

ECHOES OF THE END BOOK TWO

IGNITION



JUSTIN BELL
MIKE KRAUS

IGNITION

ECHOES OF THE END

BOOK 2

JUSTIN BELL
MIKE KRAUS



IGNITION
Echoes of The End Series
Book 2
By
Justin Bell
Mike Kraus



© 2023 Muonic Press Inc
www.muonic.com

www.JustinBellAuthor.com
www.facebook.com/WolfsHeadPublishing

www.MikeKrausBooks.com
hello@mikeKrausBooks.com
www.facebook.com/MikeKrausBooks

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, without the permission in writing from the author.

CONTENTS

[Want More Awesome Books?](#)

[Special Thanks](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

WANT MORE AWESOME BOOKS?

Find more fantastic tales at books.to/readmorepa.

If you're new to reading Mike Kraus, consider visiting [his website](http://www.mikekrausbooks.com) (www.mikekrausbooks.com) and signing up for his free newsletter. You'll receive several free books and a sample of his audiobooks, too, just for signing up, you can unsubscribe at any time and you will receive absolutely *no* spam.

You can also stay updated on Justin's books by signing up for his reading list (books.to/h8WVd).

READ THE NEXT BOOK IN THE SERIES

[Echoes of the End Book 3](#)

[Available Here](#)

books.to/YILah

SPECIAL THANKS

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

Thank you!

PROLOGUE

Several years ago, a revolutionary prototype synthetic material took the world by storm. PolySyn, a mass-produced manmade formula was developed and supposedly perfected by Metanoia, a tech company devoted to improving the lives of the world's citizens. In a frantic race to be the first to fully adopt the material, the fuel companies of the world retrofitted their massive network of pipelines with PolySyn and almost immediately began to realize the vast benefits. However, unknown to the fuel companies and to Metanoia themselves, the synthetic composite had an underlying defect and after so many years of use, the chemical lining would break down.

As these breakdowns started to occur, they released a combustible compound which reacted with the fuel and detonated, creating a massive cascade of pipeline and power plant explosions throughout the world.

It all started in Lexington, Kentucky where Jacob Fuller detected some instability in the lining of the fuel pipelines and reported it up the chain to his senior management at Emerson Natural Gas company. Unfortunately, the warning came too little too late and the pipeline erupted, causing a massive chain reaction which brought Lexington, Kentucky to its proverbial knees. All across America and across the world, similar events began to occur, cascading into larger, more disastrous explosions and before a single day had passed, fuel distribution systems had been interrupted, major cities were being ravaged by fire and the world would never be the same again.

In Miami, Florida, Jacob's brother Marcus and his young daughter Scout were preparing to fly back home to Maine, with a pit stop in New York to see Scout's older sister Holly. As the fuel pipelines explode, Miami International Airport is consumed by a massive series of explosions and Scout's father Marcus loses his life in the chaos, leaving Scout on her own. As law enforcement, emergency services and the National Guard scramble to respond, Scout is loaded up into a military vehicle and with barely enough time to grieve her lost father, transported north toward a refugee camp. But before she arrives at her destination, the vehicle is ambushed, and she finds herself grabbed away by an enigmatic old man who lives in a wilderness cabin deep in the Florida Everglades.

In New York, Scout's sister Holly has begun her internship with Metanoia Industries, working out of their penthouse in Midtown Manhattan. While attending a seminar by the Metanoia CEO, Bruce Phillips, disaster strikes. As New York is bombarded by pipeline and fuel tank explosions, the Metanoia building itself collapses, with Holly and Bruce narrowly escaping with their lives. Together, they navigate the chaos of the burning city, trying to make their way back to Holly's dorm at Columbia, with hopes of continuing on to Long Island to get Bruce back to his family. However, as the Lincoln Tunnel collapses, the Hudson River sweeps Bruce away, leaving Holly on her own, face-to-face with trauma and hopelessness. However, the Fullers are a resilient bunch and even as an angry mob storms Columbia University, Holly fights her way to freedom, rushing outside just in the nick of time.

In rural Maine, Jean Fuller has been enjoying a quiet week with her young son Keegan while Marcus and Scout are in Florida and Holly is spending her spring break working. As news reports begin flooding in of the chaos happening around the world, she frantically packs up the car, loads her son and their black lab Bucky into it and takes off, heading toward New York to try and find Holly before continuing on to Florida for her husband and younger daughter. Faced with the ravaged remains of New England and overzealous law enforcement, Jean must carefully navigate her way south,

avoiding death and destruction along the way. Finally, she manages to reach New York city just as her daughter is attempting to escape the disaster at Columbia University. Holly and Jean are reunited, yet do not have time to rejoice as the next leg of their treacherous journey is laid out before them.

CHAPTER ONE

“Final descent into Miami International; buckle those seatbelts, boys.” Marcel Ochoa glanced over his right shoulder and arched a single eyebrow at the rear of the small, single-engine plane. Beyond the tangled mass of his dark hair the broad, blue Florida sky filled the windscreen like an evenly painted canvas, with no signs of brush strokes; it might as well have been a pale, blue sheet of cloth, cloudless and bright. The pilot operated the controls with a nearly flawless expertise as the nose dipped low and the sprawling campus of Miami International spread out before them, bracketed by the gleaming spires of downtown.

“I’m still not convinced this is the best idea, boss. We’re not really accustomed to using mainstream travel, ya know?” Carmelo cast a sideways glance at the man in the seat next to him, crossing one thick leg over the other.

His immaculately tailored dress pants bunched, revealing the ankle holster strapped to his lower leg and he tapped a well-polished shoe in mid-air. Carmelo filled out every last inch of the tailored suit, which appeared to have been poured over him rather than stitched to his measurements, his steel eyes narrow and stern above the wide squat of his nose. Though Carmelo dressed like a wealthy businessperson, he had the telltale snout of a bare-knuckle boxer, which had apparently been broken and left to reset itself more than once. Probably, it had.

“No contraband on board, Carmelo. This is just a business trip, nothing more, nothing less.” Pedro Sanchez laced his

fingers behind his head, filled with neatly coifed black hair, the shining whites of his teeth revealed between the upward corner of his mouth.

“I’m not sure the ATF would see it that way, boss.” Carmelo shrugged his broad shoulders. “We’re still landing on American soil. Last I heard there was an active warrant for your arrest. Federal warrant, at that.”

“They won’t even know we’re here. All of our paperwork is in order. Urbano made sure of that.” Pedro jerked his head back toward the second row of seats where Urbano Cardenes stretched out, lying on his back.

“Yo! Cardenes! Didn’t you hear me?” Marcel called from the pilot’s seat. “Final descent. Sit your ass up and buckle your seat belt.”

Urbano let loose a string of whispered curses that would have embarrassed a sailor on shore leave, but hauled himself upright, tugging his Hawaiian shirt straight, smoothing out the pale, pink fabric well-adorned with colorful flowers. The men in the plane were an eclectic collection of so-called businessmen and as much confidence as Pedro had in their manufactured identities, he could see Carmelo’s point. They really should have been a little more careful with their trip, it had all just come together at the last minute and Pedro had made the executive call. They would forego a little security to try and save some time, and after all, he was hoping to make it to the baseball game later in the night.

Spring training in Fort Myers wasn’t the regular season, but he sort of liked it that way. There were certain elements he picked up when watching spring training up close, details and signals that one didn’t always see during the regular season. In a way, he approached baseball like he approached any other business venture. It paid to have as much intelligence as humanly possible *before* things unfolded. Attending spring training like he did every year was especially informative, mostly because he wasn’t a fan of any one team, he was a fan of the entire sport as a whole. The strategy of baseball seemed to live in strong contrast to how mired it was in tradition, the slow, methodical pace of the majority of the game interspersed

with the occasional jolt of unexpected adrenaline. In so many ways, baseball to Pedro Sanchez was an allegory for life itself.

“These papers,” Carmelo asked, gesturing with a single hand, “did you get them from your father?”

The inquisition was laced with underlying meaning and Pedro cleared his throat abruptly, communicating his discomfort with the pointed inquiry. “What business is that of yours, Carmelo?”

“I just like to know where we stand. One day you say you want nothing to do with your father, the next day you’re using his contacts to forge papers. It just, it gets muddled up in my head sometimes.” He gestured toward his left temple. Pedro leaned sharply forward, tugging his seat belt taut across his shoulders.

“If you were any other man, Carmelo, you would not get away with talking to me like that.”

“But I am only me.” Carmelo flashed a tooth-filled grin that boiled Pedro’s guts within his stomach. The younger, more slender man closed both fists, pressing them into his thighs, but managed to feign an insincere grin despite his clenched jaw.

“How right you are. You are very valuable to me, Carmelo and you know that.” Pedro leaned back again and laced his fingers across his lap. “But even the brightest gold loses its luster. Best make sure you keep yourself well-shined, Carmelo and don’t worry so much about my family business.”

Carmelo’s toothy grin lost a bit of its confidence and he nodded curtly. “As you wish.”

Crossing his arms over the broad expanse of his chest, he stared back through the windshield, a thick silence filling the cabin. Outside of the swiftly descending plane, the tall skyscrapers of downtown Miami had fallen away, revealing only the airport ahead, filling the land west of the city, a broad, hammered flatland of asphalt and pavement wedged within clusters of smaller surrounding buildings. Pedro ground his back teeth together, still biting back his frustration from

Carmelo's comments. He'd known the broad-shouldered enforcer since he was young, Carmelo having served at the hip of his father throughout most of his young life. The fact that he worked for Pedro himself instead of the elder Sanchez was mostly due to finances and clearly there remained some lingering loyalty. That would have to be dealt with eventually, but first they had to get through the business meeting that afternoon. They were having a little face-to-face with one of Urbano's military contacts, someone who could get them access to a wide array of weaponry on the black market.

"This man we're meeting," Pedro turned to look at Urbano, who, upon the pilot's request, had brought himself upright and shackled himself within the binds of his seat belt. "He is trustworthy?"

"No, of course he's not trustworthy. He's agreed to funnel us stolen weapons from the United States military. That is the antithesis of trustworthy, huh?"

"You know what I mean." Pedro was getting a little sick and tired of his cohorts' attitudes. As the youngest son of Esteban Sanchez, he was still trying to shake his image of being the little kid running around his father's yard. He was growing into his own, becoming his own man and it was high time that these others realized that.

"I've known him for twenty years— met him when I was in the Army. Him and me, we're tight. We can't trust him, but he's a friend."

Pedro shook his head and turned back in his seat, the windscreen overlooking the pale, blue sky and the airport growing closer by the second. Things would be changing after the trip; it was high time people took him a lot more seriously. The nose of the small plane was pointed more steeply toward ground level, the airport filling the entire field, no longer even the smallest slice of sky visible. Gently, the Cessna banked right, leaning slightly as it came around and Pedro leaned forward again, tugging against the seat belt, peering through narrowed eyes. Something flashed through the windscreen, something down on the ground. It was a brief distortion of light, there one second, then gone, yet still— it had been there.

“Did you see that?” His voice was low, barely above a whisper, a foot from Marcel’s right ear.

“Did I see what?”

“Something flashed on the ground.”

“A trick of light.” Marcel shrugged. “This bright Florida sun, it reflects off of everything. Makes you see things.”

“That wasn’t the sun.” Pedro inched further ahead, and the terrain opened up beneath them, a sudden, churning crash of light and thunder, a bursting explosion of roiling flame swallowing a massive section of the airport terminal ahead.

“Holy—” Marcel gasped, fingers tightening around the controls. He swept suddenly back, fighting with the yoke as a curtain of fire filled the entire width of the screen ahead. A sudden, slamming impact hammered into the left side of the plane and it juked sharply to the right as Marcel wrestled for control.

“What is happening?” Carmelo sat bolt upright, jerking against the seat belt, which held tight and fast across his expansive mid-section.

Marcel didn’t answer, he simply continued banking left even as another sudden charge of smoke and flame filled the air ahead, chunks of broken stone shooting upward in a machine-gun volley of debris. A scattering of residue pelted the outside of the small plane even as Marcel straightened out, battling to recover the steep, sloping bank which threatened to send them into a downward spiral.

“The airport! Something happened down there!” The Cessna leveled out, then shot upward as a rush of hot, explosive air slammed into the belly of the aircraft, lifting them sharply upward amid another shower of stone and glass. Smoke filled the air, the thick, gray churn blocking their view of the airport as Marcel plunged the Cessna straight into its storm cloud belly. The plane shuddered wildly as it fought back against the buffeted winds and hot air, Pedro white-knuckling the armrests of his seat, his back rigid, pressed tight to the chair back.

“Marcel, are we—”

The plane ripped free of the smoke and the airport was laid bare beneath them, what remained of it, anyway. From their vantage point, several burning planes were visible, at least four of them parked in various areas of the tarmac, split open, fire gulfing from within their tube-shaped bodies. A few wings had been shorn off and were scattered on the pavement, dark smoke unfurling from within the aircraft. The main structure of the airport itself was consumed by smoke and fire and the Cessna dipped sharply down, its engine sputtering wildly.

Marcel’s forearms bulged as he squeezed his grip, leaning forward and jerking the controls to keep the small plane relatively level and airborne. Beneath them, the airport passed by, another column of smoke swarming over them, though they managed to break free, trailing gray strands along each wing. Shaking and thrashing, it seemed as though the plane might simply break apart around them, though by some unseen miracle it held together, soaring narrowly above the burning wreckage of Miami International. Although it remained airborne, its altitude was decreasing with each passing second, a forced descent driving them down even as Marcel struggled to keep them moving. Concrete and glass transitioned into thick growth beneath, a canopy of untamed wilderness suddenly emerging beyond Miami’s city limits. Pedro had visited Florida countless times, but he didn’t know the geography all that well. Even so, he was quite sure what was unfolding beneath them.

“Can you bring us down— is there somewhere safe?” Beneath them, the massive, wild blanket of the Florida Everglades unfurled, miles and miles of nature and with each passing moment civilization seemed to spread further and further apart all around them.

“I don’t think I have the luxury of control!” Marcel’s neck tendons bulged like hot dogs, his jaw straight and rigid. The Cessna dipped again, tilted slightly and suddenly the trees were upon them. “Brace for landing!” The voice echoed wildly within the plane’s small cabin and suddenly the hammering blow of tree branches clawed at their belly, the

aircraft shaking wildly left to right. Sky was replaced by a thick wall of foliage on each side and with a sudden scraping gasp, the small plane was pulled, kicking and screaming, into the ocean of swamps and wilderness.

CHAPTER TWO

Everett Kinsman considered himself very much a simple man. It wasn't always that way, but as he steadily advanced toward his so-called golden years, he preferred to keep things relatively uncomplicated. The world, however, didn't always afford him that opportunity and as he roamed along the perimeter of his backyard he listened to the soft cluck of the chickens, willing himself to retreat into his own sense of simplicity.

Somewhere beyond the trees, however, the entire world was burning. He'd caught snippets of it on the radio in the early hours, some of his peers in the amateur radio network calling in reports of plane crashes, the Miami International Airport being ravaged by explosions. He'd heard from people as far away as Illinois and Oklahoma and the word he was getting from those far-off locales was much the same as he was getting within his own state's borders. All across the nation, and quite likely all across the world, fuel pipelines were rupturing, seemingly all at once, plunging civilization into chaos.

Everett wasn't the sort of man who wished for that type of thing, but he was the sort of man who wanted to be ready for it when it happened. But, again, he was a simple man with simple needs and the small, woodland cabin deep within the Florida Everglades would most certainly provide him with whatever he might want while humanity ate itself alive hundreds of miles away. He had no love for humanity these days, and if someone injected him with truth serum, he'd admit that he didn't really care if they all devoured

themselves, just as long as they left him out of it. Birds chattered through the thick trees surrounding him, his small spot of land swiftly disappearing on all sides into the encroaching swamp and foliage. The Everglades hadn't been his first choice for retirement destinations, especially considering his history, but when searching for somewhere off the beaten path away from civilization, he kept on coming back to them.

He had zero regrets as he made his way through the squelching swamp mud, the various species of cypress thick and green in all directions. Well, he had no regrets about where he lived, anyway; there were plenty of regrets about everything else. Gingerly, he stepped over a glimmering shine, a taut wire which caught the glister of the morning sun. He had its location committed to memory as it was, though the reflection was a nice reminder about its location. Tripwires had been strung throughout several of the surrounding tree trunks, just one last defensive measure to make sure his quaint little cabin remained undisturbed. Moving to a small swamp clearing, where a thicket of bald cypress peeled away from an oblong spot of dirt and mud, he lowered to one knee, his jeans immediately soaked with moisture.

Catching sight of another wire, a thicker gauge, he smiled, the broad expanse of his white beard curling around his lips. Following the thicker wire, he moved into a patch of wild grass and what he was looking for rested within the palm of ferns. A small body rested within the green, about the size of a medium-sized house cat, its fur pale brown and somewhat mottled with dirt and swamp water. Reaching down with two gloved hands, he gently lifted the lifeless body of the possum and tugged the wire from around its head, his trap having broken the creature's neck instantly. He had no desire for the wildlife around his cabin to suffer, but he enjoyed fresh meat whenever he could get it, especially if it didn't require a long, treacherous trip into town.

Most often he'd fed on possums, foxes and the occasional wild hog, and from time to time, when he'd been a bit younger and more spry, he'd tracked and taken down his share of deer, the venison lasting him nearly an entire season, crammed

within the confines of his chest freezer. But he was pushing sixty-five and didn't have the energy to traipse off into the wilderness, so he was content to set traps and resign himself to smaller animals. He didn't depend entirely on the wildlife throughout the wilderness; he still had a small cache of MREs in the cabin, but it was always a nice reminder that if he had to live off the land, he could. Of course, there were always the chickens and the goats as well, but he didn't want to think about that, not because he was attached to them, though he was, but because they provided eggs and milk, and that ongoing nutrition outweighed the temporary solution of eating their meat.

Besides, as the various animals had aged up, he'd always butchered them anyway, replacing them with younger fare that he acquired from a local farm, well, as local as farms were in his neck of the woods, anyway. Something told him, though, that replacing his animals with some from a local farm might be a thing of the past as the world came crashing down outside his small pocket of blissful ignorance. Silently, he made his way around the rear perimeter of his yard, checking the other traps, but finding them still set, none of them yet triggering. In fact, the possum had been his first catch in over a week, if you didn't count the river trout he'd fed the girl the day before.

His brow furrowed, eyes narrowing beneath the thick, gray bush of his eyebrows as he thought about the girl. Her name was Scout, though he continued to refer to her as the girl, both because it was easier and because using something's name generally created attachments. Attachments were one thing he didn't need and didn't want. He'd already made the decision that after she recovered from the blasted concussion she'd suffered in the crash of the Humvee; he'd cart her back into civilization and drop her off with the first cops or soldiers he saw. Everett had been living alone long enough to know that's how he liked it. It kept things simple, and he was, after all, a simple man.

Making his way past the fenced in grass and chicken coop, he eyed the two goats which roamed the small, makeshift pasture, heads bowed. In another corner of the pen, three

chickens pecked at the ground, feathers fluttered, searching for feed that wasn't there.

“Settle down, I'll get to you in a second,” he growled, then set the dead possum down on a nearby picnic table. Removing his wide-brimmed hat with his right hand, he drew his left forearm across his sweat-soaked brow, then blew out a gust of air. He got so blasted tired so quickly and age wasn't just creeping up on him but sprinting toward him from behind. Walking around the picnic table, he made his way to a clothesline that had been strung between the corner of his cabin's metal roof and a nearby tree. A plastic sheet was draped over it and he removed it with a sweep of his right hand, then draped it over the picnic table, lifting the possum and dropping him in the center of it. Chickens prattled on behind him, the three eager birds having been joined by four others, and sensing that they were trying to get Everett's attention, the goats decided they might as well join in.

“All right, all right. Pains in my ass.” Everett stalked over to a nearby shed, fumbled with a combination lock, and opened the door, reaching in and lifting out some of the chicken feed. “I'm feeding you early you little punks, best be giving me a dozen eggs today. And not those small ones either, I want fist-sized, you got it?”

The chickens responded with a chorus of eager clucking, prancing on their narrow legs, wings shifting. Tossing a handful of feed into the pasture, he returned to the shed as the birds pecked and battled wildly, the goats braying at his back. Replacing the chicken feed with some pellets, he returned to the wire fence and tossed several of them into the pasture, the two goats being joined by a third, all of them gobbling eagerly at the grass.

“Maybe that'll shut you up for a few minutes.” Somehow, he doubted it. Truth be told, however, Everett sort of liked the backdrop of animal noises and rustle of activity. He preferred to be as far away from human beings as possible, but the animals, he could tolerate—and they helped to keep his mind occupied. He needed his mind occupied often, the less occupied it was, the more he drifted back to those same

regrets, regrets he'd just as soon leave far behind. Everett walked back to the shed, having left the door open, and retrieved a knife and a sharpening stone he kept inside. He lifted a bottle of water he'd brought out from the house when he'd set out that morning and moistened the stone, then drew the blade across it, scraping back and forth to sharpen its edge.

He preferred to skin the possums when they were cold, but judging by the body when he'd found it, the trap had snapped its neck several hours earlier, somewhere in the middle of the night. The animal certainly should have been cool enough by that point, so he took the freshly sharpened blade and stepped over to the dead possum, preparing to go to work. Everett liked to take great care when it came to skinning whatever he caught, living out in the wilderness as he did, he wanted to use as much of the animal as he could. Though it never got particularly cold where he lived, possum fur had many uses beyond insulated clothing, so he carefully cut away the ears and the genitalia, placing the animal on its back in the center of the plastic sheet.

Pressing the blade into the animal, he cut down the front of the animal's front legs, reaching the neck, then cut the backs of the back legs in neat, even slices. Flexing his fingers, with the cuts freshly made, he worked around the body of the possum with his right hand, working it between the skin and the underlying meat, carefully peeling it away, fur and all. Some possums were easier to skin than others, though it always took him a few minutes longer than it might take other skilled hunters with the use of both limbs. Starting with the back legs, he freed the skin, folding it away, the neat slices making removal a bit easier than it might have been. Lifting out a small pocketknife, he used the blade to help free some of the skin from the creature's back, then tucked his thumb beneath and tore it upward, working the skin and fur along its broad torso.

After a little work peeling the skin away, Everett grabbed a length of clothesline from the shed and tied it to the animal's back legs, dragging it up and over a nearby branch so it could hang free. Once it was suspended, he worked at it some more with a mixture of fingers and pocketknife, dragging the skin

and fur up and away from around its head, then from the front legs. After some careful cutting so as not to puncture its digestive system, the skin was removed and hung on a separate branch. Working at the remains, he scraped free some last scraps of skin and hair to reveal the meat beyond. With the animal hanging upside-down, Everett cut its throat to allow the blood to drain free, then rested the knife on the plastic sheet.

With the animals absorbed by their own eating there was a moment of pregnant silence in the air, the soft wind blowing, the blue sky dusted with a scattering of plump, white clouds. Everett leaned back against the picnic table, his unoccupied mind drifting back to his past, back to days he often longed to forget. Trees shifted and blew and for a brief moment, he could have sworn he heard his daughter's laughter in the rustle of the leaves.

“Mr. Kinsman?”

Everett pressed his teeth tight together and took a long, steady breath before turning to face her.

CHAPTER THREE

She'd awoken to the empty cabin and for a moment, panic had set in. Bolting upright from the recliner, she'd fought through a momentary sweep of dizziness and swallowed down acid that burned her throat, refusing to throw up again. Scout paused a moment to let her uneasy stomach settle, then settled herself into the still waters of silence within the confines of the cabin. Memories faded into focus, memories that she didn't necessarily want to have, but memories that crept into her mind, nonetheless.

The fire at Miami International Airport never fully left her mind, the stale smell of smoke lingering in seeming eternity in her mouth, on her tongue and prickling within her nostrils. It wasn't just the smoke from the airport fire, however that lingered, it was the fire out on the tarmac outside, the fire that had consumed the bodies the soldiers had burned. The fire that had eaten away at her father, reducing him to ash and carbon, so many formless embers drifting upon the Florida winds. She missed her father with the heat of countless suns, a heat that continually burned within her chest, and for the briefest moments upon waking, that heat had been doused.

But given a moment to remember the events of the past few days, it flared anew, and tears pricked her eyes, not from smoke or heat, but from a deep and sudden sadness. Pressing her eyes tightly closed, she placed her palm on the recliner next to her, keeping herself steady and upright. She remembered the two soldiers, the ride in the Humvee through downtown Miami, a city engulfed in flames. There was a crash, the Humvee plowing headlong into an abandoned pick-

up truck, and then there was darkness, deep and all-consuming.

He'd saved her—the man who owned the cabin she stood within, he'd pulled her from the wreck of the Humvee and taken her away from the two soldiers, which had been fine with her. They were planning on taking her to a refugee camp she wanted no part of, a government camp in central Florida, far from where her mother might come looking for her. In a way, she was grateful for the man, even though there wasn't much to like about him. Prying her eyes open, she took in the cabin again, empty save for her presence, and silent in spite of it.

Exhaling, the sharpness of her nausea dulled, Scout walked toward the front door and slipped on a pair of sneakers she'd been wearing. They were caked with dried mud, but dry and she laced them up, moving slowly and with purpose to avoid a fresh wave of stomach-churning dizziness. There was no longer a stabbing, sharp pain in her temple, more of an underlying, throbbing ache, which was, at least, bearable. Opening the door, she stepped out into the yard and walked toward the rear corner of the ramshackle cabin, the soft clucking of the chickens calling to her.

The man was nowhere to be seen; his name was Everett Kinsman, she remembered that much, anyway, though she didn't know anything else about him. He spoke rarely and when he did it was mostly single-syllable snarls and low whispers, his contempt raw and unfiltered. Scout wasn't welcome in his home, that much was painfully clear by his speech and demeanor, but at least he'd saved her and at least he'd put a roof over her head. A rustling in the trees drew her eyes and she moved to her right, allowing herself to be swallowed by the swamp grass and cypress, drawing low to the ground and peering across the beaten muck of the cabin's yard.

A figure pushed its way through the trees beyond the animal pen, hunched over and moving with methodical purpose. The hobbled, tentative stride was immediately recognizable, as was the way he favored his right side,

walking with the slightest limp, his left arm clung low against his ribs. Old age, it seemed, had taken its toll, although he seemed to be doing relatively well for himself, living alone in the wilderness, tending after his animals. She moved quietly along the tree line, staying low and striding in cautious, quiet movements. The rattling growl of an engine chortled and she spotted a small generator nestled near the rear of the cabin, clattering and clunking softly. Upon the roof of the cabin were five solar panels, turned up toward the bright, Florida sun, though she didn't know enough about solar power to tell if they were functional or helpful.

Her parents had spoken about solar quite a bit over the years and had even brought someone from a local company over for a site survey. But with the long Maine winters and money being consistently tight, they'd just never gotten around to doing it, so to Scout, it remained something of an unknown novelty. Trees moved again and the broad-shouldered figure shoved his way through, the long, scraggle of a white beard identifying the man immediately as Everett Kinsman. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, though it wasn't a cowboy hat, more like a fisherman's hat and he dropped something on the picnic table, then wiped a shine of sweat from his forehead.

Nearby, the chickens and goats voiced their displeasure and Mr. Kinsman went to a narrow old shed which leaned precariously to the left, and brought out some feed, tossing it to the chickens and goats in turn. Pausing for a moment, he then went back to the shed and returned with a knife, sharpening it on a stone, before he settled in near the table, the shape centered on a broad, plastic sheet, and went to work. Scout had certainly seen her share of animals being butchered — the few times her father had returned from hunting successfully, he'd always processed the meat right there in the yard, and he'd insisted the kids come out and watch. It was nothing new to Scout and she actually enjoyed watching the old man go to work, moving with a clearly well-practiced efficiency.

After a few minutes, he hung the animal from a nearby branch - a possum, Scout thought it was - then finished

removing the skin. As he occupied himself with the work, she stood taller and stepped from the grass, making her way across the lawn, her stomach gurgling, not with nausea, but with hunger. She thought he might be angry if she was lurking around spying on him, and he was unpleasant enough when he wasn't angry, she wasn't sure she wanted to see him when he was. He slit the animal's throat, then set the knife down and stood, lifting his head to look toward the sky, his eyes closed as if in deep thought. She didn't want to interrupt him, but she was also compelled to know what was next, what should she expect. What, if anything, he was going to do with her.

"Mr. Kinsman?" Her voice was soft, yet he jerked as if shocked by her very presence. Wheeling around, his gloved fingers bunched into dark, tight fists, his ruddy cheeks red with rage.

"What do you think you're doing lurking around?"

"I—" she took an unsteady step back. "I wasn't trying—"

"Scared the life out of me." He showed his teeth, surrounded by the thicket of untamed beard.

"Sorry! I'm sorry." A thought occurred to her as he exhaled, relieving some of the tension that had bunched his broad shoulders. The redness of his cheeks hadn't been rage, it had been— something else. Embarrassment, maybe, though she wasn't sure what he had to be embarrassed by.

"I didn't know you were awake." He turned and walked back toward the dangling possum, then examined it to see if the blood was still flowing.

"Only for a few minutes."

The old man huffed, then began to untie the possum, lifted it and set it back down on the plastic sheet.

"Do you need help?" Scout approached cautiously.

"What the hell do you know about butchering a possum?" Everett didn't even turn to look at her, he just picked up the knife and began to make incisions in strategic locations throughout the skinned animal. Cutting a circular pattern between its rear legs, he removed the intestines and dropped

them into a nearby bucket with a wet smack. “You’re not gonna barf again, are you?”

“N— no. My dad, he—” she wasn’t sure how to finish the sentence. Referring to her father in the past tense was not something she was either accustomed to or comfortable with. “I helped him sometimes,” she finished.

“What did you help him with?”

“A deer once. A couple of quail. A few rabbits.”

Everett nodded, but said nothing, making a cut along the creature’s chest before reaching in and removing its heart and lungs. He placed them in the bucket with the intestines, then continued going to work.

“Head okay?”

“Okay.” Scout shrugged.

“Good.”

Scout wasn’t sure what he meant by good, though she suspected he meant that he could get rid of her as long as she was recovered. She wasn’t sure what she thought of that idea; Everett was certainly not an especially nice man, but anything was better than being crammed in with a bunch of people at a government-run camp.

“Grab these legs. Hold it down.” Everett nodded toward the possum’s corpse and Scout obeyed, pinning the creature to the plastic sheeting. Unlike Everett, she wasn’t wearing gloves and the meat was slick and unpleasant against her bare palms, though she showed no signs of her discomfort. Everett went to work on the creature’s spine, sawing through the base of the possum’s neck, then removing the head with a low snapping of tendons and narrow bone. While Scout had helped her father with the same sort of grisly task that Everett was going through, she hadn’t pressed her bare flesh into newly skinned meat and her stomach complained a bit, churning with acid. Even with the lingering headache that continued to plague her, however, she didn’t feel the need to vomit, she just turned away from the animal and tried to picture happier times.

The only problem with that approach was that thinking of happier times invariably led to thoughts of her father, which spilled down the dark rabbit hole of Miami International, world-shattering explosions, fires, and the smell of charred flesh. Everett continued going to work, severing the animal's paws and removing them, then slowly cutting down the center of the creature's torso. Though Scout chose to look away, the slick slush of organs being removed was quickly followed by the dull splat of them being dumped into the metal bucket at his feet. After a few tense, nauseating minutes, Everett grunted and the animal's body moved beneath her hands, slipped out from them so that Everett could start slicing what remained of the meat into smaller pieces for storage.

"Timing is good on this one." He spoke in a low voice, mostly to himself. "Got plenty of room in the freezer."

Scout wiped her greasy, bloody palms on her overalls, moving them back and forth, streaks of dark color staining the denim. At one point in her young life, they'd been her favorite pair of pants, though that seemed like a century ago, in an existence that was more dream than reality. Scout was just about to speak to the old man when a chortling growl sounded from behind her. It was a metallic, clattering noise, a strange artificial voice and her head snapped around. The medium-sized box-shaped generator, which rested against the back wall of Everett's cabin shuddered violently, a throttling tremor shaking it. She took an uncertain step backwards, eyes widening.

"Is it supposed to—"

"No," Everett snapped and slammed the knife down on the table, storming toward the contraption, both hands closed into bunched fists. "Damn piece of low budget garbage better not —"

There was a loud bang, the sound of an engine backfiring and the generator seized, the shaking halting abruptly. Suddenly a narrow jet of dark liquid slewed from between the slats in a side panel, darkening the color of the grass.

“Son of a—” Everett lurched forward as swiftly as he was able and hammered down an emergency shut off switch, which cut the underlying engine noise into uncertain silence. He stood over the generator, glowering down at it, his head shaking distastefully. By Scout’s estimation, the device was a good twenty years old, and she wasn’t especially surprised that it had crapped out, though that didn’t make it any less of a disaster.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Hell of a time for this thing to crap the bed.” Everett swung a booted foot, the steel toe colliding with the metal exterior of the generator in an echoing bang.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Hell if I know.” He crouched next to it and pried off the side panel with the fingers of his right hand, his left draped over his bent knee. He still wore the same tight-fitting gloves he’d been wearing when dealing with the dead possum and he leaned to his right, trying to get a better look at the generator’s interior. “Fuel pump maybe? Blasted thing crapped oil all over the inside.” He shook his head derisively, then sighed, a long, haggard sigh.

“Can you fix it?”

The old man shrugged, still glaring into the abyss of the device’s side opening. “Not without parts.”

“You don’t have parts?”

“No, I don’t have parts,” he replied, a sarcastic tenor to his voice. “This place look like a hardware store to you?”

Scout shook her head. In a way, Everett reminded her of her parents. People who knew what they had to do to be prepared, but who lacked the time or money to put it all into action. Everett had the knowledge and the skills, but he was getting older and probably didn’t have the energy or money to fully stock his tool shed. It was understandable, there was almost no way you could be ready for absolutely everything. Even the most prepared individual in the world couldn’t have

seen the whole “worldwide pipelines rupturing simultaneously” scenario they all found themselves in.

“So, what are we going to do?”

“First thing we’re going to do,” he shot back, interrupting her, “is cook the meat I just prepared. Sure as hell not gonna stick it in the freezer since we got no power. Hell, we might have to pull all of the meat out of it. We cook it up, salt it and dehydrate it, at least it won’t go to waste. Won’t taste as good, but at least it’ll be food.”

“What should I do?”

“See that fire pit?” Everett stabbed a finger toward a loose collection of stacked stone on the other side of the tool shed. The ground around it had been cleared out and beaten into rough dirt, the long grass and trees pulled far away in a wide, circular pattern to avoid stray sparks causing a fire.

“Yeah, I see it.”

“Start a fire and make it quick.”

Scout hesitated for a moment, not sure exactly how he wanted her to go about it. She’d started plenty of fires alongside her father but had also used a number of different methods to do it, depending on where they were and what they had on hand. Scout made her way to the fire pit, which was essentially a ring of loosely stacked rocks, which formed an inner circle, darkened with ash and charcoal. Near the back of the circular pit, stones were stacked up into a makeshift rear backstop and pair of curved walls. Notches had been formed within the stone walls on the right and left and there were a few different cast iron racks leaning up against the pit where Everett could have stacked meat or even used one as a spit.

“Shed!” He shouted over from where he knelt by the dead generator. “Lighter fluid and matches! Easier that way!”

“O— okay!” Scout’s anxiety was temporarily doused by the water of Everett’s voice, her next steps made clearer to her. Rounding the pit, she saw a combination lock on the shed door and was preparing to ask him for the combination, but noticed the post was pulled out of the circular lock and the door was

accessible. Threading the lock through the handles, she opened the shed, her eyes widening. To Everett's credit, he had walls filled with tools inside, almost all manner of tools that Scout could think of. As ramshackle as the shed was from the outside, things were actually fairly well organized inside, with a rake, shovel, machete hanging on hooks on the left, shelves of labeled toolboxes on the back wall ahead, and various hammers, hatchets and other items to her right. Several spare cans of fuel lined the ground floor, probably a good twenty gallons or more worth. Turning sharply right, she found a section of shelving where lighter fluid was stacked, resting above a few bags of charcoal, a metal tin of waterproof matches slotted right next to it.

She returned to the fire pit with the lighter fluid and the matches, dragging along a bag of charcoal as well. Spreading out a fresh layer of the coal, she dusted it with lighter fluid, then struck a match and tossed it in, stepping back as the pile of dark debris whooshed into crackling life. Everett appeared right next to her and clutched a metal rack with his gloved hands, then rested it within the notches of the stone wall, suspending it above the fire, which was slowly growing. Smoke filled the air, the warm and soothing heat from the flames complemented nicely by the engaging aroma of charcoal. Scout was brought back to summer evenings back in Maine, the countless family dinners on the backyard patio with her father hovered over the grill nearby.

She struggled to fight the memories away. Those inward visions of a star-filled sky and her parents' playful squabbles over how brown the meat was no longer a source of pleasant retrospection, but stabs of pain and regret. A slab formed in her chest, a dead weight of loss and she drew in a languid breath, trying to force it around the mass that had filled her insides. Everett grunted and slapped the cut-up possum onto the iron rack, stabbing at the pile of slick, pink meat with a stick to spread it out across the metal so it might cook evenly. Almost instantly, the chalky smell of burning charcoal was almost overwhelmed by the searing aroma of meat, slowly roasting over the opened fire. Scout hadn't been especially hungry when she'd awoken, but her stomach growled as the

scent snuck its fingers up into her flared nostrils. After throwing up she hadn't eaten much of anything, not wanting to add a second humiliation to the first, and she was paying for that decision with the gut-churning hunger pains.

"Go inside," Everett hissed, jerking his head in the direction of the cabin. "Empty that freezer. Bring the meat out here, we gotta cook it up, pronto."

"Are you going to try and fix the generator?"

"Of course, I'm going to try and fix the generator. But it ain't gonna happen before the meat in there spoils, so do what I asked you."

Scout nodded, jerking her head rapidly up and down before retreating from the fire pit and shuffling back toward the cabin. As she reached the front door, she shot a brief look over her shoulder at the hunched form of the older man, who continued to almost aimlessly prod at the pile of meat with the stick.

"Grab a fork while you're in there." He didn't even turn.

"Oh, okay," she stammered. She opened the front door and went back inside, her insides warring with each other over how to feel and how to react. Everett had saved her life, most likely, pulled her from the wrecked Humvee and brought her back to his cabin to nurse her back to health. But clearly, he wasn't accustomed to having company and he didn't seem to be enjoying it much. Occasionally, she'd catch a look in his narrowed, weary eyes, an accusatory one. Scout wasn't sure why, but it almost seemed as though Everett blamed her for something she hadn't done.

Once inside the cabin, she walked straight toward the kitchen where the waist-high freezer was pressed against the wooden wall. The normal, underlying hum of running power was non-existent, the cabin's interior bathed in a thick, stark silence. Along with the freezer there was an old refrigerator, a few bare light bulbs hanging from fixtures, a radio and likely an assortment of other electronic gear that had died once the generator had. Reaching the freezer, she threw open the lid and peered inside where there were several plastic bags lining the

interior. A wave of chilled air washed up from inside, sending a stark shiver down the length of her spine and raising goosebumps along both of her skinny arms. The freezer was about half full and it would take several trips to get the food out to the backyard where Everett could cook it. Her eyes roamed the kitchen until she spotted a collection of plastic grocery bags stuffed into a cloth holder, which dangled on a narrow hook next to the refrigerator.

Peeling a few of the grocery bags out, she brought them over to the freezer and began loading them up, wedging several of the wrapped food items into them. The bags grew heavy, the narrow straps straining with the extra weight, but she'd managed to fit half of what had been in the freezer into a trio of plastic bags. Pausing for a moment, she made her way back into the kitchen and struggled to open several of the hand-built drawers, all of them somewhat ill-fitting and difficult to slide in and out. Eventually, she located a wide cabinet which not only contained a fork, but a barbecue fork with a long, narrow shaft and two distinct, sharpened prongs. Balancing the three plastic bags in one hand, her fingers burning with the weight of them, she retrieved the fork and stuffed it into her pants pocket, then rebalanced the bags and headed outside.

In the time that she'd spent grabbing all of the items, Everett had pulled over a wide, metal basin, the kind of circular metal tub that old cartoon characters used to take baths in whenever Scout had managed to catch their adventures on television. He'd taken a plastic sheet and pressed it into the circular crevice, lining the metal tub.

"Dump them in there, girl." He nodded toward the tub and Scout hurried over, following his instructions, upending the plastic bags and dropping the sealed meat onto the plastic lining. The possum meat was already starting to darken slightly, shifting from pink to tan which left areas of the meat white in the same pattern as the cast-iron rack. "You ever dry meat before?"

Scout shook her head. It had been another one of those laundry list items that her parents had talked about, but never

really gotten around to.

“All right, well you’re gonna learn something today. You’re not one of those anti-learning kids, are you? One of those kids who hates school?”

Scout *did* hate school, but not because she didn’t like learning, she hated school because she spent hours learning the wrong things.

“I like learning,” she replied in a meek, almost silent voice.

“Shed,” Everett growled simply, nodding in the direction of the ramshackle tool shed that seemed one step closer to collapse than it had even a few minutes ago.

“There’s still meat in the freezer.”

“Shed first.”

Scout hurriedly nodded and made her way over to the shed, then pulled open the door that had been left unlocked.

“Wheelbarrow should be right inside, on the left.”

Scout had remembered seeing it and obediently grabbed the two handles and backed out of the shed, pulling it along with her. Turning clumsily, she pushed it over to where Everett was standing and rested it down on its rear supports.

“We’ve got more plastic sheeting in the shed, too. Back wall. Grab it and come on back.”

Scout did so, then followed Everett’s directions, unfolding the plastic sheet and pressing it into the shape of the wheelbarrow, making sure its entire interior was lined.

“When you go back inside to grab the meat, there should be a box of gallon-sized bags. Grab those. We’ll need some salt, too. Corner cabinet above the sink. There will be a bunch of other spices, too, some pepper, cumin, garlic and chili powder. I need you to grab all of those spices, you understand?”

Scout nodded again, silently reciting the long list of items he’d given her, clinging to his words with the tips of her mental fingers. She made her way back to the cabin as quickly

as she was comfortable, the lingering effects of her headache starting to creep back along her left temple as she did. After having grabbed up an armful of the same plastic bags she'd used before, she unfolded them and unloaded the rest of the freezer, cramming the meat into the bags as she quietly whispered the list of items Everett had thrown her way. Stepping over where she left the bagged meat on the floor, she went to the kitchen and found the box of gallon-sized bags, then tossed them into the living room, almost absently, not wanting to devote too much mental energy to the task.

As Everett had instructed, the corner cabinet contained several large jars of spices and she grabbed the pepper, the cumin, as well as a container of chili powder and garlic, then returned to the living room and set them all down on the floor. There had been no salt in the upper cabinet that she'd seen, so she went back to the kitchen and rifled through a few others until she found a mammoth five-pound bag of it wedged within boxes of cereal and rolled oats. She hoisted the bag of salt and wrestled it into the living room, setting it down next to the other items, trying to calculate how she was going to carry it all outside. She bent low and scooped up the bag of salt into the crook of her left elbow, then stuffed the bags and the spices into another plastic bag, hooking the strap around her curled fingers. Standing, she lifted everything, her knuckles aching with the additional weight and strain of the bag contents.

She wobbled her way back to the door, balancing precariously, already regretting her decision to try and load it all up at once for a single trip. Shouldering through the door, she walked unevenly along the grass, gritting her teeth, the bag straps biting hard into the insides of her curled fingers. There was a telltale tug of plastic, the distinctive sound of tearing and just as Everett twisted around and glowered at her, one of the bags broke loose and tumbled from her fingers, opening up and spilling its contents across the dirt ground at her feet.

“What the devil are you doing?” He shook his head and shot her another narrow glare before setting his stick down and stalking toward her, angrily. “I didn’t ask you to get it all in one trip, girl!”

“I was just—”

“I don’t care what you was just— step back, let me get the meat.” He grunted as he bent over, scooping up the bags of defrosting meat into his folded arms. Murmuring under his breath, he made his way back toward the fire pit and dumped the meat into the wheelbarrow and Scout was relieved she couldn’t actually make out the string of breathy curse words he was muttering along the way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Everett had directed Scout to take a seat and let him handle things from there, and she'd obeyed his instructions, sulking on the bench of the nearby picnic table. After testing the strength of the clotheslines, Everett had gone through the process of roasting the possum meat, flipping it with the long-handled barbecue fork until its sizzling surface was browned and dried. Retrieving five of the gallon-sized bags, he'd used the fork to pluck up each chunk of meat and dropped them into the bags before applying a healthy amount of salt and a mixture of the other spices.

Lifting the bags at the corners, he'd shaken them vigorously, mixing the salt and spice throughout the bag and coating the entire surface of the meat chunks within. Using clothespins, he'd evenly spaced the gallons-sized bags filled with meat along the clothesline, checking them each to make sure they were sealed tight and intact. From there, he'd moved on to the next load, emptying out the bags and filling the iron rack with several small, fillet-style pieces of cut up animal. Scout had no idea what animal it was, and didn't feel especially inclined to ask, just sitting on the picnic bench and waiting for the old man to decide she was once again worthy of his attention.

"So, you're just going to leave it in those bags?" Scout wasn't sure it was safe to talk but decided to do it anyway.

"Not exactly." Everett pushed the meat around on the cooking rack for a moment, not bothering to look at her. "I'll leave it in there for an hour or two, a makeshift marinade with

the spices and with some of its own juice. Then I'll take it out and air-dry it. But we have to be careful about that."

"Careful?"

"Look around you, kid. Can't see much past those trees, can you?"

Scout shook her head, not entirely sure where Everett was going with everything.

"Wildlife out there. Alligators of course, but other stuff, too, even bears. Last thing we want to do is set freshly cooked meat out hanging around outside. It'll attract all sorts of hungry predators. So, when it's time to take it outta the plastic bags, I'll move it back inside near the open windows on the western side of the cabin. Gets decent sunlight and it'll keep the air out here from attracting hunters with fangs and claws. Not to mention those without 'em."

"Without them?"

"Without the claws and fangs, yeah."

"I don't—" Scout shook her head, confused.

"The Everglades is a big place, kid. I'm not naive enough to think I'm the only person living in it. Times like this, when civilization gets stripped away, it ain't the four-legged predators you gotta worry about. It's the ones who stand upright with their opposable thumbs."

"The people."

"You're smarter than you look." For the briefest of moments, a thin smile creased the corner of Everett's bearded lip. "We leave freshly cooked meat hung out and drying in the spring breeze, that smell is gonna carry and it ain't just gonna carry to the crows and alligators. If there are people trying to escape the dangers of our major population centers, the last thing we wanna do is lead them right to our front door." Everett shrugged and turned, seemingly evaluating the ring of trees and wild swamp grass surrounding his property. "I mean, they might find us anyway, but we don't need to make it easier for 'em."

“You think other people are out there, somewhere?”

“I don’t think. I know. Granted, I ain’t run into any of ‘em recently, but if they’re anything like me, they’re keeping themselves quiet for a reason.”

“What’s your reason?”

Everett started to turn toward her, but halted halfway, an abrupt, almost jerking stop, as if he didn’t want her to see the look on his face. “Ain’t your business, kid.”

Scout walked toward the fire pit and studied the browned meat that rested on the iron rack, which remained straddling the circular pit itself. She shoved the toe of her boot into the charcoal, sending a scatter of sparks about, though she was careful not to let any of them spill out onto the grass.

“Smells good,” she said quietly.

“You ain’t lying—” Everett’s voice cut off in mid-sentence. “When did you eat last?”

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday when?”

“The fish and potatoes? I think that’s what you made me.”

“Damn, girl that was over twelve hours ago. You haven’t ate since then?”

“I wasn’t sure—”

Everett expelled a swift breath that seemed built from exasperation, sharp enough to cut glass. “You gotta learn to look after yourself, kid. There ain’t always gonna be someone looking out for you.”

“I know,” Scout replied quickly. “I mean, after my dad—”

“Nope.” Everett cut her off, holding up a single finger. “I don’t want to hear it. No life stories, you got it?”

“No life stories,” Scout repeated with a curt nod. “I got it.”

“This is a temporary arrangement,” Everett continued, gesturing to her, then back to him, then to her again. “I’m just helping you get back on your feet, then you’re going back

where you came from, all right? I don't have the capacity to take care of someone else at this cabin, much less a ten-year-old kid who—"

"Thirteen. I'm thirteen." Scout interrupted, scowling, refusing to meet the old man's eyes. The three simple words seem to wedge a stake into the older man, and he pressed his lips closed, the corner of his mouth curling down into a frown. He stared down at the meat on the iron rack and for the briefest of moments it was like a dark storm cloud had settled in the sky above them, dimming the world's illumination.

