Chapter 1

“They expect you to lead the way now. See it through.” Conrad tried to keep the skepticism out of his tone.

“I know what they expect. You need not remind me…ever again.” Carly did not hide the warning in her reply.

Carly turned back toward the window, gazing at the city skyline outside.

“Yes, of course. I only want to be of service.” Conrad tried to backpedal a little, but it was clear from the beginning that he did not think Carly the best choice for CEO of Cantor Inc.

“Perhaps you could be of service by setting up my flight for next week to Brussels.” Carly wanted to be rid of Conrad, if only for a short while.

Conrad hesitated, clearly wanting to bring up another matter.

Carly did not turn away from the window as she spoke.

“Yes?” Carly let irritation saturate her one-word question.

“The Group expects to see you in person tonight.” Conrad’s tone was calm and authoritative, reminding Carly that she could never be rid of him.

“Of course. I will be with them within the hour.” Carly kept her voice neutral this time.

“Excellent, I bid you farewell for the evening.” Conrad turned on his heels and strode out of Carly’s fiftieth-floor office.

Carly did not turn away from the window to watch Conrad leave.

She knew his purpose was to “handle” her during her occupancy of the CEO position at Cantor.

Conrad was a trusted board member and a significant shareholder of Cantor.

But that wasn’t really why he was tasked with overseeing her.

Conrad was a trusted lieutenant of The Group.

That was the only reason Carly tolerated him. Carly would likely have made him disappear long ago if he was merely a board member or shareholder.

Carly straightened her posture and pressed down the front of her business suit.

In less than a year, she would be instrumental in destroying the world as everyone knew it.

The Group had picked her for this task and given her the power and resources to make it happen.

Now Carly was expected to give an in-person report of her next steps and a timeline.

*It’s only the world.* Carly thought and laughed softly to herself.

Taking a deep breath and one last look at the gorgeous view, she turned to leave her new office.

Chapter 2

“Ohhhhh, that was so much fun!” Sandra yelled, running towards her father, Charles Sr.

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it little bug.” Charles Sr. knelt to catch Sandra as she ran straight into him.

Sandra hugged her father ferociously and then excitedly looked at her younger sister Lyla.

“Lyla, let’s ask mommy if we can get some candy fluff!” Sandra shouted at Lyla, and they ran over to assault their mother, sitting on a bench nearby with one arm wrapped around Brianne and the other around Charlie Jr.

Their father stood up, laughed, and followed them to their mother.

“Don’t let’em swindle you Charlene.” Charles Sr. joked as he approached the bench.

Charlene smiled wide as she picked up Lyla, gave her a flurry of kisses on the forehead, and then did the same with Sandra.

“How can I say no to these two lovely sprites on such a beautiful day?” Charlene looked back and forth between Lyla and Sandra.

“What’s got you two down lately? This is a wonderland out here!” Charles Sr turned his attention to Brianne and Charlie Jr.

Charlene looked up at Charles Sr as he spoke. “Brianne’s just having a tough day is all. Charlie doesn’t think we’ll have time to ride the Tornado Demon.”

Charles Sr gave the nod as if recognizing his cue. “Hey, Bunny.” He took a seat on the other side of Brianne. “I know it’s tough to be eleven and not understand all these weird feelings, but maybe some candy fluff will cheer you up.”

Brianne almost looked like she would go for it, then frowned again and just shrugged.

Her father patted her gently on the back and rubbed it a little. “Well, if you change your mind the offer stands as long as were here Bunny.”

Next, Charles directed his attention to Charlie Jr. “Hey bud, I promise we’ll have time to ride the Tornado Demon.” Charles exaggerated the last part of the sentence as he spoke. “Just one more ride with the little monsters, then it’s you, me, and the scariest ride in the park.”

Charlie smiled at this and looked in the direction of his desires. “Okay, you promised. Now we must do it Daddy.”

“Yep, we will. No question.” His father agreed.

“Charlie, honey, would you go with Sandra on the teacup river? She needs you to sit by her while your father sits with Lyla.” Charlene squeezed Charlie tight and rubbed his arm as she spoke.

“Come on big brother, you gotta protect your sister from scary sharks.” Charles Sr added.

“Sandra’s a year older than me. I’m not her big brother.” Charlie corrected his mother and father.

“Yeah, she is…but you’re bigger and stronger than she is.” Charles Sr. replied. “Plus, you’re a lot braver.”

Charlie smiled again but quickly frowned as if pretending not to enjoy being Sandra’s protector on the ride.

“I guess I will. But then we’re going on my ride.” Charlie declared.

His father laughed and smiled. “You bet big guy. Let’s go!”

Charles Sr. waved for all three of them to follow him and pretended to be in a hurry.

Charlene watched them go and squeezed Brianne again.

“I know it’s tough going through puberty Bunny, but it doesn’t last forever.”

“I’m too old for you to still call me Bunny.” Brianne kept her voice low and gruff.

Charlene smiled and kept her arm around Brianne, not saying anything.

Chapter 3

Cowboy didn’t like being referred to by his birth name.

“Teagan Catawanee…ain’t you a son…of…a…bitch.” His half-brother drawled out the words to emphasize his genuine awe at Cowboy’s skill.

“You’re easily impressed Sam.” Cowboy retorted, deciding not to mention his irritation.

“A fella could hide out in this getup for years,” Sam remarked as he surveyed the structure, craftily built above the waist-deep swamp.

“That’s the plan if and when things all go to shit.” Cowboy agreed. “Get here and stay here. I’ll catch up with you sooner or later.”

“Shit. I gotta place.” Sam sneered. “Nobody ever comes to visit now.”

Cowboy chuckled. “Suit yourself brother. The offer stands.”

“You could always put together something impressive with just a few sticks.” Sam was in a teasing mood. “But you ain’t for shit when it comes to makin friends.”

“Don’t care about making any friends Sam. Never have.” Cowboy replied. “Friends are messy and I don’t need that.”

“What if the air’s toxic?” Sam asked suddenly. “Can’t hide from the air up there.”

“I built something else for that.” Cowboy replied, already way ahead of Sam. “I have options if necessary.”

“Course you do slick.” Sam did look up to his older half-brother but used his words to keep a barrier between them.

Cowboy recognized that about Sam and didn’t care. Sam was Cowboy’s only real family. Some part of him wanted to maintain a connection for reasons he didn’t understand.

“You comin around tonight for gator?” Sam spit into the swamp as he spoke.

“Maybe, anybody else invited?” Cowboy asked.

“Na, just me. Told ya, I don’t get visitors.” Sam replied.

“I guess so then. You got shine?” Cowboy liked to make Sam feel appreciated.

“Hell yeah!” Sam was quick to reply.

“Grilled gator and some shine would do me well tonight.” Cowboy looked up at his accomplishment, already itching to get back on the road for his next job.

Cowboy and Sam shared the same mother. A woman of means who left them equal owners of almost three hundred acres in Louisiana. A little over a hundred acres of which was mostly swampland.

Sam never asked Cowboy about his work or anything else, for that matter. Cowboy appreciated that about Sam the most.

On the few occasions, Cowboy would pay Sam a visit, they mostly hunted gators, drank moonshine, and sat quietly together watching the barrel fire outside.

Cowboy and Sam were millionaires, several times over, because of their late mother’s will. Sam, however, preferred to live simply by himself in the swampland.

“Here’s a jar for ya big guy.” Sam handed Cowboy a pickling jar filled with moonshine.

Cowboy took the jar as he finished chewing his meal and nodded to Sam.

The fire was providing smooth, even flames for them this evening.

Cowboy took a drink and allowed himself to smile a little.

“Smooth ain’it?” Sam asked as he also took a larger sip.

“Always is.” Cowboy said.

Cowboy remained outside watching Sam occasionally tend to the fire, neither speaking to each other for several hours.

In the early hours of the following day, Sam merely patted Cowboy on the shoulder and headed inside to bed.

Cowboy sat alone for several minutes longer. Then he stood up and made his way over to the boat that would take him back to his vehicle.

There were no markers or signs to guide the way. A person looking for Sam would either be familiar with the area or just get stupid lucky to find his place out here.

It took Cowboy about twenty minutes to get back to his vehicle.

He drove up to the main house of the property. It was deserted except for one person.

His mother had employed her many years ago, stating in her will that Georgina could remain in the house indefinitely.

Now Georgina had the whole place to herself most of the time.

Cowboy parked in the large circular driveway and made his way into the house.

Georgina was more an administrator than anything else. She hired grounds people, maids, and repair people when necessary. She also handled any paperwork duties relating to the house as needed.

Inside, Cowboy found the house in immaculate condition. It was a large house with vaulted ceilings and a double winding staircase to the second and third floors, visible from the main entrance.

Cowboy didn’t grow up here and barely knew his mother. His father had taken him to live in Colorado when he was twelve.

He only made it back to see her in Louisiana on three occasions, spaced out over several years.

Cowboy’s father was a general contractor and went away on jobs often, leaving Cowboy home alone.

He got into trouble as a teenager, finally ending up in court and facing a felony charge at seventeen.

Joining the military to get out of going to prison seemed like an excellent idea at the time.

Cowboy walked under one side of the winding staircase to find one of the spare bedrooms he was using in the back of the house. It was set up for chefs and/or maids who may require lodging for the evening or longer.

He wasn’t going to sleep. Cowboy opened his duffle bag on the bed and pulled out one of the burner phones.

He popped in a new sim card and turned on the phone.

Typing in a number he had memorized; Cowboy sent a text to the recipient.

*‘Ready to work.’*And waited.

About two minutes later, He got a text back.

‘*Pick up box four-two-eight. Two days.’*

*Fuck. She likes to make me drive.* Cowboy thought to himself as he picked up his bag and left the room.

Chapter 4

“Drop me here.”

Carly clicked off the intercom button in the back seat. Privacy glass separated the front of the car from the passenger section.

The car slowed and pulled to the curb, stopping next to a convenience store just outside of downtown.

Carly got out of the car and stepped onto the sidewalk. It was a busy night. So many people bustling about, going to a thousand separate places.

Carly disappeared into the jumble of faces and bodies.

She had changed into some non-descript clothing that wouldn’t stand out.

Walking a block, Carly stopped to hail a taxi.

It took her about ten minutes to finally get one. Once inside, she spoke with an accent to further confuse anyone about her identity.

“Where to?” The driver asked, not looking in the mirror and not sounding interested in her.

“Warehouse District. Jaxon’s Building.” Carly answered.

The cabbie tuned his radio and pulled out into the busy street.

Carly sought membership in The Group. She was in a probationary period for the time being, but that wouldn’t last long after her report tonight. She might even get Conrad out of the way.

She tried not to get excited at the thought of it.

The drive was uneventful, and Carly was deposited in front of Jaxon’s Building Industrial Tech Center about fifteen minutes later.

She walked around the side of the building and across the street to the next building.

There was a staircase leading down on the side.

Carly walked down the stairs and knocked on the door.

She heard a series of clicks, and the door opened just a crack.

Carly opened it wide enough to step inside and walked down the long hallway to the other end.

There she found more stairs going down. Carly followed two sets of stairs.

At the end of the staircase was a man standing next to a door.

The man said nothing to Carly as she approached him. He was about six-five and stocky.

Once Carly was within a few feet of the man, she stopped, and he glanced at her and then reached over to push a button on the table next to him.

His earpiece chirped and he turned, opening the door for her.

Carly entered and found herself in a medium-sized room with a vaulted ceiling. There was an elevated area on the other side of the room where eight people were sitting in a semi-circle.

Carly walked up the ramp to their level and stopped in the middle of the semi-circle.

“Ms. Hennington. Your report.” A woman in one of the chairs spoke to her.

The Group wasn’t much for small talk.

“All is going well, ahead of schedule. We are in phase three with test subjects, and I fly to Brussels next week to personally oversee the last stage of testing.

“Excellent. You have done well.” A man sitting at the far side of the table addressed Carly.

Carly nodded, remaining silent.

“Where do we intend to release the first dose?” Another voice spoke up. Carly couldn’t see the speaker clearly because a light was shining in her face. She did, however, recognize the voice.

“South America and Europe simultaneously. Two weeks later, in North America.” Carly spoke only to provide details. No fluff or extra words.

“Congratulations on your promotion at Cantor. We’ll be watching your progress there closely. You may go.”

Carly turned and walked down the ramp and out the open door into the hallway. She didn’t make eye contact with the man outside the room.

Carly walked about two blocks from the building and called for a ride-share.

It took her about forty-five minutes to get back to the area where her apartment was located.

She had the driver drop her off a block away and walked the remaining distance.

It was much quieter in this area. Small groups or individuals were spaced well apart.

The entire face-to-face meeting with The Group took less than five minutes.

Carly had met with The Group on two other occasions but had been prepped exhaustively for those interactions. This was her first time going alone.

Her expertise and brilliance while working at Libbetell Organics brought her to the attention of The Group.

She was investigated exhaustively without her knowledge and finally approached by someone representing The Group.

Carly was immediately intrigued but remained cautious at first.

It took several interactions between herself and a few different people to finally get an invite to be introduced personally.

She understood that being introduced in person was a significant step in being accepted by this secret organization.

Carly was aware of the penalties of mentioning The Group to outsiders.

She watched as a man who had betrayed The Group’s trust had an unfortunate accident in his custom sports car.

The Group was powerful and could get to anyone without raising suspicions about itself.

Carly wanted the power that came with being accepted by this organization and would do anything to get it.

The Group had placed her at the top of Cantor Inc as a show of trust and a test.

Nothing would stop her from succeeding.

Being brilliant and capable was only part of it. Carly was also ruthless and cautious.

She was already proving instrumental in putting together a series of events that would collapse global civilization.

All this and no one outside The Group was aware of it.

*I impressed them tonight*. Carly thought as she stood in the well-furnished living room of her apartment.

She would return to Cantor in a couple hours and begin her first day as new CEO.

For quite some time, Carly rarely slept more than two or three hours a night. That was one side-effect of her inoculation.

She found it quite satisfying.

She could perform at a much higher level most of the time anyway. Still, the strange antibodies flowing through her veins amplified it.

Of course, there were other side effects, and they were not as pleasant.

Sometimes Carly would feel as if she were outside her own body, like a vivid, waking dream. There would be voices inside her head during these episodes and a feeling of being pulled away from herself.

With practice and instruction, Carly had learned to manage it and not be overwhelmed.

Carly reached for her cell phone and pushed one button.

“Yes Madam?” A voice answered immediately.

“Pick me up in ninety minutes. I’m going to Cantor.” Carly replied and ended the call.

Her first day would involve some house cleaning around Cantor. Carly looked forward to showing her ruthlessness to the board of directors.

They would be shocked but powerless to do anything about it.

Chapter 5

"Don't they understand the risks? There is so much about the artifact that we are yet to understand." Simone groaned to Chin, bringing up the issue again for the umpteenth time that week.

"Ours is not to question why." Chin retorted, wanting to get Simone off the subject as quickly as possible.

He was growing tired of Simone mentioning the obvious. Something about which neither of them could do anything.

"You do want to walk out of here alive?" Chin found rhetorical questions usually did the job of getting Simone to change the subject, at least for a few minutes.

"I've told them these test subjects do not represent a wide enough sampling of the world population. There could be micro-variations with unpredictable results." Simone did change the subject, but only to one she had also brought up numerous times to Chin.

"Yes, I have as well. The people who know the most about it all agree with you. It doesn't matter." Chin had long ago realized that Simone was a complainer, a worrier.

What he still did not understand was why he continued to respond to her at all. Most of the other members of their team ignored her completely.

"Look at them. Mindless automatons. Doing whatever they're told." Simone stood at the observation window to the lab, glancing over the other scientists performing various tasks in the main lab room.

"I gotta check subject forty-seven. Record status." Chin got up from his chair, grabbed the tablet next to his computer, and headed for the door.

"You should also…" Simone began, but Chin held up his hand as he left the room, not allowing Simone to complete her sentence.

The observation cells were located two levels down.

Chin took the elevator to that level and stepped out, ready to show his ID badge to the guard on duty there.

After inspecting Chin's ID badge, the guard nodded and waived him to the bio-scanner. The guard knew Chin, as well as all the other workers there, very well. Showing ID badges at each elevator exit was a mandatory practice regardless. So too were the bio-scanners.

Chin stepped onto the pad and waited while it scanned him.

Like all the workers, Chin did not know precisely what the bio-scanner was scanning. That was classified for security reasons.

Chin stepped off the pad, heading towards the door to be buzzed in by yet another guard.

"Mornin to ya Chin." The guard greeted Chin.

"Petre, hello." Chin replied.

"Subject twenty-eight was ramming the door to her cell again all night, but you probably already got a report about it." Petre informed Chin.

"Yes, thank you Petre." Chin smiled briefly and continued walking.

Chin walked past several occupied cells, each filled with a different test subject.

"Hey Chin. Checkin on forty-seven?" An attendant who had just finished placing a new subject in one of the cells looked up from his tablet.

"Yes Luca. This one is keeping us busy lately." Chin stopped to examine the new test subject Luca had just placed inside the cell.

"Got to keep them full," Luca commented, referring to the exhaustive research demanded by the lab's benefactors.

*Simone is correct about that.* Chin thought. The bosses were not giving them enough time to do thorough research.

The man in the cell stood motionless, facing the cell's opposite wall. He had recently been injected and would be expressionless for several hours as the contagion took over his body.

Chin patted Luca on the back as he walked past him.

Chin didn't investigate any of the other cells. He had been working here for almost four years and no longer found casual inspections interesting. The past eighteen months found him in work mode only.

Reaching his objective, Chin stopped to bring up the appropriate file on his tablet and input some cursory notes.

*I feel your blood Chin*. The woman inside the cell reached into his mind.

Still, Chin ignored her as he began inputting commands into the cell's access terminal.

This terminal would take various samples using mechanized implements attached directly to the subject in the cell. There was no physical contact with the specimens after injection of the contagion.

*I can always find you. I will hunt you soon*. The woman continued, not waiting or caring for any response.

"The subject remains restrained at 0515. Noticeable signs of flexing on the restraints. Recommend increasing restraint level. Priority sample extraction took at this observation." Chin spoke into his tablet, and it typed his words in the appropriate box on the digital form.

The samples would be sent directly to the main lab room, and analysis would begin before Chin returned to his computer.

"Two more sample batches ordered at forty-eight-hour increments. Following second sample, terminate subject and replace with new subject." Chin finished speaking into the tablet, inputted a few more commands into the access terminal for the cell, and turned to leave.

*Bao knew she was dying long before she told you*.

Chin froze. *How can it go that deep?*He thought.

Chin brought up his tablet again and brought up subject forty-seven's file for additional input.

"Subject’s telepathic abilities are growing stronger, possibly indicating synthesis of meta protein to cerebrum. Subject mentioned my dead mother by name." Chin paused and thought of conducting one additional test before returning to his workstation.

"Tell me about your mother." He spoke directly to the subject, making eye contact.

No answer. The subject only looked back at Chin with a neutral stare.

"Subject forty-seven does not engage in any sort of dialogue, consistent with previous subjects." He closed the file for this subject, clicked off the tablet's screen, and began walking toward the exit.

Nearing the door, Chin saw that the guard was about to speak to him again when they both heard a loud crash in the direction Chin had just been seconds prior.

Chin turned. The guard quickly reached his side. They both stared down the hall.

Another crash. This time Chin saw something small bang against the wall opposite one of the cells.

"Alarm!" Chin yelled at the guard. "Open the door now!"

The guard turned and ran for the alarm, Chin close behind.

The guard pushed the alarm button, and suddenly the lights flicked out and came back on. A red stream signifying the alert level ran along the length of the wall just below the ceiling. It would do the same throughout the entire facility.

Another crash. This time more pieces flew out and hit the opposite wall. Another crash.

The guard pushed a knob in the wall, and a hatch opened, revealing a small assortment of munitions.

Chin could now see additional guards on the other side of the door. They were armed with BR18 assault rifles.

"Open the door!" Chin yelled again, already knowing the door would not open but unable to control his panic.

"Get behind me." The guard spoke at a regular volume, placing an entire magazine in one rifle and aiming it toward the commotion.

Chin did as instructed and followed the guard's gaze down the hallway.

They heard an additional crash, and larger pieces scattered onto the floor outside one of the cells.

Chin looked up at the cell status panel behind the guard's station and saw that it was the cell containing subject forty-seven.

There were monitors below the cell status panel, each showing an interior view of a different cell.

Chin could see that subject forty-seven had managed to rip off her restraints and sample probes. He watched the subject reach delicately around the plexiglass to the cell's exterior.

Chin looked down the hall and saw hands feeling around the edges of the opening.

"Shoot it!" Chin yelled at the guard.

"Quiet." The guard ordered Chin.

Chin looked back through the locked door at the other guards beyond. They stood motionless, waiting.

The hands retreated into the cell.

"Gas the cell." Chin spoke up again, trying to regain his rational thinking.

"Not until I have clearance from upstairs. The gas will neutralize us as well. Stay quiet."

*Chin. I will make you watch. Then take you last.*

Chin heard the voice in his head. It was overpowering, and he involuntarily placed his hands over his ears.

The guard looked over at him, saying something, but Chin could not hear him.

A humming sound filled the hallway. Chin and the guard fell to their knees as the hum moved through their bodies.

It penetrated through the locked door to where the other guards were standing. It was weaker on their side but still strong enough to make them take a few steps back.

Within seconds the humming pulsed stronger and then stopped altogether.

Chin was stunned. He placed his hands on the tile floor to keep from falling over.

"Get ba…" A shape flew past Chin, and the guard's body flew into the door.

Chin rolled over and pressed his body against the far wall, instinctively trying to make himself as small as possible.

His eyes were closed, and his body curled up.

*Chin, look at me.* The voice filled his head again. Cold and calm.

Chin opened his eyes to see subject forty-seven crouched in front of him, watching him with calculating eyes that filled him with terror.

Chin could hear a hissing sound now. He recognized the sound of gas being released through the hallway's ventilation system.

Chin felt his face tingling and tried to hold his breath. Finally, he couldn't hold it any longer.

He gasped for air, and instantly his lungs were burning. He wretched as his mouth foamed and his body seized.

In the last few seconds of his life, he saw the crouched woman watching him calmly, as he suffocated.

Chapter 6

Cowboy never knew his clients. Only his targets.

Rutger Olmsen was the founder of Autorem, a start-up biotech company marketing a product that monitored and controlled involuntary spasms caused by autoimmune diseases.

Specifically, it targeted the basal ganglia of the brain.

Cowboy didn't know or care about any of that. These were simply details that gave him context for how to plan the accident.

He could use them or not at his discretion.

Typically, Cowboy would look for traditional methods of planning his target's unfortunate accidents.

Rutger's extracurricular activities included test piloting prototype aerial vehicles.

This caught Cowboy's interest.

*Flying cars can be dangerous as a hobby*. Cowboy mused.

Cowboy was provided an itinerary for Mr. Olmsen's upcoming activities of the week.

Deena employed a hacker to provide Cowboy with details such as this.

Rutger would be visiting another small start-up, LightStar, to inspect and test out a prototype single-passenger commuter vehicle that promised to make aerial transport through metropolitan areas a reality for the everyday consumer.

Now Cowboy needed to get to the prototype.

LightStar HQ was not a well-guarded facility. A small tech company like this would invest most of its money in research and development and Information Technology (IT) security.

Cowboy surveyed the wall he was about to climb, swung his grappling rope, and took aim. He tossed it up, the hook locking firmly on the other side.

This was the highest side of the wall running along the back of the building. The guard wouldn't drive by this area for at least forty-five minutes.

Pushing a button, Cowboy allowed the pulley to lift him up the wall.

Once atop the wall, he hooked the rope to the opposite side and used the pulley to guide him down.

The pulley system for his rope was also equipped with a short-range transmitter so he could lift and lower the rope remotely once it was firmly attached to something.

Cowboy rechecked his surroundings and moved quickly toward the main hanger that housed the fully assembled prototype vehicle.

Olmsen arranged for several local and a few national television and print journalists to report on his maiden flight of the prototype vehicle.

*They'll definitely remember this.* Cowboy thought as he ran around the corner of the building, choosing his path cautiously to avoid the security cameras.

The hanger side door was locked, as Cowboy had expected. He used an automatic lock pick to unlock the door, then slipped inside.

The prototype was sitting in the center of the small hanger.

It was a visually stunning piece of hardware. Cowboy didn't pause to admire the prototype.

He moved around to the back of the vehicle, removing the cover housing the central battery bank.

Replacing two wires leading from the battery bank to the inverter would cause the system to overheat about twenty minutes into the flight.

Replacing one of the microchips on the motherboard with one identical would nullify the warning system meant to alert the driver/pilot of imminent overheating.

Cowboy expected a final vehicle inspection before Olmsen took control of it. These replacement parts, however, were designed to look exactly like the originals.

They were also not proprietary. LightStar bought some off-the-shelf components to construct its prototype.

Deena's hacker had acquired the database containing all the vehicle components. That allowed Cowboy to plan his sabotage precisely this way.

Olmsen would fall from the sky with all those cameras rolling, providing definitive evidence to the client of Cowboy's success.

It took Cowboy about twenty-five minutes to complete his work on the prototype and replace the rear cover.

Getting up and down the wall was fast, less than thirty seconds. Getting to the hanger while avoiding the cameras took about eight minutes. Getting back would take about the same amount of time. That was forty-one minutes, plenty of time to spare.

Cowboy was back across the street and into his car before the guard drove by the back wall again.

In two days, Olmsen would test out the prototype.

In two days, Olmsen would be dead.

Chapter 7

She watched Chin's body writhe, seize and finally stop moving.

She felt no emotion as Chin died in front of her. The contagion had taken all parts of her humanity.

The woman who used to be known as Angelika was now something else entirely. She knew her name and remembered her life as Angelika. Still, it was like having a memory of someone else.

She turned toward where the armed guards were waiting for the gas to disperse before unlocking the door.

She still breathed like Chin, which meant she could feel the gas attacking her body.

Just as fast as it scorched her lungs, however, they would repair themselves.

Her body did spasm slightly as the toxic fumes assaulted her insides. Small puddles of foam also formed at her lips and fell to the floor. Some blood dripped as well.

Angelika registered the pain, but it did not cause fear or immobilization. She simply waited for it to dissipate.

Looking away from the door, she examined the cells on both sides of her. All were filled with test subjects in various stages of metamorphosis.

"Get ready. It'll be clear in five." The guard's voice was audible to her ears through the door.

Angelika stood up and ran straight into the plexiglass of the cell in front of her. She moved back in a blur and threw herself into it repeatedly.

It quickly began to form cracks and finally broke apart.

The animated fellow inside ran into the hallway frantically, trying to grab her. Still, she was much too fast for him.

She repeated the process of ramming into and breaking the plexiglass of cell after cell, moving faster and faster each time.

Within four minutes, she had managed to liberate four additional subjects. Two were more like her but less cognitive, not as strong. More savage.

One of them tried to attack the first subject she had released, but she threw him against the door where the guards would be entering soon.

The other two subjects were in severe states of physical decay. They moved much more slowly, casually moving toward the first released test subject, their jaws chomping steadily.

Angelika herded them all toward the door that would be opening in less than a minute now.

The one she had thrown against the door stood up and turned to face the guards on the other side.

She grunted at them but did not move.

The other one, more like Angelika, allowed himself to be herded but looked back at her several times, hinting that he would not be cooperative for much longer.

Angelika tried to go inside his mind just as she had done with Chin, but something pushed her back out.

She heard the click that meant the door was opening.

Instantly the guards began firing at the one standing closest to the door.

Angelika moved to the side of the small group she was pushing toward the door and rushed forward, feeling a few of the bullets hit her body.

With the guards distracted by their closest target, Angelika waited for the briefest lulls in their shooting.

She ripped the test subject they had been focusing their fire on in half in less than a second and hurled the top half of its body into the cluster of guards.

Mere seconds after that, she slaughtered them all.

A short time later, Angelika was in the air duct, looking for a way out of the facility.

Chapter 8

“But…but you can’t do this!” Greg whined and yelled at the same time.

The security guards to escort him out of the Cantor building said nothing. They merely stood looking at him after informing him that he had ten minutes to gather any personal belongings before being officially terminated.

“Is this some kind of a joke?” Greg asked, looking back and forth between the two men facing him.

“It is, isn’t it.” Greg continued, not moving to collect any of his belongings. “Is Tommy finally getting back at me for the Golf thing last year?” Greg laughed to himself. “Guy can’t take a joke. Tell him he got me. I can take it. Ha Ha.”

“Mr. Forson. Please gather your personal belongings or we can have them sent to you after you leave the building.” The guard spoke without any emotion.

Greg contorted his face into a look of utter confusion and disbelief. “I guess you’ll have to carry me out then. That’ll be pretty funny. Tommy’ll get in trouble for that. Taking it toooooo far!” Greg stretched out the sentence and raised his voice high at the end.

“Send up two more security personnel.” The guard radioed into the receiver on his chest.

“Jonas, is it?” Greg read the name tag on one of the men’s shirts. “Don’t take Tommy seriously Jonas. You really could lose your job for this.”

As Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Cantor Inc. for twenty years, Greg Forson felt immune from termination. That was evident today.

“Mr. Forson. I’m asking you politely one last time to please collect any personal belongings and we will escort you out of the building.” Jonas continued to speak in an even tone, devoid of any emotion.

“No. I don’t think I will Jonas. You’ll have to carry me out. See how that looks Jonas. I’ll have your job for that outrageous display.” Greg crossed his arms in defiance.

“As you wish Mr. Forson.” Jonas replied.

Jonas motioned to the two security personnel who had just walked into Greg’s forty-ninth-floor office. They approached Greg and began wrestling with him to get a zip-tie around his wrists.

“Stop it, you idiots!” Greg tried to resist and swung at one of the security personnel attempting to restrain him.

She quickly dodged Greg’s haymaker attempt, taking the offered arm and twisting it tightly behind his back.

“You psycho bitch!” Greg spat. “Let go of me.” Greg was practically crying now. “You can’t do this to me!”

The two personnel finally managed to get a zip-tie around Greg’s hands, securing them firmly behind his back.

Jonas and his partner on duty grabbed Greg’s legs and zip-tied those as well.

Greg was squirming like a fish by this point. “You fuckers can’t do this to me! I’m too important to be fired. I run this company!”

None of the guards spoke as they struggled to hold Greg as still as possible while carrying him out of the building.

Once outside, Greg was deposited at the exit to the front gate.

“Mr. Forson, if you attempt to re-enter the building you will be tasered and law enforcement will be called to arrest you for trespassing.” Jonas informed Greg as two security people removed his zip-ties and backed away, standing just behind Jonas.

“A car will be arriving to drive you home and your things will be sent there by the end of the day.” Jonas added as Greg stared back at him in shock.

Jonas turned, walking back through the gate and into the building. The other security personnel followed behind him.

Walking over to the main desk on the ground floor, Jonas dialed a series of digits and placed the receiver to his ear.

“Yes?” Carly answered.

“It’s done. He’s out of the building.” Jonas informed her.

“Excellent. Thank you, Jonas. That will be all for today.” Carly ended the call immediately after speaking.

Standing again in front of her office window, looking out over the city skyline Carly felt a calm rush of power fill her body.

Soon she expected to receive calls from several board members asking her if she had lost her mind.

She would tell them this was only the beginning. Additional employees would be let go by the end of the week.

She would remind them that all of this was within her authority, and she expected their support.

After the predicted threats were issued, Carly would invite each board member who called her to bring it up at the next board meeting. She looked forward to hearing them criticize her in front of the entire board.

Members who chose to draw a firm line against Carly’s decisions would discover they were also expendable, quickly replaced with new members.

She wanted everyone at the company and on the board to talk about her ruthlessness. She would set this expectation solidly in their minds.

Afterward, Carly would encourage and accept ideas brought forward by board members who had already approached her privately about ways to improve Cantor.

Her phone chirped once.

Carly frowned slightly, not expecting text messages but calls from angry board members.

She picked up her phone.

*Error code 1212*. It read.

This was not a board member.

Carly quickly walked to the wall opposite the huge window overlooking the city. She moved aside a mirror to reveal her safe.

Inside was a satellite phone with direct access to the lab outside Brussels.

Carly entered an unlock code and pushed one button to put her call through.

Someone answered immediately. “There was an incident at the lab. Multiple subjects escaped confinement. One is still missing.”

Carly felt a tinge of panic run up her back, threatening to become a wave. “What happened exactly?” Carly struggled to keep her voice even.

“Subject forty-seven broke through her restraints and the reinforced plexiglass of her cell. She also set free four other test subjects by breaking through their plexiglass. She killed eight guards after the area was gassed and the guards opened the door to neutralize her. One scientist was also killed.”

*Extraordinary*. Carly thought.

“Is she the one still missing?” Carly asked.

“Yes.” The other voice replied.

“Keep looking for her. I’ll be flying in tonight. Update me if status changes.” Carly turned off the satellite phone and retrieved her cell phone.

“Send a car. I need the jet within the hour.” Carly’s mind was racing with fascination and panic.

“Yes Ms. Hennington. The car will be available in five minutes. Main garage level.” The operator informed her.

“I’m heading down now.” Carly replied and ended the call.

She quickly gathered necessary items and headed down to the main garage level using the private elevator attached to her office.

*I’ve got to see this one.* Carly stepped out of the elevator and found the car idling just a few steps away.

She got into the backseat, and the driver closed the door behind her.

Carly worked out solutions in her head as the car drove to the private corporate airport outside the city.

A mishap at the research facility was concerning, but she felt confident she could fix it and get things back on schedule with few or no hiccups.

The power this specimen demonstrated was something she needed to understand.

With the other business, The Group was concluding within the week, Carly was confident she would soon possess a means to exert total control over all the specimens.

That would allow her and the research team to study them with greater intimacy.

*This will all work for my benefit*. Carly told herself. *I will get the test subjects to explain it to us themselves.*

Carly’s lips curled into a slight grin as she envisioned her goal already being achieved.

Chapter 9

"Someone else will recognize that I am missing, and she will find out about it eventually." Valentina looked noticeably worried and with valid reason.

Orin placed the satellite phone on his desk, having just informed Carly Hennington of the recent incident at the facility. He looked up at Valentina and sighed deeply.

"It is a risk we must take my dear. It is the only way." He tried to provide calm with his words.

"I will get the data and location to them in less than two days. We will not let The Group prevail." Valentina displayed a look of determination.

"We don't need much time. Just long enough for Andre to get here, take back the relic and shut this abomination down." Orin reminded Valentina. "The Group does not know of us and never will."

Valentina nodded in agreement. "Very well. I will leave tonight, as we discussed. I won't be missed until tomorrow at the earliest."

Orin hugged Valentina briefly, and she left his office.

Overseeing all personnel at the research facility, which was unnamed, gave Orin a great deal of power. He was personally chosen by The Group for this purpose. That gave him latitude to subvert its efforts in secrecy.

Orin punched a button on his desk and was immediately connected to the head of security at the facility.

"Give me an update on our missing petre dish." Orin spoke immediately upon the line opening.

"She…It is still MIA. We have drones doing a grid search of the air ducts and other access ways. We'll find it…soon." Demetre sounded quite confident about his success.

"See that you do. Ms. Hennington is arriving within the day. Have it secured before she gets here." Orin replied.

"Within the day? Demetre sounded worried but recovered his optimism quickly. "Yes, understood."

Orin pushed the button again, ending his conversation with Demetre.

He preferred the creature did escape. That might be enough to derail The Group's plans altogether. But, he had to continue playing his part no matter what, as instructed by Andre many years ago.

Orin trusted Andre completely. They both shared a common pain: losing loved ones to The Group.

Andre first approached Orin all those years ago to open his eyes to what really happened to his brilliant sister.

Andre was quite persuasive and charismatic, and he had a way of drawing people to his way of thinking. He was also skilled in military and espionage tactics, having established his own team to counteract The Group's efforts worldwide. All this without The Group's knowledge of his existence.

Now Orin could see an end to all his years of hiding in plain sight, working for the organization he was helping to destroy.

Orin headed out of his office, to the primary research section to get an in-person update from the lead scientist in charge of perfecting the contagion.

His goal was to push the scientists harder to achieve The Group's objective, just enough to slow progress but not enough to significantly disturb it. That was all to buy Andre a little more time.

The elevator arrived at Orin's destination, revealing Joelle waiting for him on the other side.

"Orin, a pleasure as always." Joelle sounded neutral. Orin knew she did not like him. That was okay.

"And you Joelle." He smiled warmly. "What of our progress today?"

"Please, walk with me." She gestured for Orin to walk by her side. "We have nearly finalized series twelve in trials and are examining optimal delivery modalities now."

Orin nodded, looking in through the various plexiglass windows to observe different scientists scurrying about their tasks.

"What is the time frame for that?" Orin asked. "Ms. Hennington is arriving within the day to oversee capture of Subject forty-seven and get an update."

Joelle stopped walking and turned to face Orin directly. "Arriving here today? But we must have more time."

Orin repeated himself. "Please give me a time frame for the delivery vehicle."

