

ECHOES OF THE END BOOK THREE

BURN

JUSTIN BELL
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BURN
Echoes of The End Series
Book 3
By
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SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to my awesome beta team, without whom this book wouldn't be nearly as great.

Thank you!

PROLOGUE

It all started in Lexington, Kentucky when an anomaly was discovered during a routine inspection of a section of fuel pipe. However, what began as a curiosity quickly turned into tragedy as, all at once, the vast network of fuel pipelines detonated, a massive, cascading series of explosions that decimated the world's infrastructure and plunged the entire planet into darkness and chaos.

Jacob Fuller, a pipeline worker at the scene of Ground Zero narrowly escaped death as a processing plant erupted around him, leading to a chain reaction of explosions that hammered through the city of Lexington and surrounded him in a lake of fire. After trying, and failing, to evacuate his ex-wife, Jacob decided to set foot out of Lexington and head East, hoping to reconvene with his brother and his family who he hoped had successfully made it to New York City before the world went up in flames. Along the way, Jacob met a young girl who, desperate to save her precious horse's life, asked him to take the animal, and Jacob did, galloping through the wilderness, hoping to put the dangers of the world at his back.

But there is no safe place in the world, not anymore, and he found himself moving from one fire to the next until he eventually landed in a small community outside St. Albans, West Virginia, a momentary oasis in the desert of modern reality. There he discovered Neutral Territory, a farm converted into a trading post and moonshine bar where he became friendly with local community members and hoped perhaps to start a new life. Though he still thinks of his brother's family and still wants to make his way to them, the

comforts and familiarity of West Virginia have lulled him into a momentary sense of security— though that sense of security will undoubtedly not last forever.

What Jacob doesn't realize, however, is that his brother never made it to New York. At the Miami International Airport with his daughter Scout, Jacob's brother Marcus unfortunately lost his life in the explosions, leaving the thirteen-year-old girl to fend for herself against a world threatening to consume her in flames. Initially Scout is taken by soldiers in an attempt to ferret her to a refugee camp, however, she never made it there. Everett Kinsman, a loner and ex-military man ambushed the soldiers in an attempt to steal some of their supplies, not realizing the girl was there with them. Finding her injured within the wreck of the Humvee, Everett can't help but feel responsible for her condition.

He takes Scout in, bringing her to his remote cabin in the Everglades where he's established a small stronghold, a place withdrawn from civilization where he can live out his days outside the constraints of modern civilization. Taking her in, he nurses her back to health with plans to transport her back to the military or to her grandparents, though a generator failure throws his plans into turmoil. Desperate to acquire some salvage parts, he takes the young girl into a nearby town and coordinates with her to attempt to acquire the necessary parts. During that process, however, they run into a few old acquaintances of Everett's, a confrontation that ends in violence.

Not far from Everett's cabin, a single-engine plane crashes into the Everglades, a plane carrying a group of weapons smugglers who immediately set off, in an attempt to find their way out of the wilderness. It doesn't take long for them to stumble upon Everett's cabin in their search for shelter and when Everett and Scout return, violence ensues. The smugglers are driven away, but it comes at a cost, and the danger of their return haunts the cabin like a phantom.

In New York City, Scout's mother Jean and brother Keegan arrive in an attempt to rescue her older sister Holly,

the three of them coming together just in the nick of time as violence threatens to shatter the city even further. Still reeling from the death of Bruce Phillips, Holly is determined to pay her respects to his family before they all head south to try and reunite with Scout and Marcus, who they don't know is dead. Venturing through the wreckage of Queens, Long Island, then Brooklyn and beyond, the Fullers end up on the Atlantic Ocean in a stolen boat, only to run into the Coast Guard, who forces them ashore. In the shadows of Atlantic City, a violent skirmish threatens to tear the family apart and they narrowly escape, though in the process lose the majority of their supplies. Stranded on the streets of Atlantic City, the Fullers must find a safe way out and continue their southward trek toward Florida, though that might be far easier said than done.

CHAPTER ONE

Just outside Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Day Zero

Doctor Sofia Cruz was supposed to be on vacation, but as she hurtled south, toward Miami, she wondered if there would ever be another vacation again. The fingers of her left hand twisted tightly around the contoured steering wheel of her Mercedes as she leaned forward, stabbing a trembling finger toward the station selector of her radio. Horns wailed all around her as she sped south, jerking the wheel right, then left, weaving her luxury vehicle through stalled traffic that had halted along Route 27 south, just west of Fort Lauderdale.

Just outside her speeding car, the world itself seemed to be on fire, a roiling curtain of cascading flames hungrily chewing through the urban sprawl of the popular Florida vacation destination. As much as she tried to tell herself she wasn't the typical Florida resident, the fact was she had been heading to a beachfront time share in Fort Lauderdale herself when the world erupted in a ball of fire. The radio squelched as she scanned the stations, trying desperately to find some small sliver of news about the chaos that consumed the entire world around her. On the passenger seat, her cell phone thrummed, a trembling vibration that drew her eyes immediately to it. Yanking her finger from the radio scan, she leaned over, keeping her eyes fixed through the windshield and swept the touch screen, answering the phone and putting it on speaker in one coordinated motion.

“This is Sofia.”

“Doctor Cruz?” The voice on the other end was faint and tremulous. “This is—”

“I recognize your voice, Monica. Don’t tell me you’re still at work!” A horn blared and a figure lurched forward from a stopped car, waving frantically at Sofia. She tapped the brakes, jerked the wheel right and pulled herself rigid in the driver’s seat, threading her Mercedes around the lurching figure and between two other vehicles, accelerating. To the west, twisting tendrils of bright, orange fire ran alongside the road, a sudden series of explosions having ripped apart the ocean-facing horizon several moments before. The world shook with the thunder, the sky immediately shrouded with dark smoke.

“We don’t have a choice.” Monica’s uncertain voice came back over the phone’s speaker. “Essential personnel.”

“No offense, Monica, but you work in scheduling. Get out of there! Get back to your family!”

There was a choked sob from the other end, then a ragged intake of breath. “I would like to, but my boss, she— she won’t.”

Sofia pressed her back teeth together, pulling her other hand to the steering wheel and holding tight, her arms rigid as the fast-moving Mercedes swept around another stopped car, its driver gaping at the wall of flames between them and the Atlantic Ocean.

“She’s taking advantage of you. You’re too kind to push back. Trust me, I’ve been there. It used to happen to me all the time when I first came here.” The words came in rapid succession, barely framed by her Cuban accent, an accent she’d worked hard to try and eliminate from her vocabulary since coming to America sixteen years ago.

“It’s not just that,” Monica replied. “They need me here. The entire city does! Miami is on fire, Dr. Cruz. Already millions dead, they’re turning the entire hospital into a trauma ward.” There was a momentary hiss of static on the line, Monica’s voice distorting for a handful of seconds. “We need all hands on deck!”

Sofia's jaw clenched so hard it ached and she eyed a near collision ahead, two cars coming dangerously close to hammering into each other in the southbound lane. It was fascinating to see how people reacted in crisis, many of them just pulling over to watch in astonishment as Fort Lauderdale burned, while others, like her, continued speeding southward in hopes of getting to where they were going before things got worse.

"I get it," she replied swiftly. "The moment the explosions happened, I turned around and began to head back South, but you must understand, I'm up near Fort Lauderdale. I can't get back there any time soon!" She ripped a hand free of the wheel and pounded her horn as she swerved and barely avoided yet someone else stumbling backwards from their stopped car. A moment later, as she hurled around both them and the sedan they'd been driving, a secondary explosion ripped through the flames, a churning jet of fire tearing loose like a nova across the surface of the sun. In her rear view mirror, the stumbling man was immediately consumed by the sudden, blinding fireball, a rush of heat sweeping over two lanes of stalled traffic, only a dozen feet behind her speeding Mercedes.

Sofia whispered a rapid succession of prayers in Spanish just under her breath as she leaned forward, almost pressing her chest to the steering wheel, willing her Mercedes to accelerate even further.

"So, you are coming?" Monica's voice was even closer to breaking, a thought that Sofia wouldn't have thought possible. "Dr. Pletcher says you're one of the best trauma surgeons we have. He says we need you!"

Sofia shook her head, even though Monica couldn't see it. Why did it take a crisis or disaster for Dr. Pletcher to recognize her as the skilled surgeon she was? A week ago, she would have killed for that sort of praise from the closed-off sixty year old physician, though the compliment felt empty compared to what was happening around her.

"I will be there just as soon as I can!" Sofia waited for the response to come back over the phone, but all she heard was the faint backdrop of static. "Monica?" She called out into the

empty car but heard no response. While navigating the Mercedes with her left hand, she scooped the phone up, killed the call, then pressed the contact entry for U Health, the University of Miami Health System. There was a tense moment of quiet before a digitized voice responded.

All circuits are busy now.

She exhaled through her nose and dropped the phone into the cushion of the passenger seat, drawing herself straight once again to focus on the difficult task of navigating south. As she did so, the radio squawked, a tinny voice breaking through the static.

“Cities across the United States continue to reel from the sudden onset of explosions and fires that, to this point, seem to defy explanation. In midtown Manhattan, a catastrophic series of events has left the financial district in ruins, the entire city consumed by, at last count, more than six hundred separate fires. Even in Miami, as Miami International Airport is ravaged by flames, emergency responders are trying to hold things together. U Health is already being overrun by desperate people, injured and dying, while Miami-Dade police struggle to maintain some semblance of law and order.”

Once again, Sofia fell into her familiar first language, expressing her devotion through a series of whispered prayers, her fingers curling more tightly around the rounded steering wheel she clung to. Up ahead, a tractor trailer truck, still charging south, swerved sharply right to avoid a stopped car, then jackknifed, angling back left, its trailer wrenching toward the cab, brakes screaming as it barreled headlong into a trio of vehicles that had stopped along the right shoulder. Metal struck metal in a grinding burst as glass shattered and sprayed. The impact sent a lone figure twisting painfully into the air, the truck’s impact tossing them left, across lanes of traffic and Sofia sucked in a frantic breath as she sliced between the collision, now to her right, and the stalled car the truck had been trying to avoid to her left.

Her entire field of vision out the passenger side was the sliding, scraping truck, bent awkwardly as it surged forward, rending steel like it was tissue paper, the sprawling body of the

struck pedestrian vanishing beyond a vehicle to Sofia's left. She hammered the accelerator, speeding past the shuddering truck and kept her eyes facing forward, her heart slamming so hard she thought it might force its way up her throat and out of her open mouth. The vehicular carnage smeared into a mottled blur through her passenger side window as she increased her speed, clutching the wheel to keep her German-engineered driving machine weaving forward, through the clutch of traffic.

Leaving the truck in her rear view mirror, Sofia took only a moment to glance and ensure it was falling far enough away that she could relax her grip on the steering wheel. As she drew her eyes forward again, an SUV collided with a hatchback a short distance away, the sudden crash sending it lurching into her lane with a bounce of front tires and a spray of shattered windshield. Sofia tapped the brakes and twisted the wheel, angling around the sudden movement of the SUV, then accelerated and steered back, swerving back into the correct lane even as yet another car screeched to a halt, pounding hard into the guardrail to her right. Smoke congealed in the air, thickening, clouding her visibility, but she didn't want to risk slowing down for fear of getting caught within the tangled mass of unmoving vehicles.

Instead, she floored the gas, a near collision emerging from the smoke ahead. Tensing her shoulders and tightening her grip, she pressed onward, the grill of her expensive car ramming into a narrow gap between the two vehicles in front of her. The collision was enough to twist metal and knock both cars aside, creating a gap just wide enough for her Mercedes to hack through. Compensating for the shifting momentum, she quickly regained control and her gaze widened as the stretch of road opened up ahead, traffic thinning almost miraculously.

"I'm going to do this," she whispered to herself, "I'm actually going to do this." But as she peeled away, putting a bit more distance between herself and the traffic to her rear, there was another bone-smashing boom, a secondary explosion ripping through the wall of flames to her left. The sound was almost deafening, a blast she could feel in her chest, even through the metal exterior of the vehicle. A massive chunk of

debris hurled up into the air, chased by tails of twisting fire and smoke, it arced almost gracefully, her eyes fixated upon it. Defying any known laws of physics, it almost seemed to pause in mid-air, considering its trajectory, then hurtled down, straight at the road before her. She hammered the brakes, her entire foot slamming down on the pedal even as the charred shred of rubble plowed into both lanes of paved roadway ahead of her.

It struck the ground with a shattering bang, a dance of sparks and shreds of metal bursting free as the pavement spider-webbed at the point of impact. Sofia steered wildly, her tires gripping the road, though the rear of the Mercedes slid instead of turning, shoving her closer and closer to the debris, even as it bounded headlong across the shoulder. Finally, the tires gripped and propelled the vehicle forward, hurtling at an angle, still at an intercept course with the tumbling shrapnel. All at once both the Mercedes and the chunk of debris struck the far guardrail, twisting together into a choking, smoke-filled ruin. The steering wheel wrenched from Sofia's desperate grasp, the car hurtling outside of her physical control and as she plowed through the guardrail and left the road, her stomach lurching, darkness swarmed into the vehicle like water and she went tumbling into the screeching, flaming abyss.

CHAPTER TWO

Florida

Day 01

Sofia gasped, air stabbing into her lungs, her fingers clutching at bed sheets as she lurched upward, the vacuum of blackness exploding away into stark, bright, painful reality. A fist of agony was bound around her entire body, squeezing hard even as she bolted upright, her lungs burning for air, fingers clawing for purchase as she desperately tried to regain control of the vehicle she was no longer driving.

“Where?” A single word escaped her pursed lips, her head whipping left to right as she tried to take in her surroundings. She squinted against the faint, artificial light, trying to make sense of the tiny confines of the world around her. The room smelled of sterility and lemon, an all-too-familiar concoction that answered her question, even as she asked it. She was in a hospital room, though certainly none of the rooms at U Health. It was smaller and more confined, decorated with older curtains and outdated equipment, the IV tugged into her arm connected to a machine branded with a logo she did not recognize. Her ears remained clouded, as though submerged in water, though somewhere, out in the world, voices murmured, shifting in volume and tenor.

“Hello?” She called out, sitting upright, rubbing her arm with her opposite hand. Her skin prickled where the IV had been inserted and she studied the surrounding equipment, realizing for the first time that most of it wasn’t even powered on. Pinching the catheter within her arm, she tugged it free,

wincing as a trickle of blood twisted from the puncture mark on her elbow's interior. She flexed her fingers and blinked away the brightness, struggling to get her bearings, even as she swung her legs from the bed and steadied herself against a rising tide of dizziness.

"Hello?" She lifted the volume of her voice, very nearly shouting the question, the word reverberating back to her within the tight confines of the hospital room. Tossing aside the IV line, she stepped from the bed, pushing through the nausea and unsteadiness of her balance, then stopped, drawing a deep breath. As the fog cleared, the voices outside became clearer, a crowd, bordering on the edge of panic from the sounds of it, and she shuffled forward shouldering the door open as she passed out into the branching hallway.

"Everyone, please calm yourselves!" A man in doctor's scrubs stood before an assembled group, who pressed forward, filling the entrance lobby. Sofia's room had been the first down a narrow hallway and she could see straight into the entrance, another reminder that the hospital she was in was a world apart from the sprawling campus of U Health in Miami. "There's only so many of us to go around!"

"My son! There was a car accident! He's bleeding from the ear!"

"Third degree burns!"

"Chest pains!"

"Not breathing!"

The words came in a flurry, pelting at the doctor like darts striking a dartboard. He shifted uncomfortably, twisting right, then left, hands outstretched, trying to triage all of the incoming requests at once.

"Third degree burns!" He said, pointing into the crowd. "Exam room two!" He pointed toward a secondary hallway on the other side of the lobby and another man in scrubs pushed past him, gesturing for someone to follow him.

"I'm hurt more!"

"I told you, he's not breathing!"

Voices echoed loudly as the crowd started to surge. The second doctor gripped the slender arm of a young woman and half-dragged her through the crowd as desperate hands groped at them. As she passed by, the glistening ruin of her left face caught the pale light of an overhead fluorescent, her eye pinched closed beneath a calloused fist of burned flesh.

“What about us?”

More people started to move forward, forcing the doctor back, his spine striking the reception desk behind him, giving him nowhere to go.

“I can help!” Sofia said the words before she even consciously thought them, stepping forward, lifting a hand. The doctor wheeled toward her, confusion etched along the features of his face.

“What? I don’t—”

“Trauma surgeon for U Health. I was in a car wreck!”

“Someone brought you in yesterday. Found you in the woods between here and 75, near the wreckage of a Mercedes. You’re a doctor?” He almost had to shout to be heard amid the gathered crowd, which continued to encroach.

“Help us!” someone else screamed, their shrill voice rising above the others. “My son! He’s bleeding from the ear! He’s got a brain injury, I’m sure of it!”

“I can’t—” the first doctor turned toward the crowd, his head shaking.

“Come with me!” Sofia moved forward, quickly locating the woman in the crowd, her young son standing at her side, leaning precariously against his mother. His eyelids fluttered and if she released him, Sofia was certain he’d fall straight to the floor.

“We have others who were here first,” the doctor hissed, but Sofia ignored him gesturing toward the woman and her son.

“Come on. Quick.”

“No!” Voices cried out, fingers clawing for the woman as she lowered her head and pushed through the increasing crowd.

“My wife is having chest pains!” The voice came like an accusation, as if the man’s wife’s pain was somehow Sofia’s fault. Accumulated voices grew, filling every empty space within the hospital lobby, questions shifting into shouts, screams and accusations. Sofia grabbed for the young boy, helping him back down the hall as the mob thickened, the crowd littered with furious faces.

“They can’t do this!” Someone screamed. “They have to take care of us!” The voices grew into a collective howl and the doctor tried to retreat, but again had nowhere to go. As one, the mob converged on him, pushing forward anger elevating close to hysteria. As Sofia lead the woman and her son to a nearby exam room a sudden bark of a rifle shot echoed, driving her spine rigid and her heart into an uncontrolled forward gallop. She twisted wildly, barely able to keep the boy standing as someone in overalls and a button up shirt strode from a nearby hallway. Sure enough, he held a rifle in two hands, his eyes wide with rage, split lips revealing a scowl of yellowed teeth.

“Get the hell back!” he shouted. “Get the hell back *right now!*” He shoved the butt into the crook of his arm and lifted the barrel, firing a second time over the heads of the gathered sick and injured. “These people are the only help we got out here! What are you gonna do, rip ‘em apart?”

The crowd drew back all at once, a collective gasp of surprise fueling their hasty retreat. Taking another wide step forward, the man in overalls waved his rifle in a wide, sweeping gesture, making it perfectly clear he was more than willing to fire if necessary.

“All of y’all! Get back! Form a line! It’s up to the doctor to decide priority, you got that?”

Sofia reached the room and flung open the door, taking one more glance back toward the lobby. A second armed man had joined the first, the two of them flanking the young doctor,

who stood wide-eyed and pale-faced, unsure of what to do even as the rifle wielding men forced the crowd to retreat.

“Tell ‘em, doc!” The second man snapped, his mouth a narrow line within the confines of his copper-colored beard, thick as tumbleweed.

“They’re right!” The doctor exhaled, lifting both hands, showing his palms, a gesture of peace. “We are here to help, but we can’t help everyone at once! There needs to be order! Process!”

“You’re askin’ for order while our families are dying!”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But we’re a small hospital here, we’ve only got so many staff. We will help everyone we can help, but we need your cooperation!”

Sofia smiled softly as she led the young boy into the hospital room. Being a cog in the massive machine of U Health, she’d almost forgotten what it was like to be so face-to-face with the population she was tasked to heal. It was frightening but also strangely rewarding. In a city of millions, it was easy to forget that the work she did really made a difference. Wherever she was, in a little town west of Fort Lauderdale, she was helping someone. A young boy, bleeding from the ear, who might just die if not for her trained hand and practiced demeanor. She was a trauma surgeon, and she was used to saving lives, but that fact often remained buried beneath the unnecessary bureaucracies and logistics of her chosen profession.

Suddenly, with the world smoldering around her, she was a small town doctor— someone who could do real good and who could make a real difference. No insurance, no complicated metrics, no convoluted coverage rules or ridiculous health care policy. There was her and the patient and at that moment, that was enough.

The ramrod pump of adrenaline and the rejuvenated satisfaction of getting her hands on a patient evaporated all too

quickly as Sofia Cruz slumped into a chair pressed into the corner of the makeshift operating room, her hands draped between bent knees, head hung low. An acrid tang hung in the air, the scent of sweat laced with the slightest metallic hint of blood as Sofia stared at her palms, eyes tracing the etched lines of her skin. Shoulders slumped low, she blinked through a fog of tears, her clouded mind trying to sort through the barrage of images and events that had assaulted her from every turn since the day the world caught fire.

Knuckles gently rapped the door, and she lifted her chin as it eased open, revealing the doctor who had been holding his ground by the reception desk out in the lobby. He stood for a moment, framed in the narrow doorway, his eyes puffed from lack of sleep, his cheeks gaunt, one hand resting near his right hip.

“Bad one?”

Sofia nodded, curling her fingers into softly closed fists. “I thought it would be easy. I’ve done it a thousand times. Check for soft tissue damage, pupil dilation, worse comes to worse, surgery to relieve a little pressure on the brain. I mean, not easy, but—” the last word trailed into ragged silence.

“We’re not exactly a trauma center. Even before the pipelines started exploding.”

“The pipelines?” Sofia narrowed her eyes as it occurred to her, she’d never really found out what had started the fireball rolling. “Is that what happened?”

“Wait. You don’t know?” The doctor reached to the side and scraped a chair over, turning it around and settling in it, his arms draped over its back.

“No. It’s been so frantic since it started. I haven’t really stopped to take a breath. Radio and cell service were so choppy, I never really heard.”

“Okay.” The doctor swallowed. He appeared young, probably in his late twenties or early thirties, a face that might have been fresh out of med school without the stress lines and lack of sleep adding some artificial decades. “First of all, I’m

Cooper.” He extended a hand over the back of the chair. “I didn’t even get your name before you jumped in to save some lives.”

“To *try* and save some lives. Emphasis on the word *try*.” She shook his hand, though without much enthusiasm.

“Sometimes that has to be enough.”

“Is the mother still out there?”

Cooper shook his head mournfully. “She left. Her husband helped her— take— you know.”

Sofia did know. As a trauma surgeon with several years’ experience, she’d lost her share of patients, but the boy’s injury had been a relatively simple case, something she could have normally resolved in her sleep. But the lack of resources, tools and the appropriate support had doomed her before she’d even started. Still, that surge of adrenaline and the feeling of getting her hands on someone who needed her help had been like nothing she’d felt in quite some time. Only to be followed by a sort of crushing grief, which weighed on her like sandbags draped across the slope of her narrow shoulders.

“Who were those guys with the guns, anyway? You have your own private security here?”

Cooper laughed, leaning back and dragged his fingers through a tussle of unwashed hair. “That’s Stan for you. From what I understand from Dr. Greene, he’s an old school townie. Been living in the Glades for his whole life, born and raised. Used to hang around the swamps, learned how to hunt at the knee of his father. Normally, he’s a drunk and kind of a thug, but he’s also got a vested interest in keeping the hospital safe. His pops is here, one of the rooms in the back. He’s got type 2 diabetes, had his right foot amputated a couple of weeks back. His motivations are personal, but we’ll take what we can get. I’d prefer he not shoot his guns inside, though.”

“That seemed extreme.”

“He’s got a lot of friends and I just got done talking to them. They’ve volunteered to help keep the hospital safe. And

so far, it's working. Lobby's cleared out except for a few folks we're triaging. The others agreed to head back home."

"How many have we lost?"

"Too many. First twenty-four hours we had people just wheeling in corpses. We've been, well, taking care of them best we can. Fire pit in the back. But that's about the best we can do."

"And there are only two of you? Doctors, I mean?"

Cooper nodded. "Me and Dr. Greene is it at the moment. A few nurses and orderlies, too, but most folks took off. The second that emergency alert went off warning people about what was going on, most of our staff hightailed it out of here. I'd like to think they were on their way to more populated areas to help, but to tell the truth, I'm thinking they just didn't want to be stuck here."

"And you said it was the pipelines?"

"That was the last I heard, though communication has been pretty spotty. Seems all at once a bunch of fuel processing plants and pipelines exploded. Sabotage has been ruled out because from what I'm hearing, it happened pretty much everywhere, all at once. Massive explosions all throughout the world. Death toll is, well, its incalculable." There was a moment of quiet between them before Cooper leaned forward a bit. "You have family?"

"In Cuba. Haven't seen them in years. They lived outside the city, middle of nowhere, basically. I'm just... I'm hoping they're okay. Trying not to think about it too much, honestly."

"I hear that."

"What about you?"

"I came back to town after my residency to take care of my dad, who had stage four pancreatic cancer. That was four years ago now. Don't ask me why, but I sort of fell in love with the place and just never got around to leaving."

"Where did you go to medical school?"

"Central Florida. You?"

“Miami.”

“Why does that not surprise me? You seem like the hotshot type.”

“Hotshot?”

“Well, the look on your face when you realized what was going on and that you could help someone— you shifted right into trauma mode, I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anything like it, at least not in these parts.”

“For all the good it did.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. Look where we are and what we’re dealing with. Something tells me we’re going to have to get used to losing more than we’re winning.” Cooper sighed and scraped the chair ahead, rising to a weary stance. “Speaking of which, I need to make some rounds. Check in on Dr. Greene and some of the other patients. We’ve got our hands full here.” He stepped back toward the door, then paused, turning slightly. “I assume you’re going to find a way back to Miami?”

Sofia still sat on the chair, back hunched, arms draped over bent knees. She squinted, her head tilting as she considered the young physician’s question. “You know, I might stick around, just for a few days. See if I can help out here before I try and find a way south. U Health has dozens of doctors just like me. I suspect you could use my talents, such as they are.”

“We’d be happy to have you, even for a few days.”

Sofia mustered up the energy to smile even as Cooper stepped out of the small, makeshift operating room and shut the door behind him, leaving her with only her thoughts.

CHAPTER THREE

Scout squinted as she stepped outside the cabin, her palm pressed to the uneven, rough surface of the wooden door at her back. Pushing gently, she closed the door, waiting for the telltale latch before peeling her hand free, which was already moist with sweat early in that Florida morning. A throb at her left temple reminded her of the injury that had placed her within Everett's care, the concussion she'd suffered when he'd forced the Humvee off the road in an attempt to steal some of their supplies. He'd done well, making off with several crates of MREs as well as other useful items for his isolated lifestyle, but at the same time, Scout had whacked her head against the Humvee's interior. She'd been knocked unconscious for the first time in her life and through the daze of her delirium, she'd only vaguely recalled him extracting her from the vehicle, loading her in his pick-up and carting her back to his small cabin on a patch of property surrounded by Florida swamplands.

He'd fed her, allowed her some time for rest and recovery, giving her some natural remedies and had allowed her to successfully navigate her way from the depths of her injury to a moderately normal state. However, the old man had made it perfectly clear that once she was healthy, she was no longer welcome there and he'd already started charting a course for removing her from his life. Scout wasn't sure how she felt about that. Everett was an old codger, ornery and not all that likeable, but he'd quite possibly saved her life and staying with him seemed better than the alternative. If given the choice between being locked up in a refugee camp or shackled with

her grandparents in some gated community while the world burned around her— Scout felt pretty sure she'd rather be in a cabin in the Everglades.

There was, of course, the issue of contacting her mother. Everett had access to an old radio, but it had been useless without the generator and since getting the generator running again, they hadn't had much opportunity to explore the various public channels and put the word out. Eventually making her way up to her grandparents' house was likely the appropriate course of action, but she was in no rush. It would take days, if not longer, for her mother and siblings to make their way down to Florida, if they were able to come at all. If Everett had his way, however, she'd be on her way in a matter of minutes or hours, marching up the long, narrow stretch of road through the Everglades, destination unknown. Bella Glade, the small Florida community where her father's parents lived, was a ninety-minute drive from Miami— she had no idea what that translated to in walking distance and didn't care to think about it too hard.

From somewhere beyond the wall of trees ahead, she heard the low splash of something big moving through the water. Pausing for a moment, Scout peered through the narrow slots between trees, a patchwork quilt littered with broken seams. Narrow bars of sunlight pierced through the foliage, brightening the greens and browns, painting ornate patterns of light along the uneven forest floor. The trees and sun and dirt and grass brought back fond memories— a pleasant recollection of summers spent at the rural property in Maine where she'd been raised. Perhaps that was why she longed to remain at the cabin as long as possible. It felt more like home than any other place she'd been since coming to Florida. It was certainly more like home than the glistening towers of Miami or the gated community in Bella Glade where houses were clumped together, evenly spaced and placed for the maximum number of residents, sixty-five or older, in the most minimum possible real estate.

There had been something so fake about her grandparents' community, the way the architects and builders had tried so hard to make it look natural— they'd tried so hard, they'd

managed to make it look as false as it was. Everything placed just so, the grass cut just a certain way, the layout drawn in paved ink instead of following the natural curve of earth's terrain. There was nothing artificial about the cabin or its surrounding property, every inch of the place had been cut from or built upon nature. Just how Scout liked it.

Walking along the tree line, she gazed toward the swamps, barely making out the green shimmer of water beyond the leaves and narrow twists of cypress. A few times she thought she'd caught a passing glimpse of an alligator or crocodile but hadn't seen one full-on. Scout desperately hoped to rectify that at some point during her stay at the cabin. Walking along the grass, she ventured toward the pen where the goats and the chickens roamed about, the chickens clucking restlessly as they fluttered, wings beating uselessly at the air, beaks hammering the dirt at their feet. One of the goats glowered at a particularly enthusiastic chicken and berated it with an uneven bray, then turned toward Scout, meandering toward the edge of the wire fencing. It pried open its mouth and showed teeth, the pink of its tongue extending slightly in request. Reaching into her pocket, Scout retrieved some of the food she'd brought with her and shook some out for the goat, who snatched it hungrily. Two of its friends got wind of the activity and made their way over as well, braying and pressing against each other, wrestling for a better vantage point by the fence.

"You'll all get your turn." Scout chuckled and ensured that each enthusiastic animal got their share of the feed in her pocket. Satisfied, at least temporarily, the goats withdrew, and she pried open a locked gate, moving into the pen. Reaching into the chest pocket of the green flannel shirt she'd worn every day since finding her father's corpse, she pulled out a small container of chicken feed and began shaking it out on the ground. Feathers scattered and chickens converged, clattering and pecking, giving her the opportunity to venture to the coop and gather up a sampling of eggs they'd left behind. A basket rested just inside the coop, and she used it to retrieve the eggs, then filed her way out of the pen, closing and locking the door behind her. She set the basket down by the rear wall and walked around the pen, heading toward a well-marked

section of trees. She had to approach the forest outside the cabin with care— since the clash with the gunmen, Everett had begun reinforcing their perimeter with well-concealed traps. He'd been through their locations with Scout several times and she more or less had them committed to memory, though she still proceeded with an abundance of caution.

Ducking low, she examined the base of a nearby tree, searching for something she'd left the night before. Everett, still recovering from his own injury thanks to a few recent skirmishes, had given her the responsibility of setting a few snares. The larger traps that Everett himself set were to deter human intruders, while Scout placed several smaller snares throughout the trees in hopes of catching small animals that could be used for food. They were still eating from a recent possum that Everett had snared, then processed, and even though Scout had never eaten possum before, she'd found the taste of the meat not far removed from a typical chicken. Of course, when the generator had died, Everett had gone through a lengthy process of drying and salting the meat, so it was more possum jerky, it's initial taste altered by the flavoring and the drying process.

Food, in the wake of the fires that ravaged the world, was more about sustenance than taste, yet Everett had a unique capacity to walk a line between both, likely due to his experience. Locating a wire snare, Scout verified that it was empty and scowled before moving on to a second, then a third, finally checking the fourth, making her way along the rear of the animal pen. All four of them were empty, which she was disappointed about, though it was far from a crisis situation. The MREs that Everett had managed to steal from the Humvees he'd ambushed could feed them for a month or more, not to mention the freezer full of meat he'd already accumulated before even meeting Scout. Everett was the kind of guy to live off the land even before civilization was beginning its downward trek toward ruin, so he was already acclimated to what needed to be done. Scout, in some weird, twisted way had been fortunate to run into him, given what else might have gone wrong.

As if losing her father hadn't been enough. Wholly unbidden, the shadow of her father's face appeared in her mind's eye, that familiar dark expression in his eyes, the upward slope of his smiling lips. It was rare that she'd seen him without that smile, his sense of humor an ever-present being always perched upon her dad's shoulder. She'd been so thrilled when he'd asked if she wanted to join him when he came to Florida for work, even though she'd be spending much of the time with her grandparents. Throughout most of Scout's life, her father had been traveling to various states, coming in and out of their everyday existence so regularly it was part of the natural order of things. At least while he was home, he was always fully engaged, helping run the household as best he could, spending lots of time with the kids, helping Scout's mother do the repairs and maintenance around the house.

Still— she'd rarely even been outside of Maine, to take an actual plane down to Miami— it was something that other people did, not her. Only she had, and she'd loved every minute of it. Her time in Florida hadn't been quite as enjoyable and she'd actually become a little grumpy toward the end of their time, impatient and frustrated with adhering to her grandparents' routine. But her father had promised that they could come back again and that had softened the blow, at least somewhat.

But there would be no coming back again— especially not with her father, who had been killed when Miami International exploded. The military had come through, cleaned up the corpses and— and burned them in the back parking lot. There was nothing left of him, nothing but his favorite flannel shirt, the one she'd worn non-stop since finding him, and one she wasn't sure she'd ever take off. His smell had faded from the fabric, and it was starting to feel less and less like him, but it was her lone, final connection to him and even thinking that thought, she bunched up the fabric in the tight clench of her fists and held it securely around her. Her chest hitched as she stood upright, her arms tightening around the slender length of her torso. Despite the underlying heat of the Florida sun, she suppressed a shiver and walked from the trees, back toward a

crooked tool shed. The generator rested silent against the back wall of the cabin, the parts replaced, and functionality restored, though Everett had relegated it for emergency use only.

Already they'd built up a decent reserve of fuel in several cans within the tool shed, but they had no intention to use the generator unless they had to. The food in the refrigerator had spoiled and he'd emptied the meat out of the freezer when the generator had failed in the first place, choosing salting and preserving it to make it last as long as humanly possible. With a wood stove, well water, the nearby swamps, and egg-laying chickens, they weren't in desperate need of full-time power. Scout figured she might even eventually get used to colder showers, if she had to. She'd been boiling water on the wood stove and mixing it in with the cool well water to help knock back the chill, but she'd been using less and less of the hot water each day, hoping to remove her reliance on it eventually. One more way to conserve precious resources that would only get harder and harder to come by with each passing day. Defeated and dejected, due to the lack of prey in the snares, Scout made her way back to the cabin, rehearsing what she might say to Everett in her head as she went.

CHAPTER FOUR

Everett waited for Scout to leave to check the snares before emerging from the darkened chamber of his bedroom. He'd heard her shifting about the cabin for at least an hour or two, the floorboards creaking beneath her weight, the low scrape of furniture moving. He thought he'd even heard a rasping whistle of some kind of morning song. The aroma of fresh coffee permeated the stale air of the cabin, which had remained sealed and closed off since the attack a few days prior. Everett's paranoia had set in, and he'd closed and locked the windows, securing the door and withdrawing inside his manmade cave, a self-defense mechanism as much as anything else. Everett wasn't scared by much, but he was a very cautious man, especially when it came to the most dangerous predators alive—human beings.

He crossed the aged wood floor, fastening the strap of his false left arm, securing it tightly against the stub of his forearm, just below the elbow. His left hand was covered in a black glove to conceal the pale pudge of its fake-looking synthetic skin, the fingers curled into a strange, knuckled grasp. Once in the kitchen, he bent low and inhaled over the used coffee filter, closing his eyes and enjoying the scent, then topped it off with a few more scoops of grounds, pouring steaming water over it to fill the underlying mug. Scout had proclaimed to prefer tea, but apparently, she was coming around to coffee and, in spite of himself, Everett allowed the corner of his lips to lift up into a smile.

Placing the pan of water back on the wood stove, he allowed the hot water to fully seep through the filter, enjoying

the smell for a moment longer until he dumped the grounds into a compost pile and took his first sip of dark, bitter liquid. There was a bite of heat and spice, the lingering tang of roast beans and dark chocolate, his favorite brand, which he'd thankfully ordered in bulk not long before the chaos had scorched the entire earth. The brand was tastier than it had any right to be, considering it was one of those cheap big box brands that he could buy in bulk for a handful of dollars. Not that his tastes were specially sophisticated to begin with.

He threaded the fingers of his false hand through the hooked handle of the mug, holding it even and steady, leaving his right hand free to open the door and allow him to step outside. It was pleasantly warm for the Florida Everglades, a spring breeze carried off the swamps, rustling the nearby leaves, which covered the surrounding terrain in an uneven blanket of green. His narrowed gaze drifted skillfully along the edge of the trees, searching out any unusual shapes or silhouettes, but found none, his hand resting near his right hip. He held a shotgun slung over his right shoulder, his fingers brushing the contoured pump-action, reassuring himself that it was close at hand.

As he searched the property surrounding the cabin, a figure drifted in the trees beyond the animal pen, a shadow which quickly clarified into the form of the young girl he'd rescued from the soldiers. She'd become a fixture at the cabin in the days since, a fact that he was both thankful and resentful for. Taking another sip of coffee, he relished her presence and the fact that she'd thought to prepare his beverage for him so it was ready to pour after he woke up. As she moved along the rear of the animal pen, a storm brewed within him, a battering wind of conflict. She'd helped protect the cabin from the intruders, tackling one of the men before he'd had a chance to shoot, helping Everett to turn the tide of battle. She'd been more than helpful since he'd first pulled her free of the Humvee, she'd made life a little easier around the cabin, and dulled some of the sharp edges of his insides.

Which was precisely why she had to go. Everett swallowed hard, remembering with a stark, sudden clarity why he found himself sequestered out in the Everglades to begin

with, why he ostracized himself to the middle of nowhere, removed himself from society and devoted himself to living his days alone and unencumbered. It wasn't anything to do with her, but it had everything to do with someone *like* her. Someone she reminded him of. As Scout bent low to check the generator, then stood, looking out toward the swamps along the other side of the house, a low simmer flared to a burn in Everett's gut. It was the acid mix of regret and loss, an unrelenting and unmistakable nausea that wasn't due to food or motion, but due instead to a vast emptiness far larger and deeper than should be possible.

It was the opposite of substance, it was a void and that black, bottomless pit within him only seemed to grow deeper and darker with every longing glance between him and the girl. The girl who'd needed him. The girl so desperate to impress him. The girl that reminded him far too much of that other girl, the one he worked so hard to forget. No, not forget — forget was the wrong term, after all, he wouldn't have surrounded himself with swamplands if he'd truly wanted to forget her. It was far more complicated than that— moving out to the Everglades wasn't to forget— it was to remind. It was to punish— to ensure that he wouldn't spend a single moment of the rest of his miserable life without that girl fresh in his mind. He took another long drink of coffee and though his stomach had soured, he swallowed it hungrily, feeding that acidic beast, relishing the pain and misery that it caused him. Misery he deserved and sought out at every turn, the only way he could continue to live with himself.

Scout turned to walk back to the cabin and started, clearly not expecting to see him staring back at her. She hesitated for just a moment, faltered, then lifted her hand into an uncertain wave.

“Good morning.”

Everett nodded and took another drink, choking down the hot, bitter liquid, every sharpened drop slashing at his upset stomach, just how he wanted it.

“None of the snares got anything.”

“Any traps sprung?”

Scout shook her head. “Not that I could tell.”

“I’ll take a walk around later.”

“I can walk with you— I’d like to see what you did. How you did it.”

“I’m not your teacher, kid.” Everett swallowed down another long gulp of the black coffee. “You want a teacher, you go back to school. That’s not what this is.”

Her expression darkened, another all-too-familiar shadow passing over her young features. He’d seen that expression before, or at least one like it, and that familiar barbed stab of regret rammed hard into his chest, punching through bone.

“Go back to school. Right.” Scout rolled her eyes. “There is no school— not anymore. Never will be again. And even if there was, I wouldn’t want you to be my teacher, anyway.” Her voice was a blade, slashing through the bright morning air, a surprising twinge of bitterness trailing the path of her swipe. Everett stepped back as she strode past him, an angry forward stalk across the grass. She paused a few steps ahead, back to him, then squared and turned, glowering back over her left shoulder. “What is your problem, anyway?”

“My— problem?” Everett took another sip of the coffee.

“Removing yourself from civilization, making this stupid camp in the middle of nowhere— treating everyone like crap. No wonder those guys in town wanted to kill you.”

Everett smiled, the corner of his lip turning up, deepening the crease of his weathered face. The girl had some spirit, he had to give her that.

“This isn’t funny,” Scout snapped, her fury-burning eyes narrowing. “Why are you smiling?”

“You just— you remind me of someone, that’s all.”

“Remind you of someone?”

“Just— someone— she hated school like you do, apparently.”

“I don’t hate school.” Scout’s tone softened somewhat. “I just— I didn’t learn anything there. All the important stuff I learned, I learned with my mom and dad. Dad especially.”

“What sort of stuff did you learn?”

“Hunting. Shooting. Sharpening blades. Fixing our old, beat-up lawnmower. Both him and mom taught me gardening, foraging, stuff like that. When they had time.”

“They were busy people?” The tension in the air between them softened, though Scout remained somewhat guarded in her replies.

“I have a brother and sister. Money was always tight, they both worked full time. Same old story as anyone else, I guess.”

The swamp around them had seemingly come alive as the sun had risen, the backdrop of bird song and croaking frogs filling some of the empty spaces. They walked toward the cabin, Scout’s face brightened with a blade of sunlight cutting through narrow gaps in the overhead foliage. Everett tried to avert his eyes from the slope of her left cheek, but failed, his gaze catching and holding as he tried to swallow down the sudden rock in his throat.

“Who were those people?” Scout stopped and turned.

“Which people? The ones here? The ones waiting for us?”

“Yeah. You seem to know everyone.”

“I don’t know everyone. That was the whole point in moving out here. I don’t *want* to know everyone. There are days I don’t want to know *anyone*.”

“So— you don’t know them?”

“Never saw them before. Hopefully we’ll never see them again.”

Scout studied him, long and hard, her firm gaze not wavering, the lingering heat from her previous anger still simmering just beneath the surface.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Believe what?”

“That we’ll never see them again.”

“You’ll never see them again, so don’t worry about it.”

Scout seemed to know what was coming and turned away the moment he spoke those words, making her way back toward the cabin. “Right,” she snapped, irritation framing her words. “Because you’re going to get rid of me.”

“I’m going to send you somewhere safe.”

“Rationalize it however you want.” Scout stopped by the front door of the cabin, though she remained facing forward, not looking at him. “I don’t think that anywhere is safe these days. Whether I’m here or somewhere else, I’m in danger. At least here I’ve got you watching my back.” She opened the door and hovered there for a moment.

“And you wouldn’t feel safer with your grandparents?”

“I don’t even really know my grandparents. They moved here when I was really young— this past week was the longest I’d ever spent with them. They—” her words trailed off for a moment. “I don’t think they really wanted me there.”

“What makes you say that?”

“They’ve lived on their own for a long time. My grandfather, he likes playing golf, my grandmother, she’s got a bridge club, she’s part of some ladies group. I mean, don’t get me wrong, they were nice enough. Took me to the zoo, did a few other things with me, but it was mostly out of obligation, I think. Mostly as a favor to— to my dad.”

“I’m sure they appreciated seeing you.”

“Humoring me during a vacation is a lot different than being responsible for me in the middle of— all of this.” She waved her hand casually around her as if the burning world was lapping at the edge of the surrounding trees. “Besides,” Scout continued, her voice dipping low, taking on a more pensive tenor. “How would I tell them?”

“Tell them? Tell them what?”

“About my dad? How would I tell them what happened to my dad?” Her brow knitted impossibly deep, considering her

normally youthful features. Everett's lips parted from within the tangle of his white beard, but try as he might, words would not come out. Scout's eyes shimmered with tears and before Everett could manage to cobble together a clumsy reply, she stepped through the opened door to the cabin and was gone from view. Everett remained outside, still staring at the empty plot of ground the young girl had occupied and in spite of the warm air of spring, he felt a sudden, brittle chill settle deep into his bones.

CHAPTER FIVE

The air was thick throughout New Jersey, lingering heat and acrid smoke clouding the air, darkening what might have been a nice, spring day. Late March back in Maine would have still been cold, perhaps even bordering on freezing. One of Holly's biggest draws to moving out of the state was a hope to relocate to a somewhat warmer climate and while New York City wasn't a great deal warmer than rural Maine, it had helped, at least a little. At that moment, however, given the choice, Holly would have much preferred the crisp, frigid air of Maine to the smoky tang of New Jersey, which was eternally shrouded within a fist of pale, gray smog.

Mentally, Holly, her mother and her brother were all trying to recover from the violence that had erupted along the pier of Atlantic City. The Coast Guard had intercepted their boat as they made their way south along the Atlantic, then escorted them to shore, only to be ambushed by a violent gang of gunmen. If what the Coast Guard had said was true, Atlantic City was in a pitched battle and the military had all but given up trying to maintain a sense of law and order. Since that frantic battle, where the Steel City Pier had been reduced to flaming rubble, they'd continued making their way south, moving through the urban wasteland, doing the best they could to dodge gunmen and law enforcement.

Holly lurked near the edge of the drab, brick building, her eyes narrowed, stinging from the lingering smoke that filled the air. Her stomach churned with hunger, the three of them tightly rationing food. Her mother had packed well upon leaving Maine, filling a roof-mounted cargo container on the

family SUV with plenty of gear, food and water. Unfortunately, they'd been forced to abandon their vehicle in Brooklyn in order to escape a violent mob and had left with only a few backpacks slung across their shoulders. That had been a few days ago and already the backpacks felt distressingly light, their contents dwindling more rapidly than the Fullers were comfortable with.

It was for that reason that Holly had woken with the sunrise and set out on foot while her mother and brother still slept within the hollow of the abandoned warehouse. Bucky, their black Labrador, hadn't been the least bit pleased to see that Holly was taking off without him, but he'd obeyed when Holly told him to stay and guard, giving her the freedom to venture out into the trash-littered streets. They'd made their way west from Atlantic City, covering a wide swath of southern New Jersey, creeping closer and closer to the Delaware state line. Salem, where they were currently holed up, was far removed from the chaotic violence of the coast, but still carried the weight of the unknown on its broad shoulders. A massive sewage and wastewater treatment plant along the western edge of the mid-sized city had gone up in flames in the wake of the Metanoia disaster, which had thrust the community into turmoil. Turmoil had a tendency to stoke the fires of discontent and with most of local law enforcement redeployed to larger surrounding areas, Salem had descended into mob rule.

The majority of Salem's real estate was residential neighborhoods, rows and rows of evenly spaced houses lining quaint, rural streets that might have held some small town appeal were it not for the ever-present threat of violence. The Fullers had made their way through, progressing quietly and carefully through backyards and narrow streets before finally arriving along the northern edge of the city, which was a throng of urban development that remained thankfully devoid of human population, from what they could tell. Holly stepped out from behind the drab office building and crept quietly along the sidewalk, keeping her eyes narrowed, but alert, her head on a swivel. A pistol remained tucked into her waistband, the hem of the souvenir shirt from Liberty Island draped over

its handle. Her backpack sagged on her shoulders, feeling heavier due to her lack of sleep, not because the contents of it were especially full.

Across the street, a discount store emerged from the lingering smoke, its vague, rectangular shape taking form amid the fogged air. Pausing a moment, looking left, then right, Holly moved across the street in a determined stride, knees bent, her legs propelling her forward as she transitioned from street to sidewalk to parking lot. The front door of the discount store sat ajar and askew, the glass shattered, revealing jagged, triangular shards around its angular frame. More smoke twisted from within the depths of the store, the dark interior leaking out as if it was dark ink clouding water. Running toward the front wall, she pressed her shoulder to the brickwork exterior and inched toward the opened door, listening for any signs of movement within.

Hearing nothing, she stepped across the threshold, her boots crunching broken glass as she passed through the gaping mouth of the opened passage. Smoke lingered along the rear wall of the store's interior, blotting the back of the store from view, though the shadowed shapes of shelves were visible along the store front between the door and the smoke-filled backroom. The shelves were a ravaged mess, most of their contents swept clear, leaving a scatter of detritus across the carpet and tile floor. The obvious targets like crackers, cookies and potato chips had already been hit hard, the shelves emptied completely, the compressed remnants of plastic wrappers and paperboard left in their wake. Crumbs were crushed into the carpet, pressed into a mosaic of carbohydrates, a bizarre artistic representation of the riot's aftermath.

Everything from pulverized potato chips to fragments of cookies and crackers were etched along the floor's surface, painting the floor in a myriad of pale yellows and browns. Several aluminum soda cans had been consumed, crumpled and tossed aside, as well as a healthy supply of plastic water bottles, the corner of the discount store little more than a refuse pile of empty containers. One of the shelves had actually been yanked free and toppled over, collapsed into

another shelf, creating a triangular tunnel of sorts, beneath which more of the shelf's contents were heaped in various uneven piles. Holly rummaged through the gathered contents, not finding much of value, discarding most of it even as she scooped it up and examined it.

Stepping through the trash and residue, she made her way back toward the rear of the store, pausing occasionally to search shelves and the floor, using the toe of her boot to kick around empty containers or boxes of greeting cards, whatever items previous looters had tossed away with a perception of uselessness. Finding a few cleaning products, she gathered them into a plastic bag and set them aside with a mental note to place them in her backpack before leaving. She managed to locate the sparse remains of a case of water, a trio of small, plastic bottles with the caps somehow miraculously still twisted tight. Crawling on all fours beneath the toppled over shelf, she found a box of granola bars, a cardboard cylinder of instant oats and even two loaves of white bread which were compressed beneath the weight of the shelf, but still edible.

She dragged them along the floor and lifted them, then walked over to the plastic bags containing the cleaning supplies, leaving them there before she returned to the collapsed shelves for further inspection. As it turned out, it seemed as though most of the looters hadn't considered actually digging under the toppled over shelves, as she found more food beneath, including a half-crushed box of off-brand cereal, another box of breakfast pastries and even two tubs of crunchy peanut butter. It was a brand she'd never heard of before and a month ago she could have seen herself turning her nose up at it, but considering recent events, it was like finding a two-hundred-dollar bottle of wine in the discount bin at the local liquor store.

Retrieving more plastic bags from a nearby register counter, she accumulated the various food items together, bagging them carefully to avoid crushing them any more than they were already crushed, then wedged them all in her backpack, taking additional care as she did so. In all, it took her about fifteen minutes to fill her backpack, a surprisingly successful pit stop which had gone far in relieving some of her

building anxiety. The events surrounding their narrow escape from Brooklyn, their trek along the eastern seaboard, all culminating with the violence in Atlantic City had left her more shaken than she cared to admit. What had occurred in New York City had been bad enough but it seemed, as the days wore on, the chances of violence and death increased exponentially and more than once Holly remained convinced that eventually their good fortune would run dry.

Today, apparently, was not that day, and it helped relax the bunched tension in her shoulders and loosened her lungs, her breath coming a bit more loose and free with each inhale and exhale. Pushing her way through the smoke within the smoldering discount store, she emerged back out onto the sidewalk, facing the parking lot, which separated her from the road she'd used to approach. Beyond that road was a row of squat trees and on the other side of the trees there was a sprawling residential neighborhood which opened up into three more residential neighborhoods, clusters of houses unfolding like the petals of a springtime blossom. Together they created a floral arrangement of similar looking houses and similarly proportioned yards throughout greater Salem.

Holly should have felt some comfort in that— they were in the midst of suburbia, what should have been a non-threatening cloister of middle class families from blue and white collar backgrounds. Instead, however, Holly felt surrounded on all sides, the oncoming press of people converging on all sides. She'd always considered herself a people person, but since the fires began, nearly every encounter she'd had with other people had ended in violence and whether they lurked in darkened alleyways or concealed themselves behind the venetian blinds of their middle class homes— people were a constant threat. At least when the mobs were running the streets and throwing bottles, she could identify them, locate them and avoid them. When they turned off their lights and withdrew into the hundreds of homes that occupied Salem, New Jersey, there was no telling when and where they might appear.

Hoisting the backpack along her back, Holly threaded her arms through the straps and tugged them tight, balancing the

weight of the added supplies along her shoulders. There was a reassuring heft to the backpack, and she strode out onto the parking lot, drawing the back of her hand across her stinging eyes, which watered from the smoke within the discount store. Her throat was raw, and her chest ached, and though the air was somewhat clearer out in the parking lot than it had been inside the store, the perpetual clouds, hanging low and gray, continued to irritate her airways. Keeping her eyes fixed on the row of trees separating her from the sprawling neighborhood beyond, Holly walked along the sidewalk, heading back toward the abandoned warehouse where her family had set up their momentary respite.

She couldn't help but note the various vehicles parked along the side of the road, a few others scattered in various lots, creating a mental checklist of places for them to investigate on their way out of town. So far, they'd avoided trying to acquire another vehicle, mostly because the roadways were clogged with stalled cars or roaming patrols, and they wanted to avoid conflict wherever and whenever possible. But walking all the way to Florida was a daunting task to say the least and not something any of them had the time or energy for. Holly flexed her right fist, the lingering pain from her puckered bullet wound flaring hotter and brighter. It had been all too easy to forget that she'd been shot on her way out of Columbia University, one traumatic event jumbled up with too many others to count. But the stiffness in her upper arm and the occasional ignition of pain remained a constant reminder.

Hushed voices emerged from an alley up ahead, a darkened gap between buildings to her left, and she slowed, angling right, back out onto the street alongside her path. She ducked low, using a parked car for cover, listening as the volume and tenor of the voices rose, scuffled footfalls signaling the approach of more than one person.

“How long's it been? Since you heard from her?”

“Two days. She left here heading for Atlantic City—wanted to get her folks out. But the way I hear it, things are bad there. Like even worse than here.”

Holly buried herself behind the car, shrinking low, pressing tight to its metal door, willing herself to be invisible.

“Anything’s worse than here. We don’t even have to worry about the cops anymore. They all hightailed it to Philly. We got the run of this place these days.” Footfalls scraped along the sidewalk, then halted, Holly sucking in a breath and clenching it within the fist of her lungs. “Not just this place, but all up and down the river. Can you believe it? Actually, relishing the fact that we live in a small town?”

“You’re the one who grew up here. I’m from Wilmington. Mom dragged me down here after she divorced my scumbag father, so you’ll have to humor me, Fox. This small town stuff, I’m not even close to accustomed to it.”

“All you have to know is the cops turned tail and ran to Philly and Atlantic City. Salem and these other areas got left to the wolves, and we *are* the wolves.”

“You’ve been reading too many of those pseudo-military inspirational quotes, Fox. We’re not wolves, we’re a couple of twenty-somethings with more time than brains. No different than we were before the world went to crap.”

The one named Fox chuckled dryly, finding humor in the other man’s comments. If nothing else, at least they were relatively self-aware.

“Brains are overrated, especially now. How do you think those brains are doing for those intellectuals at Yale or Princeton right about now? Are they ‘thinking’ their way out of this mess? Hell no. Longer this stretches out the more our skills become important. I’ve been fixing cars since I was eight years old. You’re an apprentice electrician, right? All those stuffed up professors and their bookshelves of literature isn’t going to amount to a damn thing. It’s guys like us, you and me, we’re going to start running the world. And hey, might as well start with our hometown, right? And not just our hometown neither. I’ve been traveling all up and down 49 since everything went to crap. Establishing contacts, you know? There are more of us out there than you might think.”

“You’re the one with all the people here. I’m just tagging along.”

“No way. You’re one of us Cliffy. Doesn’t matter how long you’ve been here. You’ve been loyal. Helped my boy rig up his apartment, kept it all off the grid.”

“For all the good that did him. There is no grid. Not anymore.”

The talking stopped, though the shoes scraped again, the two men apparently continuing on their way past the parked car Holly crouched behind. The silence stretched out, long enough to bury a tent post of anxiety in Holly’s chest. Just when she was certain that she’d been discovered, the two young men continued their conversation.

“Anyway,” Cliffy said, “it’s all well and good until the food runs out. That’s when things will get tricky.”

Fox laughed. “Look at all those houses beyond those trees. Hundreds of ‘em. Imagine all those stocked pantries. Like an all-you-can eat buffet that you don’t even have to pay for, right? We’re all set. We got the guns, we got the numbers, not just here, but back where you come from, too. Stuff like this happens, the strongest survive and you know, Cliffy— our crew is the strongest.”

“Preachin’ to the choir, Fox. Preaching to the choir. But we gotta be careful, man. All that crap happening in Atlantic City — I think some of those boys bit off more than they could chew. Ended up biting them right back. You and me— this crew— we have to play it slow and careful, right? Just a trickle, not a flood.”

There was a murmur of agreement and the soft tap of what Holly believed were fists bumping, then the scuffling feet continued along the sidewalk, heading in the direction she’d come. Turning in her low crouch, she inched toward the rear of the car she’d been using as cover and glanced around the trunk. Two young men strode away from her, one slightly taller than the other. They both wore dark denim pants, one had a flannel shirt tied around his waist, his bare arms sketched with a series of tattoos she couldn’t make out from

where she peered. The somewhat shorter guy wore a white tank top, his pale skin unmarked by ink, unlike his friend, though the sinew of his muscles shifted with each stride, his hands flexing and unflexing. Along the small of his back, the butt of a pistol stood out against the white tank top, its pearl-colored handle catching the light, even through the lingering smoke.

Holly remained there for a long moment, waiting for the two young men to round a corner and vanish, leaving the sidewalk empty in their wake. She drew back, shuffling in reverse, then pushed herself upright, twisted away and continued along the sidewalk, heading toward the warehouse where her family was hopefully waiting.

CHAPTER SIX

The low crackle of flame carried out from within the abandoned warehouse, which set Holly's raw nerves at ease as she drew nearer. Pausing at the back door of the large, square shaped slab of brick, she eased her ear close, trying to listen through the building's exterior.

"Hey, Holly."

She jumped, jerking back and whipping around, her hand instinctively twitching toward her holstered pistol, though she kept herself from sliding it loose. Keegan, her younger brother gaped back at her, eyes wide, the black lab clinging to his left leg wiggled uncontrollably, tail thrashing in excitement at spotting her.

"Keegan," she exhaled, her breath expelling from pursed lips. "Sorry, kid. I— I didn't know you were back there."

"Bucky had to do his business." Keegan removed a steadying hand from the dog, and he shot forward, whining softly as he pressed the crown of his broad skull into Holly's thigh. She crouched and scratched him aggressively behind the ears, bringing her cheek close, accepting a few swipes of his sandpaper tongue. "Did you find something?" Keegan craned his neck, looking at the backpack Holly wore, and she nodded.

"Let's go inside, I'll show you." The two Fuller siblings and the enthusiastic dog made their way into the warehouse, and Holly closed the door behind them, then scraped a chair across the floor, wedging it beneath the knob to ensure they wouldn't be disturbed. Jean crouched near a pile of broken

furniture, already charred from the previous night's fire, stoking another blaze into activity. Two open windows drew smoke from the fire, stretching the gray out into long tendrils which Holly hoped would not be too visible from outside.

"There you are." Jean rubbed her palms together. Spring in New Jersey still had a bit of a bite at that hour of the morning, and they'd been using fire to boil water for washing— though that morning, Holly was excited to tell her mother she had other reasons as well. "You have some luck?"

Holly was already sliding the backpack from her shoulder, nodding, unable to keep a smile from creasing her lips. "Found an old dollar store. It's all off brand, but food is food, right?" She crouched next to the pack and unzipped it, removing the bread, peanut butter, water bottles and finally the container of oats, setting it all on the concrete floor. Her mother's eyes widened, and her tense shoulders slackened, a sense of relief softening the sharp edges of tension that filled the room.

"Come here." She gestured toward Keegan, then began to unscrew the top of the peanut butter jar, tearing through the foil barrier to access its contents. Holly was already tearing into one of the loaves of white bread, yanking out one of the end pieces. Jean rummaged around in her own pack, finally removing a pocket knife, one of the few supplies they'd managed to transfer from the cargo container to their backpacks before the angry mob had descended upon their vehicle. Using some of the boiling water to rinse the blade, she dried it off on a shirt sleeve, then used it to scoop out a heaping pile of crunchy peanut butter and lather it upon the slice of bread.

As Holly folded up the bread and shoved it into her mouth, her mother repeated the process for the next slice before handing it to Keegan, who devoured it just as rapidly and hungrily as Holly had. Jean helped herself to a third slice, then made up a fourth, handing it over to Bucky, who gobbled it down eagerly in a single enthusiastic bite. Their mouths sticky with the peanut butter and masticated bread, the Fullers passed around one of the water bottles, each of them taking a small sip before handing it to the next, trying to stretch out the

contents as long as possible. A metal travel pot steamed with hot water, leaning next to the fire and Jean removed a bowl from her backpack, half-filling it with the dried oats Holly had recovered from the discount store.

She tipped the steaming pan over the bowl, slowly passing water over the oats, then used the pocket knife to stir it together, the mixture thickening as she went through the motions.

“No maple syrup, cinnamon, or brown sugar or anything,” she commented sadly, “but calories are calories. Is there still some water left in that bottle?”

Holly nodded the affirmative and Jean handed off the bowl of oats and the pocket knife. “Try and eat with that— be careful not to cut your tongue.”

“Note to self,” Holly replied, looking at the oatmeal balanced upon the blade of the knife, “find silverware.”

“Until now we hadn’t had any food that required it. But now that we’ve burned through our protein bars, we’ll have to figure this out.”

Holly delicately fed the knife of oatmeal into her mouth, taking great care to slide it from the blade without nicking her tongue or lips. “I passed at least two restaurants on my way back from the discount store. Their windows were broken, and the kitchens were cleared out, but I didn’t think to look for silverware.”

“We’ll check them again on our way out of town.” Jean smiled as her daughter handed the bowl and knife to her younger brother, who accepted the offerings, but scrutinized them with an uncertain, almost distasteful look. “I know you don’t like oatmeal,” Jean continued, “but try and eat it, okay? We need as many calories as we can get. I’d like to make some good progress today if possible.”

“What’s our route?” Holly ran her tongue over her teeth as Jean removed a map from her backpack, spreading it out on the floor between them, illuminated by the soft glow of the crackling fire. Using her palms, she flattened it to the worn

and battered concrete, leaning in close to examine the colored patterns on the map, the ornate patchwork of roads and landmarks mixed among the folds.

“This is where we are.” Jean stabbed a finger near the northern edge of Salem, where the clutch of buildings bent low along the path of the Salem River to the north. “This is mostly swamp and wilderness up here.” She ran her finger along splotches of green which took up a large section of the map north of the town center. “If I thought we had a way to make it across, I’d suggest we go by water— it might be safer than going by land. But as it stands—” Jean breathed through flared nostrils, leaning down to check the map more carefully. “As it stands, this bridge here is what we want.” She dragged the tip of her index finger along a narrow stretch of connective tissue between Salem and a small town to the northwest. Leaning back on her bent knees, she accepted the offered bowl from Keegan, then carefully ate some of the oatmeal from the pocket knife before setting the bowl back down.

“What is this area?” Holly circled a patch of gray amid the green.

“Little seacoast town, I believe. Biggest body of water is the river, but the river feeds straight into the Atlantic. Not much in the way of civilization there, from what I can tell, but if we keep moving northwest—” She leaned forward again and trailed her finger along a diagonal path. “We go through Harrisonville, up into Pennsville Township. From there, unfortunately, we’re sort of forced to head north toward the Delaware Memorial Bridge which crosses over into Wilmington. I’d prefer to stay as far from Wilmington as possible, but I’m not sure we have much choice.” Jean crossed her arms, her head shaking softly as she evaluated the map spread out before her.

“Seems like in our haste to get out of Atlantic City, we painted ourselves into a bit of a corner.” Holly studied the upper portion of the map, which was littered with more wilderness, but also narrow arteries of pathways through the swamps and trees, working their way around bustling population centers.

“We can’t go back now. We need to keep moving forward.”

“So, Wilmington it is, then.”

“Until something better comes along.” Jean sighed and folded the map back up, creasing it and slipping it into a narrow pocket of her backpack. “By some miracle, the water is still running in the bathrooms here. There was a water tower as we came into town, seems even without power, gravity is doing some work. I washed up while you were out scavenging.”

“I took care of that before I left. I think we’re just about ready to go.”

“Keegan,” Jean said, handing the bowl to the boy, “go wash this up, will you? Don’t go crazy, just a little rinse. I’ll stomp out the fire and we can be on our way.”

Keegan seemed poised to complain, but pinched his lips closed, nodded his head and stood, retrieving the bowl from his mother. With Bucky clicking at his heels, he walked across the dirty concrete floor of the warehouse and vanished into an open doorway along the rear wall. Jean used the water that remained in the pan and doused the flames, then stomped on them with her boots, Holly joining in, dashing the charcoal wood into cinders and ash. They worked together, crushing the pile and scattering its debris, the fire dwindling and then finally drifting into a low, pulsing simmer, smoke twisting from the wreckage of where it had once been.

Cool wind blew outside, reaching through the opened windows with phantom fingers and drawing the smoke out like cotton candy, stringy strands of the stuff leaking back out through those same opened windows. Holly turned her head and coughed, blinking through her stinging eyes, though with the opened windows, the smoke cleared quickly, leaving behind lingering, stale air. Keegan returned with the bowl and as Holly returned the scavenged food to her backpack, her mother took the bowl and slipped it back into her own. Holly crossed between the boy and their mother, then plucked the

M4 carbine from where it leaned against the wall, its magazine almost spent.

During the gunfight with the Coast Guard, Holly had managed to take off with the rifle, though she didn't have any spare magazines to go with it. With barely any ammunition, the M4 wasn't going to provide a wealth of defense, yet she'd already used it effectively as intimidation and sometimes that was enough. Slinging it over one shoulder, she rejoined her family and as a group, they made their way toward the exit.

