulders, tearing off flesh and bone beneath his neck.

Jensen couldn’t cry out in pain. He staggered back and was about to fall to the ground when the creature swiped at him again.

This time it tore off his arm holding the gun.

Roger took aim and shot.

The beast’s leg buckled as the bullet passed through it, tearing a hole in its thigh Roger could almost see through.

He ran towards it, intending to shoot again.

It looked towards him. Its face was gone, burned over completely.

*How the fuck can it see anything?* Roger thought as he raised his gun to fire again.

Roger heard another explosion behind him. He felt the vibrations it made in the ground.

*The propane tank. Roger* thought, still focused on the man-beast in front of him.

More screaming and helpless cries in the distance.

Roger didn’t allow any of that to distract him this time.

He quickly sighted in on the creature’s head and fired.

The other side of its face flew off, and Roger could see part of its brain dangling out of its skull. Some pieces fell to the ground.

The creature staggered for several seconds, fell to its knees, and remained in that position, not moving.

Roger fired again. The rest of its head disintegrated, and the creature fell over.

He ran over to where it lay, intending to shoot it again.

As he raised his gun and pointed, He heard his name being called.

“Roger!?” He turned. It was Kal.

“Everything’s burning!” Kal yelled at him from several yards away. “We need to get water on that fire! Now!”

Kal turned and ran, not waiting for Roger.

Roger started to move in the direction Kal had run but stopped suddenly. *Jensen.*

Turning, he saw Jensen’s body lying on the ground, just a few feet from where the creature lay.

Jensen’s eyes were open and glossy. They stared up toward nothing.

Roger suddenly felt sick and vomited.

He bent over and wretched more, almost falling to the ground himself.

He forced himself to control his breathing and stood upright again.

Jensen was dead, one of the many victims in Jacksonville who had crossed this beast’s path.

He looked again at the creature, motionless on the ground.

He swore to himself. He would come back for Jensen’s body later.

Now he needed to help stop the fires before they destroyed every building in Jacksonville.

Roger turned and ran toward the fires, briefly wondering about Carly and Peter.

Everything was dry this time of year, and the fire took full advantage.

It was quickly evident that they could not contain the multiple burning buildings.

Roger quickly abandoned running after Kal and turned toward his duplex.

Maybe he could at least get Claudia out in time.

He made it to his duplex faster than expected, possibly due to an extreme adrenaline rush or something else.

There was no sign of Claudia outside.

He ran up the steps and threw open the door.

“Claudia!” Roger yelled. “You in here!?”

“Yes!” Claudia answered.

Roger felt an instant relief he hadn’t expected, but it was quickly replaced by a sense of urgency.

“We gotta go now!” Roger was talking fast and loud. “Come with me!”

Claudia emerged from her room with a look of sheer panic.

“I heard explosions and gunfire…Oh Roger! Are you hurt?” Claudia’s expression informed Roger that he must look horrible.

“I’m fine.” He replied. “Let’s go!”

“Go where?” Claudia asked as she followed him out the door.

“We gotta get out of Jacksonville before the fire gets to us.” Roger informed her as he helped her get in his truck.

“But the others….” Claudia was looking around at people running in the street behind them.

“We’ll load them up in my truck, as many as we can fit.” Roger remarked as he cut her off and waited to get in the driver’s side before speaking.

He backed up quickly and put the truck in drive.

“Get in the back!” He yelled to people as they headed for the back gate.

Some listened. Others just kept running as if overtaken with fear and confusion.

They managed to get eight people in the back of Roger’s truck before they made it to the gate.

Immediately Roger noticed that one of the gate doors was open.

Some were running through the opening to get out themselves.

Roger slowed to avoid running over anyone and drove through the opening.

“We’ll get to a safe distance. Then we’ll wait for the fires to stop and go back to see who we can help.” Roger informed Claudia.

He stopped the truck about a quarter mile from Jacksonville’s rear gate.

Without speaking, Roger got out and walked around to help Claudia get out herself.

“This is terrible Roger.” Claudia had tears in her eyes.

Roger nodded at the people in the back of his truck, and they got out.

They all formed a little group at the back of Roger’s truck.

Together, the small group watched as the fire spread throughout Jacksonville.

Occasionally, yelling and screaming could be heard in the wind.

Several people could be seen running out the back gate.

Roger could tell they were yelling, but it was too far to hear any sounds of their voices.

*How the fuck could this happen?* Roger thought, feeling powerless as he watched the destruction.

Nobody spoke as they witnessed their safe haven being turned to ashes.

Roger didn’t know how many would be left alive inside or if rebuilding would be possible.

Would he be able to find Jensen’s body?

The sun would be setting soon on this afternoon of carnage.

Roger watched as his refuge from the madness this outside world provided went up in flames.

*Maybe only madness is all that awaits us.* He mused, sharing in the shocked silence of survivors.

# Chapter 42

"It's burned to hell!" Jacob blurted as he stepped out of his truck. "Jacksonville looks like a war zone."

"Do you know what happened?" Luke spoke up first.

"Yeah, I spoke with a'few folks just outside tha gate." Jacob replied. "Looks like that thing's been terrorizin the area got in and started quite the ruckus."

"Shit!" Bingo exclaimed. "Whata we gonna do now?"

Gloria walked over to where Jacob was standing. "Do they need help?"

Jacob looked confused at first but quickly recovered. "They'll need a new place to live by the looks of it." Jacob paused, then added, "Damn shame."

Luke immediately thought of Peter. "We should go ahead and finish our trip into Jacksonville, or at least park at the gates if it's too crazy inside. We're not in the best of shape here, but we can probably offer some help to them."

"Uh-huh." Jacob appeared to be considering his options.

Luke wanted to help, but his real concern was finding out if Peter was still alive.

Gloria saw an opportunity and took it. "Sanders would probably appreciate you tellin him all about how we stepped in to provide some relief in Jacksonville's time of need."

Jacob looked over at Gloria and smiled. "Well lady, you ain't no amateur at workin people are ya?"

Gloria smiled in return but said nothing.

Jacob sighed, then added, "Yeah, I guess we can head on the rest o'the way and offer them poor folks some help."

"Thank you Jacob." Luke said, sincerity in his voice.

Jacob winked at Luke and turned to direct his posse forward.

Luke turned to Gloria and pulled her aside. "I want to help too, but we need to figure out if Peter is still alive, and if so, where is he."

"Way ahead of you," Gloria confided. "I haven't lost sight of our reason for being here."