Joelle sighed and looked down at the floor before speaking. "A week at least, maybe longer."

"Have it ready in four days. Ms. Hennington will have left, but I would like to guarantee her a demonstration in the near future."

"That's impossible Orin. Four days is simply not enough time." Joelle protested.

"See it done Joelle. I know you can do it." Orin placed his hands atop Joelle's shoulders and squeezed firmly. "You must."

Without further interaction, Orin turned and walked back toward the elevator, pushing the call button. He got inside, and the doors closed behind him. Orin did not look back at Joelle.

Joelle felt tears of frustration at the edges of her eyes and quickly rubbed them away.

"This is not possible." She mumbled and quickly headed toward one of the lab rooms to stick a poker in everyone's backside.

She knew everyone was already working at maximum effort, which would only cause added stress and lead to mistakes.

Joelle sighed again, collected herself, and entered the lab.

Chapter 10

“A man who pays his debts…” Romero let a huge smirk spread across his face. “That’s a fine gentleman indeed.”

Cowboy stood on the other side of Romero’s desk, appearing disinterested.

“And will you have need of my services again soon?” Romero leaned forward and invited Cowboy to speak.

“Maybe.” Cowboy replied. “You’ll be my first call.”

“Excellent. I look forward to your call Wildman.” Romero hesitated as if thinking of final details. “Phillips will meet you at the front. He will produce your item now that the matter of payment has been settled.”

Cowboy nodded and showed himself out of Romero’s office. It was in the back of a restaurant/bar that featured topless dancers.

As he walked toward the front of the restaurant, Cowboy could see Phillips and a few of Romero’s other goons sitting at a table near the main entrance.

Phillips stood up as Cowboy approached the table. “Hey big guy. Long time no see. You wanna join us for a game of cards tonight?”

“Not tonight Phillips. Just want my merchandise.” Cowboy answered.

“Afraid to give us your money again?” Phillips turned toward the other men sitting at the table and laughed.

“I won last time we played. Is your memory that fuzzy?” Cowboy quipped. “Maybe you should get it checked.”

Phillips stopped laughing and scowled at Cowboy. “That was just luck big guy. You won’t be so lucky again.”

“I’m not playing again. Get my item and I’ll be on my way.” Cowboy kept his voice even, trying not to sound impatient.

“Very well. Drive around back, and I’ll meet you there.” Phillips took off walking toward the back of the restaurant.

The other men at the table turned away from Cowboy and resumed drinking.

Cowboy headed out to his vehicle. Tonight, it was an old pickup with a long bed.

As Cowboy drove back, he caught sight of Phillips waiting at the entrance to a garage separated from the main building.

Cowboy parked a few feet away from where Phillips was standing and walked over to him.

“It’s just inside. Don’t worry, we’re well away from prying eyes.” Phillips gestured to the wall surrounding the back of the restaurant, garage, and parking area.

“I’m not worried at all. Let’s get on with it.” Cowboy replied.

Phillips led Cowboy inside the garage. “You can, of course, inspect it all as you like here.”

“And if I don’t like it Romero will give me my money back.” Cowboy allowed sarcasm in his voice.

Phillips snorted. “No. He won’t. You understood the terms before you agreed to them.”

Cowboy already knew that, of course, but couldn’t help himself.

Inside the garage was a table to one side with a medium-sized, rectangle-shaped box and a few other items sitting beside it.

Cowboy walked over to the rectangle-shaped box and removed the top.

Inside was the item of primary interest to him.

Phillips waited while Cowboy inspected it for a few minutes, then asked. “Does it meet your expectations big guy?”

Cowboy nodded. “It’ll do.”

The box was light enough for Cowboy to carry it himself. He picked it up and took it back to his truck, placing it in the bed on the driver’s side.

He walked back into the garage to collect the other items.

Phillips had lit a cigarette and watched Cowboy load up his items. “You got a big job comin up?”

“Nothing to worry your pretty little head about Phillips.” Cowboy took one other item out and examined it as he spoke.

Phillips took a last exaggerated drag off the cigarette and snuffed it out on the garage floor. “Well, hurry it along then. I’ve got business man.”

Cowboy took a few more seconds to examine the item and placed it back in the case.

He put the strap for the case over his shoulder and walked back to his truck, saying nothing to Phillips as he got into his vehicle and drove away.

Dealing with characters like Romero and Phillips was just part of being in his line of work. He didn’t trust any of them but couldn’t really avoid them either.

He knew Romero would likely sell him out to the highest bidder given a chance. So sharing any details about upcoming jobs was not an option.

Cowboy sometimes purchased items he never intended to use just to throw them off. It was his way of creating confusion amongst his suppliers.

He would also buy different components from different suppliers to keep them from figuring out what he was doing.

Being paranoid was the best insurance for a hitman. Not trusting anyone was key to survival. These strategies had served him well over the years.

On this occasion, Cowboy wasn’t buying anything from Romero for a job but for personal reasons.

This long-range satellite transmitter/receiver was for his personal underground bunker in northern Idaho. It was remote, and Cowboy had carried most of the material to build it on foot.

He was in the middle of constructing a third location in Nevada. Still, He had not gotten around to working on it in a couple years.

Tomorrow Cowboy expected to receive the second half of his payment for the most recent job. The money should be deposited into his account minutes after the first news reports detailing the fateful end of Rutger Olmsen.

Now he had a two-day drive to northern Idaho ahead of him.

It was time to put the finishing touches on his bunker.

Chapter 11

The drone operated nearly silent as it scanned the air duct for biosignatures. An uninfected person would be unable to hear it at all.

However, the frequency at which it operated gave its presence away to Angelika.

She had taken the lives of two additional security personnel since escaping into the air ducts. The second one almost captured her using a tranquilizer gun.

She killed him, however, before he could get a solid aim and before he could call for reinforcements.

His body would be found eventually, which would redirect the search to that location.

Angelika was still changing inside, becoming something unlike her former self.

The artifact gave her power, and she did not need external nourishment while it was activated.

The scientists at the facility had yet to figure this out. They had figured out how to activate it and derive an organic formula from it to craft the pathogen coursing through Angelika. There was, alas, so much they did not understand regarding the artifact.

They referred to it as The Cube due to its shape but didn't know its actual purpose.

It was a little more than twenty-five centimeters cubed in dimension but was capable of things beyond what any earth scientist could fathom.

None of the scientists at the facility knew of its origin. The Group was just as clueless as the others but had unearthed some ancient documents that gave clues.

"Move on to grid sixteen next." Angelika heard talking below her. "We're almost done here."

She had squeezed herself into a fold in the wall just outside the air duct by peeling back one of the metal sheets encasing it.

Angelika could now sense how she should go to find a way out of the facility. She was headed that way.

Soon she would be free. There was a certainty in her mind that more like her would exist shortly, and together they would find purpose in their existence. It was only a matter of time.

Angelika waited for the frequency sound only she could hear to fade and slowly lowered herself back into the air duct.

She moved quickly and silently through the small space. In a few moments, she would be out.

As Angelika turned a corner, she heard a barely perceptible click. She instantly felt the sting of a dart on her left shoulder.

Things became blurry very quickly, and soon Angelika lost consciousness.

The automated tranquilizer gun was motion activated. It was controlled by an AI system that could adjust the velocity of the dart based on the intended target.

As soon as it fired and hit its target, the AI notified security personnel that it had discharged. It was equipped with a camera to provide a visual of the subdued target.

Security personnel arrived at the location in a few short minutes to retrieve Angelika.

She was taken to a much more reinforced containment unit this time and restrained with carbon fiber cables all around her body.

Regaining consciousness, Angelika found her vision much more restricted. She could only see directly in front of her.

A woman was looking at her and smiling warmly.

"Welcome back to us forty-seven. I flew a long way to meet you. I look forward to learning all about your fascinating qualities."

Angelika looked back at her with a neutral stare.

Suddenly the woman crumpled to her knees.

*I already know you, Carly. You will fear me soon enough.*

Angelika caught a glimpse of other people rushing into the room, quickly escorting the woman out.

Once outside the room, Carly began to regain her composure.

"Damn, that was intense." Carly, visibly shaken and trying to control her breathing. "She was inside my head, and it was overwhelming."

Orin nodded. "We'll have the device soon. Then we can control her."

"Yes, soon." Carly agreed. "Let's find out how that's coming along shall we?"

Carly steadied herself and led Orin out of the observation room.

Chapter 12

“Breaking news this morning out of Boulder, Colorado. Tech superstar Rutger Olmsen appears to have died in a spectacular crash of a prototype flying vehicle he was piloting when it malfunctioned and fell out of the sky. Early reports are still coming in, but it does indeed appear that Mr. Olmsen died in the crash earlier today. Immediate comment was not available from Mr. Olmsen’s spokespeople…”

Charles Sr. watched the headline story as he sipped his tea and readied himself for another day at work.

*Flying cars. Yeah, that sounds safe. Totally plausible.* He thought, turning his head to watch his two youngest children throw pieces of cereal at each other from across the counter in the kitchen.

“Stop it you two. That’s enough of that.” He tried to sound stern.

Lyla and Charlie Jr. giggled and resumed eating their cereal.

No one else was down from their bedrooms upstairs this morning.

Charles decided to holler up at them one more time before leaving.

“Ladies! Up! Up! Things to do! It’s a beautiful day!” He held his hands around his mouth to project his voice up the stairs.

He heard a door open, and Charlene yelled down to him. “Stop yelling! Too early for yelling and being cheerful!”

Charles smiled and yelled back up the stairs. “But you’re yelling at me now! And you sound so beautiful when you yell!”

He heard his wife mutter something he couldn’t quite make out.

Charles laughed mischievously and returned to the kitchen.

“Eat up little monsters. Get upstairs and get cleaned up. You both are so messy.”

Both children giggled again as they finished their breakfast and deposited their dishes in the sink.

Charles rinsed off their dishes and placed them in the dishwasher, inserting a pod, closing the door, and starting the wash cycle before he left.

As he headed out the door, Charles turned to examine the house they had just moved into a week ago.

He smiled and got into his car, driving away feeling quite satisfied with how everything in his family’s life seemed to be going smoothly, except for Brianne and her mood swings.

*She’ll grow out of that soon*. He thought, leaving the subdivision and heading toward the freeway.

As he drove, Charles could have no way of knowing that in a few months, his entire life would be turned upside down by global disaster and losing his oldest son.

He shared this ignorance with everyone else joining him on the freeway that day.

Their lives would be either ending or continuing in a new chaotic reality.

Some might welcome it more than others, finding themselves well adapted to the Laws of the Jungle.

Charles would find the transition difficult and ultimately crippling.

For now, however, he could still enjoy the bliss of family life and a job he only mildly disliked.

Chapter 13

“You’ve done well Valentina. This is where we start finally putting an end to The Group and its horror.” Andre hugged Valentina as he spoke.

“Soon I will strike their facility and destroy everything they have done there. It will cripple them, but it will not be a death blow.” Andre continued, letting go of Valentina and stepping back.

“They will look for me…and you after this.” Valentina’s voice was filled with worry.

“I expect so. But that does not concern me. I know how to stay out of their sights. And you will as well.” Andre replied, handing Valentina a large envelope. “Take this. Use it to hide yourself far away from here. All that you need is there.”

Valentina took the envelope and nervously rubbed her fingers along its edges. “Yes, okay. I will do it.”

Andre put his hands around Valentina’s arms and leaned in to kiss her forehead. “You will be safe my dear. I promise you. You need not worry. Go. There is someone waiting to take you to the train.”

Valentina nodded, grabbed her small bag, placed the envelope inside, and exited through the door of the small hotel room Andre had rented.

A few seconds later, another woman entered the room.

Andre picked up a small packet from the bed and handed it to her. “Take this to Gabriel. He must decode and analyze the information on this drive quickly. We strike them in ninety days or less.”

“Yes, Andre. I will do it. I will have us ready when the time comes.” Mila replied, giving Andre a thorough visual inspection.

“You must rest. You are tired. You cannot keep running yourself like this.” She added.

Andre looked over at the bed and sighed. “Yes, you are right of course. But there is so much to do before.”

“Give yourself four hours to sleep. We will be relying on you to lead us soon. You must be strong. You will have time to prepare after sleep.” Mila insisted.

Andre relented and went over to the bed, flopping himself atop it. Within seconds he was out, clearly exhausted.

Mila watched him sleep for a moment and left the room quietly.

She got into the passenger side of a car waiting outside the room. “To Gabriel.” She said, and the driver backed out and left the parking lot.

Like Orin, Mila was also recruited by Andre due to a shared tragedy at the hands of The Group. She was Andre’s trusted second in command.

Mila handled most of the details of Andre’s operation, allowing him to control the big picture and general direction of things.

They had worked together for several years thwarting The Group’s activities without being identified as of yet.

That would likely change with this attack on The Group’s research facility in Belgium.

They were already hyper-cautious about protecting themselves from being identified, but that would intensify in the coming days and weeks.

Andre and Mila had spent years discussing this particular operation and its aftermath.

Everyone knew the risks and dangers involved. There was no lack of motivation to continue.

Being able to remain hidden from The Group was quite an accomplishment. The Group had its tentacles hidden in every corner of the world. Its spies knew every secret and could get to anyone.

Andre knew his time was limited, remaining hidden for as long as he had managed to up till now. He was determined to control how and when The Group became aware of him.

Neutralizing the research facility provided him the maximum advantage on that account.

The risks ran both ways as well. Andre had told Mila numerous times that being found out this way would likely make The Group less cautious. This could also work to Andre’s advantage, using The Group’s desperation to make it more known to a broader population.

Within days Gabriel would have the information decrypted and organized, allowing Andre and his team to finalize their attack plan.

In the meantime, Andre enjoyed his few precious hours of sleep.

Chapter 14

Cowboy had bought land northeast of Copeland, Idaho. The rugged, mountainous terrain bordered the Kaniksu National Forest. It was a remote area with a low population density and a perfect location for constructing his second hideout.

The property was purchased years ago and stood undeveloped for over a decade. About eight years ago, Cowboy salvaged old barn wood from areas around Northern Idaho to erect a barn on the property.

The structure was meant to appear somewhat run down and not attractive to the casual viewer. The property itself was littered with low-profile security cameras, each powered by an individual miniature solar panel.

Inside the barn, Cowboy began assembling his bunker's entrance, which appeared to be a raggedy-looking stall filled with miscellaneous junk.

The entrance could be found on the floor of this stall once the junk concealing it had been removed.

Cowboy removed the rusted bits and pieces of old engine parts, farming equipment, and rebar above the entrance and placed them just outside the stall.

Once the stall was cleared of debris, he attached a removable crank hidden elsewhere on the property to raise the flooring section that served as the bunker's entrance.

A small concrete set of stairs led down into a small open area where the second door could be found.

Once at the bottom of the stairs, Cowboy attached the crank to a handle, closing the main entrance door again.

Emergency lighting was set to activate for five minutes once the main door was closed from the inside.

The second door, which led directly into the bunker, was opened via a heavy-duty wheel crank. It required turning numerous times to unlatch the reinforced metal door. This door was also triple deadbolted with three separate keys. Two Cowboy hid on the property, and one he kept in a storage unit just north of Bonners Ferry, Idaho.

A separate exit for the bunker could only be opened from the inside. It led from the bunker to a surface opening located under a rusted-out old pickup that was missing three of its tires, the wheels held up on blocks.

Cowboy used his keys to unlock the deadbolts after turning the crank to unlatch the central locking mechanism.

The door was about six inches thick and did not open quickly. That was by design. Anyone trying to break in would have to deal with the cumbersome door while avoiding Cowboy's countermeasures.

Once Cowboy managed to get the door open enough to enter the bunker, he stepped inside to survey his progress and check the cameras for any activity on the property in the past few months.

It had taken Cowboy nearly five years to build out the bunker, and it was about seventy-five percent completed. He thought it would take around two years to complete it.

News of Rutger Olmsen's death had spread far and wide by now. Cowboy had received the second half of his payment for completing the job and would use part of that money to finish buying materials and supplies for the bunker.

He would spend about a month here, installing the transmitter he had purchased from Romero and finishing one of the side walls where the air circulation system was located. It transferred air via a duct concealed by two large beams going from the barn's floor to the ceiling.

The transmitter/receiver would allow him to monitor his camera feed worldwide and receive and send messages if necessary.

He had purchased a subscription for the use of a privately funded satellite launched by a Japanese firm. Allegedly, the satellite service was guaranteed to remain active in any event, including natural disasters or significant military conflicts.

Cowboy had done his own research on the firm's credibility. He also relied on Deena's recommendation to use the firm's satellite services for personal or professional communications when cell service was unavailable.

Cowboy did not love or hate his revenue-generating activities as a hitman. It was a means to an end. This revenue stream did not require a paper trail like the money he inherited from his mother would. It was also suited to his skill set.

He was suited for being a hitman in terms of his disposition and abilities.

Cowboy's lack of trust for society, in general, motivated his personal ambitions, such as building places where he could escape if and when everything went to shit.

He didn't care about the well-being of society or being a responsible citizen. That fiction was for civilians who could make it work for them.

Cowboy was a loner who mostly kept to himself and had no friends. To him, participating in society was a waste of energy and time.

Cowboy would benefit from these traits shortly as most of the world's population found civilization crashing down.

Chapter 15

"The late Mr. Olmsen was kind of enough to provide us with his proprietary technology. See to it that you get it put into use immediately." Conrad's tone did not hide his disapproval of Carly.

She sat across from him in the limo currently transporting them both to a meeting across town.

"The incident with subject forty-seven generated worry in The Group. You must not allow such a thing to happen again." Conrad continued, now speaking in a tone that showed he fully expected Carly to allow such a thing to happen again.

Carly forced herself to bite her tongue, tolerating Conrad only because of his status with The Group.

"Yes, I agree." She began. "Nothing of the sort must happen again. Also, Mr. Olmsen's tech is already being implanted on all the test subjects at the facility to ensure future compliance."

Conrad nodded slowly, trying to find something to criticize in Carly's reply.

Finding nothing, Conrad decided to change the subject. "I'm flying to Egypt in two days. There I will meet with a linguistics expert we want to employ in deciphering the artifact I understand your scientists at the facility refer to as The Cube."

Carly had routinely found that Conrad enjoyed blindsiding her with new wrinkles. This was no exception.

"I was under the impression that I was in charge of vetting all personnel who would be working at the facility." She kept her tone even, not wanting to show surprise.

"Come now, Carly. You are quite busy as head of a major corporation who is also in charge of overseeing The Group's current project." Conrad tried to make his voice sound conciliatory, but Carly knew it was just for show. "You must allow others under The Group's authority to handle some of the perfunctory staffing issues."

"Did you volunteer for this delegation of my authority?" Carly asked, now allowing some anger to show in her voice.

"I simply offered to The Group that perhaps recent matters required your additional oversight and that I was more than capable of handling recruitment of a linguist to decrypt the artifact." Conrad smiled gently as he spoke, clearly satisfied that Carly was getting upset.

"Very well." Carly replied. "I suppose you should be useful in some way that advances our goals."

Conrad stopped smiling instantly, not appreciating the implication that he was useless.

"You would do well to show deference to me Ms. Hennington. I am your connection to The Group. Without me, you would surely perish." Conrad kept his gaze toward the window as he spoke, as though he had already dismissed Carly's presence.

Carly said nothing in reply.

Within a few minutes, the limo arrived at their destination. The driver opened the rear door for Carly and Conrad to exit the vehicle.

Eliminating a handful of upper-level management at Cantor, Carly moved to acquire a medium-sized company using blockchain and quantum computing to sort viable molecular compounds for pharmaceutical applications.

Carly and Conrad were greeted at the door by Quantum Link's CEO, Albert Hun.

"Welcome, Ms. Hennington, Mr. Doren." Hun shook hands and led them both toward the central elevator of the building. "We are all very excited to move forward with these final negotiations and finalize the merging of our two companies. It will truly open the door to some exciting new research vectors."

Carly smiled warmly at Hun, as did Conrad. "Indeed, it is a wonderful opportunity for us both." She replied, following Hun into the elevator.

Hun pushed a button and the elevator doors closed.

"You already know most of the people upstairs, but there is one additional person in attendance today." Hun spoke with excited energy. "Our earliest major investor, Lyle Hoope, wanted to finally meet you face-to-face. Your generous payment, tripling the original interest amount of his principal investment got him feeling sociable I guess."

Carly nodded and smiled. "I look forward to meeting him in person."

"As do I." Conrad agreed, smiling warmly at Albert.

"Well, here we are." Albert commented as the elevator came to a stop. "Right this way."

Hun led Carly and Conrad into a large conference room. Half the chairs toward one side of the large table were occupied by various individuals, employees, and investors of Quantum Link.

Hun paused while Carly and Conrad moved around the table and shook hands with each person, finally making it to Lyle Hoope.

"Mr. Hoope." Conrad said, holding his hand for a few seconds after shaking it. "Your faith in this company was well-founded. I thank you for recognizing the potential and helping these visionaries get their idea off the ground."

Lyle smiled awkwardly at Conrad and nodded. "Well, thank you for the kind words, Sir."

"Please, call me Conrad." Conrad let go of Lyle's hand and stepped back.

Lyle nodded again and looked over to Carly.

"It's truly a pleasure to meet you Mr. Hoope. Your persuasive essay regarding the use of blockchain and quantum computing to discover viable molecular compounds for treating disease first brought Quantum Link to our attention." Carly shook Lyle's hand as she spoke.

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed the essay." Lyle replied, obviously not used to being complimented so warmly.

"Hello everyone!" Albert spoke up, trying to get down to business. "If we could all take our seats, we'll begin going over some of the final points of agreement and see if we can't get this deal done by the end of the week."

There was clapping in the room and verbal agreements as people found their seats.

Cantor's acquisition of Quantum Link would make instant millionaires of Quantum's small staff, providing hundreds of thousands of dollars a year of income through a generous retirement package.

A few would join Cantor directly, granting their expertise on best usage of the hardware and software their company had invented.

"You can all see highlights of the details previously agreed upon by everyone here, as well as the final details we'll be discussing today." Hun looked around the room, making lots of eye contact. "Please direct your attention to the information on the tablets in front of you and Jarpreet will take over from here."

One of the people seated rose, nodding to Carly and Conrad as he moved around to the front of the table.

"Hello everyone, you will find that the first line addresses non-disclosure of proprietary…"

Carly sat next to Conrad at the table as the current speaker outlined some finer details relating to the acquisition. This part of the meeting would likely take about an hour or so. Most of the minute details had already been settled by legal representatives from both Cantor and Quantum.

Jarpreet was Quantum's lawyer, who was now synthesizing down the legal speak for general consumption by the employees.

There were a few questions but no significant confusion as Qauntum's legal representative finished speaking, and Hun took over again.

"Great, so it looks like we'll all be signing our final documents tomorrow and then turn it over to Cantor to complete things on their end." Hun put his hands together and rubbed them briskly. "Anything to add Ms. Hennington, Mr. Doren?"

Conrad gestured toward Carly and smiled. "Please, Ms. Hennington." Showing deference to her public position as CEO.

*People on the outside would think we have an excellent working relationship.* Carly stood up to speak.

"What you have all done here is nothing short of extraordinary." Carly began. "Your technological innovation will revolutionize bioresearch for the next century. We are all truly privileged to be part of this adventure together. Heartfelt thank you to you all." Carly raised her hands, waiving slightly to the people sitting around the table, and sat down.

There was enthusiastic cheering and clapping all around the table. Some whistled as well.

Carly and Conrad smiled warmly and waited for the applause to end.

"Thank you all for attending today. Ms. Hennington, Mr. Doren, thank you as well." Hun concluded the meeting. "We'll be back up here tomorrow morning, nine sharp for the document signings and legal paperwork. See you all again soon."

Carly and Conrad stood and shook hands with a few folks again as they got up to leave the room.

Hun stood in the corner, speaking in a lower tone to Jarpreet.

Jarpreet smiled, nodded to Carly and Conrad, leaving the room as well.

"I will walk you out. We'll have your car waiting at the front to pick you up." Hun said as he opened the door for Carly and Conrad to exit the conference room.

Once back in the vehicle, Carly decided to take the lead and not wait for Conrad to give her instructions.

"By the end of next week we should have full access to the quantum computer. I'll have it direct linked to the research facility for analysis of specimens and the artifact as well."

Conrad nodded. "Very well. See to it then."

Neither of them spoke the rest of the way back to Cantor. They were deposited inside Cantor's front gate and went their separate ways in silence.

To the public, Cantor would use the technology acquired from Quantum to research drug treatment options. In truth, it would also be used for research at the Belgium facility to decrypt the artifact.

Carly actually agreed, however, that an expert linguist would be helpful. Despite relying on technology for numerous things at Cantor and the facility, she did not blindly trust computers.

What she didn't like, and should also not surprise her, was Conrad going behind her back. It made her look incompetent to The Group.

She needed to neutralize Conrad somehow without jeopardizing her chances of being a full member of The Group.

That would require some planning on her part.

Carly entered the private elevator to her office in the parking garage at Cantor, already running different scenarios in her head.

She would figure out a way to get rid of Conrad and endear herself to The Group simultaneously.

Chapter 16

FIVE YEARS AGO

“Yes, Senator. Understood. I will set up the meeting tomorrow.” Tobias finished the call, setting his cell phone on the table. He picked up his glass of water and tilted it toward Genevieve. “Cheers darling.”

Genevieve also held a glass of water and tilted it back toward Tobias. “How did that go?” She asked, referring to his recent phone call.

“Per the fine senator’s instructions, I will set up a meeting with Peter Oskam to discuss The Mountain project.” Tobias replied.

“Excellent, truly, that is splendid news. He can’t get started too soon.” Genevieve smiled, clearly satisfied with this information.

“Well, my dear, first Mr. Oskam must agree to overseeing the project. Then we move forward.” Tobias reminded her.

“With the amount of money you will be offering him to do it, I have no doubt he will agree.” Genevieve leaned forward as she spoke.

“Yes, it is absurd the amount, but let’s not celebrate until he has agreed to it.” Tobias chided gently, placing his hand atop Genevieve’s on the table.

The Restaurant where they were dining this evening was very exclusive. Reservations for a table started at $10,000. It was set with all the finest furniture and dining ware. Each wall was built from a unique and authentic piece from a different era in Roman and Egyptian history.

It was Genevieve’s treat that night. She invited Tobias to dinner, reserving a table in one of the private dining areas, affording absolute seclusion from prying eyes, ears, and any type of listening device.

The Restaurant, as it was called, had a bold and classy look but provided state-of-the-art security for its patrons while dining there.

“You must see that he does agree, no matter the amount. Use whatever means necessary.” Genevieve held Tobias’ hand for a few seconds, then drew hers away from the table. She straightened up in her chair as if trying to correct her posture.

“Tobias, you must understand how important this is for us. Can we rely on you to get it done?” She asked after adjusting position.

Tobias understood ‘us’ to mean ‘The Group.’ He knew better than to ever mention The Group aloud in conversation. Despite the security offered by this restaurant, Genevieve, like all members of The Group’s inner sanctum, was highly paranoid.

“Of course. You can be assured I will convince Oskam to oversee the project.” Tobias hesitated, then added. “I thought this was a personal venture on your part, not related to …” Tobias drew a circle on the table. This was the accepted way to mention The Group without speaking its name.

Genevieve frowned a little, then smiled. “My dear, you mustn’t concern yourself with such things as your part is to secure Oskam. That is all.”

Tobias nodded, understanding that Genevieve was unwilling to discuss these details with him.

A waiter appeared beside the table and asked to take their order.

Genevieve ordered her usual meal of Wild Beluga Cavier and an artisan bread/cheese combination.

Tobias ordered the same.

Chapter 17

“First we cut a small section directly below the brain stem. Observe.”

Angelika could hear voices speaking above her, but she was heavily sedated and unable to focus clearly.

She felt pressure below the back of her head and then a dull pain as the incision was made.

“Once we get it attached properly, we will receive data almost instantly. The next step is setting up the two-way interface.” The voice above her continued. “That will allow us to control the subject remotely.

Simone held up the device, showing her colleague the fiber-spindle tubing at one end. It curled and quivered slightly as she held it up for him to see.

Angelika felt more pressure on the back of her head, followed by a sense of fuzziness and disorientation beyond the chemicals sedating her.

In her state, it was impossible to measure time in any way. Still, she gradually became more lucid and could see the floor beneath her. She was on a table with a hole through the part where her head rested.

Angelika was face down on the table, held by reinforced carbon fiber straps.

She lay there for several moments in silence, barely able to make out mumbling sounds from somewhere beyond the table.

Suddenly the straps holding her released via some remote switch.

She lay there for a few more seconds, then sprang up quickly, intending to force her way out of the room currently imprisoning her.

She crouched down to jump at the one-way glass showing her a reflection of herself, but suddenly her body stiffened, standing straight up on the table.

Angelika was confused by her behavior. It didn’t make sense.

Next, she slowly got down from the table and stood motionless next to it.

A moment later, she started hopping on one foot.

She stopped hopping and laid back down on the table. Then got up from it again.

Angelika was confused, but she could not focus her mind on figuring out what was happening.

Several minutes later, a man and a woman entered the room, accompanied by four security personnel heavily armed.

The woman approached her slowly from behind, then walked around her to look at her face-to-face.

“Hello, forty-seven.” A calm arrogance accompanied the voice.

The woman snapped her fingers in Angelika’s face and smiled. “Can you say hello forty-seven?”

*Hello.*

The woman staggered back a little, and the guards raised their guns toward Angelika.

“No…no, I’m fine. It’s fine.” The woman waved at the guards to lower their guns. They complied hesitantly.

“She answered me in my head. That was quite extraordinary and also unexpected.” The woman spoke to the man who accompanied her.

Now the man walked over to stand next to the woman.

“Simone, maybe we should run more tests before we start trying to interact with it. We don’t know if this connection is stable or what bugs could occur. This is our first attempt at doing this.” The man turned toward the woman while speaking, directing his attention away from Angelika.

“Yes, yes. We will run the tests. Get after the bugs.” Simone spoke to the man in a dismissive tone. “But, this is truly extraordinary.” She continued. “We can control them now. They will tell us what they are thinking, if they know what’s happening to them. How they are experiencing it in their bodies….”

Simone was clearly getting excited and didn’t finish her sentence.

The man turned again to face Angelika. “Yes, it is. The part about being able to control them is awesome if it works. I don’t know how useful them being able to tell us how it feels will be for advancing our development of the bio compound.”

Simone frowned at the man. “Open your mind Gerard. If we can understand how and what they are thinking, we can better predict behavior of variants after infection.”

Gerard looked back at Simone. “Yes, I suppose that could be useful.”

Angelika felt a jolt in the back of her head, and suddenly her mind was clearing up. She felt like she was coming back to herself.

Gerard was saying something else to Simone when Angelika raised her hand quickly and put it around Gerard’s neck, picking him up into the air.

*Gerard. Do you think I’m extraordinary?*

Gerard looked at Angelika in terror as he desperately tried to free himself in futility.

The guards quickly raised their guns, intending to fire on Angelika and likely Gerard as well.

Simone rushed toward them, shooing them out of the room, quickly closing the door behind her.

“Stay at the door.” Simone instructed the guards as she ran for the control room adjacent to where Angelika and Gerard were locked inside.

Simone plopped herself down in front of the primary computer, in charge of sending and receiving signals from the implant attached to the base of Angelika’s head.

She could see that the signal had been disrupted somehow but couldn’t figure out how to fix it quickly.

She heard a loud thud and jumped as Gerard was thrown against the observation window.

The next thing she knew, Angelika slammed into the window, cracks slowly traveling outward from the impact points.

Simone nervously pecked away at the computer, desperately trying to fix the interference problem.

As Angelika continued hammering away at the observation window, pieces of it began to fall down inside the room where Simone was working.

*Simone.*

Suddenly, the woman’s voice was inside her head again. More potent than before, and it was overwhelming.

Simone fell out of her chair and curled up on the floor.

*I am extraordinary to you. I want to see you again.*

Simone felt tremendous pressure, a force inside her head. It was nearly crippling.

*Your daughter misses you and doesn’t understand why you left her.*

Simone panicked now and struggled to regain some composure. She remembered from Chin’s last entry that subject forty-seven could apparently dig into a person’s mind, but it was still unnerving.

She pushed herself up from the floor and crawled back into the chair.

In desperation, she did the only thing she knew to do and entered the master kill command into the computer.

Another slam into the window and more pieces fell to the ground in front of her.

She looked up to see a slightly warbled image of subject forty-seven looking in at her through a hole in the window.

Simone hit enter, and Angelika fell to the ground, out of view.

Quickly, she looked over to the left and saw subject forty-seven lying on the floor next to Gerard through a monitor showing another view of the room.

Both subject forty-seven and Gerard were unmoving on the floor.

Simone didn’t know if either were dead or unconscious, but she didn’t hesitate.

She rushed back out of the room and toward the guards waiting outside.

“Get in there and restrain it back on the table! Move!” She yelled to them as she came to a stop just beside one of the guards.

They obeyed and opened the door.

Two guards picked up Angelika, placing her limp body on the table while the other kept a gun trained on her.

Finally restrained again, they turned their attention to Gerard.

One of the guards checked for a pulse.

“He’s dead.” The guard reported to Simone.

“Take him out of here and dispose of him properly.” She instructed, already forgetting about Gerard.

The guards did as instructed, removing Gerard’s body.

After they left, two other guards showed up to keep watch over subject forty-seven while Simone checked her vitals.

She could feel a pulse.

“She’s…it’s still alive.” Simone couldn’t hide the surprise in her voice. “I really didn’t know what to expect.”

The guards looked back and forth at each other and then at Simone.

“Wait outside and close the door. Monitor the room from there.

The guards wavered for a few seconds.

Simone looked away from Angelika and back to them briefly. “Do it now.” She commanded.

The guards nodded and left the room.

Simone placed her hand on Angelika’s back and began speaking to her slowly. “I don’t know what’s left of you there, but we’ll find out soon enough. You are quite strong and intrusive, with that neat little trick of getting in people’s heads.”

Simone moved her hand along Angelika’s body as she lay face down on the table.

“And yes, you are extraordinary. We will learn so much from you forty-seven.”

Simone removed her hand from Angelika’s back, walking out of the room.

“Have someone replace that window.” She said to the guards, passing them on her way to the control room.

She needed to figure out what caused the glitch.

Then she would resume testing on subject forty-seven.

Chapter 18

"Thank you, Mam." Cowboy tilted his hat to the cashier as he turned from the checkout counter, walking out of the small supply store in Ponderay, Idaho.

He intentionally drove out of his way to get small items for building his bunker farther north. It was easier to remain anonymous this way, a strategy to avoid becoming familiar with locals.

He had been working on his second hideout for over two weeks. Deena knew about him taking the month off, so he wasn't worried about missing any work. Cowboy wasn't her only contractor; she could quickly get someone else if and when he wasn't available.

He would buy all his groceries and supplies in a couple different small towns around Ponderay and rely on survival rations the rest of the time. He had several years' worth stored in the bunker and around the property.

Each hideout came with its own advantages and disadvantages. Still, Cowboy provided himself with similar basic supplies at each of them. He would do the same with the third if he ever got around to working on it again.

He was sitting at a light, thinking about just that, when a blue sedan attempted to cross through the intersection while the light was still red.

The sedan crashed into an older model silver SUV and spun it halfway around. Both cars ended their forward progress, coming to a complete stop in the middle of the intersection.

With the front of the sedan still crumpled into the right rear side of the SUV, Cowboy could see both drivers reasonably well.

The SUV driver looked around for almost a minute and then got out. The woman in the sedan hit her steering wheel a few times and did the same.

The man approached the woman, and Cowboy could see that he was pretty animated, gesturing wildly toward his car and her sedan.

None of the cars in line with Cowboy honked their horns or displayed impatience. The two drivers closest to the accident pulled over and got out, approaching the man and the woman.

The other vehicles simply drove around slowly when the light turned.

Cowboy followed in the detour line and slowly drove around the accident, not looking at the irate man, the woman, or any concerned witnesses as he did.

To him, situations like these were not worth his attention or interest if avoidable. It just brought unnecessary attention. Aside from that, he didn't really care about the well-being of anyone involved. They weren't his problem.

He'd finished most of what he came to do and would spend the next days working on small jobs.

He had noticed some new activity about ten miles from his property. Apparently, someone was building a cabin. When Cowboy had driven by it initially, he saw a couple of Conex boxes on the ground and the beginnings of a foundation being laid. A medium-sized bulldozer was on the property, but no workers were in sight.

That was a little over two weeks ago. In the past week, activity on the build had started up again. Now there were at least a dozen workers on the property, operating the bulldozer and finishing up the first level of the cabin.

Cowboy could tell it was going to be a large building. The driveway off the main road was still crude, but it appeared the owner intended to pave it eventually.

He wasn't excited about having a neighbor this close but couldn't do anything about it. Maybe it would just be a vacation home for some wealthy businessperson rather than a full-time residence.

Either way, he intended to avoid them and keep to himself.