Everett cleared his throat and used the barbecue fork to turn several of the small pieces of browning meat, then lifted them one-by-one and set them on a plastic sheet on the nearby picnic table to cool before wrapping them in the plastic bags filled with salt and spice. After clearing off the rack, he dumped more meat on it, which immediately began to sizzle, thin tendrils of pale smoke twisting up from the lumps of indistinguishable flesh.

"There's a camp," Scout said bitterly, "that's where the soldiers were taking me."

"What sort of camp?"

Scout shrugged. "I don't know. Government, I guess. Maybe FEMA. They were bringing a bunch of refugees there. I didn't even want to go."

"Probably the best place for you."

"No, it's not."

"You're a kid. You can't be wandering around out here on your own. Didn't you say you had grandparents nearby?"

Scout nodded silently, then leaned back on the picnic table bench, looking mournfully at the swamp grass that grew at her feet. The air was thick with the smell of charcoal and cooked meat and try as she might, she simply couldn't shut out the memories of the nightly barbecues in her backyard. Playing cornhole with Keegan and sometimes even Holly if she deemed them worthy enough to play with. Lying in the grass outside, staring up at the stars, at the endless blanket of

sparkling lights, the potential of life feeling just as unlimited as space itself. That had all been swept away in a matter of hours, a rip of the carpet upon which she'd stood, leaving her stumbling and off-balance. She no longer believed life's potential to be unlimited and suddenly the endless void of the sky above was intimidating, not inspiring.

“See those pieces of meat there?” Everett stabbed the long fork in the direction of a few chunks of browned meat which were no longer smoking. “They should be cool. Grab a few of those sandwich bags and mix some spices in there, then dump those four pieces in.”

Scout nodded wordlessly and stood, following the man's instructions perfectly. A few moments later, she'd clothes-pinned the four sandwich bags along the clothesline, testing the weight to make sure it would hold. While she'd done that, Everett had removed a few more pieces from the cooking rack and set them on the table, then dropped the fork next to it.

“Okay, that's all of it. You're sure the freezer was empty?”

Scout nodded, again giving her acknowledgement only motion and not words.

“We'll have to check the refrigerator, too.” Everett shook his head.

“When are you taking me back?”

Everett had stepped away from the fire and was walking back toward the cabin. He froze part of the way there as soon as she'd spoken and glanced over his left shoulder. “I'm not sure. The generator is priority number one right now.”

“Does it need parts?” The generator lurked, pressed against the back wall, which Everett had partially disassembled the last time she'd gone into the cabin to retrieve some supplies. He'd removed a panel and some of its internals, though she didn't know enough about the inner workings of a generator to tell what he'd removed.

Everett nodded. “Generator is basically a gas-powered engine. It blew a gasket on the oil pump, which is what shot all

that oil out, but even before that I think maybe the carburetor got clogged with old gas and seized up.”

Scout nodded as if she understood what he was saying.

“Chain reaction, really. Unfortunately, not only did the oil shoot out, but it dumped all over the insides, too, so I’ll need to tear the whole thing down, clean it out and rebuild it. But I need a new gasket at least and maybe a new oil pump. I’d also like to grab a spare carburetor from somewhere, just to have on hand.”

“Where will you get all of that?”

“Unfortunately, that means a trip into town. Much as I hate to say it.”

Scout turned slowly, eyeing the thick trees and grass that surrounded them on all sides. “There’s a town near here?”

“All depends on how you define ‘near’. It ain’t all that close, but it’s reachable. Might be a day’s travel. Maybe a little more if I got a kid tagging along.” He said the last part of the sentence with unfiltered venom in his voice. “But I can’t exactly leave you here fending for yourself.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Sure. Whatever you say.” Everett turned away from Scout, but not quickly enough to hide a roll of his steel-colored eyes. “Look, I’m going to go check the refrigerator, make some decisions about what we need to do with what’s inside. Then we’re going to pack up and head to town. It’s a small place, like I said, maybe a day’s travel from here, but it’s got a hardware store and a few other places. Long as the crazies haven’t burned it all to the ground.”

“The crazies?”

“People, you know? Stuff like this happens, people go a little crazy. As much as I don’t trust the government, laws are all that holds civilization together and when the ability to enforce those laws is affected, when there’s a lack of accountability, things can get very bad, very quick.”

Scout's father had often told her the same thing, though not quite in such stark, gloomy terms.

“Rest of that meat should be almost cool enough. Give it a minute and wrap the rest of it into bags, mix it with the salt and spice. We'll bring it into the cabin just before we leave.” Without another word, he stalked the rest of the way to the cabin, then moved inside, slamming the door behind him. Scout was left alone, looking toward the fire pit, the dark smoke rising from the smoldering charcoal feeling like a mirror as she stared into the dark, murky void of her own soul.

CHAPTER SIX

Against Holly's wishes, they'd spent some extra time at Randall's Island, just east of Manhattan where her mother Jean and her brother Keegan had finally found some small measure of peace. The days since the fuel pipeline ruptures had been chaotic for all of them, but even so, Holly had wanted to just keep heading south, to try and get to Florida and reach her father and sister. But even though her mother had stitched up the bullet wound in her shoulder, Holly was weak and unsteady on her feet and though she denied it to her mother, her mother's intuition was as keen and alert as always. She'd insisted they spend some time resting and recuperating, eating from the supplies in the roof cargo container of the SUV.

They'd parked the vehicle among some trees south of one of the many athletic fields that dotted the island and as Holly picked at a protein bar, chewing it slowly, she peered out across the flat expanse of manicured grass just beyond the line of trees. In the distance, on the opposite side of the athletic fields was a mammoth structure of stone and glass, an M-shaped compound drenched in darkness, despite the rising sun in the east.

"We can't stay here any longer," she whispered as she sensed her mother approaching. Keegan had taken Bucky, their black lab, for a little morning stroll, making sure to stay within the cover of the trees. In the distance, smoke rose in thin contrails from an unseen fire deeper inland.

"We'll leave today."

"This place is dangerous."

“You keep saying that, but it seems peaceful so far.”

“Don’t you know what Randall’s Island is?”

“You’ve told me several times, dear. But we haven’t seen anyone yet, so—”

“At one point it was where they dumped all the crazy people, mom. There were asylums all over it.” Holly shoved the rest of her protein bar into her mouth and chewed it aggressively, her words muffled by the act of eating.

“That’s an old wives’ tale.”

“No, it’s not.” Holly pointed toward the structure in the distance which was barely visible beyond the athletic fields. “That’s a homeless shelter over there, mom.”

“A homeless shelter is *not* an asylum, Holly. I thought I raised you better than that.” Jean peeled away the foil wrapper of her own protein bar and took a bite. “Besides, if it was that dangerous, would they have really surrounded it with sports fields? Where kids might be playing?”

“Just because it wasn’t dangerous before doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous now.”

Jean’s brow furrowed as she crushed the protein bar between her back teeth, remaining disturbingly silent and non-responsive to Holly’s concerns. The only sound was the light jingling of Bucky’s collar and Keegan’s low whispers of encouragement. Even outside of Midtown Manhattan, the stale smell of smoke lingered deep within Holly’s nostrils, her chest aching with it as well. The death toll had already been massive, there was no doubt about that, but she couldn’t help but think about all of those people with respiratory issues, people without access to health care. By the time all was said and done the world’s population could very well be measured in millions instead of billions, a thought that was stark and sobering as she stood at the edge of the trees.

“We’ll leave today,” Jean said, and Holly smiled in response, letting out a short breath.

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it? In the movies getting shot in the shoulder is no big deal, but this isn’t a movie.”

Holly nodded and started to rotate her shoulder a bit, the muscle stiff and thick, but she didn’t get very far before she winced in agony and reached for her arm instinctively.

“Yeah, still very sore. But we have to go, mom. I want to get to Long Island before we head south.”

“So, you said yesterday,” Jean replied. “You want to talk to his family? Bruce’s family?”

Holly had been interning for a revolutionary tech and manufacturing company called Metanoia when the crisis hit, the same company that had manufactured the synthetic polymer which had been at the center of the worldwide meltdown. Metanoia’s CEO, Bruce Phillips was a fixture in the tabloids, one of the most famous young CEOs in America and somehow, some way, they’d ended up together in the wake of the building’s collapse. They’d both helped each other escape the chaos of Manhattan, making their way over to New Jersey before moving north and trying to get back to the island of Manhattan. In a short time, she’d formed a bond with the man, and he’d been swept away when the Lincoln Tunnel collapsed, dragged beneath tons of Hudson River water, leaving her on her own.

His wife and stepdaughter lived in an expensive mansion in Long Island and Holly had promised they would head there first before she started heading north to Maine. Instead, her mother had come south, saving her life from a gang of gunmen who had stormed Columbia University. But Holly’s memories of Bruce still resonated with her, and she was obligated to head to his home in Long Island and tell his wife and stepdaughter what had happened. They were no doubt worried about him, not just physically but mentally; after all, Holly was pretty sure Metanoia Industries had been identified as a potential culprit in the wake of the crisis.

“We don’t have to stay long, but I at least have to tell them what happened. To him, you know? To Bruce.”

“That’s very kind of you, Holly.”

“We’d want to know, right? If something had happened to dad?”

“Of— of course we would,” Jean managed to stammer a reply. The truth was, she was petrified something had happened, not just to Marcus, but to Scout as well. Her husband and younger daughter had been about to board a plane from Miami back to LaGuardia when everything had fallen apart, and she hadn’t talked to either one of them since. Early indications had been that the disaster she’d seen in Portland, Maine and which had devastated New York was widespread, almost certainly affecting Miami as well. The one thing she held close was the knowledge that her husband, like her, was smart and capable, someone who was mentally prepared for almost anything and as long as he drew breath, he’d keep their daughter safe.

“I’m going to go check on Keegan.” Holly stuffed the foil wrapper in her pocket and turned back toward the trees. The jingling collar they’d been hearing had faded into silence and she wanted to make sure her brother and the dog were still okay. Threading her way through the tree cover, she emerged for a moment on a wide swath of grass that stood between the trees and the coastline of the island. From where she stood, the Manhattan skyline loomed ahead, a vast wall of stone and glass, though the skyline before her at that moment bore little resemblance to the famous contours she’d become accustomed to seeing. Dark smoke clotted the entire horizon, a churning curtain of ash and slate gray almost entirely blocking the cloudless sky above. Pockets of bright fires were wedged within the clusters of several buildings, flames crawling relentlessly along the spires rising above the rest of New York City’s iconic coastline.

A few of the buildings had begun their inevitable collapse, the days of fire and destruction taking their toll on their structural integrity. Further north, toward Harlem, vast walls of apartment buildings had folded into a mass of crumbling stone, shattered windows and active flames. Even from where she stood, across the Harlem River and miles from Midtown, the endless chorus of sirens still wailed, though they were quieter than they had been, their numbers perhaps dwindling,

day after day as the men and women desperately trying to stitch the fabric of civilization together became tired, hopeless, or worse. Holly had loved New York City the moment she set foot on Columbia for her first college tour, it was like a second home to her, even as different as it was compared to where she'd been born and raised. Seeing the city reduced to a smoldering wreckage within the span of several days was a stake pressed into her heart.

“Keegan?” She called out, not too loud, but loud enough, she hoped, to be heard.

“Over here.”

She turned and spotted her brother, who was seated on a bench alongside a narrow road which curled around the southwest perimeter of the island. Holly could picture cars slowly making their way alongside the coast, carting children to the athletic fields or perhaps just planning to spend a day at the many parks scattered throughout the island. But the road was empty and her brother sat alone, leaning slightly forward, the dog curled at his feet. He rested his elbows on his bent legs, but his head was turned up slightly, so his eyes were fixed on the broken horizon of what remained of New York City.

“How are you holding up, punk?” Holly circled around the back of the bench and settled next to him, the slats hard against her back, the stiffness in her shoulder turning her movements cautious and rigid. She tried hard not to telegraph the pain so as not to worry her ten-year-old brother.

“I never saw it.”

“Saw what, bud?” Wincing, Holly leaned forward to match her brother's posture.

“The city. When you came down for that tour, I stayed home with Dad. Mom brought you and always said that during one of your breaks we'd come down and visit as a family. So, I could see the city.”

“I remember.”

“But we never did. You always came home, at least until this last time, but with dad and Scout gone, mom just—” his voice trailed off and he sighed, his narrow shoulders slouching low.

“Timing just never seems right until it’s too late.” Holly rested a palm on his knee and squeezed gently.

“Now, I never will. See it, I mean. Times Square. They have these great stores and huge neon billboards.” He spoke with a sort of reverence, as if the image in his mind was far more elaborate than reality could possibly imitate.

“It’s not so special. Just a way for companies to pummel you with oversized advertisements.” In truth, Holly had been to Times Square only a handful of times in her first years at Columbia. Though, what she didn’t tell Keegan was that she had been blown away each and every time. As a girl born and raised in rural Maine, New York City seemed almost detached from reality, an oasis of metropolitan civilization and she’d loved every single minute of being surrounded by its glass and concrete. But mentioning that to Keegan was mean-spirited, so she kept that thought to herself. She was going to miss New York City a lot— she’d honestly considered staying there after her graduation and had even thought that perhaps Metanoia Industries might be her opportunity to do just that.

But New York was gone, Metanoia was gone, civilization itself might be teetering on the narrow ledge above a great, dark chasm. Even thinking the word “graduation” was disingenuous at best. There would be no more graduations in the immediate future, not for her or anyone else.

“Is it really as bad as it looks?” Keegan glanced toward his older sister.

Holly sighed, the air pushing out between the narrow gap in her top and bottom teeth. “Honestly, Keegan? It’s worse.”

“Worse?”

Holly nodded and blinked away a sudden sting of unexpected tears. Trying desperately not to think of the strewn rubble of collapsed buildings, the scattering of corpses along

West Street, the bob of lifeless forms on the surface of Hudson River. She tried not to remember the gunshots and violence at Columbia, her new friends Alex and Jesse who had offered their help, then been mercilessly shot down for their trouble. She absolutely didn't want to think of the dark confines of the Lincoln Tunnel, the sudden shuddering of its curved walls just before the stone and tile exploded inwards, bringing the full force of the Hudson River along with it. Any one of those items individually would have been enough to traumatize someone for life, yet she'd experienced them all, almost back-to-back over the period of three days. There was no way to unsee the things she'd seen, no way to reverse what she'd experienced; they were as much a part of her as her blood and muscle and she'd be carrying them around for the rest of her life.

For a long moment they sat together in silence, Bucky hoisting himself to his feet and resting his head in Holly's lap. She absently stroked the dog's ears and the top of his head, feeling the brush of his tail against her leg. Smoke thickened to the west, and beyond that layered, gray curtain, the sky shifted, morphing from pink to blue as the sun continued its trek up the horizon to their backs.

“Holly? Keegan? We have to leave. Right now.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The tone of Jean's voice drew Holly's attention immediately, and she stood even before she fully turned to gauge the sense of urgency. Keegan must have sensed it, too, because he was also charging to his feet, Bucky scrambling, alert, a low growl curdling in his throat.

"What is it?" Keegan expelled a breathy, almost panicked question, pushing off from the bench and taking three steps toward his mother.

"We need to go, right now." Jean's voice was an insistent, hissing whisper, which made Holly think that someone was nearby, someone she didn't want to alert to their presence.

Keegan opened his mouth to speak, but Holly gripped his shoulder and shook her head, pressing a finger to her lips. His eyes went wide, but he nodded and joined his sister as she moved forward, the three of them, and the dog, making their way back toward the SUV. As they approached, she gestured back toward them and waved her hand down as a silent gesture for them to remain quiet. Peering beyond the parked SUV, Holly picked out a few figures milling about in one of the sports fields beyond the trees. They walked across the manicured lawn in a group and by the looks of it, two of them were armed with rifles. She couldn't help but notice the sprawling compound in the distance, her attention focused on the homeless center and gravitating toward the rumors and stories about the asylums that had once littered the Randall's Island countryside.

Voices carried from the approaching figures, loud enough that they could hear them, but not loud enough for them to isolate any specific words.

“Get in,” Jean urged, opening the back door and gesturing toward it. Keegan nodded and scrambled up inside, with Bucky close behind, the two of them situating themselves on the rear bench seat as she shut the door as quietly as she could. Holly was already rounding the rear of the SUV and opening the passenger side door by the time Jean reached the driver’s side. The group of men had neared them, getting closer by the moment. As they came closer, Holly spotted something similar about all of them, each huddled figure wearing what appeared to be a similar uniform. They each wore a pale, green smock of sorts with long pants down to their ankles. Each one had a unique jacket pulled over their shoulders, but beneath their jackets, the uniforms were the same and to her horror, they all seemed to resemble hospital scrubs.

She wasn’t intimately familiar with every installation on the island, but she recalled that aside from the various men’s shelters there was also some sort of rehab center, a complex built for drug addicts to assist in their integration back into society. Riker’s Island prison was nearby, just north of Astoria Heights in Queens, which on a better day, would be a short drive from where they stood. She remembered in one of her sociology classes hearing about Riker’s Island convicts and how many of them funneled out through the recovery center on Randall’s Island as they prepared to be re-introduced into society.

“Get in,” Jean urged, her voice a slice of whispered air. She was halfway in the driver’s seat already, the door propped open so she could lift herself up over the windshield and bark one last order at her daughter. Holly nodded and swept into the seat herself, easing the door closed behind her as her mother repeated the same motion on the opposite side. “We have to move fast,” Jean whispered, leaning forward to peer through the windshield. “They’re close enough now that the moment I start the engine, they’re going to hear us.”

The grill of the SUV was pointed out toward the sprawling athletic fields ahead. The grass was cut close, even in spring, so there were no concerns about the all-wheel-drive SUV driving across the mowed pasture. The road that ran the outside perimeter of the island was behind them, but if her mother acted fast enough, Holly thought she could wheel around and push back through the trees to reach it. But as the frenzied and haggard men came near, whose disheveled states were clearer as they drew closer, Holly wondered what their reaction would be. It was almost obvious that they were escapees from the recovery center, the uniforms they wore most likely “borrowed” from staff or orderlies. If prisoners were truly held at the facility, it was likely they had armed security on staff, which might explain where they’d found those weapons.

Jean fed the key into the ignition, her jaw set, eyes narrowed, intense and firm. It was a look that Holly was quite unaccustomed to seeing on her mother’s face and she silently nodded her agreement in return, reaching forward and bracing herself against the dashboard ahead.

“Keegan,” Jean said in a tone that invited no disagreement, “get down.”

Keegan didn’t even argue, he just dropped low, wedging himself between the front seats and the backseat, his arms wrapping around Bucky’s neck to drag the dog down with him. To his credit, the large dog didn’t argue, he simply followed the young boy toward the floorboards, sprawling across the seat. Holly sighed and popped the glove compartment, lifting a holster from it. She turned it over in her hand, inspecting the pistol that was strapped within its Kydex sleeve, then unclasped the strap and removed the weapon, holding it in her palm. Jean nodded her approval, seemingly happy that she didn’t have to actually tell Holly what to do, then she pointed her gaze back out the front windshield and twisted the key into the ignition. Immediately, the SUV gunned to life, its engine roaring as Jean instantly pounded on the accelerator, shooting the vehicle forward from the cover of the trees.

All four men who had been crossing the sports field jerked their heads up or around, darting narrow, alert looks in their direction. One of them lifted a rifle almost at once, like a reflex. Jean floored the gas, the vehicle charging free of the trees and thundering out onto the field of play. Cranking the steering wheel sharply to the right, she tapped the brakes, guiding the vehicle into a sharp turn, its tires slewing across the grass. Twin cracks of rifle fire erupted behind them, the thudding whine of a bullet rebounding from the rear corner of the mid-sized SUV. Voices shouted from behind them, indistinguishable, mostly a chorus of loud, abrupt barks. A single voice rose above the others and in the rear-view mirror, Holly could make out one of the four men directing the others.

“We can use that car!” he shouted, thrusting a finger toward the rear windshield even as two other men readied their weapons. Jean pounded the gas and the SUV raced back toward the trees at a high rate of speed. They’d wedged the vehicle in a tiny clearing, but as they sped toward the tree line they’d just left, Holly struggled to pick out another similar break in the foliage, the trees pressed too tightly together for the vehicle to make its way back under cover. Two more shots echoed, though there was no telltale whine of ricochet and thankfully no broken glass to signal an impact.

“Over there!” Holly gestured across her mother’s body, pointing frantically at a narrow parking lot that ran alongside the eastern edge of another playing field. Trees separated along the front facing edge of the lot and Jean steered the car toward it, accelerating further. “Watch out!” Holly warned as more figures emerged at the far end of the lot, though none of them appeared to be armed. They spotted the speeding vehicle and loped toward it, an intercept course of shambling figures, running at odd, almost clumsy strides. One of the figures lifted both arms and waved them frantically, trying to flag them down.

“Help! We need help!”

“Mom?” Holly asked, her voice faint and plaintive. “What do we do?”

“Worry about ourselves,” Jean replied instantly, brooking no opposition from her daughter. She accelerated further as more gunshots echoed behind them, quieter as they drew further away from the uniformed men.

“Please!” Someone stumbled out into the parking lot, almost losing their balance, tossing their right arm in a wild, uncontrolled flail. “The wastewater plant is on fire!”

Holly glanced toward the stumbling man and indeed saw the increasing column of dark smoke coming from the north. A few moments ago, there had been a few twisting, pale tendrils, but they’d converged into a curtain of slate gray, a churning cloud of thickening smog signaling an aggressive blaze from somewhere further inland.

Someone sprinted out from behind a parked car, again waving their arms wildly. Jean accelerated further, tires transitioning from grass to asphalt, propelling the vehicle forward in a sudden, almost unexpected lurch. She cranked the wheel hard right, but the increased speed was more than she’d anticipated. With a muffled thunk, her front left bumper collided with the sprawling figure, knocking him back. He sprawled awkwardly, his spine striking the parked car he’d lumbered out from behind, the reverse momentum carrying him up onto the hood. He tumbled, flailing, rolling across the sloped front of the vehicle, and dropping awkwardly to the pavement on the other side.

“Sorry!” Jean gasped to nobody in particular. “I’m sorry!”

She guided the SUV toward the right even as another clutch of people shot forward, sprinting across the parking lot, calling out to them. The perimeter road met the far end of the parking lot and Jean merged onto it, twisting the wheel left, skidding as the SUV’s locking tires gripped at the pavement with a screech. Compensating quickly, she straightened and accelerated, the vehicle charging forward, narrowly missing a woman who was running at top speed toward the road, hoping to force them to stop by putting herself in their path. Up ahead a massive, multiple lane bridge crossed over the top of the meandering roadway and sunlight glistened from the windows and roofs of hundreds of stalled, immobile vehicles glutting all

lanes of travel. A lacrosse field opened up ahead, and Holly gestured wildly to the right.

“This way! Continue along the edge of the island! If we go too deep inland, we’re likely to run into more trouble!”

“I don’t think we have much choice,” Jean replied, pointing toward not just the highway ahead, but an elevated railroad trestle beyond. “Everything’s elevated along this side of the island. There’s no way to cross the East River unless we get up on that thruway.” She pointed above them to the multi-lane highway as they passed beneath, a shadow falling across them, the road temporarily blocking the sun from above.

“I’m not even sure where the nearest on-ramp is,” Holly breathed, her back and shoulder hurting as she leaned forward to get eyes out of the windshield. Craning her neck, she looked up onto Interstate 287 as they merged onto the narrow road running alongside. While there were plenty of cars scattered about the roadway above, the lanes didn’t look completely blocked by traffic. “Take a left up here,” she directed, pointing toward a branching roadway that wrapped around another collection of stark, concrete buildings. More figures milled about around the cluster of structures, some of them huddled in quiet groups, others staring out at them, though making no movement to try and intercept.

“Hell Gate Circle. Follow that!”

“Hell Gate?” Jean’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

“I didn’t name it!” Holly shrugged, then turned her attention to the passenger’s side window. A throng of onlookers stared back hungrily, desperation showing in their gaunt faces and hunched over postures. They gathered around an oil barrel where a fire had been set, crackling in the early morning air, some of their hands extended toward it. It had been easy to forget that it was March in New York and while it was far from the middle of winter, the early morning air was plenty crisp during spring. Smoke drifted in elevated fingers, clawing at the air from the concrete buildings that lined the interior of Hell Gate Circle. Following the road around to the

right, they were soon running parallel with Interstate 278, though it remained elevated on thick, concrete pillars, almost impossibly out of reach. Yet another series of athletic fields sprawled out to their right, a baseball diamond standing alone and empty, though Holly thought she saw a few discarded mitts, hats and a baseball bat resting on the grass.

It was as if a game had been in progress and its players had simply been swept away, leaving some of their gear behind. A few vehicles were scattered about the roadway, though Jean effortlessly navigated around and between them, weaving in and out as she continued north alongside the elevated freeway to their left. Nobody else appeared to be sprinting toward them, desperately trying to hijack a ride off the island and when they did pass by people standing alongside the road, they were mostly pathetic and resigned to whatever fate awaited them.

“Oh my—” Holly’s voice was quiet and meek as she peered out of the passenger window. They moved further north, driving past the Wards Island Wastewater Treatment plant and just as the man had proclaimed, the entire complex was ravaged by fire. The smoke they’d seen from the southern edge of Randall’s Island revealed itself, a stark, gray curtain of churning slate and coal, rising above a wall of bright, crackling flames. Whatever the wastewater treatment plant had been like before, all Holly could see was a raging inferno, yellow, orange and white hungrily consuming all within its path, churning out roiling clouds of thick, dark smoke, blotting out the blue sky beyond.

The fire had been burning for quite some time and had moved on to some surrounding structures, sprawling out in a wide swath of destruction. A trio of abandoned fire vehicles stood, forlorn and outmatched, shrouded by encroaching flames, two of them with ladders extended, though nobody remained at the vehicles themselves. The burned-out husk of another fire truck slowly smoldered, its frame buckled and melted, fire burning at all sides of the vehicle. The elevated railroad tracks ran between them and the plant, the road angling left, and Jean followed its path, merging onto Central Road, which continued parallel to the elevated freeway.

“Where is the blasted on-ramp?” Jean swallowed hard, leaning forward to look ahead. Holly could relate. Every minute spent driving deeper into the sprawling island was like tempting fate and considering what had happened to the world, that was a dangerous endeavor, indeed.

“Look!” Holly gestured at an upward angle and Jean twisted forward, following her pointer finger. On the elevated highway, the multi-lane roadway branched off, paved routes angling toward the north, curving around to meet in what appeared to be a complex cloverleaf of intersecting asphalt ahead. Gray ash filtered the air, a lingering smoke clouding the windshield, blowing west from the wastewater treatment plant. Even through the smoke, the circular connection of various roadways remained visible as Central Road veered right, wrapping around a massive acreage of parking lot. The street cut between the parking lot and another array of athletic fields to the right, several of them pressed together, with circles of dirt carved out in a clover pattern amid manicured grass.

“Take a left! Go that way,” Holly directed and Jean followed orders, banking the SUV around a tight turn, following Central Road as it wrapped around an intersection. Central Road merged onto Bronx Shore Road, traversing north of the cloverleaf, cutting beneath the overpass and just south of another grouping of parking lots. Several cars rested within narrow spots within those lots and several other shadowed figures roamed about. Holly glanced toward them and saw a hunched over man, a rock clutched in one hand, banging hard against a driver’s side window, trying to force his way into a pick-up truck. In the next parking lot ahead a sedan charged forward, bumping up the narrow slope and slewing onto Bronx Shore Road ahead of them. Jean hammered on the brakes, her fingers tightening around the wheel as she braced herself for something, though she wasn’t sure exactly what. Instead, the sedan’s tires squealed, and it shot forward, hurtling ahead, leaving them in its dust. Three people sprinted from the lot after it, waving their arms and Jean had to swerve wildly around them to avoid knocking them over like bowling pins.

Circling around another massive complex to the left, Bronx Shore Road bent south, then curled tightly west,

heading back toward the central clover leaf of intersecting roadways. The sedan was already battering its way through congested traffic, forcing its way up onto Interstate 278 and Jean guided the SUV in its wake. To the right, a miniature golf course spread out along the Randall's Island woodlands, Bronx Shore Road veering south and merging onto the congested throng of 278 on its elevated supports, overlooking the roads below. As they'd seen previously, the lanes were filled with cars, though not completely blocked off and while Jean had to slow her progress quite a bit, she was able to navigate the mid-sized vehicle through narrow gaps.

The sedan that had pulled out in front of them was no longer within view, its somewhat more slender shape allowing it to slip more easily between stalled vehicles, maintaining most of its previous acceleration, unlike the SUV which had to pick its way forward with much more care and caution. Smoke rose along the eastern horizon, while slowly, but surely, they continued south, making their way along the tightly packed lanes of the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As hairy as it had been getting out of Randall's Island, it was nothing compared to what faced them as they crossed into Queens, following the bridge through Astoria Park and into a tightly congested downtown residential area. As the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge became the Triborough Bridge, they were suddenly surrounded by tight clusters of apartment buildings, residences and businesses, the traffic thickened like clotting blood and their progress east slowed down considerably. Holly pressed herself up against the passenger side window, looking out over the edge of the bridge, down upon the roads below and felt a measure of thanks that they were somewhat removed from the activities at street level.

Several of the apartment buildings smoldered, smoke drawing from broken windows, glass littering the sidewalks and roadways outside. Furniture rested askew alongside the broken glass, some of it actively burning while others remained broken and battered as conflict boiled over within the city limits. Smoke billowed far to the north, a wide swath of dark soot and ash and even though their windows were closed, the occasional chop of gunfire carried through, faint, but loud enough to be concerning. Queens had, by all appearances, descended into a veritable war zone, the streets and apartments looking more like a third world country than a prosperous American suburb. Fires littered neighborhood blocks, many of them consuming couches, chairs or other detritus, while others simmered within apartment buildings themselves. Voices shouted from between three and four floor

structures and more gunfire popped from time to time, far closer than the background din they'd heard initially.

A few of the vehicles they passed on the elevated freeway had bullet holes punched into their glass and in one case, Holly had seen someone's silhouetted form bent over their steering wheel, a splash of dried blood coating the driver's side windshield.

"Where are the police?" Holly asked, knowing that nobody in the car had the answers.

"Midtown, maybe?" Jean tightened her grip on the steering wheel, desperately wishing that they could go faster through the section of congested highway they were navigating. A muffled thud echoed from the north, a flash reflecting from several clustered buildings a few blocks away. A moment later, fresh columns of pale smoke rose, the results of whatever had exploded moments before.

"Just keep your eyes facing front," Jean asked, reaching over and touching her daughter's arm. "That means you, too." She glared at the rear-view mirror in Keegan's direction.

As they'd left Randall's Island, he'd emerged from the floorboards with Bucky and had returned to the seat since the shooting had stopped. The SUV crept onward, still moving west even as the streets below were entangled in simmering violence, teetering on the edge of collapse.

"Is there an alternate route we can take that might be faster?" Holly opened the glove box and drew out one of the various maps inside, unfolding it and rifling through it, using her finger to trace through the ornate bloodwork of streets that crossed through Queens.

"I don't think we can take that risk." Jean kept her attention facing forward. "We get off this highway and back to street level, all bets are off." As if in emphasis, another volley of gunfire erupted to the right, closer than any of the previous shots had come. A piercing scream split the air shortly thereafter and as Holly turned, three young men darted between buildings, two of them holding rifles. Jean allowed

her attention to be diverted for a scant moment, the motion down below catching her eye as well.

“Mom! Watch out!”

Jean hammered on the brakes even before she looked back through the windshield. A man came forward, a hand extended, his palm showing. Jean gritted her teeth and moved her foot back toward the accelerator, but Holly’s fingers gripped her forearm and squeezed tight.

“He’s wearing a police officer’s uniform.”

“What?” Jean squinted through the lingering smoke and confirmed her daughter’s words. The approaching man, his hand extended outward was indeed dressed in the trademark blue uniform of the NYPD. His alert, narrowed gaze and cautious approach seemed to fit the persona of law enforcement and she remained stopped, her foot hovering above the accelerator, but not yet pressing it.

Purposefully standing in front of her car, the officer straightened, keeping his arm extended, looking at her from beyond his outstretched palm. Jean’s eyes darted left to right, then she slowly activated her automatic window, drawing it down a few inches as he approached, circling to the driver’s side.

“It isn’t safe here,” he said in a hushed whisper. “Queens is in rough shape. You really should go back the way you came.”

“We— we can’t,” Jean said. “Randall’s Island is on fire, Manhattan is worse. We’re trying to make it to Long Island.”

The police officer stared in the vague direction of Long Island, his head shaking. “It’s a long way from here to there. Queens is practically a war zone. We had to pull back, most of us are in Midtown Manhattan. Some others are north, up by the Buono Memorial Bridge.”

“What’s at the bridge?” Jean asked, her fingers still coiled tight around the wheel.

The cop gave her a look. “You’re not from around here?”

“No,” Jean replied, offering no further information. If the cop looked hard enough, he’d see the Maine license plates, but beyond that she had no desire to over-share.

“Riker’s Island,” he said simply, the words a flat tone, without emotion.

“Riker’s— like, the prison?” Jean’s eyes widened and the police officer nodded, resting his hand near his hip holster.

“They sent me into the city to see if we can find reinforcements. Someone, anyone, really, who might be willing to help stem the tide. The prison exploded; the fuel pipeline ruptures hit the power plant there. Went up like a bottle rocket.” He tucked his chin low, his head shaking. “Dozens died, if not more. But the fail-safes crapped out. Prison doors opened. It’s a disaster out there right now. We don’t even know how many of them hit the streets before we responded, it may have already been too little too late.”

“This can’t be happening.” Jean pressed her eyes tightly closed.

“Sorry lady, but it’s already happened. Trust me, this is my neighborhood. It *was* my neighborhood. Barely recognize it anymore.” He looked back over his shoulder, emotion thickening his already deep voice. Clearing his throat, he leaned slightly so he could get a better look inside the car. “You’ve got a lovely family here, lady, just— be careful, okay? There’s no telling what you can expect. If you’re determined to go all the way to Long Island, stay on 278 as long as you can. It should carry you above the fray.”

“Okay, will do.”

The cop took a step back, hand still resting near his hip, turning and taking a look around. From somewhere down below voices shouted and the staccato puncture of gunfire ripped through the air.

“Stay safe,” Jean said. The police officer didn’t reply, he just stepped back, then turned, making his way toward the west, vanishing between stalled vehicles. Jean leaned, looking into the rear-view mirror, then started the engine again,

inching the SUV forward. “Is everyone still doing okay?” she asked quietly, her eyes still pointed forward.

“I think so,” Holly replied, then looked over her seat, back toward Keegan. “You all right, buddy?”

Keegan nodded wordlessly, retaining his apparent oath of silence that he’d taken on since leaving Randall’s Island. Jean’s front bumper scraped against the rear of a stalled hatchback, the vehicle moving slightly as she shoved her way through, the somewhat larger vehicle manhandling the smaller one. There was still no sign of the sedan that had passed through earlier, but Jean pushed the SUV forward, nudging other vehicles aside where necessary, taking advantage of narrow gaps to squeeze through. At one point there was a clear swath of pavement and she actually accelerated to almost twenty miles per hour, threading a needle between stopped cars and trucks before being forced to slow again. It was an exercise in stop and start frustration, the endless halt and acceleration driving them all just a little bit crazy. Long Island wasn’t that far away, maybe a thirty-minute drive, even in normal bumper-to-bumper traffic, but as the minutes stretched on, Holly wondered if they might not arrive until nightfall at the rate they were going.

Up ahead and on the right, Holly spotted a large section of grass on street level, as what had once been the elevated roadway descended into the Grand Central Parkway, several lanes of east and westbound traffic were once again at street level. Traffic had thinned along the main stretch of highway as the on and off-ramps bunched up with vehicles trying to merge and Jean pressed the accelerator, pushing the SUV into a quicker forward pace. To the right, buildings dropped off and a wide section of urban sprawl was replaced by a vast acreage of gravestones, one of the largest cemeteries Holly had ever seen spreading out to the south of the eastbound freeway.

“K— keep going, Mom,” Keegan said in a low whisper, pressing his face close to the passenger’s side window in the back seat. His wide eyes scanned the rows and rows of grave markers, anxiety shaping his words.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Holly said soothingly.

“I don’t like cemeteries.” Keegan drew back from the window, then turned straight ahead, fingers fidgeting in his lap. Jean guided the SUV between a pair of vehicles and moved forward along a stretch of empty highway, passing beneath a pair of evenly spaced overpasses. As she emerged beneath the second, she gasped, a sudden inhalation of air drawing Holly’s attention from the window she’d been peering out of.

“Oh my—” Holly didn’t finish the sentence, she couldn’t form the words. The Grand Central Parkway continued east throughout Queens, circling just beneath the massive complex of LaGuardia Airport. Several runways curled within feet of the westbound lane of Grand Central Parkway and a massive passenger plane had crashed into the southwest section of tarmac. It had struck with such a violent impact that it had torn itself apart, the main fuselage crushing the hangar and the end of the runway, wreckage spilling out onto the parkway, leaving a battered and beaten path of destruction in its wake. The crushed remnants of the plane were littered across vast acreage of pavement and surrounding grass and Jean had to actually steer the SUV around a shorn section of wing that had destroyed at least three vehicles.

Fingers of roiling flame curled from what remained of the plane’s main fuselage, the fire having crossed over to the hanger itself and other surrounding buildings. The entire campus of LaGuardia was an ocean of rippling fire and heat, smoke and a three-story high blaze blotting out the horizon beyond the ragged remains of the airport.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no no no,” Keegan muttered, pressing his hands to his mouth as Jean navigated through the splayed wreckage of the aircraft. Somewhat surprisingly, she was able to pick a narrow path through the twisted and buckled metal, driving through a wall of smoke, the surrounding air permeating the vehicle with a dull, pervasive heat.

“It’s okay, Keegan,” Holly said softly, “just look straight ahead.” Along the left side of the road, a passenger bus had veered off and capsized, the vehicle bent and twisted, a pile of other vehicles gathered around it in a massive collision.

Across from the airport a tightly grouped residential neighborhood stood in the shadows of dozens of flight paths and though she soon wished she hadn't, Holly glanced out the passenger side window. A second plane had gone down, evidently falling short of an attempted emergency landing, pummeling a wide swath of apartments and small businesses, a ragged, scorched groove gouged through the city like a poorly healing wound. Smoke still trailed from the charred wreckage; dozens of buildings flattened into ruins in the wake of the passenger jet's crash. A single twisted tail rose from the smashed fuselage, both wings having ripped asunder and scattered debris across a wide section of Queens. Fire had taken root and spread wildly, massive sections of buildings, even blocks away from the plane, actively burning, trailing dark smoke into the air.

It was as though they'd driven into the guts of a massive forest fire, only the trees were made of concrete and glass, flames crawling across structures on both sides of the parkway. The 94th Street overpass moved above them and beyond the cloverleaf intersection, LaGuardia was consumed by a blinding wall of scalding flame. Where there wasn't flame there was smoke and in those small pockets of sky visible beyond the smoke the blue rippled in the heat's reflection, infernos on all sides. Several vehicles had been crushed or capsized, either smashed by debris or in haste as people desperately tried to escape the uncontrolled blaze that ate through the majority of northern Queens like acid burning through flesh.

Smoke blocked the sky entirely, thick and dark, consuming everything around and over them, forcing Jean to lean closer to the windshield to try desperately to peer through the opaque glass and charcoal-colored air. Even as they drove past, attempting to worm their way through the collected wreckage of traffic, a secondary detonation ripped through the air, a sudden, deafening blast of sound and light to their left raking a large scythe of fire through a section of the airport. The vehicle shuddered from the sudden rush of hot wind and debris that rained down, a large chunk of stone buckling the roof of a pick-up truck a few car lengths ahead.

“Go, Mom, go!” Holly screamed, clawing the dashboard as her mother desperately tried to identify a gap between cars so she could pick up the pace. Pounding the accelerator, she sent the SUV charging forward even as a ragged chunk of steel blistered the freeway ahead, striking so hard it knocked a gouge from the pavement before tumbling along and plowing into a minivan, glass shattering. Fresh, dark smoke boiled across Grand Central Parkway and to their left another large chunk of broken debris cratered through an overpass access road, knocking a jagged piece free of the road and sending two vehicles tumbling down in its wake.

Jean sped forward, finding a narrow space between vehicles, taking full advantage as she reached twenty, then twenty-five, then thirty miles per hour, the chaos and destruction smearing into mottled blurs on each side of the family car. Ahead of them a section of road crossed above the parkway and Holly’s eyes widened. Another explosion ripped throughout the airport, the near side of the wall blasting outward, propelling a wide arc of debris field airborne like buckshot from the world’s largest shotgun.

“Go go go!” Holly screamed, and her mother clearly sensed the urgency, accelerating more, scraping both sides of the SUV as she wedged between lanes of traffic. The overpass loomed before them and as they neared, a chunk of rock almost as large as their vehicle itself crashed down upon the narrow bridge spanning the parkway. Chunks of the overpass rocked loose, raining down across the pavement, though instead of slowing down, Jean accelerated faster.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Pleaded Keegan in a shrill voice from the backseat, but Jean paid him no attention. The tires thudded and thundered over a layer of broken rock along the road, the overpass above them trembling beneath the sudden onslaught of rubble. A groan came from their left, one of the thick supports threatening to give way as fissured cracks walked a wild, crooked line alongside its surface. Jean floored the accelerator, the overpass starting to crumble, more chunks of detritus scattering across their hood and roof. Rock fell, hammering the windshield, leaving a fist-sized divot in the safety glass, a spider-web of narrow fractures walking out from

the point of impact. Holly drew back reflexively even as Jean drove the gas all the way to the floor. The overpass finally gave way, tumbling down upon them and around them, but the SUV skated through in the nick of time, plowing through a curtain of falling dust as the bridge hammered to the ground just behind them, the ground beneath their tires shaking violently with the impact.

“That was way too close,” Holly gasped, still bracing herself against the dashboard as the van pulled further away, the flaming wreckage of the airport drifting back into their rear-view mirror, moment by moment. Just to their left, another airplane had crashed, plowing into a large section of Terminal C, collapsing walls and roof, igniting a roiling blaze, the fire already consuming well over half the eastern section of the airport. The parkway entered a twisting tangle of intersecting roads, dozens of pretzel-shaped throughways converging into a mass of stalled cars. Where Jean had been able to wedge her way through, that no longer seemed an option and the sedan they’d spotted earlier had been stopped against a wall of immobile tractor trailer trucks, two men standing outside.

One of them spotted the approaching SUV and shouted to the other, then they both sprinted toward them, arms waving.

“Hey! Hey! We need help!”

“Off ramp!” Holly gasped, jabbing a finger to the right.

“That’s not an off ramp, that’s an on ramp!”

“Beggars can’t be choosers!”

“Stop!” The man growled, no longer looking like he wanted help, his narrow glower revealing his true intentions.

“Just turn!” Holly reached across her mother, gripped the wheel and cranked it toward herself, forcing the SUV into a sharp, right-hand turn.

“Holly!” Jean gasped, though her daughter’s forced turn had indeed angled the SUV away from the approaching men, performing a tight right-hand turn which brought them close to the on-ramp. Several cars had blockaded the path of travel, all

of them pointing the opposite direction, though Jean was able to swerve around the first, find a narrow gap and push their way through, moving down toward Northern Boulevard and into a nearby parking area. Four buses were slotted into extended parking spots in the lot and breathing hard, Jean brought the SUV into a tight left turn and propelled past them all, barely giving them a second look.

Emerging from beyond a tight grouping of trees, more horrors unfolded before them, stark and sudden. Citi Field emerged from the surrounding urban sprawl, the stadium where the New York Mets played their home games, the oval-shaped structure buried beneath a blanket of orange and yellow flame. The surrounding acreage of parking spaces was mostly empty, the incident having started too early in the morning, not to mention the season, for an active home game to be played.

Flooring the gas, Jean propelled the SUV forward, moving quickly, rounding the southern edge of the burning, smoking stadium. She merged into Roosevelt Avenue, which was soon contained on all sides by iron grid work, an elevated train track supported by a thick, metal canopy overhead. Roosevelt had some traffic scattered about, but it was less busy than others and the vehicle passed between other stopped cars and trucks with little difficulty. Soon, they were continuing eastward, passing into Flushing as they prepared to continue east, then south into Long Island.

CHAPTER NINE

Neither Dave nor Hank had apparently ever arrived at the wilderness cabin, and Jacob was okay with that, even if he was a bit unsettled about what that meant for the two young men he'd met in the camping goods store. Although their older friend, a grizzled man they only referred to as "Unc" had tried to kill Jacob, the other two had seemed friendly enough, even if they were a bit dazed and confused. Jacob had wondered how well guys like them might make out during the end of civilization and the fact that there was no evidence that either of them had showed up to Hank's father's cabin answered that question, in his mind. But the cabin had provided him a temporary shelter, a place to rest for a moment, to try and heal emotionally from the discovery of his ex-wife's death and prepare for the next long leg of his journey.

The leg was going to be considerably long. At first, he'd focused his attention on Veronica, because although they'd been divorced for a few years, he'd remained close to her and he'd cared for her, after all the divorce had been her idea, not his. The discovery of her death had impacted him far more than he'd thought it might, after all she hadn't been an active part of his life for years. However, emotions were an interesting thing and though they no longer shared matching rings or matching last names, her death had carved out a hollowness in his chest, one that he wasn't sure he could ever refill. With her death and with his professional life in ruins, Jacob had nowhere else to turn, nowhere but family.

He'd thought of his brother Marcus, who was visiting their parents in Miami with his daughter Scout. They'd been

scheduled to fly back to New York the same day everything had happened, planning to meet Holly, Jacob's older niece, and a Columbia student, for dinner. With that thought in mind, Jacob had decided, he was going to head east, targeting New York, to see if he could find Holly and then, in turn, locate the other members of her family. In a way, he'd hoped Marcus was still in Florida; after all, he'd heard horror stories about planes in mid-flight when their airports had gone offline, trying to navigate, sometimes running out of fuel or even worse, colliding with other aircraft without air traffic control to help keep everyone on their own flight paths. Although Miami was likely a disaster area far worse than even Lexington had been, Jacob thought his brother and his younger niece would be safest there and he hoped they were hunkering down and waiting for help.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Jacob leaned against a nearby tree, bending one knee and propping himself there, waiting for the fog to clear from his addled mind. The low crackle of flames came from the clearing just before him, the cobbled together fire burning freely, releasing tufts of gray smoke. Spring in eastern Kentucky was typically a little chilly in the early morning hour, and though he enjoyed the heat of the fire, he relished the bitter bite of the hot coffee he drank even more. Glancing around his small campsite, he took in the one-person tent where a sleeping bag was still unfolded within, the opened flap on his oversized rucksack and the portable pot he'd used to boil the water for his morning coffee. If civilization hadn't been burning down around him, he might have considered his trek through the Kentucky wilderness to be a nice break from reality.

As it was, it was more of a necessity than anything. Lexington wasn't a large city, by any means, but it had proven to be exceptionally dangerous in the days after fuel pipelines around the world had erupted into flames, plunging the entire planet into chaos. If Lexington was that dangerous, he shuddered to think about places like Chicago or Houston, and yes, places like Miami or New York City as well. To him, sticking with the wilderness mode of travel was safer, with a wall of foliage between him and crazed humanity. His fingers

curled around the insulated thermos, he lifted it to his lips and took another long sip, closing his eyes as the hot drink coated his throat and burned down into his guts. Veronica had always gently chided him about his supposed caffeine addiction, especially as he got older, wondering aloud sometimes how it might be affecting his heart. He'd always bristled at the uninvited commentary, not realizing at the time it had been simply because she cared for him.

It was so easy to see in retrospect, but at the time— he lowered the thermos and lowered his head along with it, staring over the rounded lid at the grass beneath him. The faint glisten of dew drops layered the grass in a gleaming lace, the faint light of the morning sun reflecting within their microscopic droplets. *Veronica*. She should have been the one camping in the wilderness, separating herself from society and enjoying nature. That had always been her thing, not his and the vast, almost unending unfairness of it all sat in his gut like a thick chunk of solid lead. Beyond the fire, the trees rustled softly, and Jacob snapped out of his momentary daze, staring off toward the wall of foliage that surrounded him. He held his breath, frozen, turning his head slightly.

The sound emerged again, the shifting of leaves, the slight scrape of something moving against a tangle of tree branches, pushing its way through the forest. Reaching across his body, Jacob set down the thermos and snatched up the rifle that leaned on the tree next to him, bringing it back toward him. Straightening his knees and pushing his back up against the tree trunk he rested upon, he wormed his way upright into a standing posture, the rifle held tightly in two hands. He'd found the old bolt action inside the rustic old cabin that Dave and Hank had invited him to and didn't even think twice about taking it, along with a box of ammunition he'd found with it. The stock of the weapon wedged tight into the crook of his right arm as his opposite hand cradled the hand guard, lifting the weapon slowly, his eye staring down the long length of the barrel.