Luke grinned and patted Gloria on the shoulder. "I think you're way ahead of me most of the time actually."

Luke turned to see Lanisha walking over to them from the "Orange Beauty" as Jacob had started calling their vehicle.

"You guys got an update?" She asked. "Patrice wants to know what's going on."

"Yeah." Gloria answered. "Jacksonville got tore up by that beastly thing that's been terrorizing the countryside. It's all tore up."

Lanisha looked from Gloria to Luke and back to Gloria. "We're going in anyway aren't we?" She asked. "We gotta finish our objective."

Luke nodded. "Yeah, we are. Jacob agreed to take us the rest of the way. I told him we should go there and see if they need any help. Gloria thought to add how doing so might allow Jacob to brag about it to Sanders later."

"Excellent thinking Lady." Lanisha grinned at Gloria as she spoke.

"Of course I want to help if we can, but if Jacob's assessment is accurate we probably won't be able to do much for them." Luke volunteered. "Apparently Sanders knows about this Peter fellow, but I want us to get to him first if he's still alive."

"Understood." Lanisha nodded as she spoke, turning her eyes toward the road ahead.

"Jacob's getting his gang ready to move. We'll stay with them to Jacksonville…should be about another thirty minutes or so. Then they can do their thing and we'll do ours." Luke instructed as he gestured them back to the vehicle.

Luke stopped about halfway to the car. "Lanisha, Gloria…Patrice seems more receptive to you. You can give him an update. You don't need to sugarcoat it but feel him out a little first. See where his heads at."

"He seems almost back to normal now, but trauma can creep up again unexpectedly. I'll see how he's doing, then Gloria can take him the rest of the way." Lanisha offered.

"Yep, I can do that." Gloria agreed.

"Great." Luke nodded, and they headed back to the vehicle together.

# Chapter 43

Roger helped Claudia sit down in some shade inside the back gates of Jacksonville. “I’m going to check things out a bit. You stay here till I get back.” He handed her some water. “Don’t get dehydrated. I’ll be back soon.”

“I’m fine dear. Do what you gotta do. I’m not as fragile as you think.” She smiled up at him, daring him to disagree with her.

“No, I know you’re not.” Roger chose not to disagree. “But even tough gals need water.”

“Well I got water now, so you get to your business young man.” Claudia retorted.

Roger laughed despite the carnage all around them. “Be back soon.” He said, turning towards the wreckage of buildings, burned bodies, and torn limbs.

His first priority was to find Peter and Carly. Then maybe check on his duplex, but he was already prepared to see it destroyed.

Roger saw some people picking up body parts and burned bodies, placing them on a trailer as he made his way toward Peter’s shop.

He shook his head in disbelief. The amount of wreckage that thing could do was undeniable. He wondered if other such creatures may exist but pushed that thought away quickly.

*That’s too horrible to contemplate,* Roge*r* thought, rounding the corner where Peter’s shop could be found.

Roger knew there would be injured people needing help. He should make them his first priority. He would look for Doc next and see what he could do, but first Peter.

Peter’s shop stood about fifty feet from the closest building. That building had burned along with most of the other structures in Jacksonville.

However, Peter’s shop seemed nearly intact, except for thick soot covering its surface.

Roger walked to the back of the shop and immediately noticed that Peter’s car was missing. Peter hardly ever used that car. Roger had only seen him drive it twice in several years.

*Did Carly use the attack to kidnap him?* Roger thought that unlikely but still couldn’t bring himself to trust her.

The oversized garage door in the back was halfway open. “Peter!” Roger yelled inside. “You there? Carly!”

No answer.

Roger bent down to go under the garage door.

He saw the usual clutter but no signs of any struggle. He finished searching the remaining space, but no one was there.

Peter and Carly must have escaped in Peter’s car during the attack.

Again, he briefly thought of Carly being up to some ulterior motive and, again, pushed it aside.

Maybe they would come back when they thought it was safe. Perhaps they wouldn’t.

Roger decided to give up on looking for Peter and find Doc.

Doc was probably still alive.

*The old bastard could survive anything.* Roger mused, wanting that to be the case.

He decided to check the front gate first. Doc would probably be there if he was alive, coordinating a way to rescue any injured who he could help.

Roger passed what was left of the hospital on his way to the front gate. It was about seventy percent destroyed. The side where the front entrance was located looked nearly intact. Still, severe fire damage was evident all around the other parts.

It looked as though the fire had burned across the roof of the building.

“Take’em to the tent!” Roger could hear Doc before he saw him. “That’s one’s gone. Leave’em for now.” Doc was being his usual self, gruffly barking orders to his subordinates.

“Doc!” Roger yelled, seeing him bent over a burn victim inside the front gate. “You okay?” Roger felt some kind of obligation to ask.

Doc cursed and spit at the same time. “Better than you.” Doc eyed Roger’s clothing as he turned to spit again. “Yer still walkin though, so yer better’n these poor folks I’d say.”

“How can I help?” Roger asked, finally reaching the spot where Doc was standing.

“I got Kal ferryin supplies, or whatever he can scratch outta my ruined hospital and bringin to that tent over there.” Doc pointed as he continued speaking. “Maybe you can round up a couple of people to get the one’s I mark with these white ribbons in the tent. Leave the rest. They’re done.”

“Understood.” Roger answered and ran off to find a couple helpers.

Roger was familiar with color coding wounded victims. Lacking the usual things, Doc had created a system for identifying injured who could be treated.

Roger wanted to give Jensen a proper burial eventually, but couldn’t do anything to change his status now, so he made himself useful by helping Doc.

Several hours passed in a blur of burned bodies and debris as Roger helped Doc get anyone who could be mended into the makeshift tent Doc had erected.

Roger absently noticed how easily he managed the physical demands of this task, in addition to what he had done the day prior, but simply attributed it to adrenaline and shock. He didn’t consider that it may be something more than that.

In the middle of surveying Jacksonville for survivors, Doc took a few moments to attend to his nicotine habit.

Roger’s hearing seemed to be getting sharper as well.

He heard engine sounds before anyone shouted a warning from the front gate.

“Vehicles approaching! Front Gate!” An armed sentry shouted from outside the gate. The fire destroyed the elevated platform where sentries usually stood watch.

“Arm up! Let’s be ready just in case!” Kal yelled out to a few men and women who were in the middle of assisting some survivors who could walk into the tent.

They did as instructed and followed Kal outside the front gate.

Roger finished assisting a woman with one leg moderately burned inside the tent and ran to join Kal’s party outside the gate.

Roger still had the fifty cal with him.