As he drove by, returning to the barn, the workers were still there late in the afternoon, scurrying about the place. He could see they were building the second level, and someone was widening the driveway even further.

Cowboy shook his head and kept driving.

Since this was the only road into his place, he would run into the owner sooner or later. He would nod and keep driving, not wanting to make any chit-chat.

Most people kept to themselves around here, so that kind of behavior wouldn't necessarily make him stand out.

He also knew that in rural areas such as this, people tended to notice each other on seldom used roads.

He couldn't help feeling a slight tinge inside as he pulled onto his property and got out of his truck.

His rational side kept telling him not to worry about it. Someone was bound to buy property along this road eventually.

Still, he sighed and shook his head as he headed into the barn.

Cowboy really didn't like people.

Chapter 19

"Really Anthony, you don't need to be such a shit about it." Genevieve admonished.

She stood in the large hallway of her beach house with her arms crossed, mildly scowling at her brother.

"I know you're a bitch Gen, so I don't take your words to heart." Anthony smiled back at her from the doorway.

"Get out of my house you shit." Genevieve uncrossed her arms and headed toward where Anthony was standing.

Anthony smiled again and slammed the door when she was just a couple feet from it.

Genevieve cursed to herself, hitting the door with her palm.

She turned to the maid standing inside, left of the door, who remained silent.

"Please get that cleaned up, Tamara." she waved her hands toward the broken flowerpot on the floor to her side.

Anthony had knocked it over inadvertently while arguing with her earlier.

"Yes Madam, right away." Tamara disappeared to fetch cleaning supplies.

Genevieve cursed again and headed toward the back of the house to sit on the porch facing the ocean.

Genevieve was born into a wealthy family, but she had made her own money in finance.

Anthony used his family's wealth to rent condos worldwide, drive expensive cars, and make legal messes for the family lawyers to clean up.

Genevieve despised him deeply. If he were anyone else, she would never associate with him.

She only watched out for him because her elderly mother asked her to and because the family lawyers called whenever he got in trouble.

Genevieve handled the family trust fund, which paid Anthony's legal fees. This meant she needed to okay any funding for legal representation on Anthony's behalf.

She had always approved the funding; however, it was something that never ceased to cause anger and discord between them.

It really got to her that Anthony felt entitled about the whole thing, and he wasn't thankful or repentant for his actions.

Anthony treated Genevieve like a secretary in charge of his scheduling.

He had no idea how powerful she was in reality, and he knew nothing of The Group.

Any other individual who caused her this much trouble would have been eliminated long ago.

Genevieve toyed with the idea of doing the same to Anthony just as soon as her elderly mother passed away.

She felt no familial obligation to her only living parent or her brother. However, she understood the importance of maintaining a public image.

This meant appearing to be the responsible sister who was competent, self-sufficient, and reliable.

The Group knew about Genevieve's personal life, as it did about each member's personal life.

Anthony was camouflage, a diversion, and something to keep the spotlight off her directly.

Suppose he was out making a nuisance of himself and grabbing some minor media attention. In that case, nobody was paying too close attention to her.

This made him valuable to her in a way, at least for the next year, while such things as media attention were important.

Soon both her mother and Anthony would no longer be of any concern.

Genevieve turned her attention away from Anthony, focusing on her pet project as she picked up a small tablet.

It was the latest report on Peter Oskam's progress in building a hidden research facility called "The Mountain."

Genevieve had never met Oskam in person, nor did he know she was involved in the project.

She directed him through associates, billionaires, and government officials in her pocket.

Being a sitting member of The Group had numerous benefits and attending risks.

The Mountain was not directly a Group project. Instead, it was something Genevieve was orchestrating for her own ambitions.

The Group did not frown on such activities as all its members held personal ambitions to one degree or another.

Being independent was a requisite of being a seated member. The Group did not coddle personal ambitions.

It was established long ago to achieve agreed-upon, long-term goals centered around directing and controlling world affairs.

Members of The Group did not particularly like or care about each other's well-being. The larger objective was world domination, only achievable through members who were themselves powerful independently.

Genevieve's phone chimed, and she sat her tablet down to answer it.

"Yes."

"Mr. Santerre has arrived." A voice informed her.

"Very well, please see him into the study." Genevieve replied.

She waited for about a minute or two, allowing time for Santerre to be situated. She gazed out at the ocean and let her mind clear during that time.

Genevieve then turned and headed toward the study.

"Ferd!" She exclaimed upon entering the room. "It is such a wonderful pleasure to see you again."

Genevieve embraced Santerre warmly and allowed him to kiss her cheeks in his usual greeting style.

"And you my dear, always a pleasure." He spoke with a refined accent, his voice smooth and flowing. "You have an exquisitely beautiful home."

Ferdinand Santerre was a South American billionaire who made his fortune trading international currency and building infrastructure in Brazil and Argentina.

He was also a co-investor on The Mountain project.

"Tonight we dine on one of my chefs favorite recipes, a cuisine seldom appreciated outside of my hometown." Santerre spoke while still embracing Genevieve.

"Yes, I look forward to that," Genevieve replied, smiling warmly as Ferdinand released her, and she stepped back just a bit. "Please tell him don't hesitate to let me know if he finds anything in my kitchen inadequate. I shall remedy the issue immediately."

Ferdinand nodded and winked at Genevieve. "I shall do that, but I doubt he will find anything wanting in your well furbished kitchen darling."

"Thank you for allowing me to host you overnight this evening." Genevieve changed the subject now. "I know you have many obligations. I do appreciate you making time for me."

"Nonsense darling." Ferdinand took on a mock look of slight disdain. "Our business is paramount. We shall discuss The Mountain and make ready for its use."

"Of course, yes." Genevieve agreed.

"But, first…we eat some delicious food together." Ferdinand continued. "Please allow me to get changed and make myself proper for dinner with a beautiful lady."

Genevieve laughed. "I will." She paused. "And you must promise to regale me with more fascinating stories of your adventures around the world."

Ferdinand winked at her. "Of course my dear. I have none other to tell."

Genevieve led Ferdinand out of the study and into the main entrance of her home, where another maid stood waiting.

"Etsuko, please show Mr. Santerre to his room and see he has anything he needs as well." Genevieve placed a hand on Ferdinand's arm as she spoke.

"Yes Lady." The maid answered and motioned for Ferdinand to follow her.

Ferdinand took Genevieve's hand in his and squeezed it briefly before following after Etsuko. "I shall return to you soon, with my stories to amaze your cherished ears."

Genevieve watched the maid lead Ferdinand and his luggage toting attaché up a set of stairs and away down a hall, concealing them both from her sight.

Tonight, she intended to update Ferdinand on the final stages of construction at The Mountain and research already underway within the facility.

Ferdinand would know what she wanted him to know. He would get what she wanted him to get.

With funding from a handful of investors like Ferdinand, Genevieve was creating her own way to survive and thrive independently after the collapse of global civilization.

None of the other investors were part of that equation. It was unlikely they would survive beyond a few months or years following final implementation of The Group's plan.

Their money, however, was still valuable here and now.

Two other qualities valued by The Group were cautiousness and ruthlessness.

Genevieve had no concern for anyone beyond herself and would use whoever she could to get what she wanted.

The Mountain was her way of getting it.

Chapter 20

"It was very gracious of you to meet me in Siwa Mr. Doren." Isidora began. "However, I'm not entirely certain I am the best fit for your project."

Conrad smiled sincerely, slightly bowing his head to show consideration.

"You've recently worked on a site just east of the Libyan border Ms. Soto." Conrad looked up at Isadora as he spoke, taking on a tone of curiosity. "Tell me a little about that."

Isidora turned away from Conrad to look down at Cleopatra Spring, easily visible from the second story of the café where she had agreed to meet and hear his proposal.

"That has all but been shut down indefinitely now." Isidora sighed deeply. "Some sort of bureaucratic red tape issue with the Egyptian government."

Isidora paused to sip her tea and watch people sitting beside the Spring. "It was looking quite promising. We had already spent months recovering the first clues as to the fate of King Cambyses' lost army."

Conrad's eyes lit up at the mention of King Cambyses. "Ah, you are referring to the army's mysterious disappearance predicted by the sun god's oracle at the great Temple of Amun."

"Yes, quite so." Isidora's face showed her surprise at Conrad's knowledge of this area's history. "You did your homework before seeking me out. I guess that's something."

"I have studied much of Egyptian history. The great monuments and the dance between stability and volatility that have so long characterized this land." Conrad took a sip of his tea as he finished speaking, joining Isidora in watching people come and go from the Spring below.

"Tell me of your artifact. The one you think I would be so helpful in deciphering for you." Isidora straightened and stretched her back lightly as she spoke.

"You are well known for your accomplishments as a linguist specializing in ancient artifacts." Conrad ignored Isidora's scoff at his compliment and continued speaking. "I don't know if you will be of any use in all honesty. We've had experts from various fields already having a go at the thing and they are coming away with very little in the way of understanding it."

"What have you been able to determine so far?" Isidora asked, still quite skeptical.

"We are unable to determine its origin. The language is unknown in any databases or historic texts. The little we do understand was only gleaned from a laborsome process of figuring out patterns etched into the artifact. We don't even know of what material the artifact is composed."

"You must have some reason, a purpose for taking interest in such an artifact to begin." Isidora replied. "You can tell me that at the very least."

"I'm afraid you would laugh if I told you what we've been able to do with it thus far." Conrad chuckled and shook his head. "It really is much better if I show you. You must see it with your own eyes."

Isidora pushed herself back from the table and deeper into her chair. "Such a hook for offering so little in the way of information." A smile was forming at the corners of her mouth.

*I've got her now*. Conrad said nothing.

"Very well. I agree to see this great artifact of mystery. But I make no promises as to my willingness to participate in deciphering it. You must accept that or I walk now." Isidora had lost her smile and showed no emotion. She was all business.

"I accept your terms, of course, Ms. Soto." Conrad kept his tone calm and even. "You agree just to have a look. Then decide if you will help us."

Conrad paused before offering the last incentive.

"Of course, you will be handsomely compensated. Enough to fund your next adventure and the next after that."

Isidora frowned as she once again looked away from Conrad. "I've been promised such things before Mr. Doren. Do not offer things you cannot provide afterwards."

"I make no promises. I only do what I say. Half the amount will be deposited into an account of your choosing as soon as we touch down in Brussels." Conrad replied. "Yours to keep whether you agree to work with us or not."

Isidora's mouth briefly made an "O" shape, betraying her surprise. Then she quickly regained composure.

"Very well Mr Doren. I will accompany you on the conditions already agreed. Lead the way."

"Please call me Conrad." They both stood up from the table. "There is a car waiting to take us to your hotel so that you may collect your things and then on to our private jet. It will take us directly to Brussels straight away."

Isidora nodded and accepted Conrad's offered hand. "Isidora, please."

With a generous payoff to specific individuals within the Egyptian government to shut down Isidora's dig sight and another to Ms. Soto, Conrad felt quite satisfied with his ability to bend destiny to his will.

Controlling what Isidora would see as evidence of The Cube's power would be easy. She would figure out what was going on there eventually. Still, by then, Conrad expected to get whatever he could out of her and have her eliminated.

Isidora was a means to an end. Nothing more.

She would be handled as such when the time came.

Chapter 21

Simone turned abruptly in Dominik’s direction as if she were about to chastise his outburst, but her face calmed almost as suddenly. “You are correct. That does sound absurd. However, I agree with your assessment.”

“Well should we at least tell Joelle about this?” Dominik was getting fidgety now that his seemingly absurd hypothesis found validation from Simone.

“No!” Simone reacted without thinking, speaking louder than she intended. “We need to be better informed about what’s happening exactly before we bring wild speculation to our superior.”

Dominik sank down in his chair a little. “You’re correct, of course.” He paused, then added. “How best to go about doing that?”

Dominik started tapping a pencil on the table. Simone turned back to give him a look that made him stop.

“Perhaps we alter the cocktail just a little at a time.” She examined various tubes surrounding the examination bed where subject forty-seven lay, still unconscious for the moment.

“What do you mean?” Dominic asked.

“See how it responds to a slight variation in the stem implant. Increase the frequency five percent, then ten.” We’ll measure the data. See what transpires and perhaps alter the sedative mixture as well.” Simone answered.

Simone and Dominic continued speaking.

Angelika heard their voices and could make out their words, but she was far away.

She felt no panic, no fear. She was merely a consciousness, observing a sparkling void all around her.

As Simone and Dominic discussed their new approach to her body’s attempt at thwarting the stem implant and schedule of tranquilizers, Angelika became aware of subtle shifts in the void.

At a physiological level, she was already preparing countermeasures and predicting new paths of escape from the device.

What had been injected into her many days ago was not some mindless pathogen.

The contagion mixed for delivery by lab techs at the facility was derived from an ancient matter, reflecting the intentions of its original creators.

It would get around attempts to harness it with enough time and opportunity.

Angelika could feel altered parts of her body changing again. Reshaping in subtle ways to better interface with and take over control of this foreign device, allowing her tormentors to turn her into a dancing puppet.

“Too sudden or significant alterations may destroy it…her.” Simone was finishing up her instructions to Dominic. “We must move cautiously, but quickly. We have deadlines from people who don’t accept excuses.”

Dominic nodded as Simone turned to leave the room. “Keep me updated, and only me, about any changes. Say nothing to anyone else.” And with that, she was gone.

Dominic turned away from the door as it closed behind Simone.

He looked down at the array of keypads and input devices in front of him.

Keeping things from Joelle didn’t seem like a splendid idea. Still, he agreed that going to her with unsubstantiated speculation would not benefit his career.

If things got out of control before he or Simone could figure something out, that wouldn’t bode well for them either.

Dominic sighed, cracked his knuckles, and began making the minor changes as discussed with Simone.

He was on a deadline whether subject forty-seven breaking free again or his superiors’ demanding results.

Dominic was already behind schedule on both accounts.

Chapter 22

*I need another headache today.* Joelle waited on the helipad for Conrad’s arrival.

The new linguist was supposed to break through roadblocks that had allegedly been holding back research on the artifact.

Conrad and Orin used that same word, allegedly, when discussing research status in that regard.

Like everyone else at the facility, Joelle was compensated generously for her time there. She had increasing doubts, however, that any of them would ever be able to enjoy that compensation upon completion of their objective.

No one at her level or below knew precisely how their developed product would be used. Still, suspicions were circulating amongst the workers under her supervision.

Her intellect was eclipsed by the brilliance of more than a few of her subordinates, and they had already stepped forward, voicing their concerns directly to her and Orin as well.

Some were no longer at the facility. Removed for creating unnecessary dissension or for personal reasons.

The suspicions they raised remained at the facility after their departure.

Conrad’s helicopter landed on the pad, and Joelle held her hand over her head to keep her hair from flying everywhere.

As the blades slowed their whirring, a waiting security person opened the door to greet Conrad and his guest.

Joelle watched Conrad step out and then turn to offer his hand to the other passenger inside.

The woman stepping out was short, thin, and muscular. Her skin showing evidence of repeated exposure to prolonged sunlight.

Conrad walked over to where Joelle was standing, as did the woman.

“Joelle, so wonderful to see you again.” Conrad put on his customary grin and spoke with smooth confidence.

“And you Mr. Doren.” Joelle replied.

“Conrad, please.” Conrad winked at Joelle as he spoke. “And this is our guest who will be consulting on the artifact, Ms. Isidora Soto the renowned archeologist. Ms. Soto, Joelle Abebe.”

Joelle stepped forward to offer her hand. Isidora took it. “A pleasure.” Joelle tried to sound pleasant in her greeting.

“We look forward to benefiting from your renowned insights.” Joelle added, stepping back.

Conrad frowned a little at Joelle, just briefly.

*Shit, too sarcastic sounding.* Joelle continued smiling, reprimanding herself inside.

“Would you like to get settled and then enjoy a brief tour of the facility?” Joelle asked, redoubling her efforts to sound cordial.

“Thank you, no.” Isidora answered. “Please have my things taken to wherever I will be sleeping here. I would like to see the artifact now.”

Conrad turned, motioning to a member of security who quickly gathered the two small bags belonging to Isidora.

“Of course, without delay. Please take us their directly Joelle.” Conrad seemed rather pleased with Isidora’s enthusiasm.

Joelle nodded and motioned for Conrad and Isidora to follow her inside, leading them to the elevator just beyond.

“Can you explain to me your interest in the artifact Ms. Abebe, your work with it?” Isidora spoke up as the elevator doors glided shut.

Joelle looked over at Conrad, who nodded to her. “Well, like you, I was brought here for a specific task. That being direct oversight and coordinating of the scientists and lab technicians at the facility.”

Isidora nodded, apparently expecting more from Joelle.

Joelle paused, again looking over to Conrad.

Conrad made a very slight facial gesture, which Joelle interpreted correctly.

“Our general directive is to examine possible product development vectors using information from the artifact, The Cube as our researchers have begun calling it.” Joelle finally added.

“That sounds fairly vague does it not?” Isidora turned to Conrad, skepticism again creeping into her voice.

“Wait till we show you Isidora. You’ll see why I wanted you here and the possibilities if we can unlock more of its secrets.” Conrad assured her.

“Very well. I will do as you ask, but I commit to nothing yet.” Isidora looked away from Conrad, her skepticism now unhidden.

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped out into a well-lit hallway with large glass windows stretching its length on both sides.

Joelle led them down the hallway to the other side, where another door greeted them.

She used her ID badge to unlock the door, allowing Isidora and Conrad to enter ahead of her.

They stood in a small area with two hallways running at a slight downward slope and around a corner on both sides, similar to a movie theater entrance.

“Please this way.” Joelle led them down the hallway to their left.

Isidora followed Joelle around the corner and was immediately taken aback by what she saw upon rounding the corner.

Together with Conrad and Joelle, she was standing on an elevated walkway with stairs leading down into a central open area.

Several technicians were busily moving around; others were seated at numerous workstations, inputting data or reading reports.

The object in the center, however, is what captivated Isidora’s attention.

An object that seemed to shift in size inexplicably as she gazed at it shimmered and hummed, filling the space with oscillating light and sound.

“Once we initiated it with a small electrical pulse, it began powering itself somehow. We still don’t understand that either.” Joelle’s voice came from somewhere at her side.

“Come, let’s get you in front of it.” Joelle instructed as she headed down the steps to their right.

Isidora took her eyes away from the object, looked again at Conrad, and followed Joelle down the stairs.

Joelle walked straight towards the glowing, humming thing, stopping barely a foot from it, waiting for Isidora to join her.

“Go ahead, touch it.” Joelle motioned for Isidora to do so.

Isidora hesitated, looking at Joelle, then at Conrad.

Conrad nodded to her, and Isidora lifted her hand, tentatively feeling the air just in front of the object, then moving her fingers slowly to make contact.

As she did, she felt the sensation of her fingers briefly moving beyond the object’s surface. Still, her eyes showed her fingers remaining on the surface.

The disconnect between input from her eyes and her fingers briefly startled her, and she pulled away quickly.

Joelle smiled. “Happens to just about everyone the first time. No need to worry. Touching it isn’t harmful in any way we’ve been able to determine…yet.”

Isidora looked from the object to Joelle and frowned, bringing her hand up to touch it again.

The same input flooded her senses, but she was better prepared for it this time.

Isidora ran her fingers over the artifact. It was difficult to determine its exact size because it appeared to change slightly in size over time.

She figured it to be roughly two to three feet on each side, resembling a cube-like shape.

The endless shimmering and humming seemed to pass through her body, filling her with sensations that, while not threatening, were unlike any for which she could find a reference.

As her fingers moved over the object, she noticed patterns or glyphs illuminated distinctly and disappearing again once she no longer held her fingers over them.

“It’s beautiful.” Isidora finally said, taking her fingers away from the artifact.

“Yes, it’s quite a thing to behold. Almost mesmerizing.” Conrad commented from behind her.

“Before we pulsed it with an electrical current it was rather plain looking, like some sort of light stone or clay. Nothing at all spectacular to see.” Conrad added, looking to Joelle, who nodded in his direction. “It also appeared smaller before.”

Isidora touched the object again, moving her fingers more slowly across it, slightly tracing each illuminated pattern. “These markings, you think them some sort of language or code?”

“Yes, most certainly they are of some sort.” Joelle replied.

Isidora noticed something else as well. “The patterns change if I run my fingers over the same spot twice. Now different in shape and color.”

“We haven’t actually been able to decipher any of it yet. Our progress so far has come from studying the light and sound frequency it produces.” Joelle informed her.

“How so?” Isidora asked.

“We used an AI mapping program to recognize any correlations between light sequences and sound sequences and found that there are repeating patterns between them.” Joelle paused and looked at Conrad, who nodded for her to continue. “That’s when we started playing around with possible effects on simple and complex matter.”

Isidora turned away from the artifact and looked directly at Joelle, clearly not understanding her meaning.

“Come let me show you some examples.” Joelle spoke up and moved toward one of the workstations lining the side of the room.

“Here you see a normal plastic bottle. It is composed of no special material, beyond what you would find available for sale at any modern grocery store.” She held up the plastic bottle for Isidora to examine.

“And here you see another plastic bottle. It looks identical to the first, yes?” Joelle held up another bottle.

“Yes.” Isidora agreed.

“Now, I’ll cut a piece out of the ordinary bottle.” Joelle took a small box cutter and carved off the entire bottom of the bottle, letting it fall to the floor.

“Pretty much what you would expect to happen,” Joelle remarked, bending down to pick up the cut-off section of the bottle.

“Now, here’s the other bottle. It looks the same to your eye but watch this.” Joelle started cutting the second bottle in the same fashion, but as she did, no slit appeared along her cutting path.

“Here you try it.” Joelle handed the bottle and the box cutter to Isidora.

Isidora did as Joelle had done, cutting into the bottle and then attempting to cut off the bottom. She noticed that no cut was visible as she moved the box cutter around the bottle.

“How is this possible?” In disbelief she held the plastic bottle closer to her eyes examining where she had sliced into it.

“We have no idea. We only know that it is possible to alter the materials we’ve tested thus far in this way.” Joelle replied. “But that’s not all. There’s so much more we’ve also been able to figure out.”

“You think I will be able to translate the glowing symbols and help you to understand better.” Isidora squeezed the bottle slowly and looked over to Conrad.

“It is our goal to understand that yes.” Joelle interjected herself, trying to draw Isidora’s attention back to her. “But making plastic bottles that are seemingly impervious to cuts or scratches isn’t really our goal here.”

Neither Conrad nor Isidora spoke for several seconds.

Joelle decided to change tactics. “May I show you something else?”

Isidora finally redirected her attention back to Joelle. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Please follow me.” Joelle motioned back toward the stairs.

Isidora and Conrad followed her up the stairs and out the door leading into the room housing the artifact.

Once out in the hall, she led them into one of the side rooms of the hallway.

In this room were two cells separated from the larger space in which they stood by plexiglass barriers.

“You see this owl?” Joelle directed Isidora’s attention to the first cell on the left.

Isidora nodded, so Joelle continued. “Mr. Finch, please greet our guest.”

The owl shuffled around a little on its perch, then flew to a table inside the plexiglass barrier. On the table was a large pad with letters and numbers.

The owl waited next to the pad.

Joelle spoke again, turning towards Isidora. “Please, introduce yourself to Mr. Finch.”

Isidora looked around and smiled briefly, feeling awkward, but complied. “Hello, Mr. Finch. My name is Isidora.”

The owl tilted its head toward Isidora and blinked several times, its large eyes focusing on her for a moment. Then it jumped around on the keypad, slowly typing “H E L L O I S I D O R A” on a semi-transparent screen just above the table.

Isidora stepped back a little, shocked. “What is this? Some kind of trick? Did you train it to do that?”

“Not a trick, and we didn’t train it.” Joelle replied. “One of our techs figured it out by accident after a pen was left in the cell by mistake. The owl scratched out a short message asking for the tech to fill up its water container. It used her name when making the request.”

“Did the artifact do this to it somehow?” Isidora had placed her hand partially over her mouth in a speculative gesture.

“We think so. We were testing the effects of brief exposure to a few different animals during specific sequences of light and sound emitted from The Cube.” Joelle answered.

“Isidora.” Conrad stepped in, seeing that Isidora was teetering a little on whether to stay or go. “We think this artifact may hold possible treatment options for people with a whole host of different ailments. Think of it. The blind being able to see, the deaf being able to hear, a cure for diabetes, cancer, heart disease…And so many other things beyond that.”

Isidora ran her hands through her hair and face as if trying to release tension and clear up her thoughts simultaneously. “And you will make a very handsome profit from all that, I suppose if it is indeed possible.”

Conrad chuckled. “And you as well, should you decide to stay and help us.”

Isidora sighed. “Very well. I will not deny all of this intrigues me. Figuring out the language or communication medium of an unknown civilization is every explorers dream in my field of work. I cannot deny that.”

“Excellent. But, please. You’ve seen so much today and I know you haven’t slept in almost two days. Get some rest now and come back to this refreshed tomorrow.” Conrad balanced his tone between encouraging and concerned.

“Yes, I suppose you are correct.” Isidora answered. “I will sleep for a few hours and get started. I will need access to your computers for referencing materials and possibly some tools as well.”

“Make a list of anything you need and you shall have it. Whatever you need you shall have it. That will not be a problem.” Conrad assured her, placing his hand on her arm. “Please, get some rest now and we’ll have it all ready for you by the time you wake up.”

Isidora nodded and covered her mouth to hide a yawn. “Yes, I will.”

“Follow me then. I will show you to your sleeping quarters.” Conrad gently pushed on Isidora’s arm to encourage her along.

Joelle watched them leave the room and then turned back to the owl. It was now staring at her, blinking slowly.

One of the lab techs sitting off to the side at a workstation approached her as she stood there. “We’ll need to terminate this subject within seventy-two hours. It will likely begin showing symptoms of degradation soon.”

“Very well. See that it is done.” Joelle replied. “How have the new test subjects been responding to our updated model?”

The tech shuffled on her feet a little. “One variant showed a slightly slower rate of degradation in the subject, but all still broke down after about seventy-two hours.”

“And the degradations were all the same?” Joelle asked.

“No.” The tech replied. “I can’t, well, we can’t quite understand what we are seeing yet.”

“Elaborate.” Joelle was now getting a little impatient.

“Based on observable data and samples collected after terminating the subjects, it appears that the variants injected into the subjects are somehow attempting to modify the host’s cells in some way and I don’t want to say more about it yet.”

Joelle was now about to lose her patience entirely. “Don’t give me that data verify BS. Tell me what you think is happening.”

The tech sighed and looked over at the owl before speaking. “It’s trying to turn them into something else…something more useful to it.”

“I see.” Joelle followed the tech’s gaze over to the owl. “Perhaps select two of the most recently injected subjects randomly. Allow the degradation to proceed in them. Then collect samples from those subjects when they have self-terminated.”

“Yes. Okay. We can do that.” The tech sputtered, clearly anxious to get back to work.

“Very well, dismissed.” Joelle continued looking at the owl as the tech hurried back to her workstation.

She briefly wondered how long it would take for Isidora to suspect she was being lied to about what was happening here.

The fact was Joelle wasn’t sure of that herself. She strongly suspected it had little to do with discovering miracle cures or solving the world’s plastic bottle problems.

If Joelle was going to get real with herself, she didn’t have complete confidence that anyone working in this facility was ever supposed to walk out of it.

She tried to push those suspicions aside, but they continued to nag at her.

She had thought about asking to be taken off this assignment and let go more than a few times, not only because of the stress involved.

It scared her even more that she was afraid to ask.

She turned away from the owl, gave the techs a cursory once over, and left the room.

Joelle wasn’t going to get real with herself today.

Chapter 23

*That bitch'll pay for doing this to me.*Greg Forson pressed himself against the small brick wall just around the corner from Carly Hennington's apartment building.

Greg absently wiped sweat from his forehead as he felt for his gun, making sure it was still firmly tucked into his jeans.

He had been standing there for over an hour, trying to remain hidden from anyone passing by.

Mr. Forson was more accustomed to riding golf carts around at the country club than standing on his feet for longer than it took to swing a club or walk to his limo.

Taking another sip from his whiskey flask, Greg looked at his Rolex.

Carly's schedule was erratic under normal circumstances. Greg had spent that past week parking his car across the wide avenue from Carly's apartment. Often getting drunk and passing out while trying to learn her routine and build up his courage.

Greg knew Carly had just finished a late meeting closer to this side of town. He still had some friends at Cantor who kept in touch with him.

He figured she might stop by her apartment to freshen up before heading out again. It seemed that bitch rarely slept, if ever.

Greg spat on the concrete beside him and belched as he thought about shooting her in the stomach repeatedly. He wanted to feel the satisfaction of emptying his gun into her.

He was sure that one of Carly's bodyguards would likely shoot him dead in the process, but not before he got at least a few rounds off.

As Greg put his flask to his mouth for another sip, he spotted Carly's limo pulling up to the front of the apartment building.

It would take him about fifteen to twenty seconds from his position to reach her.

Greg raised the hood on his sweatshirt and stepped onto the sidewalk, moving slowly in her direction before the limo doors opened.

The limo driver got out and walked to the other side to open the rear door of the passenger side.

Another man got out and began scanning the sidewalk up and down on both sides.

Greg kept his hands in his pockets and walked at an even pace, feeling adrenaline coursing through his body. This was his moment.

As he saw Carly getting out of the limo, Greg picked up his pace, walking briskly and reaching down into his jeans.

The bodyguard standing between the limo and the main entrance to the apartment building noticed a figure hurrying toward Carly's position.

Turning to face Greg, the bodyguard said something into his earpiece that Greg couldn't quite make out.

Another bodyguard quickly appeared from inside the entrance to the apartment building, now taking up position between Greg and Carly.

Carly also turned to look in Greg's direction.

As quickly as he could manage, Greg took out his gun and began firing toward Carly, two shots in a row, pause, then another shot.

"Get down!" the guard standing by the entrance yelled while scrambling to retrieve his gun from inside his suit jacket, placing himself between the shooter and Carly.

The other guard already had his gun and fired one round at Greg's center mass.

Greg felt the impact. It nearly toppled him over, knocking the wind out of him.

Greg had a bulletproof vest hidden under his hooded sweatshirt. The bullet didn't go through, but the impact temporarily incapacitated him.

Somewhere he heard screaming in the distance.

As Greg stumbled, he pointed his gun in what he thought was Carly's direction and took another shot.

Still pointing his gun at Greg, the bodyguard who had shot him the first time fired again. This time aiming for Greg's head, but he missed and fired again.

The second attempt hit Greg's right cheek, turning him around.

Greg staggered briefly and fell to the ground, stunned and disorientated.

The guard ran up to where he lay and fired one last time, nearly point-blank range, into Greg's forehead.

"Clear!" The bodyguard yelled, standing over Greg's now lifeless body.

Carly heard "Clear!" and stood up from the sidewalk.

The guard struggling to retrieve his gun, remained on the ground.

Carly could see that he had been shot twice, once in the stomach and again in the chest. He was dead as well.

The other guard ran over to Carly. "Ms. Hennington, are you injured?"

"No, I don't think so." Carly moved her hands over her torso as she looked at the lifeless guard in front of her and then over to where Greg's body lay some distance away.

"If you are okay to walk, please let me get you up to your suite as quickly as possible. I've already called this in. We need to get you secure." The guard spoke in an even tone, but his voice had nervous energy. "There could be another shooter or multiple shooters."

"Not yet." Carly answered.

She pushed the bodyguard aside and walked over to Greg's body.

Looking more than a little unnerved by this, her bodyguard followed close behind.

"Pathetic little man. You should have been made to suffer longer. But I guess this will do." Carly turned, nodding to the guard, and walked calmly into her apartment building. She didn't stop to acknowledge any onlookers gathering at the periphery, trying to take videos or snap pictures with their phones.

Carly was already thinking about how to spin this with the press and how The Group might respond.

The Group didn't like anyone associated with it getting too much attention in the media. Carly knew this and needed to downplay it as quickly as possible.

News media outlets would soon learn of Greg's identity and his former employment at Cantor.

The best course would likely be to present Greg as a disgruntled employee. He could not handle being fired for unethical business practices.

It would be easy to generate evidence of Greg Forson mishandling internal corporate matters for personal gain.

Carly would issue a statement, sending her condolences to the late Mr. Forson's family and move on.

This might be a minor hiccup in her plans to move up in The Group's hierarchy, but she would manage.

As long as Carly could produce results, she wasn't in jeopardy.

Keeping things on schedule in Belgium was all that mattered.

Chapter 24

“Sukin syn!” Andre swore in Russian as he smiled at Gabriel, standing across from him at the small backlit table.

“This is how we get in, Andre. It will work.” Gabriel gently tapped his fingers on the table as he spoke, emphasizing his words. “The first EMP knocks out surface capabilities. The second and third will kill all power below.”

“Valentina has done well. This is what we needed.” Andre smiled and moved around the table to grab Gabriel by the shoulders. “And you, my friend, you have also done well. I thank you, truly.”

Gabriel nodded, looking back toward the table. “Thank you, Andre, but I must keep working. There is still much to do.”

Andre nodded and squeezed Gabriel’s shoulders one last time. “Yes of course. Please…” Andre gestured back toward the table, littered with printouts and blueprints. “This is what’s important now. Continue.”

Andre allowed Gabriel to work, watching him for a moment, then left him to it.

Once outside, Andre spotted Mila waiting for him outside the smaller barn on the property they were using to plan their attack.

“Mila, my dear!” Andre opened his arms wide to give Mila an enthusiastic hug. “Gabriel will soon have the drive completely decoded and all of the blueprints.”

Mila accepted Andre’s hug but still held a look of skepticism. “And what of the artifact?”

Andrew pulled away from Mila slightly, keeping his arms around her still. “It’s like we discussed. We take it from them and bury it somewhere they never find it. Huh?” Andre used one hand to pull up Mila’s face to meet his eyes. “They will never have it again.”

“But if we could destroy it…” Mila began.

“Mila, you know we can’t. It’s been talked about already. It cannot be destroyed by any means we know.” Andre scolded gently.

“It’s so dangerous Andre. It can bring so much harm…to everything.” Mila pressed.

“I know. It haunts me too.” Andre admitted. “But this is the only thing I can think to do with it.”

“I know, you are right of course.” Mila reluctantly agreed. “It is the best we can do.”

Andre sighed, finally letting go of Mila completely. “Perhaps, my turn comes to chide you a little, eh.”

Mila scoffed, but Andre continued. “You are running of fumes Mila. You must rest now. Not just for yourself.”

Mila nodded but held her frown. “I will Andre. I promise to rest.”

“Just over thirty days now Mila, till we strike hard at The Group. Make them pay. Let them know they cannot act without consequences.”

Mila shook her head. “This must work. It must.”

Andre patted Mila’s shoulder. “You rest now. Plenty of time to get nervous again later.”

Mila laughed a little and finally smiled. “Yes, of course there will be.”

Andre watched Mila walk toward the main house on the property and go inside to rest.

Standing alone outside in the dark, Andre gazed up at the stars and let his mind go blank, breathing in the summer air.

Andre felt such a drive to succeed now. He had never been this close to striking directly at The Group. He was filled with exhilaration and anxiety at the same time. He wanted so much for this plan to work.

Andre was well aware that no plan went according to plan. As much as he may try to predict and account for wildcards, there would be some anyway.

He stressed being adaptable in the moment to the people under his command. He also stressed the consequences of agreeing to see it through.

Andre had no doubt in his people. He hand-selected them. They were solid.

It was the unknowns that still gnawed at him daily. He took the weight of his responsibilities solely on himself.

There was nothing to do but move forward and direct the outcome as best he could.

Andre took one last look up at the stars, blowing air out slowly, heading off to the more enormous barn to check on the people he would be leading into the unknown soon.

Chapter 25

Cowboy enjoyed the jobs offering a challenge to his thinking and his body.

This job fit the bill. Make it look like an accident. No evidence of foul play.

The braking system on Ferdinand Santerre’s custom Panoz Esperante Convertible would fail on a corner, sending the doomed Mr. Santerre and his beautiful automobile tumbling down the side of a steep cliff.

Mr. Santerre was currently residing at one of his country villas in Cachoeira De Macae, Brazil. This area of Brazil beckoned the well-to-do with its beauty and solitude. It also presented many opportunities for Mr. Santerre to try cheating death with his hotrod.

Cowboy had hired a local to guide him to a remote location about five miles away from the villa, then used GPS to go the rest of the way himself.

Using satellite imagery for an aerial overhead and blueprints provided courtesy of Deena, Cowboy was quickly able to slip in and out without being noticed.

The prized convertible had arrived days ahead of Ferdinand. Cowboy waited for Santerre’s personal mechanic to give the vehicle a once-over, then went in to provide his own after-market modifications.

The key was to ensure the brakes didn’t’ fail too soon or too late, rather somewhere in the middle of Ferdinand’s driving expedition.

Cowboy hijacked the GPS system on the car to track its movements. The brake lines for the front brakes would be severed by a smart interrupter that disintegrated after use, leaving no evidence of its existence afterward. This would make it look like there was some sort of malfunction with the power braking system.