Holly froze, holding out a hand, halting the other two as she twisted, tilting her head, her ear pointed toward the outside of the building.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?” Jean's face tightened into a scowl, her brow knitting deep furrows.

“I thought I heard voices.”

“Help!” That voice was louder and clearer and judging by Jean's widened eyes, she'd heard it just as clearly as Holly had.

“Holly, don't—”

But Holly was already sprinting toward the door, backpack bouncing on her shoulders, the rifle cradled in both hands.

“Dammit,” Jean cursed in a hushed whisper as Holly shouldered open the back door and paused for a moment, listening for the sound of any more voices. There was a narrow alley running behind the warehouse, which intersected with others, creating separation between the warehouse and other bland-looking office buildings surrounding it. The slap of foot falls came from one of those intersections about thirty yards ahead and Holly lurched forward, her right hand tight around the handle of the rifle, her left gripping the hand guard.

“Don't get involved,” her mother hissed at her back, but Holly was already in motion. Halfway to the next intersection, Holly froze as a figure burst loose from the alley to the left, sprinting wildly forward, stumbling, almost losing her balance. It was a girl, younger than Holly, maybe around her younger

sister's age. Barely managing to keep her balance, the girl twisted toward Holly, her tangled strands of dirty blonde hair spreading like a horse's tail in the wake of her turn. Her pale face was streaked with dirt, her cheeks gaunt and drawn. Frightened eyes shimmered within the hollows of their dark sockets, lingering trauma evident within their circular pupils. She wore a sweatshirt with cut-off sleeves, her arms narrow twigs, fingers hooked into uneven claws, panic cutting the sharp lines of her face.

She stood for a moment like a young fawn caught in headlights, her branch-like legs turned in, bony knees thrust out from the too-thin limbs. She whipped around, looking back in the direction she'd run from and took an uncertain step back, then another, her breath sucking loudly through pinched lips.

“Do you need help?” The words spilled from Holly's lips before she could stop them. There was something about the skinny, young girl that tugged at her— perhaps it was her age, dangerously close to Scout's. Perhaps it was her panicked face, her pale skin, or the swaths of dried dirt along the contours of her face. A girl that young should have had smooth features and a youthful bliss to her expression, but the girl standing before her was all sunken features and hollow bones, wide eyes and parched lips parted into a frightened snarl.

The girl nodded and swallowed, taking another uncertain step backwards as more footfalls echoed from the same alley she'd extricated herself from seconds before. She stumbled again, took two more steps backwards before her back thudded against the brick wall behind her. She jolted, apparently having not seen the wall, then twisted, eyes widening in realization that she'd backed herself into a dead end. Three young men sprang from the alley, slowing their charge as they neared her, two of them gasping loudly while the third shook his head derisively, converging on her.

“How many times do I have to tell you—”

“Don't.” The young girl snapped her head back and forth, strings of hair whipping around her sharpened jawbones.

“Don’t what?” The lead boy asked, scowling at her. He took another step forward.

“Don’t come any closer,” Holly said, finishing the girl’s plea for her. The young man stopped abruptly and twisted toward Holly, his fingers coiling into fists. Holly had lifted the M4, holding it tightly in two hands, the barrel pointed directly at the trio of young men who’d been chasing the girl. She’d been practicing her grip with the weapon since they’d been on the move, hoping to look a little more convincing when aiming it at another human being. She held it firm and level, cradled tightly, stock wedged into the crook of her shoulder. Glaring down the length of the rifle, she centered its iron sights on the chest of the young man in front and slowly shook her head back and forth.

“Step away from her.”

“This is none of your business.” The young man shook his head, lips parting to reveal fenceposts of bright teeth. “Just walk away.”

“I think you need to walk away.” Holly took a tentative step forward, rifle still directed toward the trio.

“This doesn’t concern you,” another young man said. Holly recognized the voices, her eyes narrowing. Two of the three young men sounded an awful lot like Fox and Cliffy, the two who had been talking to each other outside the discount store. The ones who supposedly ran with a crew who owned the town, or thought they did, anyway.

“Turn around and walk your pretty face back down that alley you came from. We can just forget this all happened. These days, nobody wants to get involved. You should take that advice.”

“Sorry, I’m not wired that way.” Holly took another step forward, moving to put herself between the three young men and the girl.

The man in front, the one who sounded like Fox, chuckled, his lip curling. “Y’all making a mistake. A big one.”

“Holly— are you sure about this?” Jean’s voice was a thin whisper and Holly risked a glance in her direction. Keegan was huddled behind her and next to the young boy, Bucky crouched, hackles raised, a low growl rattling in the dog’s throat.

“Do you need our help?” Holly repeated, her eye darting toward the young girl, who nodded tentatively, a tear working free from her eye and tumbling down her dirty cheek. Holly redirected her attention back to the men. “Take your own advice,” she said. “Walk away.” She thrust the barrel forward, toward the alley the young men had come from.

“You do not want to be on the wrong side of us, girl.”

“Walk. Away.” Holly forced her voice to remain calm, chiseling it from the underlying tremor lingering a bit too close to the surface. Cliffy turned and glowered at Fox, and they both looked at the third man, then Fox turned back toward her and raised both hands, showing his palms.

“All right. All right. This doesn’t have to end in violence.” He flashed the young girl a wink. “We’ll be seeing you, sweetheart.”

“No, you won’t.” Holly’s back teeth pressed together, her jaw flexing and the world coalesced around her, a tunnel forming on each side, all of her attention focused on the three men ahead. Her eyes met Cliffy’s and held for a long, lingering moment, neither of them speaking, until finally Cliffy made a gesture to his two buddies, then the three of them stepped back, then withdrew into the darkness. For a long, quiet moment, Holly stood, rifle barrel dipping until she finally unclenched her lungs, letting a long gust of air escape her pursed lips. The ramrod pounding of her heart slowed steadily, easing into a more reasonable rhythm. She looked at the young girl, truly looked at her for the first time and again, she saw her sister’s look in the girl’s eyes, a feathery flutter in her chest hitching her breath.

“And what’s your name?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was the kind of day that would have delighted Veronica, a settling spring warmth softening the cool, West Virginia breeze, leaves gently rustling across the surrounding trees. The farm was fenced in by tall oaks and pine, a perimeter wall of greens and browns, just the kind of place that Ronnie would have loved to call home. Jacob drew the thick brush along Frenchie's hide, clearing off the dust and dirt that had accumulated during their trek east. It seemed as though they'd been traveling for a year, yet they'd only crossed into a single state. Up until that moment, Jacob had been measuring his progress with an ultimate destination of New York City in mind, but it occurred to him that he was no longer using that metric. He was only concerning himself about the distance he'd traveled, not the distance that was still left to go.

Jacob still wasn't certain what that meant as he moved around to the other side of the horse and continued brushing it, applying a little pressure to clear out the dirt in Frenchie's mane. He'd been invited to stay, offered a place in the small community, partly because of his experience in the fuel industry, but also because he'd gotten along so well with Tony almost from the second they'd met. How strange that even in the wake of society's collapse, it all came down to who you knew.

“Are you just going to brush that horse all day or are you going to pitch in with some manual labor eventually?”

Jacob turned, shielding his eyes as the silhouetted figure approached. Deena strode toward him, the woman who owned

the farm and who was graciously allowing him to stay, though for how long, neither seemed to be certain.

“Just tell me where you need me.”

“Pat’s been out in the back cornfield for a few hours. You ever shucked before?”

“Have I ever— what?”

“Shucked,” Deena repeated, emphasizing the initial letters. “You know— picked corn, peeled the ears? You really are a city boy, aren’t you?”

“Not necessarily by choice, it just sort of turned out that way.”

Deena stood at Frenchie’s flank, gently scratching the horse’s hindquarters. She wore a pale, green, knitted sweater and blue jeans, her unwashed hair tucked behind her, resting along the nape of her neck. A wide-brimmed hat sat askew across her mane of dark hair and her narrowed eyes peered out at him from beneath its shadow. She was an attractive woman, a fact not lost on Jacob, though he’d had other priorities upon his arrival. As he stood beneath the warm, spring sun and spoke to Deena, however, he had to admit he felt a gentle shifting of those priorities. Slotting themselves in a slightly different order and the realization of that fact twisted a thread of guilt within his gut, tangled and heavy.

“Where were you raised again? One of those weird New England states, right?”

“Maine.” Jacob chuckled, barely keeping his eyes from rolling. “I know to you West Virginia types I might as well be talking about Canada.”

“Oh, hush. I wasn’t born and raised here— did you forget already?”

“What about your super rich stock market investor husband? Of course I didn’t forget.”

“Technically it was hedge funds, but the sentiment is the same, I suppose.” She spoke with good humor, though that

shining light behind her eyes dimmed if only a little as she recalled the events that brought her to that rural farmland.

“Seems like he did pretty well. Your husband, I mean. Farm’s on how many acres?”

“*We* did okay.” Deena shrugged and skewered Jacob with a sharpened glare. “It’s the twenty-first century, Mr. Fuller. A woman knows her way around the stock market, too.” She turned her attention back to the horse, drawing her nails down Frenchie’s spine, much to the creature’s delight. “What good did that do us in the end?”

“The money?”

“Any of it. Gabriel still died of cancer— all the money in the world couldn’t cure that. And Pat basically owns the farm now.”

“Because you gave it to him. Helped him get Neutral Territory up and running, right?” Jacob nodded toward the barn that stood a short distance from the pasture. Neutral Territory had been his first real introduction to the small community he found himself in. Housed in an old, airy barn, Patrick McDonnell had started a little trading post, trading homemade moonshine, but only allowing people inside if they left their weapons at the door. A few of his friends and neighbors had agreed to be security, including the man named Tony, who Jacob had been immediately drawn to upon first meeting him.

“What else was I going to do with a hundred acres?” She sighed. “We dreamed of retiring here. Spending the last thirty or forty years of our lives without any stress other than crops or landscaping.”

“Only a hedge fund manager would consider farm life ‘retirement’.”

“You’ve got a sharp tongue for someone who I’m letting crash on my couch, Jacob. You better watch yourself or I’ll ship you off to the elementary school where the others are shacking up.”

“The elementary school? I don’t think I’ve heard this story yet.”

Deena stepped away from Frenchie and walked across the sparse pasture, toward the wooden fence running around its perimeter. Jacob fell in behind her, increasing his pace to keep up. “A few families,” she said as she swept between the rungs of the fence, then paused for a second for Jacob to follow. “They’re short on supplies at home, not really equipped to care for themselves. So, they opened up a section of the elementary school. Some other folks have taken turns checking up on them. Not the most comfortable situation, but better than nothing.”

“Small town, gotta love it. That’s probably one thing I miss about where I grew up in Maine. Sure, everyone knew everyone else, and you couldn’t get away with anything, but everyone also watched out for you. Took care of you. There was none of that in Lexington, or not nearly enough of it, anyway.”

“In the cities, there’s way too much pressure to watch out for yourself for anyone to spend time watching out for someone else. I know that all too well.”

“Tell me about him,” Jacob said as they strode past the farmhouse. He glanced toward the barn as he asked the question. “Gabriel. Sometimes it helps to talk about them, right?”

Deena sighed, keeping her eyes facing forward. “He deserved better.” It was a simple, three word statement but carried with it a certain weight. As if the words themselves were made of lead.

“You said cancer?”

“Brain. Came so fast.” She shook her head, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Out of the blue one day he had a headache. Nothing unusual, right? Swallowed down some ibuprofen, sat back down at the computer for some late trading. The next morning it was bad enough that he went to the emergency department. A week later we were scheduling chemo and researching brain surgeons.” She lifted her chin

toward the sparse, morning sky. “From normal to death’s door in a week. A million dollars in the bank account and it bought us— what?”

Jacob gestured at the vast wilderness that surrounded them even as they drew closer to the corn fields where a few men were already making their way through the narrow gaps between stalks.

“Just goes to show nothing is a given. You earn every second you get, right?”

“I think that’s a lesson a lot of people are learning right now,” Jacob pointed out.

Deena’s lips pursed and she blew out a breath of air. “Right? Listen to me, complaining about my husband’s cancer when millions of people are dead and the world’s on fire. Selfish—”

“That’s not what I was saying.”

“I know. It’s what I was saying.”

“I’d almost forgotten what it’s like to argue with a woman.” Jacob’s brow furrowed, his voice low, though not low enough. Deena chuckled and stopped walking, Jacob drifting further ahead a few strides before he noticed.

“Is that what you think this is? An argument?”

“No. Just— being stupid.”

“That’s the first smart thing you’ve said all morning.” She caught up with him, both of them continuing toward the cornfield.

“Yo!”

Jacob slowed and turned, shielding his eyes from the sun as a stout figure made his way toward them, hand raised.

“Saved by the bell.” Deena patted Jacob’s shoulder. “Good morning, Pat!” She tossed her own hand in the air as greeting.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to put this boy to work shucking corn.” Pat drew near, nodding toward Jacob.

“She tells me it’s important work.”

“Can’t make the moonshine without it, so yeah— it’s important.” Pat squinted a single eye closed in a knowing wink. “That being said— I do have something I was hoping to pick your brain about, now that you’ve got your feet under you.”

Jacob instinctively stared toward the grass at his feet, lifting one worn boot. “Do I?”

“Doubtful.” Deena shook her head, eyebrows lifted, then strode past them, gesturing off-handedly. “Do your little thing. But I want you in these fields before we lose too much daylight. I mean for you to earn your keep, Fuller.” Deena turned her attention toward a group of three men, who greeted her with friendly enthusiasm, the clutch of them moving deeper into the sprawling fields of corn.

“She’s good people.” Pat led Jacob back toward the barn in the distance.

“Did I hear right? This place used to be yours before she bought it?”

“You heard right. We were getting a little too old for the full time farm life. She and her husband, God rest his soul, came in and the price was right. Judith and I— that’s my wife, not sure you’ve met her— we moved out into a small house outside town. Figured we’d retire there.”

“Now you’re back?”

Pat shrugged. “In a manner of speaking. When everything went bad, it became pretty apparent pretty quickly that the place we’d chosen wasn’t well equipped to ride out something like this.”

“I can relate. I’m not sure anywhere is well-equipped, just a matter of making the most of whatever you have.”

“Yeah, there was no making the most of our little shack in the woods.” Pat laughed, but there wasn’t much humor in it. The normal upward lilt to his voice was flat and almost toneless, the voice of someone who was so close to what they wanted, only to lose it all. “I brought Judith back here, painful

as it was, we both loved this place in our younger days, and Deena, well, she has way more space here than she needs.”

“Seems like a good match.” The barn loomed before them as they neared, the massive structure with its aged, rust-colored exterior and angled roof.

“It’s not what any of us would have chosen. But there’s a guest house in the back forty where Judith and I live, and I’ve got Neutral Territory to keep me busy.”

“Seems like a nice distraction, not just for you, but for everyone.”

“Not quite everyone.” Pat averted his eyes as he rounded the back corner of the barn and led Jacob toward the right side of the structure. Jacob made a mental note to ask for elaboration on that last mysterious point. “There she is.” Pat gestured toward a large, box-shaped generator that rested along the wall of the barn. It was surprisingly modern, though a model that Jacob wasn’t immediately familiar with.

“So that’s how you keep the place running, huh?”

“Indeed. She does the trick, but she can be a bit argumentative.”

“Are you asking me for my opinion? Because I don’t know much about generators.”

“Well, yeah, but not just about the generator.” Pat crouched next to it, then turned and gestured toward his left, Jacob following the direction of his movement. Shrouded by the morning sun, he could see what looked like the vague outline of a gas pump in the distance. “We’ve got an underground fuel tank on the farm property. I installed it back when I owned it — I lost track of how long ago. Holds quite a bit of gas and honestly, Deena never really took advantage of it, so most of it is still there.”

“How long has it been there?”

“Maybe six months at this point. I used stabilizer so, from what I can tell it’s still okay. It’s been running the generator just fine.”

“You filled the tank six months ago, even though Deena and her husband still owned the farm?”

“We had an arrangement. I helped out from time to time, kept some of the gear running, you know? Sort of a working retirement, I guess you’d say. It helped offset my loss of income but kept the stress at a more manageable level. It really was a win-win.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Jacob began to say, though Pat cut him off.

“Now, in my experience, anyone asking me not to take something the wrong way is almost guaranteed to say something that I’m gonna take the wrong way.”

Jacob’s lips pressed into a flat smile, and he nodded. “That’s a fair statement. I just mean, is there a better use for this fuel?”

“Pardon?”

“Listen. About a week ago, ninety percent of our pipeline infrastructure basically self-destructed. The immediate problem, of course, was the deaths of millions of people who were caught in those explosions, but there are longer term issues, too.”

“Like fuel shortages.”

“Exactly like fuel shortages. All I’m saying is that eventually, probably sooner than we all realize, fuel of any kind is going to be a hot commodity. More valuable than gold. Are you sure using it to throw a party every few nights is the right idea?”

Pat sighed and drew his thick fingers through the tangled curl of his gray hair. “We had this conversation, you know. Me, Deena, Troy, a few others. Fact is, the way we see it, the most valuable resource will never be fuel. It’ll be people. Community, right? People who can work together toward a common goal regardless of what’s going on in the world around them. If Neutral Territory helps bring those people together, if it builds those bridges, it’s way more valuable than

the few gallons of gas I use a night to play some music and brew some moonshine.”

Jacob folded his arms across his chest, looking down at the generator, trying to find the words to argue his point. After searching for a moment, he discovered, much to his own surprise, that he couldn't find them. Pat had a point and while Jacob still had his own questions about how they were using the limited fuel they had, he could see it from the older man's point of view.

“I suppose that's as good a rationalization as any.”

“Don't get me wrong,” Pat replied, “there are those who agree with you.”

“Oh?” It was the first Jacob had heard of any sort of discontent.

“Sure. Technically we're St. Albans natives, right, but we live outside of the city a bit. Down here in our own little neck of the woods. There are plenty of people in St. Albans proper who look down their noses at us. They believe we should be spreading the wealth, sharing what limited resources we have with the greater city at large. They've made their opinions known and we've made ours.”

“You're not worried?”

“About what? That they might storm on down here and try to take our gas?” His eyes narrowed, the weathered flesh of his brows bunching together. “I guess not?” It came out as more of a question. “I suppose they could, but I'd like to think it won't get to that point.”

“Don't fool yourself. I saw society breaking down less than twenty-four hours after the disaster began to unfold. The fabric that holds civilization together is a lot thinner and more frayed than you might think.”

“I guess I sorta chalked that stuff up to big city problems. St. Albans has a decent population, but it's still small town America. We talk things through around here, we don't shoot first, ask questions later.”

“Maybe you did before things started falling apart, but assuming that’s how the world works afterwards can be dangerous.”

Pat pinched his lower lip between his teeth, considering Jacob’s words. The features of his roughened face firmed, his concerned and considering expression evident.

“Thinking maybe we need to bump up security a little bit? Tony put together a crew of about a dozen guys. So far that’s been all we needed.”

“Maybe that is all you need. I don’t know. I’m not in the habit of sowing paranoia, I would just hate for something to happen.” He continued looking down at the generator for a moment, then turned and glanced toward the older man. “There haven’t been any targeted threats have there?”

“Targeted threats? What is that even supposed to mean? This is West Virginia, Jacob, not Afghanistan.”

The two of them stepped away from the generator and began walking toward the fuel pump in the distance, boots pushing through the long grass.

“I’ll take that as a ‘none’.”

“None that I know of, doesn’t mean there aren’t crazies out there. Way I hear it, the trading post accumulates them, like roaches, you know?”

“Trading post? Is there another one? Besides Neutral Territory, I mean?”

“Oh, sure. They hold one up in St. Albans. They had this outside flea market, you know, Judith and I used to go once or twice a month. Well, they’ve started bringing all the local businesses there, put together an area where people can meet and exchange goods and services. Only been going on a couple of days, we keep talking about taking a walk up there.” He slowed by the pump, which sat upon a simple concrete slab, the pump itself connected to a pipe that angled sharply and then terminated on a panel that clearly belonged to an underground fuel tank.

“We can refill and empty the tank right from here,” Pat said, moving on from the conversation about the trading post. “Reason I was hoping you could help was that we’d love to run some kind of line direct to the generator. And maybe even install a couple more generators. Try and make the farm more self-sustaining without having to pump gas here and truck the cans to the tanks individually. I know, I know, a pipe dream probably.”

“Not necessarily. Jacob stepped back, looking left to right, silently measuring the distance between the pump and the generator, then the pump and the farmhouse. “It’s just been a while since I was in the trenches. Laying pipe doesn’t come quite as naturally to me these days as it did a couple of years ago. It could work, though.”

“Way we figure, we’d like to do something similar for water irrigation. I figure the tech is more or less the same, isn’t it?”

“End of the day,” Jacob sighed, “gravity is gravity. Pipe material and lining might have to be changed, but all workable.”

“Good to know.” Pat lifted a small can from the concrete slab next to the pump, then unhooked the nozzle, unscrewed the cap and sloshed some fuel into the can. After only a few moments, he stopped, sealed the can once again and returned the nozzle. “Come with me, got something else to show you.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Well beyond the farmhouse Jacob had become accustomed to sat a squat, robin's egg blue guest house, a structure that was more like an oversized storage shed than an actual house.

“Once upon a time I called this the mother-in-law apartment, but Judith whipped my hide so hard I've been walking funny ever since.”

Jacob snickered as they approached the front door and Pat drew a screen open, then pushed through the interior door, cupping a curled hand beside his parted lips.

“Judith? We got company! Put your clothes on!”

“Patrick McDonnell, I swear!” Her shrill voice echoed from deep within the house, or as deep as it could be, considering the relative square footage. The woman emerged within seconds, slipping through an opened doorway, dressed in a red flannel shirt with rolled-up sleeves and pale blue jeans speckled with dirt stains. “Don't listen to a word he says, whoever you are.”

“It's Jacob! Guy I told you about.”

“Jacob!” Judith bent for a moment, scraping her palms along the denim material, which was likely just as dirty, if not dirtier, than her actual flesh. She held out one hand and Jacob took it, her grasp firm and enthusiastic. “Good to put a face to a name. Welcome to our little corner of the world.” She glanced around, then darted a look back in Pat's direction. “Our *very* little corner of the world.”

“Oh, let’s not start that again, we’ve got a guest, dear.” Pat glanced at Jacob apologetically, but Jacob waved him off.

“Right. Convenient.” There was no real malice in the woman’s voice and the glint in her eyes told Jacob it was all in good humor.

“Leave the poor man alone. Jacob, come here for a minute, would you?” Pat made his way through the living room with Jacob in tow, then they inched down a narrow hallway and cut a sharp left into an office which felt more like the cubicle Jacob had inhabited in his middle management role than a true office. There was no desk, necessarily, just a flat slab of plywood resting atop stacked cinderblocks and piled with an assortment of books and thickly bound user manuals of various different flavors. Wedged within those tomes was a neat stack of three flat, gray, metallic slats, which Jacob immediately identified as an amateur radio. A set of headphones rested on a hook that extended from the plywood with a microphone toppled over on top of the radio itself. A series of dials and gauges peppered the front of the device, though Jacob wasn’t well-versed enough in radio use to translate their purpose or function.

“That’s it, huh? Your lifeline to the outside world?”

“Such as it is.”

“You seem better informed than some.”

“Not as well informed as I’d like to be.” Pat scraped a chair out from the makeshift desk and settled his bulk into it, the piece of furniture straining slightly under his bulk. “Range has been a little spotty. I need to find a way to try and boost the signal.”

“It sounded like you were getting intel from pretty far out there.” Jacob leaned against the table, looking down at the radio with manufactured curiosity.

“Second and third hand. I know someone who knows someone else who knows someone else. But really, I’d like to talk direct, you know? I’d love to get out to Baltimore myself

instead of talking to my semi-drunk pals in Virginia who swear that rumor they heard was true.”

“And right now, you can’t?”

“Range isn’t there. Not yet. Need a better antenna.” Pat turned and shrugged. “Rigged some rabbit ears up on the roof, but that only gets you so far.”

Voices carried from the house, loud enough that Jacob turned toward them, angling his head. Pat rose and shuffled past him, turning sideways to push through the door and back out into the hallway. Almost immediately, Jacob could hear the conversation more clearly and recognized the other speaker. Following Pat, he moved out into the living room where Deena and Judith were in the midst of hushed conversation, which had been clearly audible within the small confines of the house.

“Shuck all that corn already?” Jacob smiled a crooked smile.

“Don’t be a smart ass,” Deena snapped back, though her grin matched Jacob’s own. “I was just having a friendly conversation with Judith here, asking for a little advice.”

“Looking for better ways to handle the corn field.” Judith crossed her arms and shrugged. “Apparently the demand for your precious moonshine is outpacing our ability to provide its ingredients.” Her eyebrows lifted.

“Supply and demand, Judith, it’s the American way.”

Judith grunted, her expression flat and nonplussed. “Anyway, I was just reminding Deena that the trading post is opened today.”

“And I was just reminding her that the people at that trading post aren’t the friendliest individuals.”

“Seems to me we’re going to have to learn how to make friends with these people eventually.” Judith looked at Deena, then turned her gaze toward Jacob and Pat. “It’s early days still, right? We’re a self-sustainable community so far. But that’s only going to get us so far. Hospital is up in St. Albans proper. If the government is going to do anything to help,

that's going to be their first stop. We need to think about breaking down some of those walls."

"Hey, I'd be happy to," Deena interjected, "only we're not the ones who built those walls in the first place."

"I know, I know," Judith nodded and gestured toward the younger woman, the echoes of her southern charm showing around the edges of her voice. "Don't believe for a second that I'm giving those folks the benefit of the doubt. I'm not. I just think sometimes we need to be bigger people."

"On that we agree."

"How about we both go?" Jacob asked waving a hand between himself and Deena. "You can try and work a deal for some new corn shucking gear. Maybe I can look for Pat's antenna or something that might work for it. Plus—"

"Plus, you can be my big, bad bodyguard, right? I don't need one, Jacob. I can handle myself."

"The thought of me protecting you didn't cross my mind once." All things considered, Jacob thought it was an effective lie, but judging by the furrow in Deena's brow, she'd seen straight through it. "I mean, come on," Jacob continued with an affable shrug, "last I looked, I was the one with the horse."

Deena snorted a soft laugh, her eyes rolling. "Okay, fine. You win. But only for Frenchie's sake, not for your own." She jerked her head toward the door and took a step in that same direction, Jacob starting to follow.

"Does this mean I get out of shucking corn?"

"Don't push your luck."

"So, what's so bad about the trading post, anyway?" Jacob glanced over one shoulder as his fingers tightened around the reins, leading Frenchie north toward the town center of St. Albans. They followed a winding, narrow road which traveled just east of Coal River, making pretty decent time all things

considered. Besides the occasional pocket of residential homes, most of the backdrop was acres of forestland to their right, the river itself separated by thick trees to the left alongside a set of railroad tracks within spitting distance of the two-lane paved blacktop.

“It’s not bad. The people, they’re not bad either. We just haven’t always seen eye-to-eye.”

“We? We who?”

Deena sighed and leaned back on the saddle, just behind Jacob. She’d steadfastly refused to put her arms around his waist and balanced precariously behind him, her eyes scanning the trees to the east.

“Well, I’m an outsider, right? When my husband and I moved to town, it caused a bit of a stir. Pat McDonnell, you see, his family has been around for generations. They were very well known pillars of the St. Albans community. When we bought their farm there was this belief that we were coming in and taking over. That we’d somehow forced Pat and Judith from their home.”

“Pat doesn’t seem to think that way.”

“Of course, he doesn’t. He never did. He was ecstatic at the price we paid for that plot of land and the houses on it. We love the McDonnells, and they love us, too. They’re family and always have been in a way.”

“Family?”

“Better than, actually. I mean, I never really got along with my family, the people I was connected to by blood. Blood shouldn’t define your relationships. If anything, friendships can be stronger, because you form bonds with the people you choose. Those bonds, sometimes they can be stronger than just blood.”

Jacob found that interesting, especially thinking back to his own challenges with his family, especially his disapproving father. “But I take it these other folks in St. Albans didn’t want to listen to reason?”

“If anything, it only got worse.” Deena turned around and checked the wagon bumping along behind them. They’d hitched an old wagon to Frenchie’s saddle and while Frenchie had complained a bit at first, he’d gotten used to it as they’d moved along. There were a hundred ears of corn in the wagon along with a few gallons of Pat’s remaining moonshine and a plethora of some other goods for them to trade. “After the truth sort of came out, they just ended up getting mad at both us and the McDonnells. They saw it as some sort of betrayal of their small town values, not just from me and my husband, but from Pat and Judith as well. Ridiculous, really. Considering that St. Albans is technically a city, the small town politics, I tell you, it’s worse than the big cities.”

“Usually is. It’s a lot harder to get mixed up in those sorts of things when you don’t really know anyone.” Jacob peered ahead where the paved road began to angle slightly to the left, the railroad tracks crossing over it.

“Tell you what,” Deena said, patting his right shoulder and pointing past him. “You see that tunnel? Where the tracks go?”

“Yeah?”

“Go on through there. It cuts through that hillside ahead and dumps off in a quiet little neighborhood outside St. Albans. It’ll chop a good hour off of our travel time and I don’t think we have to worry about a train coming through.”

“All right.” Jacob thumped the horse’s side gently and adjusted his grip on the reins, leading Frenchie along the railroad tracks and toward the tunnel. The wagon thudded and bumped along the tracks behind them, though Frenchie was able to navigate them without much trouble. Soon enough they were shadowed within the tunnel, blackness consuming them, the ambient light from the tunnel’s opening barely providing enough light to navigate. The tunnel was a straight shot through the hillside and a distance ahead, Jacob could make out the faint glow of the opposite opening, which made navigating the tracks far simpler. However, as they moved through the darkened tunnel, a pair of silhouettes melted from the backdrop of oval-shaped light, solidifying into figures, dark shadows against the pale glow of day. From the contours

of the silhouettes, it seemed evident to Jacob that they were holding weapons.

“Is this expected?” His voice was a narrow whisper, and he turned his head slightly so Deena could hear him. She was poised behind him, glancing over his right shoulder.

“No.”

Jacob tugged the reins, bringing Frenchie to a stop, then pulled back a bit, trying to navigate the horse to turn around. Glancing back toward the entrance of the tunnel, where they'd just come through, three more similar silhouettes had formed there, stretching across its opening, penning them within. They were trapped inside the tunnel, flanked on both sides by armed men.

CHAPTER NINE

Florida

Day 03

How could she possibly feel so tired? For the relatively small, rural area the hospital served, there seemed to be a constant stream of people in need. Granted many of them, Sofia suspected, were coming from neighboring cities, but that did little to change the fact that they still landed in their lap. With her, Cooper and Dr. Greene being, more or less, the only medical practitioners, it made triaging and caring for complicated patients almost impossible. Not a day went by where she didn't wonder how the no doubt strained staff at U Health were managing, if they were managing at all. Standing before the meds cabinet, her eyes moved along the shelves, narrowing with each passing second.

“The longer you stare the more concerning it gets.”

Sofia glanced over her right shoulder as Dr. Jordan Greene approached, rubbing the weariness from his eyes with the back of one leathery hand. His gaze was surprisingly bright, even from within the darkened hollows of his sockets, his weather-beaten face sculpted into a seemingly permanent stone visage of near exhaustion. There were the hints of the dignified elder statesman he'd been, the small town doctor who everyone knew and who knew everyone, but even after only a handful of days, they were concealed beneath the veneer of stress and tiredness.

“We seem to be running out of pain killers faster than we can accumulate more.” She gestured toward the meds cabinet. “At this rate they won’t last the month.”

Dr. Greene strode up next to the cabinet, shrugging his shoulders. “I’d say we’ve got two weeks.”

Sofia’s face contorted in inquiry, thin lines drawing along the normally smooth surface of her bronze skin. The doctor carried the lingering scent of stale cigarette smoke and body odor, the acrid tang of sweat and unwashed skin, an almost permanent perfume lingering within the hall of the hospital.

“We’ve had a steady stream of people needing help, but I don’t recall issuing that many painkillers.”

Dr. Green chuckled. “We didn’t.” He started to turn away.

“What do you mean we didn’t?”

The old physician was already a few strides away when Sofia posed her question and he halted, turning to look over one shoulder. “Those men who provide us security. Stan Sussman and his crew. You think they do that purely out of the kindness of their own hearts?”

Sofia drew back, her eyes pinching to narrow slits, barely visible beneath the bunched fists of her eyebrows. “Wait—they’re stealing them?”

The doctor shrugged. “They see it as payment for services rendered.”

“People might need that medicine.”

“No doubt. Just be glad they’re sticking to the meds and not the antibiotics. Those are the truly important drugs.”

“Dr. Greene, how can you be so cavalier about this?”

“Who are we going to call? The DEA?”

“There must be something we can do.”

“There’s nothing anyone can do.” The doctor shook his head morosely and sighed. “Not anymore.” His shoulders slouched and the man appeared defeated, aging more in the past three days than he had in the past three years. The pale,

green scrubs he wore were stained at the armpits and at the cuffs of their sleeves, his pale hands closed into loosely clenched fists. He turned away again and disappeared around a corner and Sofia took a tentative step forward, as if she might chase him down and try to change his mind.

“He’s a good man. Still. In spite of it all.”

Sofia turned as a young woman stepped from the doorway across the hall, a soft, crooked smile on her face. Sofia couldn’t remember her name, though she did remember that at one point in her life, the woman had been a clinical secretary. She’d been taking night classes to be a medical assistant and had voluntarily stepped into the role of a makeshift nurse, which had impressed Sofia to no end.

“I wouldn’t dream to say otherwise.”

The woman was framed in the doorway, and she turned to look in the direction that Dr. Greene had walked, though all that remained visible was empty hallway. The lighting within the corridor was dim, shadows dancing along the ceiling and walls as well-placed lanterns shone a pale, yellow light.

“Did you know? That Stan and his guys were taking meds?”

“I think everyone knows. Without Stan, this place would have been overrun in a few hours after everything happened. Even though he’s stealing the meds, I think most of us have accepted it as a worthy trade.”

Sofia chewed his words over, uncertain. “I’m not sure why there needs to be a trade off at all. Whatever happened to doing good for the sake of doing good?”

“There are plenty of us here who are doing just that. I think expecting everyone to is fooling yourself, no offense.” The young woman swallowed, a withdrawn, apologetic look on her face.

“None taken. I really should know better, coming from the big city like I do, I suppose. I can’t imagine what things are like down there right now.”

“In Miami?” The young woman’s eyes grew just a touch wider, as if she knew something she wasn’t telling. “Wait—you didn’t hear?”

“Didn’t hear what?” Sofia took an eager step forward.

“We have a patient. Dr. Jennings has been caring for him, came in with second degree burns and smoke inhalation, he was escaping from Miami and heading north when his condition deteriorated.”

“Where is he?”

The young woman gestured, making her way down the hall, Sofia sticking close behind. Her flat-soled shoes clapped the tile floor within the narrow hallway, her figure clad in half silhouette from the dim light within. “I hope Stan and his men can find more fuel. Working on reduced generator power feels like playing with fire.” The young woman glanced at one of the lanterns as she passed. “How are we supposed to perform medicine without electricity?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid.” Sofia desperately wished she could remember the young woman’s name, a thick block of guilt wedging into the empty space in her chest. The woman had given her time and whatever skills she had, expecting nothing in return. Not only did Sofia not know her name, but she knew nothing about her beyond her medical training, or lack thereof. For all she knew, she had family at home, a husband, kids, parents, something, and she’d elected to remain at the hospital to care for strangers in spite of it all.

Up ahead, a soft glow emanated from an opened doorway to the right and the woman approached, knocking gently. “Mr. Aviles?” Her voice was a pensive whisper. “Can we come in?”

There was a murmur of agreement and the woman gestured back to Sofia, who smiled and approached, following her into the small room.

“This is Dr. Cruz.”

The man sat upright in bed, wrapped bandages covering half of his face. He looked to be in his mid-forties, his narrow shoulders slumped within the fabric of the hospital gown he

remained clad in. Even though his expression was only partially visible there was a rigid, dignified air about him, his steel, one-eyed gaze fixed directly upon her as she entered, his right hand closed into a fist on his lap. Another kerosene lantern sat on a nearby table, its flame stoking the curved interior of glass, shining an orange light throughout the room.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Aviles?”

“Could be better.” He smiled, the visible half of his mouth turning up slightly. “But could be worse as well, you know?”

“I know.”

“I need to check on someone,” the young woman said and stepped behind Sofia, placing a hand on her shoulder as she passed. The one-time trauma surgeon watched her leave, feeling a sense of indescribable appreciation and gratitude for the woman whose name she couldn’t even remember.

The man in the bed winced visibly and closed his right hand, then glanced toward his left, which Sofia noticed was also bound in bandages, like his face.

“I hear you came from Miami?”

The man nodded a vacant, almost robotic nod, as if operating on pure instinct or reflex rather than conscious thought.

“Can you tell me? What is happening there?”

“Nothing good.”

Sofia had expected that, though she’d been hoping for a little more added detail. “The other woman, she said you escaped from there? Were those the words you used?”

“Yes.” His voice was ragged, and even though he only spoke the single word, it seemed a struggle for him to force it out. “Miami was my home. Fifty years almost, and I ran from it like a rat scurrying from a sinking ship.”

“Is that how you’d describe it? A sinking ship?”

“No. It’s already sunk.”

Sofia's jaw flexed. Though she'd found value and reward working in the smaller hospital, more directly helping patients, there had been part of her that was simply biding her time. Waiting until she could return to Miami and continue what she thought of as her real work. Helping the small, local population had been rewarding, if somewhat overwhelming, but as the days wore on, she felt drawn, more and more, back to Miami, back to where more people might benefit from her assistance.

"Can you tell me about it?" Sofia couched her words carefully. Simply by the expression on the man's face, it was evident he was working hard to conceal the loss and trauma he'd suffered in the days since the pipelines ruptured.

"The entire city, it's burning. Fires are literally everywhere. You can't walk a city block without—" he paused, clearing his throat. "Without stumbling over dead bodies." His eyes darted away. "At first, people helped, police, fire departments, even just normal civilians. But people were soon overwhelmed. They began to pull out. Government ordered remaining federal assistance be diverted to Orlando, Tampa and other places, cities that were slightly more manageable. I was in the hospital there."

"U Health?"

"Yes, U Health. The big one. Downtown. Desperate people stormed the front doors, broke windows. They were angry. Furious. They—" his voice choked again, and he lifted his chin, looking toward the shadows dancing across the pale, orange ceiling. "They killed people. Doctors. Nurses. Raided medicine cabinets, stole supplies. Set fire to the hospital, although parts of it were already burning. I barely escaped with my life." Tears glistened in his one exposed eye, reflected in the dancing flames of the nearby lantern. "I was one of the lucky ones. My wife, she was not." His voice was barely audible as he spoke those last few words.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Aviles."

"In a way, there's almost relief, you know?" He swiped at his moist eye, wiping away the tears. "She was such a kind,

loving soul. Had such a positive outlook. Seeing the world like this, it would have killed her anyway, only slower. Better it happened quick.”

“You managed to make it out, though?”

“I suppose. I found an electric bicycle of all things on the street outside, even as the hospital burned at my back. Even as my face and my arm screamed at me to just give up. I stumbled out into the smoke-filled streets and there it was, lying on the sidewalk, next to a pizza delivery boy.” He looked at something in the distance, something that existed beyond the perimeter of the hospital room. Sofia was glad she couldn’t see what he was seeing. “I picked up the bike, got on, and started riding. Who knew those batteries had such range, you know?”

“You made it all the way here on an e bike?”

“Battery lasted almost sixty miles. I pedaled from there, which slowed me down, but yes. Somehow, I found the strength to make it all the way here, though I collapsed as I walked through the doors. Relief or exhaustion, I don’t know. But Mandy was right there. I owe her my life.”

Mandy. Sofia made a mental note to remember that name. The young woman deserved nothing less. “We’re all very lucky to have her here.”

“You do not know how fortunate you are.” His head shook softly. “To have found this quiet place, away from the chaos.”

“Most of the town left in the early days, from what I understand. Our hospital, too, came very close to being overwhelmed. I agree,” Sofia hated to say, “we are fortunate.” Admitting that seemed to only support Dr. Greene’s assessment that the stolen painkillers were a somehow worthy restitution for Stan and his friends.

“I’m not sure what I’m going to do. Where I’m going to go. Life without Lila is— I don’t even know why I bothered to come here.”

“You wanted to live.”

“Animal instinct, maybe? Because sitting in this bed, I’ve been trying to think of reasons, and I can’t.”

“Does there need to be a reason?”

“Without reason, what is there?” Mr. Aviles’ right eye pried more widely open. “There must be a purpose. There must. Otherwise, we are just wandering through this existence, driven by what? Hunger? Thirst? What separates us from animals if that remains true?”

Sofia wasn’t prepared for such an existential conversation. “Are you in pain?”

Mr. Aviles shook his head absently, once again, eyes fixed on something far beyond what Sofia could see.

“Get some sleep, okay? You’ve had a busy day.”

The man nodded absently, clearly no longer in the mood to talk and Sofia stepped from his room back out into the hallway. As she eased the door closed, a figure lurched forward, coming around the far corner of the hallway, gesturing wildly toward her.

“GSW to the chest! Need you in exam room four! Right now!”

CHAPTER TEN

Florida

Day 03

Sofia sprinted forward, trailing just behind Cooper, who had been the one to call out to her from the end of the hall. Their footfalls crashed along the scuffed and worn tile as they dashed around a corner and came upon the exam room. A trail of dark blood colored the floor leading to the room, but Sofia ripped her eyes away from it, focusing on the doorway as she burst through, steeling herself for what she'd see inside.

A man, not much more than forty-five, writhed in agony on a folding stretcher that had been wheeled into the exam room, his face a deeply sculpted visage of raw, unfiltered agony. His face was almost colorless, his eyes barely visible within the clenched fist of his brows, lips curled, revealing yellow, rotting teeth. The man had neglected his dental health for far longer than the three days it had been since the pipeline ruptured, that much was clear.

“Get that shirt off!” Sofia moved to the nearby counter and shoved her hands in a steel basin of water, then soaped them up, rinsed them, dried them, and frantically peeled on a pair of surgical gloves. Mandy and Cooper were both in the room already and the young woman immediately went to work with a pair of sheers, cutting away the long-sleeved shirt the man wore, working as fast as she dared.

“Son of a— shot us! Shot all of us!” The man spoke in a hissing whisper, pressed through the narrow gaps between his

decaying teeth. “Shoulda killed him!”

“Us?” Sofia barked over her shoulder. “Did you say ‘us’?” She glanced toward Cooper. “Are there more victims?”

The other doctor shook his head.

“Mack and Jackie didn’t make it,” the man hissed, pain cutting the sharp lines of his words. “They didn’t make it. Son of— he killed them! Him and that damn brat girl!”

“Okay, just relax, okay? Relax.” Sofia tried to set a calm tone as she approached, while Mandy worked the shirt free of the man’s plump torso. Thick, dark blood stained the pale skin of the man’s hairless chest and continued to bubble up from a wound somewhere beneath the left pectoral. “We need to flush this. Dr. Jennings—”

Cooper swept behind her and lifted the basin from the counter, the same one she’d just used to wash her hands. “Water’s not running,” he murmured apologetically, and Sofia did her best to conceal the clench of her jaw.

“Get me that suture kit, Mandy, okay?” Sofia pointed toward a cabinet on the far end of the room and Mandy jerked her head into a nod, staring down at her blood covered hands. “Right now, Mandy.”

The young woman blinked hard, shook free her daze and twisted, reaching the counter in two quick strides. Dr. Jennings tipped the basin, slowly pouring water over the blood-littered chest, the tacky red clouding and washing free, dumping onto the tile floor in a rusty splash.

“There it is.” Sofia bent forward. “Help me turn him over.” They worked together to lift the man’s left side and Sofia crouched low, examining his back. “No exit wound. Dammit.”

“Bullet’s still in there somewhere.”

“Yeah.” They lowered the man again and he gasped in agony, sucking in a haggard inhalation. His eyelids fluttered, his teeth pressed tightly together from between a snarl of chapped lips.

“There’s not enough damn light in here.”

“Generator’s out of fuel. Stan sent one of his men out to find some cars to siphon from, but he’s not back yet.”

Sofia lowered her head. “Flashlights? Anything?”

Mandy set the suture kit on a small table next to the bed, her eyes widening. “I’ll go grab one!” She immediately sprinted from the room, even as Sofia did her best to apply pressure to the wound.

“I’m going to need a scalpel. Forceps. Suction and clamps. I’m going to need that at the least.”

Cooper nodded and made his way past her, moving toward another cabinet in the room. He crouched low and tore the door open, rifling through some of the items within, then eventually emerged with a silver tray, some of the items Sofia requested resting upon it, askew and unorganized.

“I guess this will have to do. Anesthesia?” Sofia regretted asking the moment she said it. Modern anesthesia equipment required power and if the generator was out of fuel, which meant no power.

“Hold on, let me run to the locker room.”

Before Sofia could ask why, Cooper had sprinted from the exam room and out into the hallway, his footfalls getting softer by the second as he dashed away.

“Who did this to you?” Sofia pressed folded gauze to the gunshot wound, applying as much pressure as she dared.

The man’s eyes were squeezed shut, his lips curled in agony, though he said nothing in response to her question.

“Sir!” She shouted more loudly. “Who did this?”

“K— Kinsman.”

“Kinsman?”

The man nodded meekly. The name meant nothing to Sofia, but she filed it away, thinking that perhaps she could pass it along to Stan and his men. If someone was running around town shooting people, that was something their security people needed to know.

“Here!” Mandy burst back into the room, a flashlight clutched in her right hand, shoved toward Sofia in victory.

“Great job. Just waiting for Coop— for Dr. Jennings.” The sense of formality seemed foolish, but it was old habit that she could not just kick. Footfalls echoed loudly in the hall again and Cooper appeared framed within the door, out of breath. His hand rested by his hip, fingers closed around the narrow neck of a liquor bottle.

“What is that?” Sofia asked, as though she was seeing some alien artifact.

“Best we got for anesthesia. Jordan will be pissed, but it’s all we have to work with.” He held it out to the man on the bed. “Take a drink.”

The man stared at the offered bottle hungrily, then nodded, taking it from Jordan’s hand. He immediately tipped it up, taking a long swallow, wincing as the apparently bitter liquid slid down his throat. Swallowing it down eagerly, he lowered the bottle and blew out a rancid breath, forcing Cooper to lurch forward and grab the bottle before he dropped it. Snatching it from the man’s slackened grip, he nodded to Sofia, and she reached across the patient’s torso and lifted the scalpel, preparing to do what she did best.

Immediately and without hesitation, she pressed the narrow, sharpened blade into the tissue of the man’s chest even as Cooper set the bottle down and rushed to the man’s side to hold him down. A scream split the patient’s lips, deafening and echoing within the small room, his back arching as blade bit into flesh.

“Hold him down!” Sofia screamed just as loudly, battling against the man’s anguish and after a moment of uncertain hesitation, Mandy joined Cooper, moving to the other side, working along with him to force the man to remain on the bed even as Sofia continued her grisly work. She cut a narrow, elongated incision, vertically, working just alongside the breastbone, leaning on her years of experience.

“I need that light.” Leaning down, she scrutinized the sliced flesh and Mandy released one hand from where she held

the patient down, using her free hand to awkwardly hold the flashlight aloft. Pale white light shone down, casting strange shadows along the fat rolls on the man's chest and stomach. Sofia had to lean sharply to the left to reveal the actual incision, which had been blocked by her head, working to get a better angle. Blood seeped free of the wound, coursing along the patient's skin, soaking into the mattress beneath him, making it almost impossible to see. The echoes of his pained screams had faded, and it seemed as though he might have slumped into blessed unconsciousness.

"Is he out?" Her eyes darted to the passive expression on his face, his eyes closed, lips pressed shut over the rotting teeth.

"For the moment." Cooper loosened his grip.

"Flush this." Sofia jerked her head toward the blood-covered torso and Cooper reached over, grabbing the basin, and eased it at an angle, running some water across the bloodied torso. Sofia went back to work, cutting deeper, easing the flesh aside so she could get a better look, but between the shadows cast by the flashlight and the continually building blood it became an exercise in frustration.

"I can't work like this," she hissed in a narrow whisper, hissing through clenched teeth.

"We don't have a choice." Cooper spoke gently, but firmly and then flushed the wound again with a bit more water. The man went rigid, his body tensing air sucking in through his closed mouth.

"Get me that retractor, I need to get a better look inside."

Cooper did what she requested, and she positioned the retractor, which resembled a pair of scissors, then pried open the incision, locking the retractor in place to expose the depths of the man's chest cavity. Blood continued to build and flow, and Cooper continued to struggle to rinse the wound and the flesh as Sofia gently probed the chest cavity with her scalpel and forceps.

“Here!” She shouted victoriously from where she was hunched over the man’s body, which was stiff with pain, though thankfully not thrashing around as he had been. Using the forceps, she probed within the chest cavity, her teeth clenched until she felt the resistance of the foreign object within the soft internal tissue. “I think it nicked his lung.” She sighed an exasperated sigh. “I’m afraid if I take it out the lung might collapse.”

“I think that’s a chance we have to take, isn’t it? If we leave it in, we’ll be risking sepsis or worse.”

“Clamp.”

Cooper gave her what she asked, and Sofia went to work, clamping off an artery as she pinched the slug within the forceps and gently worked it loose, her breath holding firm and tight within the fist of her lungs. She tugged gently at first, then with more effort, finally working the bullet free and lifting it from the chest cavity, clenched within the prongs of her forceps.

“Got it.” She set it down on the surgical tray with a clatter, then returned to the wound, gesturing for Cooper to flush it again, which he did.

“Almost out of water.”

Sofia didn’t reply, she only adjusted the position of her head for a better view and went to work, snatching the suture kit and focusing every ounce of her attention on the damage the slug had done to the lung and surrounding tissue. Methodically she went to work, instinct taking over, her decades of experience framing all of what happened next.

Sofia leaned back in her chair, eyes closed, her hands folded in her lap, fingers in a seemingly permanent state of half-closure. In her mind, the scalpel was still pressed into the soft tissue of her palm, her fingers coiled tightly around the suture as she worked within the chasm of the man’s chest, slowly putting him back together again.

“I saw it with my own eyes and I’m not sure I believe it.”

Sofia pried her eyes open and slumped forward, twisting her head to gaze toward the door leading out to the hallway. Stale cigarette smoke filtered into the room, Cooper leaning against the door frame, his head shaking with a mixture of disbelief and reverence.

“Never seen anything like that.”

“Digging a bullet out of someone’s chest wall? In Miami, I lost count of how many GSW’s I’ve dealt with over the years.”

“We’re not a trauma center, Sofia. We don’t even have an emergency room. We lost power hours ago and you just saved a man’s life by flashlight.”

Sofia shrugged, though her cheeks burned with a mixture of embarrassment and pride. “So, he’s stable?”

“He’s out of it, but he’s stable. We even let him have the rest of the bottle. Dr. Greene is going to be mighty irate when he wakes up from his little nap.”

Sofia couldn’t help but laugh. She’d known Cooper for only a few days but felt as though she’d been on staff at the small hospital for her entire career. “Did he mention anything else about the guy who shot him? Kinsman or whatever his name was?”

“No. I figure we’ll let Stan have a word with him once he comes around. Just see what information we can gather. Normally I’d say the guy was a transient or something, we don’t have that sort of crime in this area.”

“But obviously he knew him.”

“Doesn’t mean he wasn’t a transient.”

Sofia nodded her agreement. She’d had plenty of experience with displaced and homeless people in Miami and some of them had become fixtures enough in the city that people knew them by name, even if they weren’t permanent residents.

“He mentioned a kid. Do you remember that? He said that ‘brat girl’.”

“Yeah, I remember. Who knows? You saved his life, pulled him back from the brink, that’s all that matters.”

“I don’t suppose you recognize him?”

Cooper hesitated for a moment, then lifted his hand, tipping it back and forth a bit. “He looks like he could be a bit familiar. Like maybe I’ve seen him around. But not by name or anything.”

“Did he say where he came from?”

“Next town over, actually. Said his two friends are still lying in an alley over there. Dead as doornails. If we can believe what he said, this guy, Kinsman or whoever he is, shot them dead in cold blood. They were unarmed and he just put bullets in them.”

“Doesn’t ring true to me, but who am I to judge?” Sofia exhaled, grimaced, and placed her palms on her legs, standing. “Hey, Jordan— Dr. Greene, he mentioned something to me.”

“Oh?”

“Stan and his men, are they stealing painkillers?”

One look at Cooper’s conflicted expression answered her question more than his words ever could.

“Are we okay with that?”

“Okay with it? Not really. But what choice do we have?”

“They were pretty helpful in the early days,” Sofia replied, “from what you told me and from what I witnessed. But we haven’t exactly had a flood of patients anymore. Sure, they come in pretty steady, but not like that first twenty-four hours.”

“Maybe not, but he and his friends have all the guns. What are we going to do, fire them? Something tells me that won’t go well for us.”

“So they’re not security then. They’re hostage takers.”

“That’s a little extreme.” Cooper lowered his chin and looked out at her through narrowed eyes.

“Fair. But still. They are, essentially, forcing our cooperation at gunpoint. Taking drugs, sleeping in our spare beds. Using our roof.”

“Getting us fuel for our generator. Offering protection. Did you see that deer they brought back yesterday? It’s not a perfect situation, I agree, but I’m not sure we should be looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

“You’re just saying that because they’ve been supplying you with a steady stream of cigarettes.”

Cooper laughed, then lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “I could deny that, but I’d be lying. I guess one hand washes the other.”

Sofia wasn’t sure if that was an adequate excuse for Stan’s behavior, but it seemed to be the reality of the situation. Law and order was an amorphous fog in the wake of the pipeline disasters, something more born of theory than reality. If what Mr. Aviles had said was true, Miami had already descended into lawless chaos, a city on fire without the rule of law. If that happened to Miami, how long until it happened elsewhere—how long until it happened *everywhere*? She’d only been in the small rural backwater for two days, but Stan and his crew had been the closest thing she’d seen to police and with Fort Lauderdale a stone’s throw away, she suspected it would remain that way for the foreseeable future.

“It’s a new world,” Cooper continued, apparently sensing her discomfort. “We have to establish these rules and regulations however we can. Otherwise, it’s anarchy.”

“I think it already is.” Sofia shook her head and knuckled her right eye, trying, but failing, to push the weariness from it. Footsteps approached in the hallway outside and another face emerged, looking into the small room.

“What’s this I hear about you giving away my bourbon?” Dr. Greene’s face was etched into a stern visage of accusation, bushy brows furrowed, steel glint eyes burning from narrowed slits.

“We do what we have to do.” Cooper shrugged. “Come on — let me see if there are any drops left. Dr. Cruz has earned herself a little nap.” He flashed Sofia a wink and led Greene away, a small gesture for which Sofia felt immeasurably grateful. Releasing a pent-up sigh, she wobbled on shaky legs, made her way to a nearby hospital bed, then crawled up onto it and waited for the inevitable approach of sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Everett crouched low in the trees, twisting the bound twine around one trunk, tugging on a narrow branch to reset the trap. While Scout had been checking and resetting various snares throughout the property, Everett had focused on the more human-centric protective measures. Moving through the trees, he'd strung along a few more surprises for anyone who might venture too close to his property line. He'd spent a chunk of the morning re-examining some holes he'd dug along his perimeter, eyeballing their depths and satisfying himself that they were deep enough to hold someone who might stumble into them. By either some stroke of luck or skill, the intruders who had breached his property a few days before had avoided the pits. He would have said they'd navigated their way around them, except for the fact that one of them had tripped the spring-loaded branch, which had been one of the more visible deterrents Everett had set.

The fact that a group of four men had breached his property without any of them stumbling into one of the pit traps told him that he needed more of them, but he lacked the time or energy to dig two or three more deep holes at that moment. With his one good arm it was an exhausting ordeal and though the girl could likely help, he hadn't wanted to get too accustomed to relying on her. She'd be gone soon enough, and the last thing he needed was a reliance on someone he was removing from his property tomorrow. He tugged the twine tight and looped it around another branch, then tied it off with a narrow fishing-line tripwire at ankle height, finishing the tie-off along the other side of the path. When someone activated

the tripwire, the fishing line would break and the coiled branch would snap forward, more or less at solar plexus height. A perfect, unexpected impact designed to blast the wind from someone's lungs and hopefully leave them incapacitated enough for Everett to finish them off.

Alongside that tripwire, he rested a small soup can with a blasting cap and gunpowder wedged into the base of the can, concealing it within the grass to the edge of the trees. When that fishing line broke, the blasting cap would smash into the gunpowder and fire off a warning shot, designed to alert Everett when the trap activated. That way if someone approached as he was sleeping, they'd not only get a four-inch diameter branch in the solar plexus, but Everett would hear the alarm as well and come running. Setting the traps was something he needed to do, though if he was being honest with himself, he didn't expect those two survivors to come rushing back to his cabin any time soon. He'd faced off against all four of them and with the girl's help, he'd sent them running, killing two of them and watching as the others scattered off into the trees with their tails between their legs. He'd seen their type before, mostly in combat, both on his side and the other, and they were all the same. Talked big when they had an advantage in numbers or firepower, but when the chips were down, they, almost without fail, shriveled up and died, unable to deal with the pressure.

Still, even though he didn't picture those two individuals coming back, he couldn't help wanting to be ready for it, if they did. If he and the girl were going to be on the road for a day or two getting her to her grandparents' house, he didn't want to leave his property wholly unguarded or unprotected. Satisfied that he'd set the final trap, he stood, grimacing at the pain that shot through his back and legs. There was no doubt, he was approaching the official 'too old for this' stage of his life, but he'd known from the start that it would come to that point eventually. It was the price he had to pay for ostracizing himself from society and it was a price he paid willingly. Standing among the trees, he peered out, his gaze lingering upon the shimmering, green surface of the swamp a short distance away.

Slivers of calm water were visible between the trunks of thick trees, just beyond waist-high grasslands and his eyes transfixed, locked onto that slab of liquid. At that early hour no springtime breeze had yet formed, and the water remained deceptively calm, a sheet of opaque glass concealing the terrors that lurked just beneath the surface. He was all too familiar with the dangers of the swamp, and those dangers weren't just about the reptiles that buried themselves within its murky depths. The swamp itself held its own nefarious dangers, with or without those animals, and as he stared across its shimmering surface, he could have sworn it was staring back.

Even outside of the creatures that lurked within, the swamp itself had a life of its own, a self-contained ecosystem, and from time to time, that life lashed out. It attacked those who drew too near, it breached that barrier between nature and man and took what it believed belonged to it. Goose flesh crept up along the skin of his right arm and a pulsing, phantom throb thrummed beyond the stub of his left, that all-too-frequent reminder of the limb that he'd lost a lifetime ago. The pond's rippling surface drew his gaze and his focus, dragged him within its imperceptible depths and held him there, almost hypnotized, his back rigid, limbs straight, rooted in place by the steely eyes of unknown waters.

“Everett?”

He blinked and shook his head, the settled fog drifting from the swamp of his own mind.

“Everett?”

He turned, blinking again, his thoughts clarifying within the clouds of his addled mind. Scout stood at the edge of the trees, looking down at him, her head slightly tilted. “You’ve been standing down here for a while.”

“I have?” He narrowed his eyes in the direction of the swamp, his chest tight, then back at her. “Sorry. I was just enjoying the spring morning.” Peeling himself away from the grass and water, he strode up the slope of the hill, ignoring the

pain in his legs and his back, only too happy to put the swamp behind him.

Scout trailed behind Everett as he made his way back around the cabin, walking toward the tool shed to the left of the animal pen.

“We leave tomorrow.” He didn’t even look over his shoulder as he punched in a combination and opened the tool shed door, exposing the narrow confines of the building’s interior. Crouching low, he lifted the gas cans from within, testing their weight, hefting each one with curled fingers to try and see how full or empty they were.

“You topped off the gas in the generator, right?”

“Like you asked me to.”

Everett nodded a silent acknowledgement and returned his attention to the other cans, sliding them all out of the shed and arranging them on the ground. “Should have plenty of gas for the trip north tomorrow, but we’ll want to siphon some while we’re out and about. Never want to come back empty handed.”

“I already packed up the pump.”

“Thinking ahead. Good.” Stepping over the cans of gas, Everett went back into the shed and returned with a funnel, then screwed off the cap of one of the cans, pressed the funnel into its opening and started consolidating the fuel into a single container. “We’re going to need some of this for the boat and some of it for the truck.”

Instinctively, Scout looked toward the trees, beyond which the boat rested in a well-concealed area at the edge of the swamp. They’d painstakingly shrouded it in cypress branches and swamp grass in an effort to keep any random passers-by from spotting it. Not that there were many random passers-by in his neck of the woods deep within the Florida Everglades.

The only people they'd seen had been those men who attacked them the day before, and at the moment, they were long gone.

They might have been long gone, but Scout didn't think they'd be gone for long. Although Everett had gone through the motions of preparing the traps that morning, she had the impression that he wasn't all that worried about the men. It wasn't an impression that Scout shared, though it wasn't her place to voice her disagreement. Not that it mattered, if Everett had his way, she'd be back at her grandparents' place by tomorrow evening. Scout swallowed down a building swell of frustration, softly clearing her throat to avoid speaking.

"Something you want to say?" Everett had finished consolidating the fuel and twisted the cap tight, shoving the two empty containers to the side in preparation for bringing them along tomorrow.

"What were you looking at before?"

"Excuse me?"

"When you were standing by the swamp? You were just staring out into nothing, it seemed like. Did you see someone? Something?"

"Nothing. Just the swamp." The words came out in chopped chunks. Everett stood, hoisting the full can of fuel with him. "Grab the empties." He strode past Scout who did as she was told and lifted the empty cans in her hands, carrying one in the curl of each set of fingers. She followed the old man back toward the front of the cabin and toward the trees once again.

"I know we're not supposed to share our life stories." Scout spoke softly and Everett's shoulders tensed visibly as he made his way toward the trees. "But the man in town a few days ago? The one you—" her voice trailed off. The one who you shot dead was something she didn't want to voice aloud. "The one you argued with?"

Everett lowered his head and pushed through the trees, leading with his shoulder, navigating the downward slope with some trepidation. He said nothing in response.

“He mentioned a kid. That you had a kid. A daughter, it sounded like.”

“Don’t pay any attention to what he said.”

“I just— if I’m leaving tomorrow, I’d just like to know more.”

“Know more?” Everett’s voice was almost a growl.

“About the man who saved my life.”

He slowed, stepping through tall grass, one foot in front of the other, hesitating for the scantest of heartbeats. Turning ever-so-slightly, his right eye fell into view, a narrow squint beneath the bunched fist of his bushy eyebrow. His mouth drew into a downward slant, his profile a stone sculpture of stoic emotion. “I think you know all you need to know.” He turned away and stepped once more through the grass.

Scout pressed her teeth together, purposefully biting back the words she wanted to say. The old man had indeed saved her life on more than one occasion, and for brief pockets of time he’d seemed almost likeable. But those pockets seemed to be getting more and more shallow all the time and the more she wanted to get to know him, the less it seemed he wanted to be known.

Rooted in place, she stood in the grass, surrounded by trees, the cabin several feet behind her as the figure of the old man continued down the uneven slope, walking toward the water. Silence settled across the surrounding wilderness, the life and spirit of the swamp seemingly swallowed by stillness. In that quiet, Scout’s mind went to her father, to the most loving and thoughtful man she’d ever known, a man who was, on the face of it, the stark opposite of Everett Kinsman. How she went from a man like her father to the man before her she’d never know, the cruel twist of fate working its barbed blade deep into her guts.

The depths at which she missed her father were nearly fathomless, the swirling dark of the deepest trench of the ocean and while she tried, as best she could, to not dwell within those depths, they seemed to consume her and swallow

her at any unexpected moment. Reaching across her body, she touched the flannel shirt she wore, the one with the green plaid pattern, the same one she'd given her father for his birthday what seemed like ten lifetimes ago. It no longer held his smell and no longer felt like him, but it was a cotton-thin connective tissue and for the moment, that would have to be enough. If there was anything keeping Scout going it was the knowledge that somewhere out there, her mother, her sister and her brother were still alive, or so she hoped, and they were going to do their best to find her.

She stepped forward, moving carefully along the soft, downward sloping ground. Perhaps going to her grandparents' house was the best option, a place her mother was familiar with, perhaps the first place she'd come looking, if she could make it down to Florida at all. Picking up the pace, she caught up to Everett, matching his uneven stride as they neared the water's edge. The old man placed the gas can he was carrying on the ground and stepped over a clutch of stumps, then started to draw back the branches and leaves they'd used to shield the boat from view. Revealing a section of the boat, Everett lifted the gas can and placed it inside, then gestured for Scout to hand hers over, which she did. He placed the two empty cans next to the full can, then bent over the edge of the boat and lifted out a bolt-action rifle he'd had stashed within.

“Almost forgot this was there.” He ejected the squat magazine, checking to ensure there were rounds loaded, then slotted it back into place and handed the rifle over to Scout. She took it from him, then froze, looking past the old man for a moment, studying the seemingly ever-shifting swamp water beyond.

“Everett?”

The old man turned and scowled at her, as if she was interrupting some critical work, crouched low, next to the boat, doing some further examination of it.

“The water.” The two words came out in a hushed whisper, panic chiseling the hard edges of her words, her eyes peeling so wide they ached. Everett sensed her sudden surge of terror and wheeled around, stumbling away from the water's edge.

The monster broke the surface, a sudden crashing splash of swamp and skin, the lunge of green leather bursting free in a stunningly swift lash.

“No!” Everett shouted, stepping back, but his boot hit soft mud and he went down. Flailing, he tried to break his fall with his non-existent left hand, but the false limb struck mud with a dull, awkward thunk, yanking him off balance, his shoulder hammering hard into the mud. The blur of motion clarified, much to Scout’s horror, the massive crocodile who had leaped free of the swamp water, twisted right, bearing down on Everett as he desperately tried to scramble away. Long jaws pried open as the beast lurched forward again, then with a sudden, vicious snap, the mouth closed, pinning around Everett’s torso.