Kal had found a pair of binoculars in the wreckage and was scanning the approaching vehicles.

“I recognize the lead truck. That’s Jacob’s group.” Kal informed them all. “Hold your fire!”

Roger had heard of Jacob but never met him personally.

“That’s quite a few vehicles.” A woman standing next to Kal commented.

“Jacob was here earlier.” Kal replied. “Said he might be bringin some folks from Hampton Flats to trade with us but didn’t know if it was a suitable time considering our situation.”

“Looks like they decided to come anyway.” Roger added.

“Yeah, looks that way.” Kal agreed.

“I’ll do the talking when they get here.” Kal continued. “Stay alert but keep your guns down. Jacob’s never been a threat before but be ready for anything.”

The men and women around Kal nodded, as did Roger.

The group of vehicles stopped about thirty feet from where Kal was standing at the front gate. Jacob got out of the lead truck and walked toward Kal and his group.

“Howdy Kal!” Jacob waived as he addressed Kal.

“Hi, again, Jacob. I see you decided to go ahead and bring those folks you mentioned.” Kal replied.

“Yessir. These’r the folks from Hampton Flats I mentioned earlier. They insisted on lending a hand if ya want’em.” Jacob stopped just a few feet from Kal as he spoke. “They also got a proposal for ya, but we can chit chat about that later on.”

Kal nodded and looked past Jacob to the caravan. “I won’t say no to help. We could use it. We’re just tryin to tend to the wounded now. Haven’t started surveying the destruction yet.”

Roger noticed another man and a woman approaching their group.

Jacob turned to introduce the man and woman approaching. “This here is Luke, and this is Janice, a couple of the folks representin The Flats.”

Luke and Janice nodded. First to Kal, then to the people standing around him.

Kal stepped forward to greet them. “I’m Kal, pleased to meet you, although I would prefer it were under different circumstances.”

Luke and Janice shook his hand in turn.

“You’ll need to stay parked outside. It’s just too chaotic in here now for a bunch of extra vehicles.” Kal explained. “We could use some help finding people in the rubble and then salvaging things from the buildings if its safe to go inside without the damn things fallin down on you.”

“I would like to help with salvage recovery.” Lanisha spoke up for the first time. “I’m on a crew that specializes in that sort of thing.” Lanisha hesitated, then added, “Many of us here do that sort of thing on a regular basis.”

“Uh-huh.” Kal replied, looking a little doubtful.

He gave Jacob a look of concern, but Jacob was ready to ease Kal’s concerns.

“I’ve been workin with these folks for quite some time Kal. They’re solid folks, or I wouldn’t have brought’em to ya.”

Kal nodded. “If you say so Jacob. I guess I’ll take your word for it today.”

Jacob smiled broadly and turned to address the vehicles behind him. “Ya’ll park’em and get out! We got work needs getten done!”

Jacob’s people did as instructed. So did Luke and Janice’s group.

Once inside, Luke surveyed the condition of Jacksonville.

*Damn!* He thought. *What could have done this to a place?*

Patrice and Cooper were already making themselves useful, bandaging up some of the injured outside the tent.

Lanisha and Gloria had gone inside the tent with the rest of their group.

Jacob continued speaking with Kal about the destruction and how to start salvaging from the buildings.

“So you’re from Hampton Flats….” Luke turned to see a man looking in his direction, about ten feet away. “My name’s Roger.” The man approached Luke and held out his hand.

“Luke. Pleasure to meet you.” Luke replied, offering his hand in return.

“Yes, me and several others you saw outside are from Hampton Flats.” Luke added, letting go of Roger’s hand.

“You were on your way here before we were attacked, is that correct?” Roger asked.

“Yes, we were.” Luke answered. “We have a problem and there’s supposedly a man here who might be able to help us, or at least point us in the proper direction to fix our problem.”

Roger considered Luke’s response for a moment, then spoke again. “Not trying to sound rude, but why would this man, whoever he is, want to help you?”

Luke smiled a little. “Well, maybe he won’t, but we’re in dire need of his help and we didn’t come empty handed. We have something to offer him that may be of interest.”

“I see.” Roger nodded as he spoke. “I know just about everyone in Jacksonville. We’re still finding bodies, but if he’s alive, I may be able to help you find him. What’s his name?”

Luke hesitated for just a moment but decided to take a chance. “His name’s Peter Oskam. You know him?”

*Shit, what are the chances?* Roger thought. “Yeah, I know him well. He’s lived here for quite some time.”

“Great.” Luke said. “Is there any chance you could introduce us to him?”

“Not at the moment. It appears he took off when we were attacked. Him and a lady we found injured outside the gates a while back. His vehicle is gone and I haven’t seen him or her all day.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?” Luke asked

“I would think so. He lives here, but maybe not. It seems like they would’ve come back by now, so I’m not sure.” Roger informed Luke.

Luke turned his head away and examined some wreckage piled up against the inside gate, unsure what to do or say next.

“Why don’t you help me scout for more injured in the rubble and we’ll get back to Peter later?” Roger offered.

“Yeah…yeah, no problem. Lead the way.” Luke agreed.

# Chapter 44

"Shouldn't we head back now?" Peter asked again as Carly walked towards the car, having relieved herself behind some bushes.

"It's too dangerous, Peter. That thing could still be there. We're safe if we stay away." Carly tried to sound convincing, but she didn't know how safe they were outside Jacksonville with other threats lurking about.

"It's not safe out here at all." Peter challenged, already thinking the same thing as Carly. "Outside the gates is full of other threats.”

"I know a place safer than Jacksonville." Carly offered, not wanting to give Peter too many details.

"Where is that?" Peter asked quickly.

"It's not too far. A day maybe two. I don't know exactly where we are at the moment. I'm trying to get my bearings." Carly tried to placate Peter with her seeming uncertainty.

"Why is it safe? Tell me about this place." Peter was clearly getting anxious.

"It was a classified location before everything fell. I head about it while working on a research project for Cantor Bio-Health." Carly knew Peter would start putting the pieces together now, but she could still play dumb as much as possible.

"Cantor…" Peter played with the word aloud as his brain tried to put things together.

"Tell me what you heard about it." Peter spoke calmly now, apparently distracted from his safety concerns temporarily.

"It was mostly gossip amongst co-workers, but later I found out a few of them had gone there to work. That's when I got more curious about it." Carly began. "It's a private research complex financed by a handful of billionaires and top-level government officials. Apparently, it was a real hush hush kind of operation."