Standing still, he stared out at the trees, the sound of rustling leaves faded into silence, leaving him alone in his clearing with nothing but the crackle of the fire as his

backdrop. His tongue slipped free and ran over the rough surface of his dried lips as he remained semi-crouched, weapon trained on the wall of wilderness before him. Trees rustled again, another shifting scrape of branches and leaves and that time, he actually saw movement along the edge of the clearing, a large form working its way through the grass and trees of the Kentucky forest. His heart hammered so hard and fast, Jacob worried that whatever was lurking in the trees might actually hear it, and the flesh along the base of his neck prickled. A dark shape lumbered through the trees, moving with a hunched over posture.

Jacob swallowed as the trees shifted, then bent away, the dark form plodding out into the clearing, one step at a time. It was the largest wild boar that Jacob had ever seen. Its head was broad and thick, its arched back nearly chest height as it placed one cloven foot before the next, shouldering its way out into the sparse clearing. Releasing a muffled snort, the animal pawed at the grass, slowly moving its head left to right, in search of what, Jacob wasn't sure. He was tangentially familiar with most manner of wildlife, deer, rabbits, even bears, but his exposure to wild boar was nil and he found himself completely unsure about what to expect. The creature's thick, matted fur was dark in color, almost black against the greens and browns of the trees beyond and its raised hackles formed a gradual arc along the length of its spine. It snorted again, digging at the grass with one, thick foot, then wedged its squat snout into the grass, pushing through the dirt and green, still snorting loudly.

Twin tusks pushed out from beneath its cylindrical nose, smaller than Jacob thought they might be, looking more like long, curved canines than anything else. The creature pried open its mouth and rooted around in the grass just beyond the fire, digging with one black-rimmed foot, evidently searching for food. Jacob remained in place, straightening slightly, though he kept the rifle trained on the animal, held within his slackened grasp. He supposed a wild boar was preferable to an angry grizzly, but he would have been a lot more comfortable if it had just been a white-tailed deer or small, gray jackrabbit. For the briefest of moments, he considered shooting it, even

though it wasn't bothering him yet. There would come a time, probably sooner than later, when his food stores might run low, and a few dozen pounds of pig meat might come in handy. But there were too many unknowns. If he shot it and missed, or if he hit something non-vital and the hog charged him that would be all she wrote. Even if he did kill it, what then? He knew next to nothing about butchering an animal of that sort and lacked the proper equipment to do it.

Even if he managed to fumble his way through skinning and processing the huge pig, what would he do with the meat to keep it fresh? He had no salt or spices, no airtight bags, no way to dry it. As much as carrying around a backpack filled with bacon lightened his dark mood, he left his finger resting on the trigger guard and didn't fire, choosing to remain where he was, nestled near the thick oak tree, content to watch for the time being. The hog snorted again, a louder, more aggressive sound, steam rising from its snout. Lifting its head, it hesitated momentarily, and Jacob held the breath in his lungs, wondering for a moment if the creature might sense his presence.

If it did, the hog didn't feel threatened, because it returned its attention to the grass at its feet and continued pressing its snout into the dirt, searching for whatever food it ate. Jacob followed the creature with the barrel of his weapon as it lifted its head again, then plodded forward, crossing the clearing. Near the far edge of the trees, it stopped again and glanced back at the fire, nostrils flaring, and once again Jacob tensed his entire body in anticipation. But then the large pig strode onward, moving back through the trees and vanishing from view, the rustling of the leaves growing fainter with each passing moment.

Jacob finally released the breath he'd been holding, his shoulders slackening as the rifle barrel drifted down, the tension that had been clawing at his spine loosening, just a little. Finally, content to believe that the wild hog had moved on, Jacob leaned over and rested the rifle back against the trees, then lifted his thermos and took another swift slug of hot coffee. His heart continued to sprint through his chest, and he stared at the coffee, shaking his head. Caffeine had nothing on

the adrenaline from the wild boar, he was fully awake and ready to keep moving. Without giving it another second, he walked to the one-man tent that still stood upright, then began the process of dismantling it, removing the supports, folding them up and reducing the canopy of the tent to a pile of rumpled vinyl. He folded and rolled, spending several minutes wedging the tent back into the small parcel it had been, struggling to fit it in more than he wanted to admit.

He did the same with the sleeping bag, twisting it into a tightly bound roll of quilted fabric. The tent strapped to the side of his large rucksack while the sleeping bag would be bound to the top, though before he attached it all, he rinsed out his portable pot, wedged the remains of his coffee filter into a small plastic bag he carried with him, so as not to leave trash scattered throughout the wilderness. It took him about thirty minutes to pack up all of his gear and he left his backpack resting against the same tree the rifle was rested against, then he disposed of the fire, breaking it apart, stomping it out and ensuring every last sparking ember was extinguished before he even considered moving on. Shouldering on the large, heavy pack, he winced slightly with the effort, but managed it, regardless, then slung the rifle over one shoulder and lifted the walking stick he'd been using to help offset the pressure on his feet.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a trail map and unfolded it, eyeing its etched lines and varying colors representing the forest by which he found himself surrounded. He wasn't sure exactly where he was, though Daniel Boone National Forest was to the south, Wayne National Forest was to the north and Monongahela National Forest was to the east, so he was surrounded on virtually all sides by vast acres of green. Pulling a compass from another pocket along the opposite leg of his pants, he adjusted his position, eying the movement of the needle to ensure he was pointed in vaguely the right direction. Satisfied that he had his approximate location and that he was facing east, he returned the compass and the map to their original locations and took a step forward. He had relatively good hiking boots, which offered plenty of support, and a few fresh pairs of socks, which would serve him

well for the next several days, he hoped. With the camp site cleared and settled, he pushed his way forward, into the trees and moved east through the thickening Kentucky wilderness.

CHAPTER TEN

Jacob understood his hopes of not running into another human being throughout his trek east were mostly baseless pipe dreams, but even so, the fact that the trail he walked opened up into a small town only a few hours after he'd left was a bit unsettling. He'd wanted to stick to the trees, to avoid civilization as much as possible, but with a steep, unclimbable rock face to the north, he'd been forced to stick to a roughly beaten path through the trees and much to his dismay, the trees thinned, revealing the pocket of the small town wedged within the palm of massive wilderness.

Stepping from the trees, he stood at the side of a narrow, two-lane road, the paved path carving a narrow gouge through the massive sprawl of trees and rocks to the west. Even from where he stood, several logging roads branched off from the main throughway, makeshift dirt paths pushing up into the trees and vanishing beneath their thick, green walls. Once again flipping through the folded map, Jacob traced his progress and located the area where he believed himself to be, a further distance from Lexington than he might have suspected. Decent progress was already being made and he hated to waste it all by diverting around the town and extending his trek east by hours, if not days. Resigned to his fate, he returned the map to his pocket and continued along the edge of the road, using the walking stick.

It didn't take long before a small, downtown area appeared in the distance, starting with a ramshackle old gas station with a pair of pumps that had been transported from fifty years in the past. An old pick-up truck sat in the parking lot and a

white sign hung on the door to the building apologizing for being closed. A second sign, one written in dark marker on pale cardboard dangled beneath the first, with two simple words scrawled upon it, thick and dark.

NO GAS

There was an almost morose silence about the town, a vast quiet that Jacob found almost more unsettling than chaos, though he continued onward, making his way past the gas station and toward an old, white farmhouse across the street. Trees to his right gave way, revealing a wide, untamed pasture surrounding a barn which seemed to belong to the same property as the farmhouse he'd seen from the gas station moments before. Three cows roamed aimlessly within a fenced-off section of pasture, one of them lifting its broad head and mooing softly as Jacob approached. He didn't slow down, he simply continued walking, glancing anxiously toward the farmhouse to see if anyone was peering out at him. No curtains moved, no silhouettes shifted from within the dark windows, and he directed his attention forward, hoping he made it clear that he just wanted to mind his own business.

Another house appeared ahead, then another, growing in frequency as he neared the town center, though by some miracle he still hadn't run into another human being. He hoped that perhaps small-town civilization might prove less threatening and dangerous than the bigger cities, but that didn't mean he necessarily looked forward to running into others along his journey. He preferred things as predictable as possible and nothing was less predictable than other humans. As he followed the road east, he heard a low chorus of voices from ahead, the road bending slightly to the right as it wound its way deeper into town. There appeared to be a conversation happening, though he couldn't make out the individual words. A church's steeple rose from the trees ahead, visible after he'd rounded the bend and a three-story building emerged from the wilderness to his left. It was little more than an elaborate residence, but a sign was hung beside its front door identifying it as the town hall.

“We need to think long term,” a voice said, audible as Jacob made his way closer. He paused as he finished rounding the bend in the road, the trees opening up to reveal a larger section of the small village ahead. The church was stark and white, perched just beyond the town hall and a gathering of people stood just outside. One of them stood at the top of the stairs leading up to the church’s twin front doors, holding out his hands as if trying to corral the gathered crowd. It wasn’t a large crowd, there were only maybe a dozen or two people gathered there and all seemed relatively calm.

“We are thinking long term,” a voice called out from below.

“One season is not long term,” the man at the top of the stairs replied, shaking his head. “I’m talking years, not months, Frank. We need to think about years.”

“Government’s already responding!” A middle-aged female stared up at the man, her voice insistent.

“You call this a response?” Someone else replied from the crowd. “They ain’t doing squat for places like us! They’re too busy with the big cities; small town America’s bein’ written off like always.”

Jacob slowed his pace, not wanting to interrupt the town’s gathering. While small towns could be more welcoming than the larger cities, they could also be more insular, more protective, and he didn’t want to be seen as encroaching or trespassing. He was an armed stranger and though he just wanted to pass through, he could certainly see why the people of the town might see him as a threat.

“Look, we have our meeting with East Bolton tomorrow. We need to come up with something.” The man at the top of the stairs gestured. “They think they’ve got all the answers, if we’re not prepared to respond, they’re gonna feel obligated to push us around.”

“East Bolton can pucker up and smooch my—”

“Frank! That’s not helping anyone!”

A light chorus of jovial laughter passed through the crowd and Jacob actually relaxed a bit as he walked forward. Tension was in the air, for sure, but it was mixed with a sense of community, and the gathered crowd appeared to be working together and unlike Lexington wasn't just at each other's throats. Still, he tried as best he could to remain in the shadows of overhanging trees as he walked along the sidewalk, willing himself to be inconspicuous, if not invisible.

"You ask me, East Bolton is bein' a little short-sighted. If they had their way, I'd be butchering my three cows tonight. Storing the meat. But two of those cows are dairy cows, they'll be giving us milk as long as they can. You want us to think long-term, that right there is long-term!"

"You really want to think long term," the man at the top of the stairs continued, "you'd be talking about where to find a bull— which of your three cows will be a breeding cow. That's where our mind needs to be right now. Not with a week's supply of meat, not even with a year's supply of milk, but an endless supply of fresh cattle that will last us all the rest of our lives."

The crowd's murmured conversation eased into an unsettled silence, heads turning to look at each other as the gravity of the man's words set in.

"This isn't getting solved anytime soon, friends. We have to be in this for the long haul."

Jacob focused forward, trying to pick up the pace, using the walking stick to push himself a bit more quickly. Sparse canopies of tree branches draped over the sidewalk, shadowing him from the morning sun.

"Excuse me!"

Jacob didn't stop, he didn't even turn to look at the voice, he simply wanted to keep walking until he made it through the town and out the other side.

"Excuse me!" The voice was louder and sharper, a stabbing echo and could no longer be ignored. He slowed at first, then finally stopped, turning to stare at the church as the

man who had been at the top of the steps stormed down them, crossing the street in his direction. “Something we can help you with, stranger?” He called out halfway across the road.

“Not a thing,” Jacob replied with, what he hoped was a congenial shrug. “Just passing through.”

“Passing through.” It was a statement more than an inquiry, the man walking closer, suspicion drawn throughout the furrows lined in his face. As he came closer, Jacob got a better look at him, the hard-edged weathering of his complexion, his chin dusted in gray stubble. Where the collar of his shirt was parted, Jacob could barely make out the telltale white collar of a priest, though the black shirt was covered by a jacket of aged, brown leather. The surface of the well-worn jacket bore a passing resemblance to the man’s skin, creases forming from where his lips were turned down into a pensive frown.

“Can you tell me, stranger, where you’re passing from and where you’re passing to? Ain’t much in this neck of the woods.”

Jacob scanned the street beyond the priest, which had been filled with the dozen or so onlookers that had been involved in the impromptu meeting. They fanned out behind the priest, fencing him in with a wide arc, making it clear that he was outnumbered. Shifting anxiously, Jacob cleared his throat, trying to choose his words carefully.

“East,” Jacob said simply, looking throughout the gathered faces. “I’m heading east.”

“That’s not very specific.” The priest crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head, peering at him beneath the furrowed bunch of his brows. “You have to understand, we don’t see too many folks come through here. When we do, it stands out.” The crowd spread out, a few burly looking men positioning themselves on the sidewalk to Jacob’s right, effectively blocking his path.

“I don’t wany any trouble,” Jacob said softly.

“You come waltzing down our street, armed to the gills, most people carrying a rifle over the shoulder aren’t just looking for trouble, they’re expecting it.”

“Just trying to be ready for anything.”

The priest exhaled, his nostrils flaring as his dark eyes darted away for a moment, hesitated, then drew back. “I don’t like repeating myself. You say you don’t want trouble, well, neither do we. We all live quiet, peaceful lives and we’d like to keep it that way. Where are you from, stranger?” He leaned in closer, spacing the words out in clear, uninterrupted syllables.

“Lexington,” Jacob replied quickly, sensing the building tension in the crowd. “I’m from Lexington.”

“Ah.” The priest nodded knowingly as if the revelation somehow explained everything. “A city boy. From my experience, city boys walking around with weapons have ill intentions. Do you have ill intentions, boy?”

“I do not,” Jacob replied with a firm shake of his head. “The weapon is for self-defense and hunting. Nothing more. I mean your town no harm. I just want to continue on my way and be out of your hair.”

“And where are you going, exactly?”

“I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Jacob sighed and turned, looking toward the east. Although he wasn’t a fan of oversharing, he also didn’t see a reason to lie. “New York.”

“New York?” The priest drew back, smiling. “You planning on walking all the way to New York?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Way, I hear it, there are cars and trucks all along Interstate 64, y’all could have your choice of what to drive. Plenty of gas to siphon. You care to tell me why you’re out here walking these trails?”

“No offense, Father,” Jacob replied, his gaze lingering on the man’s white collar clasped at his throat, “but I’m not much of a people person. The more I can steer clear of civilization these days, the better I like it. Besides, Interstate 64 is a parking lot, at least from what I’ve seen. Doesn’t much matter if I can steal a car if there’s no room to drive it anywhere.”

The priest smiled a crooked, thin-lipped smile, offering a slight shrug of acknowledgement. “That is a fair point, young man.”

Jacob chuckled. “Been a long time since anyone called me a young man.”

The priest stroked his own weathered chin, fingers scraping the pale stubble. “Younger ‘n me. That qualifies.”

“I suppose so.”

The priest turned to the rest of the group and gestured a casual, backwards wave of his hand. “Go on,” he said to the gathered group, “nothing to see here. I’m just gonna have a word with this gentleman here and he’ll be on his way. Ain’t that right?” The priest let the last word linger into an unspoken question.

“Jacob.”

“Jacob? Well, isn’t that a fine, Christian name? Welcome to Loggingham, Jacob.”

“Is that where I am?” Jacob slipped the folded paper from his pocket and unfolded it, spreading the map out between clenched fingers. “It wasn’t on the map.”

“No, I don’t suppose it is.”

The rest of the crowd dispersed, spreading out and moving away, casually heading off to separate locations, though Jacob couldn’t help but notice many of their eyes continued to linger in their direction.

“Peter Maville,” the man said, extending his hand. “Everyone calls me Father Pete.”

“Nice to meet you, Father Pete.” Jacob shook the offered hand, a warmth in its palm he hadn’t had previously.

“I do apologize for the nature of our initial inquiry. I wasn’t lyin’— we don’t get many visitors. Didn’t back then and especially don’t now. We’re cautious by nature, you must understand.”

“I do. I’ve had my own unique experiences.”

“I can imagine you have. Lexington, you said?” The two men walked together along the sidewalk, coming up next to a fenced in playground on Jacob’s right. Across the street sat an old general store, surrounded by a rectangular parking lot with two men standing outside its front door. They had their arms crossed and were engrossed in conversation, though every few moments, a set of eyes darted over, peering in Jacob’s direction.

“Indeed.”

“You live there long?”

“Several years. Wasn’t born or raised there, just sort of ended up there.”

They stopped walking, standing next to a small, brick school building, perched, appropriately, next to the playground. The air was pleasant, the sky somewhat overcast, but still bright. By all appearances, it seemed tranquil, almost normal. In many ways it seemed as though life in Loggingham hadn’t changed, though Jacob was certain it had.

“Is it true what we heard?” Pete studied Jacob, once again stroking the roughness of his beard. “This all started in Lexington? Or at least that was the first place?”

Jacob sighed, unsure if he wanted to pop the cork on that particular bottle. It could lead to a wealth of questions, questions he wasn’t sure he had time to answer.

“I was there,” he finally said, feeling almost compelled to tell the truth. “Worked for Emerson Natural Gas. We were running an inspection on a processing plant when everything just went sideways.”

“Have mercy,” Pete whispered softly, shaking his head. “I am so sorry, young man. That must have been difficult.” There

was a moment of silence, the shrill song of birds in the air. “Is that why you’re running away?”

“Running away?” Jacob wasn’t sure he liked that turn of phrase.

“I didn’t mean to offend, son. You said you lived in Lexington, but now you’re heading to New York. Seems to me, you’re trying to escape something.”

Jacob thought long and hard about that, his eyes narrowing as he peered at the general store across the street. In a way, he supposed it was true, he was attempting to escape the memories of his old life. Memories of a life with Veronica, a woman he figured he’d spend the rest of his life with. Their divorce had been difficult enough, but her death, he still hadn’t quite wrapped his mind around it.

“I have family,” he finally said. “In New York. A niece. God willing, my brother will be joining her there soon. My hope is to reach them, to do what I can to help them. Times like this, seems to me, family rules all.”

“As well it should.” Pete smiled thinly and Jacob sensed a darkness behind his narrowed eyes. Nothing menacing, just something sad— maybe forlorn. It was clear the priest had lost someone, though Jacob didn’t want to pry beyond that.

“Listen,” Jacob continued, “I didn’t mean to disrupt your meeting there. Or to get in the way of your normal day-to-day life. I really am just passing through and I should be continuing on my way. It’s a long, hard walk, and—”

“Of course,” Pete said, forcing a smile. He patted him on the arm. “And I apologize for our line of questions back there. We must remain vigilant. Protective. Especially considering everything that’s happened.”

“I understand.”

“Understand something else, too.” Pete’s voice took on a cautionary tone. “East of here is another small town. East Bolton. You’ll need to pass through it to keep heading toward New York.”

“I heard you mentioning something about it as I walked into town.”

Pete nodded. “Don’t get me wrong, they’re not bad people, the folks in East Bolton. In fact, we often used to consider them our friends and neighbors. But times like this, they change people, right? And the people in East Bolton, they’ve become a little skittish.”

“Skittish?”

“Few of them don’t really trust outsiders and it’s not just that, but— they’re afraid. Desperate. Already they’re feeling certain they’re not going to have enough food for the season. That’s put the mayor a little on edge, as you might understand. He’s not a bad man, he cares very deeply for his people. But that doesn’t always serve him well, because he’s prone to some rash decisions.”

“Good to know.”

“Just tread carefully, okay? If you can avoid being spotted, please do so. It just might be better for everyone.”

“Duly noted.”

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to stick around for lunch? We’re roasting a hog over by the church in a couple of hours.”

Jacob’s stomach gurgled at the mere mention of the roast hog, but he kept his expression impassive. “I’m okay, thank you. I’ve got miles to go before I sleep.”

“Indeed.” The priest extended his hand again and Jacob shook it, then the two men separated, and Jacob continued on his way, all but certain he’d never see Father Pete again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Everett's gloved left hand clung close to his body as he gripped the pull cord with his right, closing his fist around the plastic handle. Bracing himself, he bent his knees and torqued his waist, yanking his arm back with every ounce of strength he had, grunting loudly with the effort. The outboard motor gunned, roaring loudly among the preternatural quiet of the swamp, the engine sounds seemingly echoing from everywhere all at once. Water churned behind the boat, the engine gunning to life, foaming and swirling the swamp water in its wake. As they pulled away from the ragged, tangled foliage of the shore, the boat moved diagonally, cutting a trench through the shimmering water as it moved toward the central part of the swampland.

"Keep your hands and feet in the boat, kid," Everett said, with barely a glance over his shoulder. "And keep your eyes open."

Scout nodded hurriedly, turning in her seat to look at both shorelines, which were around ten feet away on each side. She gripped the narrow edge of the watercraft, her knuckles whitening as the backdrop of burbling water and the chugging engine overwhelmed the bird chirps and rustling wildlife. The boat seemed a bit too large for only the two of them, a slab of metal with a gradually upturned nose, a massive propellor mounted to the rear, surrounded by a metal cage.

"It's an old tour boat," Everett shouted above the rattling chortle of the engine. "Buddy of mine was upgrading, he was

just gonna toss this away. I took it off his hands and made some repairs!”

Scout forced a smile, the wind whipping through her dark hair as the boat picked up speed. The broad, metal boat almost seemed to skim along the surface of the water, thumping as it screamed forward, an outward wake of churning swamp spilling out behind them. Long thickets of tufted swamp grass broke the shimmering surface of the wide body of water, though the dark surface made it impossible to see beneath, something Scout was actually thankful for. She wasn't sure she wanted to see what was beneath the surface, every horror story she'd ever heard creating a collage of vivid imagery within her overactive imagination. On each side of them, the thick trees and tangled shoreline blurred into smears of green wilderness, the engine and the wind battling it out for which could be more disruptive. There was room for at least five or six people on the boat, though only she and Everett currently inhabited it, she supposed that left plenty of room for whatever supplies they'd be going after.

The boat slowed as it came to a wide, right-hand curve in the swamp and Everett had to navigate the big propellor and the rudders, angling the ungainly watercraft through the narrowing gap. Scout glanced to the right, swamp grass shifting as something she couldn't see moved through it.

“Before you even ask,” Everett interjected, “yes there are alligators. Crocs, too. The Everglades are perhaps one of the only places on earth where both species co-exist.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Crocs can live in saltwater or fresh water, though the gators prefer just fresh. I've seen 'em both.” He turned and narrowed his eyes in her direction. “Like I said, keep your hands and feet inside the boat.”

The watercraft picked up speed as the swamp opened up wider and straighter, the front of the airboat lifting slightly as the propellor roared and the curved hull chopped through previously still waters. As they sped forward a sudden volley of motion erupted from the right and Scout sucked in air,

drawing back, barely holding in a shriek of surprise. A flock of herons shot forward, launching from their perch just to the right of the water, large wings beating at the air as the birds swept close overhead. If Everett was surprised, he showed no sign of it, still seated in his forward bucket seat, angling the boat through the glimmering water.

As the boat increased its velocity, it lifted from the water for a split second, then thudded back down onto it, a repeated gap, thump, then another gap and thump, each impact jarring the watercraft and splashing swamp from both sides. Looking back through the propellor cage, Scout could see the twisting trail of wake following the boat as it cut a wide passage through the thickening trees and grass. A great canvas of blue sky was opened above them, peppered with several smaller clouds. Warm air settled along Scout's bare arms and the back of her neck, the swiftness of slicing wind cutting through that warmth in regular intervals. They rode along in silence, Everett focusing most of his attention on piloting the craft, though he seemed to know exactly where to go and how to get there, expertly navigating the twisting maze of canals and riverways.

On more than one occasion, the water branched off in different directions, a dividing line of trees carving the swamp in half, and in each case, there was no hesitation as he turned to the right, then to the left, then left again. He studied no maps and never once hesitated, he just catapulted the boat through the shallows at a high rate of speed, the morning hours bleeding away above the growl of the airboat engines.

"Heads up," he shouted, even as the engines started to die down, the boat finally decelerating. "There's a spot up here where I like to park it. But it's in the middle of the trees, so keep your eyes sharp, got it?"

"Yeah," Scout replied meekly, "got it."

A backpack rested on the boat's floor next to Everett's bent right leg, a rifle resting along the curved hull next to it. Bending over, Everett scooped up the weapon with his right hand and slung it over one shoulder, even as he used his left to guide the steering wheel. The engine softened further, little

more than a grumble as the wide bow of the boat veered right, heading straight toward a carpet of long swamp grass which led to the thicker trees beyond.

“There aren’t just alligators or crocodiles out there, okay? We’ve got panthers, brown bears, plenty of species of snake, too.”

“Got it,” Scout replied, speaking between clenched teeth. She could deal with most wildlife, but snakes had always been one of those things that gave her the heebie jeebies. It had all started with a science class she’d taken a few years back in school and a field trip to a local zoo. They’d passed through the snake pen just at feeding time and the moment she’d seen that serpent dislocate its jaw to wrap its mouth around an entire rodent she’d been all set with those particular reptiles. “The snakes,” she asked in a quiet voice, “how big are they?”

“All shapes and sizes, but it’s not the size you gotta worry about.” Everett bumped the front of the boat against the shoreline, all but invisible within the blanket of grass. “Water moccasins can only get around two to three feet long, but their venom will kill ya. If you can get to a hospital soon enough you might be okay, but nearest one we got is, well, just trust me. You wouldn’t make it in time.”

Scout didn’t reply, she only tipped her head down at her feet in silent reminder of what kind of shoes she was wearing. Thankfully, she still wore the old hiking boots she’d found in the discarded luggage at Miami International, and while they weren’t totally her size, they worked well enough and provided at least a little protection in the event she stepped on a copperhead. Everett shrugged on his backpack and adjusted the straps, then stepped out of the boat, carefully straddling it as he reached into the long grass at the shoreline. Digging into the grass, he pulled out a long rope and secured the boat in place, tying it to some hidden mooring that was there, although the trees and swamp all seemed the same to Scout.

Having grown up in rural Maine, she’d spent plenty of time in the New England wilderness with her mother and father, but none of that had prepared her for the ecosystem of

the Florida Everglades. Whatever she knew, or thought she knew, about mother nature seemed to fly out the window.

“How could you tell?”

Everett pulled the boat closer to shore, then wrapped the rope around a spot buried within the grass, tugging it to make sure it was secure.

“Tell what?”

“Where the rope was?”

“I know this section of swamp like the back of my hand,” he replied without looking up. “It’s a part of me, kid.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Remember what I said? About life stories?” He peered up at her from beneath the brim of his hat. “We ain’t friends. Once I’ve got this generator repaired, we’re gonna get you back to where you belong.”

“Where I belong?” Scout almost spat the words. “I don’t have anywhere that I belong. Not here, anyway.”

Everett studied her and for a second he seemed as though he might pose a follow up question, but he pinched his lips into a narrow line and refocused his attention on tying down the boat. He coiled the rope around his left wrist and used his right hand to bind it further, tightening it one last time before he was satisfied.

“Hop on out. We still got a ways to go.”

Scout jumped from the boat and landed, somewhat clumsily on the hard ground buried beneath the thick grass at the shore. She recovered quickly and stood, dusting off her pants, then rushed to catch up to Everett, who was standing on the upward bank, bent over, lifting up loose branches.

“Help me cover it up,” he said, nodding toward the boat. Scout was confused at first, but caught on quick, joining the older man as they scooped up loose foliage and used it to cover the swamp boat, which was close enough to the shore that it almost vanished beneath the leafy covering. It took a few minutes, but the boat, despite its size, had been effectively

camouflaged and giving it one last once-over, Everett nodded, then turned and walked back toward the trees at the top of the bank. There were still no distinct markers that Scout could see, just acres and acres of swampland, all of it indistinguishable from the rest, at least to her unpracticed eyes. She followed along behind him, the two of them walking in silence, though the constant birdsong and undulating buzz of nearby insects accompanied them along the way.

They pushed through the grass and trees, Scout staying as close to Everett as possible, her eyes darting left to right to make sure snakes weren't dangling from branches or slithering through the undergrowth at her feet. She saw no sign of them, which did little to ease her fears that they were still nearby, just better at hiding than she was at seeking. As pleasantly warm as it had been out on the water, it was almost stifling within the cover of trees, a suffocating, bone-deep heat soaking into her sweat-moistened clothes, clinging them to her back and her thighs. She had no earthly idea how long they'd been walking until Everett held up a hand, the simple, universal symbol for stop, a directive she immediately obeyed. It was only at that moment that she saw a slight separation in the trees ahead, a clearing just beyond, which had been invisible even moments before.

Slowly and carefully, making as little noise as humanly possible, Everett reached across himself and slipped the rifle from his shoulder, transporting it into a two-handed grip, his right wrapped around the contoured handle. He rested a gloved finger along the trigger rest, then leaned the hand guard into the open palm of his gloved left hand. Creeping forward, the barrel drifted a touch low, as he bladed his way through the trees, each step slower and more pensive than the last. He reached the clearing a moment later and stayed at the edge of the tree line, lifting the rifle and pointing the barrel out into the open air beyond the tree cover. Holding that pose for a moment, he stepped gradually forward, twisting, pointing the barrel throughout the clearing to cover all surrounding areas.

"Clear," he whispered, looking back at Scout as he lowered the rifle. She understood, intrinsically, what he meant and followed him out into the open area beyond the trees, then

stopped. Along the edges of the clearing, all she could see was more and more organic growth, tufts of trees and leaves, a vague, circular barrier around the area of grass and moss-covered rock. Everett had perched himself near the far edge of the trees where a thick cluster of low-hug branches draped, almost touching the ground. To Scout's surprise, he began to push aside these branches and leaves, revealing a pick-up truck concealed within the trees just off the path of the clearing. It had been parked within a narrow gap between ancient cypress, their narrow branches hanging so low they'd essentially blanketed the vehicle entirely.

"Get in." He nodded toward the passenger side and reached into the flat bed of the truck, withdrawing a can of fuel. He popped the gas cap and tilted the can forward, a soft burbling sound signaling the filling of the vehicle's gas tank. Scout made her way into the truck's passenger seat and a vague sense of déjà vu came over her. She was quite sure it was the same truck she'd been placed into, in a semi-conscious state, after the Humvee had crashed and Everett had come to her supposed rescue. Shutting the door, she tugged the seat belt down across her chest as Everett removed his pack, placed it in the back of the truck, then wedged himself between the steering wheel and the driver's seat back.

"All good?"

Scout nodded and Everett gunned the engine, then accelerated, the truck charging across the uneven grass. A moment later, after pushing its way through a tangle of brush and shrubs, it emerged out onto a narrow dirt road and Everett turned the truck right, then continued along through the trees.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The truck trudged on through the sprawling wilderness until it finally broke through a gap in the trees, the dirt road merging into narrow, two-lane pavement. Even the paved road was pitted and littered with heaves and potholes, but it was a step up from the rough, uneven dirt that barely had twin ruts to tell them where the tires should be. Throughout their trip across the swamp and through the trees, time had seemingly accelerated and as they drove down the narrow road, the forest thinning on each side, the position of the sun signaled mid-afternoon at the earliest. The sky itself was a stark, almost cloudless blue, the sun having crept past the apex and toward the backside of the horizon.

Pressing herself to the passenger window, Scout followed the blurring motion of green leaves along the edge of the widening road. Trash was scattered about, an unfortunate reminder that they were once again approaching civilization. Fragments of paper swept out from beneath the truck as it roared through, then angled around a sharp, left-hand turn, only to come upon a sedan parked askew in the right-hand lane. Everett muttered a curse under his breath and swerved around the stalled car, then continued onward. Up ahead, the narrow street intersected with a slightly wider street and beyond the intersection a ramshackle storefront rested alongside, its front window dark and the parking lot next door desolate, except for a few more rustling pieces of refuse.

Everett took a right at the intersection and the small town opened up before them, sparse and empty, devoid of any sense of inhabitants. There were a few abandoned vehicles parked

here and there, but no signs of people anywhere that Scout could see. A trash can was toppled over on the right-hand sidewalk, its contents spilling out into the parking spaces, evenly spaced and marked with meters. They passed an empty gas station, nozzles yanked from pumps and left resting on the pavement, their connecting hoses coiled like sleeping serpents. Lingering odors filled the air, spent gas mixed with the stale stink of old smoke and trash, which remained scattered about the roads and sidewalks. Windows were dark in each of the small buildings, which were a mixture of shops and other small businesses. A crooked sign marking a chain of the Eastern Glades National Bank hung loose and flapped limply in the soft breeze. Its front windows weren't just dark, they were jagged, the glass broken, shards peppering the sidewalk outside.

Inside, Scout could see that the place had been ransacked, drawers pulled from desks were upturned, furniture capsized, and the translucent barriers between cashiers and customers shattered into oblivion. She doubted that anyone who had broken in had successfully gained access to the safe inside, and even if they had, the money likely would have done them no good. She shook her head, continually confused about the way adults approached things, their priorities and intentions. The fact that civilization had come to a crashing halt and some people's first priorities were to break into banks and try and steal money boggled her young, responsible mind.

"Keep your eyes open," Everett whispered, the gloved fingers of his right-hand tightening around the steering wheel. His jaw was firmly set, his alert and narrowed eyes deep scanning the road ahead, the gray bush of his brow bunched tight and firm.

"What am I looking for?"

"People mostly."

"Is the town normally this empty?"

Everett shook his head. "It's a small town, always has been, but at least in the past, it's been somewhat inviting."

Seems to me its inviting nature might have gotten it into trouble.”

Scout peered through another grouping of empty stores to the right, seeing no signs of anyone moving around within. Her fingers closed into fists, pressed into her lap, then uncurled, paused and curled again, a sort of nervous tension keeping her digits moving. The truck tires crunched over broken glass as they came to yet another intersection and Everett turned left, moving from one street flanked by businesses to another, shadows creeping along the pavement on each side.

“Still nothing?”

“Still nothing.” Scout’s heart thudded, punching the inside of her chest as she kept looking through the surrounding buildings. Either the town was completely empty, or its residents were exceptionally good at concealing themselves, neither option giving her much comfort. A corner market, which, ironically, was positioned precisely on the corner between two intersecting streets, was a ruin, its window shattered and a tail of gray smoke rising from its gaping, jagged chasm. Several shopping carts rested on their sides in the parking lot with three empty vehicles parked nearby, but there was no sign of anyone, alive or dead.

To Scout’s surprise, Everett slowed, guiding the truck to the edge of the sidewalk in front of the small market, where he tapped the brakes and cut the engine, sitting there for a moment.

“What are we doing?”

“We’re here, we might as well stop and see if these idiots left anything behind.”

“What if the idiots are still here?”

Everett reached over and lifted the rifle from between them, saying nothing, though his intentions were clear, even as he opened the driver’s side door and stepped out onto the desolate roadway. Scout opened her door carefully and stepped out into the heat of Florida mid-afternoon, then eased the door

closed behind her, pressing it tight with the meat of her palm. The metal was warm against her flesh, the clicking of the door closing loud against the unsettling silence of the surrounding town.

“Should I have one of those?” Scout nodded toward the rifle clutched in Everett’s hands as he pulled his backpack from the bed of the truck.

“Last thing I need is some antsy little girl shooting me in the back. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ve used them before.”

“This ain’t target practice, girl, and if we’re shooting at something, it won’t be clay pigeons. Just stay close.” He shrugged the backpack on and stepped forward, rifle held in front of him, head swiveling left-to-right, taking in their surroundings with a calculated precision. He moved with purpose, stepping around the front of the truck and making a straight line toward the door of the market, which sat ajar, front glass broken. Before going inside, Everett walked silently to the corner of the market’s brickwork exterior and peered cautiously around it, holding his rifle close to his body. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, or what he didn’t see, he stepped back and made his way to the front door again, shouldering the gap wider so he could step inside.

Scout followed close behind, walking carefully, her heart continuing its rapid sprint in her chest. Stepping into the store, her eyes immediately stung from the cloying smoke, a pervasive, gray fog that filled the market’s interior, obscuring their vision. A rancid stink shoved aside the smoke and set up shop in her nostrils, clawing its way deep and perching there, watering the young girl’s eyes. She desperately hoped it was just spoiled food or discarded trash, but the odor was stronger, thicker— somehow fiercer than that. There was the distinct sweetness of rot, an almost organic stink of age and decay that turned the contents of her stomach into a lazy forward tumble.

Everett held his weapon out in a ready position, swinging the barrel left-to-right to cover the market’s interior. While the shelves all remained upright, they were mostly devoid of food

with the exception of some scattered containers, both boxes and cans, which littered the ground. Scout's boots crunched over spilled cereal and she absently booted an empty soda can, which went tumbling away, its metallic roll startling her. Everett wheeled toward her and angrily pressed an extended finger to his lips, telling her to be silent. She nodded apologetically as they continued forward, pushing through the smoke and lingering heat in the air. A pale slice of sun pierced the darkness, coming through a broken window along the right-hand wall, and small mites of dust danced along its beam.

Everett made his way down a center aisle and Scout followed him, the floorboards creaking noisily beneath their shifting weight as they walked toward the rear of the store, eyes open and muscles tensed. Every moment spent within the desolate market convinced Scout that there was nothing to be found here, the shelves were empty, the doors to the coolers along the wall were open and askew, and within the depths of the market, something had been burned. No longer was it just smoke and rot stinging her eyes, but char as well, the telltale stink of something burned. She was reminded of one of her many backyard family barbecues where a small chunk of chicken had slipped through the grates of the grill and had spent the night sizzling directly on the charcoal beneath. When her father finally removed it, it was little more than a blackened mass of carbon, and the pungent odor had almost forced them to go inside.

The odor within the market was similar, though somehow even stronger and thicker and, mixed with the sweetness of the decay, seemed to make it even more powerful. Creeping forward in a low stance, Everett paused at a break in the shelves, then glanced around them, left-to-right, where two more aisles intersected the one they walked down. Satisfied, he stepped forward again and Scout followed, wondering exactly what the older man was looking for. A murmured curse told her that he'd found something— though she didn't think he liked what he saw.

“Turn around.”

The two words were spoken with stark clarity, but Scout didn't immediately respond. She continued facing forward, actually taking a step, even though Everett had told her to turn around. A moment later, she spotted what he'd seen and froze in place, her eyes peeling wide in spite of the smoke clawing at her tear ducts. Beyond where Everett stood, there was a formless, shapeless mass huddled on the floor, a dark shape that chilled Scout straight down to her core. Almost immediately she identified part of the mangled form with the size and shape of a human body, laying prone, scorched beyond recognition. The floor and walls around the body were blackened by soot and a fire that had since extinguished, the smoke continuing to linger, stale and clotted in the air.

Next to the charred body, however, was a second body, considerably less disfigured by fire, though half of its face and the entirety of its right arm were marred and blackened, almost beyond recognition. Blood stained the floor beneath it and had dried to a congealed mass on the wall behind it, the left arm splayed wide, fingers curled as if grasping an invisible ball in its palm. The side of its face that wasn't burned away by flame stared empty at the ceiling, lips peeled back, the pale remains of its teeth separated in a rictus grin.

"I said *turn around*," hissed Everett and reached out, physically forcing Scout backwards and into a clumsy spin. "You don't need to see that."

"I— I've seen worse," she gasped through clenched teeth, though she wasn't entirely sure that was true. She'd seen plenty of dead bodies at the airport, but none of them had quite looked like— like— that. Everett's hand pressed against her back, pressed between her shoulders as he propelled her forward and back toward the front door. She stumbled as he forced her forward, her foot slipping on a sheet of spilled pasta, but she managed to hold her balance and together they made it back to the front door. The air and stench were thick and sharp in her throat, the lingering rot snagging deep, further watering her eyes. Finally, she burst through the partially opened doors and out into the parking lot, sucking in a delicious lungful of fresh air, her eyes pressed closed.

“There was nothing left in there,” Everett grouched. “I should have known. Even the idiots know well enough to hit the food first.”

Scout stopped and bent over, pressing her hands into her thighs as she continued savoring the clean air outside.

“Next time you listen to me, girl. When I say turn around, you turn around.”

“It’s fine—”

“It ain’t fine,” Everett snapped. “You see this place? This is nothin’ compared to what else is out there. When I give you an order, I expect you to follow it, no hesitation, no questions asked. Even a second’s delay could be life or death, you understand?”

Scout nodded, her eyes still closed tightly, the tears leaking through, moistening her cheeks. She was determined to remain facing away from the older man, to not let him see her cry, even if the tears weren’t from sadness but from smoke and decay.

“Get in the car,” he said angrily and slapped the hood of the truck with a gloved palm. “We got another place to check.”

“Well, as I live and breathe.” A voice carried across the parking lot and Scout forced her eyes open, angling her head up slightly in its direction. “Everett Kinsman, is that you? I should have known you’d come crawling out— cockroach that you are.”

Three men had emerged along the far side of the parking lot and were slowly approaching. One of them held a long, bolt-action rifle, like the one Everett carried himself, while a second clutched two curled fists around the narrow shaft of a baseball bat. The third man, the one in the middle had no visible weapons, though Scout was certain a holster rested beneath the baggy, blue flannel of the man’s button-up shirt.

“Mack— ain’t nothing I need or want from you.” Everett shook his head, the rifle held at his right hip. “We’re just looking for some supplies.”

“You find any in there?” The man in the middle, apparently named Mack, nodded toward the market, a sardonic grin creasing his weathered face.

“I suspect you know exactly what I found in there.” Everett’s voice was a knowing snarl.

Mack glanced at the other two men, his grin widening, and Scout had the urge to smack that grin right off his ruddy, stubble-littered face. After looking at his friends, Mack turned back toward them. “Anything I can help you with?”

“Nope. We’re just going to hop back in the truck and be on our way.”

“Is that a fact?” Mack took another step closer and though Everett held his rifle before him, he showed no signs of intimidation. “When did you get another kid?” Mack scrutinized Scout with his dark eyes, and she shifted uncomfortably, taking a backwards step, closer to the truck.

“Don’t you mind what I do and don’t have.” Everett stepped forward, moving at a clear intercept course, trying to place himself between Mack and Scout. “Like I said, we’re just going to be on our way.”

“We’re all friends here, no reason to sound hostile.”

“You’re no friend of mine, Mack. You weren’t before and you sure as hell ain’t now.”

“I am shocked and offended, Everett. What happened to those long nights at Pearlie’s Tavern, nursing our sorrows together at the bottom of our whiskey glasses?”

“I’ve nursed all the sorrows I can nurse, Mack. With you or anyone else. I’m passed that now.”

“You ain’t never getting past those sorrows, Everett— no matter what you try and tell yourself. Stuff you been through — what you’ve done? That stays with you.”

“Maybe it does— but whiskey doesn’t fix it. Especially whiskey with the likes of you.”

A shadow passed over Mack’s face and once again he took a step forward, seemingly ignoring the rifle in Everett’s hands.

He gently stroked the stubble on his chin and looked crookedly at the older man, eyes narrowed. “So, what are you after, Kinsman? Maybe we can make a trade or something? I’m sure you’ve got some good stuff in the back of that truck.”

“Never you mind what I have and don’t have. We’re capable of finding what we need on our own, thanks.”

“It’s a different world. You can’t just stroll to the neighborhood market anymore.” He smirked again and gave his friends another knowing look.

“That your handiwork in there?” Everett jerked his head toward the market.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure,” Everett nodded. He glanced over his shoulder. “Get in the truck.”

Scout opened her mouth to argue but remembered the conversation from moments before—the one where he told her to obey his orders. She cleared her throat, nodded, and opened the passenger door, scrambling quickly inside. Once settled, she stared out through the window, leaning close so she could hear the conversation.

“We’re going to be on our way, Mack. I don’t want any trouble from you, I’m sure you don’t want none from me.”

“I’ll be honest,” Mack replied, nodding softly, “there was a time where you intimidated me, Everett— just a little. Knowing your past— yeah— I wasn’t sure I wanted to cross you.”

“You’re smarter than you look.”

Mack’s eyes narrowed and the corner of his mouth peeled back in a snarl. “You don’t intimidate me anymore, old man. Best you remember that. It’ll be healthier that way. Healthier for you and healthier for that little girl in the truck.”

“You’re going to pretend you never saw that girl,” Everett replied. “Or we’re going to have an even bigger problem.”

Scout wasn’t sure why but that simple statement warmed her insides, made her feel— protected, somehow in a way that

she hadn't been since she'd found her father's lifeless body in the concourse of Miami International Airport. Outside the truck, there was a taut tension in the air, a silent stand-off between Everett and Mack, the two men glaring at each other with transparent malice. Finally, after what seemed like an hour, Mack shrugged his sloped shoulders and waved Everett off.

“Yeah, whatever,” he muttered. “Just let ‘em go.” He gestured toward his friend who held the rifle. “They got nothin’ we need.” The three men turned and walked away, and Everett released a breath he'd apparently been holding. Wasting no time, he circled around the front of the truck and, saying nothing, stepped up into the driver's seat, started the engine and pulled away, tires squealing on pavement.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pedro Juan Sanchez exhaled, tipping his head back, resting his spine against the outside of the Cessna single engine. By some miracle of skill and pure luck, Marcel had managed to guide the plane down into the vast wilderness, plowing through a broad section of forest and setting it down in a thick cluster of cypress and swamp grass. Though he'd managed to set the aircraft down without anyone being injured, the plane itself was beyond saving, the debris from the airport explosion and the clawing scabble from the trees tearing away chunks of exterior, clotting the engine and grounding the Cessna for good.

Each day somehow seemed hotter and more humid than the last, in spite of the spring season and with the increasing heat came increased levels of impatience and frustration. Because the men had been planning on venturing to Florida for a vacation of sorts, they'd packed for the trip, and had even brought a cooler with some food and beverages. They'd spent the past few days picking lightly from the cooler, trying to take just enough to satiate their hunger without draining their supplies too quickly. But the few meals they'd brought had been depleted as of yesterday and Pedro grew restless, his mind working with whatever few options they had.

Trees rustled to his left and Carmelo stepped free, no longer wearing his neatly tailored suit, but clad in a pale-colored tank top and dress slacks, which were stained and thick with dried mud and dirt. He held a rifle in his hands, an American-made AR-15 which was almost comical considering the circumstances. He'd ventured out into the wilderness a few

hours ago, saying he was going to try and hunt down some food, but was clearly returning empty-handed, his face carved in a scowl of intensity and frustration.

“No luck?”

“No luck. I thought the Everglades were supposed to be teeming with life or something.” He growled and stalked to the Cessna, then tore open a side door and tossed the weapon inside. Though they’d planned to take a vacation in Florida, they’d also come on business, and as the son of a notorious drug cartel kingpin, Pedro and his enforcers never went far without the appropriate accessories.

“We’re going to have to figure something out.” Pedro exhaled, shaking his head as he crossed his arms over his chest, which was clad in a plain, white t-shirt.

“Where are Marcel and Urbano?” Carmelo turned, looking throughout the sparse section of the Everglades they’d made their temporary home in the wake of the plane crash.

“Same place you were. Urbano claims he hunted with his father all the time. Maybe he’ll have better luck. Marcel was going to head to the swamp— see if he can get some water.”

“Swamp water? We’re supposed to drink that?” Carmelo scowled.

“If given a choice between drinking that and dying of thirst, I’m thinking maybe we drink.” Pedro shrugged.

“Which is worse, dying of thirst or some sort of bacteria digging through your digestive system?”

“Hopefully we don’t find out, huh?” Pedro lifted his head toward the sky, which was only barely visible through the canopy of crossing tree branches overhead. The Cessna had carved a ragged trench through the Everglades but came to rest within a tall section of overgrown forest that had essentially hidden them from view. Not that it mattered, from what they’d seen of the airport, it was doubtful anyone was going to come looking for them anytime soon. “How is your cell?” Pedro lowered his gaze again and nodded toward Carmelo. He reached into the pocket of his dress slacks and withdrew the

slender device, thumbing the power button. The man in the tank top waited for a few moments, staring at the screen, then finally swiped through something, scowled and shook his head.

“Still no service.”

“Out here in the middle of nowhere, I suppose that’s not a surprise.”

“Is it where we are— or is it what happened?” Carmelo powered down the phone and shoved it back into his pocket.

“And what did happen? Can you tell me that, Carmelo.”

“No idea, boss, but the airport went up like a bottle rocket. That didn’t look accidental, man— that looked like it could have been an attack or something.”

“You thinking terrorists?”

“I don’t know what I’m thinking. But Miami International — I think it got wiped off the map, man. Probably not the only place, either.”

“When was the last time Marcel tried the radio in the plane?”

“This morning. Nothing but static.”

“I’ll try it again.” The voice came from the edge of the trees and Pedro turned in time to see Marcel emerge, wearing a button-down Hawaiian, floral pattern shirt with no other shirt on underneath. His bare, hairless chest was visible just above the gradual paunch of his protruding stomach and he held a similar rifle in his left hand.