The old man screamed loud and frantic, a sound unlike anything Scout had ever heard. Wildly, the crocodile thrashed, wrenching his victim from the mud, yanking him violently left and right, throwing clumps of dirt and water into the air. It was the biggest reptile Scout had ever seen and it had Everett firmly in its jaws and she was suddenly absolutely certain it was going to shake him to death right before her eyes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Scout stood frozen, watching the attack happen in real time, feet sucked into mud, standing stock-still and unbelieving, even as it all transpired in seemingly slow motion before her. Everett twisted within the vice grip of the creature's jaws, clawing for purchase on the shore as the crocodile retreated, trying to force him and his meal back into the water. For the briefest of moments, Scout's eyes locked with Everett's, his pained gaze hot and edged with a fear she'd never seen in the man before. His fingers closed around a chunk of dirt, sinking deep into the wet shore, unable to find something to hold.

"Stop!" Scout screamed, her voice slicing through the air, and she lurched forward, the rifle in her hand bolting up into a firing position. Already the crocodile was dragging Everett back, half sinking into the swamp, but Scout charged forward, hammering the stock of the rifle into the creature's scale-armored head. It struck with a low thunk, but it was like pounding solid stone, the crocodile's reptilian eyes fixed and unblinking. Everett sucked in pained breath, his fingers flexing even as he dragged a fistful of mud down with him, the crocodile hauling him toward the water.

Scout swung the rifle around, pointed the barrel directly at the green marble of the creature's left eye. Water drew up around the beast, sucking Everett down, creeping above his waist, his jerking movements falling distressingly still. Scout held her pose for just a second, centering the barrel of the rifle on that same, slitted eye, then pulled the trigger. The rifle crashed and jumped, her firm grasp holding it steady, the shot, only inches from the creature's head, striking home.

There was a splinter of bone and sudden burst of ruptured eye ball, the round punching through the large reptile's skull at its weakest point. A gouge of organic debris erupted from the opposite side of the creature's armored head, its jaws yanking open, releasing its would be prey. It thrashed and jerked angrily, as if only upset that Scout had caused it to release its meal, but then its massive tail shot a wide arc of water in a desperate, last second thrashing and the creature stilled, settling onto the bottom of the swamp, barely visible beneath the surface.

Stumbling forward, Scout fired again into the crocodile's head, racked the bolt, then fired a third time, the creature jerking with each bullet impact, then remaining stock still, like a moss-covered log. Scout tossed the rifle aside and scrambled forward, grasping for Everett's outstretched hand. She clutched his hand in both of hers and strained to pull him, the dead weight of his body sloughing through the wet muck, digging a makeshift trench in its wake.

"Come on! Come on!" Her voice was a quiet, plaintive whisper, barely audible above the hissing rasps of the old man's desperate breaths. His previously pale-colored shirt was soaked in blood, so much blood that Scout couldn't even tell where the teeth had punctured, only that they had. Wrestling Everett further up the incline, she dragged and pulled, ignoring her own weakness, letting pure adrenaline funnel her strength. It took several moments, but she finally navigated to the top crest of the low-angled hill and rested him on the grass, where his chest heaved with shallow, stabbing breaths.

"Hold on! Just, hold on!" Scout scrambled back down the slope and retrieved the rifle, holding it out as she back-pedaled back up the slope, keeping her eyes fixed on the croc, which remained lying where it had been, motionless. Swallowing down a sudden rush of acid bile, she wheeled back toward the top of the slope and half crawled up, using her left hand to drag her along as she bent low, losing her balance momentarily. Reaching the top, she moved swiftly to Everett's side, crouching low and pressing a hand to his shoulder. "Where?"

Everett grimaced, his eyes pressed closed, mouth curled into a snarl of pain, the scant sliver of teeth showing from between peeled lips.

“Where did it bite?”

Everett didn't reply. His shirt was a rust-colored mass of blood, thick and tacky, obscuring any sign of actual injury.

“Come on!” Scout tossed the rifle aside and positioned herself beneath Everett's left arm, trying to force him upright, wedging her narrow frame between him and the ground. He sucked in an agonized breath and stiffened, but Scout pushed through it, managing to use her hip to lever him to an almost standing posture, his knees weak. “Don't give up on me!” She stepped forward and Everett slumped, very nearly falling back to the ground. In desperation, she wrapped her arms around his waist, which was too thick for her to reach completely around, though she managed to at least hold him relatively upright as she moved him forward.

Somehow, she maneuvered him to the front door of the cabin, though it happened in fits and starts, moving a few paces, stopping, catching her breath, then moving a few more. She settled him down, pressing him against the wall of the cabin and letting him slump slowly to the grass to avoid hurting him even more. Fumbling anxiously with the door, she managed to pry it open, then used a nearby rock to hold it ajar and once again wrestled the big man back to his feet and worked him through the narrow frame before easing him to the natural wood floor. Bending over, hands on her thighs, Scout caught her breath, letting the strength slowly ease its way back into her limbs. Stepping over him, she raced to the bathroom and operated the faucet, which thankfully still worked.

She filled a bowl with water and snatched an old towel hanging on a rack within the bathroom, then returned to Everett's side, soaking the towel in the basin. Tucking her fingers into the hem of the old man's shirt, she peeled it off, much to Everett's discomfort, the constant gasps and hisses of agony escaping his pursed lips the whole way through.

“Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry.” She spent nearly the entire time apologizing until she’d finally yanked the shirt over the man’s head, revealing his pale, blood-covered torso beneath. Using the towel and the water, she quickly began to wipe away the blood, just trying to clean a layer or two off so she could see where his actual injuries were. Everett shouted and jerked upright, almost knocking the young girl over.

“Everett, I’m trying to help!”

He rolled onto his left side, wrapping his intact arm across his torso, blood seeping into the wood beneath him. “You—you want to help?” His voice was a hoarse rasp. “Kitchen. Second cabinet. Johnnie Walker.” His lips curled back revealing a broader expanse of his yellowed teeth.

“Johnnie what?”

“Bottle! Glass bottle!”

Scout hustled to her feet, one shoe nearly slipping on the blood-covered floor. She regained her balance and hurried to the kitchen, locating the second cabinet and hauling it open. Sure enough she found a tall, narrow bottle with ornate text reading Johnnie Walker on its dark label. It was three-quarters full of an amber shade of liquid that she was pretty sure was alcohol. Sprinting back from the kitchen, she returned to Everett and presented him with the bottle, which he nearly snatched from her hand.

“Glass! I didn’t get you a—”

“Forget the damned glass.” He twisted off the cap and tipped the bottle back, taking a long, desperate drink. He appeared visibly pained as he sucked down the drink, then drew the bottle away from his lips. Scout barely got her hands around it before he let it go and slumped back to the floor with a grunt. Cradling the bottle, she pressed the cap back on and set it aside, once more focusing her attention on the blood-covered torso.

As Everett balanced precariously on the narrow edge between consciousness and unconsciousness, Scout once again ran water over his bloodied torso, searching for the underlying

wounds. She swept rust-colored water from the old man's pale chest and ignored the fact that it was discoloring the natural wood of the floor beneath him. Thick red pulsed from a few different locations, blood seeping freshly to the surface even as she washed the initial layer away. Scout was working with such swift focus and attentiveness, the boiling nausea in her stomach simply perched in the background, biding its acidic time. Several ragged gashes marked the surface of Everett's torso, mostly along his left side. An especially deep one released another stream of dark red blood, near the top of his left rib cage, dangerously close to where his left lung was located.

His breathing was haggard, but not especially raspy, which was a bit of a relief, as Scout hoped the lung wasn't punctured. As long as the crocodile's teeth were, they didn't seem long enough to pierce skin, muscle and bone, or so she hoped. More teeth marks walked a jagged line across the lower section of his torso, beneath the curve of his bottom rib. There were plenty of organs through there as well and judging by the fresh stream of blood emerging through the hacked gashes in his skin, they could very well be at risk. While it was relatively simple to locate the external injuries, the broken skin and bloodied wounds, it would be nearly impossible for Scout to determine if there were internal injuries, which were often the deadliest. With that in mind, she pressed her fingertips to the soft skin of Everett's belly and pressed gently, applying just a little pressure. The old man convulsed, sucking in a desperate, wheezing breath, his eyes springing open as he instinctively reached for his stomach, a guttural grunt curdling in his throat.

"Sorry!" Scout gasped and drew back, yanking her fingers from the point of contact. "I didn't mean to!"

Everett's jaw clenched, the tendons of his neck bunching like the guts of a freshly fed boa constrictor. Rolling slightly, he groped for the bottle of whiskey, then lifted it, removed the cap and took another long slug, his eyes pressed tightly closed.

"Is that helping?"

"It ain't hurting." He hissed through clenched teeth.

“I’m worried you might have internal injuries. Some of these bites are pretty deep.”

“Throw a few bandages on it. I’ll be—” his voice thinned, and agony sculpted the lines of his face. He opened his eyes for a moment, lids fluttering, then they closed again, and his head lolled, his fingers releasing the bottle. It rolled awkwardly across the floor, dribbling alcohol and Scout lunged over him, sweeping it up before it could spill more, then returned the cap and placed it out of Everett’s reach. She rested back on her knees, a freight train of thoughts hammering through the tunnel of her skull. Her breath came in swift, stabbing gasps, her fingers curled against the firm length of her thighs, nails digging. Springing to her feet, she raced toward the bathroom and threw open the door, plunging into the narrow confines of the room as she ripped open cabinets, searching for any first aid supplies.

Resting at the bottom of a single cabinet next to the toilet was a metal box, colored white and she yanked it free, prying open the lid even as she exited the bathroom and ventured out into the main living area. Blood continued to pulse from various wounds across Everett’s torso, not in a flow, but in several smaller trickles., though numerous enough that the concern of blood loss loomed thick and dark. Skidding to a halt next to the old man, she peered into the first aid kit she’d found and pulled out a bottle of alcohol, wrapped gauze, scissors and a box of bandages before she found something close to what she was looking for.

A portable suture kit rested on the bottom of the metal box and her eyes locked on it, peering through the haze of her vision. She’d never used anything like them before and wasn’t even sure how to use them properly, but she had to do something, and even poorly applied sutures had to be better than no sutures at all. Tearing into the kit, she was somewhat relieved to see printed instructions on the back, guiding her toward how to apply the small butterfly shaped bandages. Clear warnings indicated that the sutures were for shallow cuts only, which at least two of the wounds were not, but again, a better alternative than nothing at all.

“Keep— keep looking.” Everett’s voice was a ragged growl as he wearily lifted his hand and extended a finger toward the first aid kit. “Those damn things won’t do much. Use the glue.”

“The what?” Scout returned her gaze to the first aid kit and shuffled the remaining contents until a simple bottle of super glue revealed itself.

“The big ones,” Everett said, his voice quiet and uneven. “Pinch them together with some super glue. It— it’ll help.”

“That can’t be healthy.”

“Healthier than losing two pints of blood.” His eyelids were fluttering again, but he shifted slightly and reached into the kit himself, clutching the glue between his fingers.

“Hold on, hold on.” Scout took the glue from him and inched closer on her knees, looking at the wound on his chest, which continued to leak red. She located the wet cloth and wiped it clean again, then grabbed a crumpled up t-shirt she’d been using to mop up the rusty water.

“Do it,” Everett hissed through clenched teeth. Scout twisted off the cap and let her instincts take over, guiding the nozzle of the super glue applicator along the inside of one of the ragged edges of the wound. Hastily, she pinched it closed, wincing as the glue bubbled along the surface, oozing slightly from where the skin touched. Everett didn’t scream, much to his credit, though he did bite back a gasp and squeeze his eyes tightly shut, the back of his skull thumping on the wooden floor. His body went slack as Scout held the flaps of skin closed for a solid sixty-second count and when she released, the skin held together, containing the blood.

Breath slipped from her pressed lips, and she squinted back the pinch of tears at the corners of her eyes as she thought through her options. There were several other wounds throughout the old man’s torso, two others deep like his chest, others shallower, though Everett no longer seemed to be in any condition to direct her. His head lolled loosely on his neck, his eyes closed, the previous tension in his body loosening into slackened muscles. Once again, the tears stood on the edge of

her eyes, lingering there, but once again, she rapidly blinked them away, refusing to let them cloud her vision. Lifting the bottle of alcohol and a package of cotton swabs within the first aid kit she returned her attention to one of the deeper wounds along the curve of Everett's ribs. Using some alcohol to wipe away more blood that had pooled, she dried it off as much as possible, then pinched the wound together, applied a strip of super glue and held it tight, counting down the seconds.

Repeating the process one more time for another deep wound, she shifted to butterfly stitches for the several smaller cuts, carefully applying the bandages over the narrow gashes, trying to space them evenly apart. It took every single butterfly suture in the first aid kit, but after about thirty minutes of intense focus, Everett's wounds were as bound as they were going to be with the limited resources she had at hand. Her thoughts raced, a rapid sprint across her memories from the last several days and one kept coming back to the forefront, shoving aside all others and standing, obstructing her view. The more she thought about it and the more options she considered, the more she returned to the one she didn't want—but in the end, it was the only one there was. Blowing out a heavy sigh, she stood, spent a few moments looking down at Everett, then made her way back to the front door to step outside to retrieve what she needed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Considering how many trees the cabin was surrounded by it took Scout no time at all to locate a pair of cypress with thick enough trunks. She'd watched Everett punch in the code for the tool shed combination enough times that it only took her a second to get access to that as well, where she found a small handsaw that she used to cut down the two trees, then trim to an equal length. When they'd butchered the possum Everett had trapped he'd had a tarp handy as well and she pulled that from the shed, examining it briefly to make sure it wasn't still littered with guts or blood. At some point since then, the old man had apparently washed it off, so it remained relatively clean.

She dragged the tarp over to the two freshly cut cypress trunks and evenly spaced them within the tarp, then folded the tarp over them, tucking one end of the plastic sheet underneath the second trunk and folding the remaining over it, pressing it together. A lesson from her father had taught her that the person's weight would hold the stretcher together even without additional items to tie it off, so she dragged her contraption toward the front of the cabin, then heeled open the door and dragged the stretcher within. Everett was still lying on the floor, his chest moving, though he showed no other signs of consciousness. Thankfully he was resting on his left shoulder, and she was able to slide the stretcher along the floor behind him, then grasp his right shoulder with both hands and slowly tip him over, thumping him down onto the folded tarp strung between trees. After a few moments of wrestling with his position, she had him situated in the center of the stretcher and

moved to his head, bending low and lifting the two ends of cypress with tightly clenched fists.

Everett was on the large side and the stretcher wasn't light, but she was able to hoist it to waist height at least, then drag it around in a rough circle, the opposite ends of the branches scraping along the natural wood floor. After some effort, she fought the stretcher around in a full semi-circle, then bent forward and strode toward the door, her shoulders aching with each struggled movement. Once she reached the outside, she set the stretcher down, flexed her arms and her fingers, then stepped around it and went back into the cabin. First, she took a few moments to pack her backpack with a few necessary supplies. She packed a flashlight, some batteries, a change of clothes, a handful of protein bars and even a few of the MREs Everett had stolen from the same military transport he'd found her inside.

A filtered water bottle found its way inside the pack as did one of the maps Everett had used to navigate his way around the small, neighboring Florida towns. She grabbed a firestarter kit, a pistol and the same bolt-action rifle they'd taken with them the first time around. It took her a little extra time to locate ammunition for both weapons, but she found it and packed it, then finished off her ensemble with a jackknife pressed into a narrow pocket on the thigh of her pants. Scout wasn't sure she had everything she needed, in fact she was almost sure she didn't, but it would have to be good enough. Time was slipping away, the sun was marching relentlessly across the sky, and even from limited experience, she recalled the trip to the next town was not a short one.

Strapping the pack tight around her shoulders, she holstered the pistol and slung the rifle, then shut and locked the cabin door, making a mental note to come back and verify the generator was off and everything was buttoned up tight. Everett would not be happy she was leaving the cabin unguarded yet again, but she didn't much care how unhappy he was. His injuries were more than she could handle alone and at least if he was unhappy, that meant he was alive, which was better than the alternative.

Bending by the head of the stretcher, she hoisted it up, and arranged her position so Everett's feet were pointing forward, toward the downward slope heading to the swamp below. It would be easier to go down the slope facing frontwards, struggling to keep him from sliding, rather than try to backpedal and risk falling forward, Scout had decided. Pushing the end of the stretcher toward the crest of the narrow hill, she gripped tight, braced herself and held fast as the tree trunks stepped from the edge, dropped and threatened to wrestle free of her grasp and tumble down the slope. She inched forward, step-by-step, letting the stretcher lead her, using every ounce of her strength to hold it so that it would not slide away. It took a lot longer than she figured it would, but eventually she reached the bottom of the hill where the boat remained moored, gently rising with each crest of the swamp. Foamy, green water lapped at the murky edge of terrain and Scout was somewhat surprised that the crocodile's corpse remained where she'd left it, the ragged hole where its eye used to be staring back at her, void of light or life.

She set the stretcher down and tore off the leaves and branches that shrouded the boat, freeing the watercraft from its place of concealment in record time. It took some doing, but she hefted the end of the stretcher up and rested it on the edge of the boat, then moved back around to the head, lifting it up so Everett was more or less horizontal. Clenching her teeth, she buried her boots in the muck and stomped forward, sliding the stretcher along the boat, placing it across the watercraft's stern. Pausing to catch her breath, she bent low, placing hands on her thighs, her eyes closed tight as air sliced through the narrow gaps between teeth.

Slipping the pack from one shoulder, she dropped it into the boat, then placed the rifle next to it and marched back up the slope to do one more check around the cabin's property. While doing her last walk-around, she verified the tool shed was locked up tight and there was a little extra food for the goats and the chickens. She grabbed an extra spool of paracord from the shed before she locked it and then walked back to the boat and used the paracord to tie the stretcher down, just in case they hit some rough waters. Testing the security of her

knots, she remained satisfied that Everett was held relatively in place, and ducked low, crawling beneath the stretcher, which spanned the width of a section of boat near the back. Taking up residence by the outboard engine, Scout took one last look toward the cabin, its roof barely visible within the trees and above the slope of grass she'd just left.

Satisfied, though still uneasy, she started up the engine, then eased the boat from where it was moored, venturing out into open, green water. Liquid rippled and foam churned in a triangular wake, following the trajectory of the boat as it lurched forward and made its way north, cutting a ragged path in the water, spaced between thickly bunched trees on both sides. Her back ramrod straight, she guided the boat using a steering handle and the outboard engine, the relative quiet of the Florida everglades drowned out in the rattling growl of the motor.

In other circumstances, the trip through the swamp might have almost been enjoyable. Scout had focused on the surrounding wilderness, once seeing a flock of birds explode from a thick clutch of swamp grass to her left, bolting upward in a flutter of eager feathers. At one point, she'd been almost certain she'd seen a large snake hanging limp and loose from the branch of a nearby tree, though even as she passed by it, she couldn't quite tell if it was a reptile or a particularly thick vine. She was surprised by how familiar some of the landmarks were and seemed to recognize where she was, using the map sparsely throughout her travels along the water.

Everett stirred a few times, but only to murmur softly before sinking back into the stretcher and remaining still, a fact Scout was happy for. She had no doubt he'd be irate that she was taking him somewhere and if he woke up enough, he might even try to prevent them from going. Scout was pretty sure she could overpower him in his current state, but that wasn't a risk she was willing to take. As she neared a widening point of the swamp, she stepped away from the

engine and moved toward Everett, taking quick inventory of the state of his injuries. The super glue seemed to be doing its job, keeping his wounds together, though some thin, red trickles had wormed their way free of the glue's seal.

The butterfly sutures had also held their own narrow gashes relatively in place and for a moment, Scout wondered if perhaps she would have been okay taking care of the old man back at the cabin anyway, a thought she quickly dismissed. He was in significant discomfort, each murmur or vocal complaint accompanied by a minor convulsion or movement that indicated pain, mostly focused along his left side, somewhere in and around his ribcage. Whether he had a hairline fracture in his ribs or a ruptured spleen, he belonged with someone who had actual medical training, not a thirteen-year-old kid with a tube of superglue and more guts than brains.

Lifting the map, she gave it a quick once over, then checked the curve of the nearby shore, thick grass growing to at least chest height separating the water from the world beyond. Nodding, she stepped back and sat, once again, at the engine, steering the boat to the right, easing it back toward the soft, grass littered shoreline. Though she couldn't see through the trees, she was pretty sure that she was nearing the spot where they'd tied off the boat and transitioned to Everett's old, white pick-up truck. Sure, enough as she scraped the curved edge of the boat along the murky shore, she saw the well-concealed mooring, a place buried beneath cypress where the boat could easily be tied down. Cutting the engine, she moved to the boat's edge and jumped free, landing in soft muck and shin-deep water, green liquid splashing in a fan around her.

Grasping the edge of the boat, she dragged it forward and toward her, freeing up some of the rope and wrapping it tightly around the makeshift pier, using double and triple knots to keep it from working its way free. Thankfully the ground was firmer and harder at that point and when she hauled the boat around, she could easily access the stretcher. Grasping the ends of the trunks she sucked in a breath, tensed her muscles and stepped back, dragging Everett along the edges of the boat and toward the shore. The stretcher balanced precariously for a moment, then tipped toward her, until it rested at an angle,

Everett's head elevated, his feet down where the stretcher met the earth.

Taking a moment to put on her backpack and strap on her rifle, then to put away all of the gear she'd dragged out, Scout wrestled the stretcher from the edge of the boat, dragging it, moving it, re-positioning herself, then slowly lowering Everett's head, until his entire body rested flat on the ground next to the docked boat. Dragging leaves and branches over, Scout covered the boat as best she could, doing whatever possible to conceal it from view before she went back toward Everett, lifted the head of the stretcher and began slowly pushing her way up the slope. It was hard, slow work and her arms and legs both ached with equal throbbing pain, muscles that she didn't know she had voicing their silent, but persistent complaints.

Eventually she hit the crest of the hill and dragged the stretcher up behind her, lowering it flat and gasping for desperately needed breath as she looked toward the pocket of space within some nearby trees. Sure enough, the pick-up truck remained where they'd left it, parked off to the side, within a canopy of thick leaves so it was all but invisible from the road a short distance away. Though she was increasingly tired and sore, her work was not done, and she walked to the truck, then unhitched the tailgate and dragged it down before returning to the stretcher. Lifting Everett's head, she made her way back to the rear of the truck and rested the stretcher at an upward angle on the tailgate. She walked back around to Everett's feet, crouched low, flexed her fingers, drew in a long breath, then hoisted up, lifting Everett's feet until the stretcher was horizontal, then shoved forward, sliding it into the bed of the truck.

Her breath stabbing from her lungs, she closed the tailgate and took an uncertain step backwards, then pressed her palm to a nearby tree to hold herself upright. She was exhausted, almost to the point of passing out and gave herself a few precious moments to ensure she'd refilled her tank. *Refilled her tank.* The term resonated with her, echoing within her head and she twisted back toward the hill leading to the boat at the base of it. Moving swiftly, she pushed through the tall grass

and navigated the hill, reaching the bottom in only seconds. Lifting some of the trees and leaves she'd used to conceal the watercraft, she saw what she was looking for— the three fuel cans they'd loaded into the boat before Everett had been attacked by the crocodile. Grabbing the two empties in one hand and the partially full one in her other, she hefted them back up the hill, carted them to the truck and deposited them inside, near Everett's head.

She stopped for a moment, frozen in place, staring at the man's shirtless chest. For what seemed like a very long time, it appeared still until finally, just when she thought her own heart might stop, it lifted slightly, an exhalation sounding from the old man's pinched lips.

“Okay,” she whispered. “You're still alive. For now.” Her fingers curled around the edge of the bed, and she kept her gaze fixed on him for a few more moments, then grabbed the rifle, made her way toward the driver's side of the truck and got inside. Sliding up into the driver's seat, Scout coiled her fingers around the wheel and drew a breath, holding it within her chest. For the briefest moment, although her eyes remained closed, she could see the interior of her father's old truck. The birds called throughout the surrounding trees, the smell of fresh cut grass filtered in through the air vents and the truck was perched in the rear meadow. The familiarity was everywhere all at once, and when she turned her head, her father sat in the passenger seat, window down, arm extended through the gap above the door. His eyes were bright, his mouth lifted into a soft smile, surrounded by the bristle of unshaven face.

She was back at home, it was last summer and her dad was teaching her to drive. For the entire summer last year, she drove in and around the family property, up and down the nearby dirt roads, practicing going and stopping, three-point and two-point turns, even parallel parking. Her breath hitched in her chest, and tiny pinpricks stabbed at the corners of her narrowed eyes.

“It'll be okay.” It was her father's voice though the image in the passenger seat before her hadn't even parted its lips.

Even as the tears began to fall and even as her own mouth opened to beg her father not to leave, the image was fading, becoming ephemeral and as she dragged the back of her hand across her watering eyes, the seat where her father had been moments before sat empty. She remained in the front of the truck alone, but the memories of her lessons were fresh in mind, and she turned to face front, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. A clarity of purpose crystallized from the water of her spent tears, and she turned on the ignition and pulled the truck out from its concealment, heading east, in the direction of help.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Hey, whoa, take it easy!” Deena lifted both of her hands as the two men ahead converged, blocking their way, weapons in hand. “We come in peace!”

“Did you just say ‘we come in peace’? What is this, Mars?” Jacob whispered back over his right shoulder.

“I didn’t hear you saying anything!” Her voice was a breathy hiss, its warmth tingling the back of his neck.

“Step down off that horse, please.” One of the men strode forward, weapon still held aloft, the barrel jerking toward Jacob. “And I see that pistol in your holster. Keep your hands well away from that, if you’d please.”

“We don’t want any trouble,” Deena continued, slowly sliding from the saddle, her arms extended. “We were just heading to the trading post in St. Albans. I understand it’s open today.”

The two men glanced at each other even as Jacob followed Deena’s lead, carefully drawing one leg over the saddle so he could slide down to the ground, working to maintain his balance.

“I’m Deena,” she continued, “Deena Michaels.”

“The same Michaels that bought the McDonnell place?” There was a cautious tenor to his voice.

“Yep,” Deena replied without a hint of remorse, “that was me. Me and my late husband, anyway.”

An almost indistinguishable grunt passed between the two men, though the tension that had bunched their shoulders relaxed some, the rifle barrels drifting lower. They didn't like Deena, but they at least knew who she was.

"And you? Light ain't great in here, but I'm not sure I recognize you." One of the men turned his attention to Jacob.

"He's just a friend," Deena interjected, taking a step forward. "Got sort of stuck here when everything happened."

"We've never been crazy about strangers around these parts." The man drew closer, his thick beard and coppery skin barely visible in the low light of the railroad tunnel. "Even less crazy about them these days."

"I'll vouch for him."

"No offense, Ms. Michaels, but your word doesn't mean a whole lot."

Deena cleared her throat softly, her muscles stiffening rigidly. Her lips pressed tight, holding in a vocal retort Jacob had no doubt rested just within. "I'm sorry," she finally said, "but it'll just have to be good enough. As you can see, we've got some valuable items to trade. We're not looking for any special treatment, just an opportunity to exchange our goods like anyone else."

One of the men stabbed a flashlight to life, shining the narrow beam along the cart strapped to Frenchie's back.

"Here." Jacob kept his hands within full view, but walked to the cart and bent low, lifting a glass jar. "I'm sure you've heard of Pat McDonnell's infamous home brewed moonshine."

The two men studied the jar carefully, the liquid within shimmering in the flashlight's reflection.

"I'm sure we can spare a jar if it would help."

"Jacob." Deena's voice was low and insistent. "We need that to trade."

"We're not going to be able to trade if we don't make it there in the first place." Jacob shrugged.

“Do you know how much that would be worth at the post?” Deena insisted. A hand swept forward and snatched the jar from Jacob’s grasp, drawing it away as the two men converged. The liquid glowed, shining and ephemeral within the glow of the flashlight, reflecting within the glass jar.

“How many of these you got?” The second man asked, lifting his head from the jar.

“See?” Deena’s annoyance was evident not just in the tone of her voice but the rigid post of her spine and flat slab of her shoulders. “Give them an inch, they’re going to want a mile.”

“Listen,” the first man said, taking a step forward. “You want to get to the post. Way, I see it, whether you get to the trading post or not, that’s up to us. I don’t think it’s unreasonable for us to expect a little restitution for our efforts.”

“You’ve got your restitution.” Deena gestured toward the jar in the man’s hand.

“One jar?” The man eyed her. “For five men?”

Jacob turned and just as he suspected, the three men who had blocked the way behind them had moved up, curving around to their rear so that he, Deena, and the horse were essentially surrounded. None of them had their weapons raised, but the implicit threats hung in the air like second-hand smoke.

“You have to understand the position you’re putting us in here.” Jacob elected to try tact rather than abrasiveness. “It’s not like that’s an unlimited resource. It sounds like you know the McDonnells, right? They’ve been around this neck of the woods for a long time. That’s his shine and we’ve been sent to the trading post to get some parts for his radio. If he can extend the range of that radio, it’s only going to help everyone.” Jacob turned in a lazy circle, searching the expressions on the men surrounding them, but found little understanding. “Besides, it’s not us you’re hurting, it’s Pat and Judith. You really want to do that?”

“Tell you what,” the first man said, handing his jar off to the man next to him. The tenor of his voice was a bit flatter, less sharp. “One more jar. I was going to be a jerk about it, but — this one time, two jars and we’ll let you pass.”

Jacob turned toward Deena whose face contained residual anger over offering the first jar, not to mention giving them a second. Her jaw flexed and she turned, stalked back to the cart and retrieved a second jar of moonshine from it, then returned, holding it out to the man without uttering a word.

“Cooperation. That’s where it’s at.” The man took the jar and examined its contents.

“You say cooperation, I say extortion.” Deena blew out her breath. “Now, can we be on our way?”

The man nodded and the two silhouettes before them parted, taking steps back to reveal a broader gap between them. Jacob and Deena climbed back onto Frenchie’s saddle, then Jacob gave his sides a thump, urging him forward. They passed through the tunnel, the murmur of jovial conversation from their rear like nails on the roughest chalkboard.

“You need to be careful with men like that.” Deena glanced back over her shoulder.

“I’ve run into plenty of men like that.”

“The next time we come through here, they’re going to want three jars. Then it’ll be six. Pretty soon they’ll be knocking on Pat’s door.”

“We’ll deal with that when it comes.”

“It’ll come sooner than you think.”

Deena was right, of course but the truth was, Jacob didn’t have another plan. It wasn’t like they had endless options, they had to play the cards they were dealt and unfortunately, they had hands full of jokers. Exiting the tunnel, they emerged into a stark, sunlit sky, the bright late morning stretching out over a residential neighborhood. Jacob could picture a typical day in his mind, children rushing to catch a bus, parents sprinting to and from work or errands, the hustle and bustle of normal, American life. There was nothing normal about American life

since the pipeline disaster. The narrow, meandering streets were empty, save for the occasional flutter of refuse drifting along on the late spring breeze. No children called out, no cars emerged from the myriad driveways and the windows of the houses were plunged into a seemingly eternal darkness.

There was no way of knowing how many, if any, of the people in these houses were even still alive. St. Albans appeared to be one of the more fortunate sections of the country, a place just outside the blast radius of the pipeline explosions, but the specter of the catastrophe loomed thick and dark all the same. Up ahead, a road traversed their path, the overpass crossing the narrow, two lane road they'd joined since leaving the railroad tracks. Buildings came in thicker clumps as they moved further north, the residences complemented by a myriad of businesses. Several windows were shattered, broken glass littered the sidewalk and residual smoke clung in the air like early morning fog along the surface of a lake. As they moved further north, figures were revealed within the gaps between buildings, more men holding weapons, their piercing gaze skewering Jacob and Deena with a lingering mistrust. However hotly they stared at them, however, none of them approached and judging by the radios clipped to their waist, Jacob figured they'd gotten a call from the men at the tunnel giving Jacob and Deena safe passage.

“Taking the law into their own hands by the looks of things.”

“Sort of. That one's a cop. Or he was at one point. Seems to me they've gathered together their own little militia.”

“I didn't do nothing! I swear!” A voice called out from an intersecting road ahead as two figures emerged, a man and a woman, dragging a third, who was struggling mightily, though with futility. “Come on! I got a hungry family at home!”

“We've got hundreds of hungry families. Doesn't give you the right to steal.”

“I didn't steal!”

The man tightened his grip on the struggling prisoner's narrow wrist and tugged more tightly, almost yanking him off

his feet. The woman snarled at the struggling man and drew a step back, then kicked him hard in the lower spine, shoving him forward. It was a swift and severe boot, the prisoner yelping in pain as he stumbled forward.

Jacob's grip on the reins tightened and he pressed his back teeth together in an effort to contain his anger.

"Don't get involved." Deena's face was close to his, her voice an almost inaudible whisper.

"What are they going to do?"

"Not our problem."

"Does this happen a lot?"

The man writhed wildly, trying to wrench free, but the other two levered him forward, half dragging, half shoving him out of view, down a narrow side street, his wailing voice trailing after them.

Deena kept her eyes fixed forward, her posture rigid in the saddle just behind Jacob. "We've heard rumors," she replied quietly. "The first day or two after things went bad, the city up here nearly tore itself apart. Part of the reason why we've been keeping to ourselves. But they went to some extreme measures to get things back under control. Anyone caught stealing or anything else the city deems unseemly is dealt with quickly and severely."

As the horse crossed the street and made its way to the next city block, a volley of echoing gunshots tore through the previously quiet late morning air. Jacob couldn't help but notice they came from the same direction as the struggling man had been led only moments before.

"Just mind your own business, do your own thing and—"

"Pretend they're not murdering people?" Jacob finished Deena's sentence.

"You don't have to live here, Jacob. You don't have to deal with the consequences of confrontation. That goes for this and for bribing the sentries at the tunnel."

"And what about you? What's keeping you here?"

There was a long, drawn out pause, a gap in the conversation between him and Deena. Before she could answer, a break in the line of buildings ahead revealed a sprawling shopping plaza. Darkened storefronts littered the perimeter of the large parking lot and the lot itself was littered with several carts, wagons, and makeshift booths, the gaps between them filled with people milling about. Countless conversations were happening among the various groups, the collective volume of their voices congealing into a mass of whispered sounds.

There were dozens of people out and about, filing in and around the various booths, more people than Jacob had seen since the crisis began. Unease crawled up into his chest and took residence and even as they guided Frenchie closer to the action, his right hand released the reins and hovered near the weapon holstered at his hip.

“This is a lot,” Deena whispered, reading Jacob’s mind.

“Not much else to do other than get started.” With a gentle tug of the reins, he led Frenchie to the right and began to scan the contents of the numerous booths spread out before them. Hooves clopped along the pavement for a few strides, and Jacob slipped from the saddle, then turned to offer Deena some assistance as well. She brushed him off and lowered herself, dropping to the ground next to them, both walking alongside the horse, the cart filled with wares bumping along behind. At first, the parking lot looked as though the various trading booths had just been thrown inside, ramshackle and unorganized, but patterns emerged as Jacob examined the lanes of travel that cut wide swaths through the various sections. They were wide enough for both the horse and cart to move through, even with Jacob and Deena walking alongside.

Up ahead, an older woman wearing a long, floral dress stood perched in the center of the aisle, flanked by three other men, all of them broad-shouldered and tall. Jacob felt pretty certain he’d seen similar proportions on the offensive line at the last college football game he’d watched. On the other side of the horse, Deena slowed, then angled her neck left to right, as if searching for an avenue of escape.

“What’s wrong?” Jacob leaned around Frenchie and studied the woman, whose face had gone surprisingly pale. She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, the large woman turned, her tightly bound dark hair sliding along the slope of her shoulders. She came face-to-face with Deena and shook her head from side-to-side, brows furrowed in a glower of disapproval.

“Really?” It was a single word, dripping with malice.

“Ms. Parkland.” Deena nodded curtly. “I didn’t realize you’d be here.”

The tension thickened in the air, an underlying crackle of electricity charging throughout the empty space even as the three offensive linemen brought their stout frames around, coming to bear with Jacob and Deena. One of them burned a white-hot stare straight down at him and crossed his large arms across his broad chest.

“I could say the same,” the woman remarked, leaning forward, staring over the top edge of her glasses. “Usually, you’re too good to wallow here with the masses.”

Deena’s lips pinched into a narrow line, though she said nothing.

“We’re just here to trade. That’s all.” Jacob stepped forward, leading with his shoulder, hoping to encourage the three large men to step aside. None of them did.

“And who are you exactly?” There was a matronly look about the woman, gray streaks lined her dark hair, her face like sculpted stone. A rifle was slung over the shoulder of her floral patterned dress, and beneath the frilly hem, a thick pair of combat boots extended.

“Name’s Jacob. I’m a friend.”

“A friend of who? Her?” The woman jerked an almost dismissive nod toward Deena. Jacob glanced toward her and one look from Deena told him to stop talking.

“Yes, he’s a friend of mine. Now, please, Ms. Parkland, can we do what we came here for? My understanding was that this trading post was open to everyone.”

The woman cleared her throat, looking Deena up and down. “Within reason, yes. But you should know by now, Deena, everything goes through me around here. *Everything.*”

“You’ve made that perfectly clear.”

“Way, I hear it, you offered my boys at the tunnel a little gift? A carrot, I daresay.”

“They didn’t give us much choice.”

Ms. Parkland tipped up on her toes to get a better look at the contents of the cart, her eyes narrowing. “Perhaps we should arrange a few more gifts. Just to avoid any sort of unpleasant situations.”

“We came here to trade,” Deena replied. “If I give everything away before we do that, what’s the point?”

The woman shrugged. “I didn’t invite you here. That was your choice. Decisions come with consequences.”

“And is everyone else expected to pay these fees?”

“Everyone else isn’t an outsider.”

Deena exhaled. “With all due respect, Ms. Parkland, I’ve lived here for several years. I can hardly be considered an outsider.”

“The McDonnells were here for generations. Only family that’s been here longer is, well, mine.”

“Pat McDonnell is a good friend,” Deena replied, “and holds no ill-will for me and my husband.”

“And I’m sure he was paid quite well for that.” The woman rested back on her heels, considering her next words, then glanced back at the three men flanking her. “Let them through. We’ll cut them a little slack. But just remember this, Deena. While you and yours prance around in that expensive barn that your husband paid millions for, just know that there are people starving here. Dying. Every day. And know that what goes around, comes around.”

“That is a lesson I know well, Ms. Parkland, thank you.”

The woman gestured to her three boys, and they stepped back, creating a gap for Deena, Jacob and the horse to push through. They hurried past and Deena didn't spare one second to look back.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On the plus side, making their way along Route 49 northwest from Salem, the Fullers and their new friend didn't run into much opposition. The narrow, two-lane road stretched up through a sprawl of wilderness, the Salem River encroaching on both sides, vast fields of wheatgrass to the right, the river visible along the left shoulder. Although they were still a distance from the Atlantic Ocean, there was a clutch of marina and boat services along the river, which connected to the Delaware River not far from where they walked.

Smoke billowed from the left side of the road as they drew near, a pair of buildings, one structure close, the other about a hundred yards further along, both shrouded in gray, choking smog.

"How does a girl like you end up on the street?" Holly drew her eyes from the flaming building and toward the young girl who walked next to her, matching her almost stride-for-stride.

"A girl like me?"

"How old are you?"

"Old enough." The young girl shrugged. She'd given Holly her name, calling herself Penny, though Holly had wondered if it was her real name or not. Something about her didn't quite look like a 'Penny' but she wasn't about to cast aspersions on a young, teenage girl who seemed to be on her own in the urban sprawl of decimated New Jersey. "My mom

and dad weren't around anyway." She cast her eyes aside, purposefully not meeting Holly's attentive gaze.

"So, you're just out here alone?"

"Alone? Not really. There are more of us."

"More of you? What do you mean more of you?"

The young girl shrugged, not eager to meet Holly's gaze. "They call us the Orphans of Deepwater." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Young kids, most of us. Children of parents who worked at the big chemical plant up in Deepwater. Lots of bad stuff went on there. Lots of people sick. Cancer, other stuff. Big hazardous waste clean-up area by the river."

"Deepwater?" Jean sounded concerned. "That's near the Delaware Memorial Bridge. That's exactly where we're headed."

"Where are you going?" Penny glanced toward them.

"Wilmington first. We'll have to figure it out from there."

"You'll want to be careful. Orphans of Deepwater are scattered all over the place. Salem, Deepwater itself, Wilmington. It's not like a gang or anything, but since everything went bad, they've been sort of working together. Coordinating."

"Are they dangerous?"

Penny shrugged. "Not usually. But some of them are getting desperate."

"So, this chemical plant, is it still operational?"

"Now? No. But last I heard it was burning bad. All of Deepwater is in pretty rough shape, fires, smoke, all of it. And considering the chemicals, not many people want to go through there if they can help it."

Holly turned toward her mother, who ran her tongue over her lips, a pensive, narrow-eyed expression on her face.

"Should we find another route?"

“I’m not sure what our options really are. Unless we try and cross the river.”

Penny shook her head aggressively. “They’re watching the river like a hawk.”

“Who?”

“Everyone, really. They’ve got military in and around Wilmington, up and down the river. There’s a nuclear power plant in that direction as well, lots of government agencies worried about what might happen there. I’ve heard stories of people trying to cross the river and never making it.”

“So, what exactly are we supposed to do?” Holly did her best to soften the knife’s edge of panic that was cutting her words.

“I think we continue on. Let’s see for ourselves what things look like. All these rumors and stories can get out of hand pretty quickly.”

Holly wasn’t especially comfortable with that approach but knew better than to second guess her mother on decisions like that. They continued walking, moving a bit faster, some mysterious sense of urgency driving them forward.

“Sounds like you had a pretty rough childhood.” Holly glanced over at Penny, once again seeing her sister’s look in the young girl’s eyes.

“It’s not so bad. I’d rather be alone than with most people I know. And the other orphans— I mean, they’re not really orphans, that’s just what we’re called. They aren’t so bad.” She looked down at the stale slab of bread in her hand with a thin coating of peanut butter lathered on it. Folding it in half, she lifted it and ate hungrily, consuming half of the slice of bread in a single eager bite.

“What was up with those two tough guys?”

“Fox and Cliffy? They think they run the place. They’re street kids, kinda like me, but they been around longer.”

“Are they with these orphans?”

Penny nodded wordlessly.

“I heard them talking,” Holly continued, “said they ran the city. Is that true?”

“They’d like to think so. Not just the city but all up and down 49. Cliffy is from Wilmington, so between the two of them, they know enough people. There was already a crew of street kids, and ever since all the pipelines exploded, there’s been even more. Streets seem like they’re flooded with ‘em. Cliffy and Fox, they been taking them under their wings. Trying to work together, you know?”

“But you weren’t interested?”

“I don’t need them for anything.”

“Honey,” Jean said, striding forward to close the distance some, placing a calming hand on the young girl’s shoulder. “You’re still young. You need all the help you can get.”

Holly smiled at her mother. Jean had softened a bit since they’d first run into the young girl. At first, she’d been cautious and mistrustful, but once they’d started talking to Penny, she’d opened up some and Holly wondered if perhaps the girl reminded her mother of Scout as much as she reminded Holly. Holly did everything possible not to think too long or hard about what was happening with her sister at that moment. At least she had dad to help her navigate the post-disaster world, but that didn’t necessarily mean it would be easy.

“If anything, I’m used to taking care of myself, a lot more used to it than some people, I bet.” She darted a glance back toward Keegan who was suddenly self-conscious, glancing away and focusing his attention on Bucky, who continued striding alongside him. They made their way alongside the second building, just as clouded by curtains of smoke as the first. To the right a farmhouse was penned in by trees, thick fields of wheat rustling in the wind along each side. The color of the sky was a muted blue and as they moved north, the clouds had thickened and darkened, making the spring day feel more like an approaching winter.

“What was that place?” The building smoldered, the vague silhouette barely visible within the choking black smoke.

“A marina, I think,” Penny replied. “Where they brought in and repaired big boats.”

“Do you come out this way often?” Holly turned, looking along the western edge of the narrow road, at various patterns of grass and the occasional small body of kidney-shaped water. It was a long, lonely stretch of blacktop, which in a way, suited her just fine, though it felt as though they were moving at a snail’s pace.

“Sometimes. Up there.” She lifted a finger and pointed toward a drab, brick structure which rested on the same plot of land as a few other buildings, not residential, but more business. A single, white house was set back from the road, its driveway little more than thick dirt pathways beaten down from the surrounding grassland. “My friend lives in that white house. His name is Noah.”

Beyond the white house, the brick building sat against a run of chain link fence separating the road from the property beyond. Another pair of buildings rose above the roof of the first and as they drew nearer, a field of glittering metal came into view extending out beyond the buildings, barricaded behind the fencing in the property adjacent to the house.

“Come on.” Penny turned right, padding along the dirt-beaten driveway, gesturing to Holly, Jean and Keegan, who trailed after her. Jean gave Holly an uncertain look, her lips pressed firmly together, her eyes dark and narrow, one hand resting near the holstered pistol at her hip. Holly still had the rifle slung over one arm but resisted the urge to remove it and cradle it in her hands, not wanting to intimidate whoever this was. Walking closer to the house, the scrapyard that surrounded the other visible buildings came into better clarity, the sun reflecting from the uneven surfaces of the items stacked within it. A trio of old, stripped vehicles lined the near edge of the fence and random electronics, appliances and other items were stacked deeper within.

“Noah? Are you here?” Penny banged on the front door with a closed fist. “Some people are helping me!” A rustling series of thuds echoed from within the house, followed by

some muffled cursing until eventually the floorboards creaked just beyond the front door.

“Penny?” The voice was muffled by the thick wood. “Is that you?”

“It’s me.”

“Who’s with you?” There was apprehension in the man’s voice and the door remained closed.

“The Fullers. A nice family. They’re helping me.” She turned and looked at them, offering a flat, almost emotionless smile.

“Helping you what?” There was a rattle on the other side of the door, and it eased open, though the chain held, revealing only a slight gap. “Never known you to need much help.”

“Helping me get away from Fox and Cliffy. You know those guys. They were being jerks like usual.”

Within the gap of the opened door, a man’s broad face peered out, eyes glowering from beyond rectangular glasses. A thick, dark mustache bunched beneath his squat nose, a frown creasing the soft texture of his pale face. “They trustworthy?”

Penny shrugged. “I think so.” She turned toward them. “You’re trustworthy, right?”

“You don’t ask *them* that, dummy!” Noah hissed, shaking his head.

“Give me some credit, Noah. I’m not stupid. Yes, they’re trustworthy.”

Noah grumbled under his breath and closed the door for a moment, the chain scraping across the wood a second later. Then the door eased open, wider the second time around, and he stepped back, providing more space for them all to file inside the old house. The home’s interior was dimly lit and dated, the wood floor creaking loudly with each shifting step of the Fullers’ entry. The decor was sparse, bordering on unfurnished, the entrance hallway walls bare without any photos or other comforting adornments that might identify the house as a home. Noah’s body was just as plump as his round

face and though he was clearly quite a bit older than Penny, he only stood a bit taller than the younger girl. Gesturing toward the living room, he grunted to the Fullers, the only sort of greeting he offered and as a group, they moved into the larger room, which at least had an old, threadbare couch, an ancient television stand, and a few mismatched chairs within.

“He won’t pee, will he?” Noah studied the black Lab as his claws clicked while the dog followed Keegan and perched on the floor near the chair the boy chose to sit in.

“He’s trained,” Jean promised. “He won’t pee.”

“He better not pee.” Noah shook his head and stepped away, walking toward a kitchen, which was essentially an extension of the living room, separated only by a counter that spanned half of the floor. The young man waddled more than walked, his weight and lack of height giving him an odd, tilting gait. Along sections of the kitchen counter a few scattered items were stacked, including an empty computer case, some piled circuit boards and other items Holly couldn’t immediately identify. “Why did you bring them here?” He turned and glanced over his shoulder, firing a dart from each eye in Penny’s direction. It amused Holly that the young man was worried about Bucky urinating on the floor, from what she could tell, the smell of dog pee might be an improvement.

“They’re heading to Wilmington, anyway.”

“Why is that my problem?” Noah bent low, looking into the computer case, shoving his hand inside and removing an item, then turned it over in his hand, studying it.

“You’ve got that radio, right? I thought maybe you could reach out— see who you know. Heard bad stuff about Deepwater, but they need to know for sure whether or not they can go that way.”

“A radio. You want me to just help out these strangers?”

“Honestly,” Jean held out her hands, “we don’t need anything. We can keep walking to Wilmington and see what’s there.”

Noah looked through the computer case, not responding immediately, the words hanging within the silence of the home's interior. He glanced over after a moment. "You're not trying to drive, are you? Car won't do you much good."

"Why is that?" Jean inched forward on the edge of the chair she'd chosen to sit in, her backpack resting at her feet.

"Roads are closed along the eastern seaboard, especially down toward Washington, D.C. Area around the capital isn't just a no-fly zone, it's a no-travel zone. Even the back roads and alternate routes. I've talked to people on the radio, people who have tried. Most of 'em end up in Baltimore at the camps."

"The camps?"

"You haven't heard about the camps?"

"Not directly, no."

"Way, I hear it, most of the city of Baltimore has been converted to refugee camps. Pulling in a bunch of nearby military, but it's mostly a train wreck. Piled thousands of people in there before they even had the infrastructure to support it, now it's mostly chaos. But they've got military blockades set up all around the city, trying to keep the refugees from spilling out. Doing everything they can to try and lock down Washington, and while they're calling the camps in Baltimore refugee camps, guys I'm talking to say they're more like prison camps."

"We have to take that chance." Jean leaned forward, resting her arms on her bent legs. "My husband and my daughter are in Florida. We have to try and get to them."

"We're on the Delaware River, you try heading south along the ocean?" Noah shrugged.

"You know better than that, Noah," Penny almost snapped. "They're all over the river. The government and other people. It's too dangerous."

"Coast Guard is all over the place." Jean nodded her agreement with Penny. "We made it as far south as Atlantic City and they made it clear they were locking that down."

“Harrisonville isn’t too bad,” Noah continued, “that’s just north of here. Pennsville Township isn’t bad either, but the closer you get to Wilmington, the worse it is. Only way over is the Delaware Memorial Bridge, but that’s a chokepoint for cars and there are some nasty fires all through there. The chemical plant is burning and I’m not sure you want to be within a mile of that.”

“And there are no other options?” Jean laced her fingers together.

“For a couple of days, they were ferrying people across the Delaware River in boats, but from what I heard they put a stop to that. Smoke was too thick. There were so many desperate people the boat landings got overrun, and the Delaware River is, well, it’s a graveyard.” He glanced toward Keegan, then drew his eyes away.

“Sounds like the Hudson.” Holly sighed, her eyes easing closed as the image of bodies floating in the Hudson River came back to her, unbidden.

“Hudson? Were you in New York?” That seemed to get Noah’s attention.

Holly nodded. “Right in midtown Manhattan.”

Noah whistled, his head moving from side-to-side. “Talked to some people on the radio who were close to there. Said it was pretty bad. It’s gotten worse.”

Holly lowered her head, pressing her eyes even more tightly closed, not eager to hear the rest of what Noah had to say. The more she heard about what was going on in the world, the worse it all seemed. The swiftness with which everything seemed to descend into anarchy and chaos was almost unfathomable. It had been a rapid descent, and she suspected the crawl back to any sort of structured civilization would be a long and exhaustive effort by all of humanity and based on what she’d seen and experienced so far, that seemed like a tall slope to climb.

“We were hoping—” Jean sensed Holly’s discomfort and placed a hand on her leg as she leaned forward. “That maybe

we could listen in on your radio? Get an idea of what's going on down in Florida? We have a long ways to go and we're worried about what we might find when we get there."

Noah glanced toward Penny who shrugged, a soft, hopeful smile on her young face. "Give me a minute," he replied, "let me see what I can do."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Holly stood in the living room, looking through the curtains, out into the darkening sky. The horizon, already thick with smoke and clouds, had begun its descent into dusk, shadowing the surrounding terrain with the onset of night. Hours had slipped through their fingers, time itself bleeding away into darkness and once again each step they took forward almost seemed to push their destination even further away. Shuffling footfalls approached and she glanced over her left shoulder as Penny melted from the darkness, brushing a lock of hair from her young face. Once again, Holly was startled by the girl's similarity to Scout, a sudden and stabbing longing pained her chest as she imagined her sister's face on the girl's body.

"What?" Penny stopped, looking up at Holly. "You looked at me weird."

"You just remind me of my sister." Holly turned and looked back through the window. The beaten ground of the front driveway gave way to the two-lane paved road ahead, which stretched along the path of the Salem River beyond.

"Is that why you helped me?" Penny stepped up next to her, taking up a spot in the same window.

"Maybe. Does that make me a bad person? I'd like to think I'd have helped you even if you didn't look like Scout."

"You're not a bad person." Penny's voice dropped and her eyes lowered.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

“That look on your face doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“I just wonder sometimes if maybe *I’m* a bad person.”

Holly crouched next to the girl, though she didn’t have to crouch far. “Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know. Everyone seems so upset by what’s happening. But, I mean, I kind of enjoy the freedom. Being able to do what I want, where I want. When I want.” Penny shrugged. “I mean I know what happened was bad and that lots of people were hurt. But I was living on the streets anyway. Finding my own food. Living on the edge of starvation. Not much has changed for me, except now there aren’t a bunch of cops trying to drag me back home. Or make me go back to school.” She chuckled dryly.

“I can see how you would feel that way.” Holly stood again and exhaled, pressing her palm against the cool, smooth glass. As the sky drifted into darkness, a soft orange glow illuminated the western horizon. Somewhere in the distance a fire was burning, though it remained out of sight and was only visible by its brightened hue against the darkness of night sky.

“I haven’t even gone home. I— don’t even know how my parents are.” Penny worked herself toward the window, next to Holly and peered out into the approaching night. She craned her neck slightly, looking toward the road outside, as if in search of something Holly couldn’t see.

“Do you want to know?”

Penny shrugged, her eyes fixed through the window facing the road outside. “I don’t know. Part of me tries to tell myself I just don’t want the bad news. But another part, a part I try to keep more buried, that part enjoys the freedom more than I care about what happened to my mom and dad. And that’s when I wonder if I’m a bad person or not.”

“That sounds like a very difficult situation, Penny. I’m not sure what to say. Other than the fact that you’re just doing the best you can with the hand you’ve been dealt.”

Penny said nothing, she only stared out into the deepening darkness, seemingly absorbed by the world at large.

“Holly? Penny? Come on back.” Jean appeared in the kitchen and gestured for the two girls to come, then stepped back through a side door which led deeper into the house. Peeling themselves from the windows, Holly and Penny crossed the threshold and followed Jean, making their way down another branching hallway until they arrived in a cramped office space near the back of the house. Metal shelves lined the left and right wall, all filled with miscellaneous electronics gear, most of it dissected, its circuit-laden guts spewed along the shelves. A bare bulb flickered within a socket embedded in the ceiling, a narrow chain lowered from the white insert. Though she hadn’t heard it before, since arriving in the office, the rattling thrum of a generator permeated the thin walls, powering the lights and the radio equipment spread out along the desk before them.

There was a low hiss of static as Noah adjusted the frequency of the radio, looking at a notebook of lined paper opened on the desk in front of him, several lines filled with nearly incoherent scrawls of ink. A free standing microphone sat on the desk next to the radio, one of Noah’s hands curled tightly around its rectangular shaft.

“KC2N JL, this is Salem, come back.” Noah released the call button on the microphone, but the only thing that returned was more static. “KC2N JL, looking for anyone who can connect me to Miami, Florida, please come back.” Again, he released the button and static filled the small office.

“What is he saying?” Keegan leaned over toward Holly and whispered the question, trying not to disturb Noah.

“I’m not—”

“It’s a ham radio callsign.” Penny interrupted Holly before she could completely answer. “Noah has a bunch of frequencies of people he’s been talking to, but I think he’s hoping maybe someone can give him a frequency closer to Florida, or at least a contact who can get him there. It’s a whole big network.”

With his finger still off the button, Noah turned to the gathered group, which nearly filled the narrow floor space

between his chair and the door. “Things have been pretty active since broader communications went down. But it’s still basically an advanced version of telephone. Blindly reaching out, hoping someone can tell someone else who or what I’m looking for.”

There was a squawk in the speaker, a piercing squelch of static, then a soft voice carried through the background din.

“This is Danny James out of Memphis, I’m sorry KC2, I don’t got one of those fancy call signs.”

“It’s okay, Danny, I won’t be a snob,” Noah replied back an uncharacteristic friendliness to his voice. “We’re just trying to get some intel is all. You can call me Noah.” He released the button and through the static, the voice resumed.

“Good to meet you, Noah. How are things where you are?”

“I’m up in New Jersey and, honestly they could be worse.”

“Amen, brother. From what I hear, New York City is smoke and rubble. Did I hear you asking for updates from Florida?”

“Can confirm on New York City, got a few people standing right behind me who came from there. Affirmative, I’m trying to find some information for them, they’ve got family down near Miami and are looking to chart a course.”

“Chart a course? Way I hear it, the entire Eastern Seaboard is a dumpster fire. I don’t think anyone is driving through there. Walking maybe, but that’ll be a hell of a long journey.”

Noah pressed the button and leaned toward the microphone, but Jean bolted down, beating him to the punch. “Danny, so good to talk to you, my name is Jean, Jean Fuller.”

There was a momentary pause, the empty air filled with static, then the voice returned. “Well, hello there, Jean Fuller. Glad to hear you made it out of New York okay.”

Jean eyed the button near Noah’s squat fingers and took the initiative to press it. “I’m not sure anyone is really okay, but we’re alive, at least.”

“Sometimes that has to be enough.”

“And that’s exactly why we’re trying to figure out what’s going on in Florida. My husband is down there with my thirteen-year-old daughter and we either need to talk to them or get down to them. We’re willing to do whatever we have to do.”

There was another snarl of static before the voice returned. “I can appreciate that. Noah if you’re still there, let me give you some info. I’ve got a few frequencies for the Miami-Dade area, and I know they’ve been getting repeaters stood up over the past twenty-four hours or so. Communications have been spotty, but I think things are getting better.”

“That would be great,” Noah said, hurrying to stab the button before Jean could take over again. He dragged the notepad closer and pinched a pen between his fingers. Danny recited some numbers which Noah translated into other numbers on the faded yellow paper of his notepad, stacking these new frequencies and callsigns alongside previous notations he’d taken. Several of them, Holly noticed, had been scrawled out along the way.

“Danny, I appreciate the assist—”

“You’re a lifesaver!” Jean interrupted, leaning down. “Thank you so much!”

“Roger. Memphis out.” The call clicked out into yet more static. Noah harumphed but managed to hold himself back from verbally scolding Jean for her poor ham radio etiquette, then leaned forward, adjusting the frequency of the radio to match one of the notes he’d just written down. A moment later, he’d initiated another call.

“WB4TWZ, this is Miami-Dade.” The voice was faint, clouded by underlying static. Jean sucked in an audible breath and pressed a hand to her chest, wrapping her other hand around the back of a nearby chair to keep from falling over.

“Miami-Dade, good to hear your voice, calling to you from Salem, New Jersey.”

“Salem! Well, I’ll be damned, I’ve got a nephew lives in Wilmington, how are things up that way?”

“A damn sight better than they are where you’re sitting, from what I’ve heard. Power’s out except for those of us with generators. New York and Atlantic City are on fire, but we’re far enough away that things aren’t quite as bad as they could be.”

Holly couldn’t help but notice that Noah avoided giving any sort of update on Wilmington, which was probably for the best if the chemical plant fire was as bad as Penny seemed to think it was.

“I suppose that’s good news. Wish I could say the same.”

Holly swallowed, her throat thick and narrow with worry.

“I’ve heard things are squirrely in Miami, can you confirm?”

“Can confirm. The fact that we’ve got signals going in and out at all is a bit of a miracle, to be honest.”

“What’s it like, boots on the ground?”

There was what sounded like a burst of static, but Holly realized quickly it was instead a fierce exhalation, the exasperated breath of the person on the other end. “We mostly keep to ourselves. The entire city, it seemed, went up in flames. Several different explosions reported at various fuel stations scattered throughout Miami proper. Wide scale damage and destruction, the Panorama Tower collapsed, took almost an entire city block with it. Nothing but smoke, flames and raiders at this point.”

“Raiders?”

“The military’s gone. Local law enforcement, too. They ran several convoys in and out of Miami, trying to evacuate folks to Orlando and Tampa, away from the most destruction. They left the rest of the population to burn.”

Jean leaned forward, her hands pressed to the edge of the desk, her chin tucked close to her chest. Long strands of hair swept across her left cheek, though slivers of her narrowed eyes were visible between. “Ask him about the airport.” Her voice was a low whisper.

“What about the airport?” Noah’s eyes darted toward Jean as he pressed the talk button.

“Miami International? Whew. I heard some horror stories, man.”

Jean’s eyes squinted shut, her fingers curling on the surface of the desk, knuckles bleaching white.

“The place went up like a roman candle. So much fuel coming in and out of there, it just, I hear it’s still burning. That’s where a lot of the evacuees came from, I think, the convoy of transports that rolled through town. Even worse, without traffic control, I think last count was over a dozen hard landings, crashes and other stuff. I don’t even think they’ve bothered doing a casualty count.”

“Mom, it’s okay, we don’t know if they were there when things went bad.” Holly reached over and put a hand on her mother’s shoulder.

“You said Scout video-called you from the airport. How long was that before it all happened?”

“Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes.” Holly had to speak the truth.

“Where do you think they were? Where else could they have possibly been?”

“You heard the guy on the radio, they took evacuees through Miami, out in a military convoy. There were survivors.”

Jean nodded, pinching her lips between her teeth. Noah had been watching the exchange, then redirected his attention back to the freestanding microphone. Pressing the talk button, he leaned in again.

“Is there any way to tell where people were taken? People who evacuated?”

“If there is, I don’t know it,” the voice replied. “FEMA set up a few refugee camps throughout central Florida, trying to get away from the coast and from the most serious damage.

But considering how quickly everything happened, I doubt they had a way to track who was being brought where.”

“Anything you can tell us about getting in and out of Miami?”

“In and out of Florida? Just depends on where they’re coming from. If you’re talking up by you in Jersey, only thing I can say is— don’t try. All along the eastern seaboard there are military checkpoints and chokepoints. Scores of abandoned vehicles clogging the roadways. I’ve been talking to several amateur ham operators throughout the northeast and Atlantic region and things are bad out there. Real bad. All I can say is hunker down and hope the worst blows over.”

“Not an option,” Jean said firmly before Noah triggered the talk button. The squat man let his finger hover over the talk and studied Jean in inquiry, silently asking if there was anything else she wanted to say. Her lips pressed closed again and nothing further escaped.

“Appreciate the info, Miami-Dade. You mind if I call you again sometime? If I need you?”

“You’ve got my freak and my call sign, man. Give me yours?”

Noah recited his own information and a moment later, the call was disconnected, the radio operator leaning back in his office chair, which creaked with the strain of his shifted weight.

“Sorry, lady. I know it’s not great news, but at least it’s news.”

Jean nodded and wiped gently at the corner of her eyes, then drew back the strands of hair from the side of her face. She blew out a long, haggard breath, then turned and strode from the office, vanishing into the hallway beyond.

“Thanks, Noah,” Holly said, forcing her own thin smile.

“I really am.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Sorry, I mean. You seem like good people.”

“Not really,” Holly replied. She flexed the fingers of her right hand, the thrum of residual stiffness probing her right arm where the bullet had struck. Gunfights, deadly pursuits, a glass-breaking kit popping a young man’s eyeball, bursting it like a ripe grape— everything rushed back to her all at once, a visceral kaleidoscope of horrors jumbling together in her mind. She shook them loose, as much as she was able, then gestured for Keegan to follow her outside in pursuit of their mother.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was there in the distance, exactly where Everett had said it was during their last trip into that part of town. She wasn't familiar about the area the facility was located in and was even less familiar with the facility itself but parked within the shadows of a pair of brick buildings, she peered out, down the street, taking in the scene. Central Glades Memorial Hospital sat near the end of a three-lane street, a litter of vehicles strewn about both sides of the road, none of them looking as though they were parked, mostly just left where they were standing. The hospital itself wasn't huge, standing three stories tall, comprised of four separate buildings, assembled into a rough complex of brick, stone and glass. At least at first glance, it bore none of the fancy modern amenities of most hospitals Scout had seen in recent years, and retained a sort of quaint, rural aesthetic which she might have found charming once. Considering the situation, however, she would have much preferred a fancy, well-equipped medical center with teams of surgeons and doctors at the ready. As far as she could tell Central Glades Memorial didn't even have an emergency room.

The fact that it appeared to be operational at all was a miracle in and of itself, of course. Faint light shone through a few sets of forward-facing windows and on the second floor, a shadow moved across a pale shade, showing that there was activity inside. An ambulance was parked near a front landing zone, though it was impossible to tell how long it had been there or if it was even still operational. As she crouched, hidden, the front double doors of the hospital eased open, a

figure pulling them manually rather than it happening automatically, as he and another person exited, both of them wearing doctor's scrubs, pale green slacks and short-sleeved shirts. They huddled together outside and appeared to be lighting, then sharing a cigarette, a cloud of pale smoke soon building around them. She was too far away to hear what they were saying, though she could tell some sort of hushed conversation was happening.

It had taken her far longer than she cared to admit to get as far as she was and her frayed nerves resonated just under her skin, a seemingly eternal hum of barely contained urgency. She'd stopped the truck fifteen minutes ago to check on Everett, and he'd still been breathing, the blood still contained by a mixture of super glue and hastily applied butterfly sutures, but he had been mumbling incoherently and his skin had been hot to the touch. Her concern grew by the second and she felt a need to get him to the hospital's front doors as soon as humanly possible. At the same time, it was a risk for her to reveal herself and the chances of any of these well-meaning doctors letting a teenage girl walk away after dropping off a man in critical condition were next to zero.