"The Mountain?" Peter spoke while looking away from Carly, as if not speaking to her directly but rather to himself.

"You've heard of it?" Carly asked.

"Yes, I know about it." Peter finally turned toward Carly, looking directly at her as he spoke. "It is very secure. I was the lead architect in charge of building the place."

*Excellent.* Carly thought. *Let him be the expert. He'll be thinking it was his idea to get us there.*

"Wow." Carly did her best to sound surprised. "That's fantastic Peter! And…quite unexpected!"

Peter was back inside his head again, wheels spinning. Carly needed to keep him corralled.

"Do you know how to get there from here? Can you take us there? You think it'll be safe?" Carly tried to sound a little excited and nervous at the same time.

Peter looked at Carly with skepticism all over his face.

"Carly, what are the chances that you show up in Jacksonville, find me there, we get attacked and now you come up with the idea of taking us to a research facility I designed? It all seems more than coincidental."

Carly formed a shocked look on her face and tried to make tears form as she spoke. "Peter, you think I planned to get you out of Jacksonville, had that…that THING! attack Jacksonville…just to get you to some research facility?!" Her voice was now on the edge of hysterical.

Carly turned away from Peter and walked in the opposite direction, burying her hands in her face and crying softly.

Peter watched Carly walk away crying. Turning toward the trees on the opposite side of the road, Peter's face begged them for an answer.

He couldn't help himself.

Peter followed Carly over to where She stood crying. "No, I mean…I don't think it was your fault Jacksonville was attacked. I'm just…out of my element here… I'm trying to process it all just like you…I didn't…I didn't expect you to bring up The Mountain was all. I got overloaded all the sudden." Peter paused.

"I wasn't trying to blame you for anything. I'm just trying to make sense of things, give myself some better mental footing. It wasn't meant to be an attack on you." Peter finished.

Carly kept crying for a few more seconds, then rubbed her hands up and down her face and tried to compose herself. "I guess I'm overwhelmed too…and scared Peter."

She suddenly reached for him and wrapped her arms around him, pulling herself close to his body.

Peter didn't know what else to do, so he wrapped his arms around her, allowing her to melt into him.

"Just hold me for a moment Peter." Carly whispered up to him, her cheek pressed firmly into his chest.

Peter found himself gently rubbing Carly's hair. "I will." He replied.

Peter didn't want to admit it but feeling Carly's body pressed against him made his trousers uncomfortable in the groin area.

Carly pretended not to notice and kept her body firmly against Peter.

Finally, she let go of him and purposely glanced down to his waist, just long enough to make him wonder if she felt him down there.

"Let's go back to the car. It'll be dark soon and we need to find somewhere to get off the road for the night. Maybe we can figure out how to get to The Mountain together." Carly spoke as she took his hand and started walking toward Peter's car.

Peter tried to regain his composure as best he could. He allowed Carly to lead him by the hand and walked toward the passenger side as she let go of his hand to get in on the driver's side.

It was going to be dark soon, and they needed to get off the road.

Carly excited him sexually, and he hadn't felt that wayin a long time. His mind was a blur of so many different things.

Peter tried to regain some focus and think about the threats they faced and if and how they might get to The Mountain.

Carly drove, and they both remained silent.

It would be a long night, one way or another, for both of them.

# Chapter 45

Joining was complete.

The Nameless found new synergy guiding their purpose. Now they would become The Conduit.

Frequency and sound were moving smoothly from what they had been together to what they would become now.

Their shimmering, barely perceptible bodies would give way to a blending of energy and being.

A human with ordinary sensory perception would feel the event if he or she were close enough to The Nameless. But they would not see it.

It would be experienced like a slight disorienting pressure with no identifiable origin.

Blending themselves together in harmony and resonance, The Nameless began changing form again.

The Conduit took shape as The Nameless merged to create it.

A pulse emerged from The Conduit, sending out a location and providing a mode of conveyance.

The ones for whom it was intended were roused from their slumber.

They began transforming themselves to travel an incomprehensible distance allowed only by The Conduit.

Long ago, these creatures of foreign substance had planted the ingredients necessary to create both The Nameless and urgency to create The Conduit.

The pulse informed them of success and a chance to regain their lost abilities.

Their purpose was to exist as they had been, and The Conduit would make all things possible.

Another pulse. The Conduit neared completion.

Soon they would travel through The Conduit and be made into what had been lost to them.

No ordinary person could comprehend what was happening as a result, nor would there be any stopping it.

An unavoidable eventuality set itself in motion. Uninterrupted, it would cause an end to all living things as they were currently understood.

The energy required to transform themselves and the means to do so were finally in one place.

This is how these beings, who could not die but could be lessened, would reclaim their former entity.

All it would require was complete sterilization of one planet.

# Chapter 46

“It’s all starting to sound pretty standard for us.” Patrice chuckled softly between sentences. “The one guy we came to see is missing and no one knows where he went.”

Cooper sniffed Roger without mercy as Patrice spoke. Roger found it quite annoying.

“We’ll find him, Patrice.” Luke offered, attempting to sound much more confident than he felt. “We got this far, didn’t we?”

Roger tried to move away from Cooper in a way that didn’t make it appear as though he was annoyed. “It sounds like you survived some horrible shit I wouldn’t wish on anyone…well…almost anyone.”

Luke looked over at Roger, thinking about what he just said and finding some contentment in watching him try to avoid Patrice’s dog.

“Worst day of my life was on this trip, no question about that.” Patrice’s voice was reflective but not emotional.

*He’s so fucked up.* Luke thought, deciding to change the subject.

“Any idea where Peter might go if he doesn’t come back here?” Luke asked Roger.

“No, not a clue.” Roger answered.

“You said he might be with some Lady, Carly, I think you called her…what’s her story?” Patrice asked.

“Found her in pretty rough shape out on the road a few weeks back, brought her here and didn’t really get a chance to find out too much about her.” Roger replied.

Roger hesitated, then added, “She apparently used to work at a research facility that was attempting to figure out some way to cure the infected. The place was attacked, and she fled with a co-worker. It wasn’t long after that we found her.”

“Anything about her suspicious?” Luke asked.

“I was attacked a couple weeks ago by the same thing that attacked Jacksonville. It was outside Jacksonville where we encountered that monster the first time. I was with my scouting partner. I got injured pretty bad. Carly used something she called The Case to heal me.” Roger was still trying to figure out how to explain what happened as he recounted his experiences with Carly.

“The Case?” Patrice perked up. “Can you tell us anything about it?”