“No luck?”

“I ain’t seen jack,” Marcel replied with a shrug. “Hopefully Urbano has more luck. The way he was talking— he was plannin’ on comin’ back here with a white-tailed buck over each shoulder.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Carmelo snapped, rolling his eyes. “Just because he served in the Army, the boy thinks he’s the one in charge here.” He spoke in a low whisper, turning

toward Pedro so Marcel couldn't hear. Pedro had sensed the same thing, to a degree. Not that Urbano thought he was in charge, but he certainly had the most experience out of any of them in surviving the harsh conditions they faced. While that was almost certainly true, the condescending attitude he'd formed over the past forty-eight hours hadn't ingratiated him to Pedro in light of their circumstances.

"I will have a— conversation with young Urbano," Pedro replied quietly. "Give him a gentle reminder about his place in our little hierarchy."

Carmelo nodded his silent approval.

"Hey! Radio's working! I've got a frequency!" Marcel pushed open the door to the cockpit and waved them over. Both Carmelo and Pedro hurried, pushing through the long grass toward the aircraft, which remained entangled in wild foliage. They scrambled up inside the cabin of the disabled Cessna as Marcel hovered over the radio, the hiss of static sounding throughout the cockpit. The static squelched for a moment, and a low voice carried through the speakers as both Pedro and Carmelo hunched forward in the back to listen.

"— chain reaction that has brought the world to its knees." A tinny, female voice carried through, clearly the voice of a practiced newscaster, though there was a sharp edge to the voice, a chiseled tenor. Whoever was speaking was trying desperately to hold themselves together as they recited the apparent script before them. "Throughout the greater continental United States, fuel pipelines have detonated, a devastating series of explosions ravaging our critical power infrastructure. Reportedly starting in Lexington, Kentucky, the events have cascaded worldwide, causing widespread destruction and almost incalculable loss of life."

Pedro shook his head and glanced toward Carmelo, who wasn't displaying much in the way of emotion.

"We are hearing reports abroad as well— throughout Europe, Africa and Asia, reports that similar events have happened there as well. There have been no attempts, as of yet, to calculate the death toll, which is likely in the hundreds

of millions worldwide. Airports have been crippled, and as a result, air traffic control systems collapsed, causing many airline related fatalities across the globe. Mexico has instituted a state of emergency across its entire northern borders, effectively closing them off to America while it attempts to triage its own series of catastrophic events.”

“What did this?” Pedro asked nobody in particular. As if in response, the radio changed gears, a low static hiss interrupting for a moment before the female voice continued.

“Early assumptions are that this may have been the result of a chemical reaction— that Metanoia Industries’ PolySyn composite broke down, creating a combustible mixture which detonated within the pipes. All attempts to reach Metanoia have failed, though rumors persist that their Manhattan corporate office building collapsed early on in the crisis. As you may remember, Metanoia made the news a few years ago when they constructed the massive, sixty story skyscraper out of PolySyn as a good faith testament to their confidence in the product. In hindsight, one cannot help but wonder how thoroughly they tested the synthetic material—” there was another metallic squelch, and the voice was once again overrun by static for a moment.

The entire cabin of the Cessna fell into a momentary silence, a restless quiet, all three of them stuck rigid in their somewhat uncomfortable positions, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

“The United States government has released several statements in the wake of the disaster, with Martial Law being declared across the country as they work with FEMA to assemble a response and recovery plan. At the moment, attention has been focused on the largest population centers across the country, with many of the smaller locales struggling to formulate an effective response.” There was a momentary pause. “Again, take this as rumor because, given the situation, it’s impossible to verify, but we are hearing stories of law and order effectively breaking down throughout some of the mid-sized cities within the United States. As emergency response focuses on the larger population centers, it’s leaving the

smaller cities out in the cold, which has accelerated violence, looting and other criminal activity. If you are in one of those impacted cities, you are being advised to shelter in place. Keep you and your families safe and await further instructions.”

“This is insanity,” Carmelo hissed, pushing himself back from where he was hunched over. “What are we supposed to do? Just sit out here in the wilderness and slowly starve to death?”

“How far are we from Miami?” Pedro ignored Carmelo and directed his question to Marcel who was, essentially, their navigator.

“Too far to walk, I’d wager,” Marcel replied turning around in the pilot’s seat. “But honestly— I don’t really know. I was a little pre-occupied during our descent.”

Pedro gritted his teeth. They’d had a very meager supply of food in the plane and it had been all but consumed already, less than a week in. Bottled water was gone and while the nearby swamp might provide some, Carmelo had a point about the potential bacteria. Urbano had mentioned sterilizing the swamp water by boiling it, which seemed to make sense, but they didn’t exactly have any cookware on the plane. Every possible avenue seemed to come with its own share of roadblocks. Pedro was not accustomed to being without resources at his fingertips— as much as he might have resented it, he’d grown up in an affable, powerful family. His father, for all his criminal faults, had been influential and he’d given Pedro whatever he needed.

But all that power was useless here— it would do nothing to buy him even a single bottle of water or a morsel of food and that fact boiled rage inside of him. Pedro turned away from the cockpit and stalked through the cabin in a low stride, then slipped free and fell to the grass, landing less than gracefully. Carmelo followed close behind him, stumbling somewhat as he disgorged himself from the aircraft, pushing his large frame through the narrow door.

“Pedro! What should we—”

“How the hell do I know what we should do?” Pedro shouted, wheeling toward the other man. “My father thinks he helped me by handing me everything I needed. Look at me now! What good has that done me?”

“Ah— good to see you are finding other ways to blame your father. Let me guess, he is the one who blew up the pipelines?” Carmelo shrugged, his eyebrows raised.

Pedro stared at him, eyes narrow, jaw set, but he drew a steadying breath and let the cool air sooth the hot anger that had exploded moments before. He hated to admit it, but Carmelo was right— it wasn't his father's fault. And he had plenty of reasons to hate the man, he didn't need to invent all new ones. Pedro exhaled and waved Carmelo off.

“Stop making sense, Carmelo— let me be angry for a change, would you?”

Carmelo laughed. “I'm happy to let you be angry, boss, but be angry at the right people, huh? Be angry at those Metanoia pukes— they're the ones the whole world should be angry at.”

“I suppose—”

A rustling in the trees drew Pedro's gaze, his head twisting up, a hand immediately going for the holstered pistol at his hip. It swept free and rose sharply, cradled by his second hand, the blunt barrel pointing toward the moving trees ahead. Leaves separated and Urbano emerged, carrying a dead possum by its long tail in a tightly clenched right fist, his rifle slung over his shoulder.

“Hey, watch who you point that at, huh? I just brought home dinner!” He lifted it into the air, the rodent swinging slowly and Pedro's stomach turned. Going from gourmet meals on the eastward facing patio of his Villa in Mexico to chewing the greasy meat off of a dead, oversized rat in the sweltering woodlands of Florida— it was a few steps too far.

“Dinner. Right.” He made a face and holstered the pistol back in its place. Urbano, for reasons he couldn't ascertain, wore a broad grin across his face as he approached, lowering his hand so the possum nearly dragged along the swamp grass.

“Oh, but boss,” Urbano continued, walking closer, still clutching the possum, “I didn’t tell you about dessert yet.”

“Dessert?”

“Oh, yeah.” Urbano smiled a narrow smile. “While I was out hunting for this dude, I came across something.”

“What’s that?” Pedro was suddenly intrigued.

“There’s a cabin. About two miles east of here, give or take. Looks like someone’s livin’ there.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. A penned in yard with goats, chickens, looks like it even has a generator.”

It was Pedro’s turn to smile, his mouth curling up with a sense of optimism that he hadn’t had in quite some time.

“I snooped around a bit,” Urbano continued, “and didn’t see anyone. Though it’s right on the swamp, for all I know, they could have taken off on a boat somewhere.”

“So, no idea who lives there? Or how many?”

“Can’t be too many. It’s a small place. Two at the most, I’d think.”

“And you’re sure someone lives there currently?”

“Sure, seems like it. I saw the remains of a fire pit that looked freshly used. Could have sworn the lingering smell of cooked meat and coffee was still in the air. I didn’t want to get too close, though, you can’t be too careful, plus I had this fat dude in my hands.” He lifted the possum again.

“Okay. Well, that’s good. Great work, Urbano, sounds like it might be worth checking out. But first— let’s get that fat dude prepped. I’m freaking starving.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The chaos of Queens had eased into a simmering boil as they made their way into Long Island, though Holly was preparing herself for anything as the sky darkened overhead. Dusk was rapidly approaching and Holly's experience told her that once darkness fell, the real trouble would begin, whether they were in Manhattan, Queens or anywhere else for that matter. As with the other New York City Burroughs, Long Island's horizon was peppered by scattered infernos, the churning glow of dozens of fires spreading a caustic, unsettled glow throughout the city.

One benefit of traveling through a place like Long Island was that there were plenty of options to travel east and when Jean ran across a particularly hairy roadblock, she was able to maneuver around it, though sometimes that required backtracking and more extra time than anyone was comfortable with. They kept far away from 495, which more or less cut the island in half, west-to-east. Any moments when the massive highway came into view, they could tell it was littered with congested traffic, thick throngs of stopped cars blocking all travel. From time to time the undulating background noise was pierced by shouts or gunfire, though thankfully none of it was close enough to cause them great concern.

"Take a right here," Holly advised, a map unfolded in her lap, her fingers tracing their current location.

They'd made a brief pit stop a few blocks back and Holly had sprinted into the destroyed remains of a corner gas station, discovering a map that had been left behind. Whoever had

ransacked it had been more concerned with fuel or food and less concerned with navigating the patchwork roadways. It had been a lifesaver in the end, helping them navigate through the obstacle course that the Long Island roadways had become. Even so, it had taken them several hours just to get where they were and the sun's relentless march toward the horizon clawed gooseflesh along Holly's arms and down the length of her spine.

Jean listened to her daughter without commentary, leaning over the steering wheel, her alert gaze scanning the intersection ahead. The SUV turned, threading between rows of parked cars on each side, an already narrow road made all the narrower by people ignoring the signs asking them not to park on the street. An intersection leading to Montauk Highway emerged before them and Holly gestured left, her mother following along. A sprawling used car dealership covered what seemed like acres of pavement across the street, rows of now useless vehicles lined up side-to-side and end-to-end, filling the parking lot next to the stone and glass structure. There were no parked cars along the stretch of road and no abandoned cars either, allowing for speedier travel and Jean opened up the accelerator, reaching forty miles per hour, which was the fastest they'd gone all day. They passed several more intersections, the businesses and strip malls blurring past them in a smear of grays and browns, while up ahead a lake appeared on the left, a small, beaten down nature's preserve of sorts on the right.

Holly almost didn't see the truck until it was too late. As they neared the gap between the lake and the nature preserve, a sudden blur of motion exploded ahead of them, a truck leaping out from the dirt of the nature preserve and halting abruptly, straddling both lanes on the road ahead. Jean cursed under her breath.

“What are they doing—”

“Don't stop!” Holly shouted, grabbing her mother's wrist. “Turn left! There!”

Doors of the truck flung open, and men leaped out, weapons in hand. “Stop!” One of them shouted angrily lifting

a rifle.

“Left? There is no left!”

“Right there!” Holly stabbed a finger toward a narrow section of dirt, more of a walking path than a road, angling north, toward the lake.

“That’s not a road—”

“Just go!”

Jean cranked the wheel and hammered the accelerator again as the first crack of gunfire split their world open. Keegan gasped in the back seat, apparently waking from sleep, jolting upright as the SUV careened sharply left, hurtling toward the narrow walking path ahead. The vehicle thudded over a curb, transitioning to the dirt road with a spray of rocks striking its undercarriage. Trees clawed at the windows and doors as it surged into a small, wooded area just south of the lake and sped forward. More gunfire echoed from the direction of the road they’d just left, chased by the shouts of the men who’d launched their ambush. The roaring churn of the truck’s engine came next as the dirt path wound before them, cutting a twisting path through the trees.

A crashing of brush came from their right as the truck had apparently launched itself forward, crashing through the trees rather than following the dirt path. Jean floored the gas, the SUV winding around a sharp, right-hand turn, taking it so quickly, Holly could have sworn the right wheels left the road for a moment. The truck barreled through a line of narrow saplings just behind them, charging out onto the pathway, grinding the brush beneath its broad grill and knobbed tires. Hitting the brakes, it slewed, then turned right, accelerating in swift pursuit.

“Why are they chasing us?” Keegan shouted from the back seat, twisted around to stare out the back window.

“They probably spotted our cargo container on the roof,” Jean replied, turning the wheel left to handle another twisting turn. “Figured they’d take whatever we had.” She followed the pathway left, still scraping past the tangle of branches and

leaves along each side. The truck closed the distance behind them, thick tires chewing at the dirt, navigating the off-road passage with more efficiency than the mid-sized family SUV.

There was a jolting thud as the bumper of the truck hammered the rear of the car and Jean tightened her grip, jaw set firmly as she glowered through the windshield.

“Take a left up here,” Holly said, pointing toward the trees. “The lake is close— I’m betting they don’t know how close.”

“Holly, sweetheart— I don’t even know how close!”

“Trust me!”

Jean’s jaw flexed and she hesitated for a long moment before nodding. “I do.” She cranked her wheel left, plowing the grill of the SUV through a low cluster of trees, pushing them ahead and down, crushing them under her wheels. The pathway was even narrower and more overgrown than the previous one and it was more like driving straight through the underbrush than taking any sort of path at all.

“Keep going,” Holly said, again glancing in the rear view. “And when I tell you— turn right. Don’t pay any attention to roads or paths or trails or anything. Just turn right.” She bent over the map, studying it closely.

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable with this.”

“I didn’t say I was comfortable with it,” Holly replied, “but I don’t see another option.”

Jean exhaled through her nostrils and seemed tempted to say something, but kept her teeth pressed tightly together, her voice silent. The truck crashed behind them, another sudden impact on their rear bumper pushed the back of the car sharply left. Jean grunted as she struggled to maintain control, then accelerated, but not before the truck surged forward again and once again smashed into the back bumper along the passenger-side corner. The SUV slid sideways for a moment before Jean was able to over-correct, barely muscling it out of its out-of-control slide.

“Now!” Holly’s voice rocketed inside the SUV, loud and sharp, and Jean immediately cranked the wheel. The SUV

twisted sharply and burst through a collection of trees, pushing out into a sparse clearing. For a stomach-churning moment, the vehicle went airborne, reaching a small ledge in rock beneath the mangled grass carpet. It slammed down hard on its front wheels, everyone inside lurching forward, though Holly forced herself to turn in her seat and look out the rear window.

The shoreline of the lake crept along their left side and by turning right when they had, they'd cut it close, but not too close. In its haste to try and ram the SUV off the road, however, the pursuing truck hadn't made the same turn and as Holly watched, it plowed through the trees and hit the rocky ledge of the shore, overlooking the lake. The truck launched, carrying over the edge of the grass and stone shore, and plunged forward and down, hammering into the shimmering lake water with a sudden spray.

It struck with the same impact as it might have striking brick, but instead of broken stone, the water's surface shattered, spraying a jet of black and blue in a wide, rippling arc around the plummeting vehicle. As the SUV charged along the grass-covered shoreline, the truck submerged in a bubbling foam, its roof swept beneath the lake's surface, with no sign of anyone clambering out. A stark, abrasive silence filled the inside of the SUV as Holly turned to face back through the windshield, her white-knuckled fingers gripping her armrest.

"You still with me, kid?" Jean asked in a low voice and Holly nodded her silent reply. "Then get me out of here, okay?"

Holly nodded again and forced herself to focus on the map and not on the men who had been inside the truck as it went beneath the surface of the lake. She shouldn't feel guilty; she'd acted purely in self-defense and the men had made their choice — but despite that realization, she couldn't help it.

"Up here," she said, pointing toward the ragged tree line to their right. A slight gap appeared a short distance ahead, barely visible beneath the setting sun, but visible, nonetheless. "That should lead back to the main road."

"You did good."

Holly nodded and swallowed hard, closing her eyes, hoping, for just a moment, to block out the horrific reality of the world they found themselves in. Shrouded in blissful darkness, if only for a few minutes, she heard the crash of trees and the rugged thunder of the tires pounding along the uneven surface of dirt road as they made their way back toward pavement.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The rest of the trip was surprisingly peaceful, which was good, because Holly had desperately needed that time to allow her racing heart to settle into a reasonable, healthy rhythm. Somewhat miraculously, the guilt had passed relatively quickly, and she'd focused her attention once more on navigating them toward the Phillips residence. Although many of the news reports had spoken about his house in "The Hamptons" the truth was, he wasn't that far east, he was located in a nice enough neighborhood off Bellport Bay which was close to the West Hampton area, but not technically in the Hamptons themselves. During one of those rare, quiet moments when they'd traversed the chaos of Jersey City, heading north to where Bruce would ultimately find his fate within the Lincoln Tunnel, he'd expressed that the Hamptons were so tacky. They were where he was expected to live, and if nothing else, Bruce Phillips wasn't a fan of doing the expected.

It had frustrated him to no end that the news claimed he lived in The Hamptons when he'd tried hard not to fit his square peg into that round hole. But, in a way, it had served him well, because it had allowed him to live in somewhat obscurity since nobody bothered him much in his small pocket of residential oasis. It was during one of those same conversations that Bruce had given her his exact address, making her promise that if anything happened to him that she'd let his family know. She'd insisted at the time that nothing would, but like so many other events of the past

several days, what she'd wanted and what she'd promised didn't always come to pass.

“Here. Take a left here.” Night had fallen across Long Island and since they were out of the main downtown area, the roadways had remained somewhat clear and devoid of not just vehicles, but people as well, from what she could tell. They passed into a beachfront neighborhood, the landscape dotted with expensive mansions surrounded by tall stone walls and closed off by ornate iron gates, simple placards identifying who the fortunate inhabitants were. There were no lights in any of the windows and Holly wasn't sure how many people were actually still inside— had they escaped somehow or were the buildings simply vacation homes for most of their owners, who would come more often in the summer than the current spring climate? She didn't know the answers to any of her questions; all she was worried about was getting to a specific address and finding Bruce's wife and stepdaughter so she could break the news of his passing. It wasn't a conversation she was looking forward to having, but a promise was a promise, after all.

Holly studied the placards, many of which had house numbers etched into their metal texture and for those that didn't, she silently counted down what she thought might be the next number in line. As their headlights passed over another stretch of brick walls and iron gates, Holly peered out into the low light of evening, gesturing toward her mother with a left hand.

“Slow down— I think it's up here.” They approached another fenced in mansion right on the beach, the stone wall rising high enough that they couldn't see the home beyond. There was an arched, metal gate barricading the driveway, and a simple number was etched into its surface. The number matched the address that Bruce had given her during their harrowing trip through Jersey City and to Holly's surprise there appeared to be a faint glow coming from the lower-level windows in the sprawling, two-floor house beyond.

“Stop here.”

Jean guided the SUV to a halt along the side of the road, straddling the edge of the wide driveway as Holly leaned forward to look through the driver's side window.

"Is that it?"

"I— think so, yes." Bolted to the brick wall next to the gate was a simple intercom system, a speaker built into a metal box with a few buttons below. Holly squinted, leaning forward a bit more. "I think they've got a generator," she whispered in a low voice. Knowing Bruce as she did, that didn't surprise her. "There's a small, pinprick light on the intercom— I think they've still got power."

"Probably not the best idea to advertise that fact," Jean replied and glanced over in the rear-view mirror as if she expected someone to be coming up behind them. Holly opened the passenger door and stepped out, Jean whipping her head around and reaching after her. "Wait— are you sure—"

"I'm sure," Holly replied curtly and gently closed the door, circling around the front of the SUV and approaching the gate. A flare of pain tugged at her shoulder from the bullet wound, a rippling, stinging warmth rolling down the length of her arm. She flexed it gently, wincing, then clenched a fist, releasing it soon after, trying to massage some movement and feeling back into her arm. The driver's side door opened behind her, and Jean stepped out, then held something out to her, which Holly couldn't make out clearly in the evening light. Stepping closer to her mother, she saw what it was and lifted a startled gaze upward.

"Take it," Jean urged and thrust it toward her again. Holly didn't argue, she simply plucked the pistol from her mother's palm and pushed it into the pocket of her jeans. Her parents had been avid gun users but had recognized that Holly wasn't necessarily comfortable with their use. She'd gone through enough rudimentary shooting practice, and she'd struggled reluctantly through some of her father's lessons enough to know the ins and outs. It just wasn't something she'd embraced fully— but she also recognized the environment they all lived in at that moment.

“Keegan, stay in the car,” Jean said in a hissed whisper as Holly strode to the intercom and hesitated for a moment, her finger near the call button. The muffled voice of her brother’s argument carried from the car, but she ignored it, pressing the call button, her eyes closed, listening for a response. A few long, drawn-out moments passed with no voice in return, though she forced her eyes open and glanced through the bars of the gate toward the house beyond. A shadow moved within the pale light in one of the lower windows, the silhouette of a figure moving about within the sprawling mansion. Still, nobody responded.

Exhaling, Holly leaned forward and pressed the button down again. “My name is Holly Fuller,” she said into the speaker, hoping someone inside was listening. “I knew Bruce.” Closing her eyes, she silently cursed herself for using the past tense. She released the button and listened, her heart all but stopping within the confines of her chest. Sighing, she pressed the button again and leaned forward. “I’m sorry— I don’t want to bother you. But— I need to talk to you. I worked for Metanoia, I knew Bruce, and—” her voice cracked, and she released the button before her emotion could be heard through the tinny rasp of the intercom.

Another handful of seconds passed, the silence almost all consuming, then there was a quiet squawk, more static, and a young, female voice came from the speakers.

“Holly?”

“Yes,” Holly replied quickly, pressing the button barely in time. “Yes, my name is Holly. I’m sure you don’t know me— I didn’t even know Bruce until recently, but—”

“This is Donda,” the young voice replied, “I’m— I’m his stepdaughter. I—” another voice came in the background, female, but older.

“Donda! What are you doing?”

“Relax, mom, it’s—” there was a muffled click and the speaker fell into silence. Holly remained crouched by it, waiting and listening. Finally, after what seemed like forever, the channel opened up again.

“Who is this?” a voice barked, considerably more forceful than Donda’s had been.

“My name is Holly Fuller,” Holly repeated. “I was an intern at Metanoia. I met Bruce and—”

There was a squelch and Holly released the button. “Is he okay?” The voice cut in.

“I—” she wasn’t sure how to answer the question. “I’d like to talk, face-to-face.” Holly figured that was all the woman and her daughter needed to hear to know the truth. And sure enough, when the voice came back, it was choked with emotion.

“No,” the woman said. “Please, no.”

“Ma’am,” Holly replied, realizing that Bruce had never told her his wife’s name. “I— please— can I come in? Can—” she glanced toward her mother, “can we come in?”

“We? Who’s we?”

“I’m here with my mom and my brother. I promise it’s just us. We don’t want anything from you, we don’t want to hurt you. We just need to talk.”

No voice came back over the speaker, but there was a metallic clack from the gate and one half of the iron bars eased slightly ajar. Holly nodded briskly and ran toward the gate, grasping the opened half of the bars and pulling them wider. She latched them both to the brickwork posts that flanked the driveway, so the opening in the gate was wide enough for the SUV to pass through. Jean had already run back to the driver’s side door and climbed up inside, then started the engine, the headlights blanketing Holly in a bright shine of white light. The SUV threaded through the gap in the gate and stopped once inside, allowing Holly time to unclasp the gate and pull it closed, locking it behind them. She returned to her place in the SUV, and it drove down the length of the driveway, pulling around to a circular drop-off where Jean cut the engine.

“You are staying in here.” Jean turned and spoke to Bucky who looked back at her, forlorn.

“Aww, come on, Mom. Look at him.”

“People are sometimes uncomfortable with dogs, Keegan. We’re guests here, we need to be respectful.”

“Oh my—” a voice came from the stairs near the front door. “Is that a dog?”

Holly turned. Up at the top of the stairs, just outside the opened doors to the mansion, a young girl bent at the knees, looking into the window of the SUV.

“It is,” Holly replied. “Can— he come in?”

“Of course,” the girl’s mother said, silhouetted within the gap in the opened doors. She only kept the doors cracked and she craned her neck, looking throughout the surrounding yard. Keegan excitedly opened the rear door and Bucky leaped out. The dog paused for a moment to relieve himself on the grass, then they filed up the stairs and went inside. Donda’s mother shut and locked the door behind them, stood for a moment, back pressed against the seven-foot wooden panels, her palms pressed to their insides. Holly forced a narrow smile.

“Just get it over with,” the woman whispered, swallowing hard. “What happened to Bruce?”

Jean immediately stepped forward, walking toward one of the windows and peeled a curtain aside, looking out across the front yard.

“You really should turn out these lights.” She gestured toward a pair of small desk lamps which sat on hand-crafted round end tables. The entire main seating area was an exercise in wealth. Rich, dark wood paneling lined the large, round room, with velvet textured drapes, a trio of thickly cushioned, well-cared for sofas arranged in just the right order. “The problem children haven’t drifted this far outside downtown yet, but they will.”

“Problem children?” The woman shook her head incredulously. “I— I can’t worry about that now. What happened to Bruce?” She redirected her attention back to Holly.

“He— he’s— he’s gone.” Holly managed to piece the words together, though they were woefully inadequate. “He—

died.”

The woman closed her eyes, pinching her lower lip between perfectly white, almost tailored teeth. Donda took three steps toward her, and the woman enveloped her with her arms, pressing her head to her daughter’s. She looked up beyond the curled tuft of the younger girl’s hair, still studying Holly.

“I gathered that when I heard you through the speaker,” she managed to say, her voice choked with emotion. “I need to know what *happened* to him.”

“Oh. I— well—”

“The news— before the signal went out. The news was tearing Metanoia apart. Is it true? Do you know?”

There was a hitch in Holly’s throat, and she glanced at her mother, who was hurriedly pulling the thick drapes over the windows, hoping to block the light from shining through.

“Keegan, help me with these.” Jean looked at her son, who nodded and rushed to her side. Bucky, meanwhile, meandered over to where Donda hugged her mother and pressed the crown of his thick head into her leg. The younger girl took solace in this and turned toward the dog, lowering to one knee so she could get her arms around his neck.

“I— I think it’s true,” Holly said meekly.

“Oh dear—” the woman’s voice vanished within a throaty sob, and she pressed her hand to her chest, leaning back on the inside of the door for support. “No no no.” She shook her head furiously, as if it might rewind time back to the moments before she’d heard the awful truth. “Did he know? Bruce, I mean? Before the end?”

Holly nodded wordlessly, feeling tears start to sting in her eyes. The air was thick with the woman’s emotion, and she remained leaning against the door as if separating herself from it would bring her crashing to the ground. Drawing in two deep breaths, her inhalations steadied somewhat, her quivering lip firming and she lowered her hand to her side. Slowly, she

lifted her eyes, shimmering in the low light of the lamps scattered about the end tables.

“What happened?”

“He— saved my life.”

Whatever composure the woman had reassembled broke apart instantly. Tears streamed down her face, and she lowered her head, pressing her palms to her thighs as she bent over. Holly wanted to sprint to her, to give her a hug and reassure her, but she barely knew the woman and such an outward display didn't seem right. Mrs. Phillips staggered from the door, forcing herself upright and Holly walked toward her, taking her hand and helping her toward a nearby chair. Donda followed her, crawling up onto a couch, looking far younger than Holly figured she truly was. Sensing the need for his presence, Bucky followed her, curling up next to the girl and resting his large head on her bent legs.

“We were in the penthouse suite when the building collapsed,” Holly continued, stepping back from where the woman sat. “Do you need some water?”

She shook her head and tugged a thick strand of dark hair from her tear-streaked face. “Just— please, continue.”

Holly nodded and looked to her mother, who was yanking the last of the thick, velvet drapes across the front facing windows. She turned and looked toward the woman, huddled in her chair. “Do you have any weapons?”

“Mom,” Holly insisted, her voice a low whisper.

“W— weapons?” the woman lifted her head, eyes narrowed. “I—”

“Don't worry about that now,” Holly interrupted and shot her mother a sharp look. She crouched by the woman. “Mrs. Phillips—”

“Ellen. Call me Ellen.”

“O— okay, Ellen. I'm sorry. It's been a challenging few days.”

“I can only imagine.” She stared at the floor, which was blanketed in an expensive looking Persian area rug. “But you escaped? The penthouse— I mean, obviously?”

“Yes. We actually ended up in New Jersey.”

Ellen drew back, her head tilted.

“Long story. But yes. We ended up in New Jersey and made our way north to the Lincoln Tunnel to get back over to Manhattan. It wasn’t easy, but we made it. But— but when we were crossing—”

“Oh no.” Ellen’s voice was racked with sobs again and she leaned back, once more pressing her hand to her chest.

“The tunnel— it collapsed. Bruce shoved me out of the way. He saved my life but was swept away— in— in the water.”

Ellen closed her eyes, forcing out another stream of tears. That time, Holly did approach, taking a few swift strides forward, then bent low and took Ellen’s hands in hers.

“I wasn’t exaggerating.” Holly shook her head. “He really did save my life. I would not be standing here with you if we hadn’t escaped that penthouse together.”

Ellen nodded and forced a thin smile, then peeled one of her hands out from within Holly’s and drew the back of it across her moist eyes. “Thank you.”

“He was insistent on getting back here. Back to the two of you. It was going to be our first stop after— after the tunnel.”

“I appreciate you doing this, Holly— especially considering— everything that’s happening. Out there.” She lifted her eyes toward the front windows, which had been obscured by thick curtains. Jean hovered near one of the windows, the slab of velvet pulled slightly ajar so she could see out into the world beyond.

“You’ll have to excuse my mother. She’s— very cautious.”

“Good. That’s probably why you’re all still alive.”

Holly stood, grimacing as the stiffness in her shoulder reared its head once more. She flexed her fingers and scanned the broad expanse of the sitting room, angling her neck. “How is your food supply? Water?”

Ellen pushed herself upright. “The generator has been running— it’s got a pretty big fuel tank, but— it won’t last forever. Bruce had a contract set up with a local fuel distributor, they’re supposed to come in a couple of days, but... I suppose... it’s foolish to think they will.”

“They won’t,” Jean interjected. “What you heard on the news is right, as far as I can tell. Massive pipeline ruptures— even if the fuel distributor was inclined to honor his contracts given the situation, which I doubt they would be— I’m not sure there’s any fuel to distribute.”

“I would hope if there was, they’d be earmarking hospitals or emergency response, not rich tech company CEOs who caused this whole thing in the first place.” She turned away in an attempt to hide the expression on her face.

“This wasn’t Bruce’s fault.” Holly stepped forward and gently touched Ellen’s shoulder.

“I know. I also know what the media is like— how they’ll latch onto the low hanging fruit and tear at it until its pulp. Bruce has always been very visible. Out in front of everything. He’ll be an easy target. So will we.”

“I’m not sure you have to worry about that.” Jean let the drape ease closed and walked across the carpet toward them. “Things are... well, they’re really bad, Ellen. I’m not sure media as we know it even exists. People are going to be too preoccupied trying to survive to lay blame at anyone’s feet.”

“If I’ve learned anything in my time as Bruce’s wife, it’s that people will always find a way to lay blame at someone’s feet. Whether they deserve it or not.” She exhaled, her shoulders settling into a firm, straight line. “We’ve got probably two or three more days of fuel in the generator. We’ve been careful; we’re only running the essentials. I left these lamps on, hoping that Bruce would come... that he’d see

them and know things were okay. But now, I guess... well, we don't need them anymore."

"You have a working refrigerator? A freezer?"

Ellen nodded to each question. "Probably not for long."

"What about a pantry?"

Ellen nodded yet again. "It's fairly well stocked—I mean, not like a prepper well-stocked, but there's plenty."

"Eat out of the freezer first," Jean said firmly. "Don't let any of that go to waste. Cook it all up and what you don't eat see if you can preserve it. Can the vegetables, dry and salt the meats. Do whatever you can to make your food rations last."

"I guess I just thought that, well, this would... end? That FEMA would make some sort of broadcast?"

"I'm not sure this is going to end anytime soon," Holly said in a low voice, her eyes darting toward Donda, hoping not to upset the girl.

"I see."

She didn't see— not really. A life spent in the embrace of privilege had almost completely wiped out any sort of survival instinct, from what Holly could tell. Though Ellen claimed to understand, she believed that at some point soon the government would sweep in and offer rescue. Holly wanted her to know the truth— but she didn't want to be the one to break that news to her.

"I don't think anyone is coming." She finally spoke the words, pressing her hands to each shoulder, forcing Ellen to look her in the eyes. "You need to be ready to ride things out."

"Ride things out." Ellen's voice was monotone.

"Keep the doors locked. The lights out. Even if you don't have any weapons, find some. Golf clubs, baseball bats, anything like that." Jean looked both to Donda and to Ellen, then back and forth. Donda's eyes drew wide, and her lower lip quivered slightly. Holly was torn— she wanted the Phillips family to be prepared, but she also didn't want to scare them silly. There was a delicate line separating the two and she was

concerned that perhaps her mother had already leaped across it.

“We need to go, Holly.” Jean touched her arm lightly. “It’s night and we’ve got such a long way to go still.”

“Is it safe? To travel at night?” Ellen peered past Holly. “You can— if you need to— you can stay here. Just for the night. We have plenty of room.”

Holly’s mouth watered at the idea of crawling into one of the no-doubt soft and cushy beds, resting her head on the pillow, tucking herself beneath a thickly quilted comforter. The mere thought gave her a pained, physical craving normally reserved for especially tasty ice cream or a scalding hot bath after a long day.

“Mom?” Holly looked at her mother, trying not to sound too pleading. “It might not be a bad idea. It does get dangerous at night and—”

Jean bit her lower lip. “Miami is so far, Holly. It’s so far, and—”

“Mom, I know.” Holly stepped to her mother and squeezed her shoulders gently. “I know you’re worried about Scout and Dad. Worried sick. I am, too. But it’s just one night, and we could use the rest.”

“Yeah, mom.” Keegan said. “I bet it might even help us move faster tomorrow. We have to sleep some time, right?”

“We have working plumbing. Showers, plenty of hot water.”

Jean closed her eyes, pursed her lips and breathed out a longing sigh. She was silent for a moment, her eyes closed tight, working through the options in her head. “Okay,” she finally said with a firm nod. “Yes. Okay.”

“Good,” Ellen replied and looked legitimately relieved to have company. “Let me show you where our guest rooms are — I think you’ll really enjoy them.”

Holly gave the woman a quick, but fierce embrace, knowing that once again a member of the Phillips family

might have very well just saved their lives.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Jacob had passed through the small town of Loggingham, he'd pictured East Benton being more or less right around the corner. That corner, however, had proven to be a long and winding trek through the Kentucky wilderness, although at least he was on a paved road rather than trying to navigate sloping hills and uneven terrain. Dusk had come, almost by accident, stumbling its clumsy way across the horizon as Jacob neared the town, which would have been probably a two-hour drive, but for him had taken several hours to walk. A faint glow coated the undercarriage of the sky and within that glow, smoke churned, thick and dark, spreading out across the sky like ink in water. The smell of it carried to him as he rounded one more corner, a pungent, woody smell, not like what he'd smelled in Lexington, but more organic. Almost natural— as if the fires were purposeful and not spillover from catastrophe.

Remembering the priest's words, Jacob slowed his pace, approaching the gap between two rocky hillsides slowly and with care. The residents of Loggingham had no love for those in East Benton and in fact Jacob had the idea there could be trouble brewing in the future. Father Pete had only said that East Benton and Loggingham had a differing opinion on how to react to the world at large, and he'd neglected to elaborate. But he'd been nice enough— he'd actually given Jacob some fresh meat and a bottle of water as he left town, so automatically, Jacob had leaned to the side of Loggingham and in a way, wasn't especially looking forward to crossing East Benton's borders. In fact, if he'd had a choice, he would have scaled the rocky hillside to his right, passing through the trees

in an attempt to bypass the small hamlet entirely, but there were no clear paths that way and it would have increased his travel time by up to a day or more.

While on the one hand it seemed as though he had all the time in the world, on the other hand, he could feel the grains of nature's hourglass pouring over him, threatening to submerge him within. New York was his ultimate destination, a hope and a prayer that his niece Holly was still in town, waiting for her parents to arrive. It was such a sparse, narrow thread to cling to, but Jacob had, quite literally, nothing else. It occurred to him more than once that the clothes he wore and whatever he'd managed to stuff into the rucksack he'd taken from the camping goods store were his only possessions. He'd all but written off what he'd had in his run-down apartment, which was fine with him, as there wasn't much there worth mourning over.

As he paused, contemplating his next step, he reached into a cargo pocket along his right leg and slipped out a folded piece of thick paper. In the pale glow of the setting sun, he unfolded it and looked down— a wedding picture with him and Veronica— not one of the fancy photographer's pictures, but one taken by a relative during the reception. Ronnie's veil was removed, her cheeks red with wine and dance, her eyes sparkling beneath a tangle of imperfect, brown hair. His own tie was undone, his jacket off, shirt untucked and the smile on his face matched the sparkle in her eyes. He'd taken the photograph when he'd stopped by his apartment, captured it as his one memento of a past life. It was a double-edged sword, as he expected— a pleasant, heart-warming reminder and a sharpened blade of guilt and regret which cut deep to the bone. He'd decided the warmth was worth the sharpness, however, and treasured the folded photograph more than he treasured any of the supplies in his backpack.

Trees rustled up ahead, several feet before him, along the right side of the road, just outside East Benton's borders. Jacob froze, staring toward the trees, which had fallen still seconds after moving, the night once again quiet, except for the distant coo of an owl. It was a little early for owls, he thought, but perhaps their schedules were askew like everyone else's these

days. Slowly, he reached across his body and slipped the rifle from his shoulder, cradling it in two hands. The trees rustled again, a clear movement, right-to-left, something passing just beyond the tree line. Jacob took a tentative step forward, the rifle ready in his hands, finger resting along the curve of the trigger guard as he slowly raised the barrel. He wasn't sure what to expect— some random wildlife or a sentry from East Benton. The sentry at least would have called out and warned him, or so he thought, which left something big and dangerous lurking just beyond the road.

He strode forward, rifle raised, stock wedged tight to his shoulder. Trees rustled again, a shifting of branches and leaves and then they parted, a shape bursting loose, charging forward, running, head lowered. Jacob tensed and for the briefest of moments, very nearly touched his finger from the trigger guard to the trigger but stopped himself just in time as the figure clarified, stumbling out of the shadows. A young girl, not much more than eleven or twelve looked up at him on all fours, palms digging into the pavement, her knees scuffed from the fall forward. Her eyes were wide with panic, her cheeks red and streaked with tears. Chapped lips parted to speak, but before she could say a word the trees rustled again and a lithe, almost serpentine shape emerged, cloaked in darkness and shadow. It slunk forward, low to the ground, and uttered a throaty growl.

“Get behind me!” Jacob hissed and stepped forward, pointing the barrel ahead, eyeing the creature which looked to him like some sort of jungle cat. The young girl scrambled forward on all fours, desperately crawling toward him and he shifted his weight, pointed the rifle and fired. A deafening crack roared from the weapon, the bolt-action jolting in his grip, but his shot was high and wide and instead of dropping the animal, he merely frightened it. The mountain lion recoiled, twisted, then sprang back into the trees and sprinted away until the leaves had stopped rustling entirely.

“Hey! Who's there?” Voices cried out from around the corner ahead, in the direction of the pale glow on the horizon.

“Come on!” the young girl hissed as she scrambled to her feet. She clutched his wrist with a tight grip and jerked him toward her, already moving back toward the trees. “You don’t want them to see you!”

Jacob hesitated, not moving for a moment, hearing the thud of footfalls approaching.

“Come on!” she pleaded and the stark terror on her face convinced Jacob to follow her, even though they were running into the trees where the mountain lion had been a moment earlier. Glancing to his left, he saw the silhouettes of three figures running forward, boots thudding along the paved surface of the road. But just as they crested the bend, he and the young girl plunged headlong into the trees and were shrouded from view.

“Get down!” She hissed in a low whisper, gesturing madly with her hands. They both crouched low, frozen still at the edge of the trees, peering out as three figures walked forward, looking in all directions.

“That was a rifle shot, I’m tellin’ you.” The figure in the center revealed himself in the low light of the setting sun. He wore a dark colored hooded sweatshirt, the hood bunched up along his thick mane of dark hair. Two of them were male, one was female, that much was clear as they continued forward, rifles in hand. To the hooded man’s left a middle-aged woman scowled out from beneath the brim of a baseball cap, her eyes narrow and fixed, fingers coiled tightly around the grip of her bolt-action rifle. The third person, a man to Hoodie’s right held his own rifle slack at his side. A flannel shirt covered his shoulders, a jacket tied around the bulge of his expanded waist, a pair of paint-littered blue jeans on his legs.

“I heard it too,” the woman said as she approached the trees, venturing a little close for Jacob’s comfort. Neither he nor the little girl dared to move, not wanting to stir the leaves with the three sentries so close. “Hunter?” She looked over her shoulder.

“A little close to our borders,” the man in the sweatshirt replied. “You don’t think it was one of those Loggingham

folks, do you? They're supposed to be minding their own business."

"Someone from Loggingham would know better than to let a bullet fly this close to our border. We've made our intentions crystal clear." The woman shook her head derisively and stopped less than ten feet from where Jacob and the young girl crouched in the trees. Jacob's pulse thrummed in his ears, a steady throb of blood, almost audible against the blanket of silent dusk. He pressed his teeth together, closing off the air that so desperately wanted to escape his lungs, penning it inside, trapping it within. Holding firm and silent, he didn't dare move, he didn't dare breathe, he just peered out through the leaves at the three sentries who stood so impossibly nearby.

The two armed men and one armed woman milled about in the road for a moment, looking aimlessly through the trees and down the narrow length of pavement. They spoke in low whispers, almost conspiratorial, but finally peeled apart and spread out, though they made no movement to retreat back toward town. A tug pulled at Jacob's sleeve, and he glanced back, looking into the eyes of the young girl, who was crouched right next to him. She pressed a finger to her lips and pointed back, deeper into the forest, clearly indicating that they should leave. Jacob shook his head, not wanting to make any noise at all that might alert the sentries, but the girl aggressively shook him off. She began to stand, intent on leaving and the voices beyond the trees grew louder.

"Maybe we should check the woods?"

"Man— they got lions and bears out here. These fuel line explosions didn't do jack to them."

"I'm not afraid of a lion or a bear." There was the sound of a bolt jacking back on one of the rifles. "That's why we've got these."

The girl tugged on his shirt even harder and began to move backwards, through the trees, remarkably quietly. Jacob braced for a moment, turned and eyed the three sentries, noting that the woman had once again turned in his direction and seemed

poised to approach. Finally, he rose, just a bit, still keeping his knees sharply bent, then turned and followed the girl as they threaded their way through the deep trees, distancing themselves from the roadway behind them.

“You never told me where we’re going.” Jacob whispered the words as he followed close behind the girl, who crept along the edge of a nearby backyard, remaining in shadow. “Or why you were out there to begin with.”

“I was watching,” she replied, her voice quiet—mature for her age, in Jacob’s estimation. “And listening. My pa asked me to.”

“Your father? He asked you to— what? Spy?”

“I guess.” The young girl shrugged. “He don’t trust ‘em. The people in charge, I mean. I don’t either.”

As they crossed along the rear yard of a nearby house, Jacob peered through the gap in the homes. Smoke still lingered in the air, and he could see a fire burning in the distance, several silhouettes gathered around it. It was difficult to make it all out, but they didn’t seem to be fighting the blaze, they were just—standing there, looking into it.

“What are they burning?”

“Hunters actually got a deer today—first one since this all started. They’re fixin’ it up for dinner, but it ain’t nearly enough for the whole town. That’s what pa’s worried about. He thinks the mayor is stashing some for himself. Probably more than some. Doesn’t buy the fact that they only found one deer so far.”

“What good will it do him if he finds out the truth?”

The young girl shrugged. “I never understood adults before this all happened. Sure, as heck don’t understand ‘em now.”

“Fair point.” Jacob had to concede—there were plenty of days he didn’t understand them himself.

“The mayor is getting all twisted up,” the girl continued as they navigated along the edge of one yard and transitioned to the next. “Dad says he’s becoming a socialist.”

Jacob chortled— the young girl said the word like she’d rehearsed it many times over.

“He’s demanding everyone share their stuff,” she clarified. “Takes it all into a big pool and only he can decide who gets what. Says it’s what’s best for the town.”

“I take it your dad doesn’t like that much?”

“Nope. Neither do I. Keeps saying he needs Frenchie.”

Jacob’s brow furrowed as he followed the young girl, who deviated from the backyard and crossed over into another clutch of trees.

“Frenchie?”

“My horse. Had him my whole life. Belonged to my mom before she died.”

“Oh. I’m— I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be sorry, she died when I was born. I— didn’t even know her.”

“Still—”

“Ain’t no time for grief,” the girl said suddenly, another line that seemed like a recital more than her actual opinion. “Too much work to do.”

The branches clawed at their clothes and skin as they cut a diagonal path through the trees. A moment later they reached a narrow creek winding its way through the grass and dirt, cutting through a narrow embankment. The girl approached the stream carefully, then leaped over it, landing on the opposite side, her arms spread to help her balance herself. Jacob followed, choosing a long stride over a short jump, for the sake of his knees and his dignity.

“Just a few more minutes,” the girl said, glancing over her shoulder. “And we’ll be home.”

“Home?” Jacob slowed. “You were supposed to be showing me the way out of town.”

“This is the way out of town. But it’s also the way home.” She bent forward and made her way up the steep slope and somewhat reluctantly, Jacob followed along in her wake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Pull that branch down. Toss those leaves on the hood.” Everett gestured toward Scout as he hissed out the whispered orders and Scout followed his orders obediently, scattering surrounding foliage across the surface of the pickup truck. He held his rifle in a practiced grip, hovering near the exterior wall of a nearby building, his shoulder pressed into its rigid surface. There was an air of military precision in his posture and approach, his cautious stride bringing him to the corner of the same nearby building, where he paused, gazing up and down the street.

The truck was parked in an alcove between groups of buildings, nested within a copse of trees which shrouded it in deep shadow. Several loose branches were scattered about and Scout spread them over the vehicle, doing her best to conceal what little amount of the truck’s exterior was visible. Their trek from the abandoned grocery store to the next town had taken longer than Scout anticipated, and the town was darkened by shadow, clouds drawing before the setting sun. Trash blew restlessly along the pavement, which was littered with trash and refuse, looking to Scout as if everyone just packed up and left, leaving everything behind.

Smoke lingered in the air from fires Scout couldn’t see and beyond her view, the throttle of an engine growled, though it was far enough away that it didn’t seem to alarm Everett all that much. There was a moment where he turned in the direction of the sound and took two long strides toward it, tilting his head to listen better. But his rigid posture softened within moments, and he returned to the corner of the nearby

building, wedging himself behind it, glancing around its edge as if planning an ambush.

“Let’s go!” He hissed back at her, glancing over his shoulder. “It’s getting dark!”

Scout fumbled with a narrow branch, trying to position it just right over the flatbed to conceal the vehicle just a little bit better.

“Hardware store is a five-minute walk along this street. We don’t want to be here when it’s night.”

“I don’t want to be here at all.” Scout spoke in a low whisper, but Everett’s head twisted back around, and he glowered at her. She snatched a few more narrow branches and spread them along the hood, then took a step back, studying the vehicle. If someone looked hard enough, they’d most certainly see it, but if they only passed by and didn’t pay too much attention, she thought it might blend into its surroundings okay.

“Good enough,” Everett growled and stepped out onto the street, weapon before him. He wore the backpack he’d brought with him, a large slab of canvas strapped to his broad shoulders. Though his graying hair and weathered face betrayed his old age, he moved crisply and with purpose, shrugging off any sense of the slowness attributed to his advanced years. Scout had seen him puttering painfully around the cabin, looking every minute of his sixty-plus years, but on the street, when life depended upon it, he seemed like a wholly different person. Someone in his element. It was at that moment that Scout realized that Everett Kinsman was a soldier. Not currently, of course, but he had been at one point in his life, and there was a sort of muscle memory that came with being a soldier that he fell back into naturally.

As Everett crept forward, loaded down with his backpack, carrying a rifle and with a pistol holstered at his right hip, Scout couldn’t help but feel exposed in comparison. She had no backpack and no weapons; she was just her thirteen-year-old self creeping along the sidewalk on a desolate street walking toward some random hardware store in search of

generator parts. If they were ambushed, she'd have no way to defend herself— though she had to admit, if that did happen, she'd be woefully ill-equipped to put up a fight, anyway. She'd joined her father hunting more than once; she'd gone to the shooting range more times than she could count— but firing bullets at actual human targets was something she couldn't even conceive of. She wasn't sure she *wanted* to conceive of it. Keegan was the kid who had always played army, sprinting through the woods in the rear of their Maine property, taking cover, springing out, holding a tree branch elevated like a machine gun. Scout loved the sustainability aspect of living in rural Maine, the ability to live without the reliance on others; she had little interest in the militaristic aspects of what the new world brought to bear.