As she watched, two more men pushed open the double doors, both of them armed with rifles, the two doctors retreating as one of the armed men held the door open. Someone exited the hospital and Scout blinked, doing a double take, trying to clarify the scene before her. Sure enough, a shadowed figure emerged from the hospital with a wheelbarrow, the two handles clamped tightly within his fists, a tarp covering something indistinguishable beneath. He navigated the handicapped ramp, angling down the sloping slab of concrete, leaning somewhat to compensate for the weight within the wheelbarrow. Rounding the side of the hospital, he disappeared for a moment, swallowed by the shadows. From somewhere within the large compound, a shrill scream erupted, the sort of wailing cry scooped from a river of pure grief and mourning.

Scout ventured closer, sticking close to the wall as she crept forward, pausing only for a moment to look back toward the truck, which remained concealed. She moved across a

narrow side street, then the far corner of the hospital parking lot, making sure to keep parked cars between her and the men out front.

“How many is that now?”

“That we couldn’t save? Man, I lost track. There are so many. It’s exhausting.”

One of the doctors exhaled and took the offered cigarette from the other, pressing it between his lips and taking a long drag. Scout moved toward a nearby dumpster and concealed herself behind it, close enough to hear the men talking, but fully blocked from view.

“I don’t know what people expect. Surgeons operating by flashlight. Our own security taking off with our painkillers.” He glanced toward the two armed men who stood by the front door, glowering at the doctors. There was an accusatory look in the doctor’s eyes, but neither of the armed men was the least bit apologetic or remorseful.

“We’re at max capacity already. I’m not sure how much more I can take of this.”

“Could be worse. University of Miami Health System already collapsed. For a few days they were keeping things running on a shoestring, but they were overwhelmed. Rumors say a bunch of druggies stormed in, broke down the doors, killed a bunch of doctors and nurses, just to take off with their meds. Brutal stuff. Last I heard, those same thugs actually have control of the hospital. They’re not seeing patients of course, they just turned it into their own military compound.”

“Crazy. How’s she taking that?”

“She? You mean Dr. Cruz?”

“Yeah, whatever. I don’t remember her name. I barely remember my own.” The two doctors appeared to be at the polar opposite of their career ladder. One was young, at least trying to appear fresh-faced while the other was drawn and sullen, the slack skin of his aged face worn by sun and wrinkles. “I suppose out here in the boonies we don’t have to worry about that so much,” the older doctor continued. “Of

course, out here in the boonies the reason people aren't trying to steal our supplies is because we don't have any."

The thudding and squeaking approach of the wheelbarrow sounded, and Scout crept to the far corner of the dumpster, peering around it. A silhouette emerged, the same man who had left moments before, pushing the wheelbarrow, though it was empty, the tarp bunched up inside.

"There are about a dozen of 'em out there now," the man said, jerking his head toward the two armed sentries. "About time to put 'em in the fire pit."

"Why is it we always have to do the dirty work?" One of the armed men groused at the other.

"Well, to be fair, we are the doctors." One of the smoking men in scrubs looked toward the gunmen, speaking through the cigarette clamped between his teeth.

"Maybe if you were doing your job a little better, we wouldn't have the fire pit in the first place, huh?" The larger of the two gunmen shrugged, then jerked his head toward the second, the two of them pushing past the man with the wheelbarrow.

"Don't listen to them." Easing past the two doctors standing on the staircase, the man with the wheelbarrow fed the rolling cart through the opened double doors and disappeared inside.

"Wouldn't dream of listening to them." One of the doctor's snorted and pinched the cigarette, withdrawing it for a moment to blow a cloud of smoke from pursed lips.

"Pretty sure they're the ones leeching our painkiller supply," the second doctor muttered.

"No doubt in my mind. Not sure what we can do about it. They've got what, a dozen of them in the hospital? They say they're here for protection, but—"

"Yeah, protection my pasty butt cheeks."

"Well, isn't that a pleasant visual." The doctor drew down on the cigarette, sucking it to a sparse nub before he handed it

to the other.

“Just because I’m a doctor doesn’t mean I lost my sense of humor.” He pressed the stub into his mouth and took a long inhalation. “Damn, next time leave me more than the filter, would ya?” He flicked the cigarette away, the floating ember glancing from the hospital exterior and disappearing into the darkness beyond. A moment later, the doctors were back inside, and the front of Central Glades Memorial was vacant again.

Scout leaped to her feet, turning and sprinting back toward the truck. It took only a matter of seconds for her to get to the vehicle, yank open the front door and hurl herself inside. She gunned the engine, the truck growling to life and before it had even fully turned over, she drilled the accelerator, shooting out from the shadows where she’d kept it hidden. Bumping over a curb, she lurched up onto the parking lot and cut a narrow path between parked cars, barreling toward the front entrance of the hospital. Twisting the wheel, she hit the brakes, hard, her back tires screeching as the rear of the truck swung around to point toward the staircase leading up to the front double doors where the armed men had been a moment before. She cut the engine, flung open the door and leaped out, landing in an awkward crouch on the pavement, stumbled and almost fell.

Barely managing to maintain her balance she dashed to the rear of the truck, unhooked the tailgate and ripped it down, reaching inside and clutching the ends of the stretcher, which remained flush with the bottom of the truck’s read bed. Back-pedaling, she pulled it out three quarters of the way, then rested it at an angle, moved around to the head of the stretcher and eased it down onto the pavement as slowly and gently as she could. From somewhere beyond the hospital, the low crackle of flames filled the sparse silence and a lingering odor snagged in her nostrils, the smell of burning meat. The knowledge of what kind of meat was being burned roiled in her guts, but she pushed the sensation away and lifted the head of the stretcher, bringing it around so she could drag it across the pavement.

Reaching the bottom of the short flight of concrete steps, she moved backwards, step-by-step, carefully sliding the stretcher up the gradual incline, moving Everett closer to the front double doors of the hospital. Voices carried and though she couldn't make out the words themselves, the volume was enough to alarm her. The two armed men who had thrown the bodies in the fire pit were returning to sentry duty. She swallowed down a lump of fear that threatened to choke her and shot backwards, taking two steps at a time, ignoring the protests of her back and her arms as well as the sharp pang in both knees. She wrestled the stretcher up to the top of the stairs and set it down, sliding it near the front double doors, her breath stabbing painfully in her chest as she bent over, propping both hands on her thighs.

“Hey, did you hear that? Are those doctors still out there? Shouldn't they be like— healing people?”

“Relax, man, maybe if they're still outside I can get access to the med cabinet again.”

Scout twisted around, glaring toward the sound of the voices, footsteps approaching, far nearer than she'd thought they were. Sucking in a breath, she threw herself forward, hurtling over Everett's prone body and clearing the first two steps, landing awkwardly partially down the flight. Her foot slipped and she very nearly fell down the remaining stairs, descending the hard way, but she grasped the railing with a firm, left hand, then propelled herself forward, clearing four more stairs and hitting the pavement in a low crouch, both knees cracking audibly. Her momentum threw her forward, but she remained upright and sprinted toward the driver's side of the truck, wrenching it open.

“Hey! Who's there?” One of the armed men melted from the shadows, AR-15 held in both hands, glaring at Scout through the driver's side window of the truck.

“We've got someone at the door!” The second armed man gestured toward Everett, who remained bound to the stretcher, lying by the entrance.

“We’re not a drop-off laundromat!” The first gunman lifted the rifle and Scout dropped low as she fired the ignition and hammered on the gas. The rifle cracked loudly, and a metallic bang sounded on the body of the truck to Scout’s rear, a dance of white sparks visible in the rear view mirror. He adjusted the barrel as she slammed the gas, the truck screeching again as it jolted forward just as the rifle sounded a second time. There was no metallic impact and no sound of shattering glass, just the screeching hiss of rubber on pavement, the sound and smell filling the cab of the pick-up. She glanced anxiously in the rear view mirror, huddled low in the driver’s seat as the hospital grew smaller behind her. The front door banged open, and a doctor emerged, though from across the parking lot, Scout couldn’t tell if it was one of the same ones who had been smoking moments before. He called frantically into the hospital and even as the truck banged over the next curb and hit grass on the opposite side of the lot, a second and a third doctor came, dropping low to examine the man on the stretcher.

It wasn’t an optimal drop-off situation, but Scout allowed herself to unclench her throat, relax her jaw and exhale a swift gust of built-up oxygen, at least momentarily satisfied that Everett was under the watchful eye of someone with a little more experience and access to supplies than she had. The truck barreled over grass, then thumped back up onto another curb as she cut a path between stalled vehicles, looking one more time out of her back mirror. Three men were working together to lift the stretcher while one of the gunmen held the door open and Scout allowed herself a small smile as she rounded a corner and disappeared down a side road, swallowed once more by the night’s darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Dr. Cruz, we gotta live one here!”

Sofia sat bolt upright in the chair she'd been slumped in, teetering on the edge of the sleep, though not quite fully submerged. Shooting up from the chair, she strode swiftly out into the adjoining hallway, her mind racing with the possibilities. Even as she rounded the corner, Stan and one of his armed thug friends were steeped in quiet conversation, his face contorted in a glower of rage. Sofia could tell by the way he was holding his weapon and the bunched bulge of his rigid shoulders that there'd been some sort of conflict of some kind, though she wasn't sure she wanted to know the details.

“Let him bleed!” Stan snarled, turning to glare at Sofia as she approached. “We ain't a health care laundromat!”

“What?” Sofia shook her head in confusion as she neared them.

“Never mind them! This guy is in rough shape!” Cooper gestured for Sofia to follow him, and she did, heading into a nearby exam room where they'd already set the supposed victim up on a bed. His shirt was off, and Sofia stopped short, sucking in a breath of alarm.

“What in the devil happened to him?”

“From what we can tell, it looks like some sort of animal attack.” Cooper pointed to several jagged wounds. “The pattern of these marks is pretty typical for what we see with crocodile bites. Lord knows we have plenty of experience with that around here.”

Sofia strode to the man's bedside and leaned down, examining the surface of his pale flesh. "What is going on here?" She pressed a finger toward one of the angled wounds, which seemed congealed with a strange sort of thin, viscous substance that did not appear organic.

"Someone super glued the wounds closed." Cooper sighed, his head shaking. "At least a few of them. The deeper ones. The shallower ones, at least, got butterfly sutures, but those deeper ones, they're a mess."

"Super glue?"

"Again, we've seen it before. Lots of people who live out in the glades, they're not big fans of established ways of doing things. More than once we'll get a guy in here who, instead of seeing a doctor when he should have, did a little self-care. Then when things got infected, they come to us to clean them out."

"This is an absolute horror show." Sofia stood and walked to the nearby sink, where a metal basin of water stood. She dipped her hands inside, washing them as thoroughly as she dared, the lantern on a nearby counter casting a pale, flickering light throughout the small room. Once she'd washed and dried her hands, she peeled on surgical gloves and returned to the man's side.

"Honestly, whoever did that probably saved his life."

"Whoever did that dumped him on our doorstep and took off like a coward." Stan stood, framed within the doorway. "What I wanna know is who were they and why didn't they want to stick around?"

"That's not our concern." Sofia refocused her attention on the man's injuries. "Our concern is making sure this man is cared for, regardless of who dropped him off and why."

"That's a dangerous mindset, doc. We've got limited supplies and resources. Pretty soon we're going to have to differentiate between worthy patients and unworthy patients." Stan stared long and hard at the man on the bed.

“If you’re so worried about running out of resources, maybe you should stop taking your little percentage of our pain killers,” Sofia snapped, more angrily than she intended. Cooper cleared his throat and gave her a firm, narrow-eyed glare. Stan huffed and stepped back out into the hallway, leaving them alone.

“That’s playing with fire, Sofia.”

“I’m not a fan of men like that telling me who I can and can’t care for.”

“He brings up an interesting point.”

“That’s for the doctors to decide, not drug-hungry thugs with guns.” Sofia traced her gloved fingers along the ragged edge of one of the puncture wounds, gently pressing at the flesh to test the adherence of the underlying super glue. There was some give and as she pressed harder, suddenly the man sat bolt upright, snarling in rage, one closed fist lashing wildly outward.

“Woah, woah!” Cooper lunged forward and intercepted the man’s crazed swing, enveloping his arm within the crook of his own bent elbow, wrestling the old man into forced compliance. “Take it easy, buddy! We’re trying to help you!”

“Where— what— how did I get here?” The man’s eyes were wide, bordering on the edge of craziness, his mouth twisted open within the thick tangle of white beard. For the first time, Sofia noticed that his left arm ended in a stump just below his elbow, though it was clearly an old injury that had healed years, if not decades ago.

“We’d like to know the same thing,” Sofia replied.

“Someone in a white pick-up truck dropped you on our doorstep,” Cooper interjected, slowly adjusting his grip on the man’s right arm. “Dropped you and ran. I don’t suppose you know why they might have done that?”

The man pinched his eyes closed beneath the pale caterpillars of his eyebrows, retreating into his thoughts. His normally slackened features pulled taut along the rigid contour of his jaw, and he exhaled, head shaking. There was a knowing

glint in his eyes, a firm recollection that Sofia clearly saw, though decided to keep to herself. There was more to the man's story than met the eye, but it wasn't her place to dig that up, not without getting to know him more.

“What were you attacked by?”

Painfully, the old man settled himself back down in the bed, wincing visibly as he favored his left side. “Gator. Or Croc. Happened so fast, it was tough to tell.”

“Whichever of the two it was, it got a good chunk of you.” Cooper released his grip, stepping closer to the man's lower torso to assist Sofia in her superficial examination.

“Tell me something I don't know.” His voice was a low hiss through clenched teeth.

“Without power we don't have anesthesia, so whatever we do here, it's going to hurt.” Cooper stood next to the man, looking down. Already his eyelids were fluttering, his alert, conscious state already fading.

“Tell me we at least have some lidocaine or something? Local anesthesia?”

“We do, yes, to be used sparingly.”

“I think this qualifies. Tearing out this super glue, I don't see how that's going to be possible without some sedation and a dermal injection.”

“Got it.” Mandy had appeared in the opened doorway, and she nodded, then sprinted away to retrieve the requested medicine.

“Sir?” Cooper asked, leaning low. “Can I get your name?”

The man shook his head, remaining tight-lipped.

“Sir?” Sofia diverted her attention from the man's wounds to his face. “Can we please get your name? Some kind of identification? I assume he didn't have a wallet on him when we found him?”

Cooper shook his head, and the white-bearded man didn't reply. Sofia continued to probe the man's torso, isolating each

of his wounds. “I’ll need some tweezers to remove these butterfly sutures, too.”

“One step ahead of you.” Cooper had tweezers in hand and crouched low, examining the injury by the man’s left ribcage. “Some hematomas here, could be internal bleeding.”

“Lidocaine.” Mandy appeared, presenting a tray, upon which was a syringe and a vial of the requested local anesthesia. Sofia took it and made her way back to the bed, angling toward where Cooper was crouched. She bent low, observing the same hematoma surrounding yet another deep gash pressed together by congealed super glue. Gingerly, Sofia pressed the needle into the skin just beneath the wound and thumbed the plunger, injecting a bit of lidocaine into the man’s torso. He flinched as the needle punctured the skin, then slackened some, his breath quickly regulating.

“Get me that scalpel.”

Cooper obeyed, handing the scalpel over to Sofia, who took it in a tight grasp, moving it toward the glued gash. Slowly, she worked the sharpened blade along the thickened, dried glue, cutting through, once again separating the flaps of ragged skin. Fresh blood pooled at the edge of the wound, trickling down the curve of the man’s pasty stomach.

“Suction.”

Cooper did as asked, using a manual pump to suction out some of the blood, allowing Sofia to carefully examine the inside of the man’s injury.

“Yeah, we have a laceration here. Large intestine. Simple puncture, looks like in two places. Suction, then sutures, please.”

“Can you see?” Mandy was there, standing next to Sofia and a moment later she had a flashlight shining down, illuminating the scene of the makeshift surgery.

“You’re a life saver, Mandy.” Cooper suctioned the wound again, then held out the tray so Sofia could return the scalpel and lift the suture kit. She went to work, carefully mending the lacerated intestine, then checked again, angling her neck,

adjusting her position based on her shadow from the light overhead.

“I think we’re good here.” She scraped away some of the glue residue again, asked for and received more suction, then used more sutures to close up the wound, wiping away the remaining blood. Normally, Sofia could have performed the routine surgery with one eye closed, but in the lights out conditions, it was considerably more difficult. In spite of that, however, she made it look easy, even as she moved on to the next deeper wound, cutting through the glue and digging more deeply into the body cavity.

“Lucky here. No damage to the kidney, spleen or stomach. Some tissue damage here, but nothing that won’t heal on its own.” She repeated her previous process, again scraping away the glue until they could finally close up the wound and examine the last one, which had pierced the man’s pectoral. Again, it seemed, a bullet had been dodged as the damage was mostly muscular, without any piercing of the lungs, and Sofia cleaned up the glue, trimmed up the edges of the wound, had Cooper suction the blood, then closed things back up, operating by flashlight.

“So far so good.” She exhaled and rested back on bent knees, craning her neck, trying to work the feeling back into it.

“Why don’t you take a rest?” Cooper touched her shoulder. “I can tweeze out these butterfly sutures, flush them and sew them up. Like I said, we’re used to animal attacks in these parts.”

“Are you sure?”

“I figure at this point I need to handle one of these cases, if only for my own self-esteem.”

“It wasn’t my intention to take over. I just—”

“Let me make it clear. I am not complaining. You’ve been a Godsend, Sofia. I’m not sure how we would have handled the last several days without you. We would have lost a lot more patients, I can tell you that much.”

“I, well— I mean, thank you.” Sofia’s words were a clumsy stammer of syllables. “It was nice to be reminded why I got into this field in the first place.”

“Go get some sleep. I’ll give you a shout if anything goes sideways.”

“You do that.” Sofia mustered a weary grin, then stepped away from the patient so she could wash up and return to her small, private space and hopefully grab a little more sleep.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Deena walked lazily around the cart perched behind Frenchie, passing her flashlight over its contents, letting the pale glow linger on a few key additions to their stockpile.

“Seems emptier than it was when we arrived.” Jacob stepped around the corner of the cart, over Deena’s shoulder.

“That’s okay. I suspected we might need to trade heavily for some of what we needed. We traded away all of our corn, but we’ve got plenty more where that came from. Obviously that moonshine was among the first to go, people’s priorities as society crumbles around them always surprises me.”

Jacob bent down and lifted a can of fuel stabilizer, turning it over and examining it. “I’m surprised people are willing to trade stuff like this away.”

“If they’ve got no fuel to begin with, why do they need it?” Deena bent down and rummaged through a basket of baking supplies, which included flour, barley and even some sugar. “This is the stuff that surprises me. I figure everyone needs this.” She lifted a small bag of barley with both hands and studied the ingredients. “Pat will love this.”

“You know what Pat won’t love is that we haven’t found any radio equipment yet.”

Deena set the barley back down in the basket, then made her way to the front of Frenchie, lifting his reins and striding forward, leading the horse ahead. Several scattered torches had been lit throughout the shopping plaza parking lot as shoppers

and traders still milled about, even though dusk had settled across St. Albans, West Virginia.

“We’ve still got a few booths to check.” Jacob lifted his face toward the sky, which had begun to open up, clouds clearing to reveal scattered stars, though they were faint against the dull, gray backdrop. Deena paused at a nearby booth, which had been built out from a trio of tables set in right angles to each other. Pegboard was leaned up against one of the tables and nailed to the pegboard was an assortment of belts, and other leatherwork.

“Did you make these?” She gestured toward them as she spoke to an older gentleman standing nearby.

“I did indeed.”

“They’re very nice.”

“Not much demand for them yet, if I’m honest,” the old man replied with a shrug of his narrowed shoulders. “But there will be, more time goes on.”

Deena walked to the pegboard and lifted a dark colored belt, looking closely at it, admiring the stitching. “What do you want in trade for this?” She lifted it from the board and walked to where he was sitting, laying it out on the table.

“Our biggest worry is security. We got a private well, not too concerned about water, and the kitchen is pretty well stocked, but—” his voice broke off. “I live in Forest Acres. You know Forest Acres?”

Deena shook her head.

“Old folks’ home. What do they call them these days? Retirement communities?” He said the last two words in a mocking tone. “Fool place. Most of the employees took off already, so there’s a bunch of us taking care of ourselves, and you want to know the truth, we’re a whole lot better off for it.” He leaned over conspiratorially and glanced up and down the aisle that passed alongside his booth, though nobody else was within earshot. “Kitchen and cafeteria are pretty fully stocked,” he whispered, “but I’m a little worried that once

food starts running low in other areas, desperate people are going to see us as an easy target.”

“What sort of security are you looking for?” Jacob stepped up toward the pair to add his own two cents.

“Couple guns. Some ammo?”

“That’s going to be pretty valuable these days.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, son.”

Jacob started to speak, but Deena placed a hand on his shoulder and he closed his mouth once more. “Let me talk to a few people, okay? We have a little community just south of here. Although neither of us has what you’re looking for, I can ask around. See what our options are.”

“Thank you kindly.” The man nodded, then glanced toward his pegboard. “Go on and take it.” He jerked his head toward the dark-colored belt Deena had been examining.

“Oh no, I couldn’t.”

“It ain’t every day I can give a gift to a pretty lady. Take it. You can make it up to me when you come back around next time.”

“Are you sure?” Deena stepped tentatively to the pegboard and lifted off the belt, running her fingers along his embroidered stitching.

“I’m sure.”

She lifted it gently from its hook and turned it over in her hand, then looped it into a circle and placed it into the basket. “Thank you so much. What was your name again, sir?”

“Max. Just call me Max.” The man’s weathered face shifted, his mouth turning up into a smile. His head was covered in small scatters of white hair, similarly colored tufts sprouting along his jaw and across his chin. The concave of his lips told Jacob he was missing at least some teeth, though his jaw bulged beneath, wide and proud. His narrow, bony fingers were closed into tight fists, and he leaned back in an ornate rocking chair, accepting Deena’s thanks.

“I’m Deena. It is a pleasure to meet you, Max.” She strode toward him and extended her hand, which he accepted.

“Pleasure.” Jacob nodded toward him and repeated Deena’s offered greeting, then joined her, leading the horse away.

“That’s exactly how we make it through something like this.” Deena spoke in a low voice, thick with emotion. “Connections. Community. One hand helping the other. Ms. Parkland and her cadre of armed thugs aren’t the way forward. She shook her head derisively as she mentioned the matronly woman they’d met earlier. As they continued down the aisle, the crowd thickened slightly, more and more people gathered around a few of the final booths.

“I’m going to pass Max’s story along to the folks at Neutral Territory. See who can help. We’ve got a lot of resources we can pool down there. And we’re out of the Parkland reach, at least for now.”

“With those fuel reserves, the crops, access to pretty fresh and clean water, I’m betting there are other people we could help, too.”

“We just have to be careful.” Deena’s eyes darted along the gathered crowd to her left. “We don’t want the word spreading too far. What Max said made sense— about security. It’s still the early days. It’s chaotic, people are trying to figure out what this all means. Once food starts getting scarcer, once the masses realize this isn’t a short term problem, they’re going to be looking for targets. Neutral Territory could be a big one.”

“We’ll just have to make sure it’s not an easy one.”

Deena gave Jacob a worried look, silently communicating what he already knew, that was far easier said than done.

“Deena, is that you?” A voice called out from a booth up ahead and the dark-haired woman swept her gaze forward.

“Teddy? Teddy Linkletter?” She released Frenchie’s reins and took several swift strides across the aisle as the man who was speaking stood. They embraced briefly as Deena

approached, then pulled apart, both of them smiling to each other. “So glad to see you made it through.”

“Same here, young lady.” The man’s shining bald head glowed a pale orange in the reflection of nearby torchlight, his thick forearms visible beneath the rolled up sleeves of his farmer’s shirt. He was a bit shorter than Deena, stout and thick and as he noticed Jacob for the first time, his affable expression darkened into something almost resembling suspicion.

“This is Jacob,” Deena said hurriedly. “He’s a friend. A friend to both me and Pat.”

Jacob extended his hand. “You know Pat?”

“Sure. Everyone knows Pat. Not everyone *loves* Pat, but everyone *knows* him.”

Deena chuckled, legitimate humor in the elevated tenor of her laugh. “I’m going to tell him you said that.”

“Hey now, I’m one of his admirers, he knows that.”

Deena nodded and stepped up to the man’s table, looking at the contents that sat atop it. There was a mixture of items, including books, some pots and pans, even some old tools in a toolbox. A soldering iron sat at the corner of one table as well alongside a small stack of circuit boards and a collection of square-shaped batteries.

“You might be just the person we’re looking for,” Deena remarked, looking up from the batteries. “Aren’t you in Pat’s amateur radio crew?”

“I am,” Teddy replied, resting his linked fingers on the bulge of his stomach. “What’s the old coot looking for?”

“He’s got his radio up and going, he’s been talking to a few of his contacts, but was hoping to get a bit longer range, to be honest. I think he’s been looking for either an antenna or some kind of repeater, a way to expand the range he has. Something happened after the pipeline disaster, he’s not sure what, but he doesn’t have the same range he used to.”

“Got it. Yeah, it’s possible some repeater along the way somewhere or an antenna got damaged in the explosions, or there could be any number of other issues.” He glanced around for a moment, then stepped forward again, gesturing for both Jacob and Deena to follow him. “Come around here, would you?” They did as asked, and Teddy lead them toward the front of a pick-up truck he’d backed in to unload the gear he was selling. “I didn’t put this stuff out because I wasn’t sure I wanted to trade it, but truth be told, I don’t have a lot of reserve fuel and my radio gear isn’t going to do me much good.” He opened the back door of his extended cab and Deena shone her flashlight inside, then drew in a sudden breath. A stack of radio equipment rested on the back seat of the truck, coils of wire connecting several of the components together. “This was my entire set up back at home. In the back of the truck, I’ve got an extended range antenna and even a few repeaters. Like I said, I wasn’t real keen on getting rid of them, but—”

“Teddy, this is exactly what Pat is looking for.”

“If it was anyone besides Pat, I never would have shown it in the first place. But for him, I’m thinking maybe we can work something out.”

“What are you looking for in trade?”

Teddy crossed his arms and leaned against the truck, considering the question. “Animal feed would be a big one. We’ve got some dairy cows back to the farm, but we’re a little worried about how we’re going to keep them. Pigs, too, but they’re a lot less picky than the cows. We’ve been feeding them slop and scraps from our meals and they’ve been okay so far.”

“We didn’t bring any,” Deena replied, glancing back toward Frenchie and the cart, who remained where they’d been the whole time, “but I’m betting we have some back at our own farm. I’m sure there’s a deal we could strike. Do you want to bring some of that gear around to Pat’s place tomorrow? I have no doubt he’d be willing to strike up some sort of bargain that would be helpful to both sides.”

“I just might be able to do that, sure. I don’t have a whole lot of fuel to be driving all over creation, but I’ve got a horse back at the farm. I can ride this stuff down tomorrow, first thing.”

“I’ll talk to Pat tonight. I’m sure he’d be ecstatic to get his hands on some of this stuff.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever seen Patrick McDonnell ecstatic, but I’ll take your word for it.” Teddy chuckled and both Jacob and Deena joined in.

“By the way, we haven’t spread the word real far beyond our little community, but we’ve got our own quiet trading post down there. It’s called Neutral Territory, and Pat’s been serving some of his trademark moonshine.” Deena paused for a moment. “Well, technically it’s corn whiskey, I suppose, but it’s easier to call it moonshine.”

“Oh, I’ve had some of that, it’s good stuff.”

“I’d say you’ve earned a free jar or two. Unfortunately, we’ve already traded what we brought, but when you come down tomorrow, I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Teddy nodded and the three of them exchanged handshakes, then Jacob and Deena returned to the horse. Jacob took the reins and began leading Frenchie forward, away from the last of the booths, which didn’t seem to have much of what they wanted or needed.

“It’s getting late.” The sky was darkening, seemingly by the minute, the stars growing brighter and thicker against the approaching night. “I’m thinking we should start heading back. It’s another solid hour or two trip and I don’t want to be caught out in the woods too late.”

“Works for me.”

With that in mind, Jacob drew himself up onto the horse’s saddle, then extended a hand to assist Deena in joining him. She lifted a single eyebrow, ignored his offered hand and scrambled up onto the saddle behind him. Moments later, the sounds of the horse’s hooves echoed along the pavement as they made their way out of the parking lot.

“Are you sure?” Ms. Bedford Parkland stood by the edge of the sprawling parking lot, which had served as the trading post throughout the day. The shadowed form of the two people on horseback grew smaller as they trotted along the street.

“Heard it with my own ears, ma.” The tall, broad-shouldered young man inched closer to Ms. Parkland, their shoulders touching. “They said something about having resources. A place they called Neutral Territory.”

Her brow furrowed, Ms. Parkland kept her gaze transfixed on the figures on horseback, the faint squeaking of the wheels of their cart lingering amid the clop of hooves.

“And what do we know about this place? This Neutral Territory?”

“Seems to be a part of the old McDonnell Farm. I heard ‘em say it’s their own little trading post. I even heard them say they had a stockpile of fuel there.”

“Is that right?” Bedford tapped her booted foot, the thick sole thudding softly on the curb running alongside the strip mall parking lot. “And they bring us corn. And bad liquor. They have a stockpile of fuel, and they chuck their garbage at the rest of us.”

“That’s just not going to fly with me.” Ms. Parkland shook her head, planting her hands on both hips. “Come on with me, Carl. Let’s go talk to your brothers. See what we can do about this.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The truck was parked, and Scout shouldered her oversized backpack as she made her way across the narrow street, glancing right and left to ensure nobody was lurking nearby. She paused halfway across, her alert gaze fixed on a familiar street corner, an intersection of one road and another, a drab, concrete building erected at their point of impact. Night had fallen and she was using her flashlight to navigate, the beam catching upon a burned out storefront just off the sidewalk where two corners pressed into a single, angular point.

Her hand gripped the flashlight handle like an iron vice, her knuckles aching with the pressure of her closed fist. Still, the light shifted a bit, revealing an underlying tremor that jostled Scout's hand. The memories of that street corner remained fresh and raw, an open wound that would take far more than a tube of superglue to mend it shut. Her breath hitched and she softly cleared her throat, then swallowed, twisting away from the smoldering wreckage and walking toward a clutch of trees which stood between her and the swamp beyond. Residual echoes of rifle fire lingered within the silent streets, the memory of Everett standing over three fallen men, rifle in hand, preparing to send them into their next lives without even the slightest hint of remorse.

She blew out a breath and closed her eyes, moving into the trees, happily separating herself from the street, putting up an organic barrier to protect her from the events of that night. Scout tried to focus her attention on what Everett had done, although she'd played her own part as well, firing straight at the man named Mack, who had gone down like a sack of

lifeless feed. There had been at least some justification in what they'd done, after all, the men had burned a store to the ground and very likely killed its owners. Then, they'd threatened to do the same to Scout and Everett. But even though she tried to rationalize the events within her crowded mind, the guilt lingered, a stark reminder of her own recent sins. Moving a few more strides through the brush, she stepped deeper into the woods, close enough to hear the soft burble of swamp frogs, interspersed with the high-pitched chatter of insects along the water's edge.

There wasn't enough time for her to return all the way to the cabin, and she wasn't the least bit confident in her ability to navigate the swamp at night, so she'd already made the decision to set up camp in the trees and go back to the hospital in the morning. Step one had been completed, she'd dropped Everett off so he could get the care he needed, but that had only been step one. Somehow, after the doctors had done their work, she'd have to get him back out and that seemed like a far greater challenge than dropping him off. But it would be a challenge for another day.

Dropping her backpack to the hard ground, she opened the flap and rooted around inside for some of the items she'd packed. Pulling out a small handsaw that she'd acquired from Everett's toolshed, she set that aside, then went back in, searching for one of the MREs she'd taken from the pantry. She hadn't eaten a bite since leaving the cabin earlier that day, and the rodent of hunger was gnawing at her belly. Finding what she needed, she set it all aside, then pulled out a water bottle and filtered life straw which had been resting along the back side of the backpack.

Stepping through the small clearing, she carefully navigated the downward slope to the swamp and dipped the bottle into its murky waters, filling it. The liquid clouded visibly, even beneath starlight, yet she returned to her campsite with it in hand regardless. Lifting the life straw, which was far thicker than an ordinary straw to accommodate the layered filter within, she fed it through the opening of the water bottle, which was barely wide enough to account for the straw. Popping the sealed top, she sucked through the straw, drawing

the water from the bottle, up through the straw and into her mouth. In spite of the cloudiness within the bottle, the water tasted crisp and clean, as if she'd drawn it from a Colorado mountaintop, not from the murky depths of a Florida swamp.

Draining the bottle, she set both it and the straw aside, then swept up the handsaw and walked to a nearby tree, starting to attack its branches with the teeth of the saw. She raked the blade across the wood, chewing through bark and branch, hacking away a series of narrow limbs, then gathered them in a small pyramid shape within the clearing. Although she was in the middle of the Florida Everglades, it was still spring and the dark of night often brought a cold chill, so she prepped the fire with fresh cut cypress and a stacked pile of kindling she gathered from the nearby ground. It consisted mostly of dried grass and leaves, which she stuffed in and around the pyramid of wooden branches, building up a pile of material for ignition.

Scout dug out a narrow matchbook from the backpack and tore free a match, then struck it, sparking the tip alight, the tiny flame crackling atop the charcoal end. Cradling the lit match with her palm, shielding it from the wind, she placed it into the gathered leaves and grass. She knelt as it slowly simmered, building smoke, the interior of the pile glowing a soft orange. Almost immediately, the air warmed as smoke thickened above the gathered kindling, the orange glow growing into a low, sizzling crackle. Using a discarded branch, she stoked the fire a bit, pushing sparks around within, the flames feeding and growing, even further than they had been. Once she was satisfied that it was as large as she needed it, she went back to the bag and removed the MRE, studying it for the first time. Scout scowled down at the box, not realizing she'd grabbed a beef stew, which frankly didn't look or sound all that appetizing.

All the same, she tore open the heat pack and began starting the warming process for the main dish while she separated the crackers, electrolyte powder, and other compliments in preparation for her dinner. She paused for a moment, her head partially turned toward the edge of the trees, listening. The growling chortle of an engine emerged, growing gradually louder, moment over moment, the sound of an

approaching vehicle. Taking one quick look at the fire, she rose to a low crouch, and made her way to the edge of the trees, bent over and walking low to avoid being spotted. The rifle was clutched tightly in her left hand, a pistol holstered at her hip, though she had little desire to use either one, especially in the wake of what had happened in that very spot a few days prior.

As she pushed through the trees and reached the edge, her eyes widened as the approaching vehicle came into view. Instinctively, she drew back, the vehicle's familiar shape and color stoking the flames of fear within her. A pair of military Humvees rolled down the narrow street, their headlights shining, the engines idling like the throaty growl of a violent predator. She'd seen vehicles just like them before, back at the airport, a vehicle that she'd been forced into in order to cart her off to a refugee camp she had no interest in moving to. As the Humvees neared the intersection, the lead vehicle slowed and turned, then glided toward the right sidewalk, parking behind a stalled sedan, perched askew along the edge of the road. The second Humvee pulled alongside the first, both engines grinding into a sudden silence.

Crouching by the trees, she clenched her teeth, lips pressed shut over her mouth, her nostrils flaring with each inhale and exhale. Hinges creaked and doors opened, men and women in camouflage stepping out of their vehicles and onto the small town street. Each of them carried a rifle and was loaded down with a vest and helmet, fully equipped as if wading hip-deep into a combat zone.

“Quiet here, at least.”

In the dark of night, Scout couldn't tell which one had spoken, though the voice sounded female.

“Damn sight better than Miami.”

“Or Orlando.” One of the soldiers shook his helmeted head. “Anyone got a cigarette?”

“Those are strictly rationed, Private.”

“Funny, I don't see our Sergeant anywhere.”

“Sergeant or not, we have to play by the rules.”

“Yeesh,” the private grouched, “who invited this guy?”

The rule-following soldier strode from the vehicles out into the road, partially illuminated by the light from the stars and moon above. “Keep your eyes open. We’re near the place where that convoy was ambushed a few days ago.”

“They never found the guy who did it?”

“Nope. Both him and the girl vanished without a trace. They’re somewhere out in the swamp.”

Scout remained as still as a statue, frozen in place, unable to move even the slightest bit for fear of rustling the wrong tree branch or snapping a stray stick.

“Sarge is pretty sure the girl’s dead. The way he figured it, the sicko who ambushed the convoy took off with her to do terrible things, then dumped her body in the glades.”

“Good to know the end of civilization makes humanity even worse.”

“Like there was any doubt?” The soldier in charge turned away from Scout’s direction and walked slowly back toward the others. “Where is this hospital?”

“Just down the road here.” Another soldier pointed a finger off in the distance, in the direction of Central Glades Memorial. “If this one is anything like the others, they won’t be happy to see us.”

“They don’t have to be happy, they just have to do what they’re told.”

“Giving us their meds? Rationing their supplies? That news doesn’t come easy to these places.”

“Not my problem.” The soldier in charge shrugged his shoulders. “We can’t afford to let these rinky dink operations do their thing while the cities wither away and die. Isn’t going to happen.” The soldier patted his holstered pistol.

“First question they always ask is what we’re going to give them in return.”

“Let them ask. They should consider themselves fortunate that they’re not dealing with the same problems places like Orlando and Miami are dealing with. They should spend more time counting their blessings and less time looking the gift horses in their mouths.”

As Scout continued watching, the soldiers filed back into their Humvees, the engines roared back to life and the vehicles pulled away from the sidewalk, moving forward, winding their way around stopped vehicles and toward the hospital she’d left a short time before. She had no reason to think that Everett was in danger, but the presence of the soldiers in the first place would complicate things considerably. Not that they weren’t already complicated enough. Drawing back from the edge of the trees, she turned and walked back toward the fire, which still crackled evenly, a steady column of smoke rising into the air. The beef stew had become plenty hot since she’d been spying on the soldiers and she used the included spork to stir the mixture within the pre-heat pouch, then slowly began to eat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I can’t believe you ran into ol’ Teddy.” Patrick shook his head, his mouth creasing into a smile beneath the bush of his thick mustache. “You told him this gear was for me and he *still* agreed to the trade?”

“Well, we had to make some promises.” Jacob shrugged from the opened doorway, looking in at Pat McDonnell, who was searching through the items Teddy had given them at the trading post the night before. The office smelled of old coffee, a steaming mug resting on the table near where Pat was sitting, leaning toward his disassembled radio.

“So, he’s bringing over an antenna and a receiver?” Pat didn’t look back, he continued studying the radio, then reached to his left, lifted the mug and took a drink.

“That’s what he said. Told us he wasn’t sure he had much use for it. Told us every time he fired up that radio, he heard more bad news.”

“Don’t blame him, really.” Gently, Pat unscrewed a coupling which led to a secondary wire. “We’ll want to get the antenna up on the roof when he brings it here. I’ve got the wiring already run. As for the repeater, it’ll have to go up on the hill in the back yard.” He gestured toward the wall of his office. Jacob hadn’t seen the repeater yet, but nodded his head in agreement, then walked to a nearby window and bent low, peering out, into the distance. The window faced the sprawling meadows in the rear of Pat’s guest house and sure enough, beyond rows of corn, peeking just over the roof of the nearby barn, a large slope rose toward the eastern horizon. The

morning sun burned bright, setting the sky aglow in a blanket of pure, cloudless blue. Jacob almost had to pinch himself to convince himself he wasn't dreaming. Since the pipeline crisis began, he'd trudged through all manner of destruction, seen death and chaos everywhere. Within that small pocket of rural West Virginia, things seemed almost normal. It was startling and oddly, didn't feel all that comforting.

It was as if reality itself was wearing a mask, like the peace and tranquility before him was a carefully crafted façade and rather than looking the horrors of the world straight in the eyes, he was being lulled into a false sense of security. The thing with masks was that they were never worn forever, so eventually the mask would come off, he just had to be braced for whatever was beneath it.

“What exactly did you promise my friend Teddy, anyway? Something I should be concerned with?” Pat lifted an eyebrow.

“We extended an invite to Neutral Territory.”

“Oh? Is that all?”

“And, well, we promised him some free drinks.”

“How many free drinks, exactly?” Pat looked dubious.

“Ummm— a few free drinks?” Jacob spoke in a low, tentative voice.

“What's going on in here, boys?” Deena stuck her head in the opened door, studying the disassembled radio on Pat's desk.

“Saved me from myself,” Jacob said quietly.

“You ain't getting off that easy, son.” Pat shook his head. “Exactly how many free drinks did we promise Teddy Linkletter? That boy can put them away, you know.”

“Let us worry about that.” Deena forced a thin smile. “You worry about getting that radio up and running. We'll handle the rest.”

“That's exactly what I'm afraid of.” Pat shook his head and turned from them both, starting to stack the radio components

back together again. “I’ve still gotta crawl up on the roof and mount that antenna. Are you all going to handle the repeater, or do I have to do that, too?”

“I think we can handle that, don’t you?” Jacob glanced toward Deena, who remained a bit uncertain, though it was only a fleeting look before she returned the nod.

“Why not? What’s it take?”

“It takes a nice hike up into the hills beyond the back forty. Nothing you can’t handle.”

“Patrick McDonnell!” the voice echoed from outside, the familiar, shrill tenor of Judith slicing through the relative peace of the interior office. “Teddy’s comin’ up the drive!”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Pat shoved his stool back and stood, making his way between Jacob and Deena, heading back out into the house and toward the front door. They followed close behind, all three emerging into the sunlit morning, a winding dirt driveway clouded with billowing dust as the silhouette of an old farm tractor approached, growling along the uneven surface. “Teddy!” Pat shouted, stepping out onto the driveway and waving a hand. “What in the devil are you doing driving that thing down here?”

Teddy steered the old tractor to the left, coasting to a stop, and as he altered its trajectory, the trailer being towed behind it revealed itself.

“Mornin’, Pat, long time no see!” Teddy cut the engine and tugged a thick leg over the seat, then lowered himself to the dirt, using the vehicle for balance. The two men shook hands almost aggressively. “This old betty still runs after all these years, you believe that?”

“How much diesel did you waste hauling that all the way down here?” Pat stepped to the tractor and ran a hand along its rusted surface.

“Way, I hear it, you got both straight gas and diesel down here, is that right?”

“Might be.” Pat studied him dubiously.

“Well, maybe instead of the ten jars of moonshine, we do eight jars of moonshine and a can of diesel? Top off the tank with a little to spare?”

“Did you say *ten* jars of moonshine?” Pat turned and glowered Jacob and Deena, who exchanged worried glances.

“Did we say that?” Jacob whispered.

“I distinctly remember saying three. Three was what I remember.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Teddy continued, as if he hadn’t heard a word either Jacob or Deena had said, “where you planning on setting this baby up?” He reached the trailer and patted its contents. Walking forward, Jacob scrutinized what rested in the cart that was hitched to the tractor. Pieces of metal grid work were stacked in neat layers, at least six or eight of them, each one over four feet long.

“Excuse me?” He asked. “What are those?”

“That’s the repeater you asked for.” Teddy slapped the pile of pieces with his palm. “You’ll need to assemble it all, but that’s exactly what you wanted.”

Pat snickered, shaking his head. “You had no clue what you were even asking for, did you?”

“We rely on you for the radio expertise,” Deena clarified.

“Well, dear.” Judith stepped up next to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “That was your first mistake.”

“Hush up, woman.” Pat slipped between them and walked to the cart, then crouched slightly, studying the components that made up the repeater. “This here is a full-blown FM repeater which should allow us to then piggyback onto a broader network. I’m betting with this little tower, we can increase our range a hundred-fold. Maybe more.” He angled his neck, peering into the trailers contents. “What does this thing use for power?”

“There’s a solar panel there with a set of backup batteries. Worse comes to worst, you can haul a small, portable generator up there if you have one. Sure, that means

occasional refills, but it's not like these things suck up a ton of power."

"I'm hoping solar will work fine," Pat said, digging through the items in the cart until he confirmed the inclusion of the solar panel and associated wiring. "Bet you all didn't know what you were getting into, did you?" He glanced over his shoulder at both Jacob and Deena. "Welcome to the world of amateur radios."

"You bringing that up that hill over yonder?" Teddy pointed a squat finger toward the slope, visible over the slanted roof of the nearby barn.

"That was the plan." Jacob's tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek in concentration.

"Well, sorry, you can't borrow the tractor."

"How steep is that slope?" Jacob turned toward Pat. "You think Frenchie can make that hike?"

"Sure. He's a strong looking stud. He can do it."

"I'll go grab him," Deena volunteered, then walked off through the long grass, back in the direction of the other barn.

"There's a bag of nuts and bolts in the cart there." Teddy gestured toward the pile of equipment. "You'll need a socket set and a ladder."

"I've got those," Pat confirmed with a curt nod.

"Well, then, I'd say you're all set." Teddy flashed a wink in Jacob's direction. "As long as he's got you to do the heavy lifting, right?"

"Not just the heavy lifting." Pat slapped Jacob hard on the back. "My boy here is going to do all the lifting."

"So that's what you keep me around for."

"While you boys are figuring out the logistics here, I'm going to go to the chicken coop and gather up some eggs. Someone's gotta keep the place running around here." Judith wiped her palms on the thighs of her pants.

“We’ve got a crew coming to pick more corn in an hour!” Deena called out from the field, where she was already leading Frenchie back in their direction. She and Judith exchanged a few quiet words, which resulted in laughter from the both of them, then Judith continued on, and Deena approached, leading Frenchie by the reins.

“Do I even want to know what you two were laughing about?”

“Nope.” Deena shook her head firmly and walked past. “Now make yourself useful and go get that cart.” She jerked her head toward the nearby barn and Jacob sighed.

“I’ve got my marching orders.”

“I’ll come with you.” Pat joined Jacob and the two of them walked back toward the barn as Deena and Judith continued their quiet conversation regarding the morning tasks. “Probably a good idea if I come with you,” Pat said as they pushed through thigh-high grass in the sprawling meadow, the old barn looming tall before them.

“Oh? You sure you’re up for a hike up that hillside, old man?”

“Call me old man again and I’ll show you just how old I am.” There was a note of good humor in Pat’s voice. “I just mean, in case anything goes sideways, you’ll need someone who has a little experience with these things. Figure Deena can stay down here and help Judith while we take care of the repeater.”

“Works for me.”

Pat stepped in front of Jacob and unlatched the barn door, using both hands to haul it open, the pullies squealing on old tracks. The familiar cart rested within the open center of the barn, which was used more for storage than anything, and Jacob stepped inside and lifted the handles, immediately turning and striding back out, pulling the wheeled wagon behind him.

“These repeaters aren’t complicated, but it never hurts to have a more experienced hand at the ready.”

“You don’t have to convince me, Pat.”

“You sure?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I just figured, you know, the way you and Deena are getting along, maybe you hoped for some quiet time in the woods, you know?”

Jacob rolled his eyes, though a wash of heat warmed his cheeks. He cleared his throat softly and kept his eyes faced forward, purposefully not meeting Pat’s gaze. “There’s nothing going on.”

“Doesn’t mean nothing *will* go on.”

Jacob let those words settle in the air between them for a moment as they walked across the meadow, Deena and Judith still well out of earshot. He stopped and set down the wagon, turning toward Pat.

“Look. Deena’s a very nice woman. She’s been very kind to me, and I owe her a great deal. But my last relationship was complicated. I had a lot of unrequited feelings, and finding Veronica’s body, that memory is still fresh. I don’t think I’m in a good place to even think about starting something else. Not yet.”

“I get it,” Pat replied, then his brow bunched, his head tilting slightly in deep introspection. “Not a lot of people know this,” he continued, eyes darting toward Judith and Deena, “but Judith wasn’t my first wife.”

“Oh?” Jacob was stunned by that admission. The way Pat and Judith had been with each other, their natural chemistry and familiarity seemed like a lifelong bond, something that had been forged in their early years.

“Marian was my high school sweetheart. Married her right after graduation and both of us figured we’d be together forever.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?”

“I wouldn’t be telling this story if I wasn’t prepared to tell you the whole story.” Pat gave Jacob a wink. “Marian got

pregnant less than a year after we tied the knot. We were both beside ourselves with happiness. But there were complications. She was bound and determined to give birth to our child, she wasn't listening to any of the doctor's cautions."

Jacob suspected how the story was going to end, but he said nothing, waiting for Pat to tell it, figuring perhaps it might be cathartic.

"She died in childbirth. And— well— our daughter did, too. I went from being a husband and expectant father to just being me." He shrugged, his expression firm, as if he was wearing a thin, impassive mask to hide his true emotions. "I met Judith a year later and I was nowhere near ready. Nowhere nearby. But, bless her heart, she was patient. She couldn't have kids, which at that moment was sort of a blessing, to be honest, I wasn't sure I could put myself through that again."

"I'm so sorry, Pat. I had no idea."

"Not many people do. The way gossip spreads in this fool town, that's the sort of thing I've worked to keep to myself. But there's a point to the story, right? Point is, you'll never be fully ready. Sometimes, ready or not, you have to take the chance."

Jacob considered the older man's words, his eyes lingering on Deena in the distance, who was still speaking in a low voice to Pat's wife Judith, a broad smile splitting her pink lips.

"How long you been divorced?"

"Over two years."

Pat chuckled and slapped Jacob's back. "My boy, it might be time." He lowered his hand and stepped past him, walking through the tall grass, leaving Jacob to follow behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Rather than share a saddle as Jacob and Deena had done on the way to the trading post, both Jacob and Pat walked alongside the horse while Frenchie did the heavy lifting of pulling the repeater pieces in the wagon behind him. Pat had promised it wasn't a long trek, probably an hour or two walk from the backyard of his old farm and so far, he'd been true to his word.

"Seem to be handling these trails pretty well for a city boy." Pat closed his gloved fingers around the weathered branch, using it as a walking stick, pushing himself up the steepest part of the slope so far.

"Ronnie was an avid hiker. She had us outside almost every weekend. Nice thing about Lexington is it's surrounded by trees on all sides. Even living in the city, we were always only a short distance from the nearest hiking trail or state park."

"I remember those days." Pat shook his head, then patted the rotund bulge of his stomach. "Not that you'd ever know it with this thing strapped around me."

"Happens to the best of us." They neared the crest of the winding path, an overhang of long grass and crumbling dirt, which created a shelf of sorts ahead of them. Pat grasped Frenchie's reins with his free hand and led the horse off the path to the right, threading their way through trees and angling around until they reached the top of the slope. Jacob followed and as they stepped through the trees, the brisk, cold breeze drew his breath, a surge of chilled air which smelled cleaner and felt fresher than any air he'd thought he'd ever felt.

“Some view, huh?”

It was indeed some view. The rounded clearing was carved out of a sprawling forest, a section of bare ground at the peak of the slope. Thick clusters of oak and pine ran the length of the downward slope along the eastern edge, resting lush and green beneath the curtain of pale, blue sky. From the top of the hill, it was almost impossible to believe that the world rested on the narrow precipice of destruction, that somewhere at that moment, entire cities were engulfed in flames. For a long, quiet moment, he stood, looking at the sky, gazing over the sprawling farm below, visible along the edge of forest trees along the west. What right did he have to live a life of relative normalcy when so much of the world was teetering into the abyss? He had a niece in New York City, a brother and other niece in Miami, and he was doting around in West Virginia playing farmhand.

It was wrong, somehow, a slight against his brother and his brother’s family and while Jacob had been able to suppress his guilt for the past few days, he found it difficult to do so in that moment. His chest filled with it, a raging crash of ocean waves against his ribs, which buckled against the force of emotional waters.

“Are you okay?” Pat was unclasping the saddle and slipping it free of Frenchie’s back, glancing toward Jacob, eyes fixed.

“Yeah. Sure. Why?”

“You had a look on your face. I can’t really explain it.”

Jacob shook his head and walked to the other side of the horse, working alongside Pat to free the saddle and give the animal a bit of a break. “Just remembering why I’m here to begin with. What brought me to this place.”

“Your family.”

Jacob nodded. “My brother and his daughter are still out there. His wife and other kids, too.”

“And you owe them something?”

“It’s not about owing them something. It’s about doing what’s right. It’s about doing all I can for my flesh and blood.”

“That’s an admirable perspective.” Pat removed the saddle and set it off to the side, then walked toward the wagon and began to unload the repeater components. Jacob assisted, following the older man’s lead, separating out the long, metal pieces, the small box of nuts and bolts, the tool kit that Pat had brought, among other assorted items.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned,” Pat continued, after they’d finished unloading, “it’s that you can choose your family. It’s not always who you’re bound to by blood.”

Jacob nodded as he crouched by the metal pieces, dragging a few of them aside to eyeball their length and placement.

“What happened with my first wife taught me that. I was raised to believe that blood was everything, and don’t get me wrong, it’s important. But losing a child, it diminishes you. And when I met Judith, when we discovered she couldn’t have kids, it forced me to really re-examine things a bit. To understand that not being able to procreate didn’t lessen us. We could make our family in other ways, right?”

“That’s a healthy perspective.” Jacob lifted a slat of grid work and walked it deeper into the clearing, then set it aside. “And, you know, I agree with it, all things considered. I’m the black sheep a bit in my own family. I talk to my parents down in Florida, of course, but it’s all so superficial. They made it pretty clear they didn’t approve of how my life turned out.”

“But you’re still attached to your brother?”

“One hundred percent. Marcus, he never stopped believing in me. Never stopped urging me on, even through my issues at college and even when I moved away at a young age. Always reached out to me, always supported me. The first person I heard from after the divorce. Even before my parents.”

“Someone who is bound by blood and friendship. Sounds pretty perfect.”

“And now you understand why I’m so conflicted.”

Pat walked over with a second piece of grid work in one hand and his toolkit in the other. He placed it next to the first, at an angle, then connected a set of clamps and slowly began tightening the bolts that secured the clamps together, fitting the pieces side-to-side. As he worked on the first two pieces, Jacob walked back toward the wagon and picked up a third piece, then returned and went to work with a second set of sockets. Moments later, they'd assembled the base of the tower, a section of four pieces of metal clamped together in a four-sided base, tapered at a gradual angle.

“I’ve seen more of these in my life than I can count—guess I never knew how they actually went together.”

“Help me stand this up.” After Pat’s request, the two of them hoisted the base of the tower up, positioning it on a relatively flat section of ground. “There are some tethers in the wagon, can you grab them?”

Jacob jogged over and brought back the tethers Pat had asked for and they worked together, binding them to the base of the tower and pounding stakes deep into the hard ground to ensure that a strong wind wouldn’t knock the makeshift radio tower over.

“Let’s start on the next level.” Pat retrieved some smaller sections of grid and brought them over, the two men bolting them to the top of the base and to each other, continuing the somewhat pyramidal shape of the large antenna, which reached above both of their heads at that point, standing close to ten feet tall at its tip.

“Looking good,” Pat remarked, grasping the tower and moving it back and forth to test its stability. “One more level to go. Grab that ladder.”

Jacob did as asked and hefted the twelve foot step ladder from the wagon, carried it over, then angled it open, finding a level section of ground to set it on, as close to the tower as he could. Pat walked toward the ladder, but Jacob shook his head.

“No, no. I’ll climb. You lift those sections up to me and I’ll bolt them in.”

“You sure about that, young ‘un?”

“I’m sure.” Jacob climbed the ladder as Pat returned to the wagon and grabbed another section of repeater, bringing it over as quickly as he could. Jacob stopped halfway and leaned over, extending his hand, then took the piece from Pat and moved to the top of the ladder, bolting it into place. By the time he’d finished, Pat had two more for him and within about ten minutes, the assembly of the base tower was finished, with only the main antenna left to mount.

“Looking pretty good!” Jacob shouted from the top of the ladder, his voice echoing. He heard nothing in reply. “Pat? You got that antenna?” Focused on securing the final pair of bolts, Jacob angled his head to listen for the older man’s voice, but again, heard nothing. “Pat?” Giving the socket one last twist, he turned and looked toward the ground, then froze, fingers clawed tight around the edge of the ladder. Down in the clearing below, Frenchie stood a short distance away, eating some grass while Pat had his back to the ladder, rooted in place. A few feet ahead of Pat, pushing through the thick trees was the largest bear that Jacob had ever seen. Pat held up his hand, shaking his head, a silent command for Jacob to stop talking and the younger man pressed his lips closed, frozen in place at the top of the ladder.

Instinctively, he moved his hand to his shoulder, searching for the strap of his rifle, though he realized, too late, he’d left the weapon in the wagon, which sat several feet away, between Pat and the grazing horse. Frenchie hadn’t noticed the bear yet, apparently, or if he had, he didn’t care much, which Jacob highly doubted.

“Pat.” Jacob’s voice was a hissing whisper and Pat responded only by vigorous gesture, his head and hand shaking aggressively. The bear strode forward, lumbering along, head down and even from the top of the ladder, Jacob could hear the low, breathy snort of the creature’s inhalations. Jacob inched down the ladder, moving one step, then hesitated, unsure of what to do. The cool air was still and silent, as if the Earth’s rotation itself had halted, the only movement the

meandering stride of the large bear as it pawed its way forward, snorting at the ground.

Frenchie lifted his head from the grass and Jacob's eyes widened, peering down at the horse, who's ears twitched in curiosity as it glared around, clearly sensing danger. Pat remained frozen at the base of the ladder as the bear halted, still several feet away, but getting closer, step by step. The black horse thumped a hoof and stepped back, twisting its head to look toward the approaching bear and as Jacob swallowed down his own shout of warning, the horse reared back, neighing loudly in surprise and fear.

The bear bolted its head upright, twisting toward the sound of the horse, reeling back on its own thick legs, a growl curdling low in its fur-covered throat. Frenchie thumped down on the ground, snorted, then neighed again, rearing back, slamming his hooves down again in hopes of scaring the predator away. With a deafening bellow, the bear growled and lowered back down on all fours, hackles raised, attention focused keenly on the perceived threat. Pat took an unsteady step backwards, his heel clipping the ladder with a metallic impact.

With a sweep of its thick, brown head the bear turned toward him, spotting Pat, moving its body around, refocusing its attention on some new prey. Then, without warning, it charged, barreling forward on all fours, running faster than the large creature had any right to run. Pat fumbled and wheeled right, moving around the ladder as he scrambled away, the bear charging. Jacob started to scramble down the ladder, though as it charged past, the bear shouldered it with a broad, fur-covered flank and suddenly it was yanked out from beneath Jacob's feet, the ladder toppling one way, while he spilled from it, tumbling off the other side.

For a stark moment, he was in thin-air, arms wheeling, the world swept out from underneath him, and then he was going down, hurtling earthward and before his mind could register what was coming, he hit the hard ground, shoulder first, a bolting stab of agony ripping through his back. As he went down, the ladder went forward and clattered against the broad

back of the bear, which was likely the only thing that saved Pat's life. As the ladder hit the beast it growled and twisted, slowing its charge, giving Pat scant seconds to continue to scramble away. But Pat's feet tangled, and he went down, sprawling onto the dirt and grass, blowing a breath of pained air from his lips.

Roaring in rage, the bear wrenched itself out from under the ladder, then rose again on its back legs, looming high above the fallen form of Pat, claws bared. Through the crimson curtain of bone-deep pain, Jacob managed to claw to his knees and lurch upward, stumbling toward the wagon on uneven legs. Frenchie whinnied loudly and the bear turned toward him, caught between its two targets, unsure of which it should strike at first. To Jacob's horror, it returned its attention to Pat, dropping back on all fours with a snorting growl, bearing on the old man, head lowered. Somehow, Jacob propelled himself forward, lunging toward the wagon, fingers grasping for the rifle that rested within. He yanked it free, tugging the bolt back even as he did, planting a right foot and torquing toward the right.

Jacob didn't even take the time to center the rifle, he didn't wait to aim, he just pulled the trigger in the creature's general direction, barrel elevated so he could be sure he wouldn't hit Pat. The rifle crack rebounded loudly through his ears and into his skull, the sharp, flat echo carrying across the surrounding horizon. Several feet away the grizzly hesitated, then turned toward Jacob, redirecting his attention from Pat's prone form, exactly as Jacob wanted. He racked the bolt, ejected the shell casing and lowered the barrel even as the bear squared off toward him, back hunched. Behind him, Frenchie neighed loudly again, hooves thudding, and Jacob aimed the rifle, centered the barrel, and fired.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Scout almost forgot where she was, even as she blinked through the stab of sunlight which stoked flames of heat in her weary eyes. She bolted up, kicking chunks of dirt, cranking her head around, scanning toward the trees separating her from the road running parallel to the small clump of Everglades woodland. Her palm pressed into grass and rough dirt, small stones biting at her skin and in a moment, she was wide-eyed and alert, frozen, eyes and ears searching for potential threats. Gone were the days of waking comfortably in her own bed, slowly crawling toward the light, relishing the soft press of cotton fabric against her skin, the sun filtered through opaque blinds. Sleeping exposed you, it made you vulnerable, and the quicker you could tear yourself from slumber, the safer you were.

In the back of her mind, the growling chug of diesel engines still resonated, the sound of approaching military vehicles and the accompanying conversation of soldiers. Everett was at the nearby hospital, Central Glades Memorial, and however else she wanted to frame it, she'd abandoned him there, dropping him off and running, tail between her legs. It hadn't exactly been a split-second thing, but it was a life or death decision and a decision that she would have made all over again if it meant Everett would survive the crocodile attack. As long as he emerged unscathed, whatever risk Scout had taken would be worth it, though that did little to alleviate her stress as she ran fingers through her tangle of dark hair and focused her attention on the campsite.

The fire had gone out overnight and was little more than a blackened pile of charred cypress, thin twists of gray smoke rising from the literal ashes. Hoisting herself upright, Scout kicked apart the collection of sticks and branches, scattering the fire's remains to ensure it wouldn't spontaneously ignite again. Using her clawed fingers, she dug up fistfuls of dirt and piled it upon the ash to further smother the hot kindling, then stomped it out fully. Finally satisfied that the fire posed no risk of restarting, she opened her backpack and withdrew a sealed bag of possum jerky from the animal Everett had snared several days previously. She opened it and chewed it down, the drying method and added spice helping to nullify the gaminess of the meat. It tasted, more or less, like turkey jerky, which had been a staple of the Fuller household for years.

Finished with her makeshift breakfast, she grabbed her filter straw and water bottle, then went back to the swamp again, dipping the bottle within the green water to fill it, then made her way back to the campsite, draining the entire thing with several long pulls of the built-in filter. Setting it all aside, she ventured into the trees and used more swamp water to give herself a quick wash, then swapped out her clothes for some others she'd brought, returning to the site of the fire feeling just a little bit refreshed. Packing all of her gear into her backpack, she lifted the bolt action rifle, ejected the magazine to once again make sure it held the expected allotment of ammunition, which it did. Grabbing the water bottle again, she returned to the swamp, preparing to fill the bottle so she had some water for the trip.

Angling backwards to keep her balance, she trudged down the dirt slope toward the swamp's edge, wading through knee-deep grass. She froze, back rigid, eyes drawing almost shut as she heard a sound in the distance. Like the night before, the sound was clearly the artificial, metallic snarling of an approaching engine, though it was coming from the swamp instead of the road as it had been the night before. Bending low, she ducked down toward the grass, staying just high enough to peer across the churning, green water. A shape emerged through the morning fog, twisting its way through stalks of trees that rose up from the green waters. The engine

echoed from the water's surface, chugging along, muffled by the thick fog, but clearly getting louder.

Inching closer and lower, Scout kept focused on the water, and saw a sleek, angular shape hacking through the green surface, foam boiling along each narrow edge. A boat faded into clarity against the backdrop of morning fog, four silhouettes visible within its low profile, hunched over as the watercraft sliced a gash through the Everglades. The rear engine appeared to be boxed within a self-contained metal chamber, its throttling roar muffled by its enclosure, the boat skimming almost impossibly fast, right-to-left. Scout ducked low, almost submerging herself in the thick clusters of swamp grass, peering through the blades at the boat, which edged closer as it sped forward.

Scout took an uncertain, somewhat clumsy step backwards, barely maintaining her balance as the boat slowed, its rapid pace easing into a barely accelerated coast as it continued angling left, heading toward the grass-littered shoreline. Clutching her breath in her lungs, Scout kept where she was, desperately hoping they would move just a bit further down the shoreline, past where she'd concealed Everett's boat. While it was some miracle the men hadn't seen it yet, if they bumped into it while trying to beach, it would be impossible to conceal.

As they came closer, she could more clearly make out the individuals in the boat, all four of them dress in camouflage with boonie caps, backpacks and rifles, looking as though they stepped out of some covert operations action movie.

"Team one is at the hospital," one of the men hissed, glancing back toward the others. "They're not getting any resistance, but our job is to back them up, just in case."

"Is this really necessary, Sarge? Stealing supplies from this rinky dink little hospital?"

"According to team one, this rinky dink little hospital only has a handful of patients and they've got enough medical supplies to last a year with the population they've got. The only thing they're running low on, surprise, surprise, are

medications and team one has reason to believe that's more because they're being stolen, not because patients need them."

The boat thumped against the edge of the shore, several feet ahead of where Everett's boat remained hidden by branches and leaves. One of the men in camouflage leaped from the boat, landed in knee deep water, then clutched the boat's edge, dragging it ashore, completely unphased by the potential dangers lurking within the swamps. Working together, the four soldiers shackled the boat to the edge of the shore, locking it down firmly, then moved off into the swampy grass in a tightly grouped formation.

"Are we expecting trouble?"

"Unsure. Team one reports that the hospital has an armed group there who claims they're providing security. But the first team is a bit uneasy about their presence. Corporal Lewis described them as 'on edge'."

"On edge and armed men do not make for a good combination."

"That's why we're here."

Scout crept forward, staying low, making her way toward the upward slope, leading to the road as she kept the four men in view, following their progress. She moved as silently as she could, though she sacrificed some of that silence for speed as she rushed toward the crest of the hill and positioned herself near the edge of the trees. Thankfully, the four soldiers passed wide of her campsite, not near enough to see her backpack or the remains of the fire she'd burned overnight. Pausing for a moment to haul her pack over both shoulders, she scooped up her rifle and slung it next to the backpack, then moved forward on bent knees, pushing through the foliage so she could look out onto the road. The four soldiers had continued onward and were making their way down the intersection, straight in the direction of the hospital in the distance.