“No, we found it with Carly, Jensen and me, brought it back. I gave it to Peter as a trade for getting some work done on my truck. Rules of the road. We get to keep whatever we find, so I did.” Roger explained.

“How did it heal you?” Patrice pressed on.

“I have no idea.” Roger shook his head. “I tried to find out from Carly after I got well enough to get out of the hospital. She gave me some details about her previous work on finding the cure and how using The Cube, together with an ice bath, seemed to heal about eighty five percent of their patients…or test subjects, I guess.”

“So, you gave the case you found with this Carly person to Peter and now Carly and Peter are both gone?” Patrice examined a half-burnt wall across the street as he spoke his thoughts aloud.

“Yeah, that seems to be what happened.” Roger agreed.

“That sounds suspicious as hell.” Luke said, looking to both Roger and Patrice as he spoke.

“It does indeed.” Roger concurred.

“Did Carly ever mention The Mountain?” Patrice asked after a few moments had passed in silence.

“The Mountain?” Roger and Luke both replied in unison.

Roger and Luke looked at each other, then back at Patrice.

“I don’t know if you ever heard of it.” Patrice paused, giving Roger a chance to speak up if he had heard of it. Roger didn’t speak.

“It was a super-secret research facility funded by a handful of billionaires and certain government funding tunnels.” Patrice continued.

Roger still said nothing, so Patrice added the following juicy detail.

“Peter was in charge of building it.”

“Shit!” Roger finally said. “You think Carly is taking Peter to The Mountain?”

Patrice shrugged. “Maybe, I don’t know. You said she previously worked at a research facility. The Mountain is a research facility. Specifically, it’s a research facility built by one Peter Oskam.”

Luke, once again, found himself impressed by Patrice’s mind.

“Exceptional work Patrice. You may have figured out where they are going.” Luke offered.

“But…why?” Roger asked.

“Who knows, maybe to continue working on a cure. Maybe to build perfect ice-cream. It could be anything.” Patrice replied, his voice taking on a witty tone.

Roger scowled at Patrice briefly, then relaxed his face again.

“Do you know how to get there from here?” Roger looked at Patrice directly, then cast his glance over to Luke.

“Ah, maybe. Probably.” Patrice responded, pretending not to notice Roger’s brief scowl.

Then Patrice added, “I’m not in a big hurry to go back out on the road…cannibals and crazy monsters being what they are these days.”

“Well, not to worry Patrice, that crazy monster killed the cannibals, then Roger killed it.” Luke emphasized “It” at the end of his sentence. He had decided to match Patrice’s witty tone.

Patrice looked at Luke as if not expecting that Luke would be allowed to also sound dismissive and witty.

“Yeah, I guess I did.” Roger agreed. “If there’s only one of them out there.”

Patrice looked over to Roger as if he had never thought of the possibility that more than one massively destructive monster could exist.

Luke didn’t want Patrice to spiral again over Roger’s speculation. “Listen Patrice, we still need to finish what we came to do or everything that’s happened to us will be for nothing.”

Patrice shook his head. “We’ve already paid so much for it Luke.”

“I know we have, but we’ve made it this far. See it through with me Patrice.” Luke, who had been standing, moved closer to Patrice and knelt to match height with Patrice’s seated position.

“If you’re going where you think Peter is, I’m going too.” Roger informed them.

Patrice looked directly at Luke, searching for something in his eyes. Luke didn’t know what, sincerity maybe.

Finally, Patrice looked down, then back up at Luke. “Damn, I guess so. But, I really won’t like you anymore if you get me killed.”

Luke laughed loudly and patted Patrice on the back as he stood up again.

“I won’t like me either Patrice. Not one bit.”

# Chapter 47

"This is all so flat. Are you sure this is the way?" Carly asked.

"Yes, I am." Peter smirked. "We'll be there soon."

"This is not what I expected." Carly commented.

"That's the point." Peter said matter-of-factly.

"The point?" Carly looked confused and actually felt the way she looked for once.

"You'll see." Peter reassured her.

*Well, at least he thinks he's taking charge now.*

After about two more hours of driving and Carly asking a couple more times if they were going the correct way, Peter finally started getting more specific.

"You'll want to turn at the next right, head down the dirt road for about three quarters of a mile, then turn left onto the bridge."

"Will do." Carly replied. "You're enjoying this mystery, aren't you?" Carly smiled at Peter and put her hand on his leg.

Peter looked down at Carly's hand. She moved it closer to his groin area but stopped a few inches away, taking her own turn and teasing him a little.

She left her hand there for several seconds, moved it closer to Peter's inseam, gave him a little squeeze about an inch from his crotch, and then took her hand away.

A weak groan escaped Peter's mouth.

Carly smiled, both hands on the wheel now.

"This looks like the road." She said, preparing to turn where Peter had instructed.

Carly looked down at her odometer to measure the distance. Still, she thought she would probably notice a bridge in the middle of nowhere.

Peter changed his seating position, trying to nonchalantly adjust himself as he did so. Carly pretended not to notice.

"Did you have fun last night Peter?" She asked, not hiding her grin.

"Umm…yes, it was…it was amazing." Peter replied, growing red in the cheeks. "I haven't done anything like that in quite some time."

"I enjoyed it too." Carly agreed. "Maybe we'll do that again tonight, if you behave."

Peter chuckled nervously and smiled sheepishly. "I would like that."

Carly noticed the bridge Peter mentioned coming up on the left. It looked surprisingly new and modern. It was all steel construction with heavy-duty, reinforced grating material on both sides.

"That's a little conspicuous out here." She commented.

Peter, who hadn't been paying attention to the road, wasn't sure what Carly was referring to at first.

Carly nodded toward the bridge to get Peter back on track.

"Oh, yeah. It is. But you can't see it from the main road, so they figured it wasn't noticeable to people passing by that way." Peter explained.

"I see." Carly said.

Carly turned left to head over the bridge. The bottom of the bridge was also made of all steel construction. Carly could see similar grating material of a slightly different pattern on the part where vehicles drove over it.

Peter took a deep breath, apparently trying to refocus himself on the task at hand and away from thinking about what He and Carly might be doing later.

"I wasn't involved in designing and constructing this bridge, but I know the lady who was." Peter began. "She was a brilliant architect. This bridge can withstand practically any natural event and won't require any maintenance for a hundred years at least."

"Yeah, it's impressive." Carly agreed.

Once over the bridge, Peter instructed Carly to stop the car.

"Something wrong?" She asked, not sure why Peter asked her to stop.