“Up here.” Everett gestured forward where a white clapboard structure stood, wedged within a rectangular parking lot which spread surrounding buildings out away from the central structure. At one point it could have been someone's home, but a sign proclaiming it as “Glades Toolshed”, immediately identifying it for what it was. A ramp ran from the right corner to a square-shaped porch at the double-front doors, with a short flight of stairs straight ahead of them, leading to the same elevated platform. It had a peaked roof and windows that seemed to indicate a second level. The first level windows were dark, but at least they weren't broken, though one of the front doors rested askew, and scattered screws littering the porch told Scout someone had paid the place a visit already.

A light breeze blew in and the front door eased open slightly, then banged shut of its own accord, the sudden noise driving a stake of tension into Scout's shoulders. She closed her fists and pressed them tight to her hips to avoid jumping in fright. Everett looked unbothered, still striding forward, his head twisting left-to-right as he scanned the parking lot for any sign of other potential looters. Looters. It was such a vile, filthy term, yet there was no other way to describe what they were doing. From everything Scout could tell, Everett intended to simply walk into the hardware store, take what he wanted and walk out. It was robbery, plain and simple, though

she hadn't dared to broach that subject with the old man. Something had told her that conversation wouldn't go the way she wanted.

Everett stepped forward, placing his left hand between the door and its frame, blocking it from its repeated banging. Pushing awkwardly, he eased the door wide and stepped into the hardware store, his rifle raised in a tight, right fist. He paused partially inside the dimly lit store, then jerked his head back toward Scout, gesturing for her to continue. Bending low, she stepped forward, slipping beneath his outstretched arm and stuck close to the front wall, not wanting to venture too deep into the store itself. The memories of the grisly bodies in the back of the small corner market were still raw and fresh and she had no desire to stumble upon something like that anytime soon. If there was any consolation, she didn't smell the familiar sweet smell of decay, so there were no early indications that rotting bodies were discarded somewhere within the depths of the darkened storefront.

Everett fumbled with the door somewhat, pulling it closed behind them, then cradled the weapon in the crook of his left arm so he could close the door tightly with his right hand, tugging the handle until it snapped closed with a latch. He took a moment to re-orient himself, shifting his weapon back into his dominant hand, cradling the hand guard as he pressed onward into the store. The floors were natural hardwood and they shifted beneath his weight, creaking softly as he cut a diagonal line across a section of empty floor toward one of the aisles. The store itself was in minor disarray, with several items scattered about the floor, many of the shelves showing signs of having been ransacked. To Scout's surprise, a lot of items remained on those same shelves, it appeared as though most attention had been focused on tools and less on some of the other supplies. She made her way toward the checkout counter on the right and stopped abruptly, gasping, barely holding back a sudden shriek. Along the floorboards ahead was the curling, green form of a serpent, a thick, long body wound across the natural wood, startling her.

"What?" Everett swung around angling toward her, apparently hearing her exclamation, even though she'd

desperately tried to conceal it. He took two steps, then stopped, a muffled grunt coming from the thin mouth surrounded by thick, white facial hair. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Scout blinked in the wake of his derisive comment, her eyes adjusting to the dim light and saw that it wasn't a long snake on the floor, but an unfurled garden hose. Someone had attempted to yank it free but had apparently grown bored of the process and just left it resting there, looking for all the world like an anaconda instead of a piece of tubular rubber.

“Sorry,” she murmured, but Everett didn't even reply, he merely backed away, turned, and walked back toward the aisles. Scout threaded through a narrow gap near the register counter, coming around the back side and looked through various cubbyholes and drawers, not finding much of value. There were calculators, pens, pencils, pads of paper as well as packs of gum, credit card machines, and a scattering of other retail-oriented items, none of which seemed valuable to her. However, she did find two cases of candy bars wedged into a cupboard and slipped them out, placing them on the counter, making a mental note to take the cases with them. Candy bars weren't the epitome of nutrition, but food was food and beggars couldn't be choosers.

Going through a few more areas behind the counter she found some packs of batteries, a few flashlights, some other tools in a metal toolkit and she methodically placed all of those items on the counter as well, still unsure whether Everett would even want them. She found a sweater, a pair of work boots, an apron and a few other miscellaneous items that she thought might be helpful and soon there was a decent sized pile of items that she thought might be helpful to them in the coming days. Thinking about that, she made a minor mental correction— if what Everett had said held true, she wouldn't be there in a couple of days. He had every intention of getting rid of her as soon as the generator was repaired, and Scout wasn't quite sure what that meant.

Everett hadn't shown her much kindness beyond the bare minimum. Yes, he'd saved her life and he'd helped her recover

from a concussion and had fed her for a couple of days, but beyond that she felt like she was more of a hindrance than a help and he didn't do or say anything to absolve her of that notion. She wasn't the kind of kid that thrived on positive reinforcement, but she was also perceptive and could tell when someone did or did not want her around. Everett had very nearly come right out and said it. She returned to the counter where the registers were and shrank down in a low crouch, rifling through some of the remaining items she hadn't yet gone through.

There was nothing of particular consequence and she left it all behind, stepping back and standing up, her eyes continuing to adjust to the fading light of the hardware store's interior. With the dim light blanketing everything in shadow, she couldn't see Everett anywhere, but heard the telltale creak of his cautious steps and for a brief moment, she thought she could make out the haggard gasp of his breathing. Crossing behind the counter, she exited the register and came back out into the greater store, approaching one of the aisles to look through it. The shelves were in various states of disarray, some items removed with enough enthusiasm that it had yanked other items from their spots on the shelves, littering the floor. Other items had been tipped over where they stood, with a few boxes of nails and screws breaking upon the wooden floor.

She watched her step as she progressed down the aisle, careful not to step on anything too sharp. Near the rear of the store, Everett was yanking out drawers of individual nails and screws, evidently searching for something. The metal clatter of those same screws being dropped into a bag of some sort told her he was taking several of them, stashing them away for potential future use.

"Find anything?" He growled, not even looking back at her.

"I made a pile on the counter. Boots, coats, batteries and flashlights. A few other—"

"I got a dozen flashlights at home. I don't need two dozen."

“Oh. Okay.”

“What size boots?”

“I’m— not sure.”

“Check. No use bringing ‘em along if they don’t fit. I ain’t got a walk-in closet back at the cabin for the love of—” he hesitated a moment and lifted his head, turning slightly.

“What?”

“You hear that?”

Scout’s heart skipped a few beats at the question, and she spun toward the front door, though it remained firmly closed. And no, she had not ‘heard that’— she’d heard nothing at all but was loathe to admit it. Everett squinted near the wall of screw drawers, staring out through the front windows, bending down to see through the pane of glass separating the store from the road outside. For a long, tense moment he remained in that position until he finally grunted, shook his head and brought himself upright again, turning his attention once more to the wall of screws. He held a bag in his right hand that he’d been dumping small drawers into, but after finishing that work, he tossed an empty drawer aside, cinched up the bag and shoved it into his backpack, which he shouldered back on before lifting his rifle.

Continuing along the back wall, Everett approached the rear corner of the store which was more or less a catch-all of various different parts and pieces. Not many of the shelves had been cleared out back there, though some of their contents had tumbled down onto the floor, boxes spilling open. Everett grunted and bent low, setting the rifle down so he could rummage through some of the piles of parts. Nodding, he lifted a white and blue box from the pile and turned it, evaluating it silently with his narrowed eyes, then nodded and set it aside. After a few minutes of going through the inventory there, he’d established a small pile of various things that Scout didn’t fully understand. They almost looked like lawnmower parts, but clearly there was some crossover between lawn mowers and generators.

Lastly, he stepped over the pile and drew a coil of black hose from a peg, studying the text on the package carefully, then dropped it alongside the rest of the items. A moment later, he'd set his backpack on the floor and was carefully fitting everything inside, wedging it together, shoving other items away to make room. The pile of stuff took up the majority of the space in his pack and it was a bit of a struggle for him to lift it with the added weight, but he did so without complaint. Saying nothing, he strode along the last aisle, glancing left and right, eyeing the shelves as he went, but taking none of the scattered items that remained on them. Approaching the sales counter, he scrutinized the pile of items that Scout had set there and began filtering through them, tossing a few things on the floor and setting others aside on the counter.

Sliding the pack from one shoulder, he bent low and opened the flap, then removed the pile of items he'd set aside, a mix of batteries, a jacket, and the small cases of candy bars, and worked them into his pack, shoving them into the narrow spaces that remained. He stood and hefted the backpack back over his shoulders then snatched the bolt-action rifle back up again, turning and giving Scout a wordless, but approving nod. Scout's mouth faltered, almost smiling, but she wrestled her emotions back under control and simply nodded back. She wasn't sure why his approval actually meant something to her, but it did, and she stood just a little bit straighter as she followed along behind him, heading toward the exit.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It had grown visibly darker while they'd been in the hardware store and Everett paused on the street outside the two-floor building, his rifle at the ready. There was something about his movements and his posture that unsettled Scout, but she couldn't quite piece it together.

"Is everything okay?"

"Not sure." Everett's voice was a whispered, almost throaty snarl. Stepping out onto the road, he swiveled left, pointing the barrel of his rifle down the length of street to their left, then paused and twisted back around, pointing it right. Once again Scout was reminded of some of that news footage she saw in school of soldiers in a third world country, creeping down the streets in hostile territory, potential threats around any corner. The entire world, it seemed to her, was hostile territory these days.

Everett strode with calculated, cautious steps, making his way back in the direction of the truck they'd stashed in the trees. Scout followed him, keeping as close as she could while also sticking near the building's exterior, suddenly feeling uneasy about the open air being at her back. They made their way across the parking lot, Everett scoping things out the whole way, then crossed in front of another small shop, though the windows were too dark to see inside. Everett moved to the far corner of the building, hesitated, then turned and looked into a narrow alley before stepping across and going through a similar routine at the next building.

Scout tried to mirror his movements as much as possible, though it felt a little silly, especially in small-town rural Florida which, a week ago, was probably teeming with normal, civilian activities. People renting swamp boats for a tour of the Everglades, children eating ice cream, couples walking hand-in-hand toward the small park she'd seen when they'd first arrived. Whatever that world was, it had been wiped away in a handful of days, wiped away just like her father had been wiped away.

Not wiped away— *burned away*. Instinctively she reached up and touched the fabric of the green flannel shirt she wore—the same shirt she'd given her father as a gift. The shirt he'd worn constantly ever since. She'd taken it off of him when she'd found his body in the airport, draped it over her, relished the smell of her father on it and continued to wear it every waking minute of the day. In the days since she'd left the airport, been transported by soldiers, then ended up in Everett's cabin, the smell of her father had faded from its fabric. Somehow, however, she could still feel him in it, and having it on her gave her a mild sense of comfort.

“Let's go.” Everett stepped from the corner of the building and walked past another, where just beyond the pick-up truck remained nested in a group of thick trees and grass, obscured from view. He paused for a moment, standing out in the open, and studied the place where Scout remembered the truck being. Everett was suddenly cautious, almost tentative and he took a single step backwards before a figure lurched from the shadows, sprinting forward, and struck him headlong, knocking him to the ground with a grunt and thud.

Air exploded from Everett's lips as the silhouetted form drove into him, knocking the rifle from his grasp and pinning him to the pavement, one arm pressed against the older man's neck. Scout sucked in a shriek, somehow holding back her exclamation of shock and terror, then wheeled right, but already two more men converged on her, one shoving her roughly to the ground as the other loomed just behind him, weapon in hand.

“What did you find, Ev? Something good?”

“M— Mack? What the hell are you doing here?” Everett grunted through pursed lips, his back bent over his backpack, twisted awkwardly on the road as the other man pinned him to the ground. Scout realized then that it was indeed the man named “Mack”, the same man and his friends that they’d run into at the grocery store. The ones who had quite possibly killed the people inside and set the store on fire.

“I could tell you were after something. I could just tell. What did you find?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“I know you well enough by now, Everett— you got a nose for this stuff. You got that cabin out in the glades, everyone knows it, but nobody quite knows where it is. I’m betting you got all sorts of good stuff there, don’t you?”

“Tell you what,” Everett hissed a reply, “let me go and I’ll take you there. Then I’ll bury you in the damn swamp.”

“Bury me in the swamp? Same place your kid’s buried?”

Everett scowled, his brows furrowing, his right hand closing into a thick, white-knuckled fist.

“Don’t you even dare—”

“What? It’s the truth.” His eyes shot toward Scout. “Did you know that? Did you know about his dead—”

Everett hauled his fist up and across his body, knuckles colliding hard with Mack’s left jaw. His head snapped and he grunted in muffled pain as the momentum of the blow jarred him momentarily from Everett’s body.

“Don’t even think about it, white hair!” The armed man stepped forward lifting his rifle, pointing the barrel at Everett’s chest. “I’ll put a slug in you so damn quick.”

Everett hesitated, propped up on his elbows, twin lasers of pure rage flaring from his narrowed eyes. Scout rested on her left shoulder, her back aching from the force of the shove to the parking lot. Next to her, the man stood tall, but his attention was diverted, looking over at Everett who had just landed a punch on his friend Mack.

“You’ve got a decent right cross for a senior citizen,” Mack grumbled, caressing his jaw.

His lips were dark crimson with blood and a narrow trail slipped down toward the rigid contours of his stubble-lined face. Everett flexed his fingers from his hunched-up position, though he made no movement to try and throw another punch.

“I bet mine’s better,” Mack continued, then sent his own blow searing forward. His fist hammered Everett in the bridge of the nose, his head snapping back, an arc of spit and blood spraying in its wake.

Everett winced and grunted, his head lolling to the right. Scout got a good look of his pain-etched face, his mouth bearded in red, his eyes thick and glossy, dazed by the sudden punch.

“Not bad, huh?” Mack threw a second punch, his left, and it collided with Everett’s jaw, snapping his head back around the opposite direction, another spray of blood clouding the air.

“Stop!” Scout screamed. “You’re hurting him!”

“Isn’t that the point?” Mack snarled back at her without even looking. “Are you going to tell us where your cabin is, old timer? Or should I just beat the life out of you here in the parking lot?”

In normal circumstances, Scout would have written the man’s comments off as a baseless threat— but given what she’d seen in the back room of the grocery store, fear lingered, hot and bright. Mack wasn’t bluffing, but Everett also wasn’t talking. The younger man straddled Everett, grabbed his face and forced it back around so the old man was staring back up at him.

“I’m giving you every opportunity to do the smart thing. Tell us where to find your cabin and we leave you alone. Easy as that.”

“Go— screw—” Everett rasped, but before he could finish Mack hammered him again, another sudden strike, colliding with his chin. More blood spilled and when Everett’s face was forced to turn toward Scout with the impact of the third punch,

his entire face was a mask of ragged crimson, his eyes squinted shut.

“Should I just shoot him, boss? Get it done with quick?” The man with the rifle took a step further and jerked his head toward Everett.

“Nah— I’m having fun.” Mack cracked his knuckles and looked down at Everett again, clearly getting ready to strike a fourth time. Scout wasn’t sure how many more punches the old man could take— he’d seen his share of fights, but this wasn’t a fight— this was a beating. Scout looked up at the figure looming over her— then she looked at the man with the rifle and finally she looked at Mack, who was very nearly sitting on Everett’s chest, preparing to deliver another head-rocking punch. Her heart hammered loud and constant, her stomach churned, the acid of anticipation burning her insides. The men were going to kill Everett Kinsman, beating him bloody before leaving his body in the parking lot, then they would turn their attention to her.

She scrambled left, clawing forward on all fours and swept the dropped rifle from where it lay, where no one was paying attention to it. Operating by pure instinct, moving without thought, she dragged it up and around, pressing the stock into the crook of her armpit, her fingers closing around the front hand guard. The barrel swung right and centered on the man with the rifle and without even giving it a second thought, she pulled the trigger.

The weapon shouted, a long, abrupt bark of a gunshot, the muzzle flash brightening the surrounding darkness. With a grunt of shock and pain the man with the rifle twisted away, stumbling, his ankles catching on each other, tossing him off balance. He sprawled arms spread, dropping his rifle as he went to the ground, Scout scrambling up to her unsteady feet at the same time. Muscle memory kicked in and she dragged the bolt back swift and hard, ejecting a shell casing and loading the next from the narrow magazine embedded in the underside of the rifle.

“Stop!” her voice wavered, even with the added emphasis she desperately tried to inject. She wanted to sound hard and

forceful, but the words were thin and shaky— they sounded fragile like glass. Still the two men stopped, looking at her, their eyes narrowed in a mixture of fear and surprise. Scout was on her feet, steadying the rifle, desperately trying to keep the barrel from trembling in her grasp. “Get away from him!” She swallowed and thrust the barrel toward Mack, who was still straddling the prone form of the old man on the pavement beneath him.

“Look, kid—”

“I said *stop!*” There was no tremor in her voice. There was only a pure, sharp slash of volume and intent. “Get off of him. *Now!*” Her throat ached from the force of her near scream.

“You’re starting something you’re not going to want to finish, kid.” Mack held his hands up, glowering at her. “You’re scared. I get it. But this isn’t the right way to go about it.”

“Ask your friend how scared I am,” Scout hissed, squinting to avoid tears from forming. She nodded toward the man lying on the ground who was disturbingly motionless. Scout had no clue where her bullet had struck or how injured he was, but he was down and apparently out of the fight, which was all that mattered at that moment. “Now get off.”

“All right, all right.” Mack adjusted his posture, lifting one leg off then the other, standing with both hands still raised.

“Everett?” Scout hissed. The old man stirred slightly but didn’t respond.

“Look, kid, it’s not too late. Put the gun down, we can settle this like friends.” Mack kept his hands raised but took a tentative step forward.

Scout fired a second time, the rifle held in check, her shot slicing the air between the two men. In the brief glow of the muzzle flash, they both jumped in surprise, two involuntary jolts of shock. She racked the bolt and kept the rifle pointed at Mack, who she’d determined to be the more dangerous of the two men.

“Everett?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled and pushed himself up, struggling to stand.

“I can’t help you,” she said quietly. “Can you make it to the truck?”

“Yeah.” Everett’s voice was thick from pain and the swelling of his lips. He crawled to where the nearby stone building was, and used it to pull himself to his feet, slowly, but purposefully. He swayed at one point and Scout was worried he was going to topple over again, but he managed to stay standing. Slowly, he approached her, extending his hand for the rifle.

“I’ve got it.”

“Give me the gun.” His voice was firmer and more direct, the previous slur thinning, if only a little. Scout considered not listening to him, but she glanced left and his eyes, at least, appeared a bit more alert and coherent. “Give me the gun,” he repeated, looking at her, then glancing over at the two men. Scout nodded and slowly stepped back, handing the weapon to him as she did so, keeping her gaze fixed on Mack and the other man. Everett cradled the rifle in two hands, pointing the barrel at the two men.

“Now get in the truck,” he said in a tone that offered no opportunity for disagreement.

“What are you—”

“Just get in the truck.”

Scout’s eyes darted between Everett, then over to Mack, then back over to Everett again. Her lips parted to gently argue, but she closed them again and stepped back toward the truck. Turning away, she stepped forward and a moment later reached the truck where she slowly began lifting the branches and leaves from where they’d been set to conceal the vehicle. She’d only removed a few branches when the first rifle shot echoed, a clap of spine-jarring thunder that elicited a sudden jump and uptick of her heart.

She closed her eyes, which were filling with tears, but purposefully did not turn even as the second rifle shot

followed the first, barely two seconds between them. One of the men had shouted, starting to protest, barely getting out two blubbering words before the gunshot cut his speech off mid-sentence, the soft thud of a body hitting the pavement coming a moment later. Scout focused every ounce of her attention on uncovering the truck, forcing herself not to turn and see what was happening. A moment later there was a third gunshot, and she continued averting her eyes, sweeping a sheet of thick, green leaves from the hood, finally peeling away the last of the thin branches.

Steps emerged behind her, boots crunching on gravel that coated the pavement. The passenger door opened, and Everett stood there for a moment, wrestling his backpack from his shoulder.

“You ever drive before?”

Scout nodded, swallowing acid down her throat, unable to actually form words.

“Can you drive us back?”

Scout nodded again, though she wasn't sure she could. But Everett had been hammered multiple times in the head, and she had a suspicion he was barely clinging to consciousness and wanted the help. Without saying another word, he climbed up into the passenger seat and slammed the door closed, then slumped against the window, resting on his right shoulder. Scout finished clearing off the rest of the truck, then stepped up into the driver's seat, curling her narrow fingers around the wheel. Her father had taught her to drive in his old Ford pick-up and in many ways the one Everett owned bore some stark reminders of that one.

Still, driving on old dirt roads around their rural Maine property was a whole lot different than on actual roads. Not that there was much traffic in that neck of the woods, of course.

“I— might need some help navigating.”

Everett nodded and hooked open the glove compartment, pulling a folded map from inside. He held it on his lap,

exhaled, and slumped again, against the window. The keys were in the ignition, Everett having apparently fed them in there when he got into the passenger seat, so Scout started the truck, feeling its rugged vibrations within the contours of the steering wheel. Thankfully it was an automatic and she slipped it into drive, touched the accelerator and pulled out, leaving the darkened town in their rear-view mirror.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“They’re here!” The young girl’s voice startled Jacob even as they approached, her fingers clutched at his sleeve, dragging him down, under cover.

“Who’s here?”

“Them!” The girl’s voice was a sharp, breathy hiss as she stabbed her finger through the trees at the silhouette of the farmhouse ahead. Night had fully fallen, the sun dropping beyond the horizon, stars spread along the darkened sky like dropped diamonds on black velvet. They’d seen the farmhouse a few moments before, through the narrow gaps between trees and picked up their pace, but the girl had halted them short of the edge of the trees when it became clear that men were standing out in the front yard waiting for someone to answer the door.

“It ain’t mine to give,” a voice carried from the direction of the house. “Y’all head on back to your cushy houses and wait until mornin’.”

“Paul, you have to understand—”

“I don’t have to understand Jack. It’s her horse. She inherited it from her dead mother and I’ll be damned if I’m just goin’ to hand it over.”

“It’s for the good of the town.”

“Bull. It’s for the good of you and yours. You don’t represent me. You don’t represent the town. You never did before you sure as damn well don’t now.”

“Paul. Surely you understand the difficult position we’re all in. No power. Very little fuel. All of our supply chain and distribution pipelines are gone. We need to till the fields. We need to get the crops going. We need horsepower and not the kind you find in car engines.”

“We got plenty of our own field tillin’ that has to get done. You want us to go hungry so you can feed your own faces?”

“That’s not what’s happening.”

“Same as it ever was, mayor. Take from the little guys so the big guys get bigger. The way the world is now, I guess, guys like you are the big guys now. So, guys like me, we just gotta grin and bear it? I don’t think so.”

The man who was referred to by “mayor” softly cleared his throat, glancing down at the ground for a moment. “Paul—you see who’s with me, right? You see the badge on his shirt?”

“That badge don’t mean squat.”

“It damn well does,” the second man replied curtly, clearly a member of law enforcement. “It’s the only thing that means something right now.” He took an almost threatening step closer to the man.

“And what does it mean? What law and order do you represent? Our government is in *pieces*, sheriff. Law and order don’t exist.”

“Maybe in the big cities they don’t, but we’re a tight-knit community here. We’re friends and neighbors. The rule of law must still mean something here or we’ve already lost.”

Jacob inched his way left to try and get a better view, listening to the conversation occurring a short distance away. The man on the front stoop was pot-bellied and hunched over, the shine of his bald head reflecting in moonlight. He held a simple kerosene lantern in his right hand, hanging by his hip, its halo of light surrounding the trio in a pale, cream colored glow. There was a sense of defeat about the man’s posture, a feeling that he’d already been beaten down even before the conversation had begun. Jacob had no doubt that the man was the young girl’s father and that even before the world had

come crashing down, he'd had a long, hard life. By the sounds of it, he'd been the girl's only guardian, her mother having died in childbirth and while Jacob wasn't a father himself, he suspected that couldn't have been easy.

"Come on, Paul. We all know you're still hurtin' from what happened with Marlene. Remember how the town came together? How we all supported you during that difficult time? Remember how—"

Paul lurched forward and clutched the mayor's shirt in a tight fist, yanking him close. "Do not say her name," he growled, his voice low, though audible even from as far away as Jacob and the young girl were. "Her name will never pass your lips. Never again, you hear me, mayor?"

The sheriff stepped forward, putting himself between the two men and forced Paul's fingers to unclench from the other man's shirt. "There's no need for that."

"This ain't about Marlene. Marlene is dead and gone, mayor. This is about Stacy. Our daughter. Who is still very much alive and who needs every bit of support she can get." His voice was jagged, as if cut through the blades of sharpened teeth.

"And not a one of us wants to take that from her." The mayor kept his composure and was silent for a long stretch, his silhouette glancing out into the night before turning back toward Paul, standing on the stoop. "But this is about the greater good. I am sorry Paul, but we cannot put one child's happiness above the health and welfare of the entire town—"

"Maybe you can't," Paul interrupted, "but I sure as hell can."

There was a standoff, the tension thick and palpable, and Jacob was hypnotized by it, frozen in place at the edge of the trees. He didn't notice the girl tugging on his sleeve at first, he was captivated by the confrontation at the house's front stoop. But finally, her jerking movements were too aggressive to ignore, and he peered down at her. Her eyes were wide and shimmering in the low light of the moon overhead, a pleading look etched across her young features.

“Y’all gonna help us?” she asked quietly. “Gonna help me?”

Jacob shook his head, confused. “I don’t—”

“I’d rather he be gone. Gone is better than workin’ for the mayor. They’re gonna make him till the fields and work him til he’s dead, then they’re gonna cook him and eat him, I know it.”

“Woah, woah, slow down, kid.” They retreated deeper into the trees so their voices couldn’t be heard. The conversation continued by the house, though Jacob could no longer make out the words. “He who? Who is this he you’re talking about?”

“My horse,” Stacy said, clutching Jacob’s larger hand in her two smaller ones. “Frenchie. Like I told you.” The girl was rushing through the trees, speaking over her shoulder, forcing Jacob to lurch forward after her. The house was to their left, the darkened shadow blocking the conversation that was occurring on the front stoop. “I’d rather he be gone than dead and cooked for food!”

“So, what are you—”

“The people in town can’t take him. You can.”

“I can— wait— what?” Jacob stopped short, watching the young girl duck beneath a branch and push through some trees. In the distance, shortly ahead of where she stopped, there was another darkened structure, a large building, a barn, if Jacob had to guess.

“Take my horse,” she insisted, turning back to him and whispering, her voice edged in frustration. “Take Frenchie! We can tell them an outsider stole him.”

“You want me to take your horse? The one that you love so much?”

“He’ll be free. He can ride all day— he won’t be workin’ in the fields; he won’t be the town dinner.”

“This makes no sense.”

“It’ll be faster than walking.”

“Stacy—”

“Come on! Dad can’t hold them off forever.” She twisted around and took off running, sprinting toward the edge of the trees. Jacob opened his mouth to speak but shook his head and propelled himself in her wake, his boots crashing noisily through the leaves and brush. He burst free of the trees, stumbling out onto a broad pasture, just to the left of a fenced-in area, which was attached to the building. He’d been correct in his assumption that it was a barn and could see the vague brown color of its exterior in the moonlight as they grew closer.

“This way!” Stacy was tucking herself through the rungs of the fence and already halfway across the pasture, running toward the barn.

“This is insane.” Jacob chased after her, climbing over the top rung of the fence, unable to squeeze between the lower rungs with his backpack and the rifle in hand. Stacy was already opening the door as he crossed the meadow and had apparently lit some sort of lantern, as a flickering ripple of candlelight shone through the opened doorway. Hooves thudded on the floor of the barn even as Jacob approached and Stacy was wrestling a large, brown steed from its stall, already fastening a bridle onto its snout.

“Stacy— I can’t take your horse.” Jacob’s words of protest fell on deaf ears as the young girl finished clipping the reins to the bridle and walked to a hook on a nearby pillar where the saddle was hanging. She lifted the saddle free and hoisted it over one shoulder, speed-walking back to the creature, who stood in the middle of the barn, head cocked slightly, looking at Jacob. “Stacy, are you listening to me?”

“No, I’m not.” She lobbed the saddle up over the horse’s back, then furiously began threading the straps around and buckling various buckles, tugging on leather to secure it to the creature’s back.

“Stacy!”

Somewhere, outside the barn voices rose. They weren’t quite shouting, but they were getting there, a vigorous

argument occurring on the other side of the farmhouse.

“I don’t have time for this,” Stacy replied, lifting her face and looking at Jacob. Her eyes weren’t just shimmering, they were moist, tears streaking down the smooth curve of her young cheeks. “He’s all I have.”

“I can’t take him from you.”

“If you don’t, *they will.*” She stabbed a finger in the general direction of the house.

“You don’t even know me.”

“You saved my life. I’m a good judge of character— my dad says so.”

Jacob closed his eyes and tilted his head back, the jackhammer of his heart thudding rapidly against his breastbone, kicking like Frenchie’s hooves. Flesh touched flesh and he pried his eyes open, looking down as once again the young girl gripped his free hand in hers, squeezing plaintively.

“Please,” she croaked. “Save his life.”

Jacob had only ridden a horse twice in his life and it had been so many years he wasn’t sure what to do.

“We wanted to do this the easy way!” The voice carried from the house and Stacy wheeled in its direction. “But I guess we gotta do it the hard way!”

“Sheriff, I swear—”

“Please!” Stacy gasped.

Jacob could feel the tension, not just within the barn, but all throughout the homestead. Things were escalating and soon it wouldn’t just be the horse’s life at risk, but her father’s life — and perhaps hers.

“Just hurry!” She nearly begged and Jacob could no longer turn her away. He pressed one boot into a stirrup and swung up and onto the saddle, gripping the reins tight in his closed fists. Frenchie jostled slightly at the unpracticed way Jacob mounted, but settled quickly, thumping one hoof on the floor.

“Go!”

“I don’t know if I can bring him back.”

“Just go!” Stacy was crying openly, tears drawing grooves in the dirt on her face and without another word, Jacob thumped the beast’s ribs with his heels and snapped the reins. Frenchie galloped forward, loping toward the opened door and out into the fenced-in area. Glancing left, he saw an opened gate looking out toward the thickening trees to the east of the homestead, exactly the direction he needed to go.

“Help!” Stacy screamed suddenly, her voice loud and piercing, Jacob jerking in surprise. “Someone is stealing Frenchie! Dad! Help!”

Jacob’s teeth gritted and voices shouted from the house once again.

“What the hell?”

“Paul if this is your idea of some joke—”

“This ain’t me!” Paul shouted back and figures emerged around the corner of the farmhouse. “You there!” Paul screamed at the top of his lungs. “Stop!”

Jacob met Stacy’s eyes one more time and she mouthed the words thank you. He thumped the horse’s sides, bent low, and Frenchie took off running, charging across the grass, hooves pounding, dirt kicking up in his wake.

“Stop!” A voice shouted. “Stop or we’ll shoot!”

Jacob kept his head low, his fingers closed around the leather straps, his backpack and rifle thudding on his back with the motion of the horse’s gallop. They barreled through the open gate as the first gunshot roared from the direction of the house. But it was far behind them and the bullet screamed off into the night, nowhere close to where they were. A moment later shadows swallowed them, the narrow branches of trees digging at his shirt as they plunged into the thick woods and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It didn't take long before the thudding of Frenchie's hooves was joined by another sound, a backdrop of metallic growling, the telltale roar of approaching engines both to the left and right of where Jacob rode. Jacob had lived out in the boondocks long enough to recognize all-terrain vehicles when he heard them, and these two were bearing down on him from two sides.

"He's in here somewhere!" A voice screamed out, carrying over the growling backdrop of ATV engines. Jacob ducked beneath a thick branch crossing the narrow path the horse charged down, narrowly avoiding it striking him full in the chest. There wasn't a clear path through the forest that he could see, no logging roads or access roads, which he figured gave him at least a slight advantage. Horses were skinnier than ATV's, more capable of weaving through the tight gaps between tree trunks. Jacob wasn't familiar with the terrain in these parts, however, and he could have been galloping right alongside an access road or snowmobile trail.

He chose to let Frenchie lead the way, not knowing the various twists and turns, not feeling confident enough to lead the creature down a certain path or direction. The horse threaded almost effortlessly between thick oaks and a scattering of sycamore trees; the entire landscape filled with them. The Daniel Boone National Forest covered over two million acres of geography in Kentucky, though he honestly wasn't sure if that's where he currently was. The outdoors activities had always been Veronica's responsibility to plan, he just went along for the ride.

In spite of his hammering heart, the tension, and the relentless charge of ATV engines on both sides, the corner of his mouth lifted up into a soft grin. Veronica would have laughed herself silly if she'd seen what was happening. Jacob, the transplanted city boy, far removed from his rural background riding a horse, full tilt, through the trees, somehow not getting knocked on his ass. He fought back the urge to laugh out loud, given the almost ridiculous circumstances.

“There! I think I see him!”

Whatever desire he'd had to laugh evaporated immediately, the shouting voice overwhelming the ATV engine noise and seemingly far closer than he'd thought. That motivated him to take some control over Frenchie's direction and he torqued and twisted the reins, jerking the horse's head to the right and urging him to alter his forward progress. Frenchie sprinted between a gap in the trees, hooves kicking up ground and stones. A branch lashed out like a whip, snagging on his left arm, digging at the fabric of his jacket and the flesh beneath.

“If you have eyes on him, you are cleared to fire!”

Jacob pressed his teeth together and sank low to the horse's neck. He heeled the creature's ribs, prodding him along and it seemed as though Frenchie got the message, picking up the pace. Ahead, a thick oak had fallen across the path and Jacob sucked in a breath, but Frenchie noticed it just in time and leaped forward, clearing the massive, rotted trunk, landing with a grunt and thud, then continued onward. Jacob twisted, looking to the left and saw a darkened shape plowing through the forest several feet away. One of the ATVs bore down on him, moving at a slight angle, an intercept course of sorts. It was faster than the horse and angled in such a way that it would be crossing their path in moments, effectively blocking their forward progress.

Operating almost by pure instinct, Jacob looped his arm through the reins and bunched it in the crook of his elbow, then wrestled the rifle from his shoulder where it had been strapped. He managed to loosen it while barely maintaining a

hold on the reins, then fumbled the weapon around, eyes darting toward the ATV hurtling to his left. Pinning his legs to each side of the horse to hold his place astride its back he levered the rifle into a firing position, desperately trying to remain upright and attached to the charging steed. The barrel of the rifle jostled and swayed as he muscled it under control, pressing the stock tight to his arm, gripping the hand guard with whitening knuckles. He kept the barrel level by sheer force of will, ignoring the clawing scrapes of passing branches. Letting the barrel drift to the right so he could better lead the target he took a breath, held it and squeezed the trigger, the rifle barking loudly in his hands.

There was a grunt of muffled surprise and the ATV dipped as the brakes were hit, then slewed. A volley of barely audible curses rattled throaty from someone's voice and then the shape toppled and rolled, its rider sprawling airborne, flung from the vehicle as it apparently capsized. Jacob racked the bolt, ejecting the shell casing, having no idea if he'd actually struck his target, but he'd apparently made enough of a difference that the panicked reaction of the rider had caused him to crash. The next round loaded, he held the weapon at his side while he resumed a tight grip of the reins, making sure he wasn't going to get thrown. The other ATV engine still roared to his right, the throttling churn of its gas-burning motor drawing up alongside them. It wasn't visible through the thickening trees, but the engine sounds were clear and metallic, almost offensive within the confines of the natural barrier of oak trees.

It had been such a long time since Jacob had ridden a horse, but it was natural somehow, a genetically ingrained marriage between man and mount, both creatures operating with a strange sort of synergy. It was exhilarating, pumping his blood swiftly through his veins, though he wasn't sure if that was a result of riding the horse or the added stress of the ATV pursuit. Gunshots peppered from the right and the leaves ahead jerked with passing bullets. Jacob leaned back, yanking hard in the reins, probably a little too hard as Frenchie whinnied and drew back, rearing, his front legs lifting from the ground. Luckily Jacob's grip had been tight, and he managed

to maintain control, remaining on the saddle, though for a brief moment, he'd been certain he was spilling off onto the hard ground.

Dragging the reins left and bumping the horse's opposite side with his heel, he coaxed Frenchie off the beaten path, cutting a narrow line through the trees to his left, away from the sounds of the ATV. The engine faded momentarily, then grew louder again, the vehicle clearly in close pursuit as Frenchie picked up the pace, kicking with thudding hooves along the uneven ground. Two more gunshots came from behind him, more like a pistol than a rifle and Jacob angled left, purely by instinct. He had no clue where the shots had gone, though thankfully neither had struck him nor the horse, rounds plowing off into the trees somewhere to his right or left. But it had been the sounds of the shots that had concerned him— they were almost directly behind him, as if the ATV was in pursuit.

“Good boy,” Jacob whispered to the horse, leaning forward, tucking himself close to the creature's broad, brown neck. Frenchie responded by picking up the pace, moving faster and harder, tree branches slashing like a hundred tiny knives scraping along them as they went. From the sounds of the engine, the remaining ATV was cutting left and right, trying to maneuver around the trees, which was apparently slowing it down— though probably not enough for Jacob and the horse to fully escape. Guiding Frenchie to the right, Jacob brought him back in the direction they'd been heading originally, heading more east than north, in hopes of gaining some ground on his long trek to New York. A strange, pale glow shone from ahead and at first, Jacob wasn't sure where it was coming from, but only a moment later, he and the horse charged through the edge of the trees, out into a clearing, the glow of the moon illuminating the ground around them.

The clearing spread out before them, trees peeling away to form a wide oval around the section of sparse, beaten down grass, shrubs, the stumps of fallen trees and scattered rocks. A road cut through the trees to the right, a fair distance away, only barely visible beneath the blanket of stars in the sky above. Twin lights pierced the shadows along that road and

suddenly a second engine joined the ATV, only louder and closer. Without warning, a pick-up truck smashed through the undergrowth, moving from that apparent logging road, into the clearing, crashing through a section of low shrubbery. It pounded forward, thudding and thumping over the uneven ground, charging toward the far side of the clearing. It hurtled forward, bumping over rocks and dirt, then hammered on the brakes, the rear tires locking as it skidded to a shudder, directly in their path, blocking the way to the trees beyond. The ATV grew louder behind them, closing at speed as the driver's side door of the pick-up flew open and someone leaped out, a rifle in hand.

Jacob wasn't sure what to do. Frenchie didn't even slow down though, the horse continuing to sprint forward, and if anything he almost went faster, clods of broken dirt and tufts of grass kicking up behind him. His hooves were a rapid-fire weapon, punching the ground as they propelled forward, closing on the truck with an almost frightening speed.

"Stop!" The driver's voice cut through the silence, the rifle starting to rise. Frenchie charged, the ATV closing behind them, then lurched suddenly left, shifting toward the sloped front hood of the pick-up. Jacob didn't fight against the horse's instinct; he only hoped the creature knew what it was doing. The driver twisted, trying to follow their movements with the rifle, but then Frenchie launched, throwing itself, and Jacob, into the air, Jacob's guts tumbling end-over-end within him, a sudden lack of stable ground beneath his feet churning acid. Frenchie tucked his front legs tight, his rear legs extended as he leaped, clearing the sloped hood, one hoof clacking against its metal surface. Jacob clutched the reins tighter than he ever had and glanced back, over his shoulder, as the man with the rifle twisted around, trying to keep the barrel pointed at them even as they hurdled the vehicle.

But in trying to track them, he'd taken his eyes off the charging ATV, which had been even closer than Jacob had thought. Before the driver could likely even think to fire, the ATV barreled headlong into him and then the truck, two men and two vehicles slamming together in a sudden tangle of impact, the metal-on-metal crunch no doubt grinding bone and

muscle in its wake. The collision was so swift and unforgiving, the pick-up truck jerked, moving a good several inches sideways and Jacob was glad the actual impact had occurred on the opposite side of the vehicle, so he couldn't see the grisly results. With a bone-jarring crash, Frenchie landed on the other side, front hooves first, then rear, and catapulted forward swallowed by trees as the echo of the vicious ATV collision continued to ring in Jacob's ears.

For several moments after, Frenchie continued running, though he did eventually slow his frenetic pace, easing to a trot and then finally, evidently exhausted, wound down to a meandering walk, but Jacob let him do what he had to, the race clearly taking a lot out of the poor horse. Remaining perched on the saddle, he allowed himself a long, languid exhalation, the tension loosening his taut muscles, and he rode the ambling horse through the trees, searching for some water for the creature to drink.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Pull over here. We’re not going to make it back tonight.”

“What?” Scout turned toward Everett, whose voice was little more than a muffled slur in the passenger seat.

“I said pull over. There’s a spot up here, near the trees. We can bury the truck and find a place out in the woods between here and the swamp. We’re still ten miles from where we dropped the boat and there’s no way in hell we’re navigating these waters in the dead of night. That’s asking for trouble.”

“So, we’re going to just... spend the night? Out here?”

“Don’t see many other options.”

Scout had already slowed the truck, which had been rolling along a desolate two-lane stretch of pavement between the grocery store where they’d first picked up the truck and the hardware store they’d left a few hours before. The soft glow of its headlights cut a narrow pathway through the darkness and while she’d had to navigate around a few stopped cars, it had been a relatively uneventful trek. Just what she’d hoped for when Everett had asked her to drive. Fairly quickly, she saw the alcove he’d been referring to, an area beside the road where cypress trees grew in thick clumps, hanging low over the wild swamp grass. She turned the wheel, bumping the truck from the pavement to the hard dirt, coaxing it to a stop, branches clawing at the windshield as she inched it slowly forward, bit by bit.

She’d managed to park close enough to the line of trees that their branches hung over the vehicle, shrouding it from

prying eyes, yet far enough away that Everett could still get his door open and stumble out, which is what he did, leaning on the truck to help him remain standing. He'd been punched several times in the head and at his age, Scout was concerned what the short term and long-term effects might be. He'd slept off and on throughout their trip back toward the swamp, and there were evidently some lingering effects from the blows to the head. He was certainly at least in his sixties, if not his seventies, and part of her wondered if he was the one suffering from more of a concussion than she was at the moment.

After taking a moment to seemingly collect himself, he reached back into the truck and hauled out his backpack, tugging it on over one shoulder while he clutched at the rifle and hefted it all deeper into the trees. Scout took a moment to lock the doors of the truck and to drag a few more leaves and branches across its surface, hopefully hiding it completely from view should anyone pass by. They were on a long stretch of lonely road between towns, so the likelihood of someone just wandering past their stopping point was slim, but she didn't want to take any chances. She pushed her way through the trees, following the sounds of Everett's grunting as he dragged a few branches across the hard ground and dumped them in a section of beaten down grass and dirt. Tall swamp weeds ringed the small clearing and just beyond sparse cypress and low-hanging tupelo were the still waters of the swamp. Shoots of green emerged from the water interspersed with stalks of reed and young saplings, the dark water glistening in spots, reflecting the moon's pale stare back up at it.

The ground was low and close to the water's edge, and Scout approached the clearing cautiously, her senses hyper alert to any sort of unexpected movement, whether it be snake or alligator. Everett snapped a few pieces of wood and placed them in a rough triangular shape in the dirt clearing, then ground up some grass and leaves in his closed fist, pressing the material into the gaps between wood. Scout hunkered down, sitting on the hard ground as the old man wrestled something from his backpack, then turned toward the makeshift fire pit. He struck a waterproof match on its striker once, then a second time, the small stick flaring alight as he

leaned forward and dropped it into the ground up grass within the triangle of fodder. Leaning low, he cupped his hands and blew gently, feeding oxygen to the smoldering foliage until gray smoke filled the interior of the pyramid and a low crackle sounded from within.

Moments later, orange flame tracked along the angular contours of the pile of sticks and burned steadily against the cool darkness. Everett went back into his backpack, rummaging around inside before he finally pulled out a shirt, of all things. Scout wasn't sure why he'd brought it, but he tossed it to her, and she snatched it out of mid-air.

“Bunch that up. You can use it for a pillow. Sorry, no air mattress or blankets. I hadn't planned on spending the night out here.”

“Thanks.” Scout remained sitting upright, looking across the fire at the old man. His face was mottled with a thick, purple bruise, his lip swollen and the flesh around his right eye darkened. He had, at least, wiped the blood away, though the evidence of his beating looked especially gruesome in the soft, orange glow of the fire, enhanced by the weathered texture of his face and well-placed shadows. “Are you... okay?” Her voice was quiet and tentative, and she leaned forward, holding her palms toward the fire.

Everett had once again returned his attention to the backpack, then emerged with something wrapped in foil, which he once again tossed to Scout, and she caught in her palm. It was a protein bar, and she tore the foil wrapper and took a bite, relishing the taste. They hadn't eaten in quite some time, and she hadn't realized how hungry she truly was.

“I'll be fine.” His reply was short and curt, and he crawled to his feet, with something she couldn't make out in his right hand. Walking over to the swamp, he crouched low at its shore and dipped the item into the water, then lifted it back up, shook it some and seemed to study it in the moonlight. Returning to the fire, he handed it to her rather than tossing it and she took it. It was a capped water bottle with a straw, filled with cloudy liquid from the swamp. She stared at it for a

moment, wondering what exactly Everett expected her to do. Certainly, he wasn't suggesting she drink it.

"You can drink it," he said with a nod, apparently reading her mind. "That's a life straw filter. It'll block all the nasty crap."

"Are you sure?"

"Been drinkin' it for ten years this way." Everett shrugged and returned to the swamp's edge with a second bottle, which he filled, then returned to the fire, taking his own long drink from the straw. "See? Tastes fine."

"I'm not worried about the taste." Scout lifted the bottle and swirled the liquid, scowling at the detritus floating around inside.

"Whatever. Drink it or don't. No skin off my nose." Everett took his own bite of protein bar and washed it down with another sip from the filtered straw. Scout gingerly pressed her lips to her own and took a soft draw, the water cool and refreshing. Everett was right, it did taste fine, and there was no grit on her tongue or teeth. "You should get some sleep. Been a long day."

"I'm not tired."

Everett rolled his eyes. "Bull."

Truth was, Scout was too keyed up to sleep, at least at that moment. The events of the day had sent a surge of adrenaline through her young body, and even though she'd spent a few hours driving in the wake of the shooting at the hardware store, she still felt the remnants of that racing tension. For a long moment, the two of them sat in relative silence, chewing protein bars, gently sipping at their straws, the fire glowing and crackling, a soothing, rippling warmth further softening the spring air of the swamps. Scout finished her food and folded up the foil wrapper, then stuffed it in her pocket, taking another tentative sip of cloudy swamp water.

"Did you... kill those men?" The question just seemed to birth itself, she had almost no conscious thought as the words came out.

Everett looked down at the bottle in his hands, the shadows across his face masking his features as his brow furrowed, his eyes nearly vanishing within dark patches. He didn't answer her directly. "They followed us. They intended to do us harm. They weren't taking no for an answer, and they would have come back again."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I don't owe you an answer, kid." He sipped at the straw. "In fact, I don't owe you much of anything."

"I didn't say you did."

Heat warmed Scout's chest. It wasn't shame— it was something she couldn't immediately identify or explain. A strange blend of guilt and anger— guilt for her role in someone's death, anger at Everett for being so callous and abrasive. Somewhere within there was remorse and longing as well. Thoughts of the life she'd had and the vast unfairness of everything that had happened since.

"Sometimes you have to do the hard things." Everett took another drink. "Not because you want to, but because it's necessary."

"And killing those men was necessary?"

Everett lowered his bottle and glowered at her, his narrow eyes almost gleaming in the reflection of the campfire. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but— weren't you the first one to shoot?"

"They were going to kill you."

"Exactly."

"I saved your life."

"And just proved my point."

"But that's different. That was self-defense. You— the other guys were just— they were standing there, doing nothing."

"Just because they weren't actively shooting at us doesn't mean it wasn't self-defense." Everett took another drink,

emptying the bottle and setting it aside. “You don’t know those men. I do.” He considered his words for a moment, then a gentle smirk creased his lips. “Well... I did.”

“This isn’t funny.” The warmth in Scout’s chest burned suddenly hot, the same heat flushing her cheeks.

“You’re damn right it’s not,” Everett replied tersely. “It’s not the least bit funny. But you’ll have to forgive me if I’m struggling to find sympathy for three men who would have gladly killed me, then dragged you off to do God knows what to you. You don’t get that, do you? This isn’t just about me. I was trying to protect you.”

“I can protect myself.”

“Oh, please. You’re ten years old for the love of—”

“Thirteen,” Scout hissed through clenched teeth. “I’m thirteen.”