They passed by the small gathering of trees where Scout had concealed the pick-up truck as well, oblivious to her presence, which she took minor solace in. There wasn't a great deal of relief, however, as she realized that the four additional

soldiers would only further complicate the work she'd need to do to extract Everett from the hospital. There was no way of knowing how long the military presence was going to be there, but Scout only brought so much food with her. If it was going to be a prolonged engagement, she'd have to start thinking outside the box to find a way to sustain herself. Or, she reasoned, she could always get back in the boat and head to the cabin, leaving Everett behind, but even upon first thought, she discarded that option hurriedly. Leaving him at the hospital to save his life was one thing— leaving him abandoned there while she continued on her own was something entirely different and borderline unthinkable. She wasn't concerned about her ability to care for herself, but grumpy demeanor or not, Everett had saved her life and had, at times, shown her kindness. She would not leave him to the wolves under any circumstances.

Threading her way through the trees, she paused for a moment, then sprinted forward, running diagonally, cutting across the pavement until she slid to a halt behind the corner of a nearby brick building, which had been painted white several decades previously. The white paint appeared faded and gray, and she pressed herself against the wall even as the four men paused ahead, glancing left to right to make sure nobody was lurking nearby.

“Are things really this quiet here?”

“According to team one, yep. Said they had one guy stationed on watch overnight, never saw a thing. Not a single raider, not a single potential looter or thief, just a lot of nothing.”

“We should just close this place down. Relocate the docs, relocate the supplies. Lift the whole damn thing up and take it to Fort Lauderdale. They need the help.”

“Does the presidential order give us that right?”

“Who cares? People are dying, man. Aren't these doctors bound by that Hippocratic oath? Do no harm or whatever? I'd argue they're doing plenty of harm by barricading themselves

in this no-rent place rather than helping out where it's really needed."

"Somehow I don't think they'll see it that way."

"Not sure it matters how they see it. World's a different place. Lots of people doing things they don't want to do right now."

Scout walked toward the rear of the white-painted brick building and circled around, moving up a block, then cut left again, nearing the group of soldiers, though she remained concealed within the alley. Their voices had faded momentarily as she'd re-oriented her position.

"Did team one say how many patients were there?"

"A handful. That's it. From what I understand, none are too critical to move."

"We're relocating patients and doctors? We don't have enough beds in Fort Lauderdale as it is."

"Well, we can't just leave 'em here to die."

There was a pause in the conversation, a momentary gap which drove a stake of pure, cold ice into Scout's chest. The lack of discussion around that final point made her think it was an outcome that was actually being considered. As she approached the near corner again, the scuff of footfalls signaled that the soldiers were once again on the move and she reached the corner, peering out. They were two more blocks ahead, walking slowly in their familiar formation, always certain to be covering their various angles with elevated rifles, cradled in practiced hands. Almost silently, she slipped from behind the building and made her way forward, low-crouched, creeping along a narrow, cracked sidewalk. She'd been through the small town in the truck when she'd driven Everett to the hospital to drop him off, but for the first time, she realized just how stark and desolate the place was.

Scattered vehicles were parked askew alongside the empty streets, trash littering the pavement. There were a few darkened store fronts, windows shrouded, a real estate office, a dentist's office, front door shattered and resting on torn hinges.

The grocery store remained the only business that Scout could recall being fully burned out and destroyed, though there were signs that the others had been broken into and ransacked, at the least. She wondered if there were more dead bodies within the darkened remnants of these other businesses and decided that was a question she didn't want the answer to.

Hurrying forward, she slipped behind a newspaper dispenser, drawing low as the soldiers paused and once again surveyed their surroundings, weapons elevated. They made the most basic movements seem tightly coordinated, each man's barrel covering an area that another wasn't, as if they were highly trained dancers performing some well-orchestrated choreography. Ahead, along the edge of the narrow road, the hospital appeared as they drew closer, rising above and spread out in a small complex of buildings, brick walled and square-shaped. As she'd noticed before, it was nothing fancy, nothing like the polished concrete, steel and glass monstrosities she'd seen elsewhere. It was a quaint, small collection of last century architecture, a friendly place designed to accommodate a small, Florida town, a town she didn't even know the name of.

"Is that it?" One of the soldiers pointed toward the hospital. An ambulance remained stalled in a drop-off area, which Scout was reminded wasn't actually an emergency room, just a front entrance.

"What was your first clue, the ambulance?"

"You can stow that attitude, Breckenridge."

"Chill, Sarge, just trying to keep the mood light."

"Countless spontaneous fires have killed millions, if not billions of people. It'll take more than your half-assed jokes to keep the mood light."

"All right, all right, my bad."

Scout inched forward as the four men approached the staircase leading up to the front door. From her new angle, the military Humvee that had driven past her the previous night was visible, just beyond the ambulance. The door banged open

at the top of the stairs and one of the other soldiers emerged, weapon in hand.

“Sergeant Gavis, is that you?”

“Affirmative. Corporal Squan?”

“That’s me.”

The gathered men all lowered their weapons, conversation dropping into a less formal, more submerged tone. As the soldiers talked among themselves, Scout bolted forward, sweeping around behind the ambulance, her heart racing. Without even pausing to look, she moved from the ambulance to the Humvee, running low and quick, trying to be as quiet as possible, then used the military vehicle for cover. The hospital was several feet ahead of where she crouched, a squat, enclosed hallway connecting the main building with one of the other areas which seemed too small to really be a separate “wing”.

Creeping toward the front of the Humvee, she edged forward and paused, low to the ground, keeping her eyes fixed on the men in camouflage. There were six of them total, the other two evidently still inside, and they were talking to each other like old friends.

“Fort Lauderdale? That’s the decision?” The man who had been addressed as Corporal Squan didn’t seem all that impressed with the order.

“That’s what the colonel wants. Orders straight from the governor. Supposedly he’s getting them from the president himself.” Sergeant Gavis shrugged, though there was nothing apologetic about it, just a silent statement of fact.

“What’s the time table?”

“From what I understand? ASAP. They want us to pack up the supplies today, clear this place out, one hundred percent. Then tomorrow it’s about locating a few vehicles so we can transport the doctors and patients, where possible.”

The clock was ticking. Without wasting another second, she sprinted forward and ducked behind the corner of the

hospital building. She had to get Everett out and she had to get him out soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The doors had all been locked and Scout was hesitant to break a window, so she'd simply made her way around the far wing of the hospital, walking through a tangle of grass and thickets of narrow trees which lined the edge of the wing. There was no sign of anyone lurking about, which didn't surprise her. With only so many doctors in the hospital, they were likely all gathered in the main building itself, not an area taken up by radiology rooms or administrative offices. Sneaking around as she was in the middle of daylight was unnerving to say the least, but she didn't have much choice— waiting for night fall was no longer an option. She only hoped that Everett was in some condition to be extracted.

Nearing the corner of the building, she paused, looking out across a rear courtyard, which held a gazebo within a quartet of winding, well-manicured cobblestone paths, a place for doctors and nurses to relax from hectic and stressful shifts. A makeshift patio covered the grass alongside the back edge of the building, tall, glass doors revealing an interior cafeteria within the hospital itself. Scout remained tucked close to the wall and moved toward the glass, a bit uneasy about trying to move past it, just in case anyone was inside, looking out. Pausing by the edge of the glass doors, she squinted and peered through them. The cafeteria was a disaster. Trays littered the floor, several chairs upended with trash and other refuse scattered about a normally well-maintained eating area.

A salad bar had been almost literally ripped apart, metal tubs yanked free and tossed aside, lettuce leaves, tomatoes and baby carrots strewn about. It was clear to Scout that in the

early hours of the pipeline disaster, the patients and visitors within the hospital had their own sort of riot, grabbing whatever food they could from the cafeteria in desperation. Scout froze as her shifting gaze landed upon a stitched line of bullet holes that peppered the decorative wall paper of the place, a dull, brown-colored stain mixed among the circular punctures. There was no dead body lying on the floor, but scenes of violence were evident.

With clarity, she recalled the man bursting free of the front door the previous night, firing upon her as she left from dropping off Everett. The doctors outside had made mention of security and how they were likely stealing medications from the hospital and Scout believed she was all too aware who might have been behind whatever violence happened here. Satisfied that nobody else lurked within the depths of the cafeteria, she ran along the patio, tugging her backpack straps and rifle strap to make sure it all remained tightly pressed to her back as she moved. Weaving through tables, complete with folded umbrellas, she crossed the patio and ventured back into the tall grass, which was bordering on the edge of appearing unkept.

Crossing one walking path, she pushed into another grassy section, then reached the main hospital building, tucking herself close to the wall as she moved right, the main section larger and deeper than the wing she'd just passed by. As she approached the rear corner, her eyes narrowed, nostrils widening. An acrid, pungent smell twisted through the air like stale, second-hand smoke, only that wasn't what it was. There was a smoky aftertaste to it, as if someone had left burgers on the grill for too long, but whatever meat had been cooked, it wasn't beef. She rounded the corner and came upon another rear courtyard, though in the center of the courtyard a massive section of ground had been torn up and dug out. A stalled out excavator sat near it, a crushed path through the nearby trees revealing how it had been moved to where it was currently stored.

The piece of construction equipment had done its job, a huge pit, nearly thirty feet around, which was darkened with char and ash, a hammered crater of blackness against the

greenery of surrounding lawn. As Scout neared, she slowed her pace in direct contrast to the rate of her increasing heartbeat. The pit wasn't empty, quite the opposite in fact and as she neared it, she was reminded of her high school history class which had shocked her and others with black and white images from concentration camps in Nazi Germany. Black and white images revealing piles of unclothed, burned corpses, many of which were little more than skin and bones.

The charred mass of blackened forms that filled the courtyard firepit weren't nearly so skinny, but they had clearly, at one point, been human, though they barely resembled it as Scout's narrowed eyes drifted over them. Her lip quivered and she swallowed down a rising acid-burn of bile, yanking her eyes swiftly away, but too late to avoid taking in the grisly scene. While the fire had done its work, several swaths of pale, crusted skin were still visible through the blackened char, and the overall shape of some of the bodies was still clearly evident, even though they were covered in thick, dark ash and seared flesh.

Whoever had burned the bodies, the men with the guns Scout figured, had removed their clothes first, likely wanting them for spare material, or just to facilitate the burn to begin with. Although the pit had been dug relatively deep, the pile of bodies had very nearly reached the top already, the corpses congealing together into an almost singular crusted mass of scorched skin, muscle and bone. Scout closed her eyes together and willed herself not to inhale through her nose, pointing her face forward and moving along the edge of the fire pit so as not to stare at it too long. Up ahead a single metal door was pressed into the brickwork and she neared it, reaching out to test the handle.

She paused there for a moment, drawing deep breaths, holding them, then blowing them out, forcing her unsteady guts to stabilize. Jerking down, she was grateful to feel the handle actually move, the back door apparently unlocked, likely for ease of access. Pulling the door open, she swung inside, slipping into a rear access hallway, and closed the door behind her. Though that same fire door was a barrier between herself and the smoky burn pit, the presence of that pit still

lingered, fresh and raw in her mind, not only as something she'd just witnessed, but as a reminder of her father.

Her last image of the man who'd helped raise her had been his burned corpse, tossed haphazardly into a pile, much like the one outside, though on the airport tarmac they hadn't been able to dig a pit. Tears stung her eyes as she rested back against a wall, regulating her staggered breathing. Cool tears wormed their way free of her pressed eyes, tracking down the curve of her young, smooth cheeks. She stood there for a time, leaning on the wall, eyes closed, her face moist and chilled with her own tears, then drew a long, haggard breath, backhanded the wetness from her face and blinked her eyes rapidly open, forcing herself back to the present. Her father was dead, she wasn't going to bring him back— Everett, however, was still alive and still needed her help. Or so, she hoped, anyway.

Removing her rifle from her shoulder, she held it in two hands and began to walk down the narrow, tiled hallway, moving quietly, but quickly, ears open for any sign of trouble. In a few long, quiet strides, she reached an intersection, another hallway crossing the one she was in, and she paused, listening closely for any signs of people lurking around nearby. The lighting within the hospital itself was very dim, the power seemingly out, cloaking the rear hallways, which had no outward facing windows, in a low, gray haze. When she'd dropped Everett off the night before, she'd just sort of assumed they had a generator, that the hospital had power and was well-equipped to care for the sick and injured.

But as she visualized the carnage in the rear courtyard in her mind, as she recalled what she'd seen through the windows of the cafeteria, it occurred to her that the so-called hospital she made her way through was barely being held together. Cloaked in darkness, devoid of power and infrastructure, being guarded by crazy men with guns who were more concerned with stealing medication than they were with protecting doctors or patients. Everett's wounds had been significant, and she'd cast him aside, dragging him out of the back of the pick-up and dumping him on the place's front door, and for the first

time it occurred to her how big a mistake that might have been.

Rushing down the adjoining hallway, she moved deeper into the building, pausing every so often to listen for signs of others nearby. The last thing she wanted to do was run headlong into one of the gunmen or soldiers, she wouldn't do Everett much good if she got grabbed while trying to help him. As she approached yet another intersection, moving past several closed doors along each side of the hallway, she slowed, soft voices carrying throughout the next hallway ahead. Easing to an uneven, quiet stride, she approached a nearby corner, her shoulder pressed tight to the wall, head tilted to listen.

“Fort Lauderdale? My ass we're going to Fort Lauderdale.”

“Didn't seem like they were giving us an option, Stan.”

Scout edged to the corner and peered out. About six feet beyond was a nurses station and waiting room area near a cluster of patient rooms. Two men sat in thinly cushioned chairs, rifles resting near them, one bent over, arms draped over bent knees. The other leaned back, arms splayed, as if relaxing, though his rigid jawline and bunched eyebrows made him seem the opposite of relaxed.

“Who put their life on the line for these people in those first days? Not these National Guard wannabes, that's for sure.”

“Maybe this is for the best? Let them take the doctors and patients outta here, we can have the run of the place, right?”

“Yeah, except they're gonna leave us high and dry. They're gonna take the meds, take the fuel for the generator, probably take whatever food's left in the cafeteria. And what do we do then?”

“We'll figure it out.”

“We got a sweet situation here; we shouldn't have to figure it out.” The man who was leaned back in the chair, moved forward, inching ahead on the cushion, staring intently at the

other man. “None of us asked for this, right? We tried to live our normal, quiet lives. But when this place needed us, we showed up. And yeah, I mean, we’re taking a little off the top for compensation, right? A few meds here and there. Some of the food and stuff from the cafeteria. But we have a roof over our head and we’re keeping the doctors safe, right? Making sure there isn’t another riot. They didn’t ask us to do it, we volunteered. Now these jackboots in camouflage want to waltz in here and take it all away from us?” Footfalls echoed along the tile and Scout took a step back, ensuring she was hidden from potential view.

“Story of our life, Stan. Couldn’t even get through high school without the long arm of the law slapping us around. Hell, my dad spent more time in prison than out. Guys like us, we’re targeted, right? From a young age. Circumstances like this happen, we actually do something good with our lives, but it doesn’t matter. Targets are still there, even if the shooters have changed.”

“Military, cops, it all bleeds together, especially now.” The voices grew louder, and Scout stumbled backwards, hoping her own shoes wouldn’t squeak on the grungy tile. Shadows spread along the floor, the approaching men blocking the pale shine of light through a hallway window at their backs. She grabbed a knob and wrenched a nearby door open, plunging inside even as the men crossed in front of the hallway, their voices muffled.

“So, what do we do? Just sit here? Let them take the doctors, patients and supplies, then just live off what’s left?”

“What other options we got? We’re not going to go toe-to-toe with eight men with automatic weapons. Sure, there are six of us, but hell, no. I don’t have a death wish.”

“See, that’s your problem, you don’t see the big picture.” The two men were standing just outside the door Scout had hastily closed and she crouched low behind it, ear pressed to the door’s thin surface.

“Big picture, Stan? What big picture is that?”

“What if we get our hands on some of their weapons, huh? That turn the tide a little bit? These soldiers, they got rules of engagement, right? They have ways they’re *supposed* to fight. Not us.”

“Are you kidding? What, you want to steal their guns? Fight back?”

“I’m not saying yes, but I ain’t saying no, neither.”

There was a dry chuckle as the men’s voices grew fainter, once again walking forward, further away from the closed door.

“Stan, you are one crazy S.O.B. you know that?”

“Practical, that’s all. Just practical.” The conversation between the two men faded and soon vanished entirely, allowing Scout to release the breath she’d held tight in her lungs. Easing the door open, she stepped out into the hallway, then paused, listening once more. Satisfied that the hallway was empty once more, she angled left and continued making her way through the myriad maze of corridors, watching and listening for more signs of activity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

While she'd been grateful for a roof over her head, the accommodations in Noah's cramped little two bedroom house, which only actually had a single functional bedroom, hadn't been what Holly would have described as comfortable. Finally convinced that she simply wasn't going to sleep any longer, she rolled off the lumpy, too-short-for-her-legs couch and made her way to the front door, clawing her hair into something resembling straightness. Her body was sore, her back and legs stiff from being in an eternal semi-crouch, lying prone on the sofa throughout her restless evening.

Feeling cramped and with a desperate need for some fresh air, she lifted her stolen rifle and slipped bare feet into her socks and boots, then stepped out of the door, closing it gently behind her. The air was crisp and bitter, a typical northeast spring day, the sky shrouded beneath a blanket of early morning fog. Across the street and alongside the Salem River, the two buildings they'd passed the day before continued to burn, the darker, thicker smoke feeding into the underlying fog, a backdrop of charcoal air lingering, obscuring the normal freshness of a seaside breeze.

They weren't exactly seaside, though the Salem River fed directly into the Delaware River, which in turn disgorged itself into the Atlantic Ocean, and although they were several miles removed from the coast, the atmosphere was very much like a small sea-side village. Holly had been around plenty of those throughout her young life in Maine and something about Salem, New Jersey held true to that feeling. Strolling across the two-lane road, she continued staring at the buildings a

short distance away, a marina and boat club, if what Penny had said was true. Their conversation with Noah remained fresh in her mind and out of pure curiosity, she'd decided to take a walk to the riverside that morning, just to see what their options were.

Her mother had dismissed the idea of traveling by sea, mostly based on rumors fed to them by Noah and Penny, not to mention their run-in with the Coast Guard. Holly, for her part, wasn't sure she necessarily agreed with that approach. Yes, the Coast Guard, not to mention those boats of would-be pirates, had provided some obstacles, but there was a lot of ocean out there and there was no way the Coast Guard could be everywhere at once. The option of traveling by sea was appealing to Holly, especially since they no longer had their car. Radio reports seemed to confirm military checkpoints and clogged motorways all up and down the eastern seaboard. Continuing to travel by water was making more and more sense every day.

A natural barrier of thick, oak trees lined the far edge of the road, stretching out to her right, spaced far enough away from the burning buildings that there was little risk of fire spreading throughout the natural undergrowth. Holly followed the tree line, then stepped along a gravel parking area next to the first structure, which was completely consumed by a choking smoke. Based on what she saw, Holly believed it to be some sort of boat dealership, though the yard was more or less empty, and flames had destroyed the majority of its surrounding campus. Beyond the trees and a small section of unmowed grass, thick fields of wheat and chest-high swamp grass spread as far as the eye could see, dimly lit beneath the low cover of smoke.

Holly pushed her way into the grass, staring at the blue-colored structure, which was weathered by age and buckled by intense heat. In the distance, a large set of power lines marched their way through the grass and trees, a stark reminder of mankind's influence in what would normally be a natural habitat. More trees separated Holly from swamplands beyond where a pair of large, flat barges were grounded, pressed into the soft ground, grass and moss growing thick

along the gradual curve of their hulls. They'd been there for quite some time and nature was slowly reclaiming them, merging with their metal surface, feeding off the oxidation of their rusted exterior. Holly wondered how long it would take before the large boats were completely consumed. Her boots sank into soft, murky mud, the long grass made even longer by the gradual give of the swampy ground. Peeling her boots from the sucking mud she walked toward the edge of the Salem River, hoping to see something of interest or of value.

Instead, all she saw was a wide expanse of opaque water, a scattering of overturned boats floating aimlessly within its depths. She saw none of the dead bodies Noah had spoken of, though he'd mentioned the Delaware River, not the Salem River, and they were still somewhat segregated from that particular waterway. The water itself, however, appeared a bit discolored, floating blobs of strange rainbow hues indicating a mixture of foreign substances within the river's murk.

Across the water another clutch of land emerged, more grass and trees and swamp thrust up from the water in a kidney-shaped atoll. She struggled to see much further than that, the fog and smoke clouding her eyes, an eye-watering, smoky smell sticking its sour fingers down her throat. She coughed and pressed a fist to her chest, hacking again to clear the choking air from her lungs. She realized as the horizon came into view that even more gray smoke clotted the distance, fires burning across the water, not just from nearby. In fact, it would seem fires burned in almost every direction from where she was standing, north, south and west, and she couldn't help but wonder how much longer Noah would be safe where he was.

In Holly's mind, the flames weren't just flames, they were sentient creatures, living things that had sheltered within their makeshift caverns, only to finally be unleashed upon the world. They were starving, desperate to feed on the air around them, to suck it within themselves, to grow, evolve and further consume. It was a morbid thought, but one she couldn't swallow down, the memories of Midtown Manhattan, ravaged by flames and smoke still fresh in her mind. As she stood along the coast, staring across the Salem River, the back of her

neck tickled, a sensation that she was being watched. Sweeping the rifle from her shoulder, she swung around, lifting the weapon, the butt firmly locked into the crook of her shoulder. As she came around, she centered her barrel on someone's chest, an approaching figure, pushing their way through the grass.

Her heart locked, a sharp intake of breath stabbing, then lodging within the wall of her lungs. "Keegan! What the hell? You scared the life out of me!" She let the rifle dip as her younger brother emerged from the wall of wheat grass, an apologetic look on his face.

"Sorry, Holly. I just— I was awake and saw you leave. I was wondering where you were going."

She took three strides forward, letting the rifle hang at her right side. Ducking a bit, she swept her brother into a one-armed embrace and pulled him close. "You should have said something."

"I thought I would scare you."

"Well, you did scare me, you dummy." She pulled away, his reddened cheeks pointed up at her. Holly's eyes met his and they locked for a moment, a swell of love for the little stinker warming her from the inside, softening the chill in the outside air. "Everything okay? Where's Bucky?" She angled her head to look beyond her brother. Everywhere he went lately, the dog was close behind.

"He was asleep with mom, I left him. I just wanted to see what you were doing without him tagging along."

"Everything's okay," she reassured him, even though she wasn't sure she believed her own remark. "Everything will be okay."

"Are you sure?" Keegan tagged along as she walked with him, making her way back toward the field of tall wheat and grass.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. Everything is so different now. It seems so much worse. We barely have any food and water, everyone is

trying to hurt everyone else. Dad and Scout are— nobody really knows where.”

“I know, kid.” Holly acknowledged her brother. She was battling with many of the same demons, but she, at least, had the benefit of another decade of maturity. Keegan’s young mind was clearly reeling, and he’d been gun-shy about sharing that. “It’s okay to be scared, you know. These are scary times.”

“It’s not even about that. It’s just the not knowing. It sounds stupid, but I liked being in Maine. I liked waking up in the morning and knowing what to expect. I hate stupid surprises and life is just one big stupid surprise now.”

Holly tried to muzzle her laughter. “Sorry, Keegan, I know it’s not funny.”

“I’d feel better if I knew dad was okay.” Keegan stuffed his hands in his pockets, trailing behind Holly as she pushed a path through the grass. “It feels like we’ve been traveling forever and we’re not much closer.”

“I know. I feel the same way. I remember waking up that Friday morning and getting ready for work like it was any other day. I still— it hurts to remember what happened. And to think that it’s so much more than just what we experienced.”

“I didn’t even get a chance to talk to Garrison or Parker before we left. We were supposed to play video games that weekend. I don’t even—” his voice trailed off and he exhaled. “Do you think they’re still alive?”

Holly swallowed, her eyes pressing closed to hold back the unexpected prickle of tears. “I’m sure they are. We lived out in the middle of nowhere, buddy. Things looked okay when you left, right?”

“At home, yeah. But Portland was, well, it was bad.”

“Pretty sure every city we see is going to be bad. The bigger the city, the worse it’ll be.” They passed through the grass and angled left, away from the moss-covered barges. The smoke was thicker and tangier, the air warm with the roiling flames devouring the nearby boat shop.

“Is Miami a big city?”

“Very big.”

Keegan nodded and looked away, his hands still wrist-deep in his pockets.

“They’ll be okay. You know dad. He’s tough and so is Scout. They’re going to make it through this, just like we did.” They made their way through the trees and emerged alongside the road, which cut a northwest path through the swamp, Noah’s house and attached scrapyard spread out across the eastern horizon before them. Holly halted, looking at the house across the street, then held out a hand, pressing it against Keegan’s chest.

“What?”

“I thought I saw something.” Holly’s voice was a quiet, edged whisper, caution muffling the volume of her words.

“Where?”

“Backyard.” The rifle was in her hand, almost by instinct, cradled close to her body, though the barrel was pointed toward the grass-covered ground. “Stay here,” she said firmly, bolting Keegan’s feet to the ground with the daggers flung from her narrowed eyes.

“Holly, I—”

“Stay. Here.” She pressed her free hand to her brother’s shoulder and applied gentle pressure. He reciprocated with a jerking, if uncertain nod. Holly stood for a moment, waiting to ensure that her younger brother would indeed stay where he was asked to stay, then wheeled left and ran across the road, back bent low, weapon at the ready. She hit the lawn across the street at a dead sprint, skidding to a stop by the front wall of Noah’s house, shoulder pressed tight to the exterior corner. Peering around that same corner, she eyed the backyard, no longer spotting the shifting shadow she’d witnessed a moment before. Clinging to the side of the house, she shuffled forward, feet pushing through the grass, rifle still held close at her side. Quiet voices came from the backyard, a soft, almost whisper of conversation, though she could only hear one side, and couldn’t clearly make out the words.

Reaching the rear corner, she held her position, struggling to maintain a steady, even breath, poised to confront whatever potential threat was lurking in the backyard. Fingers closing around the contoured handle, her index finger resting on the trigger guard, she swung around, lifted the rifle and pressed her back teeth together, jaw rigid.

“Don’t move!” Her voice pressed through gritted teeth.

Noah’s eyes pried into small circles, his body frozen in place, Bucky next to him, head tilted in silent, canine inquisition. “I— I—” his voice stammered his fingers stretched outward, palms showing. “He was whining at the door, I didn’t want him to pee on my floor!”

Holly blew out a gust of air, lowering the rifle and lifting her face toward the thinning morning fog. “Sorry. I saw you from across the street, it looked like you were lurking around back here.”

“I was trying to make this stubborn mutt do his business. This is why I don’t have a dog!”

Bucky’s tail thrashed and the black lab lurched forward, pressing the crown of his head into Holly’s thigh, nearly knocking her off balance.

“Bucky!”

Holly turned as Keegan ran across the road, a look of relief on his young face. The dog peeled away from Holly and turned, running clumsily along the grass until he intercepted his young master, almost knocking him over.

“Honestly, I didn’t mean to frighten you, Noah. This is your house, you’re free to go where you want, of course. I’m just a little jumpy I guess.”

“You have reason to be.” Noah eyed her warily, then jerked his head toward the house. “Come on in. Let’s get some breakfast.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Breakfast was meager rations of stale bread and peanut butter, carefully applied so as not to spread it too thick on any one single slab of white bread. Even so, the contents of the plastic jar were diminishing quickly and after lifting the jar from the table, Holly turned it over against the light, checking to see how much was left.

“It’s going fast.” Jean was at her right shoulder, placing a gentle hand on her back. “We’ll find more along the way.”

Holly nodded, her sour mood not matching her mother’s attempted encouragement. She’d hoped that Noah would have some food reserves stashed away, but the unfortunate truth was he had been a young bachelor even before the power went out, who didn’t exactly keep a stocked fridge. He didn’t even have a separate freezer and though he had a generator, he’d eaten most of what had been in his refrigerator within the first couple of days.

“Sorry,” Noah said from the table, holding a folded piece of white bread with peanut butter in his hand. “I don’t have much food to offer.”

“It’s okay.”

“Never been very good about buying fruits or vegetables—I mainly live off of TV dinners and ordering out.” He glanced down at the rounded paunch of his belly, pressed tight against the curved edge of the aged dining room table. “Food prep just always seemed like a lot of work, you know?”

“It’s okay, Noah. Everyone has their own challenges. Everyone lives their own life.” Jean’s tone was surprisingly calm and understanding. “We’re not here to make judgments. You’ve been very kind and very helpful.”

Noah nodded, his narrow grin faltering as he turned his attention back to the bread in his hand. Jean returned to the kitchen, joining Holly.

“What is he going to do after we leave?” Holly kept facing forward, trying to conceal the fact that she was whispering to her mother.

“I’m not sure. His pantry is basically down to crumbs and scraps. It hasn’t been that long. I’m not sure he’ll survive another month the way he’s going.”

“Should we consider bringing him along?” Holly didn’t even want to ask the question.

“We can barely support ourselves, Holly. We can’t—” she paused for a moment, then glanced back over her shoulder, face sculpted in conflicted grimace. “I hate to say it this way, but we can’t burden ourselves with another body. Especially one that can’t take care of himself.”

“So, we just leave him?”

Jean considered the question, her eyes narrowed. “What’s that old saying? Give a man a fish and you’ll feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you’ll feed him for a lifetime?” She turned away from Holly, smiling softly. “Hey, Noah. After you’re done with that bread, why don’t you join us outside?”

“Out— side?” He spoke the word as if it was a foreign language.

“Yes, Noah. Outside.”

“Okay. Sure.”

Jean moved past Holly, her daughter trailing along behind her, battling confusion. Keegan got up from his chair as well, swallowing down the last of his white bread and peanut butter, then held his fingers down so Bucky could slurp the last of the condiment from them. Penny watched them all, her face

contorted, eyes tracking their movements. She cast one more look toward Noah, who remained folded over the table, eating his bread, then joined the rest of them outside.

“What are you doing?” Penny eased the door closed behind her, shielding her eyes from the sun, which was relatively bright, even filtered through the low clouds. Jean walked toward a row of trees which overlooked a small pond, which was flanked to the east by a trio of even smaller ponds. Crouching by the muck along the shore, she dug through the dirt for a few moments, until she cupped some of it within her palm and held it up. Holly immediately saw slick movement from within the gathered, brown soil.

“Lots of worms here. Grab that branch, would you? Snap it off?” Jean pointed toward a narrow extension of a nearby tree and Keegan nodded, walking toward it. He slid his hands close to the trunk of the tree and did as his mother asked, snapping it off near the base. Jean was already on her feet, taking the branch from her son, then bent it in her hands, testing its flex. “Perfect.” She lifted her eyes toward Holly. “You see any fishing line anywhere in Noah’s house?”

“I’ve got fishing line.” Everyone turned, eyeing Noah as he made his way across the front yard, walking toward them. “Plenty of fishing line.”

“Good.” Jean presented the branch, flexing it gently in front of the young man. “See this? There are plenty of worms in the dirt here.” She gestured toward the edge of the pond. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty of scrap metal you can use to make hooks. What you need to start doing is fishing. There’s a pond here, three more just over there and you’ve got the entire Salem River across the street. Plenty of fish in any of those waters, I guarantee it.”

“I’m not much of a seafood person. And I’m not sure I’d trust anything fished out of that river. The chemical plant up in Deepwater feeds right into the Delaware and the Salem River is part of that same artery.” Noah was a little green around the gills.

“These ponds look separate enough, and I don’t see much sign of chemicals. You’ll just have to learn to become a seafood person.” Jean shrugged. “We’re not staying long, okay? I want to be sure you know that. If I have my way, we’ll be leaving in an hour or less. I want to know that you can take care of yourself before we leave.”

“I’m fine.” Noah drew up his broad shoulders, his eyes darting away, self-consciously.

“You have been fine, absolutely,” Jean acknowledged. “But the world’s changed. You’re going to need to change, too. And that change might mean getting a taste for seafood.”

Noah exhaled, his broad head nodding, though unconvincingly.

“Look over here, mom,” Holly called out from where she was wandering throughout the grass. “This swamp is rich with food, too. Water chestnuts here.” She gestured toward a clutch of familiar plants, the bulbs visible within the thrust of stalks. “These tubers can be eaten raw, if necessary, but if you can get familiar with cooking over an open fire, they work well that way, too.”

“He’s going to have to get familiar. He’s not going to want to eat those fish raw.”

Noah scowled. “Penny, can you run into the house?” He turned and spoke to the young girl. “If you go into the front closet, just to the right of the entrance, there should be a spool of fishing line.”

“On it.” Penny sprinted away, running back toward the house.

“Keep grabbing some of those water chestnuts, Holly.” Jean gestured toward the tall, grassy area around where Holly stood, edging the curve of the larger of three ponds. “Keegan, there, too.” Jean pointed to another section of long grass a few feet behind where Holly crouched. “Watercress. Can you pluck some of that and gather it together?”

“Sure.” Keegan and Bucky both made their way to the area Jean indicated and the young boy began tearing free the green

plants.

“Noah, can you come with me for a minute?” Jean pointed toward an empty section of lawn beyond the trees and Noah nodded uncertainly, following her to the sparse clearing. Holly lifted her gaze from the fistfuls of water chestnuts she’d already picked, then strode forward, bunching them together into a thick cluster, finally setting them on the ground near where Jean and Noah were standing.

“We’re going to start a fire here, okay?”

“Like an actual fire?”

“An actual fire. We’re going to gather some stones, make a circle, build up a little fire pit.”

“My dad had a backyard fire pit.” Noah smiled softly. “When I was a kid, we used to sit there and roast s’mores in the summer. Really good memories of that.”

“See, the outside’s not all bad, is it?” Holly chuckled, then stepped away, anticipating her mother’s request, moving back toward the edge of the pond so she could gather up some rocks. The front door slammed, and Penny emerged, jogging across the grass, the spool of fishing line in hand. For several minutes they all worked in silence, Jean, Noah and Penny digging a section of lawn away to reveal the circular patch of dirt underneath, Holly gathering rocks and delivering them to her mother and the others, while Keegan gathered up more swamp plants and piled them next to the water chestnuts Holly had already picked.

Everyone had their role and performed it well, and after about an hour, there was a large strip of rocks encircling a broad, dirt circle, which had been filled with some of the torn out grass and piled with dried wood for kindling. Two more thick branches had been stuck vertically opposite from each other, a third branch straddling them, offering a place to hang a pot or a pan over the fire.

“Holly, you and Keegan get this fire going— Noah, you and me, we’re going to go catch the main course.” Jean gently

grabbed Noah's forearm and pulled him away, leading him back toward the pond.

The low, sizzling crackle of the fire had been going for several minutes, though Jean had her attention focused on the still, shimmering surface of the water, which rippled alongside the gentle, spring breeze. Working with Noah and Penny, she'd strung the fishing line on the flexible branch, had fashioned a hook out of an old safety pin, then threaded one of the worms through it, dipping it into the water and awaiting a bite. Noah shifted anxiously next to her, moving his weight from foot to foot, trying his best to swallow down his impatience.

"It'll come, okay? The good thing about figuring this out now is it's something that you can take your time with. Come out here every day, try and catch some fish, get in a groove. You'll figure it out."

"If you say so."

Jean held out the pole and shook it gently. "Take it."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Noah took the manufactured fishing pole from her and held it tightly in two hands, the hook drifting along the still pond water.

"If you boil and filter this water, too, it'll probably be drinkable. All things considered, you have a decent space for yourself out here. Plenty of water, plenty of wilderness. Privacy. If you can remember some basic instructions, you'll be fine."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?" Noah allowed the corner of his mouth to drift into a crooked grin.

"Why not both?"

The pole in Noah's hand jerked and he tightened his grip, eyes widening. "Did you see—"

“I did. Jerk back. Pull it, see if you can set the hook.”

“Set the what?”

Jean reached over and coiled her fingers around the branch, jerking, then yanking it to the right. The pole tugged, the fishing line tightening as something tried to wrench the bait from the hook.

“Keep pulling. Up and right. It’s trying to go left, pull the other way, lock that hook!” Jean’s directions came quickly, a burst of words, Noah nodding eagerly in response. For a moment they worked together, struggling against the tugging fish within the water until finally Noah planted his feet wider apart, bent his back and pulled again, yanking the line from the water. At the end of the hook, a small, thrashing, silver-skinned fish dangled, twisting back and forth, tossing droplets of water.

Lurching forward, Jean hooked the line with her fingers and pulled it toward her, making sure the fish was over the land before it might shake itself loose. “Grab it,” she exclaimed, nodding toward the creature.

“G—grab it?”

“Yes. Left hand around the body.”

Noah wrapped his palm and fingers around the fish, grimacing at the feel of slick skin and rough scales. His fingers curled around it, holding it tight, its small, rounded head jerking from within his grasp.

“Pinch that hook. Push it down just a bit to work it loose, then pull it out.”

Noah nodded and did as he was told, taking a moment to work the hook free, which was a bit easier than a standard hook might have been. The fish’s squirming had slowed, its gills expanding, then contracting as the creature slowly drowned out of its water.

“See that flat rock? Smack it on there, real quick. The side of its head. Try to be forceful, okay? It’ll put it out of its misery, so it doesn’t slowly suffer.”

Noah bent low and smacked the fish against the rock once, then twice, though the creature had ceased its frantic shaking after the first shot.

“Did you catch one?” Holly called over from the fire, which she continued to stoke, keeping the flames writhing and crackling.

“Got one!” Jean confirmed with a nod, then reached into her pocket and withdrew a small pocket knife. “Holly, can someone grab me a spoon from the house?”

Holly nodded and leaped to her feet, then dashed toward the house, leaving Keegan and Penny to man the fire.

“A spoon?”

“Sure. Some fish, the skin isn’t so good, so you actually want to skin the fish instead of just scaling it. Bluegill, the skin doesn’t taste so bad, actually. I kind of like it. So, we use a spoon to scale it instead of skinning it.”

Noah scowled down at the fish, clearly uncertain about that line of thinking. The front door slammed, Holly already emerging, and she ran past the fire, holding a spoon up toward her mother.

“Nice. Decent sized one, huh? Sunfish?”

“Not too bad,” Jean replied, resting back on her knees. “Bluegill, more specifically. It’s a type of sunny, yeah.” She took the spoon from Holly and pressed its curved edge to the side of the fish, while pressing its tail to the stone with her fingers. “Okay, are you watching?” She lifted her eyes toward Noah as Holly made her way back to the fire.

“Uh, yeah. Sure?”

“You’ll need to know how to scale, bone and gut the fish. You have to do that before you eat it. Nobody wants a crunchy fillet.”

“How do you know all of this?”

Jean shrugged. “Just how I was raised, I guess. Rural Maine, there was no high speed Internet when I was growing up, technology was in its infancy. Our idea of catching a

stream was— well— this.” She gestured toward the fish. “Caught plenty of these in the stream behind my house.” Putting some pressure from the spoon against the fish’s hide, she began pressing forward in swift, hard motions and with each scrape, chunks of scale broke loose, scattering into the air. Adjusting her grip, she pushed a bit harder, using the spoon to scrape the sides, the tops and the bottom, working hard until the scales had been broken loose and knocked free of the fish’s hide.

Exhaling, she set the spoon aside, taking a moment to examine her work, then unfolded the pocket knife.

“Start here, okay? Behind the fin?”

Noah nodded as she drew the blade from the fin, around the contours of the gills, then to the belly and down, cutting shallow to avoid getting the blade too deep into the body.

“Once you hit this fin here,” she pointed to the dorsal fin, “apply a bit more pressure, push the blade up through, cutting all the way.” She pressed the knife into the fish until the tip of it extended from the other side, then she cut toward the tail, in a sawing motion, the body working free of the underlying skeleton as she did so.

Flipping the fish around she moved the blade back toward the head and followed the circle of the fish’s head, careful to work through whatever resistance she felt from the bone beneath. Bringing the blade to its back, she continued to carefully cut along its vertebrae. Peeling the fillet aside to expose the ribs, Jean worked carefully with the blade, cutting around the ribs, then down a bit deeper, working free an entire side of the bluegill. Peeling the scaled skin aside, she held it up for Noah to see, turning it around so he could get an idea of the process. As she did so, she located a bit of rib bone lodged within the meat and pinched it with her fingers, tearing it free and casting it aside.

“Are you following me so far?”

“I think so.”

Jean turned the fish over and repeated the process on the other side, cutting in a similar fashion with similar depth and pressure, and a moment later she'd cut free a second thin fillet, which she also held up so Noah could see it.

"I know it doesn't look like much, but trust me, if you catch a few of these each day, it'll add up. Plenty of protein, just cook it well, mix in some herbs. It's good stuff."

"I'll take your word for it."

"No, you won't." Grabbing both fillets, Jean stood, wiping her knife off on her pants, then folding it and slipping it back into her pocket. "Grab that spoon." Noah did so and they returned to where the fire crackled a short distance away.

"You grab a skillet?" She nodded toward Holly who lifted one in her right hand, shaking it softly.

"By some miracle I managed to find one. I'm not sure it's ever been used."

"Cut me some slack, I said I was a bachelor." Noah rolled his eyes, his cheeks reddening.

"Last I knew, even single guys know how to cook," Holly said. "Besides," she lifted her eyebrows, "young ladies love a guy who knows how to prepare a meal."

"Oh. Well. Uhh." Noah glanced away, his pink cheeks turning crimson.

"Grab that skillet, Noah." Jean pointed toward it and the young man followed her instructions. "Now, you seem like a clever guy. You could probably rig something up, so you don't have to hold it. So you can suspend it over the fire, right? That might make things easier."

"Oh yeah, sure. That would be easy." For now, however, Noah held the skillet by its insulated handle and Jean flopped the fillets into it and they immediately started to sizzle. "Toss the water chestnuts and watercress in there, too."

Holly and Keegan followed her instructions and a moment later, the concoction was trailing thin wisps of pale smoke, the familiar smell of fish filling the air of dwindling morning. As

Noah, Penny and Keegan huddled around the fire, Holly and Jean drew back, starting to gather up some of the supplies they'd used.

“You think he'll remember how to do this?” Holly crouched next to her mother.

“I hope so. Best we can do, I'm afraid.”

“This was— really good of you, mom. I know you wanted to get on the road a while ago.”

Jean smiled softly, looking at the three young folks as they worked together to finish preparing the food. “If we can't pass on the knowledge we have, what good is having it to begin with?”

“I suppose you're right.”

“But I will tell you this. The minute he finishes cooking that meal. We're gone. We've wasted enough time already.”

“That's the mom I'm familiar with.” The two women rolled their eyes as Holly stood and walked back toward the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Getting down from the top of the hill had been a challenge in more ways than one, but somehow, they'd managed. Pat had felt a bit short of breath after the incident with the bear and Jacob had suggested he ride Frenchie back down the winding trail toward home. Pat had, of course, put up quite the fight, but in the end, acquiesced, climbing up onto Frenchie's saddle and with no shortage of grumbling and grouching, navigated down the hill from atop his mount. They'd hooked the wagon to the horse as well, which had required slightly more care when descending the steepest parts of the hill, though it had been more or less manageable, thanks to Frenchie's willingness to follow orders.

Jacob wasn't sure how he was fortunate enough to be given a horse with Frenchie's temperament, but he remained extremely glad and thankful for it. The creature had already saved his life more than once and had made impossible jobs just a little bit easier. Up ahead, through a final row of thin oaks and maples, the broad meadow of the farm's back yard came into view, glowing bright beneath the late morning sun. Jacob blew a breath through pursed lips as they made their way through the trees, out onto the grass beyond.

"Well, it's about damn time!" Deena stood several feet away, a group of men gathered around her, some of them with scythes in hand, others with shovels, clearly taking their instructions. She made her way through the long grass, then tilted her head as she neared, eyes narrowing. "What in the—"

“Dinner!” Jacob shouted and turned, gesturing toward the wagon dragging along behind the horse. The corpse of a large, brown bear was draped within it, piled, arms folded, as if it was taking a nap. The movement of gesturing toward it sent a stab of pain through Jacob’s shoulder and along the length of his spine. His tumble from the top of the ladder could have been a whole lot worse, but he’d been pretty stiff and sore as they made their way down the slope of the hill.

“Is that a bear?”

“It came looking for our pic-a-nic basket, but it got a bullet in the brainpan instead.” Jacob’s joke either went over Deena’s head or was ignored completely as she moved past him and strode toward the side of the wagon. Pat jerked the reins, halting the horse so she could get a better look.

“Blasted thing almost tore my head from my shoulders. Your boyfriend saved my bacon.”

“My what now?” Deena fired a narrow glower in Pat’s direction.

“Sorry. Bad joke.”

She squeezed one eye closed, the brow of the other lifting, almost comically. Returning her attention to the bear, she gently stroked its thick arm. “This thing must be six, seven hundred pounds. How the hell did you get it in the wagon?”

“Well, I mean, you know.” Jacob playfully flexed one bicep, though Deena looked unimpressed.

“Take it to Neutral Territory. Let’s figure out how to cook this bad boy. We can add it to the celebratory menu tonight.” Deena smiled broadly and Jacob found himself momentarily lost within the bright glee of her eyes. Pat grunted, swinging his leg from the saddle, and dropped down next to the horse, landing somewhat awkwardly on the ground.

“About time I get off that danged thing.” He rubbed one ample cheek of his rear end, wincing. “Not built for a saddle.” He handed the reins off to Deena who took them and drew Frenchie close, then ran her fingers along the horse’s head and down the side of his neck. Frenchie stepped forward, then

Deena led him away, walking through the meadow, the horse and the wagon and the dead bear carving a wide swath through the thigh-high grass, back in the direction of the house and Neutral Territory beyond.

“You doing all right?” Pat looked Jacob up and down as they altered their own course and walked toward Pat’s small house in the rear lot of the property. “That fall you took off the ladder would have killed me.”

“I bounced.” Jacob shrugged with a half-hearted laugh, though he didn’t feel particularly funny. Everything with the bear had happened so quickly and all at once, it could have very easily gone very badly. An outcome stitched together in his mind where the bear killed them both and devoured them, leaving their half-consumed remains at the top of the hill for Deena and others to find whenever they got around to looking. Instinctively, he looked toward the woman, who had her back turned to them and was still guiding Frenchie toward the huge barn in the distance, the morning sun setting everything within view aglow with a rich, yellow light.

He rotated one pained shoulder, wincing as he did so and clutched at the ribs of the same side. There was definitely some lingering pain within his bones, but it didn’t feel like anything was broken, a stroke of pure luck more than anything else. “Are you sure you’re okay, Pat? That thing knocked you for a loop, by the looks.”

“I’ll be fine.” Pat couched his words, not looking at Jacob.

“You were pretty short of breath up there. How are you feeling?”

Pat didn’t speak for a few moments as the two of them walked forward, Pat’s small cottage growing in size as they approached. “I’m an old man, Jacob. That brings problems with it. Problems that get bigger in times like this.”

“Do you mind me asking— what sorts of problems?”

Pat stopped and turned, extended his hand and touched Jake’s arm. “I know you’re showing kindness, but, yes, I do

mind you asking. My problems are my problems and they're private. I don't need to weigh down others with them."

The older man's skin had taken on an off-white, almost eggshell pallor. Sweat glistened on his forehead, his eyes were somewhat sunken, and his cheeks clung tightly to the contours of his underlying skull. Jacob wasn't sure how he hadn't seen it before.

"Okay. Sorry for prying."

"Don't be." Pat tapped his arm and the two of them continued walking toward the house.

"Well, it's about damn time." A figure came toward them, making its way through the grass, then cocked a hand in greeting.

"Tony, that you?" Pat flattened his hand over his narrowed eyes. It had been a while since Jacob had seen Tony, who was the first man he'd met when stumbling upon Neutral Territory a few nights before.

"It is. Judith tells me the two of you were off playing boy scout, going for a hike in those hills."

"We're back now." Pat and Jacob slowed as they intercepted Tony. "Need to run the ole radio through some testing. Get the genny fired up and rotate through some of the frequencies I've been having trouble with."

"Got a repeater stood up, I hear. I can't believe ole Teddy let you have that to begin with."

"We're lucky. I think if the old lady knew, she'd just about give birth and after eleven kids, that would be quite the feat."

"Eleven kids?" Jacob turned toward Pat, his eyes widening. "Are you talking about Ms. Parkland?"

"Yeah, I am. How did you hear about her?"

"Deena and I ran into her and some of her boys when we went to the trading post. Gave Deena a hell of a time. Clearly isn't a fan."

“Ms. Parkland is a lifer around here.” Tony glanced at Pat. “I think her family has been around longer than Pat’s.”

“It’s close, but maybe. She’s one of those types that doesn’t really appreciate the influence of outsiders. She sees what Deena and her husband did as something akin to stealing territory. She might as well have crept into town with small pox infected blankets, you know?”

“Ah. That might explain some of the attitude we got.”

“Yeah. And yes, she has eleven kids. Not just eleven kids, but eleven boys, and every single one of them inherited her bad attitude.”

“She’s one of the reasons why we actually do have some security in place around Neutral Territory. Pat doesn’t share my concern, but I’ve been legitimately worried about the Parkland clan getting wind of what we’re doing and starting trouble. I’m surprised they haven’t come down here yet, looking for a slice of the fuel Pat’s got in his underground tank.”

“They’re welcome to try and take it.” Pat’s affable demeanor had crystallized into hardened anger.

“That’s actually why I tracked you guys down. Or why I tracked you down, anyway.” Tony looked at Jacob specifically. “Remember when you first showed up and were deciding whether or not you actually wanted to stick around?”

“Sure.”

“I mentioned a project where we wanted to try and tap into Pat’s fuel tank and make the farm a bit more self-sustaining.”

“Yeah, you mentioned wanting to tap into the fuel reserves, maybe tie a direct line to the generators?”

“Exactly. We’re trying to design some better ways of doing things. Neutral Territory has the largest generator and can supply the most power, so we were thinking about tapping that directly to the underground fuel tank. The generator at Neutral Territory is big enough, too, that we are thinking we can install a transfer switch and use it for the main house and maybe even

Pat's cottage here. Power the entire farm with that single generator."

"Definitely possible." Jacob thought for a moment. "You have all the generator parts? You'll need a fuel regulator and a pressure regulator. I've installed more of that stuff than I can count. I'd also need a polyethylene piping system and that isn't the sort of stuff you can just find at a local hardware store."

Tony smiled and nodded. "You know your stuff. Just so happens one of the guys that provides security for Neutral Territory has access to some of that stuff. I guess he worked in facilities for the local elementary school, and they had an underground line installed. He's got a spool of piping, fittings and couplings."

"Magnetic tape?"

"I think he does, yeah. It's all stashed at Neutral Territory, he brought it over late yesterday."

"All right." Jacob glanced toward Pat. "Promised the old man here we'd test the radio first, then I'll meet you over at the big barn after that. Sound like a plan?"

"You got it." Tony nodded a curt, appreciative nod, then tipped his hat to Pat and turned and walked away. As there was when Jacob first met him, a rifle was slung across his shoulder, and he gripped it tight as he made his way back in the direction of the large, communal barn in the distance. Pat walked toward the house and Jacob followed behind, still watching Tony as he walked away. He still struggled to rationalize his good fortune, it was as if the community had been tailor made for him, with a Jacob-sized gap that he seemed to slot neatly into.

But with that realization came the simmering guilt, the thought that he was putting his own happiness ahead of his brother Marcus and his brother's family. He was allowing himself his own peace of mind and going to great effort not to think too long and hard about his nieces and nephew. As they approached Pat's house, he exhaled, as if that might alleviate

the building swell of guilt that seemed to fill his insides, threatening to burst free.

“You, okay?” Pat reached toward the door but stopped, looking back toward Jacob.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“You look like you got the weight of the world on you, son. What changed?”

“Just conflicted is all.”

Pat twisted the knob, opened the door and led the two of them inside. “And what are you conflicted about?” He waved Jacob inside, then closed the door behind him.

“Family, you know. I’m squatting here instead of out there trying to help them.”

“Somehow I thought that’s what you were going to say.”

“Morning, boys!” Judith called out from deeper inside the house. “Can I bring you some lemonade? Fresh squeezed, no sugar, though.”

“Ain’t that just lemon water, then? Don’t get my hopes up, woman!”

“Fine, then, don’t have any, Mr. Crabapple. I’ll bring you some, Jacob.”

“Thank you kindly!” Jacob couldn’t help but smile, even given his momentary guilt trip. They made their way down the adjoining hallway, walking toward Pat’s office.

“You need to do what makes you happy, son,” Pat said. “I know where you’re coming from, I do. Trust me. But you have no idea where they are or how they’re doing. You think you’re just going to walk aimlessly up and down the eastern seaboard? Just hope that you stumble across them? Didn’t you say some of them are in Maine, some are in New York, and some are in Miami? That’s a lot of territory to cover.” Pat settled himself into his chair and gathered together some of the radio equipment, uncoiling the wire to the external microphone.

“I know. I mean, I realize that. But that doesn’t keep the guilt at bay. Believe me, I wish it did.”

Pat cleared his throat as he adjusted the dial of the radio, a thin squelch of static sounding through the speakers. It lowered to a background hiss, and he bent forward, studying the panel displaying the frequencies. Floorboards squeaked behind him, and Jacob turned, nodding as he accepted the glass of lemonade from Judith.

“How did things go up there?” She leaned forward, trying to get a look at her husband’s face.

“Went fine,” Pat interjected before Jacob had a chance to reply with his own side of the story.

“Is that a fact? You’re looking a little pale, Patrick McDonnell. You didn’t have another episode up there, did you? I knew you shouldn’t have hiked your butt up there, I tried to—”

“I’m perfectly fine, Judith.”

“There was a bear incident,” Jacob offered, trying to lessen the blow with his soft words.

“Hush your mouth, boy!” Pat swung toward him, a scowl deepening his features.

“A bear?”

“It was no big thing. Jacob killed it, we brought it back down the hill in the wagon. Going to be a good meal at Neutral Territory tonight.”

Judith studied her husband’s face mistrustfully, head slightly tilted, scrutinizing him.

“He’s fine,” Jacob offered with a helpful nod.

“Dear, he hasn’t been fine in twenty years, but I’ll take your word for it.” Her gaze lingered on her husband for a long moment, but she stepped away and vanished into the hall, leaving the two men alone in the office. Pat said nothing, quietly adjusting the frequency, his head slightly tilted to listen for any signs of something beyond static. Grabbing the mic, Pat touched the talk button.

“This is W4VXH coming to you from West Virginia, is anyone out there?” He waited for a moment but heard nothing but static. Turning, he nodded toward Jacob. “This could take a while. You want to go out and help Tony with the fuel? I’ll mess around here and let you know the second something comes through?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Jacob stood there for a moment, studying the color of Pat’s face, his hair matted to his head with thickened sweat. He looked a bit stronger than he had at the top of the hill before they’d descended, but still didn’t look to be at the top of his game. Jacob suspected he was asking him to leave not just for Jacob or Tony’s sake, but for his own.

“Yeah, I can do that.” He took a step back, then stopped, turning back toward the old man. “You sure you’re okay?”

“You need to stop fretting about me, boy. I’ll be fine.”

With that in mind, Jacob drained the rest of his lemonade and exited the room, leaving Pat to his work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Hand me one of those shovels!” Jacob shouted toward Tony as he approached, the other man glancing up from the trench he was digging.

“With pleasure!” He yanked a shovel from the dirt and stepped over the ditch, then handed it off. Jacob grabbed it with a nod. “Pat holding up okay? He looked a little pale.”

Jacob followed Tony back to the section of ground he was digging, then hammered the blade of the shovel into the soil and followed the other man’s lead. “He wouldn’t admit it if he wasn’t, would he?”

“Nope. He wouldn’t.”

“Is he okay?” They worked together, widening a narrow divot in the ground, creating space for the piping to rest. In a perfect world, they would be going down closer to two feet, but it wasn’t a perfect world, and the manual method had its limitations. “Pat, I mean? He was pretty short of breath as we were preparing to come down the hill. I made him ride the horse, which I think pissed him off something fierce.”

“Sounds like Pat.” Tony chuckled. “He’s got some underlying medical issues, yeah. A lifetime of smoking kinda caught up to him, even though Judith made him quit a couple years back. I think the damage was already done.”

Jacob shook his head and rammed the shovel into the ground, chewed up a section, then tossed it aside.

“Try and pile that dirt together if you can. We’re going to gather it afterwards, turn it into garden soil. Can’t let anything

go to waste, you know?”

“Sure thing.” They made their way along a ragged path between the underground tank and Neutral Territory.

“He had an appointment with an oncologist,” Tony followed up of his own accord. “Rumors are, they found a mass on his lung. But then everything went to crap before he could get there. He’s been pretending everything’s fine, but the fact is, without chemo and without better care or medications, well— things might get a bit hairy for old man McDonnell.”

For reasons Jacob couldn’t explain that statement lodged itself in his chest and grew roots, drawing him into a surprisingly deep melancholy. He’d only known Pat a matter of days, but the old man had grown on him in a way that few people had. For that matter, it seemed like everyone in the small community surrounding Neutral Territory had— Deena, Pat and Tony were like long lost family members. Throughout his entire life, Jacob had struggled to make and maintain friends, then by some miracle, he’d ended up in a place where he finally belonged. Yet still, in spite of that, the lingering sensation that he was letting his brother down snagged in him, like heartburn that wouldn’t go away no matter how long it had been between meals of spicy food.

“Sorry, maybe that’s a little too much information. I guarantee you Pat would beat my hide if he knew I’d told you.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“Appreciate it. Pat will, too.”

They worked alongside each other, continuing to dig up the ditch, carving a narrow path along the grass-covered ground. Long fields of corn stretched out, not too far from where they dug, and the warm sun beat down on them with a pervasive, persistent heat that helped to dull the cool backdrop of spring. Jacob paused, exhaled, and backhanded a shine of sweat from his forehead, glancing toward the large barn that had been retrofitted into a tavern and trading post. It seemed very far away and that they still had a long ways to dig. A group of people were gathered near the barn, huddled around

something he couldn't see, their conversation inaudible from where he stood.

“Getting ready for dinner,” Tony offered. “You and Pat—you’re the heroes.”

“Say what?”

“That bear you snagged. They’re going to start butchering it soon. They figure that’s a solid week of meat on those bones, man. Times like this, that’s no small thing.”

“Just the right place at the right time is all.”

“Well, we’ve sent a few hunting parties up into those same trees. We’ve gotten a few things, but nothing like that bear.”

“Just doing my part.” Jacob returned his attention to the ground at his feet, working alongside Tony as they continued to dig. The morning hours were bleeding away and with every gap in conversation, Jacob found his mind drifting, wondering what his brother and his brother’s family were doing, how they were holding up and what troubles they were facing. Even as he stood next to a man he could easily call a good friend, his mind raced, searching for the words he could use to tell the people around him that he was leaving.

He’d been there for days already, and he’d found a place he felt like he belonged, yet family was out there, somewhere, and they might need him even more than the community surrounding Neutral Territory did. Their very lives could depend on him, and even if he had to search the entire Eastern Seaboard like Pat had said, it was something he had to be prepared to do. The realization weighed heavy on him, the looming specter of potentially abandoning a place that finally felt like home, a dark cloud shrouding the insides of his busy mind. He swallowed hard, his throat constricted, emotion boiling in his chest, and tried desperately to just focus on the task at hand.

Flames rose in the distance, a controlled burn at the rear of the barn, more figures gathered around it, a makeshift bonfire, stretching wide and tall, seemingly emerging from nowhere. The bear had been moved from the wagon and the group

seemed to be working together going at the creature with tools that Jacob couldn't see. It was quite the thing to watch, the entire community working in harmony, the occasional peal of laughter carrying across the relative silence of the late morning air.

“Tony!” A voice screamed from the direction of Pat's house, and he stopped digging, twisting in the direction of the shout. A hand frantically waved in the air from the place where the underground tank had been buried and Jacob could sense a potential crisis brewing. “We've got a leak! I think we tore a seal!”

“Damn! Son of a—” Tony tossed the shovel down and stalked through the yard, but Jacob took a much quicker approach. He sprinted forward, pushing past Tony and dashed across the sprawling meadow, ignoring the shooting pain in his legs and back. Fuel was as good as gold in his mind and a leak was akin to invaluable currency, thousand dollar bills slipping through a hole in someone's briefcase. He reached the concrete platform where piping emerged, a nozzle thrust from it, a large pipe wrench half turned around a bracket. One of the men pressed both palms to an apparent breach, fuel pulsing from beneath his skin, already starting to collect on the ground at his feet.

“Here!” The young man jerked his head toward the section of pipe, but Jacob shook him off, shoving past him and dropping low. He reached toward the base of the piping, located a shut-off valve and cranked it hard, cutting the flow of the fuel to the nozzle. Almost immediately the leaking gas eased into a soft trickle, then ceased entirely, allowing the young man to pull his hands free and look down at the pipe in surprise.

“Cut off the source first, most important thing.” Jacob stepped forward and gently pushed the young man aside so he could drop low and examine the pipe. Squinting, he stared at the sections of linked brass even as Tony jogged his way over, breath rasping. “I don't think it's a broken seal.” Jacob ran his fingers along the curved piping, shaking his head. “There's some corrosion here. An actual hole in the pipe.”

“Son of a— how do we fix that?”

“In a perfect world we’d replace the pipe.” Jacob eased back on his knees, looking up at Tony. “Do we live in a perfect world?”

“We do not. But that doesn’t mean we can’t track down some of that stuff.” He nodded toward the pipe. “Probably not anytime soon, though. We may have to send a couple folks into town.”

“Okay.”

“But we were hoping to have that celebration tonight over at Neutral Territory. We’ve got the bear, Pat already set aside a bunch of shine. The people here, we need a reason to smile.” He shook his head.

“Don’t give up yet.” Jacob leaned close again, running fingertips across the corrosion. “You have epoxy kicking around anywhere? I need a little sandpaper and some rubbing alcohol, too. Luckily the corrosion looks to be on a straight piece of pipe, not on the curve or the joint. Should be fixable.”

“All right. Yeah, I think we’ve got what you need. Shawn, go into Pat’s house, would you? You remember what Jacob said?”

“I’m on it, Tony.” The young man dashed away, covering the distance between the pipe and Pat’s house in record time. He rapped twice, then the door opened, and he vanished inside.

“You really know your stuff, huh?”

“Sometimes I wonder. Before everything happened, I’d been shuffled off to management, you know? Stuck in a desk job for a year or two. Honestly, I never understood why so many people strive for that sort of thing. I missed getting my hands dirty.”

“I can tell. The way you dove right in here, you’re a ‘hands on’ kind of guy. Not really management material, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I don’t mind because it’s true.” Jacob hesitated for a moment, rested down on one knee and remained focused on the pipe. “I haven’t told anyone this, but— you know how this sort of started in Lexington?”

“Yeah. I heard that. Seems like maybe you had a front row seat.”

“Anomalies began to appear in some of the fuel composite reports I was getting. A change to the chemical composition of the gas, very minor, but definitely present. I flagged it, maybe one or two days before everything went up in flames, had my engineering guys dig in. They uncovered the issue. Tiny bits of PolySyn, the material breaking down at a molecular level and integrating with the fuel supply. No way to notice at first, but as it continued, eventually, well— you know what happened eventually.”

“Wow. So, your guy actually predicted what was going to happen? He saw the trouble coming?”

“He did. But a little too late. I’d called a meeting with my boss, we had an inspection team from Metanoia onsite when the processing plant exploded. I— I was the only survivor.” He’d never spoken those words aloud and saying them brought a certain weight to them, a weight he wasn’t prepared to absorb. Suddenly, he was happy to be kneeling, because if he hadn’t been, his legs would have most assuredly buckled beneath the strain of that admission.

“Sounds like you did all you could.”

“Wasn’t enough. I can’t help but wonder— if I’d seen those anomalies just a few days earlier. If I’d run them up the flagpole, maybe that might have made a difference. I was miserable in my office job, you know. A drone, nothing more, flipping from mundane task to mundane task. Maybe if I’d been just a little more attentive. Better at my job.”

“Yeah, that’s bull. You can’t sit there and blame yourself for what happened. Something like this— it isn’t about fault or blame, Jacob. There were some systemic failures that happened here, and honestly, I don’t think any of them rest at your feet.”

Before Jacob could reply, the front door opened and Shawn surged out, hands clasped around a gathering of various supplies from inside. “Epoxy, sandpaper and rubbing alcohol!” He jogged to where Jacob knelt and crouched low, spreading the items on the concrete at his feet.

“Great job, kid, thanks.”

“Judith helped.”

“I have no doubt.”

“She even told me to bring these.” He set down a plastic cup holding a narrow popsicle stick.

“Gotta mix the resin and the hardener in the epoxy, she’s exactly right.”

Tony stepped around Shawn and lifted the plastic cup, the stick and the two part epoxy, then stood. “Shawn, come on over here. I’ll show you how to mix this compound while Jacob gets things ready.” The two of them stepped away as Jacob grabbed the sandpaper and attacked the area around the corrosion, working at the metal, smoothing out the jagged edges, roughing up the surface of the pipe. Curling the sandpaper around, he worked it up and down, then back and forth, finally at least somewhat satisfied with the end result. Applying a little alcohol to a cotton ball, he worked it through the surface of the metal, preparing the material, trying to get it clean of fragments from the sandpaper. Just as he was using an old rag to sweep the final bits away, Tony and Shawn returned, the cup filled with a congealing liquid within.

“Epoxy’s all mixed, should be the right ratio.” Tony handed it down to Jacob, who took it readily. Using the same stick they’d used to mix the compound, he scooped some out and lathered it along the pipe, working it around the hole, forming a makeshift barrier along the edges and over the gap itself. For a few minutes he went over it, again and again, smoothing, lathering, spreading, applying pressure, doing whatever he could to ensure the hole was patched.

“Okay, we’re going to have to sand this down once it’s dry, but for the most part, that’s all patched up. The epoxy resin

should hold just fine and keep things liquid-tight. If it happens again—” he turned and looked at Shawn. “You know what to do?”

“Sure,” Shawn nodded, lips forming into a mild smile. Tony gave Jacob an odd look as he stood, using the piping to assist.