Having already scouted the terrain around Mr. Santerre’s villa in all directions, Cowboy knew the optimal places to activate his device based on different possible routes.

As usual, Cowboy would wait for news reports announcing Ferdiand Santerre’s untimely demise and then look forward to the wire transfer that soon followed.

Cowboy figured that three or four more jobs, possibly one or two big jobs, would set him up to retire and do his own thing full-time.

He wanted to be on his own, but that required a little more financial cushion and gathering of resources.

Deena did provide a steady stream of work, and that was great. He wanted to get out before his fortunes turned, which was bound to happen if he stayed in long enough.

It was a game of roulette he wanted to stop playing sooner rather than later.

Chapter 26

"The linguist is working with our new quantum processor to analyze the symbols and unlock the artifact's secrets." Conrad stood before the sitting members of The Group, delivering an update.

"Excellent news. And what of the other matter?" replied the center chair, occupied by The Group's oldest sitting member, Sal Bernardi. "Is it being handled?"

"Yes, of course." Replied Conrad, speaking in his usual smooth, confident tone. "The suspected mole at the facility will be caught in short order, I assure you."

"Very well. We mustn't allow information leakage to continue, much less unaccounted for personnel." Added Bernardi.

"Perhaps, this was too much for Ms. Hennington to take on at once. It seems her attention is divided between Cantor and the facility." Conrad offered.

"We know you do not approve of her being involved, Conrad." Genevieve spoke up. "She is a single component we deem necessary to move things along."

"Yes, of course." Conrad looked down, showing respect to the speaking member.

"Perhaps it is you who is having too much difficulty keeping tabs on Ms. Hennington while also performing various other duties," sneered another voice from somewhere to the left of Conrad.

He could not see their faces clearly due to the light that focused on him. This was intentional, meant to hide the faces and identities of sitting members.

With time, however, Conrad had managed to figure out the identities of most sitting members, but this one still eluded him.

"I am not. I assure you I would not hide such a difficulty on my part if it existed." Conrad's tone now changed to one more petulant.

"All the same, I propose we unburden Mr. Doren of some responsibilities so that he may better focus on specific priorities." The mysterious speaker added.

"Not yet," Genevieve interjected. "We must trust him with the current tasks assigned. It would be too much trouble to bring another up to speed in time."

"Agreed." Bernardi nodded. "We mustn't disrupt our course with unnecessary complications at this time."

"Continue as you were Mr. Doren." Bernardi added. "See that we find this mole and promptly. Dismissed."

Conrad nodded and turned to leave.

Speaking before The Group was always a landmine, Conrad knew. But lately, it was particularly hazardous.

Conrad exited the unassuming building where he had met with The Group and walked across the street to his rented vehicle.

He had not expected such a response to his proposal that Carly was stretched too thin.

Driving a couple of blocks, Conrad pulled over, and another man got into the vehicle's backseat.

"They shot me down abruptly today, and it stung." Conrad looked into the rearview mirror as he spoke.

"It takes time to achieve worthy goals. The Group should have taught you that by now at least." Conrad's new guest answered in an off-hand tone. "You are justified to feel slighted at being passed over for CEO at Cantor. Pushed aside by some untested newcomer."

Conrad clenched his fists above the steering wheel but quickly regained composure.

"Do you have anything for me?" Conrad didn't appreciate this ad hock pep talk, so he decided to get to the point of their meeting quickly.

"Yes, but first I will say this. You must tread lightly with Ms. Hennington. Her performance at Cantor and with the other thing in Belgium reflects directly on you as well as her second in command."

"I know that." Impatience was now evident in Conrad's voice. He didn't like someone being able to change his disposition. "Now…" Conrad consciously evened out his tone. "What do you have for me?"

"Ms. Hennington has an appetite for eccentric sexual stress relief, as many in positions of power do." The passenger confided.

"So what? I do as well. That doesn't matter to The Group at all." Conrad retorted.

"Don't be so quick to dismiss. One of the participants in the Group which Ms. Hennington visits on occasion for said activities is a close friend. She and Ms. Hennington have developed a bit of a bond, pardon the pun."

"And?" Conrad pushed.

"And it may be possible to encourage my friend to strengthen this bond with Ms. Hennington, perhaps interacting with her in a more personal, intimate manner. Then, perhaps, things which are valuable to Cantor, or The Group, could be discussed between them in a moment of vulnerability, of passion."

"Don't pursue anything about The Group. Keep it focused on Cantor. And proceed delicately. Nothing too obvious." Conrad could see where this was going but wanted to protect The Group from any possible fallout.

"Understood. This path should insulate you from any association and focus doubt strictly on Ms. Hennington." The unnamed passenger offered.

"Meet with your friend again. Don't mention The Group at all, ever. Make it all about Cantor. Go gently. We don't want to rouse Carly's suspicions." Conrad reiterated.

"Of course. As you have said. I will see to it." The person sitting in the back got out of the car and quickly crossed the street, disappearing into the crowd of pedestrians.

Conrad knew getting more people involved was risky and messy, but ambitious goals required taking risks. Being able to calculate risk effectively was a prized trait within The Group.

His biggest question was how useful all of this would be in the brief time left before executing The Group's great initiative.

Conrad sighed, getting out of the vehicle and taking out his burner phone to call for someone to pick it up and return it to the rental agency.

He went into the café nearby and made another call. About fifteen minutes later, his company car arrived to pick him up.

"To Cantor," Conrad informed the driver, holding the door for Conrad to get in the passenger compartment.

Conrad needed to keep a low profile, not agitating Carly or The Group any further for the time being.

He would make nice with Carly, perhaps causing her to lower her guard with him. They were both aware that neither of them liked the other.

Professionally, they put on the appearance of a synergistic duo. Conrad would play to that and wait for Carly to get tangled up in her personal life.

For now, he had work to do at Cantor.

Chapter 27

“Shit!” Dominic slapped his hand on the table again. “The data points continue to diverge outside of containment parameters after fifteen to twenty minutes every time.”

“You were right.” Simone sighed and rubbed her temples. “We should have told Joelle about this sooner.”

“Now you agree with me?” Dominic did not hide his rising anger. “She’s going to boil us alive for not telling her about this sooner.”

Simone clicked her tongue. “She’s going to be irritated, then she’ll settle down and give us some new instructions.”

“We’ll see about that.” Dominic retorted, still allowing his anger to direct his tone. “You’re thinking she’ll go after me first, then maybe spare you.”

The thought had crossed Simone’s mind, but she would never admit that to Dominic.

“You are making too much of this already. I simply agreed with you that we should have told her sooner.” Simone did not allow Dominic’s anger to bait her.

In the testing room, separated from Dominic and Simone by reinforced plexiglass, Angelika stood motionless.

Having regained consciousness a little over a week ago, she was routinely tested on her compliance with instructions via the stem implant.

Angelika could quickly decipher the content of Dominic and Simone’s conversation on the other side through the slightest vibrations in the plexiglass.

If she had any emotions, she would have smiled at their torment. Now, however, it only provided confirmation of the various adaptations her body was making continuously to defeat the implant.

“Joelle will be here soon.” Simone finally overran Dominic’s incessant complaining. “We must present a united front. Get on the same page.”

“Fine.” Dominic sarcastically relented. “What marvelous story have you cooked up for us?”

Before Simone could answer, the doors to their observation room swished open, and Joelle entered. She was early.

“Simone. Dominic.” Joelle greeted them in turn. “You have an update on forty-seven that is pressing?”

Dominic’s face twisted into a look of horror, eyes wide, but he said nothing.

Simone briefly looked his way, decided that he should probably not speak up, and took the lead. “Yes, Joelle. Thank you for coming. We have encountered some odd parameter displacement results with forty-seven and we thought you should know about it immediately.”

Dominic frowned briefly, then regained composure. Now on the same page as Simone in his head. “Yes, we can only safely send commands for behavior for up to fifteen minutes before the stem implant interface loses stability.”

Joelle walked to another terminal to begin analyzing their collected data. “It looks like these displacements have been occurring for some days. Why didn’t you bring this to my attention sooner?”

Simone replied quickly. “We were making some fine adjustments, attempting to correct for the outliers.”

Joelle continued examining the data while nodding slightly. “mmmhm.”

“We wanted to have more data of the phenomenon and also our attempts to correct it before we brought this to your attention.” Simone offered, trying to sound apologetic.

“You should have informed me sooner.” Joelle replied, now turning to face Simone and Dominic. “I want subject forty-seven prepped for an interactive test.”

“What kind of test?” Dominic asked, seemingly baffled by the instruction.

“We are going to have it kill another subject at our command.” Joelle replied. “Subject 422 will do for now.”

“But we can’t ensure stable control for more than fifteen minutes.” Simone was getting nervous now, unsure where Joelle was going with this bizarre idea.

“I want to change tactics with forty-seven.” Joelle informed them. “Give it a plausible threat to itself to handle and also try something we haven’t done before with the implant.”

“Such as?” Dominic asked.

“We’ll simply turn it off after inputting an instruction and see if the subject carries out the order. Then we turn the implant back on, but never for more than ten minutes at a time. We will vary the time of each reset randomly.”

“But if forty-seven is facing a plausible threat it would probably naturally defend itself anyway.” Simone mused. “How will that tell us if it is following instructions?”

“Maybe we need to adapt to our test subject a little.” Joelle offered. “Figure out its natural tendencies and then mold our instruction parameters to it.”

Simone couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of something like this sooner. Perhaps she was too tunnel vision to see the issue from a broader perspective.

“Yes, that might work.” Simone agreed.

“Excellent.” Joelle spoke matter-of-factly. “Get forty-seven and 422 prepped within the hour. We do the test today.”

Without another word, Joelle left the room.

Simone and Dominic looked at each other, then quickly input new instructions into their workstations.

Angelika could once again feel subtle changes happening within her body.

She was adapting to the new input from overhearing Joelle’s discussion with Simone and Dominic.

Her body would use this so-called experiment to gather data and better prepare for an eventual escape.

She wouldn’t repeat the mistakes of her first attempt to flee.

Chapter 28

"I want your best contractor to do this for me." Sal Bernardi sat across from Deena at Nicoles Beach Bar in the British Virgin Islands, taking in the ocean view and a glass of his favorite bottom-shelf whiskey.

"Of course, Sal. Always the best for you." Deena kept her tone a mix between playful and business. "Aside from your abysmal taste in whiskey, you only expect the best."

"Will you ever call me father?" Sal's face took on a look of hurt. "I am far from the best father a daughter could have, but also far from the worst."

"Agreed on both accounts. But…" Deena looked at the ocean as if waiting for the proper explanation washing up on the beach. "Your parenting, intermittent as it was, also taught me to keep people at a distance, especially relatives."

"So, not calling me father keeps me at a distance?" Sal mused.

"Yes, it does. You come to me for business, sure, but also for personal reasons. I wouldn't be heartbroken at all if I never saw you again. My business would go one and so would I." Deena kept her eyes on the ocean.

"Perhaps I did too well with you then." Sal sighed. "You may beat me at my own game on that account, but I will not give up the effort."

"I would expect nothing less. If you ever get me to call you father, it will be like another trophy in the collection you keep up there." Deena pointed to Sal's head.

Sal chuckled. "I will say nothing to that, my dear."

He tilted the bottom of his glass to the sky, finishing the last bit, and stood up from the table. "Until next month when we joust again."

Deena nodded and smiled, keeping both her hands on the table.

She watched Sal walk around the corner and out of sight, remaining seated and taking slow sips of her wine for another forty-five minutes.

Finally, Deena picked up the flash drive Sal had left on the table, placed it in her handbag, and stood up to leave.

Sal, the classy father, already paid ahead for their drinks, adding generous padding to the tip, ensuring privacy during lunch.

Deena knew that Cowboy was available for another job, so this would likely go to him. He was her best contractor.

She drove straight to her condo, a couple hours' drive from where she sipped drinks with her father once a month.

She would sort through the flash drive's contents and see what information might be necessary for Cowboy to complete the job.

In a few days, the job would be handed off to him, and then it was just the usual waiting game.

The effects of the inoculation her father insisted she receive were starting to wear off, her head clearing up enough to get back to work.

Deena avoided speculating about why she needed to be injected for her protection. She found it best not to question her father, their strange dynamic set up since childhood.

Deena inserted the flash drive into her computer and opened the first file, making notes on a separate screen for herself.

For the next several hours, she sifted through pages of information, utterly oblivious to the world around her.

As strange as it may seem, her business kept her sane.

It supplied her best coping mechanism for being the child of a megalomaniac bent on world domination.

Chapter 29

"You want a top off sir?" The waitress stood holding a carafe with steam floating out through its top.

"Yes, please." Cowboy smiled politely, moving his cup closer to the table's edge.

The waitress smiled in return. "There you go sir. Anything else I can get for you?"

"No. Not at the moment. Thank you." Cowboy stretched a little, using the back of the booth in the diner to get some leverage.

He sat in a corner booth at the edge of the diner, away from the few other patrons visiting at this early hour in the morning.

It was time to review the file Deena had sent him for his latest job.

Cowboy had never been to Belgium before, which meant studying the local geography.

Jobs of this nature were straightforward.

Blending in was no problem. Cowboy could disappear into the backdrop of any place anywhere in the world. His military and posthumous careers had given him the necessary skillset.

This job wasn't supposed to look like an accident. It was a frame job.

According to the file, Genevieve Messina was a wealthy financier who had made a fortune, first trading stocks, then as a venture capitalist.

There was also a financial trail through various shell companies linking Genevieve to different paramilitary groups worldwide.

One such group called Northwestern Europe home. Coalition pour des droits équitables (Fair Rights Coalition) operated out of Belgium, Germany, and The Netherlands.

From Cowboy's experience dealing with such groups while he was in the military, they were often composed of idealists and criminals alike.

Closing the file, Cowboy stood up from the booth, left a generous tip, and headed out to his old pickup truck.

He had five hours to pick up his gear from a storage shed and meet a private jet waiting to take him to Italy.

"Good evening sir." The pilot greeted him at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the passenger cabin. "May we take your bags?" The pilot gestured to the flight attendant standing beside him.

"No, thank you." Cowboy replied. "I'll handle my gear."

"Very well, sir. This way please." The pilot motioned toward the stairs, and Cowboy walked into the small walkway separating the cockpit from the passenger cabin.

The pilot and one flight attendant followed after him. Cowboy could see the copilot seated in the cockpit, checking various instruments.

"We depart within the next thirty minutes, pending tower clearance." The pilot informed him and headed into the cockpit.

"May I get you anything now sir?" The flight attendant inquired as Cowboy was taking his seat and storing his gear.

"Just water please." Cowboy replied.

Settled in, Cowboy read the file on Genevieve and details of where the hit was supposed to take place.

The flight would take about ten hours. By then, he would be well prepared with the basic information.

Reality on the ground was often a different matter altogether.

Landing at a private airfield in Italy, Cowboy accepted the keys to a car waiting for him near where the jet came to a stop.

He now had two days to get to Belgium from Italy.

Once there, he would make his way to a set of GPS coordinates and wait for the vehicle transporting Genevieve along a predetermined course in a sparsely populated area.

Deena would handle the social media blitz afterward, with Coalition pour des droits équitables taking credit for the assassination.

Cowboy would be in and out without anyone being the wiser for it.

It should be easy money.

Chapter 30

"Eto nash den'." Andre spoke in a low tone through his encrypted earpiece to the people he was leading toward what would be the most significant victory of his life if they succeeded.

Cutting off his transmission, Andre turned to Gabriel and nodded. "Do it."

Gabriel nodded and pressed a button on the device sitting on a tripod next to him.

There was a low flicker, then the lights surrounding their target went dark.

Andre flicked on his earpiece again. "Move!"

Within seconds four groups of light but well-armed personnel rushed toward the facility from different sides.

Rocket-propelled grenades took out the guard towers in short order.

Andre could now hear gunfire from multiple directions.

"We go." He whispered to Gabriel, motioning for his group to get moving.

Andre, Gabriel, and his armed escort quickly moved to join the group that had advanced on the facility's east side.

They had managed to cut away enough fencing to pass through the outer barrier using a plasma torch, now finishing up subduing the armed guards on this side of the wall.

"Hurry, the door." Andre barked instructions through his earpiece once more.

Two people split off from the group providing cover, and hurriedly went about setting C4 charges on the door.

Moving clear, one of them pressed a button, and there was a brief explosion.

Two by two, Andre's people began moving into the facility through the gaping hole where the door once stood.

They could hear guards yelling somewhere ahead, deeper in the facility, along with more gunfire from somewhere behind them.

"Access panel three is this way." Gabriel pressed the armed mercenary in front of him to move along the corridor to their right.

Rounding a corner, they were met with a brief burst of bullets, quickly followed by another. "Contact! East exit, topside." Andre heard a facility guard yell between shots.

One of Andre's people quickly launched a flash grenade, followed by another throwing a tear gas canister toward the guard's voice.

"Masks, now," Andre and his group started moving forward again.

"There it is, up ahead. Behind the door." Gabriel pointed up ahead.

Two people set charges again, and soon the door was blasted open.

"I'll need about five minutes to set the EMP charges. Then everything will be powered down below." Gabriel was already busy taking screws out of a panel.

"Cover us, no one gets past that door. No matter what." Andre looked away from Gabriel, toward his mercenaries.

As Gabriel worked quickly, Andre took up a position between Gabriel and the door.

Bursts of gunfire ricochet off the entrance to the electrical room, some making it inside, causing Gabriel to flinch.

"Steady Gabriel. Stay focused." Andre kept his tone even. "You must stay focused."

Gabriel nodded and returned to his work.

More bullets blanketed their position. One of Andre's people crumpled over, stunned but not seriously wounded.

Andre rushed over to her. "Easy Greta. Your vest took it. You are not hit."

Greta nodded. "Thank you, Andre. I'll be alright in a moment."

Andre nodded, patting Greta on the shoulder and taking up a position just to the right of the door, behind one of his men.

"How long now Gabriel?" He yelled back over his shoulder.

"Two minutes!" Gabriel answered, anxiety clear in his voice. "I have to set the second to take out their auxiliary power generators after main power is fried."

Andre knew from the data Valentina had provided that it would take about fifty seconds after main power went out for the auxiliary power to kick in. That should give them enough time.

"Now, do it." Andre patted one of his people on the shoulder.

"We'll have four minutes after the chemical releases to get into the elevator access." A man said as he held up something resembling an RPG.

Andre nodded. "Wait thirty seconds, then shoot it towards the elevator."

The man nodded and took up position across from Andre behind the wall separating their little room from the main hallway outside.

More bullets sprinkled their position. Another one of Andre's people stumbled back, blood forming around her inner thigh.

"That's it! I'm ready." Gabriel shouted from the back of the room.

"Do it!" Andre commanded.

Gabriel pressed a button on the first EMP, and one of the circuit boards crackled for just a second. Everything went dark.

A few seconds later, Andre's man fired the chemical bomb into the main hallway in the direction of the elevator.

Shortly afterward, they could hear people yelling in pain from that direction, and the firing on their position ceased.

Fifty seconds later, auxiliary lighting came on in the hallway.

Gabriel pressed the second button; another crackling sound and the auxiliary lights also went out.

"We go now!" Andre and his group moved out into the hallway and toward the elevator.

Suddenly, there was a deep humming sound.

Andre felt the thrum move through his body and stumbled, falling into the wall beside him.

Everyone around him was disorientated as well, some falling to the ground.

It took about a minute for Andre to get enough of his equilibrium back to rush over and help the members of his team who fell.

"We must move quickly. Not much time." Andre got a few of them to their feet.

The others shook their heads a few times but appeared coherent enough.

Four of them approached the elevator, two on each side.

They used crowbars to pry the doors, revealing the empty shaft inside.

Quickly moving inside, each group member took up a position on one of the ladders lining each side of the opening to the ground floor level.

The last one had been shot and was bleeding through her clothing. Still, She managed to manually close the doors with a wrench.

The entire operation took just over four minutes, from the electrical closet to the elevator hatch.

The wounded member of Andre's team managed to close the door, but only just.

Vomiting into her gas mask, she started convulsing on the ladder, lost her grip, and fell into the darkness below them.

"It got into her through the wound." One of Andre's men glanced after the woman.

Andre nodded. "We must keep moving. We honor her with victory."

They started moving down and toward the research section of the facility.

Soon Andre would have his revenge on The Group.

Or so he thought.

Chapter 31

Isidora would never admit to Conrad or anyone else, but money was second only to archaeolinguistics in her personal hierarchy of needs.

"You see! It is working fabulous! The interface." The lab tech spoke with beaming enthusiasm.

"It does seem faster than my traditional methods, yes." Isidora frowned as she turned away from the lab tech and back to the artifact.

"We've already begun creating a language matrix with only the eight symbols you fed in to it." The tech continued, unphased by Isidora's reluctance to catch his enthusiasm.

"A matrix with four possible vectors. Each with less than seventy percent probability." Isidora cautioned him.

The tech scowled as if offended that his enthusiasm wasn't infectious. "That's still exponentially faster than the methods you traditionally use."

"Yes, Ramirez. My apologies, Jon. Do you prefer Jon?" Isidora asked.

"Just call me Ramirez. Everybody calls me that." Ramirez informed her.

"Very well, Ramirez. It is faster, at least at this step in the process. But we are a long way from understanding even the basics about this language, if it is a language at all." Isidora replied.

She had seen many fresh and green linguists like Ramirez, burning bright with enthusiasm, getting deflated when the time-consuming work of deciphering an unknown dialect began in earnest.

Ramirez said nothing but continued to watch Isidora run her fingers along the artifact and then check for recognition markers via the link with the quantum computer half a world away.

"I will admit I am enjoying this silent, dutiful partner of mine." Isidora spoke while continuing to work.

Ramirez nodded. "Am I talking too much? I do that sometimes. Just tell me to shut up."

"You are fine." Isidora assured him. "I'm just appreciating a partner that doesn't get grumpy, moody or try to get in my pants."

Laughing awkwardly, Ramirez decided to try making himself useful since he was assigned to be her assistant. "Would you like another cup of Fazenda?"

"Oh, yes, please. It is delicious coffee." Isidora turned away from the artifact to hand her empty cup to Ramirez.

"No, no. You keep working. I'll take this one and get you a new cup of coffee. Be back in a jiff." Ramirez grabbed Isidora's cup before she could reach it and hurried off.

Isidora shook her head as he ran across the open lab floor and returned to her work.

Soon she would meet with Orin, the facility superintendent, for a long-awaited full tour of the facility.

Isidora doubted she would actually get the whole tour. Orin was a personable fellow, and Isidora liked him from the outset. Still, she felt he wasn't being completely open about what was happening here.

But, as Isidora did like the paycheck and the work, she wasn't going to make waves about it.

About ten minutes later, Ramirez returned with two steaming cups of freshly brewed Fazenda Santa Ines coffee.

Isidora could smell it before he reached her side.

"So divine." She commented, turning to accept her cup from Ramirez. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." Ramirez smiled wide, handing the cup to her. "You take a little break. I'm going to analyze the two most recent symbols and see if we can get some predictions for any repeating patterns."

"Yes, okay." Isidora agreed, taking a moment to hold the cup in both hands and breath in the steam rising from the cup.

Ramirez mumbled something, having just brought up two analyzed symbols on separate screens, when Isidora heard a brief clicking sound and the lights flickered, finally going out altogether.

There were a few yells from around the room. Some researchers were startled by the unexpected disruption.

"What is happening, Ramirez?" Isidora asked, trying to set her coffee down on a table she could only make out due to the artifact's glow shedding some light on this lab section.

"No idea. This hasn't happened before." Ramirez informed her. "The auxiliary lighting should kick in soon.

About fifty seconds later, auxiliary lights came on, a soft white color that made it easy to see around the room.

"See, that's better. I'm sure they'll get it sorted in no time, whatever the issue." Ramirez tried to sound reassuring.

A few seconds later, a red stream illuminated around the top of the ceiling.

"Oh shit, not again." Ramirez babbled, obviously getting nervous.

"What not again?" Isidora asked just as the auxiliary lighting went out as well.

The red light coating the edge of the ceiling around the room dimmed but did not go out entirely.

"Oh no!" another lab tech yelled across the room.

"Get to the designated safe room quickly." Another voice yelled from somewhere else in the room.

Someone produced a flashlight a few meters away from Isidora and Ramirez and quickly instructed everyone to follow them to another door.

"What is happening, Ramirez?" Isidora asked again as Ramirez stood up to direct Isidora along with the others.

"I'll explain later when…" Ramirez stopped talking as Isidora saw a different kind of glow illuminate the wall opposite him.

Others in the room turned around to look as well.

Isidora turned to see the artifact pulsating stronger and with a dark purple glow.

"Maybe the power outage made it…" Isidora experienced something she had never felt before.

Midway through her sentence, her mouth stopped moving. She was paralyzed standing up.

So too, was everyone else in the room. All eyes locked on the artifact, unable to move.

As Isidora stood there, pupils stuck in position, her thoughts also began to freeze. Her mind now joined her body in stillness.

A dark purple concentration of light began focusing itself out and away from the artifact while remaining tethered to it.

Surge. That would have been the last word in Isidora's sentence. Her mind thought only that word as the purple, oscillating arm of light made its way toward her body, finally enveloping her completely.

Within seconds a deep hum emanated from the artifact, lasting only briefly. Then it went silent and dark.

The artifact now appeared to be a smooth-cut, cube-shaped block. Just as it had when most recently discovered…again. Also smaller now than before.

Tentacles of light shot out quickly from the haze surrounding Isidora's body.

Each tentacle found its way to the other people occupying the room, entering their minds.

Energy traveled back from the tenacles to Isidora. The dark hue surrounding her turned lighter then went out completely.

Isidora was no more.

The unnamed being she had become moved swiftly, tearing through reinforced walls with no effort on the shortest path out of the facility.

It existed only to find the ones who must become joined to its purpose.

Nothing would stop it.

Chapter 32

“Really Ms. Messina, we are glad to have you visiting the facility. It is no bother.” Orin reiterated as he took a seat on his side of the desk, opposite Genevieve.

“I’m glad to hear it, since a lot of my money is going into this place, Orin.” Genevieve’s dismissive tone showed she had no concern about convenience.

“I want a tour of your progress in a bit of course. But first give me a rundown of where things are now.” Genevieve continued, not allowing Orin to respond to her previous comment.

“As my latest briefing specifies, we are making progress with the delivery mechanism, as well as the formula we intend to release with it.” Orin kept his tone even and unperturbed.

“Still no exact dates then?” Genevieve asked

“Not as of yet. We are all in uncharted territory. We have no roadmap to follow here.” Orin replied.

Genevieve sighed, displaying obvious disappointment on her face. “We are less than six months away from the deadline. You must make it all ready.”

“I assure you. We will be ready, Madam.” Orin kept his hands on the armrest of his chair, not wanting to give into Genevieve’s apparent attempts to make him defensive.

“Perhaps Conrad was on to something. Maybe this is too much to put on Ms. Hennington.” Genevieve mused aloud.

“It would not matter who was in charge. The process cannot go faster than it is going now.” Orin rocked a little in his chair, attempting to look comfortable.

“I want to see test subjects. See what is happening with them. Subject forty-seven is of particular interest.” Genevieve paused. “The implant was supposed to make that variant compliant.”

“Yes, it was.” Orin agreed. “However, unforeseen adaptations within the host have complicated things a bit.”

“Complicated how?” Genevieve asked.

“I will let the people working closely with forty-seven explain it firsthand.” Orin offered. “Less opportunity for confusion that way.”

Genevieve stood up. “Take me to them then.”

Orin stood up as well and moved around his desk. “Of course. Please follow me.”

Genevieve was about to launch another snide remark at Orin as they walked out of his office, but a muffled booming sound stopped them mid-step.

“What was that?” Genevieve looked to Orin, alarm showing on her face.

“I’m sure it was nothing. We have all sorts of strange sounds around here from time to time.” Orin smiled at Genevieve.

*Andre is here.* Orin continued smiling reassuringly.

“Please follow me to the elevator.” Orin gestured ahead.

Genevieve looked around them, then nodded her head.

As they were walking, a red line illuminated along the edges of the ceiling in the hallway.

“Something’s going on Orin.” Genevieve stopped walking again.

“Perhaps you are correct Madam.” Orin’s voice was still calm. “It occurs to me you may be fatigued and in need of rest.”

Genevieve frowned and turned to look at Orin.

As she did, Orin punched her hard across the jaw.

Genevieve let out a holler and fell against the wall, eyes watering.

Orin slammed into her and punched Genevieve again in the face. “Sleep it off, my dear.”

As Genevieve’s body crumpled against the wall, Orin stood next to her for a few seconds.

Satisfaction filled him as he looked at her unconscious form on the floor.

“Sir!” Orin heard a voice calling from down the hall. “Were you attacked?”

Orin looked up to see two guards quickly moving toward him.

“Yes, four intruders assaulted us. They headed that way.” Orin pointed in the opposite direction.

He motioned to one of the guards. “Help me get her to the med bay. Quickly.”

The guard complied while the other said something into his earpiece, pointing his gun down the hallway.

Finally, he spoke to Orin. “Sir, this security personnel will accompany you and the injured to med bay. Please stay with them until all is clear.”

“Yes, of course. I will.” Orin replied.

The guard nodded and ran down the hall, pursuing Orin’s conjured intruders.

After that guard had disappeared, Orin turned to the guard helping him with Genevieve.

“I need a sidearm in case we encounter any other intruders. They’ve already gotten this far.” Orin spoke in a hurried tone. “Quickly!”

The guard hesitated for a second but then unholstered one of his guns and handed it to Orin. “Yes, of course, sir.”

“Thank you.” Orin replied, much calmer now. “Help me get her up. We’ll carry her together.”

Orin and the guard leaned over to each take one of Genevieve’s arms.

As the guard crouched down to get one of Genevieve’s arms around his shoulder and stand her up, Orin made ready to do the same.

Orin dropped Genevieve, using the momentum of her weight to push the guard down on top of her.

“What the hell?!” The guard was taken by surprise.

Orin fired two shots into the back of the man’s head, killing him instantly.

Orin looked at Genevieve, almost shot her too, but decided to make a break for it instead.

He turned and ran for a door on the right side of the hall about twenty feet away.

Soon Orin would be in the wind.

Chapter 33

*At coordinates. No target. Past time.* Cowboy typed into his encrypted sat phone set up on his right.

Returning to the AR scope on his custom rifle, Cowboy scanned the lonely road again. Nothing.

It would be time to bug out in fifteen minutes, no matter the situation.

Wrinkles did happen. Cowboy expected them, always.

He also knew he got paid either way. The target not showing up was not on him.

Eight minutes later, the sat phone buzzed twice, drawing Cowboy’s attention away from his scope.

*Verified. Target status unknown. Abort.*

Cowboy sighed, surveying the area one last time.

He collected his gear and began the four-mile trek back to his loaner vehicle.

Getting back stateside was his responsibility.

Cowboy had a flight to catch in Bratislava.

Chapter 34

Angelika felt power oscillations throughout the facility in her body.

"What's happening? Shouldn't we get to a safe room?" Angelika heard the panicked voice of the one called Dominic, asking the other she knew was called Simone.

"Not yet, power fluctuations have happened before. There's no red-light warning yet." Simone answered.

Something was changing. Now Angelika started feeling real pain, which caused panic within her.

Something in her mind was tormented, losing connection.

"How long till auxiliary power kicks in?" Dominic's nerves were on edge.

Simone looked up at the dark ceiling and was about to answer when the auxiliary power kicked in.

"See, nothing to worry ab…" Simone's smile turned to a frown as the red stream appeared around the edges of the ceiling in their observation room.

"We gotta go, now!" Dominic squealed, almost wholly overridden with panic.

Simone jumped up from her workstation. "First, secure forty-seven. Activate physical restraints quickly."

Dominic's fingers wouldn't cooperate as he frantically attempted to enter the proper commands into his terminal. "Damn thing's too slow." He muttered and spit as he fumbled around.

"Get out of the way!" Simone pushed him to move away as she sat down in his seat.

Dominic eyed Angelika nervously through the reinforced glass as she lay on the examination bed.

"Please work fast, Simone." He mumbled, holding himself against a table beside one of the observation room's walls.

As Simone was typing in commands, the auxiliary power also went out.

"Shit!" Simone yelled.

They were now in complete darkness.

"Find a flashlight, hurry!" Simone barked at Dominic. "One of the drawers in that table."

Simone could hear Dominic fumbling through the drawers and cursing to himself.

The terminal in front of Simone remained on, with a few minutes of battery reserve power. It cast a dim green hue across the room.

"I can't see anything Simone." Dominic's tone was high-pitched and whiney now.

"I'll help you." Simone pushed herself away from the workstation to stand up and make her way over to Dominic.

She couldn't input commands for the observation room with the auxiliary power out.

Simone quickly made her way to the table area where Dominic was frantically feeling around in drawers and dropping various objects on the floor.

"You probably dropped it, idiot." Simone knelt to feel the objects on the floor.

Angelika experienced a profound change she had not felt before. A deep sense of loss flooded her body, and an aching sensation grew.

The harmony and balance her mind had felt before were gone. A void replaced them. A hungry void.

A deep red glow slowly moved from her head down, diminishing as it traveled the length of her body.

Bones and cartilage inside her body made popping sounds as she writhed in silence.

Faint tethers of light began to form in her vision, traveling through the air into the observation room on the other side of the glass.

The tethers were a path to energy her mind desperately needed.

The popping sounds ceased as quickly as they started.

Angelika flexed her body, the bindings holding her stretching and snapping one by one.

Moving swiftly, Angelika went from lying on the examination bed to standing in front of the reinforced glass.

She could see clearly through the tinted barrier into the observation room.

The tethers of faint light got brighter at their source. Two things moving erratically on the other side.

Dominic stopped moving, hairs on the back of his neck rising. Someone or something was watching him.

"Simone, it… she's watching us." He spoke barely above a whisper.

"Who's watching us?" Simone looked up at Dominic, hand inches away from revealing a flashlight on the floor.

"Forty-seven. I can feel her eyes on me." Dominic answered, keeping his voice hushed.

Simone scoffed and resumed her search for a flashlight, finally making contact with it in the dark.

"Here, this should make you feel better." Simone was about to flick the flashlight on when they heard a crashing sound, followed quickly by another.

Shattered pieces of glass flew past Simone, one piece catching her on the shoulder.

Simone yelled out in pain as the sharp fragment stuck where it hit her.

Inadvertently Simone had managed to turn on the flashlight but also dropped it when hit by the glass fragment.

The flashlight rolled a few feet from where she was kneeling on the floor.

Simone put her hand up to her shoulder and felt blood. It was warm and flowing freely from her wound.

A few seconds later, Simone became aware of a faint gurgling sound above her.

"Dominic!" She yelled out. No answer.

Simone fumbled for the flashlight a few feet away from her and pointed it toward the gurgling sound.

As the light fell over Dominic, Simone gasped, stunned motionless.

Subject forty-seven had jumped onto the table above her in complete silence. Its fingers were clamped around Dominic's head, covering half his face.

Foaming drool fell from his mouth, and his eyes were rolled into the back of his head.

Dominic's legs flailed sporadically. It appeared that he was being held up by his head alone.

Angelika felt comforting harmony entering her mind and body again. The aching lessened with each passing second.

She greedily soaked it up and let it wash over her entire being.

Too soon, however, the nourishing conduit abruptly ended.

The aching returned in a mad rush, causing her to spasm again uncontrollably.

Simone, paralyzed with terror, watched Dominic's body flop to the floor as forty-seven released him.

The pain in her shoulder broke her enchantment, and Simone followed forty-seven's trajectory as it began convulsing and fell on the floor close to her, convulsing violently.

Simone hurriedly scooted away from forty-seven, kicking her feet across the floor to gain some distance.

She looked toward the exit door and tried to pull herself to her feet, groaning from the effort.

A pungent odor filled the room and Simone nearly gagged. She was already too disoriented to determine the source of it.

She pulled herself along the wall, inching toward the door leading into a hallway outside.

Almost to the door, Simone suddenly felt a jolting sensation of pressure around her head.

Angelika's calculating mind was replaced by a simple and singular drive. She needed to stop the ache from tearing away at her inside.

She sought out the tether source in her vision as her body ceased its spasms of pain.

Once again, harmony returned to her being. Her mind returned as well. She could contemplate and calculate again.

Angelika's body was already adapting to this new reality.

It now knew that each tether source would only provide a few brief moments of sustenance. It must ration its energy draw to maintain coherence and awareness. But that would also require much more reserve power.

It must nourish itself quickly, and that would require numerous tether sources.

Already, new tethers were appearing in her vision as she slowed her drain on the current source to regulate herself.

Simone's mind was unable to process the experience.

It was like having ice and electricity drilled into her brain simultaneously.

The pain was excruciating, and yet there was also a numbness to it. She felt herself fading away, but was not frightened by it.

Rational or complete thinking was gone, but a more primitive urge to go with the current sweeping away her intellect was taking over.

Simone wanted to let it take her away.