“Fine. Whatever. You’re still too young to know what’s good for you. And damn sure too young to be judging me for what I do. You don’t know me, girl. You don’t know what I’ve been through. The things I’ve seen... the things I’ve done...”

“So, tell me.”

Everett’s voice ceased, silence filling the void, except for the low crackling of flames. He twisted around where he sat and dragged his backpack closer, pushing the water bottle into it. “Go to sleep.”

Scout’s eyes narrowed beneath the clenched fists of her eyebrows, and she pressed her back teeth together so hard they ground like stones. Reaching to the ground next to her, she bunched up the shirt he’d thrown her and laid down, resting her head onto it, though it provided little in the way of comfort.

“What happened to your kid?”

The old man drew back, though managed to wrestle himself under control, his eyes darting away from Scout’s. “No life stories.”

“But why?”

“You don’t know me, kid and you don’t need to know me. This time tomorrow we’ll be packing your bags, okay? Hell, this time tomorrow, maybe you’ll already be heading off to your new home. You’ll forget all about me and frankly, that’s probably for the best.”

Scout huddled on the hard ground, resting on her right side, staring through the smoke at Everett’s shadowed features. “I’m not asking for your life story. Just asking about your kid. When that man mentioned it, I could tell— it bothered you.”

“Yeah, it did. It bothered me when he talked about it, and it bothers me when you ask about it. So how about you roll over and go to sleep and forget whatever you heard or saw tonight. Life will be better that way.” Everett managed to push himself to a standing posture, though he hesitated for a moment, swaying gently once he’d stood.

Regaining his balance, he turned and strode away, through the grass and back toward the swamp, leaving Scout lying on the hard, unforgiving ground. She exhaled and rolled over, putting her back to the fire and her back to the old man, then pressed her eyes closed and silently begged for the momentary respite of sleep.

The moon’s reflection melted across the shimmering surface of the swamp, its white glow distorted as a nighttime breeze rippled the water. Everett leaned hard against a nearby bald cypress, allowing the tree to take some of the weight and pressure off his aching feet. He wanted nothing more than to sit, but there was something about that girl— something about her inquisitive nature— her constant stream of questions. Something that drove him a few steps past madness. Somewhere, buried beneath the hard, ragged crust, there was realization— a deep rooted knowledge of why the young girl bothered him so much. It went beyond the mere obligation he had to protect her, it went beyond the frustration of finding her in the military Humvee, beyond the caring and feeding and the constant, unrelenting curiosity.

It dug deeper and darker than all of that and he stared into the darkened water, the mysteries of the swamp staring back at him. Everywhere he looked there were reminders of her— not Scout, but the girl before— the one he'd built his life around once the Army had taken its bite from his hide. The army hadn't exactly taken a single bite; it had bitten first when he was fresh out of high school and had continued chewing for over thirty years. A relentless grinding of teeth and slow, stomach acid digestion before he'd finally been disgorged, no longer young enough or healthy enough for Uncle Sam's use. There had been resentment at first, the realization that he'd given everything he had for the vast majority of his life only to be told that everything he had was no longer enough.

He absently rubbed at his left forearm, still leaning against the tree, watching the water of the swamp, imaging what horrors could be lurking just beneath its dark surface. He'd witnessed a lifetime of horrors and yet his life was not yet over, much to his own occasional dismay. Looking up toward the moon exhaustion weighed on him, not just exhaustion, but the after-effects of the beating he'd suffered at the hands of the man named Mack. A man he'd had friendly disagreements with in the past. Stupid arguments about sports teams which had eventually evolved into politics, both local and federal, finally culminating into something more— something worse. At one point Mack had latched onto what had happened in Everett's past, sinking his yellowed teeth into the torture he'd suffered, both in the Army and after.

The events of the past several days had done little to ease those tensions. On the surface, Everett held no true guilt for what he'd done— he hadn't liked lying to the girl, it had been necessary. But standing at the water's edge, relying on a tree to help keep him upright, he couldn't help but recall the start of his relationship with Mack— the minor disagreements over sports teams that seemed less than frivolous, given the light of new circumstances.

Everett grimaced, a strange, prickling pain walking down the length of his forearm and cascading through his fingers. He rubbed at the limb with his right hand trying to work some feeling back into it, but mostly failing. A low splash near the

far edge of the water drew his gaze and the moon's reflection distorted further, something dark moving along the swamp's surface. It wasn't moving toward him, however, it was moving alongside the distant shoreline, a good thirty feet from where he stood. It wasn't a threat, just a nocturnal creature going about its activities, oblivious to the trauma of civilization. There were times he envied those creatures, he envied their mindless, predatory nature. Relying only on instinct and survival, giving no thought or care to the looping roller coaster tracks of humanity's evolution.

Sighing, Everett adjusted the strap of his rifle, which still hung along his left shoulder, an ever-present attachment, like another limb. Trees, grass and water looked back at him— not just at him, but into him, a constant, relentless reminder of the bad times of his life. Unpleasant, but necessary. After all, he had to pay the price for what had happened, even if he was making that payment to himself. Standing near the edge of the water, he turned and looked back toward the soft glow of the fire. Reflected in that pale, orange light, the young girl— Scout— was huddled in almost a fetal position, her back to the fire and to him. For a moment longer than he was comfortable, his gaze lingered upon her narrow form, a familiar warmth building within his guts, then settling— then finally curdling like spoiled milk. He swallowed and turned away, once again returning his attention to the swamp, finding that preferable to the image of a young girl lit by flames.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Frenchie slowed to an uneven pace as Jacob guided the animal down the slope of the next hill, flanked on all sides by thick rows of trees. He'd managed to find a narrow hiking trail through the Kentucky wilderness, and he probably should have stopped hours ago to give both himself and the horse some rest, but they continued on in a desperate attempt to clock as many miles as possible. Jacob eased back in the saddle, unfolding the map across the horse's neck as he clamped the narrow pen light between his teeth, studying the surrounding terrain. He could only estimate where they were, at least until he stopped and more closely checked the compass. Whenever he'd spent those long hours with Veronica, embedded within the vast forests north of Lexington, she'd relied heavily on her phone's GPS signal, using a collection of apps to navigate their direction and location, almost down to the coordinates. He had no such luxury and without the benefit of physical landmarks, everything was a guessing game, and while that was mostly okay for the time being, the time would come when he needed more specifics.

Jacob would stress about that later— for now, he had to be content with the fact that he was no longer being pursued by angry men with rifles. Though he couldn't help but wonder what had happened to Stacy and Paul, the young girl and her father. He wasn't sure whether or not the mayor or the sheriff would believe them that the horse was stolen, but he didn't want to dwell on that for too long. There was little he could do for them, and it didn't sound like the mayor was a terrible

person necessarily— his head just wasn't quite in the right place.

Turning to the right, Jacob peered through the surrounding darkness, angling his head to listen to the background noise of the nearby wilderness. Smiling, he folded the map, stuffed it into a jacket pocket, then guided the horse slightly right, leading him at a crooked angle down the hill. He had heard what he thought he heard and after a few moments of travel, a narrow, gurgling brook crossed their path, winding its way through the rocky, downward slope of the Kentucky forest. Just ahead a section of bare dirt scattered with a few tree stumps rested alongside the shore of the stream and Jacob pulled Frenchie's reins, guiding the creature to a stop. The horse sighed and lowered his head, showing clear signs of exhaustion, lighting the fire of guilt within Jacob's stomach. He'd pushed the creature too hard and though they'd definitely made up for some lost time, he had to tread carefully. Working the horse too hard wouldn't help one bit— while they might make it a few extra miles early, it would only slow them down long term.

He swung his leg from the saddle and dropped to the dirt, his own tiredness immediately evident as his knee buckled. Using Frenchie to help him stay upright, he exhaled a single breath, leaning back against the broad side of the brown steed, who snorted, almost derisively. Gripping the reins and leading the horse toward the stream, Jacob stepped back as Frenchie lowered his head and began gently lapping at the water, his tail swishing left-to-right. The forest night was sparsely lit by the moon and stars scattered across the broad expanse of indigo sky, so Jacob used his flashlight to guide his way back toward the clearing.

Setting down his backpack and rifle, he removed the tent and sleeping bag from where they were bound atop and along the rear of the pack, then opened the flap and rummaged through it, finally coming out with a set of matches and the portable lantern he'd picked up from the camping goods store. He set the lantern on a nearby stump and lit it, adjusting the strength so a pale, orange halo of light surrounded him and the ground around him. Darkness consumed the wider forest,

though the scattered sounds of insects filled the silence, a shrill chorus of natural life making Jacob feel a little less alone.

He went through the motions of unfolding the tent, untying its binds, raising the narrow support posts, unfolding the fabric, the structure evolving from a pile of wrinkled vinyl into a rugged looking dome-shaped shelter as if by magic. Going through the process brought back painful memories of the shared laughter between him and Veronica as they usually struggled to work in concert to set up their campsite whenever they spent time in the woods. Veronica was an avid fan of the outdoors and while Jacob had grown up in rural Maine, his time working for Emerson Natural Gas had gotten him accustomed to city life in Lexington and he was like a fish out of water.

Still, he liked to pretend he could match Ronnie step-for-step, but that generally ended with him making a fool of himself and the two of them laughing hysterically as they managed to get a fire started and cracked open bottles of beer. Beer and hot dogs had always been staples of their camping trips which had been especially funny since Ronnie was normally a huge health nut and wouldn't have been caught dead munching on a hot dog outside of their wilderness getaways.

She'd claimed it was her father's influence. Going back until she'd been seven years old, camping with her parents, her father had always insisted on cooking hot dogs over an open fire, so when she was surrounded by trees, sitting near an open flame, her instinct was to roast dogs, no matter how much her diet had changed in the three decades since. Jacob longed for one of those hot dogs at that moment as he sat on a rock, bent over slightly, arms crossed over his knees, looking over at the empty tent which he'd gotten all stood up but didn't yet feel like crawling into. Late March in Kentucky wasn't especially cold, and he didn't really need a fire, yet the compulsion drove him and he gathered up several dried sticks and twigs and piled them together in the center of the bare patch of dirt before him. Using leaves and dried grass, he gathered some firestarter, then used one of the waterproof matches to ignite it and ten minutes later sat upon that same rock, feeling the

warmth of the flames, the low crackle and smoky air not unlike a childhood lullaby coaxing him to sleep.

His eyelids were heavy, but he forced them to remain open as Frenchie wandered back from the stream, snorting, his nose pressing to the dirt. Finding nothing of interest there, the horse made his way toward a patch of wild grass and began to chew as Jacob pressed his palms to his thighs and pushed himself to a standing posture. Walking to the horse, he carefully unclasped the strap of its saddle and peeled it from the creature's back, dragging it over toward the tent and piling it next to it. He stroked the horse's flanks and scratched him behind his ears as he continued chewing lazily on the grass, nostrils flaring with each exhalation.

"Thanks, buddy," Jacob said softly, continuing to rub along the bulge of the creature's ribcage, covered in skin and hair. "You saved my bacon." Frenchie's tail swished happily and there was a mixture of guilt and satisfaction in the fact that Jacob had indeed saved the creature, but at the same time had also taken him from the girl who had loved him so much. He made a solemn, silent pledge to do whatever he could to protect the horse, to ensure that it didn't meet the same fate he'd almost died protecting it from. Reaching down toward its head, he unhitched the bridle and slowly peeled it from the creature's snout, and it snorted, shaking its head with relief as Jacob returned to where the saddle lay and set the bridle down upon it.

Gently, he spent some time stroking the horse, rubbing its flank, taking great care to massage the creature's weary muscles. Frenchie had saved his life, risking a lot for a man he'd barely met and deserved better than Jacob could provide. After several moments of gently massaging the creature, a process that earned him some affectionate nuzzles and a satisfied swish of his broad tail, Jacob went into his pack. He found a length of paracord, one of the items he'd taken from the camping supply store, then picked up the bridle again and carefully eased it back over Frenchie's snout. Using the paracord, he tethered the horse to a nearby tree, ensuring it would stick around and not wander off.

His stomach growled and he settled down upon the rock, near the crackling fire and peeled open the flap, digging around inside. He came back with a couple granola bars he'd taken from the camping goods store as well as a packet of beef jerky and a filtered water bottle. Stepping past the fire, he walked over to the stream of churning, foamy water and crouched, holding the bottle out so the water would charge in, quickly filling the plastic container. He screwed the filtered cap to the top, securing it tightly, then unfolded a small nozzle and took a drink, then returned to the rock by the fire.

Jacob spent a few moments in relative silence, crunching through the pair of granola bars and slowly consuming the beef jerky, relishing the relative silence of the wilderness. The low rustle of flames, the woodsy smell of smoke and the mixture of sweet and salty granola and jerky seemed, for one brief moment, to be the perfect elixir for the death and destruction he'd witnessed the previous several days.

It wasn't a cure-all— there was no cure-all for the worldwide devastation that mankind faced, but for one small pocket of time and space, Jacob was almost at peace. The only thing that might have made it better was if Veronica was at his side, sitting on a rock next to him, cracking open a bottle of beer or telling one of her infamous off-color jokes. His food gone, the wrappers folded up and back in the backpack, he curled his fingers around the water bottle and lowered his eyes, a smile turning the corner of his mouth as he reflected upon the experiences that might have come and gone but still lived forever in his memories.

He took a long, steady drink of filtered water, draining the rest of the bottle, then slipped it back in his backpack and tied the flap closed, dragging it toward the tent. He placed it within, then laid the rifle on the ground next to it and stood, walking back over to the horse.

“I'm hitting the sack, bud, okay?”

The horse didn't reply. He pawed at the ground with one rough hoof and snorted, then glanced toward him, dark eyes searching his own.

“You and me, buddy,” Jacob said and scratched the creature again, just behind his right ear. Leaving the horse where it was, he moved deeper into the trees, using the stream to give himself a quick sponge bath of sorts. Stripping down to his shorts, he made sure as much of himself was clean as possible, then relieved himself, folded his dirty clothes and returned to the tent. Crawling inside, he opened the backpack and peeled out some of the spare clothes he’d found along his way, pulling on a pair of pants and a t-shirt. It was early spring in Kentucky and the tent’s flap faced the fire, so he was plenty warm as he tucked himself into the sleeping bag, bunched it up around him and slowly drifted off to a surprisingly deep sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Even before Holly had rubbed sleep from her eyes, she found her mother huddled by a front window, peering out through one of the velvet curtains.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Not long,” Jean replied, though that sounded like a lie to Holly.

“Where’s Keegan?”

Jean nodded through the window and Holly made her way to another, peeling open the curtain and looking out. Keegan was in the front yard with Bucky, who was dutifully searching for a place to do his business. Holly sniffed, lifting her head and looking toward a broad set of double doors at the far side of the luxurious sitting room in the Phillips mansion.

“Is that— bacon?”

“It is,” Jean replied without looking at her. “Ellen took our advice about emptying her freezer seriously. I think she cooked three full pounds of it.”

“I think I could eat two of those pounds myself.” Holly let the curtain fall closed and strode across the sitting room, running her fingers through the long tangle of her hair. She’d long since given up feeling clean again, but then Ellen Phillips had offered up her shower the previous night and it had been like being reborn. Her body practically hummed with the feeling of finally being devoid of dirt, grime, smoke and sweat, and there was a newfound strength in her core. As cliché as it was, she felt like a new woman.

Donda stepped out of the kitchen even before Holly reached it and smiled a flat, toneless smile. Holly had to give her credit, she was trying her best to be a good host, but the news of her stepfather's fate, not to mention the state of the world itself, was clearly weighing on the young girl's shoulders.

"Please, eat some bacon," Donda said, taking a step back and making room for Holly to walk through the door. The previous night, they'd gone straight from the sitting room to the showers, then to bed so she hadn't seen the kitchen, and upon entering, she stopped short, eyes drawing wide. She was pretty sure the Phillips' kitchen was larger than her family home back in Maine, a massive, dome-ceilinged room littered with gleaming chrome and granite countertops everywhere she looked. A massive, rectangular shaped island filled a chunk of the empty space between counter tops and filling the island was a plate heaped with bacon, a few empty mugs, some fruit and a pitcher of orange juice.

"Do you drink coffee?" Ellen stood next to a large, rectangular device that Holly didn't recognize, though she thought it might be an espresso machine.

"Well... yeah," she stammered, "I mean— of course."

Ellen smiled, her own lips as flat and emotionless as her daughters, the woman's movements almost purely by habit rather than actual conscious thought. Holly almost couldn't believe all of the food spread out before her on the island and had to stop herself from telling Ellen what a mistake she was making. Emptying the freezer was important, just as her mother had said the night before, but preparing all of the fruit, the huge pitcher of orange juice— it was an extravagance they might very well live to regret later on. But it was too late to do anything about it, and the last thing Holly wanted to do, given the circumstances, was hand the woman a lecture about sustainability. She plucked three strips of bacon from the plate and eagerly chewed one down, though she thought eating it actually somehow made her even more hungry.

Swiftly gobbling down two more pieces, she looked at Ellen who was holding up a small pitcher of creamer. Holly

nodded. “Sugar, too, if you have it.”

Ellen did and she added a liberal amount of each to the steaming cup then handed it to Holly, who took it and drank it, wincing as the scorching liquid raced down her throat. As hot as it was, the warm splash of a mixture of bitter and sweet soothed her roiling stomach and cleared the fog that filled her addled brain.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, my.”

“Yeah, this contraption cost a thousand bucks, but makes a hell of a cup of coffee.” Ellen laughed as she patted the large device on the counter, then glanced at the decorative floor. “At least for the moment.” She blinked heavily, then looked over at Holly. “How much longer do you think we have?”

“What— what do you mean?”

“What do I mean? I mean— with everything happening— with it all falling apart. How long does humanity have left?”

“This isn’t a death sentence.” Holly studied Ellen as she took another swallow of coffee. Donda had left the kitchen, heading back out into the sitting room so at least she wasn’t within earshot.

“Maybe not for someone like you— or your mother. But for us?” She gestured to herself, then gestured around her at the expansive kitchen. “We can’t survive in a world like this. We don’t know how. We’re not equipped.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Just be smart. Conserve your supplies. Be careful. You have a roof over your heads, you have plenty of food stockpiled. You’re in a better position than most.”

“Which is exactly why they’ll come for us.” She looked in the direction of the front yard, as if she could see the lurking mobs outside her front door. “I’m surprised they haven’t been here yet.”

“Just keep a low profile, okay? Be careful.”

“Be careful.” Ellen sighed, her teeth pinching her lower lip as she fought back against the wave of emotion that seemed to

be cresting just behind her eyes.

“You can do this, okay? You can.”

“No,” Ellen said, her voice choking. “No, I can’t.” Blowing out a breath of air, she lifted her eyes toward the ceiling. “I’m losing my mind already, Holly. Going stir crazy. For most of the last several years I’ve had every moment mapped out before me. My schedule written— my days planned. I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“Ellen, you’re a strong woman. I can tell just by looking at you.”

“Will you take her?” Ellen’s voice almost broke apart and she stepped forward, clasping Holly’s hands in her own. “Donda, I mean. Will you take her?”

“What? Ellen we can’t—”

“You can. You must. I... she... I want her to live.”

“She will live. She’ll live right here. With you.”

Ellen shook her head, tears pooling at the bottom curve of her eyes. “She won’t. I can’t... do this. Not without Bruce. Not by myself.”

“You can. You have to. For her sake. If anything, you need her here so you can remember what’s important. Why you’re fighting.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t— I don’t want to fight. I’m not built for it.”

“These days, nobody is. Most of humanity has, well, we’ve had it pretty easy. But we also adapt. We learn and evolve—that’s what we’ve always done and it’s what we’ll always do.”

“Evolve into... what?”

Holly considered the question for a moment, then eventually shrugged her shoulders, unsure of how to phrase her answer. “I don’t know, Ellen. I don’t have all the answers. As smart as my mom is, she doesn’t either. But you have to have something to hold onto. Donda is that something. She is

the reason why you'll fight. She is the reason why you'll evolve. If we take her... you've already lost."

Ellen lowered her chin and looked down at her palms, which she'd slipped free of Holly's grasp. A ragged, throaty sigh escaped her as she closed her fingers, pressing them into her palms.

"You can do this." Holly clasped her hands to Ellen's shoulders and squeezed. "If not for you, then for her. And for Bruce." Holly stopped speaking for a moment, chewing over the next words. "He died trying to get back to you, Ellen. Don't let him die in vain. Don't stop fighting just because it's hard."

Ellen swallowed again and pulled the back of her hand across her eyes, wiping away a fresh shine of tears. She pinched them narrowly and blinked, looking up, then away, pursing her lips to blow out another breath.

"Mom?"

Holly turned as Donda stepped back into the kitchen, looking at her mother, concern creasing the smooth lines of her young features. "Are you okay, mom?"

"I'm... I'm okay," Ellen replied. "I'll be okay." She straightened her back as Donda stepped closer to her, then moved into her daughter, consuming her with a fierce embrace. The door opened again, only it was Jean filling its frame.

"I don't want to rush you, but—"

"I know," Holly interrupted. "We have to go."

"We do."

"I'll be right there?"

Jean studied her daughter, then looked at Ellen, sensing some unresolved tension in the room. "Thank you for sharing your home," she said, forcing a smile and Ellen smiled back.

"Your daughter is pretty special."

“I know.” Jean placed a hand on Holly’s back, then vanished through the door, letting it thump closed behind her.

“Are you okay?” Holly asked, looking at Ellen first, then over to Donda. Both of them looked fragile, like porcelain dolls that could fracture at the slightest touch. A turbulent storm raged within Holly’s chest, guilt battling with remorse, the jagged chunks of shame battering the insides of her ribs. The truth was, she wasn’t sure how well the Phillips could ride whatever wave was coming, but she also couldn’t save everyone. And given how dangerous the world was, the safest place for Ellen and Donda was right where they were, secure within the stone walls of the Phillips homestead with their access to food, water and, for the moment, anyway, working plumbing.

“We’ll be fine,” Ellen replied firmly. “Won’t we?” She looked at Donda, put her arm around her shoulder and tugged her close.

“Yeah, Mom,” Donda replied, her voice cracking.

“Be careful, okay? And if we end up back in the neighborhood, we’ll look you up.”

Ellen nodded wordlessly, then stepped forward and gave Holly a hug, wrapping her narrow arms around the woman’s shoulders, squeezing tight. “Thank you for everything.”

“Thank you.” The two women disentangled, and Holly pushed her way out through the kitchen door and moments later was joining the rest of her family in her mother’s SUV.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Holly wasn't sure what she'd expected when they set off that morning, but if anything, Long Island seemed busier than it had the evening before. Hollowed out figures roamed the city streets, digging through trash cans, searching abandoned vehicles, various different groups gathered in various shapes and sizes, some of them seeking comfort from each other, others feeding off a mob's rage. Voices shouted from one large group nearby to a small, local liquor store, which was consumed in a dark, oily smoke. The flames themselves weren't visible, but they were clearly there somewhere, eating away at the brick and wood structure, belching the roiling column of gray slate up into the equally gray sky.

Broken glass littered the concrete at the feet of the dozen or so angry people, who seemed to be raging at nothing and no one, just sort of angry in general. A man buried within the mob was handing out bottles of alcohol, some of them getting opened for drinking while others were tossed, end-over-end, bursting apart against the stone exterior of the burning building. Jean had topped off the gas tank in the Phillips' front yard before they'd left and drove with a sort of reckless abandon, not wanting to take too long in any one place for fear that lingering people nearby would target them for violence. Throughout that part of Long Island, there were pathways to travel, the parked cars providing plenty of space between and around, so their trip west was progressing without significant interruption. Holly wondered just how long they could expect that to last. Not long, she wagered, but she'd take whatever she could get.

“Is it just me, or has traveling gone more quickly this morning?” Holly turned in her seat. Whether or not it actually was, she didn’t know, but her mother remained hunched over the steering wheel, forearms taut with tension, her knuckles bound around the wheel itself like coiled wire.

“Traffic, both foot and wheeled is thinner,” Jean replied. She leaned forward a bit and peered up through the slope of the windshield. “I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

“Why?” Holly did the same, her eyes widening. In the distance, further to the west, helicopters swarmed the sky like locusts. Within the first moment of spotting them she counted a half dozen but stopped counting as three more swept from north to south, moving in a tight, low-altitude formation. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. There definitely weren’t this many helicopters out yesterday.”

“Crowd control?”

Jean said nothing but continued gently easing on the accelerator, bringing the speeding SUV past a row of parked cars along the right side of the road, wedged between small shops, windows dark.

“Woah.” Keegan’s voice was awestruck from the back seat, his face pressed near his window so he could get a better angle. “I think those are gunships. Like real, military gunships.”

“Are you sure?” Holly tried to get a different angle, squinting into the cloud-covered sky ahead. Keegan had been infatuated with military armament at a young age, often pouring through volumes of manuals he’d found online. Holly had often teased her mother about her young son’s early devotion to America’s military, but it had never gone beyond the curiosity stage.

“Most of them look like Blackhawks,” Keegan continued, his young brow furrowed, “but I see at least two Apache’s. Even a couple of Little Birds. They’re flying low, like they’re on some kind of military operation.”

“They can’t be,” Jean replied quickly. “Militarized force against American citizens is strictly prohibited by—”

“By what, Mom?” Holly’s voice was an abrupt bark. “What laws still exist to prevent this?”

Jean chewed her lower lip as she continued watching the sky ahead. Holly pressed forward, almost against the dashboard, and to her horror, one of the Little Birds, with its egg-shaped cockpit, swooped down, then angled right, a cylindrical tube mounted to one skid opening up with the rattling chatter of a high-powered minigun.

“They’re firing!” Jean’s voice sucked in a gasp of horror. “They’re firing on the ground!”

“M— mom... what do we... where should we—” The helicopters were several blocks to their west, but far closer than they were comfortable with, but Jean kept the accelerator pressed, the SUV charging down the Long Island Street, heading toward Queens. Suddenly, the deafening roar of helicopter rotors swarmed all around them, dust and dirt sweeping up into a vicious updraft, spattering the windows and the vehicle’s exterior.

“You are entering a restricted area!” A voice boomed over the tinny echo of a loudspeaker. “The government of the United States has authorized the use of deadly force if these directives are ignored!”

“Mom! We have to—”

“We have to what, Holly? Turn around? Go back? We can’t go back.”

“Mom, we can’t just... what if they—” Keegan pressed forward, fingers curled around the headrest behind his mother.

“They’re not going to shoot on a mid-sized SUV!” Jean’s voice croaked with the raw force of her shout.

“They just fired! That other helicopter, you saw it as much as I did!”

“We don’t know what’s happening over there!” Jean twisted the wheel to the left, bringing the SUV in a sharp turn,

merging onto a southward intersection. Tires bumped over the curb as she navigated a difficult turning radius, but the SUV straightened out and for a moment, the helicopter backwash fell into their rear view.

“We can’t escape a freaking helicopter, Mom!” Holly wedged her cheek against the window to look back behind them. Sure enough, the dark shadow of the aircraft swept toward them in pursuit.

“I can’t just give up! Your dad— your sister— they’re out there!”

“Getting blown up by the Army isn’t going to help our cause.” Holly turned toward her mother and leaned forward, reaching for her arm.

“Queens has been designated as a disaster area!” The voice once again boomed from overhead. “It is off-limits to civilian traffic! Turn your vehicle around or we will have no choice but to open fire!”

Ahead of them, a twisting, churning column of oily black smoke seemed to blanket the horizon. Fire burned within its darkened mass, spreading out wide across what seemed to be several city blocks. A few helicopters circled the fiery blaze, which seemed massive and almost all-consuming.

“That’s JFK.” Jean angled her head for a better view. “The airport.”

Holly nodded and once again returned to her window, trying to get a look at the helicopter above them. “Check the map! Quick!”

Holly scrambled to yank the map from the glove compartment and unfolded it on her lap.

“We’re never going to get through JFK— we need to go around somehow— but trying to move deeper into Queens isn’t going to work.”

“Take a left up here,” Holly advised, pointing to a spot on the map. “If we go southwest toward the hospital, we can follow the beach toward Breezy Point. There’s a bridge that

crosses Jamaica Bay that might get us back into Queens if we're careful."

"This is your final warning!" The voice seemed to be coming from all around them.

"Mom!" Keegan's fingers bunched into the fabric of the headrest.

Jean hissed a muffled curse barely under her breath and cranked the wheel left, the SUV making another sudden and sharp turn before it went charging south. Holly peered out the window, the large, black helicopter easing back, not immediately taking pursuit and the knots of tension in her shoulders, arms and even her fingers slowly unbound. Tight clusters of buildings filled both sides of the narrow street, several vehicles parked on the roadside, but leaving a relatively clear lane of traffic between them.

They passed at least three gas stations, with signs of damage at each one of them, windows shattered, pumps torn askew, hoses lying across the paved parking lots like the tentacles of some dead, subterranean creature from myth and legend. But the pursuing helicopter was no longer pursuing, seemingly content to let them head south, as long as they weren't trying to get into Queens. The burning remains of JFK International Airport spread out along their right side, a literal wall of fire and smoke separating them from downtown Queens beyond.

A few scattered onlookers dotted the sidewalks here and there, several of them huddled around trashcans or dumpsters, a few crawling out from the jagged, broken windows of storefronts, with invaluable items clutched to their chests. At one point, two young men balanced a large screen television between them, moving as quickly as they could, which wasn't very quickly at all, down the cracked and debris-strewn sidewalk.

"What do they think they're going to do with that?" Keegan asked from the back seat. There didn't seem to be an appropriate answer for the question.

“There’s the hospital,” Holly advised, though she needn’t have bothered. The crowd gathered around the facility was massive, a churning mob of humanity pressed around the entrance to the main section of the sprawling campus. Rippling murmurs of voices were audible, even inside the SUV, occasionally rising to desperate shouts as the growing crowd demanded some sort of help that the local health care personnel were ill-equipped to provide. To Holly’s horror, a few bodies were scattered about the parking lot, apparently reaching the hospital out of desperation, only to collapse there on the spot, without getting the care they so evidently needed.

Holly curled her arms around herself, the lingering sting of her bullet wound a stark reminder that it could have been her. If the shot had struck her even six inches to her left— she shook that thought from her head as Jean navigated around the hospital, branching off onto another side street before driving another block south, then turning right, heading in a westward direction.

In normal circumstances, the drive would have been lovely, passing just north of the sprawling beachfront and Holly could imagine how the residents of wealthy Long Island might spend their days, huddled under umbrellas, drinking fancy drinks, wiggling their toes in the sand as they watched the tide slowly come in. Beyond the beach, beneath the lingering clouds of gray smoke and ash, the sprawling blue carpet of the Atlantic Ocean spread out across the southern horizon, seeming unbothered by the trials and tribulations of mankind.

Holly envied that, to a degree, the raw power of the massive ocean which would simply continue existing long after humanity had been stomped out of existence. Water just like that covered the majority of the Earth and eventually would likely cover it all. She shivered uncontrollably, the existential reality of humanity’s future driving a bone-deep chill through her young body. She was twenty years old, a new college student with her entire life ahead of her. She should be worrying about homework and midterms, about boys and her weekend plans, not about the future of humanity and the mysteries of what lies beyond. Closing her eyes, she rested her

head back against the seat behind her, forcing her breath to steady within her lungs.

“It’s okay.” Jean’s voice was so soft, Holly almost couldn’t hear it, but she felt the gentle press of her mother’s hand against her knee. Fingers squeezed gently and despite everything they were facing, Holly was just a little bit calmer. “It’s going to be okay.”

It wasn’t ‘going to be okay’ of course. Nothing was ever going to be okay again— but they were alive— they were moving— and they had a purpose, which was more than could be said for many others at that moment. Holly supposed the word ‘okay’ was relative and compared to the alternative, perhaps her mother was right— perhaps things really just might be okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

To the north, Queens burned as the SUV continued west, Holly bent over the map pressed to her lap.

“Here. Take a right up here. You’re looking for the Marine Parkway Bridge. That will take us over Jamaica Bay and up into Brooklyn, bypassing Queens entirely.”

Jean nodded and peered through the windshield, searching the distance through the lingering smoke. The water of the bay shimmered to their right, a vast, oval-shaped parking lot filling nearly the entire southern horizon. Dozens of cars still filled various slots within the lot, though several had apparently tried to leave, the alternate lane of traffic filled with bumper-to-bumper vehicles. There were certainly more cars than there had been on the westward lane, but Jean had been able to navigate around them fairly easily, though there was concern about whether or not the simple, two-lane bridge would be travelable.

The answer wasn’t a simple yes or no— tight clusters of vehicles converged on the entrance to the narrow bridge, but there was just enough of a gap that Jean was able to wedge the SUV through, though it involved some nudges and scrapes, which ground her teeth together.

“The paint job isn’t a priority, Mom.” Holly gripped her arm rest, bracing herself as the mid-sized vehicle inched forward, shoving a small hatchback sideways to make enough room to squeeze through.

“I’m not just worried about the paint job— we need to keep this thing running.” They pushed through the wider gap and merged onto the bridge and continued to inch forward, snaking through some narrow spaces between vehicles. “Speaking of which.” Jean tipped her chin down, looking toward the dashboard. “We’re going to need to find some gas along the way.”

“Plenty of options here,” Holly remarked, gesturing to the throng of vehicles surrounding them.

“I suppose so.” Jean glanced in the rear-view mirror, then looked to her right again, sighed and tapped the brakes, bringing the SUV to a stop. “I guess it’s about time I brush up on my fuel siphoning skills.”

“Brushed up? You mean— you’ve done it before?”

Jean shrugged and lifted her eyebrows, tossing her daughter a knowing look. “Sure. But it’s not like I was stealing a car or something.” She chuckled and looked through the windshield at the ocean of vehicles before them. “Your father and I— we were supposed to have dinner with his parents. Before they moved down to Florida. His dad was a real stickler, you know? You had to be right on time, couldn’t be five minutes late. Well, turns out in our haste to get home the night before, we hadn’t really noticed that the car was out of gas. I mean, it had some, but probably not enough to make it back to the nearest gas station, which was four or five miles away.”

“So, what did you do?”

Jean still had that distant look on her face, lips creased in a soft smile. “Went around to every piece of equipment we had — lawn mower, snowblower— thankfully they all took standard unleaded. Siphoned gas, used it in the car and we were able to inch it to the nearest gas station okay.”

“You guys were rebels, huh?”

“Hey, you grow up in the back woods of Maine, you find drama wherever you can get it.”

“Hello? I did grow up in back woods Maine, thanks to you.”

“It was good for you, kid,” Jean said, looking at Holly and punching her lightly in the shoulder. “Toughened you up.”

“If you say so.” They stepped out of the car and Keegan did the same, closing Bucky in the back seat. Jean made her way around to the rear hatch and cracked it open, lifting out one of the empty gas cans they’d brought along with them. As they’d made their way across Long Island, they’d stopped a few times to top off the tank with the gas in the cans, but the cans were all empty.

“Keegan,” Jean asked, leaning around the side of the car, “start checking some of these vehicles, okay? See if they’re unlocked? These days you have to activate some sort of manual release inside the car to open the gas cap.”

Keegan nodded, seemingly glad to have an assignment, and ran around the front of the car to start checking surrounding vehicles.

“I guess it’s a good thing we didn’t invest in that electric vehicle like dad wanted us to last year, huh?” Holly strode to a nearby minivan and tested the front door. Surprisingly, it opened on the first try.

“Well, it’s a double-edged sword. There’s bound to be a huge fuel shortage because of this crisis— if the power was still on, we might be better off. But of course, these days, a fuel shortage means a power outage, too, so— you can’t really have one without the other.”

Holly bent low and triggered the manual gas release.

“Nice thing about electric,” Jean continued, walking toward the rear cap, which was sitting ajar, “is that they’ve got fewer moving parts, you know? Less maintenance required. Long term, if the power ever comes back on, that might be the best idea.”

“If the power comes back on?”

Jean’s shoulders slumped as she set the gas can on the ground and returned to the SUV’s hatch. Slowly, she removed

everything that was within the rear of the vehicle, then pried up the mat and dug around in the wheel well where the spare tire was tucked.

“I said what I said,” she replied, her voice coming from behind the vehicle. “Don’t read too much into it.”

“Tough not to.”

Jean returned with a coil of clear, rubber hose and a funnel, pulled from the maintenance kit they kept in the car.

“Here’s another one!” Keegan shouted from a short distance away, waving his hand by a Cadillac, its gas cap also ajar.

“Great job!” Jean waved her approval, then fed the rubber hose into the fuel tank and pushed the funnel into the gas can, after she’d unscrewed the cap and nozzle. “How about we alternate?”

“Alternate?”

“I’ll do this one, you do the next.”

Holly’s face clenched, her lips peeling wide in disgust. “I just figured—”

“You just figured what? Your mother would drink all the gas? Ohhh no, this is a team sport, kid.” She crouched, holding up one end of the hose. “Watch and learn, your turn’s next.”

Holly sighed, rolled her eyes, but nodded her understanding.

“We’re using clear tubing,” Jean said, lifting the coil so Holly could see, “so it’s easier to tell where the gas is, that way, I can stop sucking when it gets close and lower the risk of drinking a few gallons of unleaded.” She blew gently into the tube and listened closely. “I hear bubbles, so there’s definitely gas in the tank.” Looking back at her daughter, she resumed her professorial tone. “In a perfect world, we’d have a siphon kit, which comes with its own manual pump, but—well— it’s not a perfect world. So, I need to suck air in this side to create suction, then let gravity continue to force the gas through the tube. Understand?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Jean nodded, then pursed her lips around the end of the tube and began to draw air, her cheeks deflating. As Holly watched, amber liquid slowly began to creep forward from the tank, rising through the tube, drawing closer and closer, her mother’s eyes focused keenly on the level of discoloration. Just as it was about to reach her lips, she drew back and crimped the tube tightly with her fingers, then lowered the end and released. Gas slid through the tube, splashed into the funnel, then swirled down through the opening of the gas can, filling the insides.

“See? Not so hard. I didn’t even taste it.”

“You look like a woman with lots of practice.”

“Trust me, you get a mouthful of gas just once and you’ll do whatever you can to not go through that again.” The gas continued to flow through the tube, the sound of liquid hitting liquid echoing from within the confines of the can on the ground.

“Here’s another one!” Keegan shouted again, pointing to another opened gas cap.

“Great job! Keep it up!” Jean stood, using the car to push herself to her feet, wincing as she straightened her stiff back. “You ready to give this a shot?”

She wasn’t, but Holly nodded anyway, bracing herself for the pleasantries of gas in her mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

All in all, they spent almost an hour on the bridge, moving through various different cars and trucks, siphoning the fuel, topping off the tank of the SUV, then siphoning some more to make sure they had as much reserve gas in the cans as possible for their long trek south toward Florida. Holly smacked her lips and made a face, the taste of unleaded still on her tongue and her lips, boiling the acid in her stomach.

“You okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Holly complained, hoping her mother felt guilty but knowing the likelihood was slim. Jean had been right, it had only taken one mouthful of gas to show Holly the benefits of being more careful and so she’d performed the rest of her tasks expertly, not tasting fuel at all the rest of the way. Once had been more than enough, however and even after drinking almost an entire bottle of water, she wondered if she’d ever get the taste of gas out of her mouth. Keegan chuckled in the back seat.

“Watch yourself, kid— next time it’s your turn.” Holly twisted and shot him a menacing glare, which he met with well-practiced wide-eyed innocence. Jean started the car and stared at the fuel gauge for a long moment as the needle crept up and up and up, finally tapping out at close to full. Unlike at a normal pump, there was no safety valve cut off that allowed you to fill the tank just right, so they’d had to approximate, and she nodded her silent approval at how close they’d gotten to filling the tank. It had been a job well done. Inching forward, she veered around a delivery truck and traveled a

narrow shoulder for a time, picking up some speed, trying to make up for lost time.

Less than fifteen minutes later, they were crossing from the bridge to the mainland, travelling over a sandy beach and passing by the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority building at the side of the road, which was dark and seeming uninhabited. Vehicles thinned out, allowing them to move a bit faster. Smoke spiraled up from the right side of the road ahead and they passed a visitors center with an attached sports arena which was nearly enveloped in a column of gray and black, the roof of both buildings obscured by the smoke. The northwest trek of the road they drove plunged headlong into a cloverleaf intersection beyond, the Belt Parkway moving east-to-west and based on the glittering shine of the elevated roadway, both lanes were likely clotted with vehicles. Sure enough, as they neared, the entrance and exit ramps were impassable, traffic congealed into metal and glass scabs, preventing anything else from passing through.

They continued onward in silence, past a sprawling, but abandoned golf course, then hung a left hand turn as the relative wilderness slammed head-first into urban congestion, a stoic wall of houses and structures creating an abutment of sorts south of the borough of Brooklyn. A large shopping center to the right trailed twists of smoke, scattered fires peppering its surrounding buildings and Jean turned left, moving southwest down Avenue U, which required some creative and defensive driving to weave in and out of immobile traffic.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Holly opened the glove compartment.

“Aren’t you my navigator?”

Holly clawed the map from its alcove and closed the glove compartment again, desperately unfolding the paper to get her bearings. Scattered trees lined the left of the road, a playground built upon a concrete slab looking solemn and forlorn without the happy children accompanying it. Avenue U stretched out ahead barreling relentlessly toward the seemingly impenetrable urban wasteland that filled the horizon. More

smoke rose from various buildings beyond, thinner contrails, upward twisting tails of gray, scattered about a dozen or so different locations within view.

“Take a left and head south, down toward Brighton Beach. I think we can get around the worst of it that way.”

Jean followed her daughter’s directions at the intersection where Avenue U met a series of other intersecting streets, angling the SUV between the tight clusters of buildings. There were two or three times more pedestrians out and about, the sidewalks filled with throngs of onlookers, several isolated, unruly mobs congealing into a massive congregation. Bottles arced through the air, passing just over their heads before they exploded in a shower of glass across the street. People surged in every direction, breaking into storefronts, smashing windows, wrenching open doors, spilling out onto the road itself in all directions.

“Holly... do we have any other choices here?” Jean’s eyes peeled wide. Brooklyn, it seemed, was on the verge of chaos—in fact, not even on the verge, but thrust headlong into it. While military helicopters had cordoned off Queens, Brooklyn, had been left to the wolves, only these wolves walked on two feet and threw glass bottles at each other for recreation. Holly sincerely thought she might prefer actual wolves to the hairless and angry ones that gathered at every street corner before her. A muffled bang sounded overhead and Keegan barely held back a shriek as a bottle careened off their roof, then exploded upon the sidewalk next to the vehicle.

“I’m not sure any other area is going to be any different than this one!” Up ahead a gathered mob seemed to emerge from nowhere, several signs held and raised over their heads. Various words were scrawled on scraps of cardboard or plywood, many of which were indecipherable. A few Holly could make out however with phrases like *Left to Die*, *Where is America*, and *No Law No Peace* among them. Jean leaned on the horn as the SUV continued driving toward the crowd, though they showed little interest in making room for the oncoming vehicle. Slowing to an almost stop, Jean pushed onward, bumping into a few of the angry gatherers, eliciting

shouts and screams, fists pounding hard on the windows all around them.

“Where is America?” Someone screamed, their voice barely muffled by the glass.

“Where are the police? Where is FEMA?”

Holly didn't have any good answers and she wasn't sure why the crowd expected them to provide any and she shrank into her seat, recoiling from the thudding fists that hammered her window.

“Keep driving, Mom, don't stop,” Keegan pleaded, huddled in the backseat, pressing himself into Bucky, who let out a low, throaty growl at the surrounding mob.

“I'm trying,” Jean replied, “I don't want to hurt anyone.”

“I'm not sure they feel the same way.” More fists banged hard on the window, jarring it from within its frame and for a moment, Holly was worried it might shatter. Jean shifted into neutral for just a second and gunned the accelerator, hoping to warn the people around them that she was about to pick up speed. If anyone noticed, they didn't show it, still converging around the vehicle, blocking their path of travel.

“Hold on,” Jean warned, “I swear these people are going to make me kill them.” She exhaled, nostrils flared, then shifted back into drive. The car inched forward, shoving through the gathered crowd, sending a few of them stumbling away, though others continued to converge. “Don't look,” Jean said and acted as though she might want to close her own eyes but kept them open. She hammered on the accelerator and Holly braced herself as the SUV charged forward. The grill barreled into a tight clutch of people, tossing them aside, sending them sprawling away, their momentum colliding with others and rippling throughout the gathered mass. Jean angled the SUV in the direction of the potential hole in the crowd and pounded the gas, the vehicle lurching to where the crowd had slightly parted.

The front driver's side grill pounded into a group gathered on the left side, knocking two of them aside as it crashed

forward. There was a sickening, gut-churning thump as the front tire rolled over something – or, more likely, *someone* – and a scream split the air just to the left as the SUV barreled awkwardly forward, picking up speed.

“I warned them!” Jean’s voice was a shrill scream through clenched teeth and the SUV slammed into another gathered group, some of which tried to scramble away, though others were too slow and were hammered by the grill and sent sprawling. Shouts and screams surrounded them on all sides, but the crowd scattered, spreading wide before them, revealing an empty lane of roadway and Jean floored the gas, shooting through the gap and separating from the masses in a surge of steel.

“It’s not your fault.” Holly barked the words almost without thinking, sensing her mother’s thoughts. Jean didn’t reply as they shot south, angling around parked cars and smaller throngs. Glass bottles continued to hurl through the air, smashing against the side of the SUV, the roof, and the pavement around them. “Keep going,” Holly begged, and Jean did, moving faster and faster, then suddenly there was another car, a vehicle screaming from their left, charging on an intercept course.

“Watch out!” Keegan’s pleading voice was a scream, echoing within the confines of the car. Jean cranked the wheel right, clipping the front of the car with enough force to send the SUV off target. It glanced right, thudded up onto the sidewalk, plowing into a parking meter, which sheared off, sending a shower of coins into the air. Wrestling the vehicle back under control, Jean thudded back onto the road, the intercepting car falling into pursuit, bearing down on them. Ahead, an overpass crossed both lanes of travel, and Holly stared up at it, then her eyes widened.

“Mom—” she started to say, but it was too little too late. A figure emerged along the guardrail of the overpass, arms hoisted overhead. Her eyes widened, her fingers clawing into the dashboard in front of her. The man on the overpass lurched forward, arms swinging, and the thick, gray cinderblock loosened from his grasp. Jean saw it, too and hammered the

brakes, a shriek cutting off, deep in her throat. With a shattering, shuddering crash of glass and buckled metal, the cinder block drove hard into the sloped hood of the SUV, obliterating steel and crushing the engine block within. It struck with such a violent impact that the mid-sized vehicle pitched forward, its rear lifting for a brief moment, the forward momentum slammed into a sudden, neck jolting halt.

Immediately the SUV died, its engine hacked into silence by the falling chunk of concrete, the rear slewing right, a spill of shorn metal and engine fluids cascading across the pavement around them.

“Gun!” Jean demanded and Holly was already handing the rifle to her mother, ripping the pistol out of her own pocket. Jean shouldered the door open even as the pursuing car skidded to a halt, doors opening.

“There’s a pier!” Holly shouted, jerking her head through the slant of the shattered windshield. “A block south!”

Jean pulled the trigger, letting loose a single, sharp crack of rifle fire. One of the men who had sprung free from the car scattered away, ducking low and running for cover. Holly had a moment to tell her that he was apparently unarmed.

“Keegan!” Jean screamed, her voice raw. “Backpacks in the back! Fold down that seat, get them loaded up! Holly, open that cargo container on the roof!”

“On it!” Holly sprinted toward the side of the SUV, opening the side hatch of the cargo container. Her mother had filled it with supplies, more than Holly could effectively quantify. The rear passenger door opened, and an almost full backpack tossed out, landing with a thud on the sidewalk. Holly crouched, yanking open the flap and starting to claw various items from the cargo container and stuff them inside without giving much thought to what she was grabbing.

Bucky leaped from the car next, and Holly pressed a hand to the dog’s back, her other hand closed around the handle of her pistol.

“Stay!” she demanded, and the dog listened. A mostly empty backpack came flying out next and with the dog at her side, Holly repeated the motion, yanking supplies from the cargo container and filling the backpack as much as she could. Her mother shouted from the opposite side of the vehicle and the rifle let loose again, chased by a panicked scream.

“Holly?” There was the clack of a bolt, the soft ting of a shell casing hitting pavement.

“Working on it!”

“Faster!” Another rifle shot echoed, then another. Holly searched her memories, trying to recall what the magazine capacity of the rifle was, but didn’t want to take too much time figuring that out. As if called to her by her thoughts, a box of spare rounds emerged in the cargo container and she clutched for it, yanking it out and stuffing it into the backpack as a third bag struck the ground. It was a gym bag more than a backpack, larger and with more capacity, but it would also be heavier.

“Keegan, come on out!” she shouted. “Load that gym bag with clothes and other light items. Stuff that’ll be easier to carry!”