"It will be if we don't stop so I can disarm something first." Peter answered as he got out of the passenger side.

Carly watched Peter walk ahead and across the front of the vehicle, heading toward a medium size tree and some bushes about thirty feet ahead of them.

Peter disappeared behind the bushes for several moments. Carly began to get worried and rolled down her window to ask Peter if everything was okay.

Just as she was about to call out to him, she heard a series of clicks and a metallic thud.

A few seconds later, Peter reemerged from around the tree and bushes, smiling.

Once Peter returned to the car, he instructed Carly to start driving again.

"It's about twenty minutes or so down this road, straight ahead." Peter informed Carly.

Carly nodded and began driving again. "What was all that about?"

"I disarmed the security spikes and pilons that come up out of the metal track we're driving over now. Once activated it takes a hydraulic pully to retract them. It's all analog, low tech stuff. No electrical components." Peter replied.

Carly nodded. "I guess they didn't want any unexpected visitors at this place."

 "There's one other roadblock just before we get to The Mountain. I designed that one myself. I'll disarm it before we head down." Peter informed Her.

"Down?" Carly asked.

"You'll see soon enough. It's easier than trying to explain." Peter answered.

The road gradually began getting wider after about fifteen minutes of driving. It appeared as though they were entering a large parking area.

"This was left over after construction." Peter explained. "It was a staging area for building supplies and construction crews."

Carly nodded again. "Where do we do from here?"

"You'll see a small side drive up on the right ahead. Pull into it." Peter replied.

After a couple minutes Carly could see what Peter had described. She pulled into the broad side of the driveway and stopped the car.

Carly couldn't see anything except the large parking area behind them and open fields with high bushes everywhere else.

"Let's go!" Peter said with more than a bit of excitement and got out of the car.

Carly did as well.

"I never thought I would be back here. I'm actually looking forward to it." Peter admitted.

*You probably won't be in a bit.* Carly thought.

Peter started walking straight ahead of the vehicle, and Carly followed him.

As he got closer to the other side of the wide driveway, it looked like he was going to walk straight into one of the bushes. Peter stopped just before the tall bushes and walked around them to his left.

Carly followed and could now see a small path, completely obscured from anyone parked in the driveway.

Carly could see that the path branched out in several directions. Peter chose one without any hesitation or doubt to his step.

The path Peter decided on was full of zigzag switchbacks. They walked along it for about ten minutes.

"The big money boys who financed the place wanted their own little mystical forest in the middle of nowhere, so that's what they got." Peter spoke over his shoulder as he led Carly deeper along the path.

Carly could see plants, flowers, and medium size trees that looked like none she had ever seen before. The trees had unusually long branches that reached each other over the path they were walking along.

Finally, Peter stopped walking and told to Carly to wait again.

This time he didn't disappear behind anything. Peter walked over to an area on the ground and began pulling on two long plant stalks.

The ground where he was pulling separated, revealing a service panel below.

"This is all fake foliage here. It never moves or sheds." Peter explained as he opened the service panel.

Carly remained but could see Peter lift the top off the service panel, revealing two identical handles underneath.

Peter pulled one handle while pushing another in the opposite direction.

Carly felt a brief hum beneath her. The ground about ten feet before her began separating, revealing a concrete set of stairs leading down.

Peter placed the lid back on the service panel and stepped away. The ground above the service panel moved back into place, hiding the area beneath it once again.

Peter walked around to where Carly was standing. "Shall we?" He asked, clearly beaming with pride now.

"Wow." Carly let out. She was genuinely impressed and a little dismayed that she might not be able to get rid of Peter as soon as she would like if there were more things like this in the facility.

Peter grinned, then nodded. "Thank you."

He turned and motioned for her to follow him down the stairs.

At the bottom, Carly could see a long hallway ahead. It looked like several double doors on both sides of the hallway. It stretched on farther than she could see.

Motion lights illuminated the space about thirty feet in front of them.

"This way." Peter said, turning to walk around and behind the concrete stairs they had just descended.

"What's all that down the other way?" Carly asked, clearly puzzled by Peter's turn of direction.

"It's all a decoy. Each double door is locked and leads to an elevator. If a person ever manages to get through the locked doors and decrypt the panel for the elevator, he or she will be taken for a long ride to nowhere."

The suspicion that she may have to keep Peter in play longer than she initially thought was getting more robust now.

"Damn, sounds like these guys were paranoid." Carly commented as she followed Peter behind the stairs.

"They had super-secret stuff to protect down here." Peter said with an air of mocking authority.

"Did they?" Carly asked, matching Peter's tone.

"I really don't know what they were doing here. I only built the place." Peter admitted.

Carly chuckled a little, not sure if Peter was telling the truth.

"Here we go," Peter spoke aloud as he opened what appeared to be a janitor's closet.

Carly followed Peter inside, seeing what did indeed look like janitor supplies.

"Help me move this table." Peter said, walking around to one side of a long flat table against the wall.

The table was heavier than Carly expected, but she managed to help Peter move it about five feet from the wall.

There was a shelf on the wall above where the table had been placed below it.

Peter took a few items off the middle board of the shelf and placed them on the table behind them. Then he pulled the central board out of the rack.

He grabbed what looked like an aerosol can from the bottom rung of the shelf and twisted it off the top. Inside was a standard-looking key.

Peter placed the key in a small opening behind the shelf's middle board and turned it all the way around twice.

Letting go of the key entirely, Peter stepped back, and the shelf and the wall behind it slid over to one side, revealing elevator doors.

"Now we're going down." Peter informed Carly.

Walking up to the doors, he pried them open with a little effort and stepped inside, motioning for Carly to join him.

"Okay…" Carly said aloud, sounding about as uncertain as she felt.

Once they were both inside, the elevator doors closed automatically.

A light came on above them, and digital displays lit up the side of both doors.

Each panel was lit around the edges by a red light.

Peter stepped to the left panel and entered a code on the pad.

The light around the edges of each panel turned green, and the elevator began moving. Carly could tell they were going down, but the motion was nearly imperceptible.

"Very smooth ride." She commented.

"Yeah, these are state of the art elevators. You can barely feel them moving." Peter agreed.

"Where are we going Peter?" Carly asked, trying to sound calm.

"I thought you would enjoy a clean, hot shower and maybe some decent food." Peter answered.

"Yeah, I would like both of those things." Carly replied.

"Great." Peter said. "That's our first stop. Then a whirl wind tour of the place I built."

"I would like that too." Carly admitted.

"I really don't know why I didn't want to come here before. We could live out the rest of our lives down here no problem." Peter mused.