“Let’s grab those shovels,” he said, though his eyes were still fixed on Jacob, “we’ve got more shoveling to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Leaving Noah had been more difficult than Holly anticipated. From the first moment they'd met him, his abrasive attitude had scraped over her like steel wool, but somehow, within the span of a day or so, that attitude had softened. Seeing her mother and him working together, Jean teaching him how to fish, how to scale and fillet a bluegill, starting the fire, making sure the fillet was brown, but not burned. It reminded Holly of the way both her mother and father had coached Keegan through similar lessons, though granted they'd taught him far younger than Noah.

Jean and Keegan had managed to catch two more fish while Holly was showing Noah and Penny how to cook the first and combined with the water chestnuts and watercress, it had been surprisingly tasty and nourishing. It had been a while since Holly had eaten freshly caught fish and while she'd grown weary of seafood throughout her time in Maine, there was a nice throwback feel to it. A reminder of her childhood, nights spent camping in the woods, fishing with her father back when she was the only child. She loved her siblings and didn't resent a single moment of their existence, but there had been something about being the only child— something a little magical and different.

Turning to throw one more wave in Noah's direction, Holly smiled as the four of them, and Bucky, continued along their trek, heading northwest through rural New Jersey. It was hard to believe they'd only made it as far as New Jersey considering everything they'd witnessed and everything they'd been through. With any luck, at least, they'd be in Delaware

by nightfall, even though the threat of the bridge loomed over them like a darkened shadow. Noah had emphasized the rumors he'd heard about the dangers of the Delaware Memorial Bridge, but without any options, the group had decided to try their luck.

“As we get closer, we can re-evaluate.”

“What's that?” Noah's door slammed behind them.

“Re-evaluate,” Jean echoed. “Decide if the bridge is the right approach.”

“Once we get that close, it might be hard to change course.” Penny tugged a small backpack more tightly over one shoulder. They'd managed to find the fourth backpack buried somewhere within one of Noah's closets, an old school bag he'd used in his younger years. Noah had been kind enough to assist in divvying up some supplies and though they'd been hesitant to take anything from him, he'd offered a few bags of potato chips he still had as well as some duplicate tools, batteries and a pair of extra headlamps, which the Fullers had lost along the way. The gesture had warmed Holly's heart and she was pretty certain it had warmed her mother's as well, who she'd caught dabbing at her eyes as they stepped across the lawn. Jean had removed a paper map from her backpack and as they walked north along Route 49, she had it opened before her, tracing their prospective path with one finger.

“You seem to know a lot about this area, Penny,” Holly said, tilting her head to one side. “Have you been through here before?”

Penny glanced away, shaking her head. “I just know what I've heard from other people. Lots of folks in Salem have either come across the bridge or been stopped trying to go to Wilmington. It's— just a lot of rumors and stories.”

“Ah.” Holly nodded, though her eyes remained fixed on the back of the young girl's head. It was as if Penny was forcing herself not to look back at her, staring straight, fingers hooked into the straps of her backpack. Not for the first time since they'd run into Penny, Holly had the strange sensation that she perhaps wasn't being entirely truthful. But she was

young, and she'd lived an entire childhood on the streets, guarding the truth was likely her default. Holly purposefully slowed her pace forward, letting Penny get several strides ahead. Jean glanced back, sensing what Holly was doing, then she did the same. Keegan and Penny continued onward, walking close, though not speaking to each other while Jean and Holly fell a distance behind.

“Can I see that map?”

Jean fumbled with the folded paper and unpeeled it, expanding it into a larger, wrinkled scroll. “We’re here.” She pointed to a spot in the midst of vast swamplands surrounding them, a strange sight, given that they were in the middle of New Jersey. A gathering of buildings was clustered along Route 49, much closer than Holly had anticipated, given their surroundings.

“Harrisonville is up here, maybe a mile or so. We’ll be there in about ten minutes. I’m guessing that’s where that’s coming from.” Jean lifted a finger and Holly followed the direction of her gesture, somewhat surprised to see a column of dark smoke lifting in the distance. She hadn’t noticed it before, though it was stark against the flat backdrop of late morning sky. “Once we hit Harrisonville, I suggest we branch off here onto Route 551. It’s a bit of a longer trek, but it will avoid major population areas until we hit the urban sprawl around the Delaware Memorial Bridge.”

Holly leaned forward as they walked, carefully studying the projected route change her mother had apparently made on her own. Sure enough, Route 551 drifted east of places like Pennsville Township, continuing along just west of the Salem River Wildlife Management Area. That suited her just fine, the less clusters of potentially dangerous people they had to deal with, the better.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way to avoid Harrisonville itself. Route 551 branches off just outside a huge strip mall with a massive department store and several other high target businesses. I think we just need to move through there as quickly as humanly possible.”

Holly nodded and stood upright, her mother folding the map back together and slipping it into a pocket, resting just beneath the holstered pistol at her hip. Holly still carried her AR-15 while her mother had the pistol and the bolt action rifle slung over one shoulder. It was almost ridiculous to think of them as a typical suburban family, walking down a two lane road in New Jersey, carrying rifles, stalking along the American countryside as if they were in hostile territory.

“What do you make of her?” Holly kept her voice a quiet whisper as she nodded toward Penny who was absently petting Bucky as she walked alongside Keegan several strides ahead.

“Honestly? I’m not sure. She’s hard to read, but I’m not sure if that’s by design or just because of her upbringing. Or lack thereof.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“Are you regretting helping her?”

“I don’t think so, no. I don’t think she’s a bad kid, I just think she’s messed up. She likes to pretend she’s not, like living on the streets was her choice or something, but how can you spend your childhood in that sort of environment and not be at least a little screwed up?”

“You did the right thing. By helping her, I mean.”

Holly glanced toward her mother as they walked. “You didn’t seem to think so at the time.”

The elder Fuller’s nostrils flared, almost imperceptibly, but enough so Holly noticed. “Listen,” Jean began, “when it comes to living in a world like this, you need to be very protective of you and yours. That’s the way I operate, and I won’t apologize for that. My priority is you and your brother. Everything else must come second.”

“I don’t disagree.”

“But— there is some value to helping others along the way.” Jean glanced back over her shoulder, back in the direction of Noah’s house, although it was long gone beyond a bend in the road. “Noah taught me that, if you can believe it.”

“I could tell there was something about him that affected you.”

“I don’t even know what. He seemed like a good guy. He didn’t ask for any of this, he’s just doing his best to live in this new reality. He didn’t have to take us in, he didn’t have to help us, but he did.”

“Thankfully Bucky didn’t take a leak on his floor.” The two of them laughed and Jean rolled her eyes.

“The thought of leaving him on his own after we left, I don’t know, I just felt responsible for some reason. I felt like I owed him at least some sort of payback, even if it was just a few hours of our time.”

“Time is more valuable than anyone gives it credit for. A small cost, but a high reward, you know?”

Jean turned toward Holly. “Very astute, Holly. Did you learn that at Columbia?”

“I’d like to think I learned it from you and dad.” Holly chuckled. “But if you want to think it was college, I’ll take it, I suppose.”

“Oh, no, if you’re going to give us credit, I’m going to take it. Every single time.” Ahead of them, the road dipped, then bent left. Along the right shoulder a small building at the point of a wide, paved parking lot stood flanked by rows of trees. A small sign for a funeral home stood along the edge of the road, just to the right of a paved entrance leading to the empty parking lot beyond. There was no sign of activity in or around the funeral home, just a lone, isolated building perched within a slab of wilderness, just outside the main population center.

Focused on the funeral home, Holly hadn’t noticed that Penny and Keegan stopped walking until they drew near. A distance ahead, the smoke grew thicker and closer to the ground, a billowing, ground-level storm cloud, dark and choking, blotting out the nearby horizon.

“Keep on going,” Holly urged. “It’s okay.” She stepped between them and shifted to a lead position, the two kids, her mother and the dog falling in behind her. Almost without even

meaning to, she slung her rifle from her shoulder and held it in two hands, her stride more measured and more cautious as they came closer to the source of the smoke. Just past the funeral home, clutches of small chain restaurants and gas stations thrust up along the right side of the road, the all-too-familiar New England based donut shop leading into a nationwide convenience store and a larger family sit-down restaurant just on the other side. The front windows of each of the buildings had been shattered, the insides gutted by looters, the ransacked interiors visible beyond the teeth of broken front windows. Across the street was the massive strip mall that Jean had referred to, the concrete slabs of big box stores little more than blackened char, buried within the cloying smoke.

Heat choked the air and somewhere within the smoke, fire still burned and thick chunks of stone and broken concrete littered the parking lot. Several cars had been caught within a fire that had retreated somewhat, leaving melted and blackened husks behind. Still other vehicles had been hammered by flying debris, roofs caved in, windows blown out, rubble sprayed all across the vast lot. Mingled within some of the makeshift shrapnel, several shadowed forms were strewn about, forms that appeared far too organic to be chunks of stone or concrete.

“Don’t look.” Holly touched Keegan’s shoulder gently, her brother’s attention redirecting so it was facing forward. Penny’s gaze continued to linger, almost transfixed by the carnage that littered the plaza parking lot. Voices shouted from somewhere nearby, though Holly couldn’t see the source directly, which she was thankful for, judging by the coarseness and volume of the voices.

“Keep walking. Just keep walking.” Jean came up on Penny’s left, her hand pressing to the young girl’s back as they moved forward. Beyond the burning plaza, the road divided, branching off to the left and to the right at a forty-five degree angle, a gas station caught within the peaked V-shape intersection. Like the plaza itself, the gas station was being swiftly consumed, a roiling column of smoke rising from its blackened carcass, the only indication that it was a gas station a buckled canopy that had rested over the pumps, but was

toppled and crumpled against the ground to the right of the main building. A cluster of echoed pops sounded, that would have almost sounded like fireworks if they hadn't been followed by a chorus of shrill screams directly afterwards.

“Are those gunshots?” Keegan’s voice sliced through pressed teeth in a hushed whisper.

“Let’s go.” Jean pointed toward the branch of the V-shaped intersection that headed to the right, then gave Penny a gentle push, urging the young girl to run.

“Where are we going?” Penny looked over her left shoulder. “That way is quicker.” She pointed to the left, a multi-lane roadway that cut a narrow trench through thick clusters of buildings lining both sides of the road.

“Too risky. We need to stay far away from people as much as possible.” Jean gave her another gentle push, but Penny stood firm, feet rooted in place.

“Why? They don’t scare me. Why do they scare you?”

“It’s not about being scared, it’s about being careful.” Jean’s jaw clenched and Holly could tell she was starting to lose her patience. They stood in the midst of the intersection, a few abandoned vehicles clustered around them, but with no real cover nearby. If someone saw them and decided to come after them, there was nowhere to hide.

“Why are you so paranoid? We need to go that way.” Penny was unusually firm about her decision.

“We’re going to the right,” Jean replied in a tone that brooked no opposition. “Come with us or don’t.” She started to walk forward, grabbing Keegan’s arm and tugging him along with her. Penny scowled at her back, more in confusion than anger, but made no indication that she was going to follow.

“Penny, come on.”

She said nothing, but also made no effort to move.

“Penny. I don’t want to leave you. But I also need to stay with my family.” Several feet away, Jean and Keegan walked

alongside Bucky, heading down the right side of the intersection, steering clear of the burning gas station. “We’re trying to help you. Do you want our help?”

“I—” Penny started to reply, but then bit off the sentence she was poised to speak. Chewing through the words, she swallowed them down like dry cereal and finally, after what seemed like a long time, nodded. “Okay.”

“That didn’t answer my question.” Holly bent slightly so she could look the girl in her eyes. She tried to study Penny, to get a gauge of the person, but the young girl simply let her own eyes slide away, looking over Holly’s shoulder.

“I said okay,” she spat, almost bitterly. Then she glanced back to the other side of the road, almost mournfully.

“Then let’s go. We don’t have time for this.”

Penny sighed, nodded and then stepped forward, the two of them picking up their pace so they could catch up with Jean and Keegan. Holly continued to drift a bit behind the young girl, centering her in her eyes, and once again, deep within, a roiling fist of uncertainty clenched and refused to let go.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It didn't take long for Holly to regret the difficult decision they'd made. Angling right at the V-shaped intersection had seemed like the only logical move, deviating from a population center entangled in twists of thick, gray smoke. But the alternate route still followed a narrow, paved road through clusters of buildings and just because danger wasn't evident, didn't mean it wasn't there. Holly had quickened her pace, taking up the lead, her rifle held firmly in two hands even as her head darted left-to-right, trying to evaluate their surroundings. Knowing nothing about the town they found themselves in did little to ease her mind and Penny was being unusually obstinate, replying to questions in only single-syllable non-answers.

“I told you we should have gone the other way.”

Though the lack of fires helped ease their anxiety to a degree, without the active flames churning around them, night had descended, drawing out deeper shadows and transforming ordinary landmarks into shifting, unknowable beasts, waiting to strike. Keegan had drawn close to Bucky, using the dog for support and for strength, one hand lowered, fingers brushing the animal's fur on an almost constant basis. Penny seemed to have her own share of anxiety as she walked alongside Keegan, glaring into each and every shadow, moving with a strange mixture of apprehension and haste, seeming scared one moment and expectant the next. As if she knew something was going to jump out at any moment and wanted to be prepared for it.

“Penny, the decision has been made.” Jean’s voice was a firm, hard whisper. Route 551 continued north through a relatively rural landscape, though as they made their way toward Pennsville Township, clusters of buildings pushed through the trees at each side. From somewhere in the darkness, the echoing crack of a rifle shot hacked a ragged gash in the silence and the group froze, all at once, backs straight and weapons at the ready.

“What was that?” Keegan drew even closer to the dog.

“There’s a hunting preserve nearby,” Penny said quietly, then extended an arm, her finger pointing to their right. “And a big residential neighborhood that way.” She pointed toward the left.

“I thought you didn’t come through here much?” Holly turned toward the young girl, trying not to sound accusatory.

“I don’t. I just— I know the area.”

Holly’s eyes narrowed, though she hoped Penny couldn’t see her expression in the increasing darkness. Once again, a hard nugget of mistruth formed within her throat, words gathered together she didn’t dare speak them aloud.

“Let’s just keep walking. We’ve got a long ways to go before we get to Deepwater.” Jean placed a reassuring hand on Holly’s back and the younger girl released the breath she’d been holding, then continued walking north. Up ahead, a road angled toward 551 from the west, a small building shadowed by trees at the corner of the intersection.

“Should we check out that building? Looks like it could be a gas station? Maybe there’s a convenience store inside?” Holly glanced at Jean, who nodded, the movement barely visible without a source of light. Making her way across the road, she picked up the pace, heading toward the silhouette. A metal canopy on twin supports melted from the darkness, covering a pair of gas pumps as Holly had initially suspected. Two cars were parked outside the building, though there was no sign of activity or light within or around the structure.

“We should move quickly. Just in case anyone is lurking around.” Jean strode forward, making a straight line for the front door of the gas station. Holly paused for a moment, turning and fishing a flashlight from an exterior pocket of her backpack. They weren’t using them constantly, wanting to conserve battery power, but she figured it would be useful to investigate the store, if that’s what stood before them. She stabbed a switch with her thumb, the light flaring from the circular lens of the flashlight, shining a pale glow upon the front of the building. A large, glass window facing the parking lot had been completely shattered, leaving behind only a rim of broken teeth and through the gaping maw of that window, empty shelves lurked within the store.

“Looks empty,” Jean remarked, then tested the front door. It opened without resistance, and she swept her pistol from her holster, holding it out in front of her as she moved inside. Holly waited for Keegan, Bucky and Penny to go in first, then brought up the rear, rifle at the ready. As it had appeared from the outside, the shelves had been ransacked already, every single one of them cleaned out, though a scattering of trash and discarded containers littered the floor. Keegan kicked an empty can that had once held beef stew and it rolled loudly across the tile, startling Holly as she wheeled toward it, tracking its motion with her rifle.

“Maybe we should sleep here,” Penny suggested hurriedly, walking back toward the broken window and looking out into the darkness.

“No,” Jean replied firmly. “We keep going. We’ve wasted too much time already.”

“My legs are tired,” Penny complained. “I bet Keegan is, too, aren’t you, Keegan?”

“I’m fine,” Keegan replied sharply.

Holly strode down one aisle, using the flashlight to guide her way, though she already knew what she’d find. Near the back of the store, the area opened up, a few groups of four-sided pegboard islands standing empty, though some of their contents had been spilled along the floor. While it wasn’t food,

Holly bent low, examining some of what had fallen, digging through phone chargers and earbuds, pawing through items, just in case there were any diamonds within the rough.

As she crouched low, moving along the rear of the store, a sound trickled in from outside and she paused for a moment, her lips parted, though she remained silent. Instinctively, she stabbed off the flashlight and rammed it into her pants pocket.

“Who’s there?” Jean spoke, her shoes squeaking on tile.

“Don’t move, lady. Don’t. Move.”

Holly’s heart locked in her chest at the sound of the male voice, far too deep and gravely to belong to Keegan, who was the only male in their group. Holly couldn’t see what was happening, she remained down, concealed by the rear shelves, frozen in apprehension.

“We’re not looking for trouble,” her mother said.

“Says the lady with a pistol in her hand.”

“Only for self-defense.”

Jean’s shoes squeaked again, adjusting her position and Holly wondered if she was looking for her.

“Hand it over.”

“Listen, I’m a woman alone out here with my kids. I can’t just—”

“Hand the damn pistol over. Now. What’s on your back? That a rifle? I’ll take that, too.”

Holly’s teeth clenched together. Whoever the mystery man was, he was stealing all of her mother’s weapons. The weight of the M4 felt both calming and unsettling within her grip, their lone means of self-defense, its magazine bordering on empty.

“Please. Just let us go and we’ll leave. We’ll be out of your hair.”

“You think you’re the only one who needs self-defense? You think you’re the only one with kids who need protecting?”

“You go your way and I’ll go mine, all right?”

“Mom,” Keegan’s voice was a frail, broken thing. Bucky growled low in his chest.

“If that dog tries anything, I’ll kill the lot of you, I swear.”

“Bucky, no,” Jean hissed.

“I can take your weapons and supplies off your dead bodies just as easy. I’m doing you a favor.”

Supplies—the mysterious man had said supplies. It wasn’t just their weapons he was after, it was everything. Holly couldn’t let that happen. Crouching low to the floor, she slunk quietly forward, angling toward the third aisle of empty shelves, silently praying the man wouldn’t hear her moving.

“Sir—”

“I’m *not* going to ask again.”

Holly closed her eyes. *Please, Mom, just do it. Read my mind and just do what he wants you to do.* She took another careful stride forward, reaching the middle of the aisle, her finger flexing along the curve of the rifle’s trigger guard.

“Okay,” Jean breathed. “Okay. Listen— take what you need. Just don’t hurt us.”

“Toss it over. Pistol first, then the rifle.”

“I—”

“*Toss them!*”

Her mother cleared her throat and the metallic clatter of a pistol hitting the linoleum floor sounded a moment later, followed by the scrape of someone picking it up. “Rifle next.”

There was a long moment of hesitant silence and Holly inched forward again, ducking low, her back aching with the pain of its deepened haunch. A slip of strap over shoulder, then another rustle, then finally a clatter as the rifle struck the ground near where the pistol had a few seconds previously. There was yet another scrape as the mysterious man picked up the weapon and slung it over his own shoulder.

“Any other weapons?”

“N— none.”

“You sure? Lift your shirt.”

“Don’t make me do this.”

“Lift your damn shirt!”

Jean sighed and Holly moved forward again, the end of the aisle just ahead, its bare shelves scantily illuminated by the moon glowing through the broken window of the storefront. Her heart crawled up into her throat, the steady, increasing rhythm of its hammer throbbing along the arteries of her neck. The end of the aisle stood just ahead, which would open up into the larger storefront and Holly twisted, pointing her ear toward the sound of the man’s voice. Within the silence, her mother must have done what the man asked because he hadn’t asked again.

“Happy?” Jean’s voice was a ragged croak.

“Nah. Ain’t no such thing as happy. Not anymore. Alive is about the best we can hope for.”

“Then do me a favor and just leave. You have our weapons. Just— leave.”

“Look, it ain’t like I want to do this, lady, okay? I got mouths to feed, too, and way I see it, my mouths are more important than yours.”

“What gives you the right to make that judgement?”

“This does.”

Holly could imagine the man gesturing with whatever weapon he held in his hands. Whatever weapon that was, Holly had to assume it paled in comparison to the one she was holding. So, she advanced again, paused by the end of the aisle and rose just slightly, ensuring she still remained behind cover.

“Backpacks.”

Holly rose a bit more, the butt wedged into the crook of her arm, her attentive listening pinpointing the man’s approximate location.

“Backpacks! *Right now!*”

Holly couldn't wait. She swung up and around, wheeling the rifle left and pumped the trigger. The M4 erupted, a sudden burst of automatic fire, the setting for three round burst sending muzzle flash illumination streaking through the store front. The man's desperate, anguished cry was drowned out by the metallic chatter of the fire, though Holly's unpracticed grip lurched left, and she missed her target, sending the rounds hammering into the far wall about a foot to the man's right. He scrambled back, face pale and eyes wide in the moonlight, nearly tripping over the curb at the front door. Holly shifted, bringing the M4 right, finger touching the trigger. Three more rounds exploded from the barrel, but the intruder was sprinting away, across the parking lot, her second volley raking chips of broken brick from the wall where he'd been standing moments before.

She sprinted forward, running toward the doorway, rifle held firm, then pushed out into the parking lot, the retreating silhouette of the man growing smaller as he scampered across Route 551, toward the trees on the other side of the road. Holly centered the barrel of her rifle on his back, finger caressed the trigger, but she didn't pull. She couldn't pull. And then, he was surging through the trees, vanishing from view, consumed by the rural New Jersey wilderness. As the echoes from her gunfire faded, her haggard, rough breathing filled the silence as she desperately tried to swallow down her thrashing heart and calm her raw, inflamed nerves.

“Sorry,” she gasped. “I'm sorry. I couldn't shoot him in the back. I just— I couldn't.”

“Holly, it's okay, it's okay, really, it's okay.” Jean spoke in rapid succession, her words tumbling from parted lips. She swarmed Holly, wrapped her arms around her shoulders and held her tight. “You did good. You saved us, okay? You saved all of us.”

Holly nodded against her mother's embrace, thankful that everyone was safe and alive while simultaneously wondering what they would do without the weapons to defend

themselves. They separated and Jean gripped Holly by the shoulders, looking long and hard at her daughter's face.

“Do you want to stay here for a bit? To try and relax your nerves?”

“No. We should keep going. We have to keep going.”

“You're sure?”

“I'm positive.”

Jean nodded, her mouth lifting in a soft, prideful smile. “Okay, then. Let's keep moving, everyone, and please— be on your toes.” As a group, they left the small store and ventured back out into the darkness, continuing north toward what mysteries lay beyond.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

There were too many hallways, even as small as the hospital was and Scout found herself turned around, revisiting a section of the building she'd already visited an hour before. Somehow, she'd managed to navigate the myriad corridors without being spotted, moving with a stealthy grace, dipping into rooms and around corners as other people approached. Approaching yet another intersection, she moved slowly, desperately trying to avoid her boots squeaking on the grungy tile. Pressing her shoulder to the wall, she glanced around and down a branching corridor, positioning herself so both she and her backpack were concealed behind the wall.

Ahead was another empty hallway, a red *EXIT* sign pointing with an arrow to the left, a sign that might have been illuminated at one point, back when electricity was a thing. Creeping around the corner, she walked forward, staying close to the wall, her eyes tracking up and down the eggshell-colored walls, searching out doorways she could use to hide if necessary. Patterned trim lined the right wall, a distinctive decor that she hadn't remembered seeing before. For longer than she could recall she'd been making her way through the hospital, looking for Everett, but she'd had no luck locating him so far. That was bad luck she was desperately hoping would change in the next few minutes. Buried deep within Central Glades Memorial Hospital, she hadn't come across an exterior window recently, so she'd lost perspective on what time of day it was or how light it was outside.

The sun was still out, that much was clear, the ambient light throughout the corridors told her that much. But she was

desperately afraid of the sun going down while she remained inside the hospital, and that she'd be forced to navigate, locate Everett, and extract him in the middle of the night. As she reached the next intersection, she heard another pair of voices speaking from down the right-side corridor. Freezing at the corner, she held her breath and tilted her head a bit, to listen in on whatever conversation might be happening.

"He's stable. Surprisingly. That level of trauma, the fact that we stabilized him at all is a miracle."

"We didn't stabilize anyone, Sofia, *you* did. I'm not sure what we would have done without you here."

"Cooper, seriously. You don't need to artificially inflate my ego. Any of my peers in Miami would tell you it's inflated enough."

Scout took a chance and peered precariously around the edge of the wall, dropping to a low crouch. A woman and a man stood in the hallway, both wearing doctor's scrubs, and Scout was pretty certain the man was the same as one of the men she'd seen the previous night when she'd dropped Everett off in the first place.

"Well, it's well-deserved."

"I'll take your word for it." She leaned against the wall, tipping her head back, her eyes easing closed. Scout noticed for the first time that some sort of kerosene lantern stood on a nearby filing cabinet that was pressed to the wall of the hallway, shining a flickering light throughout the corridor.

"I can't believe they want to uproot us." The male doctor sighed and bent over, pressing his palms to his thighs. "For better or worse, this has been my home."

"Just think of all the good we can do in a place like Fort Lauderdale. So many more people that need us."

"We've had our hands full here. We've saved lives, Sofia."

"We can save more." She shrugged, seemingly unbothered by the upcoming relocation.

“You really don’t care, do you? That the government wants to step in and just tell us what to do?”

“If what they’re telling us to do is going to help people, then no, I don’t care. Look, Cooper, no offense, but if U Health had still been standing, I probably would have already found my way back there. I’m a doctor, I got into this profession because I believe my mission is to save lives. The more of that I can do, the better.”

“I get it. I don’t disagree. I guess I just see it a little differently.” He sighed and stood upright again, looking toward Scout. She withdrew, clamping her breath in her lungs, locking her legs, bracing herself for a shout of alarm. But none came. Instead, the male doctor kept talking. “These are my friends and neighbors. What if they’d taken us to Fort Lauderdale three days ago? Who would have helped the GSW in room one? Who would have helped the crocodile attack in room four?”

Room four. Scout committed that to her memory.

“I understand what you’re saying. But how many people in Fort Lauderdale have died in the past two days? What makes the lives here any more important than the ones there? Who knows, if we’d been there the past few days, maybe we would have saved five or ten lives instead of these two?”

“False equivalence fallacy, Sofia.”

“It all is, Cooper. We can only do what we can do and the way I see it, heading to Fort Lauderdale is going to allow us to do more good for more people. That can’t be considered a bad thing.”

Scout peeked back around the corner to see Cooper nod and shrug, evidently giving up the argument.

“Now, come on,” Sofia continued, “let’s go to the cafeteria. See if we can scare up some potato chips or something.”

“You mean see if Stan will let us have some potato chips, right?”

“Won’t it be nice to not have to deal with those guys anymore at least?” The two of them walked down the hallway, then rounded a corner and vanished, their voices dwindling to silence along the way. Releasing her held breath, Scout strode forward, moving around the corner, and advanced on the nearby exam room, the door positioned in the wall to her right. She eyeballed the small, square plaque that was screwed into the wall to the right of the doorway.

Room 01

The door stood ajar, and she froze there for a moment, glancing in, just to be sure the doctor’s hadn’t gotten the room numbers mixed up. A man was in the bed, his back elevated with an angular mattress perched in an uncomfortable looking seated position. His head lolled to one side, his eyes closed but as Scout looked at the man’s face, her eyes slowly drew wide, peeling into a gaping stare. Almost immediately, she recognized the man’s face, even with his closed eyes and his sideways profile— it was a face she was pretty sure she’d never forget as long as she lived. It was the man she’d shot with the rifle as he stood over Everett, preparing to kill him. It wasn’t Mack, but one of Mack’s friends and he was perched in a hospital bed, injured, but very much still alive.

The man stirred slightly, grimacing as he adjusted his position and Scout lurched forward, desperate to remove herself from the doorway before he opened his eyes. She moved along the wall, swallowing hard, even as his voice carried from the room.

“Who’s there?”

She ignored the question and strode forward, as quickly as she dared without making too much noise. The weight of her backpack threw off her balance somewhat, but she remained upright and propelled herself forward, almost running, pure, frozen ice forming in her blood. She had to find Everett, she had to find him and get him out of there as soon as humanly possible. If Mack’s friend found out he was here, Scout wasn’t sure what he might do, but it wouldn’t be good.

Slowing as she came to another intersection, she saw another doorway ahead, though the door itself was closed. Pausing, she held her place, letting her breath settle back into her lungs, willing her racing pulse to drift back into an even keel. Exhaling, then inhaling, she steadied herself and took a few steps forward, hearing no approaching footsteps or whispered conversation. She reached the door and looked at the spot to the right of the frame.

Room 04

She sucked in a breath, pinched it off with her teeth and locked it down, standing firm and frozen in the hallway outside the room. The hospital descended into a strange, still silence, though she had the unnerving sensation that she was being watched. Glancing left and right, Scout saw nobody within view and still heard nothing, so she gently touched the door handle, closing her fingers around its cool, smooth surface. Gently, she twisted the handle down, releasing the lock, then pushed it open, stepping inside, swiftly shutting the door behind her. There were no outward facing windows and the moment she shut the door, the room had fallen into darkness, a dim light that revealed very little about her surroundings. She saw a rumped form within the sheets on the bed, and the vague outline of a counter, filing cabinet, and assorted other medical equipment, but that was it.

She peered at the body in the bed, unable to make out facial features or anything distinctive, then glanced around the room, looking for anything she could use to light her surroundings. There were no kerosene lanterns like the one she'd seen out in the hallway and no other potential light sources that wouldn't require electricity, so she slowly slipped her backpack from her shoulder and set it on the floor, crouching low beside it. It took her a few moments to dig through the items inside and close her fingers around a flashlight, which she withdrew eagerly. For a long moment she stood at the foot of the bed, staring at the form within, unsure if she wanted to take the risk. If she turned on the flashlight to look at the man in the bed and it wasn't Everett, they could sound an alarm that would bring everyone running.

But it was a chance she had to take. Her trembling thumb moved to the recessed switch on the flashlight, and she pressed it down, shining a pale beam of white light from the rounded end of the light in her hand. A broad band shone from the end, carving through the dim light, its circular glow falling upon a face within the bed.

Everett's face.

Scout choked quietly, her throat constricting as she swallowed down an exclamation of relief. Even as she did so, the eyes blinked, squinting tightly against the light, a deeply furrowed scowl forming on the familiar face.

“Get that damn light out of my eyes.” It was a guttural growl of disgust and Scout very nearly wept in response.

“Everett?” Her voice was a breathy exhale. “Everett, it’s me?”

“Me who?” He held up a hand, shielding his face, wincing as he moved. Grunting, he pushed up on his elbows, drawing himself into a pained seated posture, glowering out at her from the shadows. “Scout? Is that you, girl?”

“Y—yes. It’s me. I came for you.”

“Came for me. You dumped my ass here in the first place.” He shook his head as Scout lowered the light so it wouldn’t shine directly in his eyes.

“I didn’t know what else to do. I thought you were going to die.”

“Still might.” He gingerly touched one of the jagged, sewn shut scars on his chest. “Hurts like a bastard.”

“But you’re alive.”

“If you call this living.” He glanced around the hospital room, then ran fingers through his tangle of pale hair. “How the hell you think you’re getting me out of here, girl? Throw me over your shoulder?”

“I— I don’t know, but I need to. They’re taking everyone here to Fort Lauderdale.”

“Fort where?” This caught his attention, and he jerked upright, then grimaced, exhaled a pained breath and settled back down. “I am way too old for this.”

“There are a bunch of soldiers here. They showed up last night and this morning. Fort Lauderdale needs help, so they say they’re forcing everyone here to go to the hospital there. I don’t know when they’re planning on moving, but I’m guessing it’s soon.”

“Patients too?”

“I don’t know. I think so? At least the ones that are seriously hurt.”

“I’m fine.” He reached across his pale body and ran fingers along the stitches at his left ribs, yanking his fingers back as a flare of pain ignited at the touch. “Damn reptiles, I swear.”

“My dad always used to tell me, you play with fire, eventually you get burned.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I live near crocodiles so I’m eventually going to get bitten? That makes no sense, kid.”

“I think it does.” Scout shrugged.

“I’m sure you do.” He closed his eyes and rested his head back, exhaling through his nostrils. “So, tell me again, how are we getting out of here?”

A slice of light fell upon Everett, an expanding rectangle and Scout wheeled to the right, eyes wide. Framed within the now-opened doorway was a narrow silhouette, female, by the looks, shoulders draped in a long, white lab coat.

“Who are you?” The words expelled from the woman’s lips and Scout recognized her voice immediately.

“Sofia! That’s your name. I heard it.”

“What? Who? I don’t—” the doctor stammered, her head shaking. “How did you get in here?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Everett groaned, “worry about how you’re helpin’ us get out.”

“I will do no such thing. You suffered several deep lacerations. I sewed you up, but you’re in no condition to go anywhere.”

“No kidding. Especially not Fort Lauderdale.” Everett started to move his legs beneath the sheets, draping them over the edge of the bed. He pressed hands to the mattress, holding himself upright, his breath coming hard and uneven.

“Fort— you heard about that?” Sofia turned to Scout and the girl nodded.

“I heard people talking about it. He has a home. It’s here. I’ve come to take him back.”

“It was you, wasn’t it? Who dropped him off last night? How old are you?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Scout almost spat. “I just need you to help me get him back home.”

“That ain’t gonna happen, kid. Not on my watch.”

The woman doctor twisted as a larger shadow emerged from behind her. Scowling teeth were pressed together between an oval of pursed, angled lips within a broad, hard face.

“Stan,” Sofia lifted her palms.

“Shut it, Doc,” the man growled in response. He pushed past her and clutched Scout around the narrow length of her arm. “You’re coming with me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Scout was smart enough to know when not to fight back and she let the man named Stan drag her through the hallway, then push her into another exam room, the second one empty, save for the bed, chair and desk. Stan shoved forward and released her arm, sending her stumbling backwards until her back struck the bed, painfully halting her backwards momentum.

“What exactly are you doing here, kid?”

Scout stood, back pressed to the bed, her arms behind her, palms bunched within cotton sheets.

“I need to take him home.”

“Him? Him who? The old man?”

Scout nodded.

“Who is he to you?”

“Nobody. Just a friend.”

“A friend. He’s old enough to be your grandpa, kid. Is he your grandpa?”

“No. He’s just a friend.”

Stan palmed the door to the exam room and pushed back, closing the door behind him, shrouding them both within the tight confines of the room. For the first time, Scout noticed he’d been holding a lantern in his left hand, and he set it on a nearby filing cabinet, then twisted the dial, illuminating a flickering flame within its rounded, glass chamber.

“What’s a teenage girl doing with a seventy-year-old friend?”

“He saved my life, okay?”

Stan considered the response, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back against the wall. One booted foot tapped restlessly against the tile floor. “You got parents?”

Scout bit her lower lip, applied enough painful pressure to focus her attention on that rather than the storm of emotion forming within her mind. All she wanted to do was get Everett and take him home.

“Kid?”

“Yes.”

“Where are they?”

Scout wasn’t sure how to answer that question. One lesson her father had always taught her was to keep information to herself unless she absolutely had to share it. She had no desire to share anything with the man who stood before her.

“Listen, I’m not asking you complicated questions. Where are your parents?”

“My mom— she’s coming for me.”

“Coming for you? What the hell does that mean?”

“She’s not here, she’s far away. I was here with my dad, and my dad—” her voice broke off, the words turning jagged in her throat. Stan tilted his head, scrutinizing her, but his face showed zero remorse or emotion.

“He dead? Your dad?”

Scout swallowed, but didn’t answer, glancing away from the mean-looking stare. Something told her that Stan couldn’t care less whether her father was alive or dead.

“Okay, that answers that.” He sighed, then pinched between his brows, squinting tightly. “So, what have you been doing? Just running around with that old man?”

“He saved my life, I told you.”

“Yeah, I got that. I’m trying to fill in the blanks here. An old coot like that, he doesn’t do nice things just because he feels like it. Usually guys like that, they expect something in return.”

“It’s not like that.” For reasons Scout couldn’t explain her guts squirmed like snakes were writhing around inside. “I just want to take him back home.”

“What happened to him?”

“What do you think? He got attacked by a crocodile. I— I couldn’t take care of him myself, otherwise I would have. I probably should have.” She glanced away, immediately regretting her decision to bring Everett to the hospital in the first place.

“So, this old guy, he helped you out of the kindness of his own heart and now you’re returning the favor. Got it.”

Scout sniffled, dragged a chair out from the desk and thumped down into it, suddenly without the strength to keep standing. She felt naked without her backpack or weapon, but Stan had swept her out of the room so quickly, she hadn’t had a chance to grab anything, which was, of course, just how he’d intended it.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say?”

There was a second chair that rested against the wall to the left of the door Stan had forced closed. He pulled it over, turned it around and sat down, draping his arms over the seatback. “I’m just trying to help you.”

“Help me? Shoving me into this room and interrogating me is helping me?”

“If you’re in trouble, I need you to tell me so I can help you.”

“The only trouble I’m in is from you.” Venom soured her words. Stan glowered at her, his narrowed, steel-glint eyes burning twin holes in her. His hair was close cropped, though starting to show signs of not being cared for since the fires had

begun. He wore a stained t-shirt from what appeared to be a minor league baseball team, a ragged hole exposing a swath of tanned flesh beneath. His arms were muscular, but thin, coils of narrow sinew crossed over each other along the back of the chair. Lingering, stale cigarette smoke and sour body odor thickened the air around him and had filled the tight confines of the room as well. The textured handle of a pistol was plainly visible tucked into his waistband, though he didn't have a rifle with him as he had the night before. Uncrossing his arms, he rubbed at his temples, shaking his head as his glinting eyes pressed closed.

After taking a moment to formulate the next question in his head, he lowered his hand and fixed her, yet again, with an unrelenting glare.

“We have a patient here,” he said in a low voice. “Gunshot wound. Said he was attacked by an old man and a girl. I don't suppose you know anything about that, do you?”

Acid burned in Scout's throat, her stomach curdling into a mixture of fear and body odor induced nausea. “I told you. He got attacked by a crocodile and I brought him here.”

“So, the two of you haven't been involved in any sort of gun violence? If I bring that guy with the gunshot wound into your friend's room, he won't recognize him, right? He won't recognize you?”

Scout shrugged. “It's a small town. Everyone knows everyone.”

A thin, knowing smile creased Stan's lips. “Good save, kid. Good save.” He leaned back a bit, unfolded his arms and linked his fingers in his lap, between his stomach and the seatback. “Pretty soon you're not gonna be my problem, anyway. I don't know why I care.”

“Whose problem will I be?”

“Hell if I know. You won't be mine. That's all I care about.” He shoved the chair forward and stood just as a rapping sounded at the door, a repeated pounding of frantic knuckles.

“Stan?” The voice was muffled from the other side, but Scout recognized it all the same. The door opened immediately afterwards, and Sofia stepped in, looking worriedly at Scout first, then turning an accusatory stare toward Stan. Beyond her, a pair of men dressed in camouflage were in the hallway, neither of them looking especially impressed with the situation. “You can’t just march her in here and interrogate her. She’s a kid!”

“You heard what that gunshot victim said, same as me.”

“I don’t care what he said. We don’t close teenage girls in a locked room and give them the waterboard treatment.”

Stan turned his palms up. “We were just having a conversation.”

“Are you all right, sweetie?” Sofia stepped to Scout and hunkered down, pressing a calming hand to one shoulder. She tilted her head, looking up into her eyes.

“I’m fine. I just want to go home.”

“And where is that? Where is home?”

“Yeah. Where’s home? Tell us that, would you?”

“Butt out, Stan.” Sofia remained crouched, looking at Scout.

“Let me take Everett. We’ll leave. You won’t see us again.”

“Honey, I’m not sure we can do that. Everett is still in bad shape. He may think he’s okay, but if he moves around too much, he could tear out those stitches and some of them are on the inside, do you understand? If he tears those— there won’t be anything you can do.”

“He can’t go,” she said, looking past Sofia and toward the soldiers. “They can’t take him. He’s got a home.”

“I understand. But he also needs medical attention.”

“Not in Fort Lauderdale.”

Sofia turned slightly, looking back at the two soldiers, who stood rigid, looking unbothered by the emotion in the room.

“That might be the only choice.”

“Then I’ll take him.”

“We can’t let that happen.” One of the soldiers stepped forward, shaking his head. “You need a support system. You can’t just take him out into the woods and hope you can make him better.”

“I don’t *need* a support system.” Tears stung the corners of Scout’s eyes, and it took everything she had to keep them at bay. Her chest filled with a rigid heat, her fingers closing into fists. The truth was, she did need support, but she didn’t need it from them, that was for sure.

“Look,” Sofia stood and took a step toward the two soldiers, “we can figure this out. We have to figure this out.”

“There’s nothing to figure out, Doc. We’re taking you all to Fort Lauderdale. It’s not optional.”

“Last I knew, this was a free country.” Scout’s jaw ached from how hard she was clenching it.

“Last you knew was a long time ago,” the soldier replied. “We have obligations now. Obligations to do what we can do to protect who’s left. Heaven knows there aren’t many.”

The words sent a chill down Scout’s spine, drawing her into a straighter posture. There aren’t many left— a few simple words, the weight of which felt almost crushing.

“She just lost her father,” Sofia whispered. “Have some grace.”

“All the more reason for her to come with us. There’s a place we can take her, a place where she’ll be safe.”

“I am safe,” Scout interjected. “I was.”

“Were you safe when you and your old man friend got into a gunfight?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Scout’s scream echoed within the tight confines of the exam room. “He saved my life!”

“I bet he did.”

“Stan, you are not helping.” Sofia shook her head.

“Listen,” the soldier said, exhaling. “We’re not going to solve this now. We leave for Fort Lauderdale tomorrow, so you need to get her in line and get her ready to accept it. It’s for her protection, her and her old man.”

A wet streak sliced down the gradual curve of Scout’s cheek, her struggle to hold back her tears breaking down, if only temporarily.

“Find a place for her to stay tonight. Feed her, get her some water, we’ve got rations in the Humvee. But like I said, tomorrow we’re leaving, like it or not. This isn’t a discussion.”

Sofia nodded and Stan smirked as he pushed past her, back out into the hallway, vanishing a moment later. The soldiers remained stoic, not moving too far, just taking a step back, while making sure they were still keeping their eyes on both Sofia and Scout.

“Come on,” Sofia said, extending a hand. “At the very least, I can let you spend the night with your friend. Okay?”

Scout sniffed and scooted off the chair, then walked forward, completely disregarding the doctor’s offered hand. She moved out into the hallway and made her way back toward Everett’s room, doing everything in her power to hold back the flood of tears that begged to be released.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Holly could hardly believe what she was seeing. For several hours, they'd navigated rural New Jersey, making their way north, then east, then north again until they finally came upon Deepwater, an urban sprawl covering the eastern edge of the Delaware River, pressed up against the border between New Jersey and Delaware. The majority of their travels had been without incident, though the walk had been long and tiring, covering nearly twelve miles over a period of over four hours. They'd stopped only twice, once to take a small break and once because they'd stumbled upon a convenience store that had only been partially ransacked. Finding a few bottles of juice and more scattered junk food, they'd added that to their coffers, making sure to only eat and drink what they absolutely needed to continue walking.

As the sun made its relentless approach toward dusk on the western horizon, Holly paused in the middle of Hawk's Bridge Road, a two-lane highway that crossed above the New Jersey Turnpike. Along the turnpike below, cars littered the pavement, stalled end-to-end and side-to-side, with only sparse, narrow gaps separating the countless vehicles filling the highway, turning into an extended parking lot more than a commuter path. Holly's fingers curled around the guardrail as she looked west, more smoke churning from the distance, a thick wall of darkness, like an encroaching shadow demon consuming everything within its boiling gullet.

"Holly? We need to keep moving."

“Is that Wilmington?” Holly lifted her chin toward the distance. The smoke was so dark and thick, it resembled an earthward lightning cloud more than actual smoke. There was a distinct, acrid, almost sour tang in the air, the breeze and smoke fouling the air.

“It’s the chemical plant,” Penny said quietly, almost recoiling as she scanned the smoke-filled horizon. “I don’t think we want to smell that smoke.”

“Wilmington is definitely in that direction.” Once again, Jean withdrew her map and spread it out on the railing ahead of them both. She tapped her fingers along the bridge crossing the turnpike, then trailed it along the distance between where they stood and where the bridge was. “We need to cross the turnpike, then cut west and walk alongside it. We can cut through these trees here and make a straight line, though eventually we’re going to run into the main population center of Deepwater. I don’t like that idea much.” She blew out a breath, puckering her lip so it would move the hair from her eyes. “If we stick to the edge of the Salem Canal here, use that as a landmark, that will take us right where we need to go.” She trailed her finger along the narrow line of the water and Holly nodded her understanding.

“Cross at this bridge?” She stabbed at a narrow bridge that crossed the canal and ended up just east of the bridge itself. She lifted her eyes, squinting toward the smoke. “I can’t even see the bridge through all of that.”

“I’m sure it’s there. Makes sense to me.” Jean folded the map back together, pushed it into an inside pocket, then the two of them stepped away from the guardrail and continued walking. Holly’s feet were sore, her legs aching from the strain of the continual movement. She considered herself to be in pretty good shape, but four and a half hours straight of walking was taking its toll, especially with the added pressure of alertness to potential threats. It was the constant state of awareness that brought forward the most mental exhaustion, though that was a fact of life in the days since civilization began to crumble.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Holly turned toward Penny. “That’s Deepwater?”

Penny nodded, her face an off-white shade, lower lip quivering, just a bit. She sensed the outward sign of emotion and pinched the lip between her teeth. Holly touched her shoulder in an attempt to reassure her, then they followed alongside Jean, who was leading the way.

The road traversed the turnpike and Holly scanned a few of the cars below, noting that a few of them had shadowed silhouettes within the windows, though it was tough to tell if they were awake or asleep— or something else entirely. She cleared her throat as the bridge lowered to almost ground level, a simple guardrail separating them from the wooded area to the west.

“Let’s hop the guardrail here.” Jean pointed to a particularly low section and all four of them hopped over the guardrail with Bucky barely managing to slink beneath, all of them moving seamlessly into the cluster of trees. They drifted left until the canal came into view through narrow gaps in the trees, then made a conscious effort to follow the track of the water, navigating the uneven terrain, threading between tree trunks, transitioning from urban walk to rural hiking. After several minutes of making their way through the trees, voices came from nearby and Holly turned, holding up a hand to signal to the rest of them that they needed to tread carefully and quietly. The trees narrowed to a funneled passage, just north of the canal, but just south of a large building, its roof littered with solar panels, junked out vehicles set in even rows alongside the main garage format building. Stopping for a moment, Holly peered through the trees, a group of men gathered amid the vehicles, having a conversation in voices too low for her to hear.

One of them held up a gas can, pointing frantically toward it while the other man shrugged as if confused. The first man thrust the gas can at him, thumping him in the chest with it so hard, the second man staggered back, fury etching the hard lines of his face. He planted one foot and lurched forward, pounding the man in the chest with both palms hard enough to

take him off his feet and knock him to the ground. The gas can sprang loose from his slackened fingers and tumbled onto the ground as he sprawled backwards. Turning toward the building, the second man placed a cupped hand to his mouth and shouted, his voice echoing loudly even as the first man, from his position on the ground, waved his hands, his head shaking wildly.

Three other men emerged from the garage, one of them with a crowbar in his hand, striding calmly toward the man on the ground who was begging and pleading, his head shaking rapidly side to side.

“We need to keep moving,” Jean hissed, clutching Holly’s arm. She dragged her forward, yanking Holly’s attention from the backyard scene just in time. Shaking her head to clear her mind, Holly fell in behind the others, moving back, deeper into the trees. A moment later, the trees ended, following the rounded area of someone’s well-manicured backyard. Or it had been well-manicured up until explosions tore open the guts of society itself. Slightly overgrown, some grass encroaching on neatly organized trim work, the lawn spread out behind a house and exterior garage, one car slotted into a driveway. Things appeared quiet and empty, no sign of lights, even against the dimly lit surroundings with no indication of activity from within.

“Let’s make it quick,” Jean hissed. She perched at the edge of the trees, keeping her attention focused on the yard ahead. “Holly, you first. Keegan, Penny, Bucky, you next. I’ll come last.”

“Are you sure—” Holly started but was immediately cut off.

“Go!”

Holly went, breaking into a low sprint, dashing along the rear edge of the backyard, not even slowing to look. Her booted feet thumped along the uneven grass, sore legs pumping as she propelled herself forward, her breath closed tightly within her lungs. Finally hitting another line of trees on the other side, she skidded to a halt and exhaled loudly, her

racing heart pumping a machine gun beat. Crouching low, she glanced toward the houses, but saw no signs of activity. Nodding firmly, she beckoned for Keegan and Penny, and the two of them charged forward, Bucky lumbering happily behind them as if they were playing a particularly fun game. A moment later they joined her in the trees and Jean brought up the rear, running faster than Holly had ever seen her run before, crossing the entire yard in seconds, reaching them in the trees, all four of them breathing hard, taking a moment to recoup.

Through staggered breaths, Jean gathered herself. “A few more of those, then there’s more trees, then the bridge across the canal. We’re almost there.”

“What happens once we cross the canal? Won’t we be smack dab in the middle of everything?”

Jean nodded. “Not much else we can do about that. If we want to get into Delaware, this is what we have to do.”

“I’m starting to think that maybe Noah’s idea of using the water was a good one.”

“It wasn’t,” Penny replied sharply. “This is the only way.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I just can.” Penny shrugged, peering out across the next backyard, which was sparse and also nicely manicured. To Holly’s surprise a kidney-shaped outdoor pool took up a chunk of the backyard as well, though since it was spring, it remained empty, its liner covered with a black tarp. They repeated the previous process, sprinting across the backyard, taking their turns, once again running across no resistance. They descended back into trees, walked for a moment, then sprinted across another backyard, the associated house just as empty as the ones they’d passed so far.

The four of them breathed hard as they followed the Salem Canal, walking through the brush, stepping over and around thrusts of roots and uneven stumps. Veering further left, the gaps in the trees widened and the canal became visible. Holly stopped, her mouth widening, a silent curse formed within her

lips, but not uttered out of respect for Keegan and her mother. Bodies floated in the canal, in plain view of where they stood, the humped backs of motionless corpses bobbing along with the gradual heave and ebb of the canal waters.

“Oh, no,” Jean whispered, her head shaking.

“What happened?” Keegan inched forward, staring through the trees, angling his head for a better view.

“Nothing good,” Holly replied, stepping back. If the canal had a few dead bodies in it already, she suddenly wasn’t sure she really wanted to get to the bridge for fear of what she might find there. She’d had her fill of dead bodies since the explosions had started, though something told her these weren’t the last ones she’d see. They continued through the trees, walking west, a muffling silence falling over the group. Conversation felt unnecessary and unwanted, a silent respect for the dead seeming more appropriate, all things considered. The sky was almost completely shrouded in a blanket of gray smoke and the closer they got to the river and the chemical plant, the stronger the air reeked, artificial and metallic.

“There.” Holly pointed a finger toward a brick building perched amid the trees, up a gradual slope from where they walked alongside the canal. She angled toward it, hiking up the hill, her sore legs throbbing even more as she pushed herself upward, breath stabbing in her lungs. Moments later, she reached another guardrail running alongside Route 130 and she paused there for a moment, looking right and left. To their right was a cluster of buildings, industrial office parks by the looks, tightly grouped with similarly designed structures. She saw nobody milling around outside any of them or alongside the road, then to the left, across the narrow bridge crossing the canal. Though there was nobody in view, the bustling buzz of activity seemed to resonate from the south, an underlying static charge of human activity that she found unsettling.

Jean appeared at her left shoulder, coiling her fingers around the guardrail to lean forward and get a better look. She said nothing, only nodded softly in understanding.

“For better or worse,” she whispered, shaking her head. She turned and looked back toward the kids. “Come on, Penny and Keegan. It’s now or never.” As a group, they filed over the guardrail and moved across Route 130, which seemed to head into the guts of the fire beyond. Continuing along the edge of the canal, the air continued to thicken with acrid smoke, and more fires dotted the landscape. It amazed Holly just how different some areas of the country were from each other— the swamplands of the Salem River Wildlife Management Area seemed almost tranquil, while the more urban clusters were being swarmed with active fires and a choking, low hanging smoke. Her eyes stung and watered, her throat raw and a lingering burn simmered in her chest. The air itself was hot, as if they’d stepped into a citywide sauna and she was beginning to fear for their respiratory health if they kept on going.

“Where are we going?” Penny drew near to Jean who crouched through tall grass along the northern shore of the Salem Canal. “That bridge was the one crossing the canal. That’s where we need to go. We need to get to the bridge.” Her voice was hushed, but quick, a quiet burst of concerned words. Jean craned her neck as they traversed the grass alongside the canal. Trees had thinned on the other side of Route 130, and they could see directly into the yards of several houses lined side-to-side. Canal Road had branched off from Route 130, and they followed the path of that quaint, tree-lined street, which might have been picturesque, if not for the haze of gray that filled the air.

“There’s a railroad crossing up here,” Jean replied, not looking at Penny, focusing her attention on the path forward and the nearby houses, just to make sure nobody was planning on sneaking up on them. “It’ll be less traveled than the main bridge.”

Holly studied Penny as she glanced across the canal, in the direction of the massive cloverleaf that twisted into the New Jersey Turnpike just beyond a row of trees on the opposite shore. Her fists opened, then closed, tension evident within the coils of her neck and the clenched bunch of her shoulders.

“It’s okay.” Holly placed a calming hand on Penny, who jerked impulsively, drawing away from her touch.

“You don’t have to tell me it’s okay,” Penny snapped back. “I’m used to this.”

She didn’t look especially used to it. If anything, she was even more anxious and nervous than Holly felt, though she wasn’t ready to state that out loud. The nearby yards empty and quiet, the group continued along until they came across the railroad tracks Jean had mentioned, which crossed Canal Road and led to a narrow bridge spanning the canal to their left.

“I’ll go first,” Jean stated, turning to the group. “Keegan, Penny and Bucky next, Holly you come up behind.” The four of them gathered together and made their way across the narrow railroad crossing, the flat span of canal rippling beneath them in the gentle breeze. Holly kept her eyes forward, centering the two kids and the dog in her field of vision. Sunlight edged precariously close to dusk, the dull haze of approaching evening casting everything around them in a low, muted hue, only emphasized by the thick smoke and clotted, chemical-laced air. Trees on the opposite shore converged around the railroad tracks, a closed fist of green leaves clutching the far end of their crossing. Shadows fell as they drew near, moving into the trees themselves, the gap wide enough to fit any passing train, but not much wider. They passed through the trees, a small, single-level ranch to their left, another house with a covered boat parked next to their driveway across the street, then emerged, still following the tracks.

None of them spoke, they simply followed the gradual curve of the railroad tracks, which cut through another section of trees, then opened up into complete and utter devastation.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jacob walked toward the generator which stood to the rear of the large converted barn, a gas can hanging from curled fingers, resting at his right hip. Lifting the can, he tilted his head to listen to the slosh of fuel from within, then unscrewed the cap of the generator and emptied the can's contents within the mounted fuel tank. His entire body was thick and heavy, the bone-deep weariness slowing every process into a meandering crawl. Easing the empty can down, he gingerly crouched and set it in the grass at his feet, then screwed the fuel cap back on the generator tank.

"Won't have to do that much longer, huh?" Pat appeared around the corner of the barn and nodded toward the generator. "How'd that go today?"

Jacob blew out a breath of air, his head shaking. "Exhausting."

"That's what happens when management turns you soft, huh?" Pat gave him a wink and Jacob rolled his eyes in response, though he didn't disagree. "Don't give me that look," Pat snorted, then patted the bulge of his stomach. "I'm the last one to call someone else soft." He lifted his eyebrows. "But, soft or not, I can assure you, I make a hell of a corn mash. You want a peek behind the curtain?"

"Sure." Jacob followed Pat around the corner of the barn to a narrow back door, which Pat opened, then beckoned Jacob to join him. At one point in its life, the barn that housed Neutral Territory had been built to house dozens of animals. According to Deena, the McDonnell's had once run a dairy

farm, and had, in essence, run that right up until the day Deena and her husband arrived in town, looking for property.

“Deena told you about the dairy cows, I assume?” Pat almost seemed to have read Jacob’s mind. They stood in a closed-off rear section of the barn, which, at one point, had been for storage, if Jacob’s assumptions were correct. However, it had been converted into a distillery at some point, probably even before the disaster had unfolded several days before. A trio of wood stoves provided ample real estate for heating the water needed to make the corn mash, with ventilation chimneys that ran the length of the wall, venting out into the open air at the rear of the barn. Several transparent, plastic containers were lined along a shelf, separated into full and empty, along with coils of plastic hose, an assortment of funnels and a number of different stills. Everything appeared to be meticulously organized, the floor neatly swept, the shelves bare except for the expected supplies, and to the left, bags of barley, corn, sugar and other items were stacked and sorted.

“As you can probably tell, this operation has been going for a while now. I used to bottle this stuff and sell it in most of the local grocery stores. Hell, I had a handshake deal with a guy in Roanoke who sold it in his package store. Whenever he’d stock it, they’d sell through within a week. It was a long trek between here and there, so he only swung by every couple of months, unless I felt like making a special trip. Believe it or not, I was getting myself a decent reputation. Helped to subsidize my retirement, if you know what I mean.”

Jacob stared at the assorted equipment in stunned silence, the operation appearing remarkably professional, given the circumstances. There were even a few industrial sinks mounted over metal shelves along the far wall, new plumbing extending from the drains, funneled back into an interior wall.

“These over here, they’re still fermenting.” Pat walked over to a shelf of plastic water jugs, the same kind that Jacob remembered seeing in the water coolers at his office job for Emerson Natural Fuel. Most of his officemates relished the free water and coffee the office offered them, but Jacob always

thought the tepid drink from his dingy, rust-marked water bottle tasted better, though he could never explain why. Amber liquid filled each of the containers, and each container was marked with a hand-written date, labeling when the fermenting had begun. “These things can ferment anywhere between a week or a month. I try to let them do it as long as possible, but sometimes I have to cut it short, depending on supply. Stuff we’re serving tonight I had to still after only two weeks of fermenting, but I’ve been working hard to get a backlog, so we can age it a bit more.”

“I’ll pretend to know what you’re talking about.” Jacob smiled, enjoying Pat’s enthusiasm for the process.

“I’ve been brewing this stuff since way before I was even old enough to drink it. It’s my pop’s recipe, and back in the day, he always seemed to need an extra hand. Mom didn’t like it much, but he recruited me pretty early. I still remember taking my first sip when his back was turned one day, then I immediately spit it out into a pile of dried hay. To this day I have no idea if he knew I’d done it, but I’m betting he did.”

“You seem to have acquired a taste for it now.”

“Honestly? Yeah, I drink some, but the distilling is more about providing for others than getting obliterated myself. Believe it or not, I’ve never been a big drinker. I just make it available for those who are. Doesn’t mean I can’t evaluate the quality, though. I’ve got a taste for the good stuff.”

Jacob walked over to one of the wood stoves and looked at the still that stood upon it, metal lid clamped down, a section of piping rising from the lid, a strange device hanging from one side of the pipe. At the apex of the pipe was a round thermometer.

“So, we’re heating this over medium heat,” Pat said, stepping up next to Jacob, then pointed toward the thermometer. “We need this to hit around 140 degrees. Once it gets somewhere around there, we turn on this condenser, which will start dripping, usually grab the first quarter cup or so and dump it, the head’s pretty nasty, ain’t nobody wants to

drink that.” He made a face, then leaned down to look at the thermometer. “Still a little ways to go.”

He walked over to another shelf where rows of empty glass jars were evenly lined up, side-to-side. “After we get rid of the head, we start collecting the body in these jars, making sure we keep the temperature around 180. We keep filling these jars until the temperature tops 200, at that point, we’re getting to the tail, which we have to dump just like we do the head.”

“When you say dump it, you mean that you literally dump it? Like down the drain?”

“Oh, hell no. We can’t waste it. Sometimes we recycle it by mixing the heads and tails into the next batch of mash, helps give us a bit more yield. I’ve also noticed some flavor differences depending on how much of the head or tail I recycle. The heads can also be used as sanitizer or weed killer, believe it or not.” Pete smirked and Jacob gave him a sideways look.

“So people are drinking weed killer.”

“Kinda. It can be a bit flammable, so we can use it to flame weed, but that’s sort of a lost art, a lost art that I ain’t found yet. So, I mostly just turn it over into the next batch.”

“Pretty amazing process.”

“Labor intensive. Good news is, though, a lot of it can be done without power. Wood stoves, gravity fed pumps for the plumbing. Granted, eventually we’re going to start running out of malted barley and sugar, but at the moment we’ve got enough to last months, if not a year or more. Guess it depends on how busy we get.”

“That first night I was here, there were what, a dozen people or so?”

“That’s about normal. But if what Deena said is true, you passed the word along to Teddy right? The guy who brought us the repeater and radio gear?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, word’s gonna spread, then, I’ll tell you that right now.”

“Are you okay with that?”

Pat exhaled, crossed his arms and surveyed the shelves of supplies that lined the various walls. “I think so. I mean, supplies are gonna last as long as they’re gonna last. Once it’s gone, it’s gone. But at least in the meantime we should be able to arrange some trades, maybe get some more folks around the farm to help work. That’s what we really need. Sure, we’ve got some stockpiles of food, leather, other materials, but what we really need is bodies. We need workers. We can only stretch the farm staff so much.”

“What about security? Still not all that worried about security?”

“I won’t lie. Knowing that Deena had a little run-in with the matron, that makes me a bit anxious. She’s got no love for Deena anyway, and she’s got some resentment for me, too, for selling out in the first place. She’s always been a nasty piece of work but being spiteful is a whole lot different than actually inciting violence.”

Jacob pictured the woman in his mind, flanked by her sons. She’d been a hard woman, that much was clear, her expression severe and intense. Deena had told him some horror stories of their interactions before the disaster, but it was impossible to say whether or not that underlying hostility would spill over into something worse.

“Tony on duty tonight?” Jacob checked the thermometer on the still.

“He is.”

“I’m thinking maybe you should have as many guys on duty as possible. You know, just in case?”

Pat shook his head and dragged his thick fingers through his thinning hair. “I hate living like this, Jacob, I ain’t gonna lie. I miss the days when neighbors were neighbors and the biggest disagreement you might have was over someone

stealing a parking space or whose college football team won the rivalry game.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking those days are long gone.”

Pat lowered his hand and was silent for a long moment, a pensive look on his face as he stared at the shelves of supplies that had governed his life for so many years. “It’s a damn shame that after over sixty years of life, I’m going to live out the rest of my days in a world like this. In some ways I guess I kind of wish the Lord had taken me before this all happened. Not trying to be melancholy, and I definitely ain’t suicidal, but as these tumors eat away at my lungs, I just— I can’t help but think.”

“I, for one, am glad you stuck around, Pat. Wouldn’t have met you otherwise.”

Pat chuckled. “I guess every storm cloud does have a silver lining, eh?” He turned and gave Jacob a solid pat on the arm, then stepped past him and walked toward the exit.

“It was exactly what I thought. Exactly.” The woman Pat only called the Matron stood at the peak of the grass-covered hill just north of the old McDonnell farm. Flanked by rows of trees, she peered down the steep slope, lowering the binoculars from her eyes. “People working the field. It looks as though they’re laying gas lines to power a generator. They’ve got a nightclub of all things. A blasted night club.” Ms. Parkland snarled the words, handing off her binoculars to the thuggish man standing at her right shoulder. He stood a good head taller than his mother, his fingers thick like kielbasa gently closed around the binoculars. He grunted his muffled understanding and slotted the bino’s into a bulky pocket on his dark-colored cargo pants.

“Hand those over, Laz.” Another large man stepped up next to his broad-shouldered brother, extending a hand. Lazarus Parkland grunted again, slipped the binoculars from his pocket and handed them back to his older brother. Stepping

away from his mother and younger brother, Graves Parkland pressed the circular reticules to his narrowed eyes, angling the binoculars along the back edge of the barn. “They’ve got a fire going.”

“I saw that,” his mother replied sharply. “Wasn’t sure what they were doing with it.”

“I can tell you what they’re doing with it. They’ve got a damned bear. I can see its head. They’ve butchered most of it, preparing it for a feast tonight, I’m thinking.”

“How big?”

Graves lowered the binoculars and lifted his eyebrows. “Big enough.”

Ms. Parkland held out her narrow-fingered hand and the binoculars were pressed back into it, cool and smooth against her palm. Twin breaths exhaled from her nostrils, and she ran her tongue over the smooth fence of her clenched teeth.

“They’re going to have protection. You know that, right?”

That’s what she loved about Graves. As the oldest of her many sons, he’d developed a keen mind while helping raise his brothers. His father, God rest his soul, had left the earth shortly after the birth of their youngest and Graves had to pick up a lot of slack. He’d done so without complaint and in those moments when Bedford was being honest with herself, he probably did a better job than her deadbeat husband would have. Her husband who’d drifted from dead end job to dead end job, who seemed useless at everything except putting babies in her womb. Still, she’d loved him, and she’d stuck with him, even if she did feel a bit of relief in the wake of his untimely demise.

In a way, he’d more than served his purpose, he’d given her a clan of protectors and enforcers, a crew of hard, tough, strong men more than happy to follow direction and to risk themselves to further her goals. She’d become a fixture in the St. Albans community and had been preparing a run at the local select board when everything had gone sideways. Rather than lament her poor timing, however, she only saw it as a

better opportunity. In the wake of the pipeline explosions, the city of St. Albans had only become more malleable in her hands, and she gave it a month, maybe less, until she was fully in charge. No more life of poverty, no more counting their pennies to make sure she could actually feed her growing family.