Keegan emerged from the back seat, standing on the running board to give him additional height as he started yanking clothes free of the cargo container, tossing them down toward the gym bag. Holly stuffed a box of batteries and another small lockbox with a gun into the second backpack, filling that to almost stuffing. She joined Keegan in yanking more items free of the cargo container, wedging them into the gym bag. Everything from protein bars to spare clothes to a few empty water bottles. There was another crack of rifle fire followed by a chorus of shouting and Holly spared a moment to peer out around the SUV.

The unruly mob had come in pursuit, seeking vengeance for their injured, dozens, if not hundreds of angry people bearing down upon them from the north. They were still some distance away but were closing fast— they’d be on top of them in minutes.

“Hey!” Jean appeared at the front of the SUV, holding the rifle. “Magazine’s out. Give me your pistol! Load this!” The orders came fast and furious, her mother’s capable and well-orchestrated commands impressed Holly more than a little. She obeyed immediately, handing over the semi-automatic she’d held in her hand and grabbing the rifle from her mother’s offered hand. She dug back into the backpack she’d just loaded and removed the box of ammunition, then ejected the magazine and fed five rounds into it, one at a time, pushing them in with her thumb. She slammed the magazine back into place and slung the rifle over one shoulder.

“Keegan?”

“It’s full!” He yanked the zipper along the surface of the duffel-shaped gym bag.

“How heavy?”

Keegan bent low and hoisted the strap over one shoulder, grimacing, but standing straight with a firm nod. “I’ve got it!”

“You’re sure?” Holly lifted the backpack she’d filled and drew it over both shoulders, tightening it across her back. She shot a remorseful look toward the cargo container, which was still at least half-full, regretting the fact they had to leave so much behind. “Mom!” she barked. “Ready!”

“Coming!” Jean backpedaled around the front of the vehicle, arms straight, pistol held in both hands. “Cover!”

Holly circled around her mother, taking her place in the road, aiming the rifle she’d just reloaded at the approaching crowd. Jean shouldered the last backpack, securing the straps and began to take a step backwards, separating herself from the vehicle.

“What’s left?”

“Too much,” Holly confirmed. “I couldn’t get a good count.”

“It’ll have to do.” The crowd had grown— thickened, in spite of the fact that Jean had fired shots in their general direction. They were almost at the car which had been

pursuing them, joining the two men and surging forward, toward them.

“There’s food and water in the cargo container!” Jean screamed. “Go ahead! Take it! I hope you’re happy as my kids starve to death!” As a group, the three of them strode slowly backwards, keeping their weapons trained on the mob ahead, putting more distance between them and their SUV. Then, all at once, the group converged on the vehicle, turning their attention from the Fullers to their car, grasping and tearing at the cargo container, fighting each other for the contents within.

“Go,” Jean said, pointing toward the pier in the distance. “Go now and don’t look back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Urbano had always been a man that Pedro merely tolerated, though he had to admit, as an Army veteran, having the young man on board was already paying dividends. He'd been the only one to successfully catch something for dinner the previous night and had managed to locate a nearby cabin buried in the trees and swamps. After they'd cooked and eaten the possum the previous night, they'd elected to stay near the plane to sleep and set out in the morning. Urbano lead the way, using a machete they'd had in the plane with them to hack through the cypress and swamp grass, pressing their way west.

All four of them moved in concert, Urbano leading the way, with Marcel just behind him, Pedro third in line and Carmelo bringing up the rear. The rifles they weren't supposed to be transporting into the country had been handed out and all four of them carried them, though Urbano kept his slung over his shoulder so he could operate the machete.

"You know, when I got my job with your dad, I thought my days of hacking through the sweltering jungle were over." Urbano glanced over his shoulder, his face shiny with slick sweat. "Crap like this is why I quit the Army."

"Your superior officers catching you smuggling drugs was why you quit the Army," Carmelo shouted back at him, "or should I say that's why the Army quit you!"

"It's all semantics!" Urbano shook the larger man off and swung the machete in a swift, sideways arc, knocking through the narrow grass and hacking a stray branch from his path.

“Are you sure this is where you saw it? Seems like we’ve been walking for hours.” Marcel twisted left as he stepped forward, sweeping his AR-15 around, the barrel pushing through tall grass to his left.

“Trust me— I spent a decade navigating in terrain just like this. I know what I’m doing.”

“Lotta swampland in Afghanistan, is there?” Carmelo chuckled. “Or are you talking about when you got bumped down to administrative duty and shuffled off to—”

Urbano whirled around, machete held out in front of him, eyes bright and hot with anger. “I could have just kept this to myself. I could have just set up shop in this cabin, just disappeared and left the rest of you to starve to death in the swamps!” His voice was raw with fury, his cheeks red, neck tendons bulging like thick cables.

“Take it easy.” Pedro lifted a hand, stepping between the two men. “We have enough problems without killing each other.”

“Then tell him to cut the crap.” Urbano stabbed the machete in Carmelo’s direction. “Way I see it, you all need me a lot more than I need you.”

“He’s right.” Pedro glowered at Carmelo. “I hate to admit it— but he’s right.”

Carmelo’s teeth ground together as he took a tentative step through the knee-high grass. “What’s he done? Besides killing one possum and supposedly finding this mystery cabin ain’t none of us seen yet— what’s he done?”

“Let’s give him his shot.” Pedro lifted his eyebrows.

Carmelo exhaled through his nostrils, the barrel of his rifle drooping low. “Fine,” he hissed. “Take your shot.”

Urbano stood for a long moment, staring back in silence at the other man, then finally relaxed his posture and turned away, bringing the machete back around to continue hacking his way through the brush. Pedro and Marcel exchanged glances and Pedro sighed, lifting his eyes in a half-roll before

continuing along, following Urbano's ragged path through the undergrowth.

"Did you tell your father about this little trip?" Marcel strode closer to Pedro, his voice lowered.

"He knew. I couldn't have gotten access to the plane without a full itinerary. You know my father as well as I do."

"Then perhaps— he will come for us?"

"That is assuming he can. I have to think things are just as bad in Columbia as they are here, yes?"

Marcel shrugged. "Who's to know?"

"Yes, who's to know." Pedro ran his tongue over his teeth, touching the rough sandpaper of his chapped lips.

They'd been rationing water since landing in the infernal wilderness, and he'd been hesitant to even sample the swamp water. Given their circumstances, bacteria in the water could very well prove fatal, and he had no idea if boiling it was even good enough to kill whatever might be swimming around inside of it. He hated the Everglades with every fiber of his being and every second spent there was an eternity— an eternity without his bed, without his finest tequila and without the girls and parties. All of those things that being a part of the Sanchez family earned him; and though he detested the way his father earned his money, he had to begrudgingly admit the perks had their benefits.

Urbano paused for a moment ahead, staring at a thick clutch of cypress trees a short distance away, his head angled oddly to the left. "There." A hint of victory edged his voice and he moved more quickly, diagonally through the grass.

Pedro didn't follow yet; he turned and looked through the trees to his left, somewhat surprised to see how close to the swamp they actually were. Dull, green water rippled about ten feet from where they stood, stalks of reeds and narrow trunks emerged from the surrounding liquid and even from where he stood, he could see insects dancing along the surface of the still swamp water. For every bug he could see skittering along the top of the water, there were dozens of creatures he couldn't

see, lurking just beneath the surface. Goose flesh tracked along the length of both forearms, and he stepped back, turned, then followed Marcel, Urbano and Carmelo, who had walked past him through the trees.

Carmelo slowed, glancing back in his direction and Pedro hustled, stomping through the grass and muck, catching up with the large, rifle wielding man.

“We don’t want you get lost, boss,” Carmelo muttered, “if your pops did come looking— that would not end well for us.”

“You don’t have to babysit me, Carmelo.”

“Boss, I been babysitting you since before you could walk. Old habits, they die hard, you know?”

Pedro chewed it over in his head and suddenly the appeal of having Urbano as part of the crew was just a little more evident. Unlike Marcel and Carmelo, Urbano was closer to his age and worked alongside him for his own sake not as a glorified babysitter for his father. Marcel and Carmelo were both trustworthy, but at that moment, Pedro couldn’t help but feel a little resentful— that link to his father a persistent presence, even then. For all of his faults, at least Urbano was loyal to him and not just to his family.

“Here!” Urbano hissed back through the trees, trying to be as quiet as possible and Pedro jerked his head up and around. The tree line had thinned to a sparse wall of narrow trunks and branches, the pale sky shining through the gaps in the leaves. Pedro took a few cautious, quiet steps forward and the faint sound of chickens clucking faded into the background, coming from up ahead. Marcel had already caught up to Urbano and had taken up station just to his left, rifle clutched, barrel pointing out through the trees, while Carmelo drifted right, looking for an alternate approach.

Pedro finally reached them and crouched low, peering through the throng of greens and browns. The cabin was a short distance ahead, surrounded by a broad patch of beaten down dirt and swamp grass. Sections of the swamp had been knocked down and back to make room for the structure, though some of the more stubborn Everglades fauna continued

encroaching on the log building. The cabin itself looked clearly hand built, but with an expertise Pedro hadn't often seen, the logs evenly cut and placed, accented with mud and mortar, the windows flat, even rectangles filled with clear glass. From their angle, he could see an old generator pressed up against the side wall, a short distance away from the fenced-in pen with a chicken coop and a small stable of sorts. A pair of goats wandered aimlessly throughout the pen, chewing on grass while chickens jerked about in their uneven strides, occasionally pecking at the hard ground.

A partially dilapidated tool shed was erected beyond the animal pen, ringed by thick trees, a surprisingly modern looking combination padlock securing its front door. Churning swamp lands hovered nearby, spread out behind the small patch of dirt, only a stone's throw from the structure's exterior, though partially obscured by forest. Vast acres of Everglades swampland surrounded them in all directions, as far as the eyes could see, a trilling chorus of insects and birds singing back at them. There were no other sounds to speak of, even the expected chug of the generator motor was absent and by all appearances, the cabin seemed empty.

Not abandoned, of course, Pedro clarified to himself— the padlock on the shed, the chickens and the goats were proof positive that someone was living there— he just couldn't tell if they were at home at the moment.

“You think anyone's there?” Marcel crept closer to the edge of the trees, which earned a more furious chattering from the chickens, who evidently sensed their presence.

“If they are, you're gonna let them know right where we are!” Urbano's voice was a narrow dart. “Back up a little!”

Marcel begrudgingly obeyed, evidently just as enamored with Urbano as Carmelo was. Carmelo, to his credit, continued to make a wide berth around them, approaching closer to the rear, at a more strategic angle, just in case they met with any resistance. Pedro inched along the edge of the trees, ducking low and moving toward Carmelo.

“Be careful,” Urbano cautioned. “Guys like this—sometimes they have—”

There was a muffled crack as Carmelo took a step forward, the snap of dried twigs louder than it should have been. Suddenly, a cypress branch, which had been bent sharply, almost invisible among the other trees, broke loose and swung horizontally like a baseball bat. The thick branch, almost more of a trunk than a branch, hammered Carmelo directly in the chest, blasting the wind from his lungs and sending him sprawling backwards. At the same time a rope which had been bound around a gathered collection of empty beer cans tumbled to the ground, rattling and clattering loudly, easily heard above the relative silence of the swamplands.

“Son of a—” Carmelo clutched his chest and stomach, lying prone on the ground, his rifle a few feet away, gasping for air. Urbano froze, weapon readied, jaw flexed above gritted teeth as he braced for what was to come. But nothing came—the area surrounding the remote Everglades cabin remained startlingly, almost disturbingly silent.

“I was tryin’ to tell you to watch for traps,” he growled, turning toward Carmelo, who was still struggling to catch his breath. “You’re lucky he didn’t put punji stakes on that thing!” Shaking his head, Urbano returned his attention to the structure a short distance ahead. “Seems like it was more of an early warning system than a death trap.”

“Tell... that... to my solar plexus,” gasped Carmelo, still struggling to get his bearings from where he remained on the ground. “What... happened?”

“If I had to guess, he bent the trunk of a tree around and secured it with a tripwire. That tripwire also apparently activated a little early warning system. Probably figured if anyone was roaming around his property, he wanted to know.”

“So where is he?” Marcel studied the front door of the cabin, which remained securely closed.

“I’m guessing he’s not here. At least not right now. I’m betting if he was, we’d know it.” Urbano inched forward, lifting one boot and touching it gingerly to the ground ahead.

His eyes scanned the terrain at his feet, searching for any other tripwires or traps. Seeing none, he finally breached the tree line and stepped out into the open side yard, just next to the goat pen and chicken coop. His back and knees bent, rifle raised, he moved as if he was still a soldier on a covert operation in enemy territory, carefully approaching the building. His shoulder pressed the near corner and he hugged the wall as he moved toward the front door.

Marcel made his way to where Carmelo lay on the ground and assisted him in sitting up, talking in a low voice, Carmelo nodding that he was okay, though his face was flushed, and pain narrowed the edges of his eyes. Finally, frustration getting the better of him, Carmelo wrenched his arm free of Marcel's attempt at assistance and used a nearby tree to hoist himself up, dusting off his pants and sweeping the rifle from where it had fallen on the ground. He advanced on the house with considerably less stealth or skill than Urbano, heading around back instead of toward the front. Carmelo paused at the rear of the cabin, getting on his tiptoes to peer into a window, then turned and glanced back in the direction of Marcel and Pedro.

"Nobody home," he said and shrugged. Behind him, Urbano rounded the other side of the structure and confirmed the older man's suspicions.

"He's right. Place is empty. I looked along the shore and there's a place to moor a swamp boat, but no boat that I can see. I'm thinking he took off."

"Can we get inside?" Pedro finally strode from the trees, his weapon cradled before him.

"There's a pretty hefty lock on the front door," Urbano replied. "Plenty of windows we can break into. Who knows if there are any other traps or hazards, though. I wouldn't put anything past this guy, whoever he is."

"We can worry about who he is later— for now, let's see about getting inside. Anyone who has a set up like this is bound to have some decent supplies." Pedro smirked as he took in the surrounding property. "To be honest, though, I'd take a roof over my head at this point— that might be treasure

enough.” The group fanned out and converged on the cabin, beginning their search.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Narrow knives of pale sunlight sliced their way through the trees and Jacob blinked his eyes against them. While the brightest of the light was filtered through the canvas top of his tent, the risen sun still roused him anyway and he snaked his way free of the sleeping bag, lifted his rifle, tucked it close, and crawled from the tent to get a look at his surroundings beneath the newly risen sun. Frenchie lifted his head lazily and regarded Jacob with little more than a passing curiosity, quickly returning his attention to a patch of grass at his feet. From somewhere deep in the trees, birds sang their early morning wake-up songs, but beyond that, there was utter silence. Without the liquid adrenaline fueling his jackhammer heart, muscle stiffness and weariness had settled in and Jacob winced as he drew himself upright.

Every mile of his trek from Lexington clung to his spine and his limbs, making them heavier than they truly were, sapping his scant reserves of strength. Even with Frenchie bearing the brunt of the escape the previous night, Jacob's body thrummed with the pain of the jarring ride, his back and arms especially sore.

"Morning, Frenchie." He gave the horse a brief stroke of its round head and a fresh wave of guilt crashed against his ribs. Stacy's face still lingered within his semi-conscious mind, the young girl's pleading requests to save her horse ringing in his ears, especially loud against the silent backdrop of morning. Jacob had done what she'd asked, he'd taken Frenchie and ridden him far away, but Frenchie had been the little girl's last connection with her mother and taking him was

wrong somehow, even upon her request. There was little he could do about that, however, so he fought to close that chapter of his life out and begin anew. Returning to the tent, he grabbed the backpack and hoisted it up, carrying it across the grass and back toward Frenchie. Untying the horse, he clutched the reins and gently guided him back toward the stream, then released him so the horse could drink, and drink he did.

While Jacob had given himself a brief sponge bath the night before, he hadn't washed the clothes he'd brought, so he slipped yesterday's outfit from the backpack he'd temporarily stashed it in and began the process of placing it across a few rocks thrust up through the churning water of the stream. Grabbing the soaking wet shirt, jacket and pants, he beat the clothes hard against the rocks, turning them over in his hands as he continued to try and pummel whatever dirt was in there out. He had no washing detergent or scrub brush, so the water and rocks would just have to suffice. It would be better than nothing, though obviously not optimal. Carrying the soaked clothes back to the campsite, he found a stray tree branch and hung them over it, then crouched low, over the pyramid of charred sticks he'd used to ignite the fire the night before.

Stuffing more old leaves and firestarter in between the triangular stacks of sticks, he flared another waterproof match and a moment later, the fire was going. As luck would have it, the tree branch hung over the fire and the warm air rose from the flames, helping to accelerate the drying process with his clothes. Joining Frenchie back at the stream, he once again filled the filtered water bottle and brought it back to the fire, relishing the warmth. It had been a somewhat brisk, spring morning in the Kentucky wilderness and the warmth surrounding the fire was especially soothing against the cool air. Digging through the pack, he located the small saucepan, the coffee filters and the collapsible metal thermos he'd found at the camping goods store. Pouring some of the filtered water into the small saucepan, he leaned it near the fire, steam rising quickly from the liquid within.

It took him another moment to locate the coffee grounds in his pack, but he did so, then spooned some into a filter and

placed the filter into a portable coffee maker which could be positioned above the thermos. He set that all aside and found another protein bar in the pack, which he unwrapped and began to chew, taking the bites slowly and spacing them out evenly to make breakfast last as long as possible. He supposed eventually he'd get to a point where he'd need to trap or hunt for his food, though that wasn't something he was looking forward to. His rural upbringing meant he was familiar with such things, but it had been many years of relatively easy city life between then and now. Remembering that trapping and hunting existed was a far step removed from actually relying on them to keep him alive.

Retrieving the trail map, he unfolded it and pressed it onto the hard ground, using some rocks to secure the corners so it could lay flat and allow him a better vantage point with which to survey the surrounding territory. Finding his precise location would be impossible— whenever he'd gone camping with Veronica, she'd used technology to determine where they were, although she did mention manual methods her father had taught her to discover their coordinates. Jacob looked at the map and after very close scrutiny identified a few landmarks that he believed confirmed the location of East Benton, where he'd met Stacy and had taken her horse. Using his finger, he traced an approximate line east, deeper into the trees and made some silent calculations based on the speed of a horse and the time it had taken to reach the campsite.

Pressing his finger to a spot on the map among the thick, Kentucky forest, Jacob searched the surrounding areas, looking for any obvious clues for where he should head, when, and how quickly. To his surprise it became clear that the border of West Virginia was only around fifteen miles away, northeast of his current location and that he could fairly easily reach that border by continuing through the trees. He wasn't sure why he found that news so welcome, it just seemed like a landmark worth celebrating. He'd been mired in the Kentucky wilderness since leaving Lexington and reaching West Virginia was a sign that he was actually making some progress, albeit slow. Checking his compass to get his bearings, he made a mental note of the direction he intended to go, then folded the

map back up and stashed it away, threading the compass into the pocket of his pants, which were still damp and hanging above the crackling fire.

Using the hem of his shirt to grasp the handle of the small saucepan, he lifted the steaming, bubbling water and slowly ran it through the coffee filter, filling his thermos with dark liquid. Jacob closed his eyes, drawing in the rich aroma of coffee and though it wouldn't taste as thick or bitter as it would have if he'd used his expensive coffee machine at home, it would still be coffee, which was good enough. Screwing the insulated cap on the thermos, he set it aside, then dumped the pan and went to the stream to rinse it and the portable coffee maker. He set them on a nearby rock to dry, then went through the somewhat arduous process of dismantling the tent and sleeping bag, winding them both all up into tight bundles, wrapped with their string ties, as tightly compressed as he could get them.

Satisfied that his clothes were about as dry as they were going to get, he folded them up and stacked them into his backpack along with the pan and other items he'd used to make his morning coffee. With the tent and sleeping bag tied to the pack, he gave the horse a once-over, then bound the saddle to its back, shouldered his back, stomped out the fire and climbed up onto the creature, rifle slung over one shoulder. For a moment, he stood in the clearing, Frenchie pawing at the ground, then he tugged the horse's reins and gently nudged its side, and it trotted forward, passing from the clearing and into the thickening forest.

Alone, on the horse's back, it was difficult not to feel a sense of aggressive isolation. Indeed, it almost seemed as though Jacob was the last man left alive in the world, passing through the trees and over the uneven terrain with nothing to accompany him but the shrill songs of birds and the scattered buzzing of various insects. His morning routine had nudged him further along toward noon and the air was growing warmer by the moment, but still he sipped at the bitter heat of his insulated thermos and urged Frenchie along, making their way through the vast forests of northeast Kentucky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

As the forest terrain became somewhat unwieldy, Jacob navigated Frenchie down a narrow, sloping trail and eventually emerged onto a stretch of pavement. The horse's hooves clopped along its hard surface as he picked up a little speed, certainly not galloping, but trotting with purpose. A narrow slice of blue sky perched above, visible over the sprawling oaks and chestnut that lined each side of the narrow, two-lane road. It didn't take long for Jacob to set his eyes upon a sign alongside, marking the road as Route 3. Remembering what he'd seen on the map, Jacob recalled that Interstate 64 passed west-to-east north of his current location and was the main road into West Virginia in that neck of the woods.

He narrowed his eyes as he gripped the reins more tightly, leading the horse along the paved trail. Something about Interstate 64 stuck in his craw, a sense of familiarity, especially at the border between Kentucky and West Virginia. There'd been nothing on the map that jumped out at him, but he could have sworn there was something there— something important. He shook the thought loose as he heeled the horse, urging Frenchie to pick up speed, which he did. Soon they were trotting even more quickly along the paved surface of Route 3, angling further north, past an old, white clapboard church. A few parishioners stood outside, turning to watch him as he rode by, looking at him with a sense of morose curiosity. A scattering of houses and farms lined both sides of the road, but they were spaced apart, the empty landscape peppered with grass and trees.

They passed an old cemetery on the right and yet another church on the left, though the second church was empty, almost forlorn compared to the first. A small cluster of structures dotted a main street area of small-town Kentucky just past the church and a few vacant stares landed on him as they passed through. Jacob made no movement to stop or even slow, learning his lesson from the last small town he'd crossed into. None of the onlookers appeared especially dangerous or threatening, mostly they looked jealous, as if Jacob had something they didn't— and of course, he did. Jacob had freedom. Or at least he was sure that was the perception as he strode past on his horse, Frenchie's hooves thudding sharply against concrete.

At one point an old tractor approached, slowly trundling down Route 3 toward him, an aged, overall-wearing farmer perched behind the wheel, straw hat cockeyed along his broad scalp. He tipped its brim and nodded with an air of friendly greeting and Jacob nodded back, slowing the horse a bit as he approached.

"Where you off to?" The man jerked his chin toward Jacob. "Not the highway, I hope."

"No," Jacob replied, tugging Frenchie to a halt. "West Virginia, then farther east."

"Highway's nothin' more than a parkin' lot up that away." He stabbed a squat thumb over his shoulder. "Buncha city folk who thought maybe things were better elsewhere." The man shrugged his shoulders, which were bare save for the twin, denim straps of his overalls.

"I'm pretty sure there's nowhere necessarily better than anywhere else these days."

"Not sure I agree with that, stranger. I'll take where I am over the cities any day of the week. Way I hear it— most of them are burnin' to the ground."

"I've seen it," Jacob confirmed. "It's not pretty."

"Well, you be careful stranger. You got a beautiful horse there— wouldn't want anything to happen to it."

“Much appreciated.” Jacob nodded to the man, who gunned the old engine of his tractor and continued on his way.

Up ahead, Route 3 veered east, cutting close to the Interstate the old farmer was referring to, only a thin line of trees separating the two-lane road from Interstate 64. For reasons he could not explain, that made Jacob feel just a bit unsettled— if there were disgruntled drivers who had been forced from their vehicles, he might be drifting a little too close for comfort. All the more reason to encourage Frenchie to pick up the pace. He thumped the horse’s sides with his heels and yanked the reins, lowering himself a bit as the horse galloped forward, clopping along the empty roadway. Sure enough, through the sparse trees to his left, Jacob could see a long stretch of cars, stalled bumper-to-bumper, filling every lane of Interstate 64. The lane closest to him was the eastbound lane while the far track was for cars heading west. Not that it mattered, as both of them were filled to the point that nobody could get through.

Sunlight glittered from the carpet of metal and glass, a terrestrial starfield of sunlight reflection. The rusted hinges of a door sounded as an old Jeep shifted, someone peeling themselves out from within the passenger seat.

“Hey!” They shouted in Jacob’s general direction. “Get a little help here?”

Jacob didn’t slow, didn’t turn, he just pressed himself closer to the horse’s back and urged him along, even faster. As much as he hated to admit it, Jacob’s times of helping random strangers were over. There were just too many variables with the world as it was, and it wasn’t a chance he could afford to take. Frenchie lurched beneath him, his backside and arms thumping with each galloping stride. As they continued east, Jacob’s eyes narrowed and his throat dried, scratchy as if he was thirstier than he was. Lifting the thermos of coffee, he swigged down a gulp and slotted it back into a spot on the saddle, once again gripping the reins with both hands. All around him, the air thickened with a gray haze and cloying smoke, his eyes physically stinging, forcing him to clear his throat to try and gather up some moisture. Turning over his

right shoulder, he coughed heavily into the crook of his elbow, his chest hurting.

It became suddenly hot, the air heavy and sweltering, but not from the approaching afternoon sun. Then, coming around another bend, trees thickening to his left and falling away to his right, the vision spread out before him. A wall of dark, black smoke filled the horizon, a boiling storm cloud of ink and slate. At the base of the churning clouds, bright yellow flame shone against its flat backdrop, a closing fist of raw, hot fire. Drawing back on the reins, Jacob slowed the horse's sprint, hooves clapping into a more evenly spaced rhythm as Frenchie reared slightly, sensing the danger up ahead. Before him, all along Route 3 and beyond, the massive wall of fire seemed to be eating the entire world, drawing the earth into itself, feeding on it and disgorging it in a voluminous, black cloud. It was at that point he remembered what he'd forgotten about Interstate 64 and where Kentucky met West Virginia.

“The refinery.”

He said the two words in a hushed whisper as Frenchie slowly clopped forward, snorting his acknowledgement of the words Jacob had spoken. It all came back to him, the massive complex along the shore of the Big Sandy River, a huge refinery on the western edge, a power plant on the eastern, separated by a narrow body of water. Millions of gallons of fuel ran through the refinery and as a part of the vast network of connected pipelines, and it would have been part of the chain reaction that had nearly burned Lexington to the ground. Route 3 continued east and he followed it, but as he moved closer to the wall of flame and smoke, embers dusted the air like white insects, trailing carbon and the heat from the fire was a wall of thick, scalding air.

Jacob physically recoiled, dragging the reins around, forcing Frenchie to alter his path. Interstate 64 intersected with Route 23, which angled south, a large park and ride separating Route 3 from the road itself, the refinery completely consumed by fire beyond. According to the map, if he followed alongside Interstate 64 south, there was a bridge that crossed the Big Sandy River, leading into West Virginia. But as the smoke

thickened in his throat and stung his eyes, darkening the horizon and the fire's heat cascaded over him in rippling waves, he jerked Frenchie to a halt.

“Woah, boy— woah!”

Frenchie shifted uneasily, clearly disturbed by the proximity of the nearby flames.

“Let's go!” Guiding him back north, Jacob thumped his sides and snapped the reins, catapulting the horse forward, no longer moving south, but in the opposite direction. Although there were scattered cars all along both lanes of Route 23, Frenchie wove between them, charging expertly along the highway, threading the narrow gaps between vehicles. To Jacob's right, the sprawling compound of the refinery spread out along the western bank of the Big Sandy River, continuing to actively burn, fire and smoke roiling from the blackened mass of the refinery's remains.

Though the dark smoke persisted, the flames died down somewhat along the shoulder and the twisting serpent of brown water was visible to the right, bisecting the urban sprawl and signaling the effective border between states. There was a baseball field on the right, which led into a small hamlet, a bigger sort of village than what Jacob had seen a short time ago, but nothing close to city status. Route 23 cut down the center of town, one and two level buildings thickening along each side. A handful of pedestrians halted, watching Jacob as he passed, a uniformed police officer standing nearby, working to maintain some small slice of law and order. Near a church a well-dressed man lifted his arms, talking to a dozen or so people who had gathered around, and from the snippets of speech that Jacob heard, he believed he was likely some sort of politician.

He was mentioning something about food rationing and a common kitchen, which had elicited some grumbles of disagreement from the people gathered around him. Jacob had spotted a few broken windows in some store fronts, and there was still the stale stink of smoke in the air, though it had mostly carried north from the refinery and wasn't coming from the town itself. The river had disappeared beyond the sudden

thrust of buildings, though ahead an intersection bypassed Route 23, heading west-to-east and a sign pointed to Jacob's right, directing him toward 35th Street and West Virginia beyond. A man charged out into the intersection, frantically waving his hands, shouting to Jacob at the top of his lungs, but he simply yanked Frenchie's reins, guided the horse to the right, and thumped over the sidewalk, moving onto 35th Street and heading east.

An oncoming car screeched to a halt, a local sheriff's department vehicle and as it skidded, the lights flashed for a moment, a siren bleating a shrill warning. Jacob ignored it, driving Frenchie to sprint past and continue onward. As he passed beneath the gradual curve of a railroad track, he saw it and heard it at the same time. Behind him, the police car's siren wailed more loudly, more than just a warning, but a sustained howl of pursuit. Up ahead, three other police cars were stretched across the road, stark black in color with an orange circular emblem and diagonal line angled toward the rear. West Virginia State Police was written within the sphere of orange and three uniformed officers created a makeshift phalanx, letting Jacob know that the border was effectively closed.

Jacob wheeled left, the horse careening off the road, over the sidewalk, and onto a narrow patch of grass. Tufts of dirt kicked up in his wake as Frenchie charged forward, quickly moving onto a narrow side street heading north. Police sirens wailed, though the pursuing vehicle had to move more slowly to navigate the section of lawn the horse had sprinted over and by the time it transitioned back to pavement, Frenchie was turning left, hurtling down a narrow gap between residential neighborhoods.

"You got it, buddy, you got it!" Jacob leaned far forward, close to the horse's ear, shouting encouragement as wind buffeted his head, slicing through his hair, the exhilaration keeping him buoyed in spite of the fact that they were being chased by cops.

They sprinted through another business district, mostly industrial, without any onlookers gathered about, though the

parking lots were dotted with abandoned vehicles. Pale smoke rose from a structure up ahead, the dimly lit building slowly simmering and beyond its massive, block-shaped structure, Jacob saw what he'd been looking for. The siren grew louder behind him, and he jerked Frenchie's reins, thumping his side to turn him left, sending him sprinting across the vast parking lot of the burning factory. Just beyond train tracks sat at street level, running further north and further south and Jacob led Frenchie toward them.

“Take it nice and slow, bud, okay? Nice and slow.”

It was a risk, taking the horse onto the train tracks; if he couldn't properly orient his hooves on the trestle, he could hurt an ankle or worse. But they didn't have much choice and as the police car screamed to a halt behind them, Frenchie was already bounding along the tracks, transitioning to the overpass Jacob had ridden beneath moments before. The bridge rose above the scattered businesses and residences and Jacob kept Frenchie moving, hooves clunking along the rails as he carefully calculated his trek along the elevated bridge. Jacob studied 35th Street where he'd run into the state police barricade as the railroad trestle veered further south, gradually curving around to the east. Jacob was glad to see the railroad ties were pressed hard into the gravel base of the tracks, leaving a relatively smooth surface for Frenchie's hooves to navigate, so he urged the horse to pick up speed.

As he turned to look over his shoulder, ensuring the police weren't following, he caught the winding snake of the Big Sandy River to his south. Flanked on both sides by the massive refinery, which was currently consumed in a blanket of dark smoke, the river twisted southward, then vanished into flames. Across a wide swath of land along the border of Kentucky and West Virginia there was nothing but fire and smoke, the dark ichor of clouds contrasting with the yellow and white of the crackling flames from within its slate-colored belly. Fuel from the refinery had spilled into the river and then ignited, the water itself actively burning. It was as if the world itself had ended in a wall of unending fire, the maw of hell opening up and threatening to draw him within.

Turning back ahead, he snapped the reins and jabbed Frenchie with his heels, spurring him on, the faint echo of police sirens to his rear and to the left. The bridge crossed the river south of the bridge where the state police had set up a barricade, but looking through the trestle, Jacob tensed as a trio of those same dark-colored police cars hurtled toward the spot where the bridge met the other side. Just beyond the opposite coast of the river, the railroad bridge sloped down to ground-level and the police cars were dashing toward it, clumsily navigating the various intersecting roadways between where they'd been stationed and where Jacob was going to make a strange sort of landfall. Suspended several feet above the river below, Jacob was running out of options as the police closed in, their blue lights flashing, the sirens growing louder and louder with each passing moment.

“Come on, Frenchie!” He thumped the horse again, “let’s do this!”

Seemingly sensing the urgency, Frenchie managed to gallop harder and faster, chunks of loose gravel breaking apart and spewing into the air with each impact of his pounding hooves. Fire and smoke to the south blurred into a smear of strange hues, a film that was somehow caught between black and white and technicolor, swirled into a formless mass of grays and oranges. Hooves thudded, echoing within the confines of Jacob’s already busy skull, his eyes darting left to right, desperate to pick out an avenue for escape. The bridge sloped down and Frenchie went faster, wildly galloping and Jacob wondered how much more the horse could take. Angling it to the right, they sped forward and down, air slicing at his face and hair, lashing his flesh with cool whips of wind and stale smoke. The sirens were seemingly everywhere, converging from the north as the downward slope of the tracks hit ground level and Jacob jerked right, driving Frenchie off to the side, away from where the cops were approaching.

A residential neighborhood spread out before him, barricaded by a west-facing wall, some sort of makeshift barricade against the noise of the railroad tracks. Jacob sent the horse charging toward it at top speed, the thudding hooves transitioning from gravel to grass, kicking back chunks of

loose dirt. There it was— a sparse gap in the wall, a side entrance to what appeared to be a trailer park lined with mobile homes, each driveway occupied by a vehicle. Police cars fell into pursuit, thudding over the tracks and onto the grass, their sirens wailing as Jacob drew close to the wall, then twisted left, the horse threading through the narrow gap and onto the dirt road beyond.

The first State Police SUV followed, easily fitting through the same gap Jacob had slotted through, the siren so loud he was certain at any moment the SUV would barrel headlong into the back of him and Frenchie, sending them sprawling. Mobile homes and residences littered the small neighborhood, the narrow spaces between them grass-covered side and backyards, assorted playground equipment, tool sheds and lawn equipment parked in haphazard placements. Jacob sent Frenchie leaping over a waist-high row of uneven shrubs, the horse bounding, then crashing to the ground on the other side, continuing its frenetic run forward. They cut across a side yard and into a backyard, racing past a stunned old man who sat upon his back porch, watching as they raced past. Behind them, the police car screeched to a halt, sirens still warbling as two others raced past, following the dirt road along the front of the house, desperately seeking some alternate path that might provide an intercept course.

But Jacob traversed another backyard and continued veering right, heading south, running alongside the shore of the Big Sandy River. To their left, another set of train tracks wrapped around a thickening forest, south of the trailer park and Jacob led the horse across the tracks, plunging into the trees. They were immediately shrouded by forest, the sirens falling back and away, growing faint as they sprinted deeper. Moments later, they broke loose of the trees and flew out onto a sprawling meadow around an elaborate farm, Jacob sticking to the southern edge of the clearing, keeping the trees close. Large hulks of agriculture equipment darkened the landscape like mechanized infantry, but there were no people milling about and no calls of alarm. Soon they had transitioned once again into forest, running along the southern edge of several residential neighborhoods, staying just out of view. From time

to time, the sirens grew momentarily louder, but never loud enough to cause concern and then they faded completely as Jacob and his trusted horse were fully enveloped in the West Virginia wilderness.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Various vehicles littered the vast stretches of parking lot as Jean, Holly, Keegan and Bucky moved along the broad stretch of road alongside Sheepshead Bay. Voices called after them, the voices of the eager and desperate, a broken off section of the violent mob who had consumed their family car moments before.

“They have supplies!” A voice split, rising above the background chorus.

“Mom! What do we do? Where do we go?” Holly spoke between gasping breaths, forcing the words out above the thundering horse-kick of her heartbeat. Jean slowed to a jog, wheeling left to right, eyes scanning the surrounding vehicles. But the road back into Brooklyn was clogged with the angry mob and churning smoke boiled to the west, a storm cloud big and black enough to darken the afternoon light.

Jean angled left, threading between two parked cars as she moved into a larger parking lot beyond. She held her pistol in her right hand while Holly cradled the rifle, neither of them all that enthusiastic about firing at the approaching mob, who were mostly just hungry and desperate people looking for their next meal. In a perfect world, FEMA would have been establishing shelters, providing food and water, setting up infrastructure. The world had already been imperfect, however and, since the pipeline detonations, had been thrust into something far worse. FEMA, from what Jean could tell, might as well not even exist except in the busiest, most prosperous cities. Holly had mentioned a presence in Manhattan at least,

but that might as well have been in a different part of the world entirely— Brooklyn had been left to the wolves.

“Over here!” Jean picked up her pace, running across the parking lot and further south, twisting around to ensure her kids were following her. Holly thrust both thumbs into the straps of her backpack while Keegan manhandled the gym, both of them running a somewhat labored pace away from the approaching throngs. “The pier is up ahead!”

“The... pier?” Holly gasped the words as they moved from one parking lot to the next, hobbling as fast as they could muster.

Jean didn't reply, vaulting a guardrail along the south edge of the parking lot and taking up station, bringing her pistol around to stand sentry as her children followed her over. The charging mob was still a good distance behind them and seemed cautious to approach further, especially with her waving a weapon around. She back-pedaled, navigating a slope of ratty grass next to a set of concrete stairs, moving to a broad expanse of pier along Sheepshead Bay. Three large boats listed casually in the water, all three of them smoldering, thick smoke rising from their massive superstructures. However, dozens of smaller boats littered the bay around them, some of them tied down to docks, others floating away, slowly being carried by the tides of the Atlantic.

“Are we... getting on a boat?” Keegan sounded incredulous.

“You have a better idea?” Jean joined them down on the docks, looking across the moorings, searching for a potential victim. “We can't drive out of here; the roads are blocked off and we have these psychos after us. If we take this bay out around that inlet, it'll lead us to the broader Atlantic and we actually might make better time heading south!”

“I'm not riding a freaking boat all the way down to Miami.” Holly jerked her head side-to-side emphatically.

“Don't be ridiculous— we wouldn't take it all the way down. We just need it to get us out of the city. We'll regroup and figure things out better from there.” Jean moved to one of

the docks and jogged out along its clapboard surface, the floor bumping left to right as her weight shifted upon it. A decent sized sailboat bobbed along the rocky surface of the water, looking to be about twenty-five feet long and while it had the main mast and accompanying sails, there was also a simple, low horsepower outboard engine bracketed to the rear as well. A low-profile enclosed cabin with a pair of oval portholes was set just ahead of the steering section, surrounded by tall, curved walls, a gap for entering from the rear. It was a narrow boat with a long, pointed bow, the mast thrust up from the center of it, accompanied by a sail, though the sail itself was tightly wrapped up.

“Inside! Get inside!” Jean stabbed a finger toward the white boat and Keegan darted toward it, gesturing frantically at Bucky.

“Come on, boy!” He shouted, waving the dog on and the black lab approached, looking unsure about that particular course of action. Though the boat was tied to the docks, it floated about a foot away from the wooden planks and the large dog seemed unsure of his ability to jump. Jean ran to the stern of the boat, unclasped her backpack and tossed it into a small sitting area at the rear, where the outboard motor had been bracketed. Holly stood firm, feet frozen in place, she and Bucky both in silent agreement about their lack of enthusiasm for jumping.

“Holly, we don’t have time for this!” Jean eyed the parking lot and saw that several of the people were still running toward them, although many of them had spotted other boats and were captivated by what they might contain. Holly slid the backpack from her shoulder, caught the strap in her right hand and lobbed the heavy bag forward, thudding hard into the seating area. Jean was already at the outboard motor, looking it over, evaluating what it might take to get it going.

“Come on, Buck!” Holly crouched low and strode forward, urging the dog to jump onto the boat. The lab crept to the edge of the docks, but held firm, tail dropping low. Voices carried from nearby as the mob drew closer, some of them scrambling down the slope toward the docks, shouting, fists pumping,

eager to rob them of their invaluable supplies. There was a low, growling chortle and Jean emerged from the steering section as the engine gunned to life.

“I don’t know how much fuel we’ve got! Better get on board! We need to get outta Dodge!”

Holly gritted her teeth, bent low and wrapped her arms around Bucky’s midsection. She hoisted with her back and legs, grimacing as she hefted the heavy beast into the air, then tumbled the dog unceremoniously into the boat. The poor, black dog floundered, rolling awkwardly, legs flailing, but came upright, shaking his head aggressively as Holly sprang forward, landing in an awkward crouch in the seating area of the twenty-seven-foot Swedish keelboat.

“We’re on!”

A glass bottle struck the fiberglass hull and exploded, spraying an upward shower of fragments and Holly sucked in air, recoiling from the edge. Half a dozen angry-faced aggressors had funneled onto the narrow dock and were pushing their way forward.

“We’re still tied!” Jean yelled and Holly lurched forward, fumbling in her pocket. She tore free her glass breaking tool and for a heartbeat stared down at it, its handle still discolored, a faint crimson hue, dyed dark by a man’s blood. Shaking the memory free, she swiftly hacked at the rope with the breakout tool, clearly not a tool designed for that sort of work, but with a few rough chops, the rope severed, water foamed wildly at the rear of the watercraft, and it jolted forward, away from the dock. Someone lumbered toward them and threw themselves into the air, desperate to leap into the boat. The last-minute rope cut and lurch of momentum put just enough space between the stern and the dock that the eager thief plunged headlong into the foamy surf.

Holly stumbled as the boat charged forward, chased by the undulating roar of the engine, but she managed to maintain her balance as her mother stood behind the wheel, navigating the watercraft with surprising skill.

“When did you learn to drive a boat?”

“We grew up in Maine, Holly. Driving a boat might as well be a part of the public school curriculum!”

“I never learned how to drive a boat!”

“Then I failed you as a parent!” Jean refocused her attention, fingers tight around the circular wheel as the boat sliced its smooth trench through the uneven waters of the bay.

Jean found herself threading a needle through stalled watercraft, much like she had the roadways with their stalled cars, though she had more room to work out on the bay than she had on the Interstate. The community of Manhattan Beach spread out before them as she angled left, following Sheepshead Bay out into the more open sea. Continuing east, Jean weaved in and out of stalled boats, gently cresting the uneven waves, trying to steer clear of both shorelines. A few other boats on the water moved with a distinct purpose, some people with the same idea they had and whenever Jean spotted one of them, she did her best to avoid them as well.

Along Shore Boulevard, the northern edge of Manhattan Beach, people stood and waved, asking for help, for some kind of rescue that would very likely never come. Near the eastern edge of Manhattan Beach stood a massive complex, what looked like a college campus at first glance, burning and coughing a steady stream of pale, gray smoke, tongues of flames clawing out from broken windows. Jean wasn't sure if it was the pipeline rupture that had caused it or if fire had been set to it after the fact, but that didn't really matter. All that mattered was that it was enveloped in an aggressive inferno and several young people stood helplessly on the campus surrounding the buildings, looking desperate and alone. Jean's heart broke as she peeled her eyes away from the gathered masses to focus her attention on the waterways ahead, doing her best to avoid distraction. She saw her daughter in some of the young faces looking out from the Manhattan Beach shoreline, young men and women who had done nothing to deserve their fate. Yet she couldn't possibly help them all and if she wanted to reunite her family, she couldn't alter her focus. Every ounce of her attention had to be devoted to the task at hand.

The growling engine of the boat took them further out into the water as they curled south, following the shore to their right, essentially the eastern end of Manhattan Beach. Air thickened with gray smoke, an ocean wind carrying the choking air out from the city, dimming the morning light into a gray pallor, almost like dusk. Circling around the shore, Jean steered the boat back west, keeping Manhattan Beach in view, using it to navigate. The boat would have a navigation system somewhere on board, but even though she was familiar with the broad strokes of operating a watercraft, being able to accurately read maps of ocean routes was a whole other story. The best option was to keep the land in view and use that as their north star of sorts, as painful as it was.

A mass of land emerged to the west, barely visible through the smoke and she kept the boat heading directly toward it. They were well south of Midtown, which would have made the shoreline in their view Staten Island, most likely, as good a navigation point as anything else.

“Oh, no...” Holly’s voice was a barely audible croak as the weight shifted behind Jean. She allowed herself a step back and glance toward the north, where her daughter’s attention was affixed. All it took was one glance to tell her what she was looking at. At first glance, it would have just been another scene of chaos at the New York shore, a smoke ravaged length of beach, hammered by the recent disaster. But it wasn’t just another section of New York shoreline, it was the famous Coney Island beach, a scene of childhood glee and amusement, pummeled into a smoking ruin.

Pipelines that had been used to feed fuel to the various attractions along the beachfront amusement park had ruptured, and the detonations had run wild throughout. The infamous Ferris wheel had been knocked from its moorings and had collapsed, falling into the surrounding rides, crushing several and breaking apart on impact.

The Cyclone, one of Coney Island’s main roller coaster attractions was in battered shambles, its familiar frame crushed and buckled, partially collapsed, thin tendrils of pale smoke twisting up from the wreckage that remained. Small fires

littered the boardwalk, the amphitheater and churned throughout the cluster of shoreline businesses beyond the amusement park itself, finishing what the initial detonation had started. As the boat continued west, Jean couldn't avert her eyes no matter how much she wanted to, the entirety of the beachfront awash in dark smoke, drifting out toward sea as the fires consumed everything in their path. She had no emotional attachment to Coney Island, she'd never been there, and though she'd promised Keegan that maybe they'd go during one of their trips to visit his sister, they'd never managed to make it happen.

Because of that, and more, there was a hard, jagged rock in her stomach as they drifted past the amusement park. Something about the rides and carnival atmosphere descended into a ravaged wasteland of fire and smoke was like a boxer's body blow straight into her solar plexus. Drawing in a ragged breath, she turned back to the west, fixed the Staten Island shoreline into the center of her vision and increased the throttle, driving the boat away from what remained of Coney Island.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Scout blinked against the light of morning, rolling over restlessly on the hard, grass-covered ground. To her own surprise, she'd plunged headlong into a deep, almost comatose sleep, consumed by blissful, ignorant oblivion for the entire night. Her cheek was warm from the sun and the Florida heat, and the telltale low tickle of an insect prowled across the skin of her forearm. Slapping it away, she stirred, pushing herself upright, then used her knuckles to dig the sleep out of her eye sockets. Her vision clarifying, Everett stared back at her from across a softly crackling fire, his back pressed up against the narrow trunk of a tree, a thermos in his hand. He nodded curtly, but said nothing, then took a long draw from the thermos before turning and looking out toward the swamp beyond the trees.

“Were you up all night?”

Everett took another sip, wincing at the heat of the liquid. “How’s your head?” He was still looking toward the swamp.

Scout blinked more of the sleep away, squinted and gingerly touched her left temple. There was a gentle throb, but it had eased considerably compared to how tender it had been in the days following the Humvee crash.

“Better. I think.” Her voice was thick from sleep.

Everett nodded and took another long sip of coffee. There was an immaculately assembled fire between the two of them, built within a patch of grassless ground. Several small branches and sticks had been gathered together, formed in a

small pyramid and stuffed with firestarter. Another branch had been sharpened and stabbed into the ground next to the fire and a small, metal pot dangled from one outstretched twig.

“You drink coffee?” Everett nodded toward the pot.

“I prefer tea.”

“Didn’t ask what you prefer. We don’t have tea, we have coffee.” He leaned forward and set his own thermos down, then produced another from somewhere Scout couldn’t see. A small, black, funnel-shaped item slotted over the thermos opening and the smell of coffee grounds sent a growl rippling through Scout’s stomach. She’d never been a fan of drinking the stuff, but the smell of the grounds seemed to trigger an instinctual hunger. It had been a part of the breakfast routine her entire life, smelling the coffee brewing for her parents while she either awaited breakfast or fixed it herself. With his gloved right hand Everett lifted the pot from where it hung over the fire and tipped it up, pouring the liquid within down through the black funnel and into the thermos. Water splashed with a metallic echo within the thermos and a moment later he tipped the pot back up and returned it to where it hung.

Lifting the black funnel from the top of the thermos, he twisted around and placed it on the ground next to his own thermos, apparently saving the wet grounds for later. He eyed her as he screwed the cap back on the thermos.

“We’ll bring the coffee grounds back home. They make decent compost.”