"What about the people who financed it?" Carly asked. "Wouldn't they be thinking the same thing?"

*Carly already knew the answer but wanted to play dumb as long as possible and keep her true identity hidden.*

"Maybe, but I suspect they had other places built for end of the world type stuff. Plus, like you said, they were paranoid, so they probably wouldn't trust each other enough to shack up together long-term." Peter added.

*More than you know, Peter.* Carly thought to herself.

The elevator door opened. Peter stepped out first, followed by Carly.

Peter was just about to explain where the elevator had taken them when Carly saw what looked like a pipe in her peripheral vision.

She ducked instinctively, but whoever was holding the pipe was quick.

An arm pushed her forcefully into the wall.

She bounced off and fell to the ground but was back on her feet almost instantly.

She could see her attacker now. It was a woman, and Carly recognized her.

"Get behind me Peter!" She yelled.

Peter, frozen since the attack, moved to get behind Carly.

The woman who attacked them darted toward Carly again but pivoted at the last second, hitting Peter square on the forehead with her pipe.

There was a thud, and Peter fell to the ground unconscious.

Carly used the distraction, slipping behind the woman and punching her in the kidney. Then Carly shoved her against the far wall.

"You were always such a bitch Genevieve." Carly snarled at the woman as she hit the wall and steadied herself to face off with Carly.

"Look who's talking Carly." The woman spat back at her and lunged for her again.

Carly side-stepped Her and tripped Genevieve, causing her to fall and drop the pipe as she tried to catch herself.

Carly looked over at Peter lying on the floor but couldn't risk trying to get him now.

She took off running away from her attacker.

Genevieve stood up, looked at Peter, laughed, and took off after Carly.

"I've got you now bitch!" Genevieve yelled, chasing after Carly.

# Chapter 48

"Jacob wanted me to get this news to you as soon as possible. He wants you in the loop."

Sanders listened to the woman Jacob had sent to deliver news about Jacksonville, already looking at all the angles.

"Rebecca, correct?" Sanders asked, pretending to not remember the messenger's name. It was a tactic Sanders used periodically to make people feel less important than him in a meeting. "You're sure the thing that attacked Jacksonville is dead?"

"Yes sir. Roger, one of the residents of Jacksonville, shot it several times with a fifty-caliber rifle…shot off half it's face and one of its legs."

Sanders paused intentionally as if contemplating this information, trying to hide the importance of what really interested him.

"You also mentioned two men you encountered along the way. Luke and Patrice. You said they were also on their way to Jacksonville…is that correct?" Sanders spoke in a skeptical tone.

"Yes, I recognized Luke immediately. I've been with Jacob's Enforcers for quite a while. We've crossed paths with Luke in previous dealings." Rebecca answered, trying to sound confident under Sanders' scrutiny.

"Do you know why they were heading to Jacksonville?" Sanders kept his questions thoughtfully timed.

"Not exactly, something about The Chamber, that's all I know." Rebecca admitted.

Sanders stood up and walked over to his office window, his mind running a thousand miles an hour.

Rebecca shifted a little from one foot to another, wanting this interaction to end, but trying to be respectful and follow Jacob's orders.

Finally, Sanders turned around to face Rebecca again.

"Rebecca, please tell Jacob to keep a close eye on Luke and those who were with him, but mainly Luke himself. If he does anything I should know about, have Jacob use this to contact me."

Sanders handed Rebecca a portable short-wave radio.

Rebecca was clearly puzzled about the device, hesitantly taking it from Sanders.

"Also, give him this." Sanders handed Rebecca a folded-up map. "It has marked locations where Jacob can boost the signal if necessary. He should be able to reach me from any of those places."

Rebecca nodded. "Anything else sir?" Rebecca tried her best not to look impatient.

"Yes, of course." Sanders smiled and paused again for effect. "Please collect the supplies at the gate I am sending with you to Jacob. Inform him I want him to be well supplied, always."

Rebecca forced a smile on her face. "Thank you sir. I will do that. Jacob appreciates your partnership and looks forward to the future."

"As do I." Sanders replied. "Farewell Rebecca."

Rebecca nodded and smiled again, leaving the room and closing the door softly behind her.

It was now a loosely kept secret that The Chamber House was malfunctioning regularly. Sanders was made aware by another Council member who'd been told by a technician in The Chamber House.

Upon hearing of the issue, Sanders immediately thought of Patrice's absence, along with Luke. It occurred to him that Patrice might know Peter Oskam and told Luke about him.

Now, hearing they were both in Jacksonville, Sanders was nearly convinced of his suspicions.

What neither of them knew, however, was that Sanders was also aware of The Mountain research facility. He knew its location and how to get inside.

Sanders had been a trusted confidant of more than a couple high ranking government officials and corporate CEOs back in the day.

Sanders had toured the facility on two separate occasions, seeing firsthand some of the work there.

Now he suspected Patrice was trying to find Peter to access some of the tech inside The Mountain to remedy whatever was malfunctioning with his prized creation in Hampton Flats.

*The resident genius couldn't fix the issue with his wits alone.* Sanders thought.

Sanders needed to get to The Mountain before Peter, Luke or Patrice ended up there.

He would take a few trusted lieutenants to handle any safety concerns and probably have Jacob meet him along the way.

A few people in Hampton Flats still knew a thing or two about computer systems. They would be instrumental in accessing database records to determine what Peter and/or Patrice might be searching for there.

Sanders walked over to his desk, retrieved the other portable short-wave radio he had been hiding inside a drawer, and walked out of his office.

The race was on.

# Chapter 49

“We’ll bury what we can of them,” Kal spoke with sincerity and authority, addressing the small group of guards and scouts assembled to assist in salvage and recovery. They were joined by most of the people from Hampton Flats and a few of Jacob’s.

“If you can’t stomach pulling out arms, legs and torsos from the wreckage, don’t feel ashamed. There’s plenty of other work that needs getting done.” Kal continued. “We’ll salvage what we can from any of the buildings, take it to some of the structures that weren’t seriously damaged and just keep moving forward.”

Kal continued giving instructions as Luke thought about how long they should stay to help pick up the pieces in Jacksonville before leaving to find Peter.

“You wanna take off don’t you?” Roger looked straight ahead as he spoke, standing next to Luke.

“I do, yes.” Luke confessed. “But I also want to help here too. I can’t not do something. Your refuge here was nearly destroyed. There is so much work to be done.”

Roger nodded and looked to where Patrice was busy sorting supplies with a few others.