Places like Neutral Territory would be forced to pay a sort of tariff, a little slice off the top to ensure they could continue to operate. It was a tale as old as time, only instead of watching it unfold on her old television set, she'd be the one pulling the puppet strings. Of course, she wasn't lamenting the timing—quite the opposite. It was all going according to plan.

“We need McDonnell to know who's in charge,” she said flatly. “We need him to understand who he reports to.”

“No offense, Ma, but Old Man McDonnell has never been the ‘report to’ type. Not sure he's going to take that news very well.”

“That's a decision he'll have to make. Then,” the old woman continued, “he'll just have to live with the consequences.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Stop! Stop right here.” Jean hissed the command, raising her hand, head snapping back to reveal her narrowed eyes. The group of four had converged into a tight cluster as they neared the edge of the trees where the railroad tracks angled west. A full view of the scene beyond was like something out of a disaster movie, something that Holly struggled to believe, even though she saw it with her own eyes. Cars were stacked up along all lanes of the turnpike, a full eight lanes of backed up traffic. A few of the vehicles hadn’t stopped in time and from where they stood, Holly could see at least a half dozen fender benders, crumpled steel and buckled plastic pressed together into a mass of tangled wreckage.

Several doors stood ajar and motionless bodies were scattered about, face down, face up, many of them prone on one side beneath the growing thicket of smoke and soot. A young man sat upright, and Holly might have thought he was just relaxing against the side of a red sedan, except his head was lolled strangely to one side, his eyes wide and vacant, tongue protruding from between swollen lips. Here and there, bullet holes marred the sides of vehicles and the windshields, many of them puckered with round holes or gaping, jagged chasms of broken glass.

Several doors stood ajar and there were people literally everywhere. They lay on the turnpike itself, filling the narrow spaces between vehicles, on the shoulder, even on the grass running alongside 295. The deep, gray haze hung low and there was no way of knowing how long people had been there, some of them, Holly guessed, may have been there since the

first explosion ripped through the pipelines several days before. Just beyond the field of death ahead, a pair of military vehicles were twisted together, a collision crumpling both of them into a tangled mass of olive green metal and buckled, pale plastic.

“I don’t like this.” Keegan’s voice was a barely audible whisper.

“None of us do, buddy.” Holly tried her best to soften the edges of her voice, though she wasn’t sure she was successful. Thankfully Bucky’s training took hold and while a growl burrowed deep within the dog’s throat, he made no movement to disengage from Keegan’s side, remaining at his post next to his young master.

“The bridge is just over that way.” Penny pointed to her right and took a step forward. Holly lunged, claspng a hand around her shoulder and holding her in place.

“Wait,” she urged.

Penny snapped her head around, her young face shadowed in anger. “Let me go!” She wrestled her shoulder away. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m not saying you don’t. But we need to be careful. These people are dead, likely because of the chemicals in the air. We can’t just barrel onward, the air itself could be poison.”

A shadow of worry brushed the edge of Penny’s expression, a strange realization shaping her face, something she’d been trying to conceal, but could no longer hide.

“There are bullet holes, too. Raiders or rioters or something came through here, who knows how long ago.” Jean moved precariously along the edge of the turnpike, scanning their surroundings. Without weapons, save for Holly’s bare bones rifle, they had to proceed even more carefully than usual. “If they’re still here somewhere, they might—”

“They might what? Attack us? Look at all of these people. They won’t attack us, we’re just four more people added to the masses.” Penny shook her head.

“Four more people with backpacks. With supplies. Two women, a girl and a young boy. Some people might view us as easy targets.” Jean pressed her shoulder to the trunk of a nearby tree, peering out along the span of paved turnpike ahead.

“Can we follow this road?” Holly pointed toward a narrow street running alongside the canal to their right, parallel to the turnpike.

“No.” Jean shook her head. “The turnpike elevates as it heads toward the bridge, there’s no way to get from that road back to 295 before it crosses over the river.” Her gaze fixed on the wreckage of military vehicles on the other side of the road, studying them.

“Come on, let’s check out those vehicles.” Jean stepped away from the trees, moving toward the pavement at a cautious, measured pace. Holly nodded to Keegan and Penny, watching the two kids continue on as she brought up the rear. She fought the urge to let her eyes drift over the carnage alongside the vehicles, keeping them elevated and facing forward. Thankfully she saw Keegan doing the same, physically restraining himself from looking too hard at the death that surrounded them. Holly would have expected the air to be rank and foul, the sweet stink of decomposition souring their stomachs, but for better or worse, the smell of dead bodies was overwhelmed by the thick tinge of chemicals in the air. While there was a measure of relief in that, she couldn’t help but be concerned about what the continued exposure might be doing to their respiratory systems.

Pushing that thought aside, she followed the kids and her mother toward the twisted tangle of olive drab military vehicles, a pair of Humvees by all appearances which had been hammered into a single, malformed organism, without clear definition of where one ended and the other began. Jean stepped toward them and eased her head inside, scanning the vehicles’ interior, though she soon withdrew, shaking her head.

“I don’t see anything of value.”

Holly made her way toward the rear of the vehicles and searched in and around the Humvee as well. A backpack had been yanked from the back seat and strewn across the pavement, most of its contents yanked free. As Holly crouched low, she angled sharply left and stared beneath the Humvee, then saw a shadowed shape resting along the pavement, which she reached in and curled her fingers around. Drawing it out, her eyes were wide as she gazed at a gas mask, complete with intact respirators, twin tanks attached to an angular mouthpiece. She held it up victoriously and Jean nodded, tossing her a thumbs-up.

That was the lone bit of good news, however, as a search of the rest of the vehicles resulted in nothing of use or interest.

“It’s been picked clean,” Holly said, hooking the gas mask on her backpack and staring out over the field of abandoned cars, in the direction of the bridge, though the bridge itself was obscured by a wall of churning gray. “What do we do?”

“The only thing we can do, from my perspective.” Jean stared at the smoke. “We keep going. We keep going until we can’t.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Scout hadn't slept a wink and suspected she wouldn't, even though her body was telling her how late it was. Everett's small hospital room had no external facing windows and was clad in deep shadow, but even without visibility outside, the weariness that settled deep within Scout's marrow was enough to inform her about the hour of day. It was night, that much was clear, even if she couldn't actually see the moon or stars. The nice woman doctor had somehow convinced the soldiers to let her stay in Everett's room, which had a second, unoccupied bed, and though she'd been lying in it for a couple of hours, she stirred restlessly, unable to grasp the evasive prey of slumber. She wasn't sure she even wanted to sleep, however, relying on her brain to try and figure out a way out of the mess she'd found herself in. Judging by what Sofia had said, bringing Everett to the hospital had indeed saved his life, he would have likely died of internal bleeding otherwise, but that didn't make the grueling wait, surrounded by people who wanted to imprison her, any easier.

She'd acted out of desperation and that desperation had bought Everett some much needed time, but that same desperation might have imprisoned them. It had been the best of a litany of terrible options, though try as she might, Scout couldn't bring herself to feel good about it. Pushing herself upright, she swung her legs off the bed and sat there for a moment, poised on the edge. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, the vague shadows and shapes clarifying into gray-hued landmarks, including the rumpled form of Everett, shrouded beneath a blanket on the other bed a few feet away. Pushing

herself from the mattress, she hit the floor and made her way around the bed, walking toward the door. The door had clacked upon closing, clearly secured from the outside, but she tested the doorknob, nonetheless, knowing what she'd find. Sure enough, the door was firmly locked and wouldn't budge, the small exam room her defacto prison cell.

The fact that they'd let her stay with Everett seemed like a small favor, though a favor, just the same, even if he'd been asleep the whole time she was inside. Turning, her back to the door, she looked into the room in his direction, finding a small comfort in the gentle rise and fall of his shoulder, indicating that he was still breathing.

"You gonna stand there and watch me sleep all night? Giving me the willies, girl."

Scout started, sucking in a breath. "You're awake."

"I am now."

"Oh. I'm— I'm sorry."

Everett grunted and shifted on the bed, rolling over, pushing his covers off so he could hoist himself up on his elbows. His lips smacked and he tilted his head, his neck cracking with the motion. "Time is it?"

"I have no idea."

"How long you been in here?"

"A few hours maybe?" Scout shrugged and slowly made her way back to her bed, lifting herself up onto it and turning so she was facing Everett while seated on the edge. She leaned forward, crossing her arms over her bent legs. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore as hell." Even in the dim light, his movements were visible as he rubbed at his injured ribs, wincing a bit. "Even breathing hurts."

"According to Sofia you had internal injuries. Intestines, I think. They had to sew you up."

"Sofia? Who's Sofia?"

“The doctor. She— seems nice.”

“She the one who locked you in here?”

“No, that was the soldiers.”

Everett straightened, his posture stiffening. “Soldiers?” The softness in his voice sharpened, hard edges shaping the firm words. “Is that who’s taking us to Fort Lauderdale?”

“Yeah. I think so, anyway. I keep hearing them talking about it.”

“Why can’t they just leave us here?”

“The doctor thinks you still need monitoring. You need to be in bed for a bit longer to heal.”

“The doctor can kiss my pasty white—”

“Everett, ew, that’s gross.”

“Well, she can.” He grunted again and pushed himself gingerly upright into a seated posture. “Maybe we should just get out of Dodge.”

“Might be easier said than done. We’re locked in here. They already had a bunch of security here, now they’ve got like six or eight soldiers, too. We can’t just walk out.”

The silhouette of Everett’s head dipped, his chin tucking close to his chest. There was a defeated look to it, a sort of slump as if every ounce of resistance had bled out.

“I’m sorry, Everett.” Scout’s voice was quiet, almost inaudible.

“Sorry for what?”

“For getting us into this mess.”

There was a moment of tense silence, then the shadow turned toward her. “You saved my life, Scout. If my intestines were perforated like you said, I would have died otherwise. Maybe not right away, but I would have died.”

“But now we’re stuck here. We’re surrounded by men with guns who are going to force us to leave.”

“They can try.” There was defiance in his voice.

“I figured— maybe you’d rather die at home then live in Fort Lauderdale.”

“I don’t think it’s an either, or scenario, Scout. You made the right decision.”

Scout swallowed, an unexpected swell of emotion warming her chest and starting to crawl its way up her throat.

“As much as I’ve hated to admit it,” Everett continued, once again looking away from her, “but you remind me of her in many ways.”

“Her? Are you talking about your daughter?” Scout had heard the men who attacked them talk about Everett’s daughter. Something terrible had happened to her, judging by their conversation, though she’d never gotten the full story.

“Yeah.” The shadow nodded its head. “Missy. Her name was Missy.”

“Missy. That’s a nice name.”

“It was from my wife’s side of the family. Her aunt Melissa more or less raised her. Everyone called her Missy.”

Scout sat upright on the edge of the bed, not replying, giving Everett an opportunity to further elaborate. She didn’t want to pry, but to that point, Everett had been adamant that they wouldn’t be sharing their life stories. She wasn’t sure what had changed, but she wanted to be open to listening to whatever he had to share. After a full minute of silence, when Everett neglected to continue, Scout finally decided to speak up.

“What happened to her? Missy, I mean.” For a long moment, Everett didn’t reply, and Scout was worried she’d pushed her luck. But then, just as she was about to lay back down on the bed, he sighed, a low whisper of resignation.

“She died. Drowned. In the swamps.” He sighed again, his head tilting back. “I took her on a fishing trip. She was a nature lover, really just enjoyed being surrounded by it. So, I took her with me. Out into the Everglades. My wife hated the idea, said she was too young, too inexperienced. Said that when I get into fishing mode, I don’t always pay enough

attention to what's happening around me. I promised her that day would be different. Promised her I'd bring Missy back—along with a nice sized catfish for dinner.” He laughed a humorless cough of a laugh. “Didn't come back with either one.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Nothing for you to be sorry for. Me, I've got plenty to apologize for, and I've tried like hell to do just that. But no matter how many times I say I'm sorry, it isn't enough. I'll keep saying it for the rest of my life, hell, it'll probably be the last words I speak before I die. It won't be enough.”

“Where is your wife now?”

The Everett-shaped shadow shrugged its narrow shoulders. “She left soon after, not that I could blame her. At one point she moved to Tampa, but I heard through the grapevine she was actually leaving Florida entirely. That was years ago, I'm not sure where she ended up. Hell, with everything happening in the world, I'm not even sure she's still alive.”

“You haven't talked to her at all since then?”

“Not much. What was there to say? I killed our daughter. If I was her, I would have done the same thing.”

“It was an accident.”

“Accident.” Everett shook his head, saying the word with disgust. “I should have known better. There was no reason for it to turn out like it did. No damn reason at all.”

“Were you living in the cabin when it happened?”

“Nah. I moved out there after the divorce. Without Missy and without my wife, I had no need for human interaction. No need for so-called civilization.”

“So, you moved out into the swamps? Didn't that—remind you of her?”

“Every single damn day of my life.” Everett's silhouette turned toward her. Although his eyes weren't visible, the needle pricks of their stare probed her own. “Figured it was the least I could do to atone. I had to be punished for what I'd

done. What other punishment could there be other than reliving what had happened every time I step out my front door. It's nothing less than I deserve."

There was such distaste in his voice, such self-hatred that Scout was physically ill, her stomach burning with the acid of guilt and shame, even though it wasn't hers. Perhaps she shouldn't have pushed him— shouldn't have forced Everett to tell his sad story. But in some way, she was glad she had. He'd been so abrasive, so prickly, so anti-social, she'd started to blame him for his personality. Knowing what she knew about what had happened to his daughter helped put him in a better light.

"Don't you think you've paid enough? Maybe Fort Lauderdale is an opportunity to separate yourself from your past. Get a fresh start?"

"I don't need a fresh start. I don't want it. I want the last breath I take to be staring at those green waters that took my daughter from me. I want to stare the everglades in the eyes as I leave this world. That's the only way this ends."

"There's something to be said for forgiveness, even if the person you need to forgive is yourself."

"There's no room in my heart for forgiveness. Not for me or anyone else. I've lived long enough to see the best and worst humanity has to offer. Anyone who does something bad enough to need my forgiveness isn't going to get it."

"That seems harsh."

"Life is harsh." He turned back away from her again and seemed to have lost the desire to discuss the events of his past. Scout was conflicted, she'd been happy to hear him open up, though the more she heard him talk, the more she wondered if he'd ever find happiness again. He was a belligerent, hard-skinned old man, but he'd saved her life and somewhere, buried beneath that crusty exterior, she could sense something good. The more she tried to dig into that goodness, however, the more he tried to build up a wall around it. Without much else to say, she folded her legs, bringing her feet up onto the

bed, wrapped her arms around them and settled in for the night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Sofia stood outside the door to Room Four, arms crossed, one foot gently tapping on the tile floor. The voices from within the room had stopped and she remained poised out in the hallway, a lightning storm raging within her. What level of desperation did a teenage girl have to get to in order to drive her friend to a hospital and dump him on the front step, only to run away, then come back a day later to try and sneak him out? The whole thing seemed incongruous to her, a bizarre impossibility that if she'd seen it in a movie, she would have proclaimed the plot point ridiculous and unrealistic.

That was the world they were in, a world of the ridiculous and unrealistic, a world where a teenage girl is so desperate to save her friend's life that she risks death for a man she's only known for days. And what was she going to get for her efforts but a one way trip to Fort Lauderdale where she was likely to wind up in some refugee camp, locked away, force fed military rations and strict allotments of water, at least until it all ran out or the government arbitrarily decided another point on the map was more important.

Soft footfalls approached down the dimly lit hallway and Sofia turned, tension tightening her shoulders. When Cooper stepped from the shadows, she released her breath in a long sigh.

“Just you.”

“Yeah, just me.” He eyed the door, then glanced back at her. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You’re just standing out here minding your own business in a darkened hallway?”

“Maybe I just wanted some peace and quiet?”

“Next to the room that girl is locked in?”

Sofia rolled her eyes, then stepped away from the door and leaned back on the wall, her body giving way to exhaustion. “She deserves better, Cooper.”

“Better than what?”

Sofia looked up at him from where she was slightly hunched over. “Better than everything. Look at this world we’re leaving people like her. What are we even doing to fix it.”

Cooper leaned on the wall next to her, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. “The best we can? We’re saving lives, Sofia. Doing more than most.”

“Not enough. Especially for her.”

“What is she to you?”

“In reality, nothing. But she represents something, you know? Look, I never had kids, honestly, never even wanted to have kids, but I look at that girl and, I don’t know. What are they going to do, cart her off to Fort Lauderdale and lock her up? Let her live the rest of her life in some germ-infested refugee camp?”

“What would you have them do, let her wander off into the swamps? I’m not sure that’s a better alternative. At least in Fort Lauderdale she’ll have food and a roof over her head.”

“Will she? And for how long?”

“You’re letting this eat you up inside. It’s not our problem.”

“That’s so easy to say, but it’s not reality, Coop. I look at that girl and I feel a measure of responsibility. Believe me, I wish I didn’t.”

“You already helped to save that old guy’s life. Obviously, he means something to her, so in my mind, you’re doing what you can.”

“Did you see the look on her face when she heard about Fort Lauderdale? She just wants to take the guy home. Back to the cabin.”

“You said it yourself, Sofia, without continued medical attention to ensure he heals, things could go very badly very quickly. If he tears that incision and starts bleeding internally again it could lead to all sorts of complications.”

“And what about shipping him off to Fort Lauderdale. We don’t even know what things are like there. In his condition, he’s ripe for infection. Sepsis. Worse.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head, pressing her eyes tightly closed. “I just feel like there’s something more I should be doing. Some way I should be helping her more than I am. Her and Everett both.”

“Everett. So, you’re on a first name basis with him now?”

“I don’t even know his last name.” Sofia chuckled. “How are things with Doctor Greene?”

“Jordan? Okay, I suppose. He’s his typical grumpy self, not the least bit impressed at the idea we might be headed to Fort Lauderdale. You ask me, he might wait until those soldiers have their back turned and just take off.”

“Take off where? He’s been living here since this all started, right?”

“Sure. Like the rest of us, his home’s not really equipped to withstand something like this. Until recently, we at least had power, some sort of infrastructure. Food and water. Those resources are dwindling, though.”

“So how are you feeling about Fort Lauderdale? Starting to come around a bit?”

“Not even a little.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“I live in this small town for a reason, Sofia. I tried the big city life, I tried a residency at a larger hospital. I thought I was better than what this small town could offer, but it’s in my blood. It’s in my bones. This is where I belong.”

“Maybe it’ll just be temporary? This Fort Lauderdale thing?”

Cooper shook his head dismissively. “No way. I mean, sure it might be, but if anything, they’re going to shuffle us on to something bigger and worse. First stop Fort Lauderdale, next it’ll be Orlando or Tampa Bay. Miami is already a lost cause, but there are plenty of other places they could shove us, too.”

“They need people like us, Cooper. I think I’d rather have it that way than the alternative. At least we’re contributing to society, right?”

“Society. Right. As if that still exists.”

Sofia stared down at the floor, the memories of her trek down Route 27 still fresh in her mind. The congested traffic, the displaced and angry drivers, the sudden, metal twisting explosion. She’d heard the rumors about U Health being taken over by angry mobs of displaced people, people who were only looking for medical care, but who quickly turned violent. The sick and the injured who became the aggressors, perhaps out of desperation; not that it gave them the right to hurt, maim or kill. She wondered, not for the first time, how many of her fellow peers at U Health were even still alive, or if any of them had been shuffled off to Fort Lauderdale already. From what she’d heard, Miami had been fully written off, but she still didn’t understand what that truly meant. She wasn’t sure she wanted to.

“Do you smoke?” Cooper had fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket and held them in his hand. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get more of these, so the fact that I’m offering you one should be taken very seriously.”

Sofia shrugged. “Never smoked in my life. But hey, it’s not like there are enough cigarettes to fuel a bad habit these days. Hand me one of those bad boys.”

Cooper pinched a cigarette between his fingers and extended it toward her and Sofia plucked it, then turned it around, examining it as if discovering some ancient archeological relic. Together they stood and walked toward the exit so they could grab a few moments of fresh air and fill their lungs with nicotine.

“I thought they’d never leave.” Stan rounded the corner after giving the two doctors a few minutes to walk away, then paused and glanced back over his shoulder. “You coming?”

Two more men filed out around the corner behind him, all three of them with rifles slung over their shoulders. Stan wore his familiar t-shirt, the narrow muscles of his bare arms scattered with ornate tattoos, many of them of the hand-drawn prison variety. He scratched restlessly at his right forearm, clawing at the skin with the chewed off nails of his left hand. Anxious eyes darted left to right, peering through the dim shadows to ensure nobody else was lurking about.

“You sure we wanna do this, Stan? What with all the National Guard jokers hanging around?” The second man in line wore an old, brown jacket over denim pants, his steel-toed boots thumping on the tile as they made their way down the hall. To his left, the third man was mostly visible by the bright logo of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on his red sweatshirt, the skull and crossbones gleaming against a black backdrop.

“This is the last chance we got.” Stan paused by the next corner, then eyed the opened door to Room One which sat a few feet ahead. The man with the gunshot wound was in that room, a man that Stan really wanted to talk to, especially since that girl had arrived. But that would wait until later, they had a visit to make to the medication room first. Moving slowly and as quietly as possible, they strode past the opened door and

down the hall, then made another left turn. A few paces later, they reached the thick, blue door with the sign bolted to it that read Authorized Personnel Only. There was a combination lock on the door which had been disabled early into the disaster, giving Stan and the others unfettered access to the medications inside.

The fact that Stan and his crew were helping themselves to the meds was the worst kept secret at Central Glades Memorial Hospital, though Stan didn't much care. The doctors seemed willing to let him get away with it, so he was going to keep on coming back for more. However, the arrival of the military had put a bit of a crimp in his plans and for that reason, he'd decided that perhaps it was time for a more aggressive withdrawal. Stan had lived his entire life under the thumb of the government, watching as they bled his family dry, pushing and pushing until his father had finally broken.

In a way, there had been a measure of relief in the days following the pipeline explosions, a sense that the underlying pressure had released, allowing Stan to draw a breath. But the jackboots were back, they were back and already making their demands, and Stan wasn't about to let them take the one thing that had brought him some joy over the past several days. They'd put their lives on the line to force some semblance of security and control at the hospital, and they deserved their restitution.

"Watch those hallways." He nodded in both directions, toward the connecting hallways at each side. The other two men separated, making their way toward those two corridors, then stood watch, weapons at the ready. Although the combination lock was bolted to the door, Stan bypassed it with a master key, twisted and unlatched, then opened the door to the medications closet on the other side. Pausing for a moment to grab a paper bag from a shelf just inside the door, he fished a flashlight from one pocket and shone it into the darkened belly of the storage room.

After locating what he was looking for, he immediately went to the treasure trove of pain medications and simply swept what was left from the shelves into the bag. At first,

they'd staggered what they'd taken, only grabbing a little at a time. Not necessarily because they were worried about being caught, but if they took it all, they'd use it all and he wanted it to last.

Well, they no longer had that luxury. If they didn't take what belonged to them, the jackboots in camouflage would, and he wasn't about to let that happen. Moving through the room, walking the orb of pale white across the various shelves, he picked out certain medications and liberated them, shoveling bottles of pills into the bag until there was a solid heft to its weight. Bunching up the top of the bag, he rested it on the floor by the exit, then grabbed another empty and went back to work, spending a few moments in each section. Once he'd filled four bags, he crouched and removed a backpack from his shoulders, unzipped it and opened it, then shoved the bags of meds inside, quickly zipping it back up afterwards. Hoisting it back to his shoulders, he draped his rifle back alongside it, turned off the flashlight and exited the storage room.

As he closed the door behind him, footsteps thundered on the hallway to his right and he tensed, bracing himself for what might be a horde of approaching soldiers. Instead, his friend with the Buccaneers sweatshirt lurched into view, two doctors sprinting past him at full speed, racing down the hall.

"What the hell is going on?" Stan strode forward, trying to peer around the corner.

"Dude who got shot. He woke up."

"Oh, did he now?" A corner of Stan's mouth lifted into a crooked grin as he moved out into the hallway to follow the sprinting doctors. His other friend, the one with the leather jacket fell in behind them. The two doctors had already dashed into Room One and when Stan arrived at the opened door, they were huddled around the man, who sat upright, blinking the weariness from his eyes. He peered out at Stan, looking confused, then the female doctor was stepping closer, urging him to lay back down.

“Relax,” she said calmly, “you’re in the hospital. We found you out on the street. You’ve been injured.”

“No kidding,” the man hissed with a snarl. “Put a damn bullet in me.”

“Just try and relax,” the male doctor urged. The lingering stale stink of cigarette smoke filled the small exam room.

“You know what would help me relax? Some oxy— oxy would help me relax.”

Sofia’s eyes darted toward Stan for a moment, then swung back, lingering just long enough to tell him that she knew what he’d done. Not that he cared. By the same time tomorrow, the National Guard will have lifted the doctors and patients out of there and carted them off to Fort Lauderdale. Not him, though, he was staying right where he was, he had no interest in beachfront property now that the world was on fire.

“Let’s hold off on the oxy for now,” Sofia said, “I’d rather do a more thorough examination without pain meds on board just so we can get a baseline of your discomfort.”

“A baseline of my discomfort. Great. Easy for you to say.”

Cooper leaned over him and pressed the stethoscope to his chest, narrowing his eyes as he listened through the earpieces.

“Hey,” Stan interjected, taking a step forward. “Since you’re a little more conscious now, how about you tell us who shot you? Might be good for us to—”

“How about you give us some privacy.” Sofia glowered over her shoulder, speaking abruptly, interrupting the gunshot victim before he could reply.

“Excuse me?” Stan’s back teeth clamped together, and he shifted his weight as if he might take a step toward her.

“Come on.”

Stan turned, spotting two men in camouflage filling the doorway, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, blocking the way. “Let’s go. Give the lady some privacy.” They separated, opening a gap between them, making it perfectly clear that saying no wasn’t an option.

“All right.” Stan nodded his acceptance. Pushing back might invite inquiry; it might provoke them into checking the contents of his backpack, and nobody wanted that. Nodding to his two friends, the three of them moved together, vacating the room and letting the doctors do their work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The music thundered throughout the interior of Neutral Territory, a familiar bluegrass twang resonating from the guitar player who stood upon a makeshift stage. It was a collection of pallets with wooden planks laid over it more than an actual stage, but it did the job, providing a spot for the middle-aged man in the sprawling white beard to hammer on his guitar, hacking away at a cover of a song Jacob recognized, but couldn't name. They'd eschewed the jukebox, hesitant to consume too much of their invaluable fuel, the thousands of gallons underground seeming like a lot less. Still, the vibe was much the same, a jovial, partying atmosphere bearing a fraction of the stress of reality which lurked just beyond the doors to the barn.

Pat was perched behind the bar, shelves stocked with corn whiskey behind him, speaking affably with one of the young men who had helped Jacob dig the ditch for the fuel line earlier that same day. The actual words Pat said were lost within the murmur of conversation and music, but whatever it was caused the young man to howl in laughter, his head tipping back with the force of his humor. Pat cackled himself and slapped the young man on the shoulder, his facial expression wearing not even an ounce of the emotion his undoubtedly terminal diagnosis would normally elicit. For a man who was being slowly consumed by the tumors in his lungs, he was content and happy; Jacob could only hope he would be the same way when facing down his inevitable last moments on Earth.

“You’d never know, would you?” The low, female voice whispered in Jacob’s ear, its warm breath sending a swath of gooseflesh up his arms. He looked back into Deena’s eyes, far closer to him than he’d been expecting.

“Never know what?”

“About the big ‘C’ word, dummy.” She fixed him with a stare, her lips barely parted. “He keeps it top secret. Doesn’t want to upset people.”

“I think he’s doing the opposite of upsetting people.”

A second man had joined the first and after another brief conversation with Pat, had let fly with his own uproarious laughter.

“That’s partly why we do it, you know?”

“Do what?”

“This.” Deena gestured around them at their surroundings, confined within the converted bar. “We all know it’s resources are being spent on frivolities, I’d guess you could say. But it’s what Pat wanted. He said if he was going to wither away and die in a world like this, he wanted to spend his last weeks enjoying himself. And I have to tell you, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him enjoy himself this much.” She rested back in the chair, which sat alongside a small, rounded table, across from where Jacob sat. He gazed at Pat as well, the broad smile, his hunched back and scraggly facial hair. He could remember, earlier that day, the old man facing down a bear on the hillside, showing not even the slightest hint of fear. Like Tony, Jacob felt like he’d known Pat for his whole life, and he was going to miss him when he was gone.

Just looking at Pat it was difficult to picture a future where the big, vibrant personality was not an active participant. His broad smile, his aggressive shoulder claps, Pat made his way up and down the bar, checking the level of everyone’s drinks, jotting down notes, working the room like the best corporate CEO or politician.

“Not drinking?” Deena leaned over the table and nodded toward the glass jar, which remained three quarters full of

whiskey.

“Oh, I’m drinking.” Jacob lifted it and took a long swallow. “Just appreciating the show. Pat knows how to work a room.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

The crowd was about the same as it had been the first time Jacob had come, with around ten to twelve drinkers, though Jacob noticed that Tony had taken his advice and ramped up security. Along with Tony himself, there were four other armed men lurking about, inside and outside, which wasn’t a lot, but was better than the two people they’d had a few days before.

Kerosene lanterns spread throughout the converted barn cast everything in a faint, orange glow, shadows dancing along to the rhythm of the flickering flames within glass cylinders. Laughter and conversation filled the empty space within the room and Jacob smiled, tightening his grip around the glass jar. He lifted it to his lips and took a drink, swallowing down the bitter, corn-flavored whiskey, which he hated to admit he’d gotten a taste for. Setting down the jar, he looked across the table where Deena’s fingers were curled around the base of her own container, which was completely empty.

“You need another?”

Deena pretended to consider the question, then nodded, pushing the empty container toward him. Jacob swept it up and left the table, walking toward the bar, then paused, turning toward the barn door front entrance where a commotion had quite suddenly started to fester. Peering toward the entrance, his eyes widened, and he very nearly dropped the two jars he was holding.

“Are you kidding me?”

Tony and another security guy had converged on the entrance and were standing in front of a would-be customer. Through the gap between them, Jacob easily identified the potential drinker they were blocking— it was Ms. Bedford Parkland, the woman Pat referred to as Matron. Jacob tensed

and wished that he was armed, but as usual, before setting foot into Neutral Territory, you had to dispose of whatever weapons you had on your person. He was suddenly naked and exposed, sensing danger, not just for him, but for others throughout the makeshift tavern.

“I’m not here to start any trouble.” Matron lifted her hands, showing her pale palms to the security folks. “Frisk me if you must.”

“I plan on it.” Tony slung his rifle over his shoulder and began running his hands along her stout frame, probing for any concealed weapons. He did it without hesitation or restraint, running his hands along her legs, outside and in, through the folds in her skirt, not bashful about any of it.

“You don’t have any female security do you?” Her face was a mask of disgust as she glowered down at Tony, who knelt by her right ankle.

“Nope, sorry. You can always go elsewhere.” He stared up at her from his low crouch. “We have no obligations to serve anyone.”

“Tony, Tony, Tony.” Pat gestured to the woman with one hand. “Everyone is welcome, as long as they abide by our rules.”

“Your rules.” Matron shook her head. “Acting like you own this place still. Maybe you should ask *her* what the rules really are.” She jerked her chin toward Deena, who met her gesture with a cold, hard stare.

“My rules are Pat’s rules. That’s how partnerships work.”

“Partnerships. Right.”

“Look,” Tony said, standing, finally satisfied that she was unarmed, “if you’re here to make trouble, don’t bother. Pat may welcome you, but last I knew, I had final say over who stays and goes. If I deem someone a risk to safety, they’re out.”

“I’m an unarmed, elderly woman, Tony. Do I look like I’m here to start trouble?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, you do.”

“I just heard about this place from the folks at the trading post. Sounds as if Deena was inviting everyone and their brother to this place. I’m surprised there aren’t more people here.” She smirked at Deena and stepped away from Tony, making her way to the bar. As she did, Jacob crossed the threshold, walking to where Tony stood, shoulder-to-shoulder with the second guard. A walkie talkie was clenched tightly in a gloved fist, and he pressed it to his mouth, eyes still fixed on Matron.

“Perimeter sweep. As thorough as you can.” He released the talk button and listened to the static-edged voice on the other end. “Yes, I know there are only two of you. Do the best you can.”

“You want me to go out and help?” Jacob whispered, leaning in close to Tony so he could hear him.

Tony shook his head. “I think the guys have it covered. If they try something, I’d rather we have people here, just in case.”

Jacob nodded, following Matron with his eyes, turning toward her as she approached the bar. Pat appeared unbothered, leaning against the interior of the makeshift counter, resting on one elbow, mouth lifted into a diagonal smirk. If he was concerned, there was no sign of it on his face. Jacob stepped away from Tony and followed the older woman toward Pat, wanting to keep close to her, just in case. As he neared her, she reached into her dress, pulling something free of the inside of the cloth draped over her shoulders. For a moment, he tensed, anticipating a weapon she might have had concealed, but as he drew up near, he saw it was just a small, handheld radio.

The tension in his shoulders relaxed its firm grip and he eased his forward stride. Pat eyed the radio in confusion, his thick, gray brows knitting tight as he squinted down at the item in her hand, unsure of what he was seeing. Jacob came up next to her and she lifted the radio, thumbing a long button along one side.

“Only two inside. Do it now.”

Jacob froze, his narrowed gaze meeting Pat's, the realization striking them both at once, twin bolts of lightning shooting through the tops of their heads.

“Tony!” Jacob whirled left, the warning on his lips, a moment too late.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Jacob didn't even hear the gunshot, but he saw the sudden ragged hole torn through the chest of the young man next to Jacob, the second security guard who had the misfortune of being framed by the opened barn door. He went down in a sprawl of limbs, the echo of Jacob's shouted warning fading amid the rising din of panicked attendees. As the young man hit the ground, his fingers released, the rifle he was drawing from his shoulder twisting along the floor, skidding over aged wood.

"Take cover!" Jacob screamed, wheeling right, shouting mostly at Deena, though his voice was raised loud enough to apply to anyone within earshot. Most ignored him, a sudden surge of people charging toward the opened door at the front of the barn. Another gunshot echoed, the second more audible than the first, and a sprinting woman catapulted backwards, her head snapping around, a spray of crimson dusting the air in her wake. Jacob hit the ground, clawing for the young, dead guard's discarded rifle, clawing at it as a third shot seared through the crowd, miraculously missing the glut of humanity. It struck the wooden floor a foot to Jacob's right, tearing open a gaping wound in the hardwood, tossing splinters and dirt into the air.

Tony lunged to the left, taking cover behind the barn's interior wall, which would do little to actually protect him from incoming fire, however it would at least hide his location. With the rifle in hand, Jacob scrambled back toward the rear of the building, head low and legs bent, then twisted over his shoulder, searching out the Matron. She'd dashed

away from her spot at the bar, running to a distant corner, away from where the crowd was trying to funnel through the opened door. A third body had joined the first two on the ground and as Jacob's eyes drifted across it, he saw boots crunch down upon it, snapping an elbow, pulverizing a wrist, and shattering all five of its fingers.

The body didn't twitch or move, didn't feel the pain at all, it was simply pulverized beneath the crush of desperation that trampled over it, pounding toward the only avenue of escape. With a splintering crack, the barn wall erupted, an uneven hole punching through the wood slats as a bullet smashed through, trailing wide left of the attempted escapees. Beyond the frenzy of the escaping crowd, the churning growl of approaching engines filled the background, two or three of them by the sounds of it. Tony swung out from his cover and fired once, racked his bolt, then fired again, shooting into the darkness beyond the tavern.

"We've got headlights! Three sets! Look like pick-up trucks!" He twisted to the right, turning his weapon on the Matron, his face sculpted in a mask of rage. Before he could pull the trigger, another scattering of incoming shots pelted the wall, the crowd pushing out into the night, then scattering, leaving the barn's interior relatively empty. Tony back-pedaled, drawing his barrel away from the older woman, ducking low to grab some cover. Jacob reached the round table he and Deena had been seated at and clutched the thick edge with his fingers, hoisting up, toppling the table over so its rounded surface faced the opened door. Dropping for cover behind it, he looked to his right where Deena was scrambling behind the bar, her head low as a round drove an angry gash through the wooden surface of the counter, only two feet from where she was. Frantically, she waved toward Jacob, urging him to follow her behind the bar and he nodded, starting to inch that way.

Bullets struck the floor just ahead of him, hammering chunks of wood and dirt, forcing him back. Another round struck the table just behind him, smashing through it like it wasn't there at all, the bullet embedding itself in the floor to Jacob's right. The whole flipping the table over for cover

didn't work in the real world like it did in those old Wild West movies. Headlights beamed through the opened door as trucks skidded to a halt just outside the barn, men perched within their beds. Tony squeezed off a pair of shots as he retreated, moving closer to the rear of the barn and Jacob bolted forward at a dead sprint. Bullets walked a ragged line toward him, and he launched himself, hitting the top of the bar, sprawling, then spilling over, toppling down behind cover in a clumsy flail. He hit the ground hard on the other side, one knee pounding into unrelenting wooden flooring, his elbow colliding angrily with the interior of the counter.

By some miracle, his fingers remained clutched around the rifle, and he drew it close to himself, then scrambled upward to try and return fire. Two men dashed in through the opened doorway, weapons in hand, both of them with semi-automatic pistols. As Jacob tried to get an angle, Pat swept up from behind the bar to his right, a double-barreled shotgun clutched firmly in two hands. The old man said nothing, he simply pulled the trigger, both barrels slamming pure thunder, a shower of sparks and smoke launching. One of the would-be intruders screamed in pain as projectiles from both barrels ripped open his chest, throwing him down amid a shower of blood and shredded denim from his overalls.

“No!” The Matron squealed a howling, shrill scream of pure fury. Jacob leveled his barrel and fired as well, striking the second gunman high in the chest, the impact driving him back and down, falling next to his brother, motionless on the floor. Fingers clawed at the back of Jacob's shirt and yanked him down as a hail of bullets roared back at him, chewing apart the top of the counter. He fell to the floor next to Deena, who had dragged him down, out of the line of fire.

“You're gonna get your head blown off if you're not careful!” Her voice was shrill and loud, rebounding in his head, even above the ratcheting crack of rifle fire. Next to Jacob, Pat reloaded twin shells in the shotgun, then slammed it closed, breathing hard, his face glistening with sweat. Tony sprawled out behind him, diving behind the bar even as more shots poured in, filling the air with smoke and splinters.

“Tear this entire place apart!” Ms. Parkland’s scream echoed loud and clear. Pat snarled and shot upward, swiveling toward the sound and unloading both barrels. Jacob drew up next to him, aiming with his bolt action. Buckshot tore a chunk from the barn wall, though the Matron had already scrambled away, ducking out of the front door, her sons approaching, weapons firing.

“This isn’t going to end well for us!” Tony fell back against the wall, sat on the floor, and pulled out his magazine, checking for ammunition.

“Is she really doing this? A full blown assault? Risking her sons’ lives? For what?” Deena twisted her head, looking at one man, then the other, as if anticipating an actual answer.

“Desperate people do desperate things.” Pat shook his own head, loading another pair of shells into his shotgun.

“Desperate people do stupid things, you mean.” Deena sighed. “You have another weapon hiding somewhere back here?”

“Yeah, what happened to this being ‘Neutral Territory?’” Tony asked, sounding only a little incredulous.

“My place, my rules— Deena even said so!”

Jacob’s back pressed hard against the interior of the bar, his rifle held in two hands. “The back and forth banter is great, but we gotta figure out a way out of this mess! And I don’t think we can shoot our way through.” As if affirming that, more shots crashed inward, thudding into the bar, glancing from the top of the counter, and smashing into the far wall, drawing Jacob’s gaze in that direction. His eyes fell upon the interior door which led from the bar area to the prep room in the back where he’d been earlier that day, watching Pat work his magic.

“We can escape through there!” He jerked his head toward it.

“Escape? Escape to where?” Deena shook her head. “You think Parkland is going to stop with this place? If she runs us out of here, she’s going to run us off the whole property. She

doesn't want the barn, she wants the fuel, she wants the crops, she wants *all of it!*"

"Well, the only way she's getting it is over my dead body!" Pat's jaw flexed and he showed his teeth. Voices shouted from the direction of the doorway and another scattering of gunfire erupted, keeping their heads down. Tony rose, shouldered his rifle and fired, then dropped again, just to keep them honest.

"I don't think it has to come to that." Tony drew in a rough breath, then nodded his forehead toward the back door and Pat's curious gaze followed it. Jacob exhaled, studying them both, trying, but failing to peer into their minds.

"I'm picking up what you're putting down." Pat nodded, but a scattering of gunfire roared above them, crashing into the rear wall and knocking a line of circular impact craters in the wood, showering them with splinters. "Easier said than done, though, I think."

"Jacob, give me your magazine." Tony gestured toward him.

"What?"

"I'll give you all cover. Pat will tell you what to do!"

"I don't—"

"Give me the damn mag!" Tony's teeth were bared and Jacob detached his magazine and handed it over, while Jacob tilted onto one hip. He removed a pistol from his waistband and handed it over, Jacob taking it from his upturned palm. "Follow Pat's lead."

"You can't stay here," Jacob warned, his head shaking, "you'll be killed!"

"That's my problem, not yours. Follow Pat's lead."

The tendons in Jacob's neck pulled taut, but he read the determination sculpted into Tony's face and simply nodded without argument. Taking the magazine from Jacob, Tony dug the remaining bullets free, then ejected his own mag and thumbed them into place, one at a time, hammering it back

into place. Rising up on one knee, he cradled the rifle close, his shoulder pressed to the interior counter.

“Ready?”

Pat hoisted himself into an upward crouch, aiming his focus at the back door, then nodded.

“Go!” Tony swung up, bringing his rifle around, then squeezed off one shot, racked the bolt and fired another. Pat sprinted forward, running low, his squat body moving awkwardly, leading with his shoulder. He snatched at the door knob and ripped the door open, plunging inside, shotgun cradled, with Jacob and Deena close behind him. Return fire thundered from the front of the barn, rounds blistering the walls and door, though they slipped into the backroom without incident.

“Stay low!” Pat swung left, moving on bent knees toward a shelf at the far end of the prep room. Jacob took it all in, remembering his visit from the previous day, the wood stoves, the industrial sinks, the shelves and shelves of supplies for brewing, mashing and distilling. The conversation with Pat had been illuminating as well, talking about what they do with the heads and tails, the alcohol content, the fact that—

Jacob’s eyes drew wide as Pat went to the shelf and lifted a jar from it, holding it up so he could peer through it. Kerosene lanterns were strategically placed throughout the room, and he held the jar toward a gentle light, looking at the color and the separation.

What was it that Pat had said? Something about the discarded heads being used for flame-based weed killer? Pat was already reaching for a knife from a nearby counter, then lifted it and punched it hard through the thin, metal lid of the jar. He twisted and tore, ripping a small hole in the surface of the jar’s lid.

“Follow my lead!” He jerked his head toward the shelves where several more jars remained stacked, side-by-side. Jacob understood immediately and did as asked, joining Pat at the shelves, using another spare knife to carve ragged, rounded holes in the lids of the bitter corn whiskey. Deena did the same

and within moments, they'd torn open the lids of six separate jars, while Pat peeled away and swung open a nearby drawer, yanking out a dishcloth. Without even speaking, he began to tear the dishcloth into strips and as he discarded the strips, Jacob snatched them up, feeding them into the holes in the liquor jars' lids. Pat jolted over to the wood stove and bent low, scooping a box of matches from a shelf next to the oven, which he fed into a hip pocket.

He turned toward Jacob, his lips parting to offer instruction, but Jacob didn't need it.

“Just point the way.”

Pat nodded firmly and pushed past Jacob, making his way toward the back door. Out in the tavern, gunfire tore open the silence and Jacob felt almost certain that Tony was lost.

CHAPTER FORTY

Without dwelling on what might have happened to Tony, the three of them burst through the back door, arms filled with jars of liquid, wicks of cloth extended from ragged holes cut in thin metal lids. They made their way around the barn, sticking close to the wall, even as the thundering echo of gunshots filled the empty space within the Neutral Territory's interior. As they approached the corner, a darkened figure swung around, rifle in hand, running at a full sprint. He drew up abruptly, stumbling backwards, surprised to see the three of them converging. Pat released his bottles, the three jars thumping on the ground, then brought the shotgun around and fired, the echoing boom jerking both barrels back within his grip.

The approaching man took the shot full in the chest, launching backwards, hitting the ground with a flailing sprawl as a faint cloud lingered in the wake of the shotgun's blast.

"Over there! They're around the back!" A voice shouted from the front of the building.

Pat unfolded the shotgun, ejecting shell cases, then thumbed two more in, jerking his head toward the ground. "Deena, grab the matchbox out of my pocket! Quick!"

Deena, with three of her own jars gathered within the crook of her arm, hurried forward and managed to reach into the baggy denim of Pat's pocket, then pulled out the box of matches.

"You know what to do?"

“I think I’ve got some idea.”

Jacob set his jars down and lifted the pistol from his waistband, holding it out in two hands as Patrick closed the shotgun, both shells loaded in the chamber. Deena set the jars down, struck a match, then picked one up, a thin, blue flame stroking the darkened match-head. She stared at Pat, then at Jacob, then waited for no further instruction. Lighting the wick, she sprinted forward as the whiskey soaked fabric ignited, then cocked her arm back and threw. Jacob back-pedaled giving himself an angle with his pistol, watching as the arcing tumble of the flaming bottle struck the rear bed of one of the pick-ups that had parked outside Neutral Territory.

Against the hard edge of the tail gate, the bottle exploded, the flammable liquid from within spraying out in a sudden surge of pale, blue flame. In the reflection of the sudden surge of fiery light, three men twisted toward them, faces frozen in shock as the rear of the truck went up. Orange fire clawed at the first man’s legs, feeding itself on the fabric, narrow serpents of orange twisting up both limbs. Jacob took aim on the second man and fired his pistol three times, his target tumbling sideways, over the edge of the bed, and crashing hard to the ground.

“Over here! They’re over here!” One of the young men vaulted out of another truck, landing on the ground in a pained crouch. A rifle shot echoed from within the barn, a bullet ricochet careening from the metal frame of the truck’s window. Deena lit another wick as Pat pressed himself tight against the barn wall, shotgun at the ready. The second makeshift Molotov spun over everyone’s head and struck the grass beyond, spreading a thin carpet of fire along the ground. Snatching the box of matches from Deena, Jacob struck one and lit his own Molotov, lurching to the right as two men fired upon him, then threw a wild sidearm, the jar spinning through the air before it struck a truck’s windshield and splashed apart, fire cascading in a wide arc around the point of impact. Some struck the exposed face of one young man, scalding him, sending him sprawling backwards. Orange fire coated the left arm of another, flames eating fabric as he desperately slapped at the burning shirt, trying to extinguish the growing fire.

“Three of them tight together, advancing!” Jacob shouted and Pat got the message. He swung around with the double-barrel and unleashed a boom of thunder, the shot hammering into all three men. They scrambled and sprawled, moving away from the onslaught just as Deena’s third Molotov hit the front grill of the truck and erupted, coating one of them with a liquid-fueled fire. Pained screams filled the air as burning men writhed on the ground, others clawing and slapping at their raw, reddened flesh. Two of the trucks were actively burning, the third so far unscathed. Desperately, two men scrambled into the front of the third truck, starting the engine, heads low. Jacob fired four rounds into the windshield, the pistol kicking with each pulled trigger, though he kept his grip firm and the barrel level.

Still, the truck shot backwards, safety glass puckering with bullet impacts. A shadowed figure lurched from the front of the tavern, hands over her head, loping in an uneven gallop. Pat had loaded two more shells and he catapulted forward, sprinting at the brutal chaos ahead, preparing his double-barrel shotgun for firing.

“Matron!” He screamed, his voice raw from smoke and the woman, purely by instinct, held up, twisting toward him just as he fired both barrels. The blast hacked a ragged gouge from the exterior wall of the barn, but also pummeled her in the torso, knocking her back and down, an agonized scream dying on her lips. The last remaining truck continued on without her, not bothering to wait, shooting in reverse before the brakes locked tight, the wheels turned, and it took off, racing back up the hill it had descended moments before.

Another Molotov somersaulted through the air, then struck near another group of huddled men, splashing one in the arms with fire, the other two separating and trying to put some distance between themselves and their burning brother. Jacob sprinted to where the Matron lay on the ground and dropped to one knee next to her. Blood speckled her lips and dusted the skin on her face, though a mask of raw, furious hatred still set firm lines beside her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. Her shirt was torn and bloodied, but Jacob thought she might just survive as long as they could get her some medical attention.

“Cease fire!” He screamed as loud as he could, standing, holding his pistol, the barrel pointed toward the old woman’s head. “Everyone cease fire!”

The surrounding chaos ebbed, the shouts and gunfire peeling away into ragged silence. Smoke and heat filled the surrounding air, the stink of burned meat and blood snagging deep in Jacob’s throat, spoiling the bear meat appetizers they’d all been served.

Two gunmen maneuvered around, stepping from behind one of the burning trucks, rifles in hand. They positioned themselves at opposite angles, focusing their attention on Jacob, who remained exposed, standing there without cover, pistol pointed at the elder Ms. Parkland.

“Put down your guns!”

Groans of pain sounded from the injured men around them, some burned, two shot, their soft cries of agony like small pinpricks of sharpened guilt stabbing at Jacob’s insides. It had been self-defense and they’d done what they had to do, but that didn’t make him feel a whole lot better about the end result. Carnage, death, and bloodshed surrounded him, and he was there, holding a pistol to a seventy-year-old woman’s head, threatening to kill her in front of her sons. What had the world come to? The two young men made no motion to release their weapons.

“There’s been enough bloodshed,” Jacob said, his voice low and body weary. Pat held his shotgun and took a step forward, coming up on his right side. Deena was behind him, keeping her distance, wide eyes searching the carnage, making sure nobody was going to suddenly rise from where they lay. “I don’t want to kill her.”

“They— they killed your brothers,” Ms. Parkland croaked from her spot on the ground, eyes pinched closed, crow’s feet deepened at each eye. “What they do to me doesn’t matter. Finish it.”

The two brothers looked at each other uncertainly. They were struggling to keep their composure, the reality of what had happened to their family starting to establish itself. Their

brothers were dead or injured, some perhaps permanently disfigured by flames. Their mother had a gut full of buckshot and while she could survive, she would never be the same and would require significant medical intervention. The men who did all of the horrible things were standing right before them, and yet their weapons remained pointed down at the ground, the aggression gone from their eyes.

“Are you just going to let your brothers’ lives go to waste?” Ms. Parkland hissed through gritted, teeth. “Let them die for nothing?”

“They didn’t die for nothing,” Jacob replied with a firm shake of his head. “They died for you. They died because of you. Now that’s something you need to live with.”

The woman’s nostrils flared and through the pain etched in her face, she managed a sharp scowl of feral rage. Her lips parted to speak, but instead of words, a burbling cough let loose, blood curdling along the corner of her red lips. A thin strand worked loose, trailing down the curve of her chin and her eyelids fluttered, the fight leaving her menacing stare.

“Come on, mom.” One of the remaining men stepped forward, dropping his weapon, and went down on a knee, near his mother’s head. “Let’s get you back home.”

The Matron’s lips quivered and her formerly firm eyes glistened with tears. “My boys,” she whispered softly, her head turning to one side to observe the flaming remnants of the trucks, a chorus of pained groans coming from the area around them. “My babies.”

“Let’s get you in the truck. We’ll get our brothers in the back.” His lip pinched between his teeth. “We won’t bother you.”

“I’m sorry it came to this, son,” Pat replied earnestly, though he made no motion to lower his shotgun. “It was never my intention.”

The young man swallowed and nodded, his other brother stepping over, dropping low so he could assist in getting their mother to her trembling feet. Working in concert, they heaved

her up and maneuvered her back toward the lone remaining truck, its engine still throttling. It took some work, but they opened a door and helped her up into the passenger seat, sliding her up and in, wedging her there, closing the door quickly before she could spill back out.

Tony stepped out of Neutral Territory, or what was left of it, walking with a slight limp, his pale, blue shirt thick and tacky with blood.

“Tony!” Pat lurched forward, handing his shotgun off to Jacob as he made his way to the other man, reaching his side before Tony could fall over. “Come on, brother. Come with me, let’s get you looked at.”

So, the battle at the place that had been, at one point, Neutral Territory had ended and all that was left was to pick up the pieces.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The closer they moved toward the bridge, the slower and more pained their forward progress became. It had gotten to the point where Jean struggled to peer through the increasing smoke and the growing darkness did little to improve their visibility. Moving along the left shoulder of the New Jersey Turnpike, they went to great lengths to avoid the corpses strewn about, moving through the grass and trees of the far side, edging their way west, one small step at a time.

Long and exhausting hours had taken their toll and while it had likely been the right decision to skip rest the previous night in order to make up for lost time, as the night wore on, they were moving far slower and more labored than Holly or Jean felt comfortable with, taking frequent breaks to rest their weary legs.

“Over here.” Jean gestured toward a small section of ground, a sparse patch of grass alongside a row of trees to their left. “We need to sit for a moment. Get some water. Maybe have some food, restore our energy reserves.”

“The bridge is close.” Penny peered through the smoke, rapidly blinking away her watering eyes. She twisted around, glancing over her shoulder, peering throughout the surrounding darkness. “Taking a break might be good.” Her breathing was strained, as all of theirs was.

“As close as we are, we need to wrap some cloth around our mouths. Figure out a way to filter out this nasty air.” Jean slung her backpack from her shoulder, dropping it onto the grass, opening up its flap so she could search through it. Holly,

Keegan and Penny did the same and after a few moments, they'd liberated a few t-shirts from the few spare clothes they still had and gathered them together.

"We're running low on drinking water." Holly held up a bottle from the backpack and swished it around, the clear liquid moving low to the bottom of the translucent plastic. "I'm not sure we can waste this."

"There's a rest area over there." Penny pointed through the trees. "Probably some water there. Maybe we should use that rather than waste the water we use for drinking."

Jean peered toward the trees and sure enough saw a westward off ramp angling from the turnpike and vanishing behind a thick clutch of trees that had blocked their view of the rest area.

"All right, let's check it out." Jean turned and nodded toward Holly. "Can you stand watch? Keep an eye on our supplies? Give me your t-shirt, I'll get it wet for you and bring it back."

"You got it."

"She should come," Penny said. "The supplies will be okay for a few minutes. It's not like anyone's living out here."

"I'll stay." Holly took a few strides forward and handed the T-shirt off to Jean, who took it and joined it with the other. Jean gestured toward the trees and took a step in that direction, Keegan and Bucky following immediately behind her. Penny lingered a bit, looking unsure, but finally followed them, moving from the shoulder to the grass and onward, though she kept glancing over her shoulder in Holly's direction.

"Don't worry about Holly, she can take care of herself." Jean reassured the young girl. Penny was dubious, but eventually followed along, all of them making their way toward the trees that separated them from the rest area. Jean shouldered her way between trunks of pine, inching carefully, just to be sure nobody lurked nearby. As it was in and around the turnpike, there remained no signs of life, though thankfully there were also no corpses visible. Broken windows stared out

from the rest area's exterior like the jagged teeth of vacant mouths, opened in mock surprise. Darkened by shadows, the rest area was a small, square-shaped husk of brick and broken glass, its parking lot about a quarter full of vehicles. A cough boiled in Jean's chest, and she swallowed it down, not wanting to make any noise to alert anyone to their approach, although the building resembled a desolate tomb.

"Watch for people," she warned, approaching carefully, feeling particularly vulnerable without her trusty sidearm. She hated leaving Holly alone, back with their supplies, but at least she had the rifle, which would hopefully be intimidating enough on its own without her even having to use it. They approached the front door and Jean made her way carefully toward it, step over cautious step, her gaze raking the parking lot in search of movement. Two cars sat with their doors ajar, the others remaining all buttoned up, though she couldn't see whether or not anyone was inside any of them.

Before opening the front door, Jean moved to one of the broken windows and edged up on her tiptoes, looking into the darkened chasm of the rest area interior. Pulling a flashlight from one pocket, she stabbed a beam of light into the depths, walking it along the perimeter of the building's insides.

"Looks clear." She walked toward the door and pulled it open, stepping aside to make a gap. "Bucky, you first." The dog eagerly trotted inside, immediately sniffing and snuffling, searching the inside of the rest area for any sign of an unwanted stranger. There were no growls or barks, no outward signal of trouble, so Jean ushered Keegan and Penny inside, then trailed in after them. The rest area appeared just as desolate and deserted inside as it had appeared from outside. Racks of maps and local pamphlets had been toppled over, their bound contents strewn about the floor. Jean carefully strode over a scattered pile of documents identifying landmarks throughout the Wilmington, Delaware area, then moved along the darkened tile, reaching a customer service desk.

Peering over and around it, she saw nothing of interest, then peeled away and scanned the open area around them.

Vending machines lined one far wall, though the plastic covering over the contents had been buckled, broken, and ripped away, revealing nothing but empty sections within.

“Keep looking,” she advised Keegan and Penny, “I’m going to check the bathroom, see if the sinks work.”

Keegan nodded, still clinging tight to Bucky as they made their way around the perimeter of the main rest area lobby, which was disheveled, but mostly in one piece. Jean pushed open the double doors to the woman’s bathroom with her shoulder and ventured inside, the tile grungy, though not filthy. Reaching one of the sinks, she twisted the knob for the water, holding her breath. The knob squeaked noisily as it turned, but not even a single trickle of water drifted from the chrome-plated faucet. Exhaling in frustration, she moved down the line of sinks, checking each one, and each one provided the same lackluster result. With the lack of power, the plumbing had failed as well, and their hopes of using water to soak the cotton to help filter the smoke and ash were all but dashed.

As she turned to leave, she found herself facing a row of bathroom stalls and a thought occurred to her. Yanking open the first door, she stepped within the stall where a toilet stood, thankfully with no sign of use. She clawed off the top lid of the tank and smiled as she stared down into its contents, within which a surface of water rippled within the reflection of her flashlight.

“Keegan! Penny!” She turned and shouted over one shoulder. “Bring your shirts in here!” She untwisted the bundle of cotton t-shirts she’d been holding and dunked them into the toilet tank one at a time, thoroughly soaking the material, turning it thick and heavy with moisture. The door opened behind her and without even looking, she issued her directives. “Check the tanks of the toilets in the stalls. There’s water. After we soak these t-shirts, we should go back and get our water bottles, then come refill them here.”

“Refill our water bottles with toilet water?” Keegan sounded incredulous.

“This water is what’s used in the toilet— the water itself isn’t contaminated, Keegan. It’s probably not optimal drinking water, but it won’t kill us.”

Keegan made a disgusted noise, but opened one of the stall doors and scraped the lid from the toilet tank, splashing his t-shirt into the water within. Penny followed suit and moments later all three of them converged back out in the main rest area lobby, the t-shirts damp with moisture.

“And this is supposed to help us?” Penny lifted her shirt, studying it curiously.

“It is. The wet fabric absorbs the smoke and filters out some of the more noxious chemicals that might be in it. Even if we don’t refill our water bottles to drink, we should fill them so we can use them to wet this cotton more as it dries out.”

They made their way toward the front door and Jean paused for a moment, once again looking back at Penny. “How far is the bridge from here? It’s hard to say with the smoke.”

“Not far. After we get back on the turnpike, it’s maybe a five, ten minute walk. Due west.”

“So straight into the smoke?”

Penny nodded, her throat bobbing as she swallowed. Jean didn’t like that idea, but it wasn’t about what she liked or didn’t like, it was about what was going to get her family out of the situation alive. Not just the family that was with her, but the family she was trying to get to. As they stepped back out into the world, Jean turned, bracing herself against a sudden influx of wind. A slice of breeze hacked through the parking lot, carrying with it a sudden surge of darkened, black smoke, tinted with the acrid scent of chemical residue.

“The wind’s shifted!” Jean coughed loudly, pressing her fist into her mouth. “It’s blowing in from the river!” The air was hot, almost steaming, and glowing embers scattered the air like fireflies. “We need to move quickly!” Gesturing wildly to the kids, she urged them out and then forward, running back toward the trees they’d cut through, back in the direction of Holly and their supplies. The surrounding air was thick with

dark smoke, the heat sharper and more scalding than it had been moments before. Running felt sluggish, the air heavy and clawing, as if trying to drag them down to the ground.

“Holly! Let’s get ready to go!” Jean screamed, her voice faded and raw through the sudden howl of surging smoke.

“The fire must have spread quickly!” Penny sounded panicked, glancing over her shoulder. “The plant is just over that way— it’s on both sides of the bridge!”

“Holly!” Jean sprinted forward, scanning the area at the side of the road where Holly had remained with their supplies, guarding them, just in case. Smoke twisted around them, the air clearing for a moment, lined with the charcoal cotton of churning smog. “Holly?” Jean’s voice drew quieter as they approached, her squinting eyes burning through the clouded air, looking for her daughter. The first thing she noticed was the missing backpacks, the fact that none of their supplies seemed to be where they’d left them. Her forward pace slowed in stark contrast to the rising pace of her hammering heart.

As she stepped through the curtain of gray toward the empty section of ground where the supplies had been, she realized with a jolt of shock and fear that it wasn’t so empty, after all. Holly lay crumpled on the ground, folded and prone, her arms outstretched, legs twisted over each other. She was down and not moving, and all of their supplies were gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Holly!” Jean’s voice twisted into an almost feral scream as she charged forward, so abrupt that Bucky began to bark wildly from behind her.

“Don’t move!” A snarl of rage halted Jean in her tracks, her feet skidding to a halt on the grass as she twisted left, eyes wide. Two men stood facing her, their stolen backpacks resting in a pile at their feet and one of the men held a rifle, its barrel pointed directly at her. It wasn’t just any rifle, it was the M4 that Holly had been carrying with her since Atlantic City. Jean could fully appreciate the intimidation factor of the weapon, staring deep into the stark blackness of its barrel as it was aimed directly at her.

“Just stop.” The second man said, lifting a hand. Keegan and Penny stumbled out of the smoke to her rear, spotted the men and also stopped, the young boy immediately lurching down to clutch Bucky’s collar. The dog growled, low and mean, but held his spot at his master’s side, back hunched, hackles raised and teeth bared.

“What— what is this?” Jean asked, eyes darting toward Holly, then darting back to them.

“Why don’t you ask her?” The man with the rifle nodded and Jean followed the direction of his nod and found herself staring right at Penny. The young girl’s face was a conflicted mosaic of emotions, part fear, part anger, but with a clear backdrop of knowing shame.

“Penny?” Jean drew back, confused. She turned back to the young man, eyes narrowed and for the first time, recognized the gaze pointed back at her. His name was Fox, or so she thought, and he’d been one of the young men they’d rescued Penny from back in Salem.

“Come on, girl. You did good.” Fox nodded toward Penny.

“What did you do?” Keegan twisted toward her, mouth pried open in a snarl.

“I—”

“Penny. Come on.” The second man was clearer and more abrupt. “Let’s go.”

“What is going on here?” Jean took a tentative step forward. To her right, Holly began to stir, groaning softly, rubbing her palm against the back of her head.

“I’m sorry.” Penny swallowed, her voice thick with conflicting emotion. She stepped away from Keegan and walked across the grass, joining the two men, standing at their sides.

“You’re— sorry? We saved you.” Jean stood, aghast, mouth and eyes gaping open, her mind a gathered mass of twisted conflicts. Slowly, she made her way toward Holly, still facing the two men, holding out one hand so as not to appear threatening. That wasn’t difficult, considering she had no weapons, no way to fight back and trying to do so would likely just result in her being target practice. “Holly? Are you okay?”

Holly nodded slowly, continuing to rub the back of her head. “Snuck up on me. Knocked me out before—” her eyes narrowed, focused keenly on Penny, who stood at Fox’s left side, eyes darting away. “What is this about, Penny?” Holly allowed her mother to bend down and place an arm around her back, then stand, helping her to her feet. “Is that all this was? Some ploy?”

“Penny’s our secret weapon.” Fox sneered. “She’s got this innocent look about her, don’t ya, Pen?”

Penny didn’t respond, she simply stared at the ground.

“Why us?” Jean asked. “We— we barely have anything. We’ve been living on stale bread and peanut butter.”

“See, that was our mistake.” Fox shrugged and glanced over at the second man, the one Jean thought was Cliffy. “See, I saw your daughter over there, thought she was hiding from us behind a car, but I saw her. She had this rifle here slung across her back.” He lifted the M4. “Way, we figured it, she had one of these, you guys must be loaded, right? Must be ex-military or something? So, we had Penny get in close. Help us track you. Find just the right time to surprise you.” Fox looked down at one of the backpacks disdainfully, then booted it with one foot. “All for this? What a waste.”

“So just give it back. Or take it. Do whatever you want. We won’t come after you.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Way, I figure it, though, if we’re going to take it, we might as well take it all, right?”

“Take it all?” Jean was confused.

“You got clothes on your back. I see a flashlight in your pocket.” He took a few tentative steps forward, directing the barrel of the rifle toward Holly. “And her— she’s got plenty more.” His smile was narrow and crooked, a sinister upward tilt framing his thoughts.

“Stay away from her,” Jean growled, taking a step forward. Her breath came in stabbing gasps, her fingers closed into tight fists. She’d dropped the dampened t-shirts, focusing all of her attention on the man with the rifle. A pistol tucked into the front of his waistband, a button up shirt unbuttoned and askew, revealing a dark T-shirt etched with the emblem of something she didn’t recognize. His friend held a pistol at his side and was wearing Holly’s backpack over one shoulder.

“Come on, lady. We can do this the easy way or the hard way, right?” He turned, pointing the M4 in her direction. “You can step back and let me do what I want to do, or I can just blow your face off and do it anyway. Choice shouldn’t be that hard.”

“Don’t,” Penny hissed. “You said you wouldn’t hurt them.”

“And you said they’d have some valuable supplies. This is crap.” He booted one of the backpacks. “I have to get some sort of payback for all this trouble.”

“Penny!” Holly gasped angrily. “I can’t believe you’d do this.”

“I tried to tell you,” Penny replied quietly. “I’m not a good person.”

“You are,” Holly said, her voice croaking. “I know you are. I’ve seen it.”