Angelika had learned from her second victim to regulate the flow of energy transfer between herself and her tether source.

This would be a more controlled transfer than the last. The next would be even more refined as well.

The force knocked Angelika back, releasing her hold on Simone.

Simone's body fell to the floor, motionless.

Angelika stumbled backward, feeling a deep pressure building on her body.

A clicking sound filled the air and her vision blurred.

Angelika felt her insides becoming unstable and fell to her knees.

Her body couldn't quite locate the source, but she felt its power moving closer to her, then away again.

Finally, it faded entirely and was gone.

Angelika stood up quickly, still feeling disoriented.

The tether from her second source was faint but not entirely gone.

Angelika looked down at the crumpled form of the one she knew as Simone.

Brighter tethers drew her attention away and through the door leading out of this small room.

Hitting the door hard enough to rip a tiny hole and again to make the hole bigger, Angelika stepped into the hallway.

Following the tethers, Angelika moved down the hallway in a near blur seeking her next source of nourishment.

Chapter 35

"We can see from these projections that Cantor is set to enjoy another fabulous quarter of growth in key sectors." The senior vice-president of mergers and acquisitions, Ranjit Bakshi, was halfway through his presentation to senior management in the main conference room on the fifty-first floor of Cantor Inc Headquarters. "Core revenue funnels are solid. We are creating choke points for controlling competitors' access to our base clientele in health care, agriculture and pharmaceuticals."

Carly and Conrad were both attending, as was expected at this meeting.

Both were focusing entirely on the presentation. So much so that Carly barely noticed before an aid bent down to deliver a message.

"Pardon Ms. Hennington, but a matter most urgent requires your immediate attention."

Carly frowned, and Conrad looked over toward her and the aid, concern showing on his face.

Carly smiled at Conrad and the other senior execs sitting next to her and quietly got up to leave the room.

Conrad watched her go, as did several others in the room.

Once outside, Carly struggled to control her irritation at being called out of the meeting.

"What matter is most urgent Shaundra?" Carly kept her voice level but crisp.

"Ms. Hennington, my apologies again. You received a priority call on a secure line from an encrypted voice. I was told to deliver a message."

Carly waited, growing impatient. "And the message?"

"Yes, of course. Check SP immediately." Shaundra replied.

Carly froze for an instant, then recovered.

"Come with me." Carly started walking briskly down the hall.

Shaundra, a little taken aback, hesitated, then followed after Carly.

Carly stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the top floor, where her office was located.

"Once we get to my office, you remain in the reception area outside. Leave the lights off, lock the door and secure it with this code." Carly handed Shaundra a piece of paper. "No one, no exceptions, gets in."

Shaundra nodded but said nothing, clearly starting to get anxious.

Carly rushed out of the elevator doors on the top floor, heading for her office. "Do what I said!" she yelled back. "Get it done quickly!"

Carly headed into her office, closed the doors, and locked them shut with her security code and a deadbolt.

She activated a jamming device that only her personal sat phone could penetrate. It would jam all signals on the entire floor level.

Carly retrieved her sat phone from the safe, entered her access code, and turned it on.

There was one message waiting to be read. *CF at f*.

This meant Critical Failure at the facility.

Carly didn't hesitate. She had only one option if this message ever appeared on her sat phone.

Carly entered a set of ten digits and pushed the send button. She waited for the expected message to appear.

*Verify AD and CO*. Carly inputted a different ten-digit set to verify the original message.

The phone chirped once, and the screen turned green, yellow, then…nothing.

*What the fuck?* Carly thought as she watched the screen in confusion. *Why isn't it working?*

AD stood for Auto Destruct. Carly was the only one who could initiate the process from her sat phone, and it was the only sat phone that could also send the instruction.

The phone screen was supposed to turn red after yellow to indicate that auto-destruct had been initiated remotely.

It stayed yellow, which meant one of two things. Someone was jamming her signal remotely, or auxiliary power had been cut directly at the facility.

Auto destruct would use auxiliary power to release massive quantities of Chlorine Trifluoride throughout the facility in Belgium.

Exactly four minutes later, nitroglycerine and dynamite charges buried deep in the walls would detonate, causing the entire structure to implode beneath ground level.

Carly swore, then felt her body going into panic mode.

She had to find out what was going on…and fast.

CO stood for Cleaning Operation. This was to be handled by an elite team of ex-special forces soldiers who would fly in by helicopter to secure the area and report back status.

Carly dialed a number on her sat phone and put it to her ear.

"Verify." A voice said from the other side after one ring.

"Skimpy Circles Blue and Orange." Carly counted to five and then added, "Livrez les fleurs."

"Hold." The voice answered, then there was silence for about ten seconds.

Another voice now. "Command. What are your instructions Ms. Hennington?"

"AD did not verify. I need you to check the site now." Carly answered.

"On our way." The voice immediately replied. "Update in fifteen minutes. Over."

"Get there as quickly as you can and let me know what the fuck is going on." Carly replied and ended the call.

Carly paced back and forth in her large office, walking to the window and back to her safe numerous times, holding the sat phone.

She knew Conrad would be on her as soon as the meeting ended.

The Group conducted no information exchange over the phone, email, or other electronic means.

Protocol for this unlikely situation was to show up for a specific kind of Chinese takeout not found on the menu at a seedy fast-food joint thirty-five minutes across town.

That protocol seemed not well thought out to Carly, but it was all she could do to reach the Group quickly.

Carly decided to push her luck and slightly break the established protocol.

She took out her personal cell phone and placed a call to the Chinese restaurant. It rang about twelve times before someone answered.

“Nǐ hǎo, shì de.” A woman’s voice answered.

“Jī gāowán.” Carly replied.

The woman hung up the phone without another word.

Carly didn't know what to expect since this was not standard procedure for setting up a meeting.

She briefly mused that she may have just signed her own death warrant.

Without hesitating, Carly rushed to her private elevator. She called ahead for her driver to meet her in the parking garage.

Perhaps someone from The Group would already be at the restaurant when she arrived.

Chapter 36

“Get the door open, bystro!” Andre shouted down at the first two mercenaries to reach the bottom level.

Andre and the rest of his team descended as the first two people down used pry bars to pull the door open. They were joined by two others to speed up the process.

About two minutes later, the door was open enough for everyone to get through it and into the utterly dark hallway on the other side.

The team could see all around them using night vision goggles enhanced by active infrared.

Andre’s people took up positions in the hallway as everyone entered from the elevator shaft.

Gabriel nodded to Andre. “It’s straight ahead. The door at the end.”

Andre motioned with his hand, and the team advanced to the door.

Everyone could hear faint screams and yells from various rooms to their left and right. These were interrupted by occasional banging sounds.

Using a torch, one of Andre’s soldiers cut a hole in the door, and they entered the small area with two walkways leading down and around the corner on both sides.

“Nalevo,” Gabriel instructed, and they moved to the left, slowly advancing down the walkway.

Once around the corner, Andre could see down into the main research floor of the room.

Bodies were lying throughout the room, but something else as well.

A few people below were standing, not moving. The standing individuals were facing in all different directions as if frozen there.

“It’s there.” Gabriel pointed to the far side of the room below. “In the middle.”

Andre nodded and motioned for his people to descend the stairs to their left.

Reaching the bottom, Andre stepped carefully over the bodies, making his way toward the artifact on the other side of the room.

He and Gabriel were almost to the artifact when Andre heard a yelp from behind him.

Turning, Andre could see one of the people standing had grabbed hold of one of his soldier’s heads.

“Ahh!” A cry escaped the soldier’s mouth, then he started drooling heavily, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

More of the frozen people turned and began making their way over to where Andre and his team stood.

Andre unholstered his sidearm and shot the person holding his soldier’s head between the eyes.

Both the attacker and the soldier fell to the ground instantly.

“Shoot them!” Andre yelled to the rest of his team.

Gunfire lit up the room in flashes as Andre’s team opened up on the people moving toward them.

Because they were spread out, getting clean shots on all the targets was impossible.

Some of Andre’s people shot at the center mass of their targets. This caused them to stumble into some of Andre’s soldiers. They quickly screamed and went silent as the people falling into them grabbed the soldier’s heads.

The gas masks covering their heads apparently were inadequate to protect Andre’s people.

“Get the artifact. Move!” Andre waived his hand toward the artifact as he yelled through the random gunfire.

Gabriel quickly dashed to the artifact, jumping over some bodies on his way.

Grabbing the artifact and turning back toward Andre, something caught his ankle. He tripped, sprawling out on the floor and tossing the artifact a few feet away from Andre.

“Please help me.” A voice pleaded from behind Gabriel. “I need your light.”

“No! No!” Gabriel screamed as he could feel hands grabbing and crawling along his legs and torso toward his head.

Andre looked at the artifact and then back to Gabriel.

“Gabriel, hold on! I’m coming!” Andre yelled, sidestepping the artifact and reaching Gabriel’s position.

More of the bodies lying on the floor started moving now. First rolling over, then slowly standing up.

Andre used his machine gun to whack the individual crawling up Gabriel’s leg in the head.

The person grunted, then fell limp, halfway covering Gabriel.

Gabriel quickly scooted out from under the limp body.

“The artifact.” Gabriel whispered, pointing to it.

Gabriel quickly got to his feet and dodged another person on the floor, slowly rolling over on their side.

Andre followed.

Andre’s people had managed to subdue the original attackers, but others were now slowly turning and walking toward them. As they did, Andre watched bullets haphazardly hit their midsections and heads.

“Shoot only the head!” Andre yelled while surveying the room, determining an exit strategy.

He turned to Gabriel. “We go along the outside where there are less of them.”

Gabriel nodded, and Andre took off running, sidestepping a few motionless bodies on the floor.

“This way! Evacuate!” Andre yelled behind him, finally reaching the stairs and taking out his pistol again.

Andre fired off round after round as Gabriel ascended the stairs and more of his people followed after.

Two of his people were still there. Lying on the floor, several bodies jumbled over them, hands firmly intertwined around their heads.

Seeing their bodies convulsing slightly, Andre sighed and then shot both in the head.

The hands on their heads pulled away, and people stood up, heading toward the staircase.

Andre turned to head up the stairs himself. “Out! Now!”

Once outside the room and back in the hallway, Andre tossed two grenades back through the cut-open doorway as his people ran toward the elevator shaft opening on the other side.

Two large explosions sent dust and debris back through the cut opening. Andre didn’t turn to look.

Once everyone was back in the shaft, Andre spoke up again.

“Close the doors, quickly.”

Two of his people turned the crank that manually closed the doors, and they began climbing the ladders on both sides of the shaft again.

They were about halfway back to where they had started down the shaft when Andre heard a voice in his head.

*You make such a ruckus.* The force of that voice nearly caused Andre to lose his grip and fall.

Using every ounce of his strength, Andre managed to hold on, but three of his people didn’t.

He could hear them scream out as they fell to their deaths.

Then he heard another cry out above him from the other side ladder.

Someone was wrapped around one of his people. He couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman, but its hands were wrapped tightly around his soldier’s head.

Andre saw Joanna’s limbs flail about, her head trapped between two hands.

“Climb Gabriel! Fast as you can!” Andre barked up the ladder.

Gabriel and the two people between him and Andre began climbing again, frantically trying to reach their exit point.

Andre followed but kept his eyes on Joanna and her attacker as he did so.

They were near the top when the unknown attacker released Joanna, allowing her body to fall to the bottom of the shaft with a soft thudding sound.

Andre could see two more of his people on the ladder below Joanna.

The thing that attacked Joanna jumped onto the next person as he and the person below him fired shots directly at it from nearly point-blank range.

It didn’t even slow down, clamping its hands around the next person’s head.

The bottom-most soldier on the ladder began screaming in panic, firing wildly above him, trying to hit the thing attacking the soldier above him.

Bullets ricocheted along the shaft as he did so.

Finally, to their exit point, the three remaining members of Andre’s team quickly exited the shaft, followed close behind by Andre.

“Close it. Do it now.” Andre could hear the panic in his voice. He was clearly rattled.

One of Andre’s people ripped off a panel next to the elevator door opening and, with another, hand-cranked the shaft doors closed.

They could still hear screaming from below as bullets ricocheted throughout the shaft.

Now at ground level, Andre radioed for his team topside. “Exiting facility now. Rendezvous at east gate.”

“Copy. Copy.” Two of Andre’s groups reported back. One did not.

Andre didn’t wait. He motioned for the team members at his side to follow him and headed quickly for the exit.

They encountered no resistance heading for the east gate.

Andre could see the other teams waiting at the agreed-upon rendezvous location.

“Five casualties on our side Commander.” One of the lead team members reported when Andre reached his position. “Where are the others from your team?”

“Dead.” Andre replied. “We have to move.”

They could now hear helicopters approaching from the west on the opposite side of the building.

As Andre and his people fled in the other direction, Carly’s personnel landed to evaluate the situation.

They would be powerless to stop what came next.

Chapter 37

Carly's driver pulled up to the curb across the street from Your Goose is Cooked Chinese restaurant and came around to open her door.

Carly checked her sat phone again for the fiftieth time and felt growing anxiety threatening to overtake her body.

She couldn't think of any reason for her CO team not reporting back to her in the allotted time. She could, but that was too unpleasant to entertain in her current state.

"Find a place about five minutes away and wait to hear from me." Carly scanned the sidewalk in both directions as she spoke.

It was a busy night on the town for a lot of folks. The sidewalk in both directions was bustling with activity.

The driver nodded, and Carly stepped away from the car as he drove off.

Looking across the street, Carly could see the congested street side serving window.

People were stretched out about twenty deep in the line.

Crossing the street, Carly moved to the alley lining the restaurant on its right side.

A woman was sitting next to the alley door for the restaurant. She did not look up as Carly approached her.

“Nǐ bù yìng gāi dǎ diànhuà.” The woman spoke without looking up as Carly reached the door.

"I had no choice." Carly replied.

The woman said nothing, merely stood up and knocked on the door two times. It opened. A man was standing at the dimly lit entrance leading into the back of the restaurant.

He stood aside and motioned for Carly to enter.

Carly walked through the door and the short hallway to a small office on the left.

A woman was sitting behind a small desk. The room was lit by one lamp on the desk.

The woman looked up as Carly stood outside the office.

"Come in and close the door." The woman spoke with no inflection in her voice.

Carly did so, and the woman motioned for her to sit opposite her desk.

"Tell me why you are here." The woman took a sip of tea and looked straight at Carly.

"There's been an incident at the facility." Carly fought to keep the desperation out of her voice. "AD did not work, and my CO team has not reported back to me in the allotted time."

"We already know about this incident." The woman did not take her eyes off Carly.

Carly couldn't hide her surprise. "How…how do you already know?"

"It is likely we have lost containment of various test subjects." The woman stood up as she spoke and made her way to the door, opening it and nodding to someone in the hallway. "Someone wishes to speak with you now."

As she stood, Carly couldn't help but notice this woman's tall, slender form.

Carly felt her body freezing up. The woman's calm demeanor and foreknowledge of a mishap were too much for her to take at once.

Before Carly could clear her head enough to think, the woman stepped aside, and a man appeared in the doorway.

He already had his gun out, equipped with a silencer. Two quick shots to Carly's chest and stomach.

Carly's vision dimmed as the man hoisted her over his shoulder, carrying her out of the room into a nearby alley.

He tossed her limp body in the trunk of a waiting vehicle, and drove off into the night, quickly disappearing amidst the throng of other cars.

Chapter 38

By the time Cowboy arrived in the Cayman Islands for his connecting charter flight to Texas, then on to Nevada, there were already news reports of chaos in Belgium.

“Residents of Sint-Truiden are using social media outlets to report explosions, police gunfire and civic discord in the town as authorities rush to quell the mysterious unrest…”

Cowboy watched the large monitor on the wall as he waited for his private charter plane to fuel up outside.

There were images and grainy videos of people running and screaming through the streets in the dark, as well as sounds of gunfire in the background.

Feeling relieved to be out of that area Cowboy looked over to see his pilot entering the small waiting area. “We are all fueled and ready to depart sir.”

Cowboy grabbed his small bag and stood up. “My things are all loaded as well?” Cowboy asked as he walked toward the pilot.

“Yes sir. You are all set.” The pilot nodded and smiled.

As Cowboy and the pilot were walking toward the plane the pilot looked back at the building. “Crazy what’s happening in Belgium, huh?”

“Yeah, glad I’m nowhere near any of that.” Cowboy nodded briefly.

The pilot nodded in return and gestured for Cowboy to walk up the short stairs into the main cabin. “We’ll be underway in a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable.”

As the plane lifted off from the runway, Cowboy reclined his seat and started dozing off.

In half a day he would be back in Nevada to catch up on building his off-grid home located there.

Maybe afterward he would finally be able to pay Romero the money he owed him for supplying some of the hardware for his latest job.

Soon all thoughts disappeared as Cowboy drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 39

“We must make ready for the end now Mr. Doren. Events will unfold very quickly.” Sal Bernardi sat across from Conrad at the upscale downtown café.

“Yes, of course. I will see that matters are upheld on my end…” Conrad hesitated. “And Carly?”

“Ms. Hennington is relieved of all duties effective this last evening.” Sal looked away from Conrad. “She is no longer a concern for anyone.”

Conrad nodded and took a sip of his coffee. “Excellent news.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Bernardi’s voice was suddenly filled with anger that surprised Conrad a little. “The plan was not supposed to unfold in this manner. Whether she was around or not wouldn’t affect anything.”

“I understand.” Conrad slowly set his cup down.

Sal looked around him, realizing he had drawn attention with his elevated volume, and sighed a little. “In any case, we must move forward quickly. Soon everything will be in chaos. We need to secure ourselves before that happens.”

“In forty-eight hours, you and I will be in a secure location. I assure you of that.” Conrad kept his tone low to alleviate some of the attention Sal’s brief outburst had brought their way.

“Damnit.” Sal swore quietly, scanning the room without moving his head. “I mustn’t let frustration get the best of me.”

Conrad saw his opportunity to comfort Sal and took it. “It’s understandable Mr. Bernardi. You’ve worked diligently to keep things on track and this event could not have been foreseen by anyone.”

“Regardless, someone had to pay for it. This time it was Ms. Hennington.” Sal mused aloud.

“There won’t be time for another mistake.” Conrad stepped in quickly to keep any insinuation of the threat away from himself. “As you said, events will unfold quickly. We must stay ahead of it.”

“See that you do, Mr. Doren.” Without another word, Sal got up and left the café.

Conrad sat a few moments longer, sipping his coffee.

He casually glanced around the room, checking to see that no one was paying him any attention.

Satisfied, Conrad stood up, tossing a fifty on the small table.

Genevieve’s last known whereabouts were at the facility in Belgium. She was there when communication was lost and the facility went dark.

Conrad could not allow himself any time to verify her status.

Sal Bernardi trusted Conrad enough to let him handle securing The Mountain for both of them. It would serve as their oasis during the upheaval soon to arrive.

“To Salem Airfield.” Conrad informed his driver as he let himself into the backseat, not waiting for his driver to open the door for him.

The driver nodded and pulled away from the curb.

There would be no returning to Cantor. Any disruptions caused by his and Carly’s sudden absence would be quickly dwarfed by global events.

*Abandon the job. Carly’s gone. EG happening now. Get to safety.* Conrad finished typing on his burner phone, took out the sim card, and broke it in half.

Conrad felt loyalty to none; however, he had a secret soft spot for his stepbrother, whom he recently charged with tarnishing Carly’s reputation.

That was all irrelevant now, with Carly dead and a breach at the facility.

The least he could do was give Gerald a heads up.

Conrad’s jet took about an hour to reach its destination, another private airfield in a rural area far removed from the bustling city he had left behind.

A car was waiting for him there.

Conrad drove himself alone to The Mountain.

It took a couple of attempts to find it. Conrad had never been there personally, and GPS was unreliable in this area, as Genevieve had planned it that way when selecting the location.

Sal had managed to obtain all of Genevieve’s security protocols for accessing the site, passing that information along to Conrad.

However, fully automating The Mountain would require Sal to be there in person. That was Sal’s insurance policy against Conrad trying to lock him out of it.

Conrad pulled into the large parking area left over from construction. He made his way along the hidden path to The Mountain’s entrance.

Conrad was immediately taken aback by the unusual foliage surrounding this hidden path. He stopped briefly to examine the trees with branches extending over the way and into each other.

He also studied the vibrant flowers littering the path on either side.

It was apparent this section of the larger forested area was intentionally designed. Conrad briefly wondered how it was possible to get these large trees planted so quickly.

Putting those thoughts aside, Conrad found his way to where he was supposed to see two artificial plant stalks growing side by side.

After several attempts, he located the correct stalks and pulled to lift the service panel below, revealing two identical handles.

Conrad turned the handles in opposite directions as instructed, and the ground beneath him hummed and vibrated softly as the earth separated about ten feet away.

Conrad secured the service panel and stood up, walking over to the newly revealed stairway leading down.

Ignoring the hallway with double doors on both sides, Conrad looked around for a janitor’s closet.

Next, he moved a large table aside with more than a little effort and looked around for a non-descript-looking aerosol can.

Twisting off the top, Conrad removed a key from inside and pulled out the middle shelf above where the can was sitting.

A keyhole was revealed behind where the shelf had been located.

Conrad inserted the key and the shelf, along with the wall behind it, slid to one side, revealing elevator doors.

Conrad knew these doors were not automatic by design, so it was necessary to pry them open manually from the outside.

They swooshed open as Conrad was reaching to pry open the doors, and two men quickly emerged from the elevator.

“Hands up! Turn around and get on your knees.” One of them was already pointing a gun directly at Conrad.

“Wait, I can explain. Genevieve sent me here.” Conrad turned around, hands above his head, and knelt to comply.

“Verify with code.” The other man said.

“Anthony Messina is a shit brother.” Conrad replied.

“Very well.” Conrad heard one of the men say from behind him. “You may stand. Please accompany us to the lower level.”

Conrad stood up and followed the two men into the elevator.

No one spoke as the elevator descended.

Finally, the display panels on the left and right of the doors showed they had arrived at their destination.

“Follow us sir.” The man who had held a gun to Conrad motioned for him to exit the elevator.

The two men led Conrad into what looked like a command center and escorted him to one of the workstations.

“Please enter your personal access code.” One of the men pointed to the keypad in front of Conrad. “Once it is verified our team will vacate and you will be left as the sole occupant.”

“Understood.” Conrad replied, entering the code he had memorized from Sal’s information.

Five seconds later, two distinct chimes sounded, and all the panels in the room turned solid green for three seconds, then returned to their previous screens.

“Very well sir. Our team will be fully vacated within thirty minutes.” The man informed Conrad.

Conrad nodded and turned back to the display screen. He saw it was requesting a new verification to take command of all autonomous functions within The Mountain.

Conrad needed to wait until the security team had gone, then go back topside himself and drive an hour away to inform Sal it was safe to come.

It would take Conrad and Sal together to fully take command of The Mountain. It was set up similarly to a nuclear launch protocol. Sal and Conrad would need to be in two separate rooms and input two different codes providing joint control of all functions.

Conrad didn’t know that Sal already had plans to eliminate him as soon as he made the call to Sal.

Sal would bring someone else with him to occupy The Mountain while civilization fell around them.

Chapter 40

"ohhh." Genevieve whimpered, opening her eyes slowly.

She cried out again, attempting to sit up, pulling the left side of her face away from the sticky, dried blood holding her cheek to the floor.

She found herself in complete darkness.

Sitting against the wall, Genevieve listened for any sounds. There were none.

Using the wall for support, she pushed herself to her feet, letting the wall guide her down the hallway.

*That fucking bastard!* Genevieve mentally berated herself for not suspecting Orin as the mole initially.

Something about him always made an alarm bell go off in her head. She ignored it in favor of The Group's decision to put him in charge of the facility.

That was clearly a mistake, but the time to do anything about it had passed.

She knew what floor she was on and had a general idea of how to get to an exit, but it was difficult in the dark to figure out her bearings exactly.

Her body ached in several places from where Orin had attacked her.

She would repay in spades if ever given a chance.

Genevieve's mind was busy, deducing what had happened at the facility and her current status there.

It was immediately evident that all power, including auxiliary, had failed.

Genevieve knew that was the only reason she was still alive and not fried to vapors by the auto-destruct protocol.

It also meant that any or all of the test subjects could be loose somewhere around her, anywhere really.

Hearing no sounds gave her both comfort and concern.

Comfort because she could not hear any commotion she would expect if test subjects were loose.

Concern because the facility was full of personnel. Where were they? She should hear yelling, screaming, or at least talking.

Rounding a corner in the hallway, Genevieve felt along the wall for a supply closet she knew to be on this side of the wall.

Of course, the ID scan locks would all be disabled now with auxiliary power out.

There was a way to manually unlock and open the doors. That required removing a panel from the bottom left side of the door and using a physical key.

This key would only work in the event of total power failure, as was the case presently.

Cursing in silence, Genevieve removed a key hanging from around her neck inside her blouse.

She slid down to the floor, using the door to support her.

Pulling off the panel from the bottom of the door, she felt around for the keyhole and inserted her key, turning it around once.

The door clicked sharply and opened.

Genevieve nearly fell into the room, forgetting to balance herself away from the door.

She crawled inside and shut the door behind her.

Once inside, she stood up, strolling forward until she could feel a cabinet on the back wall.

She pulled the cabinet open, fumbling around for the item that brought her to this room in the first place.

Eventually, her hands found the item, pulling it out of the cabinet.

Clicking it on, Genevieve had the small comfort of a flashlight to find her way out of the facility.

If Genevieve could manage her way out of the facility, a storage shed separate from the main building contained survival gear, rations, sat phones, and other supplies.

She didn't know how long she had been unconscious.

Genevieve was scheduled to remain at the facility for thirty-six hours before a helicopter shuttle returned to pick her up.

That time may have come and gone or not yet happened. She could not determine how much time had passed.

Genevieve returned to the door, holding the flashlight, and knelt down to unlock the door using the same access panel on this side of the door.

It clicked once again and unlatched, opening slightly.

Stepping into the hallway, Genevieve directed the beam of her flashlight in both directions. The hallway was empty.

She would need to climb one of the ladders in the elevator shaft to the surface and crank the doors open.

Barring unforeseen interruptions, she figured it would take about fifteen minutes to get to surface level.

*Where is everybody?* Genevieve wondered again as she cautiously moved toward the elevator doors.

She was almost to the elevator when she heard mumbling behind her.

Quickly turning, Genevieve pointed her flashlight in the direction of the sound.

She rounded the corner on the other side of the hallway and saw a woman.

Genevieve watched as the woman shuffled and mumbled down the hallway in her direction.

"Hello!" Genevieve called out, but the woman appeared not to hear.

"Are you assigned to this floor?" Genevieve lowered her voice, but it was tinged with anxiety.

The woman stopped suddenly and looked up at Genevieve, brushing both sides of her cheeks slowly with her hands.

"Can you help me?" The woman called out.

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

The woman's head snapped around, looking behind her, then back to Genevieve with concern.

"We can't stay here. It's not safe. We have to get out of here." The woman again looked back the way she had come.

"Why isn't it safe?" Genevieve cringed inside, not really wanting to know the answer.

Not waiting for the woman to answer, Genevieve spoke again. "Do you know a way out of here?"

The woman looked at Genevieve once more. "Yes, I can show you."

"Great." Genevieve replied. "Let's get moving then."

The woman smiled in a way Genevieve found slightly unsettling.

Genevieve already knew a way out, but she figured this woman could be an expendable distraction should they encounter any test subjects on their way out.

The woman started limp walking faster toward Genevieve. "Yes, let's go. I'll show you."

The woman hobbled past Genevieve, apparently heading toward the elevator herself.

As they were walking, the woman spoke up again. "I'm Tiffany. You have beautiful hair."

The woman's tone and odd introduction again unsettled Genevieve, but she kept following the woman anyway.

"Genevieve. Thank you." Genevieve slowed as the woman ahead of her also began walking slower.

The woman stopped after a few more steps and again started rubbing both sides of her face.

Genevieve walked up to where the woman was standing and shined the light on her face. "Is something the matter?"

The woman moved her hands down from her face, holding them at about the level of her breasts.

"Your light is different, but clear." The woman spoke while still looking ahead of them.

"My what?" Genevieve couldn't keep the frustration out of her voice. Perhaps this woman wasn't worth the trouble.

"I need you!" The woman shouted and lunged onto Genevieve, wrapping her body around Genevieve's midsection and clasping her hands around Genevieve's head.

Sharp, cold agony invaded Genevieve's mind. It was sudden and debilitating.

Genevieve dropped the flashlight and screamed as she struggled to pull the woman's hands off her head.

A few seconds later, the woman began screaming as well, violently letting go of Genevieve completely and throwing herself into the wall opposite them.

Genevieve fell to the floor, screaming at first, then heaving as she vomited intensely.

Having thrown herself into the wall, the woman was now curled up on the floor, also screaming.

As Genevieve's retching slowed, the woman's screaming was replaced by a more profound, guttural sound.

Genevieve pushed herself farther away from the woman as she continued dry heaving, backing herself into a wall on the opposite side of the corridor.

Genevieve watched as the woman contorted her body several times and continued making sounds that resembled growling.

Getting onto her hands and knees, the woman moved slightly toward Genevieve, continuing to growl.

Genevieve covered her head as best she could still disoriented, head throbbing.

The woman growled and groaned at her a few more times. Then she got up to her feet and ran down the hallway, back in the same direction she had come.

Genevieve watched her run around the corner, groaning and growling in a low, impossible tone.

"Fuck." Genevieve said aloud as she squeezed her still throbbing head.

Using the wall to get back to her feet, Genevieve made her way to the elevator shaft.

It was already open.

Genevieve paused, unsure what to make of it, then walked closer to the open shaft, shining her light in all directions.

At the opening, Genevieve scanned up and down the shaft with her light, seeing no movement in either direction.

Genevieve looked around at her level inside the shaft and quickly located both side ladders.

She chose the one on the right, grabbing it, stepping onto the ladder and into the shaft completely.

Genevieve began climbing up the shaft, stopping periodically to scan below her with the light.

After some time had passed, she couldn't think straight enough to tell how much, she found herself at the top level.

Using one hand to hold onto the ladder, Genevieve tried to turn the crank that would open the elevator doors.

The crank was too tricky to open with one hand.

"Fuck!" Genevieve yelled out, her voice echoing in the shaft.

She twisted her legs around the ladder to hold her and tucked the flashlight in her pants.

Using both hands, Genevieve gripped the crank and twisted it with all her strength.

For a few seconds, it didn't budge. Then, slowly it began turning.

Genevieve was sweating profusely as she managed to open the top-level doors enough to squeeze through them.

Crawling out of the shaft and onto the floor of the ground-level security room, Genevieve turned over on her back and breathed deeply for several moments.

"Ahhhhhhh!" A sudden yell from somewhere down in the shaft startled her.

Genevieve sat up quickly and scooted away from the shaft instinctively.

Now she could hear a groaning sound and more yelling. It didn't quite sound normal to her.

Genevieve quickly spun around and crawled over to the side of the shaft.

She tried to yank the panel off, intending to crank the door shut from the outside.

Examining the panel more closely, Genevieve could see that it was screwed on. She could not get it off without a screwdriver or drill.

Genevieve cursed aloud and looked back over into the shaft.

The sound was getting closer.

She couldn't bring herself to shine her flashlight down the shaft and determine the source of the groaning and yelling.

Getting to her feet quickly, Genevieve ran toward the exit door. The manual lock on the exit door was disengaged. This meant it couldn't lock at all.

She turned to grab a cord from one of the computers at the security desk just inside the door.

She could hear the strange groaning clearly. Something was crawling up the ladder to her level.

Whatever it was, it was nearly there.

Opening the exit door, Genevieve turned to push it shut, wrapping the cord around both latches of the double doors to prevent them from being able to open from the inside.

Genevieve sprinted across the opening between the main building and the outside storage shed.

As she ran, she was already getting ready to unlock the storage shed door with her key, as she had done below in the facility earlier.

Approaching the door, Genevieve could see that the door was already open just a bit. Someone had already been inside.

Cursing again, Genevieve crept up to the door and pushed it open a little.

The room wasn't completely dark. Someone had turned on a battery lantern and left it atop one of the big tables in the middle of the shed.

The rest of the shed was dark beyond light offered by the lantern.

Genevieve fumbled to quickly get out her flashlight and shine it around the entrance area.

"Hello! Anybody!" She called out as she clicked on the flashlight.

No answer.

Stepping inside, Genevieve pushed the door shut behind her, relieved to hear the lock click as the door fully closed.

She walked around the shed's walls, searching for anybody lurking inside.

The shed was empty.

Genevieve could see that someone had left in a hurry.

Large lockers where gear and supplies were stored hung open. A few items were scattered across the floor between the lockers and a large table in the middle of the shed.

Genevieve started walking over to the lockers when a sharp pain in her head made her double over.

She felt the pain radiate down her body, terminating in her abdomen.

Her vocal cords seized, and she couldn't scream as the pain intensified briefly, then subsided.

Genevieve realized she was utterly exhausted. She would need to rest before she could risk trying to drive one of the ATVs in the shed back to any kind of civilization.

It then occurred to her that there may not be any civilization to get back to anymore.

She had to secure transport back to The States before that happened.

But not before she rested just a bit.

Genevieve grabbed one of the oversized parkas from a locker and spread it out on the side of a large table, facing away from the entrance door.

She sat down on the parka and felt her body ache with relief.

Leaning against the table, Genevieve closed her eyes and quickly passed into a deep sleep.

Upon waking, Genevieve will feel two things distinctly.

An urgency to get to The Mountain and a new hunger she has never known before.

Chapter 41

"Local news reports and social media posts show increasing violence and unrest spreading across Western Europe and into Central Europe as several EU leaders have declared a state of emergency. Airports are being shut down all across Europe in an effort to ensure public safety as authorities grapple with…."

Charles Sr. watched in horrific fascination the images and videos of people jumping onto unsuspecting victims, wrapping themselves around the bodies of their victims, and dragging them to the ground as they appeared to squeeze the victim's head.

The news anchor continued speaking as these images were replaced by others showing explosions and smashed-up vehicles on a freeway in Italy.

"Should we be worried? Should we get out of town?" Charles's wife pulled him out of his trance by shoving his arm to get his attention.

"What? No…No, that's way over in Europe. It's intense, but it's far away from us." Charles attempted to sound authoritative and soothing at the same time.

"Maybe we should get out of town before it gets here, and our freeways look like that." Charlene pointed to a particularly graphic aerial video showing semi-trucks jackknifed around smaller vehicles, with cars piled up going both directions on a major freeway. "Apparently, all that caught THEM by surprise."

Charlene emphasized "them" as she pointed at the destroyed vehicles, some smoking from being recently on fire.

Pausing for a moment, Charlene added, "And what about the kids?"

Charles looked away from the television, glancing over at a family portrait on the wall leading into the kitchen.

"It'll get handled there way before it ever gets here. They're shutting down airports. It'll get contained there and things will calm down in a couple weeks, tops. You'll see."

Charlene glanced back at the television and saw the talking heads starting to weigh in on the European situation.

"Well, it's almost eleven and we both have to get up early…and get the kids moving. It's Friday tomorrow." She stretched before getting up off the couch.

"Yeah, I'll be up in just a minute." Charles watched news flashes roll across the bottom of the screen.

"See that you are. I need your help with the monsters in the morning." Charlene reminded him as she shambled up the stairs.

"Yeah, I will," Charles was only half listening to her, trying to simultaneously focus on the scrolling news updates and expert commentary.

One of the talking heads was in the middle of speculating on the cause of the mass disturbance…" It's still way to early to say with any certainty, however, it appears that authorities are handling things systematically by locking down major airports and railways in their respective countries…"

Charles yawned and looked at his phone. It was now five minutes past eleven.

He thought about struggling to get his kids moving early in the morning and suddenly felt very tired.

Yawning again, he pushed up from the couch and forced himself up the stairs to bed.

*Things in Europe will settle down again soon.* He stopped to check on his three youngest children before heading to bed.

Maybe by tomorrow, he would feel less alarmed by the whole thing.

Chapter 42

“Alle containers geverifieerd en beveiligd.” Jan Blyweert radioed into his walkie, signaling to his foreman that the container ship departing the Port of Antwerp, en route to Boston, was ready to leave.

A cool breeze gently danced across the air as Jan walked between the stacked shipping containers, taking one last sweep of the area before finishing his ten-hour shift for the day.

It was unusual for Jan to be finishing up his shift alone. Usually, at least one other person went with him when verifying containers destined for international ports.

The past couple of days had changed all that. People were calling in sick all over Antwerp, fleeing the city as mass hysteria took hold due to recent social unrest.

Jan had little doubt that the Port would soon be shut down, only barely operating with a skeleton crew.

The ship he was inspecting would be leaving within the hour, and it may be one of the last.

Jan walked down the narrow path between stacks of container boxes and headed for the access bridge between the ship and the dock. He was already a little anxious about his drive home.

*Je bent helemaal alleen. Het zal geen pijn doen*.