“You think he’ll be okay going out again?”

Luke followed Roger’s gaze over to Patrice. “He’ll have to be. I need him to be. He’s the only way this works once we get there.”

“That doesn’t mean the guy isn’t just a few steps from the cliff’s edge.” Roger cautioned.

“I know that too.” Luke agreed. “Me and several others like me will be dead if he doesn’t hold it together.”

Roger looked at the ground, then up at Luke. “This Chamber thing that’s broken. It really works?”

“It does.” Luke replied. “It’s kept me here for years now. Me and many others. We would be lost to the infection without it.”

Roger sighed deeply. “Probably could have helped a lot of folks who never it made here too.”

“Infection isn’t the only barrier to civility.” Luke spoke with a tone bordering on apathy. “The resistance to forming a partnership between Jacksonville and Hampton Flats is a minor conflict compared to how people have become outside our gates.”

“I’m not blaming you for not offering this chance to people here sooner.” Roger watched people begin to spread out as Kal finished speaking. “I’m probably more suspicious than most about other people’s intentions. I was just thinking that we should leave sooner, rather than later is all.”

Luke nodded but didn’t speak.

“Let’s spend today helping out here and tomorrow we’ll get set up to head out.” Roger finally said.

“Okay Roger.” Luke agreed.

Together, they joined up with the group assigned to them by Kal and began looking for the remains of victims in the rubble.

# Book 2 Preview

Cowboy felt the eggs smashed against his face and yolk running along his beard.

“You ain’t gonna give us no more trouble, big boy, are ya?” One of the men, a man Cowboy, knew well, leaned in close to Cowboy’s ear as he spoke.

Cowboy mumbled something quietly.

“I didn’t catch that. Speak up.” The man said, leaning a little closer to Cowboy as he spoke.

Cowboy mumbled quietly again.

“You tryin to eat that meal with your face smashed into it.” The man laughed as he spoke, looking around the room.

The two men holding Cowboy down laughed along with him.

“One more time big fella.” The man leaned in a little closer now, as if trying to be considerate.

Cowboy blew a little air out of his mouth as if frustrated that the man couldn’t understand him.

Then, in a single motion, Cowboy suddenly pushed the booth back, causing the two men holding him down over his meal to fall into the booth, next turning to head butt the man who had been speaking to him in the nose.

The man stumbled back, holding his nose that was now bleeding profusely. “Muver Fu’er!” The man spoke behind his hands as he continued to stumble backward.

Cowboy grabbed his plate of food and broke it over the head of one man now leaning over face first in the booth.

He punched the other in the ear as hard as possible in the confined space and then rammed his knee into his mouth, breaking several teeth.

He pushed the now unconscious man he had hit over the back of the head out of the booth and onto the floor, leaving the other to attempt simultaneously holding his bleeding ear and mouth.

“Philips.” Cowboy said in a calm and even tone as he approached the man whose nose he had just broken. “You know when it comes to you, I’m nothin but trouble.”

Cowboy punched Philips in the stomach, causing him to hunch over and nearly fall to the ground.

“Not just yet. Stay with me.” Cowboy was still speaking calmly.

“Don’t ever interrupt my breakfast again. I won’t go easy on you the second time.”

Still holding Philips up, Cowboy patted him on the back, then brought his knee up quickly into Philips’ stomach and let go of him.

Philips fell to the ground in the fetal position, gasping for breath, still holding his nose.

Cowboy returned to the table where he had been eating and retrieved his hat, nodding at the man whose teeth he had knocked out.

The man started to reach in his jacket but stopped when he saw Cowboy shaking his head.

“You can try, but you probably wouldn’t make it Stevens. Go ahead if you want. I’ll wait.” Cowboy fixed his hat atop his head and adjusted it as he waited for Stevens to decide about grabbing his gun or not.

Stevens pulled his hand away from his jacket and resumed holding his mouth with both hands.

“Okay, your choice. Maybe next time.” Cowboy winked at Stevens. “You’ll need a different gun, though.

Cowboy reached inside Stevens’ jacket and took his gun. “This one’s mine now.”

Tipping his hat to Stevens, Cowboy turned to leave the nearly vacant interstate diner.

He nodded to the waitress behind the counter and handed her three hundred dollars.

“For the trouble Mam.” He said, walking out the door.

Once back in his vehicle, Cowboy checked his burner cell phone. He made a practice of not taking phones with him inside restaurants to avoid being bothered while eating.

There was one text.

*New job. 50M*

Cowboy reached under his seat and pulled out a new burner phone.

He removed it from the package, inserted a new sim card, turned it on, and typed a reply to the sender.

*Accept. Info. 2 days.*

Cowboy had a new job. It would take him two days to reach the rented mailbox and pick up the file containing his target’s bio.

He was surprised to have a new job soon after the mishap in Belgium.

As an elite hitman, Cowboy had done high-paying jobs before, but this was the highest he had taken yet.

The high payday for this one meant either urgency, danger, or both.

Since he had already accepted the job, he would have to see it through.

*Politician or CEO?* He thought to himself as he got back on the freeway and headed toward the mailbox.

If it had to look like an accident, that would take more time. If it was a simple hit job, less time.

Cowboy didn’t have any connection to morality or ethics. He was a sociopath and didn’t mind being one.

He wasn’t born that way, as some experts claim is necessary to be an authentic sociopath.

Becoming a sociopath happened gradually from his time in the military and then as a mercenary.

Now he used his skills and augmentations to look out for himself.

The government had lied to him about what was being done to him. The process of being augmented was brutal and nearly took his sanity.

The only reason he was still alive was that he was presumed dead. Killed by supposed allies on another continent far away.

Cowboy drove, mind empty, set on his destination.

The burner phone rang.

He looked down at it, alarmed by the break in protocol.

It was Deena.

She wasn’t ever supposed to call.

He almost decided not to answer, but something told Him He should.

“Yes.” Cowboy said, holding the phone up to his ear.

“Just listen. Don’t speak.” Deena said. “Things are escalating very quickly. There is no job. Get yourself to safety. Everything’s going to fall.”

Deena ended the call without another word.

Cowboy sat the phone down, eyes set on the semi-truck fifty yards ahead of him on the freeway.

He thought briefly of the news reports he had seen, first in The Cayman Islands and now back in the States of chaos in Europe.

*Was this connected to Belgium?*

Survival was about adapting and doing what needed to be done in any situation.

Cowboy already lived outside of society’s rules and had officially died several years ago anyway.

Whatever was coming next, he would be ready.