“She hides it well, sweetheart.” Fox laughed. “That’s why she’s so valuable. But man, I never thought we’d have to chase you all the way up here.” He glanced back at Penny. “We’ll have to have a little chat about that.”

Penny glowered back up at the man, then chewed her lip. Holly took a step forward, reaching for the young girl.

“Penny, come on. It doesn’t have to happen like this. This isn’t who you are.”

“How do you know who I am? You don’t know anything about me.” Penny’s eyes darted toward her. “While you were going to your fancy high school and college, I was walking the streets, trying to figure out where my next meal was coming from. Fox helped me. He’s always helped me.”

“But that help comes with a cost, doesn’t it? It always has.” Holly inched forward again, trying to move in very small increments.

“She’s still alive,” Fox snapped back, his rifle still trained on Jean. “And don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing. Stop right there or I swear, I will gun your mother down. I’m not bluffing.”

“I know you’re not.” Holly swallowed, her jaw set firm.

“Then maybe you best just stay right there. Trust me when I say, I’ll be with you shortly.” His eyes snapped toward Cliffy. “Where are the others?”

Cliffy turned over his shoulder, trying to peer through the increasing smoke. “Should be right along.”

“Well, then maybe they’ll just miss the fun.” Fox snickered, looking over at Holly, his finger sliding along the curved guard of the M4’s trigger.

“Do whatever you want,” Holly whispered, “just don’t hurt my family.”

“See, now that’s the spirit.” Fox nodded toward Jean.

“Please, Fox,” Penny begged, “you have the supplies, what else do you need?”

“Whatever I can get.”

“This isn’t who you are.” Penny shook her head. “We’ve been together for a long time— you helped raise me. You taught me everything I know, everything there was to surviving life on the streets. But you always taught me to do things the right way. Not like this.”

“Things change, kid. My whole life, society was built to keep us down, right? To do everything it could to keep us crushed beneath its heel.” Fox shrugged and half-smiled. “Not anymore. Things are flipped now, you see that, right? Now us street kids, we know how to live, it’s the rest of these so-called civilized people who are under *our* heel.”

“Just because we can step on them doesn’t mean we should.” Penny’s voice was faint, though Fox appeared wholly unconvinced.

“Just goes to show you, kid,” Fox continued with a nonchalant shrug, “you still got a lot to learn.” He stepped forward, rifle raised, the barrel still pointed straight at Jean. “Now, where were we?”

“We were at the part where you’re going to lower that rifle,” Holly said, taking another tentative step forward, hand outstretched. “You were going to lower that rifle, just be happy that you can take our gear, and then you were going to leave.”

Fox’s brow furrowed and he shook his head. Around them, the wind howled, smoke cloying along the surface of the

ground at their feet. Jean's eyes stung as she tried to keep them open and focused, braced for whatever was going to come next.

"That's not what's going to happen." Fox said with a shake of his head.

"Okay. Then I guess we do this the hard way." Holly sprinted forward, lunging, all of a sudden in motion, closing the distance between herself and the man with the rifle. Jean surged toward them both, moving by pure instinct. Fox immediately pulled the trigger of the M4, without even a moment's hesitation.

Nothing happened, the trigger pulling on an empty magazine, the bolt locking open in an empty position. Fox's eyes widened as he stared down at the weapon, but before he could register what had happened, Jean threw herself forward, wrapping her fingers around the front handguard, shoving up and back, pushing the barrel up into the air. Holly slammed into Fox from his left side, the two women converging in a brutal combined football tackle, taking him off his feet and pushing him backwards. All three of them hit the ground in a collision of bodyweight and force, Jean smashing his chest, Holly hammering his ribs, the rifle slipping from his slackened fingers as they all struck the ground.

Jean brought a closed fist down hard on the bridge of the man's nose, so hard she felt the cartilage give beneath the force of her downward arc, pain shooting through her palm and pinky. Bucky snarled and barked and as Jean slammed another punch into Fox's ribs, a blur of motion signaled the black lab's attack on Fox's friend Cliffy. Even as Cliffy was turning, bringing his weapon around, Bucky leaped, clamping jaws on his arm, wrenching down and back, fangs rending flesh. Jean had Fox overpowered and Holly lunged upward, hobbling over them both and sprinting toward Cliffy, who was wrestling with the dog for control of his arm. Holly wrapped her arms around Cliffy's neck and squeezed, pulling him back and down, pressing her knee into the back of his, caving his leg in so she could bring him to the ground.

Jean turned back toward Fox as an elbow shot up, colliding with her right temple, snapping her head around amid a bright splash of white against black. Coppery tang flooded her mouth, a rush of warmth against the inside of her teeth, her eyes pinching closed as she recoiled. Bucky, Holly and Cliffy tangled together in a combination of feral shouting and canine growling even as Jean struggled to maintain control of Fox. His palms barreled into her collarbone and shoved, pushing her from him, his raw strength overcoming her surprise. She tumbled left and sprawled, arms splayed as Fox scrambled to his feet, lunging at her, then hammered her again in the ribs, knocking the wind from her lungs.

Jean gasped, biting back a squeal of pain and Fox hoisted himself upright, staring at her from above the split skin and blood-covered nose that was smashed against his skull. His breathing was hoarse and ragged, blood bubbling at the corner of his lip, but he showed pale teeth and reached toward his waistband where the pistol had been.

Fingers clawing, he tugged them against where his shirt met his pants and found only emptiness. Jean's eyes darted there as well, widening as they did so and realized that indeed, his waistband, which had once held the pistol, held nothing at all.

“What the—”

A sharp crack sounded behind him, the echoing thunder of a single shot, and Fox twisted, bowing outward and stumbling as he grasped awkwardly at his torso. There was a second shot, and he went down, falling toward Jean, who had to roll and crawl out of the way to avoid him landing directly upon her. Glaring past the fallen form of Fox, her eyes met Penny's, standing in the grass, a few feet away, Fox's discarded pistol held tightly within the clench of her narrow fingers. Tears streaked her smoke-stained face, her lip quivering as her fingers sprang apart, releasing the weapon, letting it thud to the ground.

“I— he— he promised he wouldn't hurt you.” Her voice was little more than a squeak. “I didn't want to—”

A sickening crunch came from behind Jean, and she wheeled left just in time to see Holly smash the side of Cliffy's head with the butt of his own pistol. Once, twice, then a third time, the writhing, sprawl of the young man's limbs finally slowing to an uneven stillness. Bucky still held the man's bloodied, limp arm in his jaws, his hackles up, but not much force being applied to the bone and skin, which were already ravaged.

"Penny. Come here!" Jean leaped to her feet and sprang across the grass, wrapping the young girl in a sudden fierce embrace, drawing her close. "Come!"

Voices in the distance carried through the smoke.

"Fox! Cliffy? You there!?"

Penny wrenched herself free of Jean and twisted around, staring into the darkening smoke that surrounded them, fueled by the chemical plant fire and eastward winds.

"The others are coming! They'll be here soon!"

"We have to go!" Holly freed herself of her tangle with Cliffy and strode forward, shoving his pistol into her own waistband. "We have to go right now!"

Penny's eyes darted toward her, then back toward the smoke. "I'll stay." Her voice was a meek sounding croak.

"No! Come with us! We can help you!"

"I don't—I can't."

Jean ducked low and swept her backpack from the ground, heaving it over her shoulders and fastening the straps. Holly ignored hers at the moment, which remained on Cliffy's back, pinned partially beneath his motionless, blood covered form. Lunging forward, Holly closed her fingers tightly around Penny's wrist and dragged her toward her, pulling her away from Fox's dead body and the sounds of the voices.

"You said the bridge was just over here. Come with us!" Holly gave Penny a fresh, hard tug.

"Why? Why would you do this? Why would you save me even after everything I've done?"

“It’s not who you are, Penny. It’s not. I know.” Holly fought back tears even as Jean tossed Keegan’s backpack toward him, the boy catching it in mid-air and slinging it over his shoulders. “Come on!” Holly shouted, yanked Penny, then propelled her forward. They all converged, Jean halting for a moment to rip Holly’s backpack from Cliffy’s back, dragging it along, then lifting it as they ran. She grabbed the two t-shirts next, which were still damp with water.

“T-shirts!” They were running directly into the swirling smoke, a wall of stark, smoldering fire roiling at all sides. It was almost unbearably hot as they ran up the moderate incline of the turnpike, weaving in and out of stalled vehicles, thankful that the smoke obscured their view of the more gruesome visions that were likely intertwined within.

“Up there!” a voice shouted from where Cliffy and Fox were lying, a staccato of gunshots ripping open the air from behind them. They were mostly shrouded in smoke, the metallic smack of bullet ricochets a drumbeat in all directions, none of them particularly close to where they were running. From the bridge, Jean glanced left, her eyes peeling wide even as she pressed the wet cotton over her mouth. A vast, brick building, down within a wide swath of concrete and metal grid work, was enveloped in pale, orange fire and a ravage of black smoke. The river itself was almost completely obscured by the thickening air, which clawed her throat, even with the t-shirt pressed over her nose and mouth.

Bucky sprinted alongside them, showing no major ill effects of the smoke, though Jean hoped they’d be through it quickly. They reached the bridge, still maneuvering through stalled vehicles, cars, pick-ups, delivery trucks, motorcycles and everything in-between. At one point, Jean’s foot struck something too soft to be a vehicle and she almost lost her balance, barely staying upright. Reluctantly she glanced down as she stepped over, her stomach churning at the gaping, drawn face of the corpse that glared back up at her through its glassy stare and rotten egg colored flesh. Closing her eyes, she pressed onward, her family moving around her.

“Stop!” The shrill voice cut through the smoke and the fire, a jet of ice water through the heat and stale air. Penny wrenched her arm free from Holly’s grip and stumbled backwards, her head shaking. “I— I can’t! I won’t!”

“Penny! Come with us!” Jean was begging the girl, even as the smoke increased, billowing around them in a hurricane swirl of heat and ash. “We forgive you! We understand what you had to do, and we forgive you!”

“I don’t care!” She spat back. “This— this is all I know!” She gestured back in the direction from where she’d come. “These people, for better or worse, they are my family!”

“Fox took advantage of you!” Holly yelled, her hoarse voice pleading.

“Fox is dead! He’s gone. They’re not all like him!”

“Penny. Don’t do this.” Holly took a step forward, but Jean found herself grabbing her daughter’s arm and gripping it tight. Smoke grew thicker and darker, the heat almost too much to bear. Even with the wet cloth it was difficult to breathe, Jean’s chest aching and eyes bleary and stinging. Penny stepped backwards, away from Holly’s offered hand.

“I know you said I wasn’t a bad person, Holly.” Penny’s voice was barely audible. “Maybe you were right, I don’t know. But if I can change things— I should change things. If not with you, then maybe with them.” She gestured back toward the chorus of voices.

“Penny,” Holly pleaded.

“I’m not your sister, Holly. I’m— I’m someone else. Someone not like her. Not good like her. But maybe I can be.”

Holly’s mouth opened again, though she couldn’t speak, either because she didn’t want to, or because she wasn’t physically able. Penny stepped back again, and again the smoke thickened around her, almost completely shrouding her from view. Jean coughed a hoarse, short bark of chest-clawing pain, her eyes burning.

“We need to go,” she said, pulling on her daughter’s arm. Penny nodded her agreement and forced an uneven smile.

“Good-bye,” she said quietly. “And thank you.” She twisted around and sprinted back through the smoke, gone forever. For a long moment, Holly stood, fixed in place, feet bolted to the pavement until Jean finally gave her one last hard pull, forcing her around until they were face-to-face.

“We need to go.”

Holly nodded and they both turned back west, and began to run through the smoke, struggling to catch up to Keegan and Bucky as they made their way over the Delaware River and hopefully toward better things.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Somehow, at some point within the deepest part of the night, Scout slipped into sleep. For a moment she'd been slipping on the narrow edge of consciousness, and then there was nothing but darkness, though it was a shallow darkness. When the distinctive clack of keys in the lock on the exam room door sounded at some unknowable hour, she bolted upright, her shallow slumber snapping apart, thrusting her into a full, waking state. She swung her legs across the rough sheets of the hospital bed and pushed herself from it, landing on the floor in a crouch, her stocking feet landing with silent pats. Everett showed no signs of awareness or movement, still laying on his side, his shrouded form heaving gently with the rhythm of his breathing.

For a moment, Scout wasn't sure she'd actually heard what she'd thought she'd heard and she crouched there, in the dim silence, listening. The interior handle turned slowly, a slight downward motion, great effort being taken to do so quietly. Without thought, operating on pure instinct, Scout lunged forward, crossing the entire exam room and flattening herself against the wall to the left of the door, even as it began to swing inward. Stiffened posture, she pressed her spine solidly against the hard surface at her back, drawing herself up slender, willing the door to close over her.

Sucking in her chest, she pushed herself flat against the wall, the inward swing of the door covering her as a shadowed figure crossed the threshold, stepping into the exam room. The slender figure eased the door closed behind them, holding the handle to keep the door from slamming, then gently pressed it

shut, uncovering Scout, who remained pressed against the wall to the intruder's rear. She took a quiet, cautious step forward as the intruder paused in the center of the room, head turning, evidently noticing that Scout was not in her bed. The young girl leaped forward, grasping, wrapping her arms around the invader's neck, clutching them into a clumsy, but aggressive headlock.

"Wait—" a voice choked, arms extended as the shadow braced their legs, trying to keep themselves upright, even as Scout twisted and pulled. Turning her hips, Scout stepped into the makeshift wrestling match, then used gravity and the placement of her hip as a lever, twisting and yanking the shadowed form, who was taller than she, off their feet. The intruder pivoted awkwardly over Scout's thrust-out hip and went over and down, thudding hard to the floor as Scout fell upon them, pinning them there, placing a bent arm around their neck, cocking her other first back, prepared to strike.

"Scout! It's me! Doctor Cruz! It's Sofia!"

Scout was breathing hard, her heart racing, her bicep a taut, bent coil, her bunched fist perched at the end. "What? Why?" She breathed the two words, glowering down at the woman on the floor. In the dim light she could see the vague outline of her features and confirmed that she was indeed who she claimed to be, though that didn't answer the question of why she was sneaking into their room in the dead of night.

"I'm here to help!" She hissed the words through gritted teeth.

"Help? What do you mean?"

"You don't want to go— I think— I think you should stay if you want."

"Stay? Where? Here?"

"No. I mean go back. With him." Sofia struggled to nod her head in the vague direction of the bed Everett slept on. Scout looked up and saw, somewhat startled, that Everett was fully awake, upright and at the edge of the bed, poised to strike.

“Go back where?” He snarled, his face awash in shadow, though Scout could picture the rage in his eyes. “Go back home?”

“Y— yes. Go back home. I want to help you go back home.”

Everett pushed himself from the bed, landing more awkwardly than Scout had, favoring his left side, visibly wincing, even in the dim light of the exam room. “Why would you do that?”

“I swore an oath,” Sofia replied. “As part of my becoming a doctor. I swore to do no harm. I believe that trucking you off to Fort Lauderdale would do you harm.”

Everett scowled down at her, the darkened shadows enhancing the gleam of his narrowed eyes. Scout relaxed some, leaning back, though she still straddled the female doctor’s torso, keeping her pinned to the floor. Her adjusted posture allowed Sofia to push herself up on her elbows, relaxing her breathing.

“I won’t lie— you’re still in danger. Those internal injuries, if anything should happen, it would be very bad. But I believe with the proper care, you’ll recuperate better at home than you will mixed up in— whatever this is.” She gestured vaguely around her. Scout shifted, lifting one leg from over her stomach, using the nearby bed to help her stand.

“From what I can tell, most everyone is asleep. The National Guard have two men on guard, but I’ve studied their patrols and I think I can get you out.”

“You think?”

“Best I can offer.” Sofia used the same bed and the same method to hoist herself up to her feet, nodding a nod of thanks to Scout. “I’ve got a key to where they locked up your supplies. The backpack you came in here with.”

“What about the weapons?”

“That I can’t help with. They’ve been confiscated and I don’t have access to those. National Guard put them under lock and key. But if we can get your supplies and get out

through the gap in their patrol coverage, you shouldn't need them."

"Maybe not now, but what about later?"

"I've got more at the cabin," Everett said. "Don't worry about whatever we leave behind."

Scout nodded firmly, reassured by the old man's calming words.

"We should move," Sofia advised, walking toward the door. She turned the handle and gently eased it open, just a crack, then stepped to the gap and peered out into the hallway. Satisfied that the hallway was empty, she widened the gap between the door and the frame, then stepped through, moving out into the low light of the corridor, once again, stopping short. After slipping her boots back on, Scout came next, eyeing a few scattered lanterns that shone throughout the corridor, creating a shifting audience of shadows moving throughout the plain decor of the hospital hallway. Everett took a moment, waiting until they were out of the room before he removed his hospital gown and replaced it with his old, dirty, blood-stained clothes that had been piled in the corner of the room. Just when Scout was about to knock on the door again to check on him, he eased it open and stepped out, narrow eyes glowering along the hallway warily.

Sofia angled left, moving slowly, walking on the balls of her feet as she strode along the floor and Scout trailed along behind her. The female doctor crossed the next intersection, then moved quietly to a door that she opened very slowly to reveal a storage closet, which contained cleaning supplies and other housekeeping items. Reaching toward the floor, she lifted Scout's backpack, tested the weight to ensure items still remained inside, then turned and handed it to Scout. Accepting the offered item, Scout swung the pack over one shoulder, tugged it across both, then tightened the straps, securing the bag of supplies to her back. Absently, she patted her hip and ran her fingers along her waistband and shoulder with the realization that she was unarmed, and she felt surprisingly exposed because of it. She'd only started carrying a weapon

with her a few days ago but was already naked without the distinct weight of one tugging at her belt or torso.

“Back to the crossing.” Sofia whispered and pointed, the three of them retreating back to the intersection they’d crossed, then they held for a moment, waiting for Sofia to lead the way down the intersecting hallway. Scout recognized where they were, it had been the same way she’d come and sure enough, the opened door labeled with “Room One” stood just ahead on the left. The door was ajar, though no light shone from it and all Scout could do was hope that the patient she’d seen in there as she’d come inside was still asleep. Sofia had the same thought and slowed her creeping pace as she neared the doorway. The hall itself was cast in a pale, orange light, the evenly spaced lanterns illuminating the corridor, keeping things bright so in the case of emergency, the doctors could navigate the corridors freely.

Apparently satisfied that the man was out of it, Sofia took a tentative step forward, with Scout trailing along behind. However, as Everett brought up the rear, a voice croaked from the direction of the room and everyone froze, spine locked, muscles rigid.

“You!”

It was a sudden, hissing snarl of anger and Everett twisted left in surprise.

“Kinsman! The hell are you doin’ here? Coming to finish me off? You and your snot-nosed girl?”

“What’s going on?” Sofia wheeled around, her face panic-stricken, eyes wide, mouth puckered into a tight circle.

“He’s the one!” The man shouted, his booming voice echoing throughout the silence of the surrounding hospital. “He’s the one who shot my friends! His girl is the one who shot me!”

“Shut your damn hole,” Everett hissed and stalked in the man’s direction, fists bunched.

“There’s no time for this.” Sofia lurched forward and clutched Everett’s arm, pulling him. “We need to get out of

here before the whole world knows we're leaving!"

Everett held his ground for a moment, glowering in at the man Scout recognized, even in the dim light. The man with the gunshot wound tossed the sheets from him and struggled to sit upright, clearly still in agony from the emergency trauma surgery.

"Let's go!" Sofia almost shouted herself, pulling Everett even harder and finally the old man broke free, the three of them surging forward, moving through the hallway. They sacrificed some of their stealth for speed, breaking into a run, three sets of foot falls thudding along the tile-lined hallway as they navigated the corridors, heading toward the nearest exit. "Lobby is up ahead to the right," Sofia barked, "we need to move fast! The way that guy is screaming, they'll on us in no time!"

Everett trailed behind the other two, only managing a pained, shuffling gait, visibly slowed by his lingering injuries.

"You're lucky we're up against time." Sofia glanced over her shoulder. "Or else I'd be interrogating you about exactly why you shot three men and left them for dead."

"In all fairness," Scout replied, "I shot one of them."

Sofia shook her head.

"It was them or us." Everett's tone was no-nonsense, offering no opportunity for denial or argument. "I'd do it again."

"What kind of world have we become?" Sofia rounded a corner up ahead, across the hall from where an exit sign pointed a red arrow. They made their way toward the lobby, moving as quickly as their collective sets of legs could carry them. A doorway opened ahead, leading to a broader, even more brightly lit room, tile shifting into pale carpet, a clinical setting blending seamlessly into a more administrative perimeter.

"That's as far as you go."

As they breached the door and lurched forward into the lobby, Scout saw the source of the voice, her stomach turning

to rock in her guts. The security guard she knew only as Stan stood by the front door, blocking their exit, a rifle held across his body. Another man stood, similar posture and similar armament in the corner of the lobby, with a third by an uncomfortable looking couch. Scout, Sofia and Everett stood within the center of their collective, focused attention.

“Go back,” Sofia hissed and began to step back toward the door leading to the hallway, but a squeak of boot sole on tile dissuaded her of that notion. Scout turned and back-pedaled immediately as two men in camouflage filled the hallway before her, then began to slowly approach, penning them in. They were trapped, five men against their three, and their plan for escape had been dashed as quickly as it had been formed.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear this explanation.” Stan chuckled, staring intently at Everett, fingers cradling his weapon. “Let me guess, you both just needed a little bathroom break.”

“Stan, there’s no reason not to let these people go home.” Sofia held out a calming hand.

“No reason? In case you didn’t notice, a man that this girl shot almost bled out during trauma surgery. I’d think you’d remember—you were there.”

“It was self-defense,” Scout replied meekly.

“Self-defense. Right. What about the two corpses that were with him.”

“It was them or us,” Everett offered, though Stan showed no inclination to believe him.

“They need doctors in Fort Lauderdale, right?” Sofia turned toward the soldiers, plaintive expression on her face. “We’re complying. One hundred percent. No argument from us. All I’m asking is that we let these two go back home.”

“You’re the one who told us the old man was too sick to go back home.” One of the soldiers narrowed his eyes in accusation. A name tag identified him as Bronson and he wore rank markings, though Scout wasn’t sure what they meant.

“I changed my mind.”

“You changed your mind?”

“It’s not about how hurt he is,” Stan snapped back. “He’s dangerous. We can’t just let him walk out of here. He has to pay for what he did.”

“We don’t know what he did. It’s that man’s word against his and the girls.”

“So, what? We gotta hold a trial? You gonna send out jury duty summons, Doc? Give me a break.” Stan rolled his eyes. “Justice has to be a little cleaner and swifter these days. We don’t have prison cells and judges.”

“So, what are you proposing?” Sofia drew back.

“We gotta send a message,” Stan replied firmly. “We let him get away with this, we’re one more step toward anarchy. Things are close enough as it is, we have to hold a hard line.”

“A hard line?” Sofia tilted her head. “So, tell me, Stan. Where does stealing medication from sick and injured people stand in your scope of justice?”

Stan’s face reddened with rage, his eyes narrowing, the corner of his lip tilting up in a wordless snarl.

“Yeah.” Sofia turned toward the soldiers and thrust a finger directly at Stan. “You really should talk to him about that.”

“Doc, be very careful what you say.” Stan shook his head, adjusting his grip on the rifle.

“Is she telling the truth?” Bronson’s eyes met Stan’s with an unrelenting, hard stare. “Medications are one of our most vital resources these days. We inventoried the stores yesterday and were pretty surprised at how few pain killers were there.”

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” Stan hissed.

“That’s bull and you know it,” Sofia replied. More footsteps approached and Scout looked around the two men, catching the eyes of Cooper Jennings, one of the other doctors, the one with the bad smoking habit.

“What is going on out here? I was trying to catch some sleep.”

“Cooper. Tell them.” Sofia nodded toward the two soldiers. “Tell them about Stan stealing pain killers.”

Cooper’s eyes peeled wide, the color draining from his face that seemed to shift immediately from exhaustion to stark, sharp alertness.

“Yeah, Coop,” barked Stan, a menacing, threatening look gleaming within his bright eyes. “Tell them.”

“Look,” Cooper lifted his palms as he stepped into the hallway, “I don’t know anything about anything.”

“Dammit, Cooper,” Sofia growled. “Tell them the truth.”

“I don’t know what’s going on here,” Cooper pleaded, “but we don’t belong in the middle of it.” His eyes darted toward Sofia’s.

“I’m not going to let them take this man and this girl. All they want is to go home.”

“Criminals don’t always get what they want.” Stan shrugged, positioning himself in the center of the exit door to ensure nobody would try to sneak past.

“If what she says is true,” Bronson interjected, “these people aren’t the only criminals in here.”

“We saved these people’s lives.” Stan’s voice twisted as he completed the sentence, slicing through the narrow gaps in his clenched teeth. “We didn’t have to do that.”

“So, you’re saying stealing the oxy and the Percocet was out of the kindness of your own heart?” Sofia fixed Stan with a glare.

“Okay, Doc, you’re one step too close to the edge here.”

“What are you going to do, shoot me? The same thing you were accusing this man and this girl of doing?”

“Doc, I don’t know what the hell you’re trying to do here, but whatever it is, it’s a mistake.” Stan and his two friends took a step forward, their weapons still held, though the barrels had redirected slightly, starting to turn toward them.

“Take it easy.” Bronson stepped forward, his own weapon adjusting. Sofia and Cooper stepped back precariously, clearly sensing a brewing conflict. Scout swallowed hard, looking throughout the room, the tension thickening the air, clenching at her skin like sharpened nails. The air stirred like an approaching storm, hurricane force winds building within the confines of the Central Glades Memorial Hospital lobby, and she didn’t want to be there when it made landfall. She took a tentative step toward the door, hoping it was subtle enough that the others wouldn’t notice, even though Stan still stood between them and the exit.

“Take it easy? You think you National Guard goons can just stride in here and tell us what to do? You weren’t here in those first days, man. You weren’t here when people stormed the hospital and threatened to tear it apart. You weren’t here when me and my friends put our lives on the line to protect these people.” Stan’s voice elevated, rising almost to a shout. “Did we take some meds? Yeah, maybe we did. A fair trade for saving lives, wouldn’t you think?”

“What I would think,” Bronson said firmly, “is that maybe you’d save lives because it was the right thing to do. Not because there was something in it for you.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re with the government. You’ve got food, water, no worries about shelter. Easy for you to waltz in here more than week later and start making demands.”

“Stan— that is your name, right? You need to relax.” Bronson approached again, walking carefully, though the grip on his weapon was tight. Scout inched toward the door again, then glanced back at Everett, who nodded subtly. “Why don’t we all go back into the hospital and talk this through.” Bronson gestured back toward the hallway. “We’ll figure out a path forward.”

“A path forward.” Stan chuckled, his head shaking. “Right. And what path is that, exactly? Fort Lauderdale? Some refugee camp with ankle deep sewage and fist fulls of oats and warm tap water?”

“Just take it easy.” Bronson took another step forward and Scout edged closer to the door again, realizing that she was holding her breath.

“Take the doctors,” Stan said, his eyes wild, “do what you want. But this place is ours, got it? It doesn’t belong to you.” The tenor of the man’s voice was wavering and uneven, the octaves rolling like a roller coaster car, up, then down. Hysteria seemed to be creeping at the edges.

“Stan.” Bronson took another step forward, and Stan’s fragile grasp on reality shattered.

“No!” He screamed, throat tight, and his weapon shot upward in a single, swift arc. He pulled the trigger even as he was bringing the rifle up, the first shot driving hard into Bronson’s lower torso. The soldier gasped and stumbled, sprawling clumsily backwards as his squad mate’s widened eyes broadcasted his intentions. Stan’s two friends swiveled toward the second soldier even as Stan did so as well, focusing all of their attention on the National Guard member even as Bronson dropped to a knee, supporting himself with one hand, sucking in breath.

Sofia moved all at once, shoving past Scout and Everett, launching herself toward Stan. She leaped, screaming wildly, her shrill cries piercing within the lobby, filling the silence of the rifle shot echo. Striking Stan from his blind side, she sent him sprawling to his left, his legs buckling, unprepared for the sudden assault

“Go!” She screamed, staring desperately at Scout and the young girl snapped into action. There was only a moment’s hesitation, a fistful of seconds where she feared for Sofia’s safety. Stan and his friends wouldn’t hesitate to kill her, Scout felt certain of that, yet even with that in mind, Sofia had risked everything to give them an avenue of escape. Scout sprinted forward, leading with her shoulder, pushing her way through the front door. As she angled right to give Everett a gap to exit, she saw Cooper running toward Stan as well, snarling in rage, determined to help his friend. The second National Guardsman had his rifle elevated and unleashed a few three-round bursts,

an automatic chatter of gunfire tearing apart Stan's two friends as he pumped the trigger repeatedly in succession.

Chaos reigned, shouts echoing from deeper within the hospital, Bronson's fellow soldiers alerted by the screams and the gunfire. Everett stumbled through the exit, gasping and wheezing, yet somehow remaining upright, moving alongside Scout as they reached the stairs. She plunged down, using the railing as support, hitting the pavement at the base of the stairs in a low crouch before she turned and offered her hand, guiding Everett down the last few steps. He nodded his thanks, then surged forward, pushing through his own pain and exhaustion, breaking into a loping run. Scout ran alongside him, their feet thudding on the pavement of the road leading to the hospital, heading back west. More gunfire echoed from within the lobby, a shouted bark of agony sounding very much like Stan Sussman's voice.

"They're out! Go go go!" Another voice sounded. "Two of them slipped away! You and you, chase them down!"

"We need to keep moving, Everett, can you keep moving?"

Everett nodded as he wheezed further, though to his credit, his pace didn't slow, he continued running, or what passed for it, anyway. His gait was clumsy, uneven and unsteady, but carried him forward, which was all that really mattered.

"Left!" Scout pointed toward a gap between buildings along the left sidewalk, then led Everett that way, cutting into the alley, descending into darkness. Behind them, voices grew louder as soldiers exited the hospital, emerging onto the steps outside.

"Please! Just let them go!" Sofia's voice carried across the night air, calming Scout's nerves. The doctor had apparently survived the confrontation with Stan. Her anxiety eased, if only a little, she picked up the pace, darting right, behind another building, moving through a narrow, darkened alley that separated the rear of the structures from the sprawling Everglades wilderness to their left. Everett began to lag behind, his pace faltering, one hand grasping at his left ribs as he favored his opposite side.

“They’ve got to be here somewhere!” An authoritative voice boomed from the street beyond the buildings. Scout turned toward Everett and stopped for a moment, holding out a hand.

“I’m going to go on ahead, okay? Get things ready.”

Everett nodded. Even in the sparse moonlight, his face was pale and glistening with sweat, his breathing a bit labored. His time in the hospital had saved his life, but there was still plenty of recovery on the horizon.

“I’ve got the boat. It’s parked where it normally is. I’ll go get it ready, okay?”

“Go,” he affirmed with a curt, uneven nod. Scout stepped back, turned, and sprinted down the alley, moving quickly, not even sparing a second for a backward look. Footfalls crashed down the sidewalk, far closer than she was comfortable with and she angled left, pushing herself into the trees. The silhouettes of two armed men appeared within one of the alleys, backlit by the moon, creeping forward, weapons raised. Scout could only hope that Everett was concealing himself well enough even as she moved through the wilderness, keeping herself out of eyeline of the soldiers. They emerged from the alley behind her, though she was already almost a block ahead, running low, doing her best to not rustle leaves, stepping over and around the various thrusts of roots and stumps.

Once she was certain she’d drawn far enough away, she pushed back out onto pavement, cut a diagonal path across the alley and ducked behind another building, once again crossing out toward the street. Holding her place by the corner of a wood-paneled building to her right, she glanced out along the street and seeing no sign of the soldiers, she broke free, running toward the shore which met the rippling edge of the swamp. Hitting the crest of a downward slope, she slid down, angling her hip to take the brunt of the impact, descending the grass and dirt at a swift clip. Bracing her foot, she propelled herself back to a stumbling stance as she hit the base of the hill, close to where the churning water met the mud and grass lined shore.

In the scant light of the overhead moon, she saw the boat the soldiers had approached in, resting along the ragged edge and she paused for a moment, looking back up the hill to make sure nobody was coming. Approaching the military boat, she located its mooring line and untied it from the uneven stump one of the men had bound it to. Once the line was untied, she stepped into the knee deep water, and shoved the boat from shore, watching as it drifted aimlessly along the swamp, coasting the gentle crest of windblown waves, moving several feet from where it had been tied off.

She back-pedaled, returning to Everett's own watercraft, the one she'd concealed beneath a curtain of foliage, and she began sweeping the leaves and branches from the top of it, exposing it with each cautious removal of organic covering. Slipping off her backpack, she dropped it into the boat, and searched around inside, looking for anything that might help them escape. The occasional voice came from street level, soldiers barking to each other, issuing and acknowledging orders, clearly still on the hunt. It seemed as though there were more of them, a chorus of four, maybe five voices, getting closer and closer all the time. There was still no sign of Everett, she had no idea where he was or how he was approaching, though the fact that the soldiers were still searching gave her some hope at least.

A solution formed itself in her mind. She located the gas can inside the boat and lifted it, testing its weight. It was heavy, but not heavy enough to be full and the slosh of liquid inside indicated some, but not much, fuel. She dug along the shore, clawing a tree branch from the dirt, then lifted it up and examined it, satisfied that it might do the trick. Setting it in the boat, she unbuttoned the green, flannel shirt she wore and accessed the t-shirt beneath, gripping it from the bottom and tearing at it, ripping a narrow strip of cotton from the fabric, long and skinny. She wrapped the fabric around the base of the tree branch, tying it off in a knot, then grabbed the gas can and poured a liberal amount of precious fuel on the cloth, soaking it through. Voices were closer, approaching the top of the hill and while she scoped out the street above, she still couldn't make out Everett's form. Going into her backpack, she found

the small package of matches she'd brought along from Everett's cabin for when she had to start a fire, then pocketed them.

Bending forward, she strode up the slope, going step over painful step, her back and legs straining from the effort of her upward climb. Approaching the top of the slope, she kept herself low and scanned the street, her eyes finally landing on a nearby corner. Concealed within the shadows of the same clapboard building she'd been hiding behind moments before, she saw the broad silhouette of a man hugging close to the edge, buried within the darkness. She smiled and to her own surprise, a pinprick of tears stung the corners of her eyes. With two more careful strides upward, she neared the top of the slope and peered down the street, quickly identifying four approaching soldiers, fanned out slightly, searching the area for wherever they'd gone.

Regulating her breathing, Scout fished the matches from her pocket, swiftly struck one, igniting its red head in a flickering finger of blue flame. Touching it to the fuel-soaked fabric, the torch immediately illuminated in a soft, whispering hiss of ignition. Wasting no time, she eyed a section of wilderness to her left and as much as she hated to do it, she lurched forward and tossed the torch, the flame tumbling end-over-end through the darkness.

"There!" A voice called out, one of the soldiers pivoting in the direction of the tumbling torch. It glanced from a nearby tree and tumbled to the grass-covered ground, embers scattering from its point of impact. It landed in the grass, simmering and flaming, the fire slowly spreading out in an arc around the fallen torch. The four men made their way toward it and Scout darted to the right, waving her hand so Everett would see her. He must have seen her toss the torch, because he was already in motion, running as fast as he was able and she grasped his arm, leading him down the hill, toward the boat.

"It's a torch! Someone threw it! They're here somewhere!"

Scout and Everett hustled back down the hill as quickly as they could, reaching the shore where the boat was tied off.

“Get in,” she whispered with a ragged hiss and Everett didn’t argue, barely managing to hoist one leg over the edge and tumble clumsily inside.

“Down there! I think they’re down there!”

Scout vaulted over the edge, landing within the boat and swiftly made her way to the rear engine.

“There’s a boat!”

She yanked the pull cord, her arm straining with the force of it even as the four silhouettes emerged at the top of the slope, within view.

“Go go go!” All at once the four soldiers catapulted forward, sprinting down the hill, though thankfully none of them thought it prudent to open fire. Scout and Everett were unarmed, after all and unlike some men Scout had seen, the National Guardsmen didn’t appear to be the shoot first, ask questions later type. But they were quickly converging, charging through the wet grass and muck, closing the distance.

She yanked again, her arm burning with the force of her attempted pulls. The cord tugged—and the engine ignited, a sudden throttling growl of successful combustion.

“Thank you!” She hissed as the boat began to lurch forward, the engine propelling them as she shoved the steering mechanism straight away from her to angle the engine and push them away from shore.

“Stop!” One of the soldiers hit the swampy edge, his boots sinking deep, water rising to just below his knees. Scout ignored him, guiding the boat away, sending it charging through the murky depths of the swamp, an angular churn of foaming water trailing after them.

“Stop!” Another voice cried out, but again, the soldiers seemed more concerned with bringing them in than shooting them dead. “Where’s our boat!”

“It’s gone! Someone untied it!”

Scout and Everett moved through the blackened water, the shore getting further and further away as the boat cruised

across the swamp. To their rear, the soldiers' voices faded, getting dimmer and quieter, though with no less sense of urgency. Closing her eyes, pinching back the tears of relief, Scout straightened the steering as the boat shot forward, increasing speed and pulling away, bringing them back toward the cabin— back toward home.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The events of the previous night would have almost seemed like a dream, though Everett's groan of pain as he maneuvered himself out of the easy chair was a reminder of his lingering injuries. Scout had gotten them back to the cabin without further incident, parking the boat so they could both disembark, helping Everett back inside the cabin and putting him to bed. She'd unloaded the boat and hidden it as per Everett's instruction, brought everything inside, then made one last perimeter sweep of the cabin's grounds and locked things down so they could rest and recuperate.

As exhausted as she was, Scout had gotten up several times throughout their sleep to check on the old man, verifying that he was still breathing and still cool to the touch. The dangers of infection were prominent and although Everett had some antibiotics in the cabin's medical coffers, Scout wasn't sure he had enough, or the right kind, to battle back an onslaught of sepsis should one emerge. Thankfully, he remained fever free throughout the night and seemed to have gotten several hours of good sleep, which was all she could ask for.

Scout had woken first and started some coffee brewing, then had run out to the chicken coop to see what was there for eggs. She was pleasantly surprised by the results, and collected nearly a dozen of them, most likely from both the previous day and that morning, collecting them all and bringing them inside. Everett had started to stir, so she'd begun the process of prepping breakfast, some eggs to go along with the coffee and

by the time the old man was up and about, she had a plate ready for him.

The eggs were scrambled with just a hint of goat milk, sprinkled with some spices from Everett's garden, and accompanied by a few strips of dried possum jerky that still remained. Everett allowed himself a grateful smile as he sat at a small table and dug in, washing down the bites of egg and possum with delicate sips of hot, black coffee. Neither of them spoke, devoting every ounce of energy to consuming the calories, neither of them particularly enthusiastic about revisiting the events of the previous days. Finally, after emptying their plates and returning them to the sink, Everett sighed as he walked toward the cabin's front door. He paused, placing a palm on the wooden frame next to it, his gaze drifting toward the floor.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Scout's cheeks flushed as she stood at the counter, checking the basin for water. There wasn't much, she'd have to bring it out to the pump out back to refill it.

"You saved my life, Scout."

"No more than you saved mine."

Everett nodded, still looking away, appearing almost uncomfortable with meeting her gaze. "I— never realized just how old I was until last night." He shook his head. "It's been a long, hard life, kid."

"But you're still here."

"I am." His voice was quiet and Scout wasn't sure if he was happy about that fact.

"Thank you, by the way," she said in a quiet voice. "For sharing."

His shoulders tensed and his flattened palm coiled into a fist, fingers pulling tight. "I shouldn't have burdened you with that. It's not your cross to bear."

"It's not yours either."

"Yes. It is." His head dipped just a bit lower.

“Things happen, Everett and it’s not always someone’s fault.” Scout swallowed hard, thinking, as she always did, about her father. Not just about his death, but about his smoldering corpse in the airport parking lot, about the last time she ever set eyes on him. She wished so much that she’d had a better last moment with her father’s face, some fateful final words, some grand message of acknowledgement. But she hadn’t. One moment he’d been there, alive and protecting her, then the next moment he’d been gone, just like that, his soul blown out of him by an explosion that should never have happened.

“Maybe not always. But that was.” He turned slightly and Scout could just make out the edge of his ruddy face. “I’ve made peace with it.”

Scout smiled softly. “I’m not sure of that.”

There was a flash in Everett’s eyes that she could barely see and for a moment she thought that perhaps she’d pushed too hard. But the anger dimmed, and his eyelids fluttered, his gaze drifting away. He sighed and opened the front door, stepping out into the late morning light. Scout grabbed the basin and followed him, walking through the front door, shielding her eyes from the shining sun.

“What the hell is this?” Everett’s voice was a mixture of shock and— was it admiration? Sprawled along the ground, a few feet away, was the corpse of a nearly six foot crocodile. Everett turned and gaped at Scout, an expression on his face as if he was trying to solve a complicated math problem. “Is that the one—”

“That tried to eat you? Yup.” Scout nodded, a smile creasing her lips. “I put a bullet in his eye. Figured it was stupid to let it go to waste, but I had no idea what to do with it, so I just dragged it up here. I guess we’re lucky nothing else stumbled across it.”

“Very lucky.” Everett bent down and ran his hand over the rough texture of the creature’s leathery skin. “Did you pull this all the way up from the swamp?”

“I’m stronger than I look.” Scout shrugged and extended her narrow arms.

“Well, good. Then you can help me move it into the backyard. We’ll spend the day processing it, try to salvage as much of the skin as we can.”

“Is it— edible?”

“Is it edible? Oh, yeah. We’re going to eat like kings from this thing. You haven’t lived until you’ve had a tail filet from a fresh crocodile. My mouth is watering just thinking about it. Hell, if there were still tourists around, the meat from this bad boy could get us hundreds. Those rich city slickers will pay through the nose to tell their wine club friends that they ate gator meat.”

Scout screwed up her face but walked over to the dead animal. Everett approached, but she shook him off with a gesture.

“Not with those stitches you don’t.”

“Kid, I can still lift a croc.”

Scout didn’t give him the chance to help, crouching low and grabbing a leg. She hoisted up and stepped back, dragging the lifeless reptile along the grass, slowly, foot-by-foot. Scout smiled, the sun warming her face, the feeling of hard, productive work giving her strength rather than sapping it out of her. She’d done something good— she’d helped save Everett’s life and, in the process, he’d shared a part of himself with her. She still longed for her father’s company and still dreamed of a day when her mother and siblings might find their way down to her. But for the first time since the initial explosions that had torn apart Miami International Airport, she felt at least a small bit of contentment.

She only hoped that perhaps the events of the past twenty-four hours might convince Everett that dragging her off to her grandparents or a refugee camp wasn’t the right move. Time would tell, and for the moment at least, time was one thing they seemed to have.

The battle had been won the previous night, but victory was not the first word to come to Jacob's mind as he stood outside Neutral Territory that morning, surveying the damage. The burned out hulks of two pick-up trucks darkened the yard in front of the converted barn, still leaking dark soot-fueled smoke from their blackened remains. The fire had spread to the front wall of the barn, and it had taken a concerted effort from multiple parties to douse the flames and thankfully the structure had only suffered minor fire damage. Damage from the gunfight, however, was far more severe. Chunks of the wall had been blown out and blistered, a ragged scattershot of bullet impacts tearing apart exterior and interior walls.

Pat removed his hat, shaking his head as he looked at the scorch marks marring the exterior walls of the barn. He drew the back of his hand across his sweat soaked forehead, then wiped it off on his shirt.

“Is it salvageable?”

“Salvageable? Sure.” Pat shrugged, his head shaking. “Should it be?”

“Of course. Why not?”

“People died last night, Jacob. Three customers, several Parkland boys. All for what? Some jars of moonshine and live music?”

“It represents more than that, Pat. It represents the time before. What things were like before fuel pipelines started exploding. It tells people that happiness is still possible even in the worst circumstances.”

“And as a result— people died. I'm worried that's all we'll remember. No matter how loud the music plays, no matter how strong the whiskey is, all they'll remember is the gunfire and the trampled bodies.”

“At first, you might be right. It'll be your job to make enough happy memories that they cover up the bad ones.”

“I don’t know if I’m up for that, Jacob. I don’t know if I *want* that responsibility.”

Jacob wasn’t sure how to respond. Farm workers gathered around the barn, examining the damage, scraping away the carbonized wood. They spoke in low voices, gesturing toward the bullet holes, silently measuring the jagged gashes of shattered boards. They’d cleared out the bodies long ago, wrapping them in sheets and tucking them away for some future ceremony. Because the reality was, Jacob felt the same way. For a time, the small community south of St. Albans, West Virginia had been a pocket of sanity in the midst of an untamed world, and he’d embraced that. But the violence had followed him, it had come to his doorstep once again and it hadn’t just knocked on his door, it had lifted its steel toed boot and kicked it down. Jacob had found peace for a moment and within that peace he’d set aside his priorities but in the wake of the shootout the previous night, he’d found himself restless and guilt ridden. He’d told himself that if a place like St. Albans existed, then perhaps his brother and his family had found a place, too. But the cold, hard reality was, there was no safe space in the world anymore, no place that existed outside death and destruction. He couldn’t put it off any longer—he was going to have to leave St. Albans and continue east. He couldn’t ignore the realities of the world any longer, not as long as family was caught in the whirlwind of it. He’d stay a few days, help bury the bodies, help repair the barn as much as it could be repaired, but then he would have to be on his way.

Out of the corner of his eye, a figure emerged, making its way through the sprawling cornfields. She moved with a purpose, but where her shoulders were normally squared and where her chin was normally held high, her posture slumped, and her gaze tracked along the clustered stalks at her feet. Jacob patted the old man’s shoulder and made his way toward Deena, who forced a narrow smile that didn’t touch her eyes.

“How is he?”

Tony was the first person Jacob had met upon his arrival in St. Albans and he’d become a fast friend. He’d been injured in the fight the previous night, he’d sacrificed himself to give

Jacob, Deena and Pat a chance to escape and attack. He'd survived the initial conflict but had taken two bullets in the process. Whatever resources they had at Deena's farm, a functional operating room wasn't one of them and though he was awake and alive, the prognosis was grim.

"About the same. We sent someone up into the city to try and track down a doctor. But if the word spread about what happened with the Parklands, I'm not sure we'll have many volunteers. Even if we do, I'm not sure—" her voice broke and she pressed her teeth firmly together, her jaw hardening the smooth contours of her face.

"He's strong, Deena. He's a fighter."

She chuckled dryly, without humor. "Do you know how many times I heard those words while my husband was battling cancer? I lost track."

"Sorry. I was just—"

"It's not about strength or toughness, Jacob. My husband was one of the strongest men I ever knew. By the end he was little more than a shadow. Paper thin skin, bulging ribs, no hair anywhere on his body. The cancer had utterly destroyed him." She turned to him, tears leaking from her eyes. "Does that mean he wasn't strong enough? That he wasn't tough enough? That he wasn't a fighter?"

"Of course not."

"Sometimes bad stuff just happens and sometimes no matter how hard you fight or how strong you are, the bad stuff wins."

There wasn't much Jacob could say in response, so instead of trying, he stepped into her and allowed her to fold herself into him, the two embracing for a long, quiet moment. Her cheek pressed against his chest, her tears dampening the cotton of his shirt. She steadied her breathing, her shoulders heaving as he kept her close, his arms coiled around her narrow frame.

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

Jacob didn't reply right away, which was probably reply enough.

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“Is it?”

“You have family out there.”

“Someone once told me that family can be more than just blood. It can be a bond stronger than blood.”

Deena gazed up at him, her eyes wet with tears. “You’re a good man, Jacob. Better than this world deserves.”

“You give me too much credit.” In his mind he saw the old man in the camping goods store, the one he shot in cold blood. He saw the flames tracking up the denim pants of one of the Parkland boys, he smelled the acrid stink of burning flesh and heard the desperate wails of a grieving mother.

He thought of those final days of his marriage, the stupid arguments and vindictive actions that accomplished nothing except hurting the woman he loved. He thought of the parking lot outside Veronica’s office building, her broken and bloodied body crushed beneath the collapsed building. Most of all, he thought of that engineer, frantic on the other end of the phone, screaming about what he’d found mere moments before society itself unraveled in a twisting shred of fire and smoke. He was not a good man, no matter what Deena might think or say— but maybe it wasn’t too late to become a better one. That might have to be enough.

The Fullers had wasted no time crossing the Delaware River and upon reaching Wilmington continued moving at a hurried pace, working to further separate themselves from the fires at their back. Wilmington itself wasn’t much better than Deepwater, fires raging throughout the broader city, but the Delaware River had at least provided a fire break, a separation from the worst of the chemical plant smoke and devastation.

Holly hadn’t said much since peeling away from Penny, making her way through the city along with her mother and brother. While she wasn’t holding the handgun that had once

belonged to Cliffy, it was close at hand, tucked into the belt of her denim pants, within easy reach. She'd hoped that once the sun had risen, it would shine a fresh light on the world, perhaps illuminate the more positive aspects and make things seem not quite so gray and dour. But instead, the opposite had happened. As daylight had broken and the sky had shone brighter, it had only served to reveal how broken and shattered the world had become.

Wilmington was littered with destruction, shattered windows, broken storefronts, fires smoldering far from where pipelines would have ruptured. Every single gas station they came upon was a ravaged, smoking mass, dark, fuel-scented smog wafting from the ashes of surrounding buildings. Trash lined the city streets, and whatever people they saw were aimlessly wandering, searching for food or lost loved ones, or in some horrific cases, searching for nothing at all, simply stunned and dazed by recent events. Cars were parked at every possible angle and in every position, some stalled out in the middle of the lanes of traffic, others pushed up onto sidewalks or even smashed into each other, wrapped in a twisted embrace over a spray of broken glass and spilled fuel.

In one case, a truck had run into a light post, smashing it at its base, knocking it over, toppling it across the street where it rested atop the smashed roofs of other stopped vehicles. Holly had seen more dead bodies, impossible to tell what had killed them whether they'd been shot or simply bludgeoned to death by angry bystanders or desperate looters. Throughout Wilmington, Delaware, all they could see was damage, death and bloodshed, a microcosm of the world at large. Holly's eyes remained narrow and alert in spite of their weariness, darting left to right, eyeing every single person who came within ten feet of them, her hand twitching toward the butt of the pistol in her belt.

But, for all the damage and smoldering aftermath, nobody bothered them as they made their way south through Wilmington. Even though they all wore backpacks, even though it was a couple of woman and a young boy, the passers-by steered clear. Holly kept her face twisted into a rigid, hard expression, her eyes dulled, but focused, her spine

rigid and posture wary. There was a part of her that hoped maybe the piercing glare in her eyes might be enough to discourage those who saw them as easy targets, but there was no way to know that for sure.

Following the westward edge of the river, they found themselves approaching New Castle Battery Park, a small riverfront nature preserve south of the main part of central, downtown Wilmington. The population had thinned, and the danger seemed lessened somehow as they crossed from a cluster of residential houses and moved along the grass and occasional clutch of green trees. The sky was still gray with smoke, the lingering air hot and sour, but being surrounded by nature, even within the Wilmington city limits, eased the tension in Holly's shoulders, if only a little. They strolled along the rocky shore of the park, where river water lapped restlessly at the land, and Holly glanced around, satisfied that they were more or less alone. She found a wooden bench perched at the river's edge, unslung her backpack and fell into its curved planks, her strength all but leaving her.

Air expelled from her lungs, hissing through pursed lips and she bent over, resting her arms on bent legs, letting her chin drop. Without speaking, Keegan found a bench next to hers and settled himself into it, Bucky only too happy to curl along the grass at his feet and take a load off. Jean removed her own backpack, set it down and sat next to her daughter, peering out across the river. Though they were south of the bridge and had been traveling for some time, the choking columns of dark smoke smeared across the eastern shore of the river, blacking out where the chemical plants had once been. They had vanished completely behind the curtain of dark charcoal, continuing to churn and fuel the constant fires.

"She made her choice." Jean rested a hand on Holly's knee. "Sometimes you have to let them do that."

"It was my fault. My fault she got so close. My fault they almost—"

"She reminded you of Scout." It was a statement of fact and one that Holly did not deny. Jean nodded her silent agreement. She leaned over, opening up the backpack and

finding the folded map kept within. She lifted it out and tucked it under one leg, then reached back in and dug out the half loaf of white bread. She didn't ask Holly or Keegan if they were hungry, she just set about lathering the peanut butter on the bread, applying it carefully to be sure there was enough to go around. She handed one to Holly, then stood and carried two over to Keegan and Bucky. Returning to the bench, she made one for herself, and then handed a bottle with only a little bit of water in it over to her daughter.

“Rinse it down. Don't want that peanut butter getting caught in your throat.”

Holly took the bottle and sipped, then turned toward Keegan, held it up and when Keegan nodded, she tossed it over. He caught it and drank it, then offered some to Bucky before tossing the now empty bottle back.

“Ironic that we're sitting here at the riverfront with thousands of gallons of water right there— but I wouldn't drink it if my life depended on it.”

“Our lives do depend on it. I'm still not drinking it.” Jean peered over toward the blackened remains of the chemical plants, shrouded by smog. “We'll find some along the way somewhere.”

Holly nodded, though she didn't seem too sure.

“You took quite a chance there— rushing Fox. You know, with that rifle he had and everything.”

“I knew it was empty. I'd fired the last rounds when I chased away that guy at the convenience store just outside Deepwater.”

“You were one hundred percent sure?” Jean was unfolding the map to get a better look.

“At least ninety-five.”

Jean sighed, then chuckled dryly. She didn't sound the least bit amused. Spreading the map across her lap she leaned forward, silently charting their course.

“Whatever we do, we steer clear of Baltimore. We can’t risk ending up in those camps.”

Holly nodded and leaned over her mother, examining the map herself. “We could go deeper into Delaware here.”

“Into Maryland, yes. If we follow this region down to here, we can cross at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. Though that puts us directly into Norfolk. That area is littered with Navy bases. Could be just as dangerous as Baltimore or Washington.”

“Mom, I hate to break it to you, but no matter what path we choose, it’s going to be dangerous. There’s no avoiding it.”

“I know.”

Together they reviewed the map, talking in low whispers, tracing various routes with the tips of their fingers, discussing and arguing the pluses and minuses of each route they were evaluating. Holly was thankful for the conversation, appreciative of the distraction, the welcome reprieve from her thoughts which had been littered with remorse and regret over what had happened with Penny. She’d let a relative stranger get close to her and close to her family and they’d very nearly paid the price.

She couldn’t let that happen again. The world was rich with danger, wealthy with people who were looking to take advantage, and as much as it went against the core of who she was, she would have to close herself off to it. It would keep her safe and it would keep her family alive, the only question was, would she be able to live with herself— with the person she was destined to become.

Leaning back in the bench, her face turned up, the gentle warmth of the springtime sun fell upon her, even through the stink of smoke and soot. They’d survived another close brush with death, but there were still miles to go before they could rest.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Desperation had all but set in back at the site of the Cessna plane crash. Pedro's attempted attack on the small cabin deep within the Everglades had backfired, leaving two of their crew dead and sending both him and Urbano scurrying back to the plane with their respective tails between their legs. In the days since, Urbano had been a caged animal, pacing back and forth, ranting and raving, swearing vengeance on the one-armed man and his teenage brat who had somehow fought them back. But Pedro's biggest worry was food and clean water. Even with Urbano's manic moods, however, Pedro was still the boss, which is why they found themselves trudging through the growth, pushing through thickened grass and cypress for hours on end. Urbano held one of the rifles from the weapons cache in the plane, cradling it in two hands as he shouldered through the trees, leading them both east.

"Water ahead."

"Can we move around it?"

Urbano drifted south, moving along the ragged bank of the water, which shimmered and rippled in the low breeze. Stalks of grass and foliage emerged from the water, like the thinning hair along the ridged spine of a rhino, though it was impossible to tell just how deep the water itself was.

"There's a tree here." Urbano stepped through the waist-high grass, moving toward the thickened trunk of a fallen tree, which had tumbled into the water, creating a natural bridge that spanned the potentially deadly depths of swamp. Pedro didn't especially like crossing the water, his eyes tracking

along its surface, searching for the telltale movements of aquatic predators. Nonetheless, he followed closely behind Urbano, balancing along the fallen tree until they reached solid ground on the other side. Urbano took a few strides forward and halted, peering into the trees ahead, and held up a hand to halt his boss in his tracks. Pedro stopped, but quickly noticed the same thing the other man had, beams of pale light slicing through the sparse gaps in trees ahead.

They moved closer, the faint sound of conversation carrying through the thinning trees. Urbano gestured for Pedro to stop, then ducked low, moving through the long grass and cypress, stepping through the curtain that separated the deeper Everglades from the urban sprawl beyond. Pedro slowed his forward progress, but didn't stop completely, following Urbano until they both stepped through the trees and out onto a long grass meadow, a sprawling terrain of open ground and Pedro sucked in a sudden breath. Before them, several yards away, the grass abruptly ended, the far horizon consumed by acres of simmering pavement, heat rippling from not just the roadway, but from the stacks of stopped cars pressed together, end-to-end, a sudden, jolting transition from nature to civilization.

“What is this?” Pedro looked left to right, the pressed line of stopped traffic filling his entire field of vision.

“It's the interstate, I think. Not a main interstate, that's further east, but obviously busy enough to cause a traffic jam.”

Pedro lifted his eyes toward the sky, though it was obscured by an omnipresent cloud, lingering, gray smoke hanging low and pervasive, revealing none of the blue sky or pale clouds beyond. The air was thick and sour, the smoke carrying traces of gasoline smell, his skin radiating with the underlying heat. Intermingled within the stalled traffic several figures strode through, opening doors, leaning into the vehicles for a moment, before withdrawing, sometimes with items in their hands, sometimes without. They spoke to each other in elevated voices, oblivious to the fact that they were being watched. Slowly, Urbano and Pedro approached, the younger man tightening his grip on the rifle, positioning

himself in front of Pedro, between him and the strangers ahead.

“Yo! These people left their groceries in their back seat! A lot of spoiled milk, but some crackers and cereal!” One of the men emerged from the rear of a maroon sedan and waved a hand, capturing the attention of another.

“Solid! Start separating the spoiled stuff and bag up the goods. Bring it over to Charlie, he’s gathering it all together. There’s a hardware store over the ridge, Kyle and Peck are seeing if they can snatch some wheelbarrows! Place is on fire, though.”

Pedro glanced toward the upward slope of grass where the man had gestured and sure enough an even thicker column of dark smoke rose from the distance, a broad stalk of charcoal gray from beyond the hill.

“Be careful, boss,” Urbano warned, glancing back toward him. “We don’t know these guys.”

“Maybe we should?”

“No offense, but are you nuts?” Urbano looked back over his shoulder.

Pedro smiled a thin, crooked smile, then strode past Urbano, walking swiftly across the grass separating the curtain of trees from the roadway beyond.

“Uhhh—Clark? We got company here!” The man who had found the groceries halted in mid movement, turning to look at Pedro as he approached.

“Woah, woah!” Clark echoed, lifting his hands. “Stop right where you are! This is our territory! We claimed it!” All at once the various figures milling around halted their movements, drawing upright, slowly converging. Pedro’s eyes darted, silently counting those he could see, quickly reaching eight before he decided to redirect his attention to the man named Clark.

“Claimed it? Is there some sort of process for that?” Pedro shrugged.

“Yeah, the process is we beat the crap out of anyone who tries to encroach on our territory. Or we kill ‘em.” Clark’s voice hardened. “That process too complicated for you?”

“Have you had good luck so far? With your territory?” Pedro’s voice was level, showing no intimidation by the larger, clearly angrier man.

“We do all right.” Clark stopped several feet away, studying Pedro with pensive confusion. His eyes darted toward Urbano, then widened as he took in the weapon the man was carrying.

“You like that?” Pedro glanced back and gestured toward the rifle, one of the AK-47s they’d illicitly smuggled across the border before the plane had gone down deep within the Florida Everglades. “We have more.”

“What makes you think I give a crap what you have or don’t have? This is our territory, all up and down Highway 27. Might as well walk your ass back into those swamps.”

“Look,” Pedro continued, then pressed a hand to his stomach, which had started to grumble. Quickly he removed his hand, not wanting the other man to know just how hungry they really were. How desperate things had already gotten. “I was just thinking, maybe we can help each other, huh? Maybe so far you’ve been able to hold this,” Pedro gestured vaguely around them, “this territory, you speak of. Do you think you’ll hold it forever? Sooner or later, someone will show up with bigger guns and larger numbers. What happens then?”

“We figure it out.”

“You figure it out.” Pedro nodded. “How many people do you have? I count eight here. You mentioned two others walking to the hardware store. Ten? Is that your limit?”

“Ain’t none of your business. Now turn around and go back into the swamps where you came from or we’ll bury you there.”

Pedro laughed and rolled his eyes. “Such intimidation. Is that all you know? Throw your weight around? Be bigger and stronger? Have you lost the art of negotiation?”

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with, man. Believe me, I know all about negotiation. I know when to do it and I know why we do it.” He leaned in, bringing his lips close to Pedro’s ear. “If I’m not negotiating it’s because I don’t *need* to.”

Pedro nodded and rubbed his palms together. Without even a spoken direction, Urbano lifted the AK-47, stock pressed to his shoulder, barrel pointed directly at Clark, who found himself in the middle of the span of grass with nowhere to go. Urbano tugged the trigger once, a few pounds of pressure and the rifle clattered, an echoing, metallic crash of fire cascading across the previously silent morning. Clark didn’t dive for cover, he didn’t go flipping backwards, he simply folded in on himself, the 7.62 millimeter round punching the life from his lungs in a span of seconds.

He crumpled to the ground, Pedro remaining still, palms still pressed together, looking impassive and unimpressed as the other man’s life expired in a series of gasping, blood frothed breaths. The remaining men stood in stark silence, gaping back at Pedro and Urbano as the man with the rifle stepped around his boss, keeping it elevated, tracking it back and forth across the gathered crowd.

“Anyone else feel like a tough guy?”

Heads slowly shook back and forth, nobody even attempting to reach for a weapon, all of them holding their hands out.

“I gave your boss an opportunity.” Pedro spoke clearly, elevating his voice to be heard throughout the gathered group. “He declined.” His eyes roamed from man-to-man, staring each one in the eyes for a split second before moving on to the next, ensuring each one of them got the message. “In spite of his negligence, I am extending that opportunity to each of you. We can work together. You can allow me access to this territory,” Pedro used air quotes, “and in return, I can provide you with more of this fine machinery that Urbano used to execute your man there.”

Heads turned toward each other; the figures gathered about shifting uncertainly. Pedro's teeth clenched as he waited for someone to take some sort of leadership role in Clark's absence, though nobody stepped forward to do so.

"Do we have a deal?" Pedro's voice was a bit more insistent.

"How many of those guns you got?" Finally, one of the men before him spoke up, taking a tentative step forward.

"Charlie," another man hissed, "they just shot Clark dead. Like a damn animal."

"I saw it," Charlie replied sharply, "I'd prefer not to go out the same way."

"Smart man, Charlie." Pedro looked at the others. "See? Negotiation. Charlie and I, we're negotiating." He looked back at Urbano. "How many?"

Urbano shrugged. "Twelve, I think. Maybe ten."

"There you go. Twelve. Maybe ten. Regardless, enough of them to make holding your mythical territory here a little easier."

"And what do you want from us?" Charlie crossed his arms over his chest.

"Same as anyone else. A little food. A little water. Maybe a roof over our heads."

"That's it?"

"We just want to find our place in this world like anyone else."

Charlie considered his words, nodding softly, his bald head bobbing up and down. "I'm thinking maybe we can work something out." Murmurs rippled throughout the other men around him and Charlie snapped around, holding out a hand. "Shut it. All of you. We're gonna at least talk about this." The voices ebbed.

Pedro gestured toward him with a casual wave of his hand. "By all means. Talk."

The group peeled away, drawing tightly together, forming a small cluster, whispering among themselves as Pedro and Urbano stood several feet away.

“You think this is a good idea, boss? These guys, they don’t seem the brightest bulbs.”

“All we need is food, water and shelter,” Pedro replied, though he turned and met Urbano’s eyes. “And maybe a little cannon fodder.”

“Cannon fodder?”

Before they could finish their conversation, Charlie stepped away from the group and walked to Pedro, nodding softly as he drew close.

“That didn’t take long.”

“You got a deal.” Charlie extended a hand and Pedro took it, shaking softly.

“Mutually beneficial agreement, as it should be.”

“So what happens now?” Charlie looked at Pedro then back at the others, seemingly uncomfortable with his sudden spot at the negotiating table.

“Not a thing. Keep doing what you’re doing. We’ll help. Consider us a part of your crew. My name is Pedro, this is Urbano and either later today or tomorrow, he’ll join a few of your crew and head back to where the weapons are. We’ll make our exchange and life goes on.”

“Life goes on.”

“Such as it is.” Pedro ran his tongue over his teeth, the smoky air leaving a film, both in his mouth and in his nostrils. Within the swamps they’d been a bit more removed from the ongoing fires, that would take some getting used to.

Charlie nodded wordlessly, then joined the group, circling his finger in the air. “All right, enough rubber necking. Back to work!”

Some sets of eyeballs drew back toward Pedro and Urbano, but the group at large made their way back toward the

road and the abandoned vehicles, resuming their process of searching them for supplies.

Urbano moved next to Pedro, leaning close. “You think this is a good idea? What’s to stop them from turning on us once they get those rifles in hand?”

“It’s like you said, they’re not the brightest bulbs. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement.” Pedro spoke low, so the group couldn’t hear.

“What you said before, about cannon fodder? What were you talking about?”

A sly smile spread along Pedro’s lips. “Did you really think I was going to let that one-armed bastard and his little brat walk over us like that?” He shook his head. “No way. We use these guys. We get access to their resources. We let them have a few guns. Then we make our move. That old man and that kid have more resources than they’ll ever need, and by the time I’m done, they’ll all belong to us.”

Pedro and Urbano stood in silence, watching their new crew continue to search for supplies, a plan slowly unfurling from within the depths of Pedro’s active mind. Things, it seemed, were starting to look up.

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