The voice suddenly invaded Jan's mind, instantly bringing him to his knees.

Angelika looked down at her prey, already knowing his thoughts and fears.

As she had sampled different minds in her trek across Belgium, Angelika took in knowledge from each, including language.

Her attack always started in her victim's minds. This paralyzed them, allowing her to take mind energy without a struggle.

She refined her skills significantly in a brief time. From some, she would take everything, leaving them dead. Other times little more than mindless things that would either die from a lack of synaptic cohesion or shuffle about in a primitive hunger with no ability to control it.

She was also developing a new skill.

Angelika could make some of her victims become more like her, thinking, calculating, and, most importantly, obedient to her.

She would take Jan and keep him.

Jan held his hands around his head, reeling from the pain as Angelika hopped off the container and landed just a few feet from him.

*Wees niet bang voor mij.*

Angelika moved closer to Jan, pulling his hands away from his head effortlessly as she paralyzed his body with her thoughts.

Jan felt hands wrapping around his head and then cold electricity penetrating his skin, slowing advancing down his body.

His sense of self began to fade as he lost the ability to think and could only feel what was happening to him instead.

Soon Jan lost all consciousness as Angelika released his head and he fell limply to the ground.

Angelika stood motionless over Jan's body. Soon he would regain consciousness and be hers.

The others Angelika had made hers were finishing up their own sustenance gathering close by.

Angelika had taught them to be discreet, not draw unnecessary attention.

But the victims they left behind were already busy causing mayhem across the country, along with other test subjects from the facility.

She still felt the restraints around her body. She was driven by a powerful impulse to quickly distance herself from that prison.

The chaos she and others precipitated across Belgium and beyond was spreading quickly.

She had to move fast to get out of Europe ahead of it, and this cargo ship was her best option at the moment.

Angelika called out to the others and felt them drawing closer to her, some more reluctantly than others.

She would take the ship's bridge crew and other workers on board after they cleared the mainland.

A new land of freedom beckoned to her across the Atlantic.

Chapter 43

Carly let out a quiet breath.

Headlights shining directly toward her were nearly blinding, but as her vision cleared, she could also make out a man digging a hole in front of her.

The ground beneath where she lay was cool, and the air quite still.

Darkness hovered around the edges of light cast by the headlights.

As the fog began to clear from Carly’s mind, it all came back to her, talking to the lady at the Chinese restaurant and then being shot in the chest and stomach.

She remembered the pain in her abdomen, first dull, then increasing in intensity.

Carly let out a soft whimper, unable to stop herself.

The man she recognized as the one who shot her stopped digging and looked over at her.

Carly closed her eyes, forcing herself to remain motionless.

She heard the sound of digging again after several more seconds.

Waiting a bit longer, Carly opened her eyes just a bit to see the man busily finishing up the hole wherein he intended to bury her body.

She would need to move quickly, or she would be underground soon.

Feeling behind her and trying to remain still, Carly searched for something to use as a weapon.

There was nothing.

Keeping her head as still as possible, Carly glanced around for a rock, a stick, anything.

She was beginning to feel desperate when she spotted the man’s gun lying on a sweatshirt opposite her side of the hole he was digging.

Grabbing two fistfuls of dirt behind her, Carly sat up suddenly and threw the soil at the man’s face.

He grunted and stumbled backward in the hole, tripping a little over his shovel.

As the man tried to steady himself using one hand and rub the dirt out of his eyes with the other, Carly jumped across the hole, landing next to the sweatshirt.

She grabbed the gun and turned to shoot the man just as he made a half-blind attempt to swing at her with the shovel.

Carly stepped out of the shovel’s path and fired continuously into the man.

She continued firing until the semi-automatic pistol cleared empty.

The man had sunk down in the hole, his back against one side and legs scrunched up in front of him. He sat there motionless, staring with blank eyes at the other side of the hole.

Carly lowered her gun and was again overtaken with intense pain in her midsection.

As she hunched over in agony, Carly pulled up her bloody shirt, revealing the bullet wound in her stomach.

Pulling up the shirt a bit more, she could see another bullet wound just to the right of her left breast.

Carly rolled herself over, crying out in pain once again, and pulled her shirt completely off.

This time examining the back of her shirt, Carly could see two distinct, blood-stained holes.

Apparently, the bullets had gone clean through her.

Carly struggled to regain control of herself and settle down enough to think in her amped-up state.

*The Group took me out.*

Carly was immediately aware of two things. The Group had decided to take her out, and test subjects had escaped the facility.

The only plus of those two things was that The Group thought she was dead until their hitman lying in the hole meant for her failed to check-in.

That may not matter, however, if The Group was more concerned about what happened at the facility.

Likely, every member of The Group would now be looking after their safety as test subjects spread out unchecked across Belgium and possibly beyond.

Carly didn’t know how far along the formula scheduled for release was when contact with the facility was lost.

Nor did she know the capabilities of the test subjects as a whole.

Her only option was to look out for herself and stay off The Group’s radar long enough to find safety, wherever that may be.

Carly was guaranteed a spot at one of The Group’s secure locations, but that was no longer an option.

Carly looked down at the sweatshirt on the ground next to her.

She reached over and picked it up, pulling it over her to replace the bloody shirt she had been wearing.

Pushing herself to her feet, Carly looked at the man in the hole and got into his vehicle.

He dug the hole while the engine idled to avoid draining his battery.

Somehow thinking about that made her laugh out loud as she put the vehicle in reverse and backed up to turn around.

Carly looked down at the display panel in the car to see her current location.

Her unknown assailant had driven her fifty miles away from the city into a remote and unpopulated forested area.

Carly put the vehicle in park and clicked the trunk open.

She got out of the car and walked back to the trunk area.

Her phone and small purse were pushed to one side of the trunk.

Carly picked up her phone, removed the back, and took out the sim card.

She grabbed her purse as well, walking back to the driver’s side and reentering the vehicle.

Carly would break the sim card in two and toss it somewhere along the road and her phone somewhere else.

She didn’t want to be tracked by it.

The car likely had a tracking device somewhere as well.

She would need to ditch it soon, just in case The Group wasn’t too busy to follow up on their hitman.

Carly drove along the barely perceptible side road until she could see what looked like a country road ahead.

Stopping the car, she turned off the engine and popped the hood.

Carly pulled off the positive and negative terminals of the battery and slammed the hood back down.

Walking the rest of the way to the country road, Carly continued through the night for about four hours, frequently stopping due to pain in her abdomen.

She could see darkness giving way to the twilight of dawn as a small gas station appeared ahead of her.

The gas station was closed but did not look abandoned. There were no vehicles around.

Carly removed her sweatshirt and used it to break one of the glass panels on the front door.

Putting the sweatshirt back on, she reached inside to unlock the deadbolt.

Once inside, Carly located a first aid kit behind the checkout counter. She also found a sewing needle and fishing line in one of the aisles.

Using the only bathroom in the gas station, Carly spent the next two hours cleaning her wounds and attempting to sew and cauterize them herself.

She couldn’t reach the exit wounds in her back with the needle.

Instead, Carly tried cauterizing them with a lighter.

The pain from sewing herself up in front and burning herself with a lighter in the back made her repeatedly cry out and pause her work.

She dropped the lighter three times, trying to burn the wounds in her back.

By the time she was finished, Carly’s body and mind were spent.

Her legs were wobbly. Carly tried to lower herself to the bathroom floor. She stumbled a little and flopped down onto the hard tile unceremoniously.

Catching herself by her hands and knees, Carly collapsed on her side, just underneath the sink, drifting off into unconsciousness.

Chapter 44

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 bit closer 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 pushed the booth back, causing the two men holding him over his meal to fall into the booth, next turning to head butt the man speaking 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, 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 phone. He practiced 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 either meant 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 it 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 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.

Chapter 45

Conrad turned onto a side road a little over an hour’s drive from The Mountain.

Stopping his vehicle after about a quarter mile, he took out his burner phone and called an answering service back in the city.

The call went straight to voice mail.

“The garden is beautiful.” Conrad ended the call after speaking.

With the vehicle still running, Conrad turned around and headed back to the main road, intending to drive back to The Mountain and wait for Sal to arrive by his own means.

About one hundred yards from the main road, a single shot zipped past Conrad’s head, clipping his ear.

Conrad cried out in pain and veered suddenly to his right, instinctively reacting to the pain.

His car plunged into a deep ditch beside the road and suddenly stopped, one rear tire coming up off the ground.

The airbag deployed, walloping Conrad in his cheek, causing him to cry out in pain again.

As the engine stalled and fell silent, Conrad opened his door and fell out in the ditch next to his vehicle.

It was almost a hundred degrees outside, but Conrad barely noticed as he tried to quickly clear his head and figure out what to do next.

A few seconds later, he could hear a car heading his way, likely the shooter.

Delaying no longer, Conrad stood up, running into the tree line on the other side of the ditch.

He heard the approaching vehicle screech to a halt somewhere behind him, and two doors slam.

Conrad kept running as fast as he could, tripping once over a root but not slowing.

The shooter and his partner would likely pursue Conrad until they could confirm the kill.

As he ran, Conrad’s mind sifted through different possibilities.

His first thought was that someone in the café must have overheard his conversation with Sal and somehow put a tracking device on his vehicle.

He also considered that Sal may have double-crossed him.

Neither possibility seemed out of bounds.

Conrad needed to either disappear quickly or neutralize his assassins.

After twenty minutes of hard running through the woods, Conrad took a breath, sitting between some tall grass and a tree to conceal his location.

As he worked to slow his breathing and listen for any sounds, he tried to figure out his next steps, presuming, of course, he made it out of the woods alive.

Gerald would help him. Conrad was not above using his stepbrother to help him hide from The Group.

The Group and/or Sal would not spend much time trying to find him with all that was happening in the world.

If Conrad could make it to Gerald, he would be safe, at least temporarily.

Stopping himself from planning anything beyond getting to Gerald, Conrad focused on staying alive for the time being.

He sat patiently between the tall grass and tree for an hour, waiting and listening.

Conrad risked peeking to survey his immediate vicinity, hearing nothing beyond the usual forest sounds.

Nothing unusual.

Sitting back down for a moment, Conrad listened again. Still nothing.

Slowly Conrad emerged from his hiding spot and began walking in the opposite direction of the road where his vehicle crashed.

He figured it would take about thirty minutes to reach another road parallel to where he ran into the woods.

Then he could head in the opposite direction on that road, possibly finding a gas station or somewhere else to make a call to Gerald.

He would wait for Gerald somewhere nearby, random, and away from travelers.

Conrad walked a little and stopped to listen as he made his way toward the parallel road.

Conrad didn’t know if Sal was aware of Gerald or not, but Gerald was his only option.

He would warn Gerald to be cautious and check for tails.

Gerald looked up to Conrad as a big brother, and Conrad had used that to his advantage on more than one occasion.

This time would be no different.

Conrad emerged from the trees and turned to the side road as he practiced precisely what he would say to Gerald.

Everyone was expendable to Conrad in his new fight for survival.

Chapter 46

“I am so relieved to see you alive bratan!” Orin rushed to hug Andre as he stepped out of the vehicle parked between two large barns in the countryside, just outside Minsk.

“And I You.” Andre chuckled, returning the embrace.

“You lost people.” Orin frowned, taking inventory of the others exiting Andre’s vehicle and a few around it.

“They knew the risks. I prepared them all. It was necessary. It had to be done.” Andre’s somber tone let Orin know he also felt sadness for the losses they had endured securing the artifact.

“But, you got it. Did you?” Orin inquired anxiously.

“Yes. We did.” Andre waved his arm to one of the people standing beside another vehicle.

She nodded, turning to retrieve something from the back of the vehicle.

“It is with us now. The Group shall never lay eyes on it again.” Andre assured Orin.

Orin placed both his hands around Andre’s shoulders. “Thank you. From my heart.”

Andre nodded, and Orin stepped back as the woman who had gone to retrieve something approached them both.

“This is it.” Andre gestured toward the object held by the woman.

“Yes, the artifact as I saw it first. Nothing remarkable when powered down.” Orin chuckled lightly.

“And we shall keep it that way.” Andre added, turning to look at his soldiers, who nodded in return.

Andre turned away from Orin momentarily. “We must make ready for what comes next. Chaos follows us even now!”

Andre’s soldiers hurriedly began unpacking the vehicles as Andre motioned for Orin to follow him into one of the barns nearby.

“We unleashed a deadly thing in that pit of abomination.” Andre spoke quietly as they entered the barn.

Standing inside the barn talking to someone else, Mila walked over to stand next to Andre and Orin.

“Yes, I feared the test subjects may escape as a result of your attack. We knew it could happen.” Orin affirmed, emulating Andre’s look of concern.

“How bad is it really Andre?” Mila spoke up now. “I’ve seen the crazy videos of people jumping on each other…grabbing the heads.”

“It is what you see Mila.” Andre admitted. “It is much worse than what it shows in videos.”

“Things are shutting down, one country after another Andre.” Orin interjected. “Are we safe here?”

“Not here. This will not be safe when the abominations come to Minsk.” Andre informed them both. “We must travel into Russia. To a place more remote. Away from roads and people.”

Orin nodded.

“When do we leave?” Mila asked, clearly alarmed.

“Tomorrow night, no later.” Andre replied. “We must not delay.”

“What about the artifact?” Orin looked back toward Andre’s vehicles.

“It comes with us. We must bury it where we are going. Keep it far out of the way.” Andre followed Orin’s gaze.

Andre patted Orin and Mila on the shoulders. “Tonight and tomorrow, we gather supplies and pack for the journey. Soon we will be to safety. No one can get us where we are going.”

Mila forced a smile.

Orin nodded, voicing his agreement. “Yes, to safety.”

Andre patted each of them a few more times on the shoulders and turned back to his people, joining them in gathering supplies.

Mila spoke up first as Andre departed. “Will that be soon enough Orin?”

“It has to be my dear.” Orin turned to look at Mila. “This is our only option now.”

Chapter 47

"Rin, we must hurry. This is the last plane out of London. We discussed it already. We can't miss this flight." Haruto's eyes pleaded with Rin to see things his way. "We are almost to security. You agreed."

Rin rubbed her temples and pressed her hands against her head, trying to push the headache away. "I know Haruto. I just don't feel well."

"That man who attacked you at the hotel was just some crazy person…like we saw on the news." Haruto tried to encourage Rin along in line.

"Daddy, are we leaving soon?" Haruto looked down at his young daughter as she squeezed his hand. "Is mommy okay?"

"Yes, Ichika. We are leaving soon. Mommy is fine. We're going to see Papa. Are you excited?" Haruto tried to appear happy and relaxed, but Ichika wasn't entirely buying it.

"Maybe we should stay and I can see a doctor here." Rin slowed a little in line.

Haruto put his arm around her waist, trying to encourage her forward. "The doctors are better in Tokyo. They will help you. We just need to leave this madness behind."

Rin was still hesitant.

Haruto turned to face Rin squarely, forcing himself to remain calm. "Rin, please. I love you so much. I want to protect you and Ichika. Please let me do that now."

Rin looked up at Haruto, then nodded. "Yes, Okay. I know you are trying to protect us. We can go."

As they took their seats on the plane Rin's headache intensified. She popped a few more Ibuprofen into her mouth and downed them with water.

Rin tried to focus on her breathing and calm herself internally. Their direct flight from London to Tokyo would take about eleven hours.

Haruto looked around, trying not to appear anxious, as he took inventory of the other passengers. Haruto would not admit it to Rin, Ichika, or anybody else, but Rin's attack had unnerved him deeply.

Watching in horror as a stranger jumped on Rin, wrapping its hands around her head in downtown London. Haruto repeatedly punched at Rin's attacker, tearing him off of her. Fleeing with little Ichika being nearly trampled was almost more than he could manage.

"You want your tablet, Flower?" Haruto put his arm around Ichika. "Watch some cartoons?"

Ichika nodded, still looking uncertain. Ichika could clearly sense Haruto's tension but did not understand it.

"Yes Daddy." Ichika smiled at him, then looked down at her empty hands, attempting to hide her own uncertainty.

It took another forty-five minutes for the cabin doors to be closed. Haruto felt his tension rising by the minute, fearing the flight would be canceled at the last second.

Finally, the plane began to move away from the gate.

Haruto sighed loudly, distracting Ichika from her cartoons briefly. He patted her head, smiling, and she returned to watching her little screen.

Looking over at Rin, Haruto was relieved to see her sleeping soundly. He smiled again, feeling a little more tension lift.

As the plane took off, Haruto could feel muscles in his body relaxing. He glanced once more at Ichika and felt his own eyelids getting heavy.

*Soon.* He thought. *We'll be safe in Tokyo.*

Chapter 48

“You like coffee?” Minjun gestured toward Cowboy, holding a large pot of hot water.

“Yes, I do. Quite a bit.” Cowboy replied, smiling at Minjun.

“People think coffee healthy.” Minjun began speaking as he poured the water into his coffee maker. “It is, but that only half story.”

“I see.” Cowboy looked around the room.

“Drinking boiled cleans water, then keeps body clean too.” Minjun opened a cupboard door to examine some cups inside.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Cowboy watched Minjun select three cups and place them on the counter next to his coffee maker.

“Please sit Cowboy. My son drink with us.

Cowboy sat down as instructed, waiting for Minjun to join him.

“You come for herbs like before?” Minjun asked, finally sitting next to Cowboy.

“Yes, I need them as soon as possible. I don’t know when I’ll get back this way.” Cowboy examined a painting in the small shop where Minjun conducted his business.

“It crazy what happening out there.” Minjun waved his arms toward the door. “Craziness be here soon too, you think?”

“I don’t know. It could.” Cowboy sighed, wanting to get back on the road but not wanting to be rude.

Minjun’s coffee maker beeped twice, and he stood up to pour the steaming liquid into three cups.

As he did so, a young man entered through the shop door, carrying bags of groceries.

“Hello father. I have all the things you wanted.” The young man nodded at Cowboy, then set the bags down on the shop counter.

“Thank you, son.” Minjun handed a full cup to his son, then one to Cowboy.

“Cowboy, please meet my son, Luke.” Minjun sat next to Cowboy and motioned for his son to join them.

“Pleasure.” Cowboy stood up to shake Luke’s hand.

Luke took Cowboy’s hand, shaking it twice, then sat down by his father.

“I have everything you need here. All of it you will need.” Minjun lowered his cup to speak.

“Great.” Cowboy replied, trying not to sound impatient.

“My son thinks we should leave town. You agree?” Minjun eyed Cowboy skeptically, taking another sip of his coffee.

“I don’t tell people what to do.” Cowboy paused to take a sip of his coffee. It was quite pleasant. “I’m heading north for a while. Maybe you should listen to your son. Get somewhere safe if you can.”

Luke nodded. “He’s right father. We should…and soon.”

Minjun shook his head, then spoke up. “I hate to leave shop. I build it up myself. Now I have many customer. I make money here. I do well.”

“Things could get chaotic here soon. It will be difficult to leave the city when everyone’s trying to get out at the same time.” Cowboy looked down at his coffee, avoiding eye contact. “You may want to consider that but make the choice for yourself either way.”

“Maybe my son right Cowboy.” Minjun looked over to Luke. “He try to look after me. I am stubborn old man.”

Luke sighed. “Father, you and I are all that’s left of our family here. We need to look after each other now.”

Minjun’s eyes moistened a little, and he looked down at his coffee. “Yes, son, I know.”

Cowboy finished the rest of his coffee, setting his cup on a shelf next to him.

Minjun looked over at his shop counter and stood up. “I get the herbs. Be ready soon.”

Cowboy nodded as Minjun disappeared into the back of his shop.

“Thank you for encouraging him to leave the city. I’ve been pressing him on it for a week now. He is stubborn.” Luke stood up and reached over to take Cowboy’s empty cup as he walked over to a sink next to the coffee maker.

“Not necessary. I just told him what I was doing.” Cowboy replied, standing up himself.

“Our mother died two years ago from cancer. It’s just the two of us. I have no siblings.” Luke explained as he rinsed out the cups.

Minjun emerged from the back of his shop as Luke was speaking, heading over to his shop counter. “This everything you want.”

Cowboy took out a wad of cash and handed it to Minjun. “Thank you. Maybe I’ll see you again when things settle down.”

“Yes, I like you Cowboy. You good customer.” Minjun bowed slightly, taking the money from Cowboy.

Cowboy tipped his hat to Minjun and waived once at Luke. “Till next time. Stay safe.”

Leaving the store, Cowboy focused on getting himself out of town.

It was a day-and-a-half drive to Idaho, and he hadn’t made any progress on his home in Nevada.

That would have to wait now, pending developments around the world.

Driving from Nevada to Idaho, Cowboy could see evidence that people were getting nervous about European unrest.

There were a few areas of congested traffic, and it was apparent some vehicles were packed up for a long trip across the country.

It amused Cowboy to think that so many people felt they would be safer far away from where they lived.

He supposed many more would feel that way if Deena’s prediction bore out and civilization did indeed collapse.

Pulling over at a gas station, Cowboy pulled out one of his burner phones to call Georgina.

“Good afternoon, Georgina speaking.” She answered on the second ring.

“Hi Georgy, this is Cowboy.” Cowboy was quite fond of Georgina, but he wasn’t a big talker.

“Hello young man!” Georgina always lit up when he called to speak with her. “You gonna pay us a visit sugar?”

Cowboy chucked, despite himself. “No Mam. I’m driving up across the country in the opposite direction.”

“That’s too bad. I would absolutely love to cook you up a tasty home cooked meal baby.” Georgina genuinely sounded disappointed, but that’s how she always sounded when Cowboy informed her he wasn’t on his way to visit, which was almost every time he called.

“I’m sure it would be delicious as always Georgie. I’m actually calling because I need you to check the animal shelter for a lost dog.”

“I see.” Georgina paused, then added, “Are you sure sugar?”

“Yes, try to do it as soon as possible. It’s urgent.” Cowboy kept his tone calm.

“Understood. Will do.” Georgina’s tone was now much less bubbly. “I will do it today.”

“Thank you, Georgina. I’ll call in a few days to check up on you if I can.” Cowboy ended the call and threw his burner phone in the passenger seat.

Being the cautious and paranoid type, Cowboy had taught Georgina and Sam a few phrases that held entirely different meanings from what was stated.

The message he had just delivered to Georgina meant that she should gather all her things and get to Sam as quickly as possible.

Cowboy wanted to know that Georgina was safe with Sam.

He felt confident Sam could look after himself and that no one would get to Sam in the middle of a secluded swamp.

Cowboy had practiced the entire routine with Georgina on two separate occasions when he visited his mother’s house in Louisiana.

Georgina knew to drop everything, get her things, and get to Sam. She also knew to call no one about what she was doing or where she was going.

Georgina had no family, aside from Cowboy and Sam.

She would be safe with Sam, and he would look after her. They would both be safe in the swamp.

Cowboy had no idea how much time he had before things started going sideways stateside. He wanted to be underground in Idaho before things fell apart.

He was prepared to stay underground for years if necessary.

Chapter 49

"Hilfe!" The man cried out loudly as others ran screaming.

The woman who used to be known as Magda clutched his head tightly, her body wrapped around him.

Saliva, lightly sparkling, dripped from her mouth as tiny tentacles began to emerge from the tips of her fingers and bore themselves into his head.

The pain was unbearable, a mixture of cold and electricity falling in a wave over this body.

The man was called Elias. He owned a small luggage boutique about a block down the street. He was quiet, married to the same woman for almost thirty years.

Now that life was over.

Elias fell to the ground, quickly losing any capability of rational thought as his mind drifted into a numb awareness of light and sound.

People of Ansbach, Germany, had been watching the news reports along with the rest of the world, falsely thinking themselves safe from the chaos recently spilling into their country from Belgium.

Magda, like Angelika, had escaped the facility shortly after Andre's attack.

However, she was not as far along in her transformation into what she would become.

Magda's awareness was primitive, less calculating. Her drive instinctual.

She would not become like Angelika. Magda, or what used to be Magda, would primarily operate on instinct, following her targets' light energy.

Some she would drain completely, leaving them dead.

Others, like Elias, would become something more primitive than even Magda, simple stimulus/response organisms. They would seek out targets, drain them, and move on.

The pattern that began inside the facility when Magda took her first victim would now spread like an ink stain around Europe and eventually the world.

Local police in Ansbach quickly responded to this first attack, as they were still functional.

"Hey! Halt!"

Two officers arrived within a couple minutes of Magda's attack, yelling for her to stop, then taking aim at her with their guns.

One shot into her center mass, throwing her backward off Elias.

She lay on the ground, not moving, as the officers hurried over to assess the scene.

One called for an ambulance, while the other surveyed the area around the attack.

Leaning over to check her pulse, he detected none. Standing up, he shook his head at his partner, "Kein Puls." She had no pulse.

People who had scurried away began moving closer to catch a glimpse of the aftermath.

"Treten Sie zurück!" The officers now found themselves on crowd control, no longer attending to Magda or her victim.

Their attention on the swelling crowd of gawkers, holding their phones up to snap photos and get a quick video, the police didn't notice Magda rolling over onto her side.

"Sie steht auf!" A man yelled, pointing toward Magda to get the officers' attention.

One of the police turned just as Magda reached him and yanked one of his legs out from under him.

People began screaming, and, once again, the crowd fled in a panic.

Falling, the officer cried out as his partner rushed to help him, wrapping his arms around Magda, trying to pull her off his fallen comrade.

He could not.

She quickly pulled along his body, wrapping her hands around his head, squeezing tight.

As she squeezed, the helpless officer cried in agony again while his partner yelled and screamed for her to let go.

Magda finished this one quickly.

Turning in a flash, she did the same thing to the officer grabbing her.

He collapsed, spasming, as she moved with him down to the ground.

This one she finished rapidly as well.

Looking up, Magda jumped to her feet and moved with a swiftness seemingly impossible.

She would satisfy her hunger this evening, leaving many dead.

Those who did not die would rise, seeking to quiet their hunger.

Chapter 50

Carly felt a hand shaking her arm. “Hey lady, are you okay?”

*Fuck! Stop yelling in my ear.* Carly squinted, seeing a teenage boy hunched over her.

“Should I call an ambulance?” The boy’s face was scrunched up in concern.

Carly coughed twice, then cleared her throat.

“No!....no, that won’t be necessary.” Carly realized her throat was bone dry. “Can you get me some water?”

Carly instinctively felt her wounds, surprised to find them already healing.

“Water?” The boy let go of her arm, standing up. “Uh, yeah sure. Be back in a sec.”

She tested her body, turning this way and that, seeing if any pain registered. She was achy but nothing like the night before.

The boy returned quickly with a bottle of water as Carly struggled to sit up against the bathroom wall.

“My name’s Henry. What’s yours?” Handing her the water, he stood at the doorway awaiting her response.

“Valerie.” Carly replied after downing a large gulp of water. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too.” The boy shifted back and forth on his feet. “You look pretty rough. My parents own this store, but I usually open up on the weekends myself. We’re not too busy on a Sunday morning.”

Carly nodded, taking another sip of water.

“I thought someone broke in here. I almost called the police and waited outside. I’m glad I didn’t now, though.” Henry smiled as if he fancied himself a gentleman.

“Me too. Thanks Henry.” Carly forced a smile.

Carly took another sip of water. “Can you help me stand up Henry?”

“Ah, yeah. Of course.” Henry knelt down, offering his hands to Carly.

“Thank you Henry.” Henry helped Carly out of the bathroom and into the hallway.

“Henry, I know we just met, but I need to ask you a huge favor.” Carly looked into Henry’s eyes, locking them to hers.

“Ah, yeah. Of course. Anything.” Henry quickly answered.

“Please, you can’t tell anyone you found me here. Okay. There’s a dangerous man after me. He beat me up last night.” Carly forced herself to tear up.

Henry hesitated, looking back toward the broken entry door and then at Carly. “Umm, yeah, okay. I won’t tell anyone. I promise Valerie.”

“Thank you, Henry.” Carly held onto Henry’s hands a few seconds longer, squeezing them gently to show appreciation. Also, she sensed Henry might have a bit of a crush on her.

She reached up to rub his right arm gently before backing away from him. “Thank you.”

Henry smiled sheepishly. “It’s no problem. I’ll just tell my parents I broke the window on accident. They’ll be mad at me, but not for too long. It happens.”

Carly smiled at Henry in a subtly flirtatious way. “You really are a gentleman, Henry.”

“We have to clean up the bathroom before I get out of here. Will you help me?” Carly walked back toward the bathroom, examining the sink and floor.

“Before you get out of here?” Henry turned toward Carly, a quizzical look on his face.

“I can’t stay Henry. It’s not safe…for either of us.” Carly added. “Will you help me clean up my mess here?”

Henry shuffled around a bit, then answered abruptly. “Okay, let me grab the cleaning stuff out of our back closet. It’ll only take a sec.”

Carly watched Henry disappear into a back room.

She had immediately thought of killing Henry to keep him quiet.

However, she quickly decided against that idea, realizing it might draw more attention to her current location if anyone from The Group was paying attention.

Henry returned, and they spent about fifteen minutes cleaning up the bathroom.

“Where will you go Valerie?” Henry wiped off the mirror.

“Can you tell me how far it is to the nearest town from here?” Carly asked, not sure of the answer herself.

“Turney is about fifteen miles up the road.” Henry paused, looking back toward the main entrance to the gas station. “It’s a lot of hills. Kind of a long walk…”

Carly moved closer to Henry, touching his arm again. “Is there any way you could give me a ride Henry. I would really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, no problem. I give some of the people around here rides all the time. My parents won’t think anything of it if I close the store for a little while.” Henry grinned, looking down toward Carly’s arm, then briefly at her chest, before looking back to her face.

“That would be super.” Carly pressed herself against Henry gently before moving away from him again. “Thank you so much Henry.”

“Of course. It’s no problem.” Henry nearly tripped as he followed Carly out of the bathroom, his eyes locked on her and not paying attention to his footing.

Carly reached out to steady him a little. “Watch out. That floor’s slippery.” She smiled gently.

“Yeah.” Henry agreed, looking behind him quickly. “It is.”

Henry looked back at Carly, and she frowned deeply.

“Is everything okay?” Henry asked, mimicking her frown.

“I know this is a lot to ask, but could I borrow a little cash? The man who attacked me took my purse.” Carly allowed her eyes to tear up again.

“Uh…” Henry felt the back of his pants for his wallet. “Yeah, okay. Sure. I have some cash in my wallet.”

Henry took out his wallet and handed Carly two Twenties and a five. “That’s all I got. Is that enough?”

Taking the money, Carly smiled at Henry, then a look of concern appeared on her face. “Is there a hotel in Turney where I could stay for the night?”

“Ah.” Henry thought for a moment. “Yeah, The Big Moose Lodge is in Turney. It’s the only place in town. You could stay there.”

Carly rubbed the money as if it were the most valuable thing ever. “Will this be enough for a room there?”

Henry scratched his head and shuffled on his feet once again. “I don’t think it is actually. Maybe I could give you a few more bucks out of the till.”

Before Henry could think about it too much, Carly reached for him, hugging him tightly, pressing her body against him. “Oh thank you Henry. You are such a lifesaver.”

In return, Henry reluctantly put his arms around Carly, clearly caught off guard.

Carly could feel a bump in Henry’s pants getting more prominent as she hugged him.

She pressed herself more firmly into him for a few more seconds, then let go and stepped away.

Henry’s face reddened as he attempted to nonchalantly adjust himself, clearly uncomfortable.

Carly pretended not to notice, turned around, and walked to the checkout counter.

A moment later, Henry cleared his throat, attempting to compose himself. “Um, give me just a sec to get some more cash for you. Then we can leave.”

“Of course. Thank you Henry.” Carly used the sincerest tone she could manage, still looking away from Henry.

Carly waited while Henry took some money out of the till and then came around the counter to hand her four more twenties and a ten.

“This should be more than enough for a room and some food too.” Henry handed the money to Carly quickly, then stepped back.

She could tell he was a little embarrassed and nervous. Evidently, he hadn’t been hugged like that by a girl before.

“You are such a sweet guy Henry. Really. You are doing so much for me.” Carly smiled at Henry as she pushed the cash into the pocket of her slacks.

“It’s no problem. I’m glad I could help.” Henry smiled back at Carly, still looking uneasy but a little excited.

“Okay. I’m ready if you are. Lead the way.” Carly motioned toward the door as she spoke.

“Oh, yeah.” Henry looked as though he had forgotten about giving Carly a ride to town. “My truck’s just outside. Follow me.”

Henry led Carly to his truck, opening the passenger door and closing it for her after she was seated inside.

The drive to Turney took about thirty-five minutes.

Carly made some small talk with Henry as they drove, keeping the conversation as light as possible.

“Here it is.” Henry waived toward the sign for the lodge as he pulled into the narrow parking lot, stopping close to the lighted vacancy sign inside a little office within the single main building.

Carly looked over toward the office, then back to Henry. “You really are a life saver Henry.”

“It’s no problem. I’m glad I could help you, Valerie.” Henry’s eyes fell to Carly’s chest just for a second before returning to her face.

“Henry, I need to ask you one more favor before I get out, okay.” Carly made her voice take on a worried tone.

“Sure, anything. What is it?” Henry perked up.

“You can’t tell anyone about me. That includes your parents or anyone else. If anyone comes asking about me, you never saw anyone matching my description.” Carly held his gaze for a few beats. “Understand?”

“Yes, I won’t. Promise. You can trust me. I won’t tell anyone. Ever.” Henry nodded to Carly.

“Thank you, Henry. You are such a wonderful young man. You really helped me out today.” Carly leaned over and kissed Henry on the cheek, pressing her hand to his thigh as she did so.

Without another word, Carly moved away and got out of the truck, turning to wave one last time before entering the lodge’s small office.

Henry watched Carly enter the building, letting out a long sigh.

He briefly thought about following her inside to see if she wanted him to keep her company for the evening. He was thinking about a lot more than that as his mind raced with possibilities.

Finally, he shook his head, pounded a hand on the steering wheel, and laughed nervously as he pulled out of the parking lot, driving back to the gas station.

Henry would never know how close Carly came to killing him instead of flirting with him for a bit of cash and a ride to town.

Chapter 51

Deena did not enjoy disruptions.

The past two days were bringing nothing but disruptions to her previously organized life.

“I rarely question your advice or instructions Sal, but you need to give me some idea of what’s going on.” Deena could not hide the exasperation in her voice.

“You’ve seen the news. The chaos is spreading around Europe…and now Asia. I already told you. We will be safe if you just trust me.” Sal had been elusive and impatient since first contacting Deena two days ago.

“All you said was I needed to meet the plane and get to you.” Deena didn’t understand the sudden urgency or why they were driving through the countryside in such a mad rush.

“You will see soon. I will explain everything. Just let me get us there first.” Sal’s tone indicated he did not wish to be questioned further, so Deena kept quiet as they drove.

Sal parked his rental out of sight just beyond the large parking area and led Deena into a well-hidden path, revealing a beautiful scene beyond.

“This is gorgeous.” Deena offered as they walked along the path. Sal said nothing.

Leading Deena into The Mountain, through the numerous secret passages, and finally into the elevator, Sal adopted a calmer disposition. “All the civilization you knew above ground will cease to exist in a brief time. I knew this was coming, but it happened sooner than expected.”

“You knew about Europe? Or you had something to do with it? What are you saying, father?” Deena rarely called Sal “Father.” Doing so showed how unnerved she had become.

“Everyone knows about Europe now.” Sal scoffed. “And yes, I had something to do with it.”

“What? How? Tell me what’s happening.” Deena managed to get out a complete sentence despite her building frustration and anger.

“Think of it. So much chaos. So much famine. Entrenched belief systems and corruption.” Sal exhaled deeply, slowly releasing his breath. “It was much worse behind the scenes. The whole thing needed to be reset. All of it.”

“That’s something you and your secret group thought you had the authority to do? What gives you the right to destroy everything?” Deena couldn’t decide if she was more angry or scared.

“If we didn’t, someone or something else would have sooner or later. You have no idea what sort of policies were being pursued behind the scenes by people in seats of power, what kind of diseases were lurking just around the corner. One, the other, or both could easily destroy the life you were enjoying in the blink of an eye.”

Deena closed her eyes and forced herself to count to ten. As she was doing so, the elevator chimed and came to a stop.

“Ah!” Sal exclaimed. “We are here. We will have plenty of time to chat about this in the coming days. Please follow me now. I need your help.”

“Of course you do.” Deena quipped, pursing her lips together.

Sal ignored her comment as he led her out of the elevator and into the primary control room.

“Take this walkie.” Sal instructed. “You must go across the hall and enter this code.”

Deena grabbed the walkie and the piece of paper in Sal’s other hand. “Are we launching a missile?”

“Just do what I tell you. No, we are not.” Sal looked away, clearly not willing to entertain Deena’s sarcasm.

Deena did as she was told, and within ten minutes, She and Sal had taken control of The Mountain.

The next few hours were calm as they took a tour of The Mountain together. Their survey of the primary control level revealed sleeping quarters, a dining area, and a fitness room.

There were three levels in addition to the one where they first exited the elevator.

One of these levels was organized like the research floor of the facility in Belgium. It was equipped with several small rooms on either side of the hallway, enclosed by automatic, plexiglass doors.

Only one room on this floor was different from the rest. The door to this room was solid, reinforced steel. Above the door was an etched sign to identify the space. It simply read “Chamber.”

There was a maintenance level for electrical, water, and HVAC. This level also contained storage for food, clothing, tools, weapons, and other various supplies.

Deena was captivated by the last level they visited. It was a semi-automated garden. Machines tended to various crops, providing essential support.

A minimal level of human interaction was necessary. They would need to visit this level regularly to keep things running smoothly.

Deena was surprised by her excitement attending to a garden. It was something she had always wanted to do someday but never found the proper time for it.

As their tour ended, Deena realized she was exhausted. She really hadn’t slept much in the past forty-eight hours.

“Sal, I need sleep now. But, later, when I’m recharged, we are going to have another conversation about why we are here.” Deena informed him after trying to suppress a yawn.

“Yes, my dear. Please rest now. We’ll talk when you are refreshed.” Sal agreed.

Sal watched Deena walk off toward her sleeping quarters.

He knew this would be a difficult adjustment, but he wanted her to be safe. She was the only person in the world he cared about, almost as much as himself.

They had enough in The Mountain to last them for at least two decades, perhaps longer. Genevieve was a thorough planner.

Sal headed to the control room to familiarize himself with the system while Deena caught up on her sleep.

Sitting down in one of the chairs, he too began to feel tired.

A few minutes later, Sal drifted off to sleep without realizing it.

Chapter 52

Genevieve’s unplanned tour across Europe offered generous portions of danger and discomfort.

Crouching behind a car on the street in Lille, she listened as a woman was brutally taken down by a former lab technician at the facility.

Genevieve could only determine this much about the attacker due to his tattered uniform.

She listened as the woman screamed, fell to the ground, and made gurgly throat noises as her assailant drained her completely.

After a few moments, the woman stopped making any sounds, lifeless on the ground.

The attacker jumped to his feet, looked around disjointedly, and ran off quickly to find another feeding source.

Once a bustling city in Northern France, Lille was now eerily quiet and mostly deserted.

The quiet was intermittently disrupted by yelling, screaming, or gunfire.

Genevieve bit her lip and chanced a look over the car’s hood. There was no sign of the woman’s attacker.

It was risky to be out in the open for too long. The “drainers,” as Genevieve had started calling them in her head, could spot a target from miles away.

Genevieve didn’t understand precisely how, but she could relate to their hunger and ability to find energy sources.

Succumbing to her hunger once, shortly after waking up in the supply shed back at the facility, Genevieve had found herself drawn uncontrollably to a source of light flowing like strings in the distance.

The first source of light that attracted her dimmed before she found it, but another quickly took its place.

It took half a dozen redirections, after sources dimmed, to find one that remained illuminated until she got to it.

This one was a child hiding in a dumpster. Vividly, Genevieve remembered tearing off the lid, pulling the screaming boy out of his hiding place, and sinking her fingers into his head as he struggled to escape.

Her draining killed the boy within minutes. Since that time, Genevieve had not felt hunger. She did not know if she would need to feed or how often.

She felt no remorse for killing the boy. If the part of her that would feel guilty ever existed, it was forever gone.

Running from building to building in various towns and cities. Commandeering vehicles abandoned by their owners to drive when she could. Genevieve came to realize different kinds of drainers existed.

Some completely ignored her as if she were invisible. Others seemed powerfully drawn to her, moving with unnatural quickness to subdue Genevieve.

One had managed to take her down, temporarily getting its fingers clutched around her head, beginning to insert tentacles from its fingertips.

Genevieve managed to escape by ripping out her attacker’s throat before the tentacles penetrated her skull.

Wet and sticky from the blood a torn throat releases, Genevieve had slept in a dumpster herself that night.

Some two or three days later, she was a little closer to the private airstrip outside Berck.

She owned a small plane there that could get her to England.

Genevieve didn’t really have time to contemplate, much less appreciate her reduced appetite for traditional nourishment.

Since leaving the facility, she had only eaten two meals and drank water on three occasions.

Her body was different. It ran more efficiently. However, in her present circumstances, she barely registered the change.

Getting to England and then on to the States was her only objective.

She needed to get to her safe place. She had built it for herself and possibly one other person.

She was never supposed to be topside, actively experiencing The Group’s end game.

Genevieve still thought of Orin on occasion as she closed the distance between herself and her plane.

Her body could go for longer than a day without needing rest, but when it did, she fantasized about The Mountain and sometimes Orin.

If He happened to ever cross paths with her again, she would enjoy taking her time, peeling off layers of skin and listening to him scream. She would keep him alive for as long as she could, weeks perhaps. He needed to suffer for his deed, horribly suffer, for as long as possible. Or, until she bored of him, whichever came first.

Genevieve checked the vehicle she had been using as cover. The door was unlocked, but no keys anywhere.

She dashed from one car to the next, squatting down to scan all around her and prepare for an attack as she moved.

The fifth car was unlocked and had keys.

Trying the ignition, the small sedan came to life, the engine humming smoothly.

Genevieve grinned as she pulled out onto the street, pressing the gas pedal to the floor.

A few drainers ran toward her as she drove through the streets, but they could not keep up with a fast-moving vehicle.

She saw no regular people at all.

The chaos was spreading quickly. She didn’t have much time to get home before it arrived there as well.

Chapter 53

“Reports are unclear at this time, however, it appears that an attack similar to those reported throughout Europe occurred at Miami International Airport as a woman lunged at another passenger shortly after deplaning.” Cowboy switched off the radio as he turned onto the long, windy road leading to his barn in Idaho.

*They’ll be all over the place soon enough*. Cowboy watched as the sun began to peak up over a mountain to his right.

His truck was full of gear and supplies bought along his drive from Nevada. It would all find its way into his underground safe house soon.

The time just before sunrise was Cowboy’s favorite time. The air was fresher and the land quieter during this brief pause between night and day.

Cowboy rolled down his window to enjoy the air and listen to silence.

For the past week or so, Cowboy had been experiencing an odd sensation in his body. It reminded him of how he felt just before dropping into a remote location during his military days.

His spine tingled, sending smooth yet excited impulses throughout his body. It was similar to the feeling of adrenaline, yet more refined. His senses heightened, his strength increased, and his need for sleep nearly vanished.

Usually, the feeling would last for two or three days and subside, followed by a need to slumber for hours.

This time, however, the feeling persisted beyond a few days. He hadn’t felt like sleeping much for the past five days.

He had made excellent time to Idaho, arriving several hours earlier than he intended.

As Cowboy rounded a bend in the road, He was subconsciously taking inventory of his body, quadrant by quadrant, when something out of the ordinary caught his eye.

A woman of stocky build stood just off the road to his left, a few feet from the tree line. She was staring toward the sunrise, not moving.

As his truck neared her position, the woman turned toward him.

Immediately, Cowboy could see that this woman was alert and coherent. She lifted a hand to wave in his direction.

Slowing his truck to a stop, Cowboy killed the motor, raising a hand slightly to wave back at her.

“Hello Miss.” Cowboy’s tone was neutral but friendly. “You in some kind of trouble?”

Cowboy could see that the woman was armed with a gun, holstered to her hip.

“Hello, Mister.” A slight tinge of caution was evident in her tone. “No, not lost at all. I just built a cabin up the road a ways.”

The woman paused, clearly resting a hand on her hip, close to her gun. She wanted Cowboy to notice it was there.

The woman continued speaking, “How did you find yourself on this particular road this early in the day, if I may ask?”

Cowboy chuckled, finding it oddly charming to be interrogated for driving to his own home by a woman standing by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. “I live just up the road, past your new cabin. I noticed your construction was getting along well last time I drove past almost two months ago.”

The woman nodded, relaxing but keeping one hand close to her gun. “That so. Well, it’s a pleasure to make my new neighbors’ acquaintance. My name is Gloria.”

Gloria did not move toward Cowboy after speaking, apparently not quite ready to let her guard down.

Cowboy tipped his hat to her. “Cowboy, pleasure is all mine, Mam.”

“Are you staying long? Things are getting crazy in the world lately.” Gloria scanned the horizon to their left as the sun poked its head up, obscuring the mountain.

“Indefinitely. I’m gonna hang out here for a while. See how things play out for now.” Cowboy followed Gloria’s gaze, stretching a little in the driver’s seat.

“You think the chaos will reach us here?” Gloria spoke calmly, but Cowboy could tell she was anxious at the thought.

“Can’t say for sure, but it wouldn’t surprise me. It’s spreading fast. Our biggest danger could be outlaws…they start the plundering when things go south.” Cowboy looked ahead as he spoke, purposely avoiding eye contact with Gloria. He occasionally did so to mentally disarm a person during conversation.

Gloria nodded, turning her eyes in the direction Cowboy had been driving. “This place is fairly remote. You think they’ll come up here?”

“Not at first, if they come at all. But, eventually, its possible.” Cowboy looked toward the sun again, holding his hand up to block the light now flooding in.

Gloria took a few steps toward Cowboy’s truck, stopping outside his reach. “You got a walkie at your place?” She asked, eyeing him cautiously.

“I do.” Cowboy replied, adjusting his hand to provide some cover from the sun’s relentless brilliance.

“Channel ten, code 324.” Gloria removed her hand from her hip, rubbing both hands together. Cowboy noticed it was slightly chilly now for the first time. “We can stay in contact. Give each other updates, that sort of thing.”

Cowboy looked over toward Gloria again, examining her face in the early sunlight. “You usually this trusting of strangers, Gloria?”

“I don’t trust anyone but myself.” Gloria met Cowboy’s gaze. “I can read people well though.” She paused. “You’re an easy read.”

“Am I?” Cowboys smiled. “How so?”

“You’re a loner. Try to stay out of people’s way. Probably ex-military. You don’t really give a shit how I feel about you.” Gloria returned his smile.

*Damn!* Cowboy thought. He was starting to like Gloria. “You’re a pretty observant lady. Very intuitive.”

“I had to get that way. I was on my own a lot growing up.” Gloria admitted. “Sink or swim. You know.”

“I do.” Cowboy offered. “I do indeed.”

Cowboy nodded at Gloria again. “I’ll keep my walkie open on that channel. We’ll be in touch. Watch yourself out here.”

“Yeah, you too. I’ll check on you in a day or so.” Gloria smiled briefly as Cowboy started up his truck and put it in gear.

Pulling away, he looked in his rear-view mirror to see Gloria remaining where she was, eyes looking elsewhere as he put distance between them.

*She might be an asset*. Cowboy mused as he lost sight of Gloria, turning along another bend in the road.

Chapter 54

"Much appreciated." Carly stepped out of the box truck next to her storage unit on the edge of town.

Years ago, she had secretly purchased a foreclosed farm near Hays, Kansas.

The place was run down, and she had never gotten around to fixing it. Still, it was better than nothing and was also her only option for refuge.

Teeno's Self Storage was her first destination.

Carly managed to steal two cars on her way to Hays and was keen on getting out of sight.

Inside her storage unit was various supplies. She also had a vehicle stored on the lot under a carport.

She hadn't been to the place in almost three years.

There was no one on duty in the small office today. Carly was relieved since she didn't want to bring more attention to herself than was necessary.

The property was equipped with security cameras and motion detectors. Carly had cut her hair, dyed it, and wore a hat and sunglasses to disguise her appearance.

During her driving and hitchhiking to Hays, Carly kept updated on events around the world via radio. It was clear things were happening fast, and any semblance of organized society would soon disappear.

Carly would hold up at her old farm property as long as possible. Like Cowboy, she was already thinking of outlaws roaming the land shortly after things fell apart.

She didn't know how long her farm would be safe when that started happening, but she would face the challenge, just like she had all the others up till now.

Carly felt for her hidden key under the front tire of her dust-covered vehicle, unlocked the door, and tried to start it. It took two attempts before the engine sputtered to life and died. She tried it again, and it stayed running the third time.

Next, she drove her car to her storage unit and opened it up. Her vehicle was a large, older model SUV, providing plenty of room to move boxes and the like.

Carly emptied out her storage unit, filled up the SUV completely, and drove from the storage unit straight to her farm.

It took the rest of the day to unload things and get somewhat organized inside the medium-sized house situated at the back of a large, untended field.

Carly intentionally wanted the place to look abandoned, figuring it would be ignored longer.

She intended to get the place ready a little more just in case her tenure with The Group went sour.

In actuality, Carly hadn't taken seriously any possibility that things wouldn't work out with The Group. Her backup plan wasn't well prepared.

She figured she had enough emergency rations to last three to four months, perhaps a bit longer if she reduced her calorie intake. Eventually, however, she wouldn't be able to remain at the farm.

She needed to figure something else out as quickly as possible. The farm bought her a little breathing room, but not much.

Carly decided to risk a trip to town that evening.

Hays seemed calm on the surface. However, when Carly arrived at one of the supermarkets in town, she found the parking lot full. She had to park in an adjacent lot and walk the rest of the way.

Inside, the store was just a step or two below mayhem. People were panicking since news from Miami had spread around the country.

Carly grabbed a shopping cart from the parking lot and was glad she did, seeing no available carts inside.

Avoiding anything requiring refrigeration, Carly loaded up on whatever canned goods remained, a few different types of crackers, and four large bags of dog food. She knew people would eventually buy up all the animal food products once the people food was sold out. That is if stores were still open by then.

Visiting three places, Carly drove back and forth from her property, loading up her SUV with food and some other supplies and unloading it in the house's main room.

Many things were already out of stock at each place she visited. Soon, she knew there would be nothing left to buy.

It was nearly eleven at night when Carly finished shopping, using some of the $250,000 in cash packed away in her storage unit.

Exhausted, Carly left much of the items she had purchased out in the main room, heading to the bedroom of her house.

There were no sheets or pillows on the mattress. It was covered with a large plastic sheet.

Carly didn't bother putting any sheets on the mattress. She pulled off the plastic, found a pillow with no pillowcase and two blankets in her bedroom closet, and passed out on the bed in less than a minute.

Her wounds had been healing rapidly, but her body used tremendous energy during that time.

Being on the run, trying to heal, and not getting much sleep was taking its toll on her.

Carly slept for almost fourteen hours straight, finally waking up with a start as her mind replayed getting shot repeatedly.

She still felt exhausted. Her sleep was not restful. Her body felt like it had been working all night.

Aches and pains were sharper than before she fell asleep.

She told herself that was probably normal, but it didn't make it any easier to get moving.

It hurt to lay in bed, and it hurt worse to move around. She pushed through the pain, forcing her body to follow commands as she went into the main room to finish organizing her shopping bonanza from the previous evening.

Still wearing the same clothes from two days ago, Carly kept moving throughout the day.

About an hour from sunset, she finished the task of organizing food and supplies, once again feeling exhausted.

She chuckled dryly, realizing she must be feeling a little better. She was aware of her grubbiness from not showering in almost three days.

Tomorrow she would venture outside onto the property and check the condition of the large water tank between the house and an old barn outside.

Fortunately, it was not visible from the paved road that ran parallel to her property. It was designed to catch rainwater.

Carly had no idea in what condition she would find the tank.

Too fatigued to worry about it tonight, she forced herself to shower and find some clean clothes for the next day.

Unlike the night before, Carly took the time to put new sheets on the bed and pillowcases on the pillows.

This night she slept much better.

Tomorrow would bring a new set of challenges.

Chapter 55

"We can't stay on this road." Charlene's panic meter was nearing the top register as they sat in the deadlocked traffic, along with thousands of other panicked city dwellers.

Charles, Sr. continued looking straight ahead. His nerves were also on edge, but he was trying to keep his cool. Charlene's panic spread to the children, and Charles didn't want to add to it.

"We literally cannot go anywhere else at the moment. Look around. There are cars on all sides of us. Also not moving." Charles commented, forcing himself to speak slowly and at a low volume.

Charlene sighed again, rubbing her temples.

"Daddy, are we gonna get attacked too? Like on TV?" Lyla spoke up from two rows back in their SUV.

"Quiet down, Lyla. Read your book." Charlene snapped back, causing Lyla to start whimpering a little.

"Don't worry Sprite. Daddy won't let anyone get you. Promise." Charles offered, watching Lyla through the rearview mirror.

"Don't make promises you can't keep." Charlene looked out her side window, speaking loud enough that her oldest children, one row behind them, could overhear.

Charles risked changing the subject in an attempt to calm his wife. "What did Casey say on the phone?"

Charlene put her hands over her face, rubbing briskly.

"He will try to meet us in Dayton. Things are hectic. His roommates have already left town. He promised to pack up and wait for us in the mall parking lot where we had lunch together last month." Charlene spoke calmly. There was a hint of numbness in her voice.

"That should work." Charles replied. "I can get us there in less than an hour if traffic loosens up a bit."

Charlene scoffed, shaking her head.

Cars behind and in front of them occasionally honked as if doing so would somehow encourage the gridlock to disappear.

Charles looked over his shoulder, glancing toward Brianne and Sandra sitting in the first row behind him. "You two doin okay?"

"Yeah." Sandra answered. Brianne just shrugged, not making eye contact with Charles.

"Well, there's some snacks in that bag on the floor." Charles reminded them, tapping the bag with one hand. "See if your brother and sister would like some as well."

Brianne didn't budge. Sandra pulled the bag closer with her foot, then unbuckled to reach down and pick it up.

"Thanks Daddy." Sandra cheerfully replied, rifling through the bag's contents. "Lyla, Charlie. You want peanuts, or peanut butter crackers?"

"What else's in there?" Charlie asked, poking his head over the back of the seat to peek in the bag.

"Here's some gummies." Sandra tossed them in the back, just missing Charlie's face.

"Hey!" Charlie yelled, turning to retrieve the gummies.

"I want peanut butter crackers!" Lyla proclaimed loudly, waiting for Sandra to toss her some.

The children ate quietly, save for Brianne.

"Mom, I need some things. Like really soon." Brianne kept her voice low, wanting to avoid any attention from her father and her siblings.

Charlene hit her head with her left hand. "Shoot dear. I totally forgot to grab some before we left. I was so busy… it's my fault."

"Forgot what?" Charles asked, looking back and forth between Charlene and Brianne.

Suddenly realization hit. "Oh, I see. Nevermind." Charles looked away, trying to avoid any extra focus on the topic.

Fortunately, the younger children were too busy scavenging the treat bag to notice anything.

Charles was about to start a new discussion with Charlene when the vehicles in front of him began moving forward.

"Finally!" Charlene yelled at the windshield.

"Fwweh." Charles let out a sigh of relief. Stepping on the gas lightly, he followed after the vehicle in front of him. "Maybe we can get this show moving along now."

"Mom?" Brianne spoke up again.

"Yes, dear. We will grab some first chance at the mall, okay?" Charlene said quickly, struggling to not sound exasperated.

Charles began humming to himself quietly, slowly rapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "Mind if I turn on the radio?" He moved one hand toward the button.

"Please don't." Charlene begged. "I can't handle anymore of it. It's all the same horror. Please."

Charles moved his hand away, continuing his humming.

Charles finally made it to the mall exit, driving no faster than fifty miles an hour.

"We're almost there gang!" He made his voice sound sing-songy.

"You're so corny Dad." Brianne quipped, rolling her eyes.

"Jeesh, tough crowd." Charles replied.

It didn't take long to spot their oldest son Casey's car in the parking lot.

Pulling up beside it, Charles parked and turned off the SUV. "Alright, everybody out for a potty break."

"But, I don't have to go potty." Lyla chirped from the back seat.

"All sprites out of the car. That's an order." Charles yelled back as he opened the driver's door and stepped out. "Quick!, Quick! Like a bunny rabbit."

Lyla moaned loudly, wrestling out of her seatbelt and crawling over Charlie, who was asleep. "Wake up Charlie, we gotta go potty."

Charlie just moaned and laid down where Lyla had been sitting.

Charlene sighed again and went around to coax Charlie back to life.

Charles bent down to wave at his oldest son, who was still sitting in his car, talking on his cell phone. Charles waved awkwardly at his son until Casey finally turned to look his way.

Casey waved back, exaggerating his facial expression to show annoyance. Charles just laughed and stood up again.

Waiting another thirty seconds to protest having his phone call interrupted, Casey, opened his door and got out.

"What's up Dad?" Casey blurted out, slamming his door.

"Easy son, the door didn't do anything." Charles grinned.

"Whatever. How long we stayin at the mall?" Casey avoided eye contact with his father, wanting to let his annoyance be made clear.

"Maybe thirty minutes or so. The monsters need a potty break and Brianne's got lady problems." Charles answered.

Casey shook his head. "Wow."

"Well, you asked." Charles shot back.

"I asked how long we were gonna be here. Not details about bodily functions." Casey turned his head back toward the freeway.

Casey's disposition was now starting to rub off on Charles. "Can you drop it down a level or two? I didn't show up to ruin your life today, son."

Casey looked toward the ground. "Yeah Dad. I didn't mean to take it out on you. It's been a rough day."

*Get in line*. Charles thought. "What's the problem?" He asked.

"Teresa had to go with her parents. They were headed in the opposite direction from us." Casey informed him.

"Ah, I see. That's tough son. I understand her parents wanting her to be with them." Charles offered.

"I just don't know when I will see her again." Casey continued looking at the ground. "If ever."

"You'll see her again. We'll get through this as a family and things will go back to normal soon." Charles felt as though he were watching himself talk. He knew he was lying and expected his son would know it too.

"You don't know that. You can't control what's goin down." Casey replied, all the fight out of his voice.

Charles didn't say anything. He knew he couldn't offer anything honest and comforting at the same time.

"At least you'll be with us. Your brother and sisters adore you. That's got to count for something. Maybe you can cheer Brianne up. That would be the accomplishment of the year. You might win prizes." Charles decided to use his favorite tactic of changing the topic.

Casey laughed and shook his head. "She doesn't look up to me like she used to. You know how kids are at that age."

Charles immediately thought of a wise-ass remark, considering Casey's behavior over the past few minutes. Instead, he decided to say something encouraging. "She still adores you, Casey. She just hides it well."

"Very well." Casey agreed, looking up now, smiling.

Charles made small talk with Casey, both enduring the awkwardness of it as they waited another thirty minutes or so for Charlene and the children to return.

Seeing them exit the mall, heading toward the SUV, Charles turned back toward Casey. "We'll drop them off at the cabin and then head into the town nearby. Load up on some things."

"Stores are gonna be packed or sold-out Dad." Casey clearly didn't agree with his father on this one.

"You got a better idea? We need a few things. The cabin should already be stocked with plenty of stuff, but not everything." Charles countered.

Casey shrugged but said nothing as Charlene and company reached the SUV.

Charlene opened the back door so the children could return to their seats. Then, she walked around the car to give Casey a hug. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm fine, Mom. How are you?" Casey returned her embrace.

"I know your upset about Teresa. But, its only for a while. You'll see her again." Charlene continued hugging Casey, not quite ready to let go.

Casey started patting her back, indicating he was ready for hug time to be over. "Okay Mom. We gotta go now."

Charlene let go of him slowly. Put her hand up to his cheek and then backed away, turning toward the SUV.

"Casey, you follow us. I don't want to get separated before we get there." Charles instructed, turning to get back in the SUV.

Casey exhaled loudly. "Fine. Whatever. Let's get going."

Chapter 56

The swiftness of it offered no time to prepare.

The thing that had been Isidora moved with nothing but a glimmer toward the one who must become like it.

Adil’s wife sat his plate down at the table, smiling warmly at him.

“shkran lak, Celmira.” He replied, returning her smile.

Adil was very concerned about things happening in the world around them but tried to put on a brave face for his wife and family.

“You must eat tonight, husband.” Celmira gently chided him. “We cannot have you weak.”

Adil nodded, keeping his smile, but the worry in his eyes was unmistakable.

He turned his attention toward his two sons. “Yes, I will eat. We must all eat. We are fortunate to have this food. We mustn’t forget that.”

The family sat silently for several moments, chewing their food on autopilot, avoiding eye contact.

“Father, will we be safe?” Adil’s youngest son, Zahir, broke the silence as he held a cup of water away from his mouth.

“We mustn’t allow fear to…” Adil felt an odd vibration at his feet, followed shortly by a low humming sound.

He found his mouth was stuck in place, and he suddenly could not move the rest of his body.

The edges of his vision blurred.

As it did, part of the wall adjacent to their dining table began to crumble softly, then burst apart.

Adil, together with his two boys, fell to the floor unconscious, bits of the wall pummeling their bodies as they collapsed.

Dark, purple tentacles of light stretched out into the room; their source concealed outside the shattered wall.

The brightest tentacle enveloped Celmira. Her body was the only one that remained seated. She also was frozen in place.

Celmira could see what was happening, having not lost consciousness. She felt tingly energy crawling over her body.

Slowly, her panicked thoughts faded, replaced by nothing.

Her body began to lose cohesion as dark colors replaced her skin.

Tentacles already surrounding what were her other family members stretched out to her changing form, pulses of bright light traveling along with them into her now undefined state.

The entire process took only moments.

What had been Celmira skipped across the room in a matter of microseconds and was gone.

The broken room sat quietly throughout the rest of the evening and into the early morning.

Two hours before sunrise, Zahir’s body began stirring first. It was soon followed by the body of his older brother and then his father.

Adil, with his two sons, would never mourn the loss of Celmira. For they two were changed.

Mindless and driven by a primitive need to gather mind energy, the three bodies staggered out into the early Damascus morning.

Soon there would be more like them.

Chapter 57

"You still got something to say?" Conrad watched as his stepbrother leaned in to deliver another blow into the face of a man crumpled and bleeding profusely on the ground.

"Gerald." Conrad began, but his stepbrother waved him off.

"I'll be done here soon. Stay back Conny."

Gerald beat his fists into the man's face several times, finally standing upright again, brushing off his clothes.

Looking down at the battered face of his betrayer, Gerald chuckled to himself. "I never shoulda trusted this fool."

Conrad looked around them. Intimate beatdowns like this were not his thing. He became more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Gerald, we really have to be going." Conrad spoke up again. "We don't have much time to get out of the city."

Gerald looked over at Conrad, obviously distracted by his current business.

"Yeah, no worries. I know how to get us out. We'll make it. Chill Conny." Gerald took one last look at his handiwork, then walked quickly away, past Conrad.

Conrad followed after Gerald, quickening his pace to keep up.

"We don't gotta leave the city at all. I know a safe place we can hold up. You'll like it." Gerald informed Conrad as he caught up to him.

"We talked about not staying in the city. It'll be crazy once it reaches here. Too many people." Conrad felt himself getting frustrated.

"This place is on the edge of the city. Easy get away. You'll see." Gerald attempted to reassure Conrad.

"The roads will be jammed everywhere. We won't be able to get out easily in any direction if we are anywhere in the city." Conrad protested, feeling his hands clenching.

"We won't be relying on any roads, brother." Gerald smiled as they approached his shiny new convertible in the parking garage.

"What are you talking about? A boat? I hate boats." Conrad stopped, unwilling to get in the car until they discussed the matter.

Gerald also stopped opening the door to his vehicle, realizing Conrad wasn't moving.

"Just trust me, please Connie. It'll be a fast boat ride out if we gotta bounce. I'm a planner. You know me. I know what I'm doin man!" Gerald looked straight at Conrad, daring him to disagree.

Conrad said nothing in return, simply staring back at him.

"I've never let you down before, have I?" Gerald held up his hands, twirling them toward the car's passenger side. "Now get in before I decide to leave you here."

Conrad shook his head, sighing loudly. "No, you've never let me down."

As Gerald and Conrad sped off, out of the parking garage and into the night, Conrad allowed himself a moment of self-pity.

He had done so much for The Group. And now, all he had was the slight advantage of foreknowledge about what would happen. The severity of it all.

It didn't seem like much to show for his unyielding loyalty.

He did know one thing. He knew where Sal was going. Conrad quietly promised himself that he would see Sal again, no matter the difficulty.

He would survive and thrive, despite the chaos.

He would have his revenge.

Chapter 58

“Reports now of a military blockade, attempting to completely seal off Miami, as we continue to hear of numerous airstrikes being carried out on the city. People trying to evacuate the quarantine zone are turned back at all erected checkpoints. Those trying to force their way through have been shot as…”

Cowboy clicked off his radio, checking the time. It was 2:04 AM.

He already knew military blockades, airstrikes, or anything else would fail to contain the chaos crawling across the US and the world.

City after city would fall. Next, outlying towns and rural areas would succumb to the inevitable.

Going topside, Cowboy checked the motion cameras placed around his property and his various stashes of weapons and supplies hidden around the place.

He didn’t know when, but eventually, he expected visitors of the unfriendly sort. Desperate people do desperate things. Aside from that, plenty of individuals would prosper in a lawless reality, quickly picking off the soft targets first, then moving on to places farther out.

Cowboy had seen it before in other parts of the world. Civilized behavior was superficial at best, easily crumbled by the slightest instability.

The rest of the day found Cowboy rechecking his guns, ammo, and other gear. He was getting into a routine. It was his way of staying alert, sane, and entertained.

It had been four days since his last interaction with another person.

Gloria had radioed him a few times following their brief introduction on the road. She wasn’t a big talker, and neither was Cowboy.

He understood the advantages of keeping in contact with someone nearby. He also understood its liability.

Cowboy wasn’t prepared to team up with anybody. His way was working alone. Anybody else was baggage, drag he didn’t want or need.

News outlets would also go silent as more cities and surrounding areas fell.

There would be a period of calm, perhaps weeks or months long, before dangerous people would come his way.

He spoke to Gloria about this during one of their conversations. She had agreed with him, hinting they should look out for each other when it came.

Cowboy hesitantly agreed with her. They had devised a basic plan for working together when threats arrived.

By car, the two properties were about twenty minutes or so away from each other. On foot, about an hour.

Threats would most likely show up at Gloria’s first. In that regard, Cowboy felt he was getting the short end of their arrangement.

There were several off-road trails in the area, however. So, it was also possible Cowboy could be under siege first.

In any event, He had agreed to her partnership of sorts. He probably wouldn’t have had Gloria made a negative impression on him during their initial greeting.

She did quite the opposite. Cowboy liked her. She was clearly capable of handling herself and intuitive about others as well.

Both were qualities of a survivor.

As Cowboy settled into his bunker for the evening, relaxing as he sharpened knives atop his small workbench, his radio chirped twice.

“Cowboy, you around?” Gloria’s voice came over the walkie’s speaker.

Turning, he pushed a button, setting the walkie to auto. “Yeah, fiddling with my gear.”

Cowboy turned back to his knives.

“Saw a car driven up our road today. It stopped for a few minutes three hundred yards from my place, then turned around, headed back the way it came.” Gloria informed him.

“Probably lost. But keep me posted.” Cowboy held a knife up to the light, checking the edge.

“Will do. Sleep tight.” The walkie chirped twice again, falling silent.

Cowboy’s first thought was the car Gloria mentioned probably took a wrong turn, possibly seeking refuge with a relative or heading to a second property seldom visited.

Mentally, however, he began adjusting his timeline for when to expect unwelcome visitors.

People may start getting desperate sooner than he expected.

Chapter 59

“You are certain it is him? You are certain he has it?” The tall, slender woman gazed into the quiet street outside her restaurant.

“Da, I know they do. I wouldn’t call if they didn’t.” A man’s voice replied in a thick Russian accent.

“You know what to do then.” The woman replied, ending the call.

Yǔ xī sat her phone down on one of the empty tables in the restaurant.

As a sitting member of The Group, she held tremendous power and influence worldwide.

Spending her childhood as an orphan in China, immigrating to Canada as a young woman, and now living in the United States. She had long ago changed her name to Justine to fit in with Westerners.

However, she only used her birth name among the members of The Group. It was a pride thing.

The man she spoke with on the phone had just identified the person who had attacked the facility in Belgium and stolen the artifact from it.

He had also informed her of Andre’s current location.

Yǔ xī had dispatched her most trusted lieutenant, Marik, to Belgium within an hour of the attack.

It had taken him almost a month to find Andre and his mercenaries close to the Russian border with Belarus.

Marik would follow his orders to kill Andre, retrieve the artifact, and bring it to her.

Travel was being systematically locked down tight all across the world. Fortunately, Marik had access, courtesy of Yǔ xī, to a dozen large sea-going vessels.

He would carry out his orders and depart from a Russian port for Canada, rendezvousing with Yǔ xī at her compound located in a remote part of the Northwest Territories.

Marik kept his distance from Andre’s small caravan as it turned north, just west of Krasnaya Gorka.

Equipped with a fully customized prototype version of the Sikorsky Raider X helicopter, disguised to look like a weather-tracking aircraft, Marik could keep his distance while shadowing Andre across the country.

“Ne dolgo, teperʹ.” Marik sputtered into his helmet mic, sensing Andre wouldn’t be traveling much farther now. “We see where he goes, then circle back on foot to take him out.”

Marik thrived on the rush of tracking and killing his prey. Andre was simply a trophy for him. A reward from Yǔ xī for his loyalty and service.

Soon he would have his trophy, take the artifact, and return to his master.

Marik bore his teeth in a wide grin as he followed after Andre.

Chapter 60

Driving through town four days ago to get a read on things, Carly found it nearly deserted.

A notable exception, she did see a few store owners boarding up their places of business, signs out front reading, “Sold Out” and “Closed Indefinitely.”

*Soon, the looters.* Carly’s mouth formed a grin devoid of any joy at the thought.

Since then, Carly had not left her property, remaining indoors and out of sight during the day, only venturing out to check her water supply after sunset.

Carly was well trained in hand-to-hand combat and firearms, but she had learned from the man who shot her that all that training could fall apart quickly in the real world.

She would need her wits and common sense to survive what was coming.

She hadn’t seen nor heard many vehicles driving along the road adjacent to her property. It was not a well-traveled road under normal circumstances.

Carly was beginning to feel the mental pressure of figuring out what she would do when her supplies ran out.

Her shopping spree had bought her a month or two extra time, but it may be sooner if her farm came under scrutiny from looters or outlaws.

It wouldn’t be long before people realized law enforcement no longer existed.

It was during the second week of her stay at the farmhouse that Carly had her first unwelcome visitor.

While falling asleep on the sofa in the main room of her modest house, Carly saw the headlights through her side window, hearing a vehicle pulling up and stopping soon after.

Carly grabbed her semi-automatic shotgun sitting on the couch next to her. She tiptoed over to a curtained window, sneaking a peek outside.

Three men were approaching her house. She could hear them speaking but couldn’t understand what they were saying.

Two men walked onto her front porch while the other headed to the back of her house.

Carly had installed reinforced security bars on all her windows and doors several years ago. It would be difficult to break into her house, but not impossible.

The bars would only buy her a little extra time. She would need to go on the offensive.

One of the men tried the door. “It’s locked. Bring the crowbar.” She heard the man who had pushed her door say to the other man standing next to him.

“Shit. Okay. Be right back.” The other man ran back to the driveway.

The man at the door cupped his hands together, trying to get a peek inside.

Carly remained motionless as he did so, waiting for him to step away.

The man stepped back from the door. “Hurry up, Ethan!” He yelled, turning his head in the direction the other man had gone.

Carly hadn’t heard anything from the back of her house yet. That made her a little edgier.

The man kept his attention directed toward Ethan as Carly crept toward the door as quickly and quietly as she could manage.

A few creaks in the floor got her unwelcome guest’s attention. He turned his head back to the door, furrowing his brow, putting his hands up to peek inside again.

Carly wasn’t going to give these fellas any warning.

Sliding her shotgun through the mail slot in her door, Carly fired off one round, blasting a hole through the man’s pelvis.

He stood motionless for about two seconds, then crumpled to the porch deck like an accordion.

“Shit! Derek!.” She heard Ethan yelling toward the porch. The man who had been silent in the back of her house now ran around to the front.

“Derek!” He yelled, running up to the porch.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” The man bent down, cussing, as he spread his hands over Derek’s gaping wound.

Carly took another shot, taking one corner out of the kneeling man’s head. He wobbled for a few seconds, then fell over off the porch.

“Fuck!” Ethan yelled from somewhere Carly couldn’t see.

Firing two shots at the front door, Ethan turned and ran back to the vehicle the men had arrived in. He quickly started the car, throwing dirt up from the back tires as he sped out of Carly’s driveway.

Carly watched through her front window as taillights retreated down her long driveway, turning onto the adjacent road and disappearing into the night.

Carly didn’t sleep a wink, sitting on her sofa, shotgun beside her, until the sun rose.

Venturing slowly, she kept a watchful eye on the road as she stepped onto her porch to examine the body lying there.

The twelve-gauge slug from her gun had blown a hole several inches wide through the man at that close of a range.

The man on the ground, just off her porch, was lying in a crumpled mess, partially atop an unmanicured boxwood shrub.

Carly spent the rest of the day cleaning up. Removing the bodies and taking them out into the field behind her house, overgrown with bluestem grass.

Carly had neither the time nor the inclination to dig holes for these would-be looters. She figured animals would get to them eventually, cleaning up the mess for her out of sight.

Despite being a cold, calculating bitch, Carly felt fear growing inside her.

Being exposed to all this was not part of her life plan. She was supposed to be safe and secure by now.

Her mind had been playing through options all day as she hurried about her chores.

What was she going to do? She didn’t know. She had no idea.

Today she no longer felt any safety at her farm.

Maybe tomorrow, she would feel differently and come up with a plan.

For the second night in a row, Carly didn’t sleep.

Chapter 61

“Just come out! We won’t shoot you! I’m giving you a chance here! Don’t be stupid!”

Charles Sr. crawled across the cabin floor, trying to hold Lyla in one hand as he fumbled over her legs. Lyla could not stop herself from whimpering softly.

“Lyla, please be quiet. Please baby.” Charles begged her. He was almost to Charlene behind the couch.

“Dad, we have to fight back,” Casey whispered to him from under a window just to the right of the front door.

“No. No shooting.” Charles could not hide the panic in his voice. “You shouldn’t have started shooting at them.”

Holding the other children tightly behind the couch, Charlene was frantic but remained still. “Charles? What are we going to do?”

His mind racing through options, Charles could not force his brain to focus clearly. He was on the verge of freezing up. Only instinct to protect his family kept him moving.

“I’m going to give you five minutes to make up your mind in there!” A voice yelled through the shattered window above Casey’s head. “Then, we’re gonna light the place up!”

Reaching Charlene, Charles pushed Lyla into her arms, covering all of them with his own. “I don’t know what to do, Charlene. We have to protect the children.”

Charlene looked around in a panic, searching desperately for a solution. “The back door. We can get out the back. It’s our only way out.”

Charles turned his head toward the back door. It was about forty feet from the couch.

“Dad.” Casey whispered loudly. “I can get the leader. I have a clear shot at him.”

“Casey, please. Listen to me. We don’t have any time. You have to do what I say now. No arguing. Just listen to me goddammit.” Charles spit as he yanked his head back toward Casey, desperation obvious in his voice.

“Charlene, take Charlie and Lyla. Stay low. Head for the back door. Go, hurry. I’ll follow with Brianne and Sandra.” Charles pushed Charlene’s arm as he spoke, prodding her to get moving.

Charlene nodded as she wiped snot from her nose, grabbing Charlie and Lyla by the arm while she bent down to stay low, leading them toward the back door.

Charles looked over at his oldest two daughters. “Brianne, Sandra…you two stay close to me. Stay low. Keep quiet.”

Brianne and Sandra nodded quickly as they took each other’s hand, getting up from behind the couch to follow their father.

Charlene reached the back door and took one hand away from Charlie, reaching up to turn the knob.

Charles was close behind her, Brianne and Sandra just behind him.

As Charles was almost to the door, He turned to check on Casey. Casey was still sitting under the window by the front door.

“Casey.” Charles whispered as loudly as he could manage. “Come. Now. Please, just listen to me.”

Casey peaked over the window, gun still in his right hand. Kneeling back down, he nodded to his father and started crawling toward the back door.

Charlene opened the back door just enough to squeeze through, but just as she did, Charles heard her scream.

“Stupid bitch.” Charles heard a man say from somewhere beyond Charlene. A second later, she flew backward into the kitchen area of the cabin, toppling as she tripped over Charlie and Lyla.

“Mommy!” Charlie and Lyla both yelled, frantic now. “Mommy!”

Charlie and Lyla both crawled over to where Charlene was sprawled out on the floor, clutching at her desperately. “Mommy, wake up!”

Charles froze, Brianne and Sandra bumping into him from behind.

A shotgun barrel appeared in Charles’ view, pushing the backdoor open.

A man stepped into the opening, his gun holding the door open for the moment.

“Tryin to run out on us. That’s not very hospitable. You should really stay.” The man smiled at Charles, revealing several missing teeth.

Before Charles could do anything, he heard running behind him. Then, the sound of a gun firing just above his head. The sound of it sent him to the floor, his ears ringing in pain.

“You can’t hurt my family!” Casey yelled, his bullet meeting the man’s right shoulder. The man staggered backward out of the cabin, falling down the back steps behind him.

Suddenly, more guns were shooting from outside the front of the house. Windows shattered, and bits of wood flew away from the wall as the place seemed to rattle.

Charles rolled over to see Casey stumbling forward, knocking over Brianne as he did so.

The bullets kept flying as Casey fell to his knees, then fell flat on his face to the floor, motionless.

“NO!” Charles yelled, still not able to hear anything clearly. “No! No! No! No!” He kept yelling, trying to pull his way toward Casey.

Rolling him over and patting Casey desperately on the stomach and chest, Charles saw blood dripping from his hands. He pulled himself up to Casey’s head. Casey’s eyes were open, but they only stared blankly out as Charles held his head.

 Charles yelled, closing his eyes tightly as he cupped Casey’s head, willing him back to life.

The gunfire ceased as quickly as it had begun.

Brianne and Sandra had been keeling as low as they could, arms covering their heads. They both looked up to see their father halfway lying over Casey’s body.

“Casey! Casey!” Charles pleaded. “Wake up! Say something!”

Charlie and Lyla continued clutching at their mother, oblivious to their other family members.

Charlene gasped softly and began coughing loudly as she opened her eyes. Her vision started clearing as she tried to sit up and hug her children simultaneously.

She became aware of Charles yelling Casey’s name and looked over his way, her mind slowly coming out of a fog.

*Why are Charles and Casey wrestling on the floor?* She thought, thinking it was such an odd scene.

In a flash, it all came back to her. The men outside. Trying to escape through the backdoor. A man hitting her.

Now she could see that Casey wasn’t moving. “Casey!” She called out. “Casey!” “Charles!”

Charles stopped pleading with Casey to wake up, lowering his head to Casey’s chest, sobbing uncontrollably.

“No. No.” Charlene started shaking her head slowly.

“What’s wrong mommy?” Lyla asked, looking back and forth between her father and her mother.

Ignoring Lyla and Charlie, Charlene flipped around, crawling hurriedly toward Casey’s motionless body.

“Casey! Charles!” She kept repeating.

Charles turned his head toward Charlene, intending to hold her back and regain control of the situation.

As He did, he saw another man barging in through the back door.

“You don’t do that to us! You fuckers!” The man hollered.

“See what we do about that.” The man said in a lower voice.

Charlene, who had her attention entirely on Casey, didn’t register the man’s presence until he yanked her by the hair and started pulling her back out the door.

“No!” Charles screamed, rushing toward the man pulling Charlene out the door.

Charles followed the man out the door, and as he did, he felt something smack him across the side of his head.

Charles fell to the porch, unconscious.

He wouldn’t hear Charlene or his children screaming as these men tormented what remained of his family.

Chapter 62

“You don’t know what it’s like. Those head suckers are everywhere. And the bandits, they go after anyone not turned yet.” The old man pleaded with Gloria as he fell to his knees. “Please let us stay here. We won’t bother you. We’re no threat.”

The man continued begging Gloria to let him and his elderly wife park their motorhome in her front yard.

Cowboy stayed back, watching the scene play out in front of him.

He felt no empathy for these people. They meant nothing to him. But this was Gloria’s call, not his.

Gloria stood, not speaking, looking down at the elderly man on his knees in front of her.

Finally, she said, “I’ll let you stay, parked out front. I’ll protect you if I can, but I won’t risk my life for you. And, I don’t share rations. No exceptions. Do you understand?”

The man looked up at her. Slowly he began nodding his head. “Yes, yes, I understand. We won’t bother you at all. We are no threat to you.”

“What’s your name?” Gloria asked the man. “Stand up.”

The man got to his feet, brushing off his jeans. “I’m Hester. My wife’s name is Patricia.”

“I’m Gloria. You can park your RV over there.” Gloria pointed to a corner of her sizable driveway. “Keep to yourself and stay out of my way. We’ll get along fine if you can do that.”

Hester nodded again. “Thank you. Thank you so much. You have saved our lives.”

Gloria watched as the man turned away from her and got back into his motorhome, parking it where she had instructed.

Then she turned and walked over to where Cowboy was standing.

“You got a soft heart Gloria.” Cowboy smiled dully.

“Not really. They’re extra security for me. Looters will go after them first, making a lot of noise. Give me some extra time.” Gloria informed him.

“Might work.” Cowboy admitted. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“I’m not a good Samaritan Cowboy.” Gloria admitted. “If it doesn’t benefit me. I don’t go for it.”

“Others like them may show up. How many you gonna let stay?” Cowboy asked, turning his head away.

“I don’t know. We’ll see how this one goes.” Gloria stared at the RV.

“Okay, its your property. Your call.” Cowboy began walking toward his truck.

“Damn right.” Gloria nodded to herself.

Cowboy chuckled as he got into his truck and headed back to his place. Gloria had surprised him again.

The past week, Cowboy heard ATVs running somewhere on the trail behind his property. They hadn’t gotten close yet, but it was only a matter of time if whoever was driving them managed to stay alive long enough.

“These head suckers,” as the old man had called them, were also on Cowboy’s mind.

He didn’t like a threat he didn’t understand. This threat was new, and it was an unknown.

Cowboy had begun, together with Gloria, putting together intel on these unknown attackers.

Listening to news reports on the few remaining active stations, they had written up a list of characteristics and effective countermeasures.

Apparently, the head suckers fed by clinging to their victim’s heads.

Eyewitness reports indicated that the head suckers also drooled as they attacked, dripping saliva that sparkled faintly.

The attackers also seemed to have cooler than normal body temperatures.

Shooting them in the body had little or no effect. Headshots were the only thing that stopped them completely.

Victims could also show varying degrees of symptoms. It was unclear if all victims turned into head suckers themselves.

Most who were attacked died or fell unconscious before waking up to attack others.

It all sounded like something out of a movie or comic book. Cowboy had difficulty buying into the news reports but couldn’t ignore what he heard either.

Sooner or later, he or Gloria would face off with one of these things. It was prudent to be prepared.

Cowboy knew he was safer staying in one place, but it also felt like waiting to be attacked.

He hadn’t expected this to unnerve him as much as it did. He was used to dropping in, doing a job, and getting out.

The practice of staying in one place for an extended period was new to him.

It was made more manageable by having Gloria, a woman who could handle herself, close by.

He didn’t really crave her companionship. He appreciated her skills and abilities. She was an asset to him.

Her taking on refugees was a new wrinkle he needed to process for a bit.

There were so many ways it could go wrong, but he was used to that reality as a professional hitman.

Cowboy tended to view all civilians as liabilities, but Gloria’s rationale for allowing the old couple to stay made sense to him.

Her act was not out of kindness but in self-interest.

Cowboy fiddled with his radio as he settled for another long night of searching for any remaining radio broadcasts.

Chapter 63

“No need to apologize, I know you’re impressed Brother.” Gerald held up his hand in a mock halting gesture.

Conrad smirked in return. “Yes, you have done well. Excellent choice.”

“It’s out of the city, but not out of the city.” Gerald moved around the room, sounding confident.

Conrad took a moment to admire the house. It was in a high-end neighborhood on the edge of city limits. There was a private boat dock with a covered access ramp extending from the back porch to the dock.

The interior design highlighted a modern industrial motif, complete with an oversized polished steel dining table and EcoSmart Flex fireplace.

The centerpiece of the large downstairs was a c-shaped couch wrapping itself around the entire room opposite the fireplace.

“The owner won’t mind us borrowing the place?” Conrad asked.

“We are the owners now.” Gerald waved his hands, dismissing the question.

Gerald flipped on the enormous flat-screen TV hung above the fireplace.

“…the citywide curfew was announced today as part of a larger effort to curb looting and vandalism across the city. Unconfirmed reports of two Miami-like attacks in two separate suburbs just outside the city limits to the East…”

*That’ll spread fast*. Conrad said nothing as they continued watching the news for a bit longer.

Conrad was not accustomed to improvising as He went along. Apparently, it was Gerald’s comfort zone.

The dramatic change in Gerald’s demeanor since their conversation so many weeks ago in that rented vehicle, speaking of sabotaging Carly’s career, also took some getting used to for Conrad.

Gerald was a different person now, no longer so refined. Rougher, less proper than before. It was as if a switch had flipped inside.

Conrad had no interest in trying to understand Gerald’s transformation. He needed Gerald to stay safe. So long as he was helpful, Conrad didn’t concern himself with Gerald’s mental state.

“How long would it take us to get away in the boat?” Conrad asked as the talking heads took over from the news segment of the report.

“How fast can you run?” Gerald turned toward Conrad, showing his teeth in a wide grin. “No, seriously man, less than a minute. I’ve practiced it a few times.”

Conrad nodded in return. “Great. Excellent.”

“That curfew will only last until the police are overwhelmed and any kind of organized law enforcement stops altogether.” Conrad mused aloud.

“Yeah, I figure we will be okay here for a week, maybe two before things just get too hot to stick around.” Gerald added.

“Supplies?” Conrad asked.

“I already hooked us up with at least a couple months’ worth of freeze-dried stuff in the boat.” Gerald informed him. “There’s a desalination machine on the boat. We will have unlimited water too.”

“At least until we run out of gas.” Conrad stood up from leaning over the couch. “I’m going to check out the place. Familiarize myself with exits and possible weak spots.”

“Suit yourself.” Gerald waved in Conrad’s direction, not taking his eyes off the TV.

Conrad rechecked the front door, examining the locks and hinges. Then he moved on to inspecting the windows and garage.

Heading upstairs, Conrad found himself in a long hallway with a bend at the other end. He could see three doors to his left and two to his right.

As Conrad explored each room, he was running through scenarios in his head, trying to prepare for the violence he would surely meet eventually.

Conrad abhorred violence. He had ordered others to conduct violent acts, including murder. But, for him, it was always something happening far away, out of sight.

Being up close to it, such as in the parking garage with Gerald, unnerved Conrad more than he was willing to admit.

He would have to get tough quickly to survive. Be willing to do violent things to other people.

Conrad rounded the bend in the hallway and looked at two large, glass double doors. Through the doors was an expansive balcony. Fancy outdoor furniture covered the space, spread out evenly.

Conrad walked over to the balcony’s edge, letting himself get lost in the small white caps lapping the shore.

He briefly wondered why he had never allowed himself to enjoy a place like this before.

Chuckling, Conrad felt anger building inside. Sal’s betrayal hung over him like a heavy, wet blanket.

Maybe he could use that to hurt others when it became necessary.

Conrad moved over to one of the padded recliners closest to where he had been leaning on the balcony.

Not trusting sleep, Conrad continued watching the ocean, allowing his mind to play out diverse ways Sal would suffer for his treachery.

The sun slipped lower in the sky. He waited for the moon, which would take its place with a pale and ghostly glow.

Chapter 64

“YA na meste, stoyu ryadom.” Marik heard his partner’s voice in his ear.

“Very good. Hold position. Two of them are walking out of the house.” Marik replied.

Marik worked alone or with one other person only. He preferred the simplicity of small numbers for hit-and-run jobs such as this.

The two people he watched through his monocular were a man and a woman. They appeared to be engaged in an intense discussion.

Marik would let his partner take these two out. Andre, however, was all his to enjoy.

“As soon as they are clear of the house, take them out.” Marik spoke again.

The couple strolled around the house and into a driveway, apparently taking a walk around the property. This would make the job of eliminating them easier.

The couple was almost to the end of the short driveway when Marik saw the woman fall to her knees. The man bent down quickly, apparently trying to help her regain her balance. A few seconds later, the man crumpled to the ground. The woman remained on her knees, holding her chest. Another shot, and she was down as well.

Marik’s partner now came into view through his monocular. The man drug both bodies a short distance then headed back along the driveway and out of sight.

“Clear, Watch the door as you approach.” A voice instructed Marik.

“Copy.” Marik replied, moving out of his hiding spot to follow after his partner.

Approaching the house, Marik heard a man yelling suddenly, quickly followed by gunfire.

Cursing to himself in Russian, Marik ran up to the front of the house, launching a smoke grenade through one of the front windows, then ducking behind a half wall separating the driveway from the trees surrounding it on either side.

The front door flew open. Several people exited the house in a rush, firing automatic weapons in random directions to cover their escape.

Marik could still hear gunfire from around back. That meant his partner was still alive.

Marik sat a small backpack down beside the wall.

Counting to ten, Marik started moving along the wall, allowing it to conceal him from anyone on the other side.

He could hear people yelling in French and German as he neared the end of the wall.

Listening to get a read on their positions, Marik broke from the wall, running into the trees encircling the house.

Marik waited a few seconds, crouching just beyond the forest’s edge. Satisfied no one saw him, Marik took a remote detonator out from his belt and pressed the button.

Less than a second later, he heard an explosion off to his left. More yelling and gunfire.

Marik circled around the edge of the trees until he was parallel to the back of the house.

The sound of gunfire was much louder now.

Grinning to himself, Marik took out another remote and pressed it. Soon he could hear additional gunfire farther away, quickly answered by the sound of return fire.

His two remote auto fire guns would keep the people outside in front of the house busy for several minutes. Each was set to fire at a random interval.

The two remote guns were also armed with a proximity sensor connected to explosive devices. When someone got within ten feet of either weapon, the explosives would detonate, likely killing anyone within that ten-foot radius.

Each separate explosion would also act as a warning system for Marik, informing him when his distraction was no longer viable.

The gunfire in back of the house suddenly ceased. “Back is clear. Move in.”

“Coming in.” Marik replied in a whisper, breaking from the trees and heading into the house’s rear entrance.

Once inside, Marik could see two bodies lying on the floor just inside the door.

*This is no challenge*. Marik thought, looking up from the bodies.

Moving toward his partner’s position, Marik heard a brief grunting sound in his earpiece, followed by silence.

“Oleg.” Marik whispered. No response.

Waiting several additional seconds, Marik tried again. Still, no response.

Oleg was down.

Marek listened to the gunfire coming from outside the front of the house. Still no explosion.

As he moved further into the house, He relied on night vision goggles to navigate through the dark.

Marik could see no other bodies. Where was Oleg?

Hearing a slight creak in the floor behind him, Marek spun around, just in time to dodge a knife swiping at his mid-section.

The man holding the knife was quick. He parried and lunged at Marik again, this time making contact with Marik’s shoulder.

Marik bounced off the wall to his left, attempting to regain stability. His attacker swept Marik’s left knee, making solid contact, causing Marik to lose his balance.

As Marik fell, he turned to dodge yet another knife swipe at his head.

Two close-range gunshots hit him in the side, absorbed by his bulletproof vest but nearly taking the wind out of him.

The man dropped on top of Marik, aiming the knife at Marik’s throat.

Marik grabbed the man’s arm, holding the knife away from his throat.

As the man pressed harder, Marik waited until his weight was overextended up top, using his hips to throw the man off him.

Marik scooted away, taking out his gun and firing two shots at the man’s blurry form.

The man grunted in pain, returning fire with his own gun.

Marik hit the floor, quickly scooting through a door in the hall and kicking it shut.

As he kicked the door shut, Marik heard a distant explosion outside the house. One of his guns had been taken out.

He didn’t have much time left.

Marik looked around the room to get to his feet, trying to determine his best escape options.

Just then, he heard Oleg’s voice, weak and gurgly, in his earpiece. “Protect yourself, Comrade. I fly away today.”

Marik dropped to the floor as another explosion inside the house brought half the ceiling down on top of him.

Looking toward the door, Marik saw that it was nearly torn off its hinges.

“Blagodaryu vas Oleg. You have died well.” Marik whispered to Himself.

Rolling over to his side and standing up, Marik moved cautiously back into the hallway.

Debris was spread out everywhere. The ceiling had collapsed around where the man shooting at him had been when Marik retreated into the room.

Marik climbed over what was left of the wall leading into the room opposite the one he had just exited.

Inside this room, most of the ceiling had collapsed as well.

Marik squeezed between two fallen support beams, pushing himself into what used to be the back part of the room.

Under some broken ceiling panels, he spotted a large chest.

Working quickly, Marik tossed aside the broken bits of paneling, opening the chest.

Then he saw it. The artifact just where he expected it to be.

Grabbing the artifact from the chest, Marik pulled himself out of the room through a missing wall section, landing on his shoulder outside.

He was now on the side of the house, close to the back door where he had entered originally.

Inside the house, Marek could now hear someone yelling. “Andre. Andre, are you injured?”

Marik swore to himself again, rolling over into a crawling position.

As quickly as he could manage, still holding the artifact, Marik made his way along the house, bolting for the trees as soon as he made it to an area of the wall that was still intact.

As he ran deeper into the forest, Marik realized that the second gun was still firing. It had not exploded.

Apparently, his ruse had not been effective the second time.

Marik winced, falling to the ground once as a sharp sting in his chest took his breath away.

His ribs were broken where the man had shot him.

No bother. He had the artifact. Marik gritted his teeth, getting back to his feet.

Another forty minutes and he would be back to the helicopter, flying away with his prize.

Yǔ xī would be disappointed that he could not verify Andre’s death. But she would likely overlook that when he presented the artifact to her.

In a matter of days, Marik would be reunited with his master.

He had accomplished the most important part of his task.

She would forgive his minor failure.

Chapter 65

Cowboy could sense the changes in his body, but they were unlike any he had experienced.

Some days, he would feel almost back to normal, almost like sleeping again. On other days, his senses seemed to heighten and blend together.

Today was such a day. For the past few hours, Cowboy noticed he could taste the air and identify objects before he touched them without looking at them.

Being a new experience, Cowboy could not reference these sensations with anything in his past.

A calm awareness of the space around him brought with it an absence of fatigue.

Then, just as it had come on slowly, the feeling began to fade over the next several hours, reaching a minimal state.

Cowboy had not shared with Gloria, or anyone else, that he hadn’t slept a wink in over a week. His body just didn’t seem to need or want sleep.

A recurring and unnerving thought kept paying Cowboy a visit throughout the day and night. Were these new sensations related to his augmentations while in the Army?

Cowboy didn’t pretend to understand all that was done to him. It was all classified. Regardless of whether that was the case, he wasn’t sure a thorough explanation would have made sense.

There were probably very few people who really understood it, and perhaps none today.

There was no reason to discuss any of this with Gloria as far as Cowboy could determine. If it, for some reason, became relevant, he would make her aware of it. For now, it wasn’t.

Beyond the immediate sensations being without reference, Cowboy felt a certainty growing inside him that head suckers were getting closer every day.

The headshot strategy seemed straightforward. Cowboy could do that. No problem.

He doubted, however, that things would prove that simple. If any of these things were capable of thought, they were also capable of learning and planning too.

Just as Cowboy would learn from his interactions with them, so would they learn from his behavior.

Waiting for eventual, unavoidable conflict could mess with a person’s head.

However, Cowboy was not just any person. He did not know, nor did he attempt to predict the outcome of this engagement ahead of time. Flexible thinking means being able to adapt and modify one’s outlook on any situation. Cowboy could do that. He had done it many times.

He would match his wits against the head suckers when it became necessary.

For now, Cowboy set his mind to accomplishing small tasks each day. This was his way of taking control of what he could at the moment.

Early the next day, Cowboy received a transmission from Gloria.

“You up now, or is it too early for ya?” Gloria’s voice came over the walkie.

“I don’t sleep.” Cowboy couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I understand that.” Gloria replied. “Got some new ones down here. Appear to be refugees like last time. I’m thinkin of let’em stay.”

“More warning signals?” Cowboy continued sharpening his machete.

“Somethin like that. Yes. I already gave them the unconditionals. They agreed.” Gloria added.

“What do you want me to do?” Cowboy held his machete to the light, examining the blade as he always did after sharpening.

“Drive over, but keep your distance. Just let’em know you’re there. That I’m not alone here.” Gloria responded.

“Can do. Be there in fifteen.” Cowboy sat his machete down, satisfied with the blade.

“Fifteen?” Gloria sounded surprised. “Don’t wreck over it.”

“See ya in fifteen.” Cowboy repeated, getting up from his chair and heading for the primary topside exit.

“Copy.” He heard Gloria reply as he opened the door.

Cowboy arrived within visual distance of Gloria’s cabin in seventeen minutes. Not his best time, but he didn’t think she would notice.

He could see the newest arrivals parked a little way from Gloria’s first tenants.

He kept his truck lights on and directed toward them, waiting several minutes.

“I got eyes on them now.” Cowboy held his walkie close to his mouth.

“Copy. Thank you. That should do it.” Gloria radioed back.

“See you soon.” Cowboy backed up his truck a little, turning around.

*That was easy*. Cowboy thought, heading back to his bunker.

He was grateful for the distraction. It gave him an excuse to get out for just a bit that night.

Before heading down, Cowboy walked around his perimeter in the dark. He had done this numerous times before, but the experience was always different.

His property was a different world at night. He couldn’t schedule when strangers might come his way. It was excellent practice.

He still expected Gloria’s cabin to be the location of his first violent interaction but wasn’t relying on that as an absolute.

At the very least, preparing for direct threats kept him busy.

Chapter 66

Carly gasped as she was roused out of sleep by a loud voice.

“Good morning Ms. Hennington. My name is Lt. Colonel Adam Sebridge. We would like you to come with us.”

Carly stood up from the couch in her main room. She had taken to sleeping there the past week.

Someone was outside, speaking to her through a megaphone.

Holding her shotgun, Carly cautiously made her way to one of the windows facing the driveway. Her eyes squinted as she pulled back the curtain a little.

“Don’t think about running. We have you surrounded on all sides. Drones in the air. Thermal imaging of your house. We know you are standing just behind the curtain.” Sebridge sounded chipper and crisp.

Carly looked up at the sky. The sun would be rising soon. She couldn’t see any drones, but that didn’t mean anything. They knew where she was in the house.

“You could use that shotgun and try to shoot your way out, but we’ll subdue you and take you in just the same.” Sebridge continued. “Of course you could also shoot yourself and end it all now. That suits me just fine.”

Taking a look at her gun, Carly sighed. Sebridge had basically just listed off your options before she had time to think of them.

Carly had never interacted with someone in the military before outside of The Group. There was a General holding the position of sitting member, but she didn’t know him personally. He had only bothered to speak on a couple occasions during her interactions with The Group.

“Come out now. Surrender. Things will go a lot more smoothly for everyone involved.” Sebridge may as well have been ordering off a fast food menu.

Despite Sebridge laying it out for Her, Carly still rummaged through her options quickly.

She could see several military vehicles in her driveway. She didn’t understand how they could be there without hearing them drive up.

Carly tried to devise an escape plan, but then what? Where would she go? She had no one and no place.

She was already living on edge after the attack where she shot two men. More would be coming soon. Perhaps the turned ones would show up as well. Then what?

Carly looked down at the floor of her house, feeling all the fight drain out of her.

She kneeled, laying her shotgun on the floor.

Standing, Carly felt her eyes watering. She wouldn’t allow herself to break down.

Carly wiped her eyes and walked over to the front door.

Slowly, she opened the door and walked out onto the front porch.

“Excellent choice, Ms. Hennington.” Carly could see Sebridge, smiling at her.

Sebridge nodded to a couple of his men, and they approached Carly.

Once the men had reached Carly, one of them spoke. “Come with us. Don’t resist.”

Carly did not offer any resistance as the men led her over to Sebridge.

“Pleasure to finally make your acquaintance Ms. Hennington,” Sebridge spoke with relaxed confidence, holding the megaphone by his side.

“Why are you here?” Carly matched Sebridge’s calm tone.

“We have a few of your friends gathered up. Together with you, we intend to figure some things out. Get a clearer picture of what’s happening.” Sebridge replied.

“My friends?” Carly was genuinely perplexed.

“Don’t worry. You’ll see them soon. You’ll be spending a lot of time together.” Sebridge sounded almost reassuring. That made Carly feel uneasy, but she fought not to show it.

Sebridge nodded again to one of his men, and the man approached Carly. He was holding a small cloth bag.

Another man approached Carly from behind, placing her hands together, zip-tying them snuggly.

The man in front of her waited, then placed the cloth bag over her head.

One of the men grabbed Carly’s arm firmly and led her to a vehicle, where she was walked up a short set of stairs and into a small compartment.

Less than fifteen minutes after waking up, the vehicles were pulling out of Carly’s driveway again. Carly could barely hear the vehicles moving. They must have been rigged to run quietly.

Carly had no idea why Sebridge showed up that morning to collect her. Part of her brain desperately wanted it to be some rescue effort. Another part thought the Chinese woman from The Group had tracked her down.

They hadn’t killed her, so she must be of some value to someone.

She figured it would all become clear sooner or later, for better or for worse.

At least these people were well-armed. They could probably handle bandits, and the turned alike. Probably.

All Carly could do was sit, zip-tied, bag over her head, waiting to learn her value.

It was going to be a long drive to find out.

Book 3 Preview

Roger didn't like it, but it wasn't his call. Jesse had a soft spot for family.

"It's my son. He's messed up, but he's my boy". Jesse's eyes betrayed him, showing defeat.

Roger looked away, already sensing the first stage of failure for this small settlement of survivors.

Roger recalled events of the previous day in his mind.

"It's me pa." Jordan stood at the gate, waving. "You gotta let me in."

Roger took a spot next to Jesse at the gate that day, looking over the rag-tag group outside.

His first impression of them did not bring any comfort.

"Jordan, where you been, son?" Jesse's initial reaction sounded stern, but it would soon soften.

"Runnin!" Jordan couldn't hide his desperate condition. "Them bastard scramblers is everywhere pa."

"Who are your friends son?" Jesse scanned over the motley crew accompanying his wayward child.

"We been lookin after each other. They're my crew." Jordan's look of pride was unmistakable.

"They're a rough lookin bunch." Jesse eyed Roger, obviously concerned about Jordan's group. "They gonna cause trouble?"

"We just need a place for a bit. We'll be moving on again after a day or two." Jordan's voice didn't sound genuine.

Roger should have spoken up but was a newcomer himself. Jesse had listened to him about Bert. However, Roger knew that what happened with Bert still ate at Jesse. Jesse believed they could have done more to keep Bert from dying.

A long sigh escaped Jesse's mouth. "We'll give you a day, two at most. You can't stay here with them."

Jordan looked at the ground. "Okay pa. That's all we need."

A woman in Jordan's group spoke in a muffled voice, but Jordan shushed her quickly. Roger couldn't make it out what she said.

"We gonna have trouble?" Jesse took note as well, challenging Jordan immediately.

"No pa. No trouble. Please, just let us in." Jordan waved the scraggly woman away from him.

"I'll run 'em out they cause trouble. Understood?" Jesse wasn't ready to relent just yet.

"Yeah, we got it. No trouble." Jordan smiled at Jesse. Roger felt his anxiety rising.

"Okay, let 'em in Ned." Jesse backed away from the peek hole, turning toward Roger with a look of challenge and apology blended.

"Allright!" Jordan cheered as the gates rolled apart.

Jordan brought his gang inside, stopping to hug Jesse along the way. "we won't make ya sorry pa. You can trust me."

Jesse returned the hug but did not speak.

Jordan ignored Roger and everyone else as he led his people through Jesse's community, selecting the children's play area for them to settle.

Roger forced himself to avoid eye contact with Jesse. He didn't trust his face to hide his apprehension. There was no way this ended well for anyone.

"I know it was one of 'em that did it." Jesse sat next to Roger in front of Roger's trailer the following day. "I gotta confront 'em bout it. Get 'em gone. Couldn't keep the peace for one damn day."

"You think we coulda done more for Bert." Roger looked ahead, examining the trailer across from them.

"What?" Jesse seemed surprised by the statement.

"Tell me. I want to hear you say it aloud." Roger needed to get Bert out of the way with Jesse. The current situation with Jordan gave him an opening.

"I followed your advice Roger. We did like you said." Jesse turned to look at Roger.

"You weren't happy about it." Roger didn't take his eyes off the trailer.

"He'll no, I wasn't happy. Bert was my friend. He was family." Jesse paused. "Why you bringin that up now?"

"You blame me for Bert. Maybe not entirely but you think we shoulda left the food stash sooner. He might still be alive if we did. Tell me I'm wrong." Roger looked directly at Jesse.

Jesse looked away from Roger. "Maybe, maybe some part of me does. That's just the hurt lookin for somethin to blame." Jesse shook his head. "I know you was just trying to keep us safe."

"You think runnin your boy off is gonna be a problem or you wouldn't be sitting here talking to me." Roger could already see where Jesse was headed in his thinking. "You want my help because I don't give a shit about him. But, I'm not willing to have you blame me later for how it goes down."

Jesse lowered his head. "You read me too well Roger. Damnit."

He's your boy, but he can't stay here. If you don't get him gone, someone else will. Then you'll lose power with the people in this community, and they'll look to someone else to lead them." Roger figured it best to lay it all out in the open.

"If I can't protect 'em, maybe they should. Jordan bein my boy don't mean I can let his people thievin get by." Jesse teetered between defeat and resignation.

"If I help get rid of him, I gotta know you won't hold on to resentment about it later. It's that way or I won't be part of it." Roger was giving Jesse an ultimatum.

Jesse didn't speak for a moment.

"You have my word. I won't blame ya later, whatever happens. Now, will you help me run off my son or not?"

"I will. Lets get to it." Roger stood up, turning toward his trailer. Roger wanted his shotgun.

Roger walked beside Jesse to Jordan's makeshift camp in the children's play area.

Jordan caught sight of them as they approached.

"Pa!" Jordan called out, at once noticing Roger's shotgun in hand. "What's up?"

Jesse remained silent as he and Roger stopped just a few feet from Jordan. Several of Jordan's group sat around him, seemingly disinterested.

"Someone in the community had food and knives go missing this mornin after they left their trailer." Jesse was all business like he was talking to a stranger. "We know it was someone here took it."

Jordan scoffed. The woman who had whispered something to him yesterday outside the gate laughed. She spoke again. Roger could hear her this time. "We gonna take what we need."

Jordan shot a look her way, and she stopped laughing, continuing to smirk at the others sitting around her.

"You don't take what's not yours here. Thought I made that clear yesterday." Jesse turned his attention to the woman, disgust growing on his face.

Jordan hesitated, looking back and forth between Jesse and his gang. Roger could tell Jordan was debating pacifying his father versus looking weak to his people.

Jesse surprised Roger, speaking up before Jordan offered any reply. "You gotta clear out. Can't have ya here no longer."

Jordan looked at Jesse, not understanding that his father would force him out so quickly.

At the same time, a man sitting close to Jordan stood up, walking toward Jesse. "You don't talk at us about what we gotta do old timer."

The man continued moving toward Jesse, raising his hand to take a swing at him.

As he was getting ready to unload on Jesse, Roger brought up his shotgun, slamming the butt end into the man's face.

The man fell backward, knocked unconscious instantly.

Everyone else around Jordan stood up, turning toward Jesse and Roger. Roger leveled the shotgun on the group.

"You all get movin now. Walk out the gate. Just get out. I'll shoot the next one makes a move I don't like." Roger took aim at the one from Jordan's group closest to him. "This one can die first."

Jordan spit then spoke up. "We don't take threats from no one." Jordan brought a knife out from under his shirt. Jesse at once recognized it as belonging to the woman who confronted him about being robbed earlier in the day.

"I'm gonna come over and gut…"

Roger pulled the trigger, sending a slug directly into the man standing just a few feet away from him. It tore a hole through the man's chest.

He staggered back into the person behind him, falling to the ground.

Roger already had the shotgun pointed at a new target before his first target hit the ground.

Jesse stood next to Roger, speechless.

"You all be outta here in ten seconds, or I keep shooting till you're all dead." Roger looked into the eyes of the woman who had laughed when they first approached Jordan moments ago.

The woman's demeanor had changed. She looked panicked and afraid. She knew Roger would kill her.

"We gotta get Jor." She started walking away quickly, toward the gate.

Jordan hesitated a second longer, eyeing his father. Jesse just stood next to Roger, blankly staring at the dead man on the ground.

Jordan hissed in Jesse's direction, then ran after the woman.

The gate was already open as per Jesse's instructions. Jordan and his people were gone less than thirty seconds later.

Roger walked after them, stopping just inside the gate. Satisfied Jordan had gone, Roger tilted his head toward the men standing at the entrance, returning to Jesse.

He found Jesse standing over the dead man, joined now by Arlene and a few others.

"Jordan's gone. The gate is closed again." Roger turned his gaze toward the dead man as well.

Jesse looked at Roger, clearly still dazed by recent events. "That didn't go well at all."

"It did. We got 'em out. That's what you wanted." Roger wasn't willing to give Jesse an inch of time for regret.

Arlene moved around to face Jesse. "Roger did what was necessary. Probably saved us all."

Jesse avoided eye contact with Arlene, keeping his eyes on the dead body in front of him.

"I need a moment. Let me be." Jesse said nothing more.

Arlene got Roger's attention, signaling him away from Jesse. "Give him time. He'll need a few."

Roger shook his head, but Arlene put her hand on his arm. "He knows you did what had to be done. Just give him some time."

She pulled Roger away with her, leaving Jesse alone. Everyone else backed away as well, leaving Jesse to stare in silence.

Roger felt annoyed but relented.

He gently but firmly removed Arlene's hand from his arm, walking to his trailer alone.