Scout nodded as Everett held out the thermos from where he sat. It was evident he had no intention of standing up and bringing it to her, so she hoisted herself up, paused for a moment to await the passing of a wave of dizziness, then stepped around the fire and took the thermos from his outstretched hand. The thermos was warm against her bare palms, so warm, in fact, she was a bit hesitant to drink it, fearing it was too hot. But she uncovered a small hole from the screwed-on cap and took a tentative sip, wincing at both the heat and the bitter sting of the liquid.

“Sorry, no cream or sugar. I forget some folks like that.”

“It’s okay,” Scout replied, then took another sip. The taste was awful, as she suspected, but she choked it down, waiting for the caffeine to help clear her head and hopefully ease the after-effects of the concussion she’d suffered.

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she replied abruptly, without even thinking.

“Good.” Everett leaned forward again and lifted something from his backpack which rested on the opposite side of the fire. “We’ve been running on a shoestring calorie budget. Figured we might need our energy today.” He lifted a brown wrapped bundle, which Scout recognized immediately. One of her father’s hobbies, related to his desire for preparation, was to sample all manner of different Meals Ready to Eat—MREs. Initially developed as a way for soldiers to bring a complete meal along with them while in the field, they had since started being sold through normal online channels and her father had bought hundreds of them over the years.

“Is that the breakfast cake one? Or the hash browns and bacon one? Or—”

Everett glowered at her, though a hint of bemusement turned the corner of his mouth. “You eat these before?”

Scout nodded. “My dad. He used to order them a bunch, always wanted me and my brother and sister to try them.”

Everett had focused his attention on the MRE itself and was struggling a bit to unwrap it. He had the body of the brown pouch pinned with his left hand and tore at the wrapper with his right, grimacing as he finally ripped open the packaging. A secondary wrapped package was within the first and he opened that as well, producing the main meal in a single wrapped sleeve. Setting that aside, he went through the other contents, which included a hot beverage packet, a pouch of granola, plastic ware, some almonds, some apple turnover and a cheese packet, the identifying labels large and dark enough to read even from Scout’s vantage point.

“Hash browns and bacon,” Everett replied, organizing the various pouches. “We’re splitting it.”

Scout was a little disappointed at that— she was pretty sure she was hungry enough to eat an entire thousand calorie MRE by herself, but given the circumstances, she understood Everett's rationale. He wasn't going to be able to fire up his old computer, log onto an online store and buy more MREs any time in the near future. He had to stretch his meals longer than he might have otherwise. Lifting a small accessory pack that had been bundled within the MRE, he grunted and tore it open. Lifting his eyes to Scout, he slipped a pair of small pouches and tossed them over the fire. Not expecting him to do that, Scout drew back as they both landed near her bent knee, eyes following the track of their movements.

“Creamer and sugar. Use ‘em if you want. Or don’t.” He returned his attention to the MRE itself. Scout set down the thermos, pinning it to her with her curled legs and tore open the creamer and sugar, pouring the contents into the thermos. She screwed the cap back on and shook the thermos vigorously to mix it all together, then crumpled the paper wrappers and stuffed them into the chest pocket of her father's flannel shirt, which she still wore. Everett lifted the largest pouch, which was the main course, then removed the outer cardboard sleeve, and activated the self-heating pouch that surrounded the hash browns and bacon. Slipping it back into its cardboard sleeve, he rested it against a tree to his left, somewhat elevated so it could heat. Scout had witnessed her father going through the same routine many times and was familiar with the steps needed to prepare the meal.

Wordlessly, Everett tore open the granola and blueberries pouch next, then lifted a bottle of water, and eyeballed some as he poured it directly into the pouch, then using a plastic spoon to stir it, then set that aside as well. Everett moved with a remarkable, silent efficiency, going from one step to the next without hesitation, though manhandling some of the pouches seemed to give him a little trouble. Removing the apple turnover from its pouch, he broke it in half then leaned over, holding some of it out to Scout, prompting her to change her position, getting a bit closer to the old man, so she could accept the food, which she eagerly began to consume. As she'd recalled, the apple turnover actually was pretty tasty,

with small bits of apple within the mixture. The sweet bite of sugar made her mouth water even as she ate it, her stomach churning with hunger.

Crackers came next and he squeezed some of the cheese spread from the included tube onto one of the large rectangles, then gave that to Scout as well, keeping one for himself. They ate in silence, moving on to the almonds after the crackers and by the time they'd finished those, Everett turned back to the granola pouch with blueberries. He squeezed the pouch to open the end, then leaned forward and smelled, wrinkling his nose a bit.

“You can eat these first.” He reached over, handing the opened pouch and the spoon he'd used to stir them. “I don't have a tray, just scoop 'em right from the pouch.”

Scout didn't argue, she just accepted the pouch and the spoon, then looked inside. Her father had eaten them before, so the bizarre blue tinge of the mixture didn't surprise her. An involuntary smile creased her lips, however as a passing memory clarified within her mind. The first time her father had gotten that particular MRE he'd placed it all on a metal tray and Keegan had absolutely lost his mind when he saw the granola with blueberries. He'd squealed, called it Smurf poop and claimed he was never going to eat it and ran, screaming from the kitchen. Her father had laughed so hard he'd nearly knocked the tray off the table and Scout's mother had to come in to calm everyone down.

She chuckled softly as she scooped some of the moist granola and blueberry mixture from the pouch and ate it. It was strangely mushy, much more like oatmeal than granola, but it tasted fine, a taste she definitely recognized from previous exposure. Eyeballing the contents of the pouch, she estimated that she'd eaten about half and handed it back over, Everett taking it back without a word. He exchanged the granola for the largest pouch with the hash browns and bacon, which was warm to the touch from the heat activation. Unfolding the plastic bag and opening it, Scout used the same spoon to scoop out the mixture, which was essentially moist potatoes with bacon bits mixed within. Scout had long loved

hash browns, which had been part of the reason her father had wanted to try the MRE to begin with, but much of that love came from the crisp of the outer shell. There was none of that crispness with the MRE, of course, but to her surprise, the taste was actually very close to what she was used to.

Hungrily, she devoured several spoonful's of the mixture and was disappointed when she realized that she'd rapidly consumed half of it in a matter of seconds. Once the food had settled, she was certain her hunger would satiate a bit, but staring down into the pouch, she so badly wanted to scarf down the rest, but handed it back over to Everett, who nodded a curt thanks and took it back. While she'd been eating, he'd used the included drink mixture and some water to fill another foldable cup with orange electrolyte drink and had already drunk half of it. Giving the rest of it to Scout, he ignored her initial dismissal.

“Gotta drink it. You need the electrolytes.”

“That stuff is gross.” She wrinkled her nose. The drink was the only thing about the breakfast MRE that she'd never liked. “My dad never made me drink it after I tried it the first time.”

“It's not about taste, kid. You need it. Just because your dad spoiled you doesn't mean the rest of the world will.”

She grabbed the cup from his hand and scowled back at him. “My dad didn't spoil me.”

Everett rolled his eyes. “Kids these days— every one of them is spoiled.” His eyes darted away from hers at the mention of the word ‘kids’. “None of ‘em appreciates the sacrifices it took to get them their cell phones and coffee baristas. They don't get what freedom or oppression really mean.”

“You don't know me.”

“No offense kid, but I don't want to know you. I don't need to know you. This is a temporary arrangement between you and me. I get that your dad let you sneak MREs off his tray, but your dad ain't here, and—”

“My dad’s dead,” Scout spat and tossed the empty cup back toward Everett. He looked at her, his brow furrowed, a spoonful of hash browns and bacon halfway to his lips, shrouded in the pale beard, which was somewhat discolored from what he’d already eaten. Scout bolted upright, standing swiftly, yanking her thermos up with her. Turning away from the fire and from Everett, she stalked back toward the truck, in desperate need of some time to herself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Scout froze as she approached the vehicle, which remained concealed within the assembled foliage of the surrounding trees. It wasn't so much what she saw as what she heard. There was a low, telltale growling coming from the distance, but not the natural, animal growl of a predator— it was the metallic grind of an engine, and not just one engine, but two or three. Slowing her pace, she crept toward the truck, lowering to a crouch to avoid being spotted through the trees covering the vehicle. She reached the front of the truck and ducked low, using it for cover as she peered along the slope of the hood, out toward the road beyond.

The first Humvee appeared a moment later, the military vehicle making its way along the narrow road between towns that they'd traveled to come back to where the boat landing was, a short distance north of their current location. Colored in drab green, the familiar looking military vehicle continued along, the silhouettes of figures within visible from where Scout stood. Then, the first Humvee slowed, its engine drawing quieter until the vehicle halted with a low, mechanical rattle. A second Humvee followed, slowly rolling after the first, then eased off to the side of the road behind the other, both of them falling silent.

Voices carried from within as one of the doors opened and a soldier stepped out, dressed in full camouflage, a rifle slung over one shoulder.

“I swear you have the bladder of a seventy-year-old man!”

“When you gotta go, you gotta go!”

“We’re supposed to be in Okeechobee by lunch. If you stop to piss every hour, we’re gonna be late!”

“Well excuse me for drinking two extra cups of coffee this morning!”

“You only drank those extra cups so you could flirt with the FEMA girl. I don’t know why she didn’t cut you off— it’s not like they’ve got extra to spare!”

“She didn’t cut me off because she loves me. You watch, me and her—”

“You and her what? Damn civilization itself is crumbling around us and y’all are trying to find your next date!”

Scout huddled tightly to the front of the truck, her fingers pressed to the sloped hood, her eyes peering over its slanted surface at the two Humvees across the narrow street. She began to question how well they’d concealed the vehicle, picturing all these nightmare scenarios where the soldiers would spot the vehicle and come over, looking for them. In one of those nightmare scenarios, Everett shot the soldiers in cold blood, a horrific reminder of what had happened the night before, a reminder of something Scout would have been more than happy to forget entirely.

The young men in camouflage talked in lower voices to each other while the other one relieved himself on the side of the road.

“You hear about Orlando? They ran out of food— refugees revolted up there.”

“No freaking way.”

“That’s what I hear. FEMA was forced to pull out. Talking about relocating to Tampa.”

“Son of a—”

“Ain’t the only place that’s happening. They got emergency services stretched so damn thin and they expect guys like us to fill in the cracks.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised Miami is still standing. We’re holding that place together with duct tape at this point.”

“Not even. Scotch tape. Duct tape is at least pretty strong stuff. Problem is, with Orlando going down, that’s going to throw supply chain sideways, too. We had logistics guys there who were coordinating distribution. I’ve been trying to reach Sergeant Keeler since I first heard about Orlando, guy’s fallen off the map.”

“Not good.”

“Ain’t nothing about this that’s good. Sometimes I wonder why I’m bothering.”

“Because if we don’t, we’ll get court martialed?”

“So what? What the hell does getting court martialed matter now? There ain’t no law and order anymore. Guys like us, we’re putting ourselves in harm’s way every day.”

“We also have a guaranteed roof over our head and three squares a day, man. Families are taken care of, too, at least to a degree. You ask me, we actually got it better than most.” The young man shrugged and smirked. “Besides— you get to hang out with me all day. Ain’t such a bad racket, is it?”

“I think I’d rather be court martialed.”

“Funny guy. Real funny guy.”

A figure loomed next to Scout, the shadow falling across her vision, and she forced her lips to clamp shut so she wouldn’t shriek in surprise. Everett drew up next to her, glaring across the street in the direction of the two Humvees.

“You should turn yourself over to them.”

“Wait— what?” She twisted around, shrinking away from him. “N— no!” Her voice was a whispered hiss.

“I took you in to help you recover from the accident. You’re doing better. Best place for you is one of those camps. At least until your parents—” his voice drifted into silence. “Until your mother can get to you.”

“You heard them— Orlando has fallen. There isn’t enough food and water. I don’t want to go to one of those camps.”

“You’re not staying with me.” Everett spoke through gritted teeth.

“I— I thought— you were taking me to my grandparents? After we fixed the generator.”

The old man exhaled, his nostrils flaring. “You’ve got a free ride right there. They’re much better equipped to take care of you than I am.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me,” Scout snapped, her voice getting dangerously loud. “I never asked for that.”

Everett pressed his gloved finger to his lips, his eyes narrowing to twin, dark slits. His lips parted for a moment as if he might speak, but he didn’t. Across the street, the soldier who had stopped for a bathroom break returned to the lead Humvee, making small talk with the others. There was a chorus of laughter as everyone filed back into the Humvees, though one soldier lingered out on the road for a time. He looked in their direction for a long, tense moment, head angled, scrutinizing the tree line.

Scout’s heartbeat hammered in her ears; her breath clutched tight in the closed fist of her lungs. She didn’t move, didn’t even breathe, just waited, her body tense and rigid, anticipating what might come next.

“Come on! Get your ass in the Humvee! You were the one complaining we were gonna be late!”

The soldier remained standing outside, looking straight at them for another long, drawn out moment. Finally, his rigid spine slackened, his posture relaxing, and he turned back toward the first Humvee. He filed back inside and both engines gunned loudly to life. A moment later the two vehicles pulled away from the side of the road and ambled north, disappearing from view.

“I don’t get it.” Everett stood from where he’d crouched, turning toward Scout. “That was a free ride right there. They would have taken you to one of the camps. Helped you get in touch with your family.”

“I don’t want to be in one of their camps!” Scout couldn’t understand why Everett didn’t get it. “Fenced in, force-fed whatever they’ll give me.”

“Being force-fed is better than starving, kid.” Everett stormed back toward the fire.

“I’m sorry I’m such a burden!” She shouted the words suddenly, echoing loudly within the trees, the words reverberating across the surrounding swamp water. Everett stopped walking, though his back remained turned toward her. “Sorry I’m ruining your life. I didn’t ask for this— I didn’t ask for *any of it!*” The sudden outburst of emotion even took Scout by surprise, and she stood, back straight, small hands coiled into taut fists. Her muscles were nearly humming with pent-up emotion, emotion so desperate for release that it almost vibrated within her.

“Let’s pack up your stuff.” Everett still didn’t turn.

“And do what?”

“We stick to the plan. Get to the boat, go back to the cabin. Fix the generator. Once that’s all done, I drive you up to your grandparents and we’re done with this little exercise.”

“Little exercise.” Scout coughed, her head shaking. “This isn’t a little exercise, this is my life.”

“Trust me, your life will be better at your grandparents.”

“No, it’s *your* life that will be better if I’m at my grandparents. Don’t try and tell me this is all for my own good. I might be young, but I’m not stupid.”

Everett bent near the campfire and began to scoop up the gathered trash, feeding it all into a plastic bag, which he wedged back into his backpack. The fire still simmered, crackling in the quiet stillness of mid-morning air.

“Less than a week ago I saw my father’s dead body.” Scout spat, sweeping up her own refuse. “He died at the airport. He died saving my life.”

“Listen,” Everett grouched, pausing his clean up momentarily, “don’t do this.”

“They burned his body. Started a fire out on the runway and threw him in it like trash. That’s the last memory I have of my father.”

Everett twisted around, craning his neck to stare at her. “I don’t need to know this. I thought we agreed— no life stories.”

“*We* didn’t agree. *You* agreed.” There was a sudden surge of hot rage swirling within her. A tornado of fire and anger, twisted by winds of hate.

“What do you want from me?” Everett stood and hoisted the backpack onto his shoulders. “I’m sorry you ended up in the middle of this. I’m sorry I ever forced that Humvee off the road.”

“I’m not,” Scout replied. “I never wanted to be there in the first place. We were— we were about to go home.” She lowered her head and to her horror the sting of tears burned in her squinted eyes. She didn’t want to cry, not then and not like that, but she almost couldn’t help it. Her tears were a surging river, trying to be held back by a dam of narrow twigs. Wetness touched her left cheek, running a long stream down the length of its smooth surface and she swept it away hurriedly.

“Well, sometimes things don’t work out, kid. The way life is.” Everett walked to the fire and turned over the last of the bottle of water, dousing some of the flames. Fire hissed and smoke thickened as he ran the liquid over what remained of the fire, then made his way back to the swamp. Crouching low, he filled the water bottle again and returned, using the swamp to knock down the flames yet again. Scout was left standing there, watching him work, unsure of what to say or do, conscious of her wet cheeks and scratching away the tears as they fell. It took a few minutes for Everett to effectively extinguish the fire at which point he stomped out what remained, crushing the pyramid of sticks before finally using a foldable shovel from his backpack to bury the rest of the ash in a layer of dirt.

He returned the shovel to his pack, gave the spot another once over and seemingly satisfied, stalked past Scout and made his way back to the truck. Scout watched all of what transpired in a sort of semi-conscious silence, going through the motions, still struggling to contain the tsunami of conflict within her. She'd always prided herself on being agreeable to anything, going along with what people wanted. She didn't like being contrarian and didn't particularly enjoy conflict, yet whether she enjoyed it or not, she was consumed by it. Yet, try as she might, she couldn't bring herself to hate Everett for his bluntness. She wanted to, especially at that moment, she wanted to feel the fires of hatred, to find a reason to be happy to rid herself of him, but there were aspects of Everett that reminded her of her father. And no matter how hard she tried to shove those away and focus on the bad, she struggled to do it.

The man was a cold-blooded murderer. He'd gunned down their would-be assailants without hesitation the night before. But he'd also saved their lives and had done what he thought was necessary to protect them, not just then, but in the longer term.

"You gonna just stand there or you gonna help clear off the truck?" He was dragging scraps of leaves and branches from the vehicle that they'd used to conceal it. Scout cleared her throat, composed herself and joined him there, clawing away the foliage that had blocked the vehicle, and them, from view. The Florida morning sun was bright, forcing her eyes into narrow slits, a canvas of stark, cloudless blue draped over their entire existence. Somewhere fires burned. Somewhere a dark, choking smoke was disgorged into the sky, blotting out the sun. But that was somewhere else, and for a brief moment, Scout basked in the light and heat relishing that oh-so-small slice of freedom.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Holly perched on the rear seat of the boat, sheltering her eyes with the flattened board of one hand, shading herself from the morning sun, such as it was. Gray smoke hung low and pervasive across the eastern seaboard, though the morning sun remained stubborn, a stoic reminder of its existence above and beyond the tribulations of the human population. The world itself may have been burning, but the bright heat of the morning sun persisted, even if humanity couldn't see it or fully appreciate it. Holly preferred to keep her focus on the ragged skyline of New Jersey to the west— in those few moments when she looked eastward at the vast nothingness of the Atlantic Ocean, she was small and inconsequential— almost overwhelmed by the reality of it all. Even though the mainland was a smoldering ruin, active fires churning smoke and ash into the air, she found it helped keep her somewhat grounded, not just physically, but mentally.

Jean had cut the engine a short time ago, then had worked with Keegan to unfurl the main sail and leverage wind power to propel them, which had slowed their progress, but would help conserve fuel. They still hadn't quite decided where they would set back ashore, but the momentary peace and relative tranquility compared to being on land was relished by all on board. For the first time since the crisis began, Holly had allowed herself a moment to relax and exhale, to not consistently look over her shoulder or be on guard.

Perhaps that was how the other boat had gotten so close, unbeknownst to anyone. Somewhere above Holly, a seagull called, a sound she'd become accustomed to, not just from her

time in New York, but back in Maine, in those rare times they traveled from their inland alcove to the beach. She leaned back, craning her head up to look for the bird and spotted the small boat surging toward them, a handful of intense stares looking back at her as they approached.

“Mom!” Holly’s voice erupted from her throat, all the way from her guts, and she leaped upward, twisting around to face the approaching watercraft. Jean was near the bow of the boat, checking the lines on one of the sails and lurched up, bringing her head around, hair sweeping in a halo with the sudden motion. She hissed a word Holly couldn’t quite hear, but guess was one of those four-letter exclamations she wouldn’t typically utter in Keegan’s presence.

“Do you have the gun?”

Holly clawed at her hip, brushing the holster and drew the pistol free, clasping her second hand around it, hoping to keep the first from trembling.

“Got it!”

The boat continued heading toward them, its engine snarling and if she’d had the time, Holly would have chided herself for not hearing it sooner. Jean moved forward as Keegan emerged from the cabin, Bucky at his right hip.

“Get back inside!” Jean wrestled the bolt action rifle into a firing position, approaching the cockpit where the steering column stood, though it was unused at the moment.

“What’s going on?” Keegan’s voice was narrow and trembling.

“Get back inside, kid!” Holly hissed, taking just a moment to turn and scowl at her brother, the barrel of her pistol pointed toward the floor of the boat. Jean vaulted from the roof of the boat, landing in an awkward crouch next to her daughter, rifle in hand.

“Don’t come any closer!” Her voice was a shrill scream, louder than the growling engine, her rifle raised.

“We’re not your enemies!” One of the men in the boat showed his palms, as if that might prove their innocence. “We

can help! offer you manpower in exchange for—”

“In exchange for what? We’ve got nothing you want!”

“M-mom?” Holly gestured to the starboard side of their boat where yet another small watercraft was approaching, cutting a ragged line through the smooth, blue water.

“Come on, now, ladies, don’t be like that.”

The way the man said ‘ladies’ grated on Holly’s last nerve, gripping her muscles in a vice and squeezing. Gritting her teeth, she squeezed her hands together to keep them steady, still not entirely comfortable with a pistol in her hands.

“Just steer those boats away. We don’t want anything from you.” Jean stepped up next to Holly, rifle pointed at the man who was showing his palms.

“Pretty sure they want something from us,” Holly murmured, her voice a low whisper. Fury glinted in her mother’s eyes—a look Holly had not often seen, if ever.

“Just keep on going,” Jean said, rifle still straight and level. Both of the boats inched forward slowly, getting a bit closer.

“Come on, we can be friends.”

“We don’t need friends.”

“M— mom?” Keegan spoke from behind them, and Holly turned to hiss at her brother to get back inside, but quickly saw the reason for his emergence. A third boat was drifting over from the direction of the shore, one that Keegan had apparently seen through one of the portholes in the cabin. Jean glanced in that direction, but kept her rifle trained on the man in the first boat.

“Where did they all come from?” Holly’s question came out in a hushed, almost frantic whisper.

“I don’t know.”

“You can’t keep us away on all sides!” The man still had his hands raised, his palms showing empty. Holly scanned all

three boats and while she didn't immediately see any weapons, that didn't mean there weren't any.

"Get back inside," Jean whispered to Keegan, "but not in the cabin. Go to the cockpit."

Keegan's eyes widened. The cockpit was surrounded by walls on all sides with the exception of an opening at the rear for entering and exiting, those same fiberglass walls surrounding the steering column and drive controls.

"What are you thinking?" Holly had lifted the pistol, pointing it at the second boat, though that left the third boat with direct access at their rear.

"I'm thinking we need to get the hell out of here." Jean's head swiveled toward the third boat, then back to the first as she took an uncertain step backwards. On the third boat, someone moved along the bow, approaching in a low-slung crouch, making Holly nervous.

"He's up to something."

"They're all up to something." Jean's finger spasmed along the curve of the trigger guard, but she kept it there, no matter how tempting it might be to let a warning shot fly. "Keegan?" Jean raised her voice an octave.

"Yeah?"

"Did you see how I started the boat?"

"Y— yeah?" His voice trembled.

"I need you to do that for me, okay?"

"But... if we start it, won't they—"

"I need you to start the boat, Keegan." Jean repeated her request, keeping her voice level. Holly twisted, looking toward the third boat, her heart hammering as it drew a little closer, moment by moment. The man creeping along the bow held something in his hand, though she couldn't make out exactly what it was.

"This doesn't have to get violent!"

“I agree,” Jean replied, “so turn around and go the other way and it won’t!”

“That’s not going to happen!”

The engine growled to life as Keegan pressed the ignition, a churning foam building in the water to the rear of the boat.

“They’re starting the engine!” the man with his palms showing shouted. On the third boat, the same sneaking person lunged forward and tossed what he’d been holding. It was an anchor attached to a chain, though instead of anchoring himself in the water, he’d tossed the large, heavy object and it drifted through the air for a moment, then crashed down onto the seating area, the thick, iron object crunching fiberglass and burying itself within the side of one of the seats. The entire boat listed toward it, throwing Holly off balance even as Keegan increased the throttle, the boat starting to move away.

“Go go! Board it! Now!”

The man who had thrown the anchor took two broad strides, then leaped, covering the two-foot distance between the two boats and landing in the seating area, lumbering forward. Holly didn’t hesitate. She sprinted across the seating area, meeting him as he landed, ramming her shoulder into his chest like a hockey player checking someone into the boards. The sudden reverse momentum threw the man off balance, and he stumbled, the back of his legs striking the anchor. He went over, legs flailing, and tumbled awkwardly into the ocean, striking the water with an oblong splash of blue and foamy white.

“Go!” the man with his hands raised shouted and someone from the second boat strode forward, preparing to leap. Jean spun toward him and without even hesitating fired the first shot. The rifle echoed loudly, the booming thunder of its report carrying across the vast glass of ocean’s surface. Her aim was good, not great, and struck the approaching man in the left arm, twisting him and sending him sprawling into the drink, even though she’d been aiming for center mass. Racking the bolt, she turned again, re-orienting the barrel and Keegan gripped the throttle, shoving it up to try and increase their

speed. The boat lurched momentarily, but jerked and tilted right, its forward momentum held back by the anchor.

“Holly!” Jean screamed, but she was already moving, tucking the pistol into her holster as she ducked beneath the rifle barrel and moved to where the anchor was wedged into broken fiberglass. Working her fingers between the anchor and the crushed remains of the side seat, she straightened and lifted, the anchor’s weight more than she could immediately handle. From behind her, Jean fired again, a shout of alarm following directly in its wake, though the rifle wouldn’t keep the men at bay forever. It had a limited magazine and the moment she had to reload, they’d storm the boat, and their little adventure would be over.

“We need that anchor out!”

“I’m trying!” She gritted her teeth and hefted again, and the anchor budged, but not enough. “Keegan!” Holly screamed, her voice raw with the force of it. Her brother released the throttle and sprinted back out, head low.

“Everyone *stay back!*” Jean’s scream was a force of nature.

“You can’t shoot all of us, lady!”

“Maybe not, but I can start with you!”

Keegan dropped low, across the anchor from Holly and she met his eyes. They were glassy and shimmering with barely contained tears, a look of panic sketched across his young face.

“Lift with me.”

He nodded jerkily.

“You can do this.”

Keegan nodded again, his jaw flexed.

“Go!” She straightened her legs and Keegan did as well, both of them wrenching the anchor free, tearing it from the ragged, broken fiberglass and hoisting it into the air. “Over the side!” Leaning right, she hefted it up and over, Keegan mirroring her movements, the anchor splashing down into the

Atlantic a moment later. Jean fired again, then racked the bolt and a voice called out after.

“Go go go!”

“Throttle— now!” Holly screamed and Keegan sprang upward, twisting and sprinting back toward the cockpit as Holly ripped the pistol free of its holster. The boat lurched as someone leaped from the second boat onto the edge of theirs, hands splayed for balance. Jean turned toward him, but her shifting attention allowed someone from the first boat to do the same, leaping onto the stern, just above the outboard engine. She torqued back toward the stern, not firing on either man and then a third was approaching, suddenly both remaining boats emptying as intruders clawed forward, trying to get on board. Holly had her pistol free and fired, a single shot at close range, ripping into one of the man’s shoulders. He spun and toppled backwards, hitting the water in a flail even as two others closed in. As they converged, Jean twisted the rifle around and lurched forward, stock-first, hammering it into the face of one of the men, Skin split and nose cartilage fractured, a sudden jet of dark blood spraying from the broken flesh. Shouting in pain, he faltered, clutching at his face and taking an uncertain step backwards, which gave Jean a chance to lunge forward and shove him with her shoulder, knocking him back, into the water.

Another man from her right grappled for her weapon, his fingers closing around her arm and tugging her to him. Furious barking and growling echoed from the direction of the cockpit and Bucky came sprinting forward, teeth bared, closing his massive jaws around the lower leg of one of the intruders. He screamed in agony, drawing back, releasing his grip on Jean and giving her a chance to reset her stance and crack the rifle butt against his jaw. The Labrador released his grip, the impact from Jean’s strike sending the man sprawling off the boat and into the water, another loud splash swallowing the man’s frantic shouts.

In the cockpit, Keegan hammered the throttle and the boat leaped forward, suddenly putting some distance between them and their would-be boarders. One lone man remained on the

rear of the boat, in the seating area, the same man who'd been showing his palms moments before. Twisting around, his eyes widened as he realized he was outnumbered, the other three boats growing smaller as the Fuller's watercraft separated, moving at a high rate of speed. Turning back to the women, he found himself staring directly into the barrel of the pistol, clutched tightly in Holly's interlaced fingers.

"Last chance," she said, her tone offering no opportunity for argument.

"I— I don't—"

"Jump in the water or I'll put you there myself."

The man swallowed, his scowling face staring angrily back at her. He seemed to be searching for some sort of response, some answer to her directive, but ultimately, no words emerged, he simply took a step back, then jumped off the rear of the boat, vanishing into the churning waters as they continued onward. Jean was sucking in desperate breaths, one hand removed from the rifle and clasped around the railing of the seating area as she tried to catch her breath.

"All right," she finally managed, snatching the words from the limited oxygen, "I think that's that." She turned and looked at Holly first, then over to Keegan, still in the cockpit at the controls of the boat. "You did good, Fullers. You did real, real good."

Holly exhaled a long, languid breath and collapsed into one of the seats, letting the pistol rest on the thin cushion next to her. No matter how many times she fired a weapon in anger against another human being, it never got easier. Leaning forward, she draped her arms over her bent knees and closed her eyes, listening to the engine growl and smelling the clean salt of the Atlantic Ocean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Before Pedro had even asked how hard it would be to pick the lock, Carmelo - who had broken into his first car at nine years old - had gained access to the cabin, shouldering the door and stepping inside, weapon drawn. As they'd all suspected, the cabin's interior was empty, though there were clear signs that someone had been there recently. The smell of smoke and seared meat still hung in the air, the lingering scent of seafood and onions as well as the barest hints of roasted coffee beans. Pedro walked across the sparsely furnished living room and placed a palm on the surface of the wood stove and found it was cool to the touch. Whoever lived there hadn't been in for a while.

“Search the place.” He gestured, though the search wouldn't take long.

There was an attached, open concept kitchen, a bathroom, a narrow doorway leading to a hallway, which, in turn likely led to the single bedroom, and less than three minutes later, Marcel, Carmelo and Urbano converged back in the living room, confirming that the place was empty. Pressing his hand to the headrest of the recliner perched by the fireplace and wood stove, Pedro pushed down, feeling how smoothly it rocked and how thick the cushions were.

“This is my kinda chair.” He made his way around it and settled into the chair, hitching a lever to lift the footrest, then rocked slowly, back and forth.

“He's got a pretty well stocked pantry. A bunch of MREs that look pretty new.”

“Did you see his backyard? Like five wooden crates back there, neatly stacked— they had markings from the Florida National Guard.”

“This guy a soldier?” Pedro sat upright, twisting around.

Urbano shrugged. “Not active duty, I can tell you that much. Those crates are stamped pretty recent. If I had to lay money on it, I’d say he swiped ‘em.”

“Swiped them? From where?”

“There isn’t a national guard armory anywhere near here that I know of. Maybe a convoy rolling through?”

“So, this dude, whoever he is, single-handedly ambushed a National Guard convoy and stole their supplies?”

“What makes you say single-handedly?”

“Look at this place.” Pedro lowered the footrest and stood, the recliner gently rocking back and forth. “No way more than one person lives here.”

“Maybe they do— they’re just real close.” Carmelo lifted his eyebrows comically.

“You didn’t see the bed in that bedroom.” Urbano shook his head. “A glorified cot. Ain’t no way this dude is sharing that with someone.”

“Anything else of note?” Pedro took a walk over to the kitchen to get his own look at the pantry.

“A locked gun cabinet on the wall in the bedroom. Got a pretty nasty lock on it, biometrics and combination; I don’t think Carmelo is picking that one.”

“We’ll see about that.” Carmelo rubbed his hands together and walked toward the bedroom, disappearing down the hall. Pedro stood in the kitchen, which looked exactly like what it was: an old rustic hunting cabin sort of kitchen. The counters were cut from wooden planks that had just enough imperfections to look legitimately handmade. Dug into a hole in the counter was a simple metal basin with a goose neck faucet hanging over it. Wider and deeper than it might have otherwise appeared, the pantry was indeed well-stocked with

several gallons of bottled water, the aforementioned MREs, cans of condensed milk, boxed oats and an assortment of other spices and baking supplies. It was the model of efficiency, not overloaded, but with just the right amount of the right foods built for sustainability without taking up a huge amount of space.

Pedro had to admit a begrudging respect for whoever the cabin belonged to. Clearly, they'd been around the block and made the most of their limited resources. He crouched near the baseboards, holding the pantry door open, and filtered through the items stacked there, nodding in appreciation for the way the cabin's owner had stocked and replenished his supplies. Most of the food was calorie dense, designed for efficient use, but also food with high sustainability. Perfect for a remote cabin where someone could live out their days without being forced to see another human being for months, if not years on end. In his own way, Pedro was jealous of the man, the way he'd crafted a perfect life for himself, with only his own future to worry about. Not bound to the history of his father or his family, not compelled to follow in the footsteps of someone he barely acknowledged, to say nothing of respected.

Pedro's half smile drifted into a frown the more he thought about his father's legacy and his own. He'd refused to join the family business, drawn a line in the sand when it came to being part of the notorious drug cartel. But at the end of the day, all he'd done was choose a different criminal enterprise to surround himself with: smuggling arms instead of drugs. Thanks to Urbano's contacts, he'd made quite a name and a fortune for himself in his own line of business, but the separation between Pedro and his father was wafer thin and didn't offer him much of a pedestal to stand on.

"Check the bedroom more carefully," he said, pushing himself to his feet.

He turned and opened the refrigerator, which held some sparse selections of food, though placing his hand into the fridge told him that the dead generator outside meant that whatever was in the fridge had likely spoiled. A chest high freezer was pressed against a nearby wall, and he pried that

open as well, examining its contents. Plastic-wrapped meat was wedged inside of it, but upon closer examination, it became clear that the meat had been salted, dried and sealed airtight for preservation. Like the refrigerator and the rest of the house, the freezer was without power, but Pedro smelled no spoilage or rot. The cabin's owner must have emptied the freezer the moment the power had died and set out to preserve the meat within a different way rather than relying on artificial cooling.

“Yo— I found something.” Urbano crossed the living room floor and held up a metal lock box in one hand. “Under the dude's bed.”

He dropped it on the nearby counter with a metallic clatter and tipped the lid open. It had been a lockbox, but it hadn't actually been locked— after all, surrounded by hundreds of miles of Florida Everglades, who did the owner have to worry about? Urbano tugged the metal box across the wooden counter with a scrape as Carmelo and Marcel came up behind him, all four of them converging near the tiny kitchen.

Urbano lifted a small folding case from the lock box and opened it, revealing a heart-shaped medal with the embossed profile of George Washington upon it. He studied it, his eyebrows lifted slightly and to Pedro, it was a sign of respect.

“Purple heart.” He held it closer, studying it, then lifted the metal from its velvet backing and turned it over in his hand. “Tough to tell where he got it or when. Can't exactly access the archives these days.” He returned it to its case and closed it, setting it aside.

Before Urbano could reach back into the case, Pedro did, lifting a pistol from within, a revolver with a six-shot cylinder. Although he was an arms dealer, the weapon he held was likely older than he was, and he couldn't immediately identify it. Despite its age it was clean and well-polished and Urbano held out his hand for it. Pedro pressed it into his palm and the ex-soldier expertly folded out the cartridge and spun it briefly, searching to see if the weapon was loaded.

“Empty,” he reported before snapping the cylinder closed again and setting the weapon on the counter next to the medal.

“Do you suppose this is the right caliber?” Pedro reached into the lock box and removed a single bullet, pinching it between his finger and thumb, holding it out so Urbano could see it. The other man nodded curtly, no doubt within the upward movement of his head.

“Definitely.” His brow furrowed and he leaned in closer, examining the bullet. Taking it from Pedro, he held it up to the sunlight, which shone through the surrounding windows. “There are initials carved into the casing.”

“Initials?”

“PLK. Looks like they were etched there by a blade or something.”

“Who the hell keeps a single bullet with engraved initials in a lockbox?” Pedro shook his head, returning his gaze to the inside of the container.

“Someone who intends to use it— but only once.” Urbano set the bullet down next to the pistol and the medal. Pedro lifted his eyes to meet his gaze. “I don’t think he was interested in playing Russian Roulette. I think he kept it there for when the time was right.”

Pedro chewed that over for a moment, then once again lowered his eyes to the box. A small folder was pressed into the bottom of the box, and he removed it, easing it open and looking at its contents. First, there was what appeared to be a family photograph featuring a man, a woman and a young girl all huddled together on a cropping of rocks with the ocean in the background. Thick, white clouds seemed to float aimlessly along the sky, as blue as the water beneath. The woman had dirty blonde hair swept across one shoulder, her eyes partially down turned to look at the child, while the man leaned toward them both, his right arm extended while his left was off-screen from the elbow down.

“Happy family,” Pedro muttered.

“Not the kind of guy who keeps a pistol with a single bullet within arm’s reach.”

“Maybe not then. Guess something changed.” Pedro set the photograph aside and looked at the piece of paper that had also been in the folder. It was hand-written in an uneven scrawl, though Pedro could make out most of what it said. What he latched onto most were the first lines of the first paragraph.

I, Everett Kinsman, am of sound mind and body

“Dude made a last will and testament.” Pedro chuckled, then turned the paper over. It was a very short document, straight and to the point. “Leaves everything to his wife—well, ex-wife, if I had to wager.”

“There’s no way a guy lives in this cabin with his family. So, yeah, I’d say ex-wife is a good bet.” Urbano took the document from Pedro and glanced at it before returning it to the folder, which contained a few other documents as well. “Here’s his DD-214. Military discharge.” Urbano didn’t bother reading through it, he just scanned the document, turned it over, then returned it to the folder. “Guy’s a vet for sure, which we already knew based on the purple heart.”

Nothing else remained within the lock box and item-by-item, they returned everything, then closed the lid and latched it. Urbano hefted the box from the counter and made his way back toward the bedroom.

“So, what exactly are we doin’ here, boss?” Carmelo shrugged. “Whoever this guy is— he’s gone.”

“Took his boat,” Marcel interjected. All eyes turned toward him. “Yeah, the swamp is like ten yards from his front door. There’s a small docking pin there with a rope, but no boat on the other end. The way some of the branches are scattered about, I’d say when the boat is here, he’s got it hidden. But when he needs it, he takes it.”

Urbano stepped back out from the bedroom and Pedro fixed him with a quick look. “You said this place was empty when you found it yesterday, too, right?”

Urbano shrugged. “Looked like it was, but I couldn’t tell for sure.”

“And you didn’t see or hear a boat anywhere?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe the old coot drowned himself in the swamp instead of usin’ his last bullet?” Carmelo shrugged, a crooked grin creasing his pink lips.

“Does salting and dehydrating meat that would have otherwise spoiled strike you as something a suicidal man might do?” Pedro tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice. Carmelo was a loyal soldier— well, loyal to his father, anyway, but he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. Carmelo grunted an unintelligible reply. “I think it’s much more likely,” Pedro continued, “that he went in search of parts for his broken generator. I have no idea where the nearest town is, but it doesn’t strike me as odd that he might need to take a boat there. I didn’t see many highways as we trudged through those trees back there.”

“Shopping for generator parts takes two days?” Carmelo’s question edged a bit too close to a challenge for Pedro’s liking, but he didn’t react.

“Considering the devastation we saw in Miami before the plane crashed, I’d say that’s not just possible, but pretty damn likely. He can’t fire up his laptop and order parts online or walk to the neighborhood hardware store anymore.”

“Okay, fair point,” Carmelo replied. “So, what happens next?”

Pedro smirked as he turned, looking around the small, but well-stocked cabin. “Seems to me this place is a lot more sustainable than our little patch of grass around the Cessna. Wouldn’t you all agree?”

“It’s got a roof, walls, a wood stove and a well-stocked pantry.” Urbano nodded. “I’m game.”

“So, what comes next?” Marcel leaned on the counter and inched forward expectantly.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Pedro replied, “this cabin belongs to us now. The old man— or whoever it is that owned this place— is going to have to take it from us.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

They passed into the trash-littered town a short time later and Scout was thankful that Everett had agreed to get back behind the wheel. She'd spent most of the trip huddled against the far window, gazing longingly outside, watching as the swamp drifted by. At one point she thought she'd seen an alligator lazily make its way from the muddy shore and dip low, into the water, but the movement had been brief, and she wasn't sure if it was just her imagination or not. The vehicle slowed and she twisted around from where she sat, looking at Everett who was glancing out of his own window, then looking toward a nearby rear-view mirror.

“We're stopping.” It was the most he'd spoken in the entire trip, the tense silence filling every empty space within the truck since they'd had their little disagreement by the campfire.

“Why?”

“Anytime I come out here, I grab some fuel.” He nodded toward a nearby parking lot where several cars remained parked and glancing at the building behind the vehicles told her why. It was an old car repair shop, some independently owned garage, but whoever had owned it hadn't bothered to return since everything had gone south. He either hadn't bothered to return—or he couldn't return, either was distinctly possible. Everett guided the truck into the parking lot and coasted to a stop, then opened his door and stepped out, a sudden wash of warm air gushing inside.

Scout did the same on her passenger side and as she slipped out onto the parking lot, she recognized where they were. The small market where she'd seen the burned-out bodies was a few buildings down the street from where they stood, and her awareness brought with it the realization that the air smelled of stale smoke and burned meat. But it wasn't the pleasant sort of burned meat. Instead, it was the tangy char of something overcooked and left too long on a grill, its drippings burnt into the charcoal.

"In the back," Everett jerked his head toward the bed of the truck. "There are some fuel cans."

Scout followed his directions and they each reached into the bed, lifting out two cans apiece, then carried them back around the truck, toward the parking lot. Everett set his down on the pavement, then returned to the truck, opened the flap on his backpack and retrieved a hose with a sort of rubber plunger in the center of long tubing. He also removed a funnel and strode back to where Scout was standing near one of the vehicles. Without any hesitation or apparent concern, Everett plucked a strange tool from one of the numerous pockets of his denim overalls and slammed the sharpened end into the glass window. It starred, buckled, then broke apart with a single strike, falling into an avalanche of jagged shards. He reached in and fumbled the door open from the inside, then ducked low and used the manual catch to release the gas cap.

"Come here. You'll learn something."

Scout followed his voice and came around to the gas tank side of the vehicle, which was an old, brown, almost rust-colored sedan. The gas cap already sat ajar, and one end of the rubber tubing had been fed into the gas tank, a funnel placed within the opening in the gas can on the ground.

"See this black pump?" Everett indicated the rubber bulge in the center of the length of tube. Scout nodded. "Squeezing that creates a vacuum which draws the gas from the tank and up through the tube. It's a lot easier than trying to use manual suction. Doesn't require drinking mouthfuls of unleaded either." He pointed to it and Scout gripped the pump with her narrow fingers, then squeezed once, released, and squeezed

again. “Keep going. Shorter, quicker squeezes, kid. Get the air flowing.”

Scout did as she was told and pumped the black bulge rapidly. A moment later, amber liquid emerged, rising from the gas tank and into the clear tubing, then made its way past the pump, through the rest of the tube until it finally splashed into the empty can at her feet. Everett nodded in silent approval.

“Fill that can, much as you can. I’ll get a few more gas caps open. These four cans will give us twenty gallons and I’ve still got some back at the cabin, so that’ll do us for a little bit.” He turned and walked away, leaving Scout alone with the siphon. She watched him work, using the glass breaking tool to shatter another window, open another gas cap, then repeat the process twice more while she furiously pumped the gas from the sedan’s tank. Her hand and fingers were aching with the motion, the muscles of her forearm already growing weary, but she didn’t let up. The sun beat down upon her from above and even beyond her aching arm and fingers, a bone-deep weariness burrowed deep within her, a weariness born not just of physical tiredness, but of the mental sort as well. She tried desperately to focus only on what she was doing, to shut out the rest of the smoke-filled world, but something told her that would be a fool’s errand, no matter how hard she might try.

A little more than an hour later, Everett slotted the truck into its small alcove near the edge of the swamp, settling it into the same place they’d retrieved it a day ago. It was somehow far longer than twenty-four hours and Scout struggled to piece together the events that had all occurred within that relatively short period of time.

“Let’s go, cover it up.” Everett jerked his chin toward her, and Scout nodded, shaking herself free of the fog of her memories. That exhaustion she’d had in the parking lot of the car repair shop hadn’t lessened at all, if anything she was even more tired as she went through the motions. Lifting the branches and leaves from the ground at her feet, she spread

them about the contours of the truck, doing her best to shield its exterior from outside view. Dangling branches of cypress covered the vehicle naturally, but their added efforts in laying foliage over it filled in the gaps the normal branches left and within moments, there was no sign that a truck had ever been there at all.

While she'd finished camouflaging the vehicle, Everett had made a couple of trips down to the swamp, digging out the airboat and loading it up with their supplies. The full backpacks they'd stuffed with gear from the hardware store, the cans of gas and other random items filled the bottom of the boat, leaving only a small space for them to slot in, but they did their best to work with it.

Without waiting for Everett's inevitable instruction, Scout untied the rope they'd fastened to keep the boat ashore, and Everett fired up the engine, the water churning as the motor turned over and propelled them forward, into the murky waters of the swamps. Scout sat perched by one side of the boat, glancing back toward the shore, making sure nobody happened to wander by and catch a glimpse of them as they departed, but she saw no sign of anyone or anything. Leaves and swamp grass rustled along the left side of the river and again Scout wondered if it was some large snake or reptile slinking through the wilderness, awaiting just the right time to strike. Her father had always told her that animals, even the apex predators, were far more afraid of humans than humans were of them, though that gave her little comfort.

The swamp unfolded before them and around them, the airboat skimming the water, pushing through throngs of reeds and grass as the large propellor at the rear of the boat howled its war cry. Once they'd progressed a distance from the shore, Everett dialed down the propellor and brought the boat to a more casual pace, moving steadily along the water, though not at a breakneck clip.

"I'm sorry." His voice was low and when Scout looked over at him, he wasn't looking at her. "About your father."

"It's... fine." Scout wasn't sure how to reply.

“I didn’t realize it had happened recently.”

“We were about to board our plane back home. At the airport in Miami.”

“What... was it like? If you don’t mind me asking. I’ve spoken to people on the radio, I’ve heard second and third-hand accounts. But I’m still not sure I understand exactly what happened.”

“I— I don’t know what happened. Everything just started exploding. Her voice trailed off and she cleared her throat, taking a breath to settle herself. “Wait.” Her eyes blinked back open, recollection coming to her. “We saw a news report on television. One of the TVs at the airport before it all went bad.”

“What did it say?”

“Something about fuel pipelines rupturing. I think they said it started in Lexington? But—” her voice croaked. “New York, too. Things were... bad there.”

Everett must have sensed the shifting tenor of her voice because he finally drew his eyes from the shore and looked around at her. “You know someone there. New York, I mean.”

“My sister.”

Everett nodded. “You’re not an only child, then.”

Scout’s trembling lips eased into a smile. “I thought no life stories.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow, anyway. What’s the harm.” There was no hint of humor in his voice, just a flat, matter-of-fact tone, and whatever smile was forming on Scout’s lips retreated into a downward frown.

“I’m not an only child. I’ve got an older sister and younger brother. My brother is in Maine with my mom.”

“So, the middle child, then. That’s a good deal worse than being an only child.”

“It’s not so bad.” Scout returned her eyes to the water and saw the shifting heave of green liquid by the far edge and

immediately pictured a Jurassic-sized crocodile beneath the surface. She doubted that's what it was, but she allowed her imagination to drag her in that direction. In so many ways imagination was better than reality— especially the existing reality.

“Were you close with him? Your father?”

Scout nodded. “When Holly was the only kid, my mom mainly focused on her because dad traveled a lot for work. Then Holly got a little older and I was born, and while mom had to focus on me for a little while, Keegan came shortly after. So, then dad took back over entertaining me when Keegan was born. By that time, Holly was older and off with her friends or whatever. Holly was never into the hunting or shooting range or any of that outside stuff like I was. Me and dad... we were just... alike, I guess.”

Everett swallowed so hard that Scout could hear it, even above the boat's engine. His eyes remained steadily averted, though his shoulders were square, and his back was a straight, vertical line. It seemed as though he was trying desperately to hold himself in place. Tensing his muscles to keep from crumbling apart.

“That happens sometimes,” he finally said. “Genetics are weird like that. Sometimes the kid is just... wired like one of their parents.”

For a moment, they drifted along, and Scout worked to sort through her confusion. Everett had barely spoken a sentence to her in two days, yet they were on the verge of a legitimate conversation. Likely it was because of how he'd treated her back at the fire; he'd been rash and unfair, and the conversation was probably his clumsy way of making it up to her, some last-ditch effort for him to feel better about himself before casting her out of his life.

“What about you?” She pieced the words together carefully, trying not to sound like some sort of interrogation.

“Excuse me?”

“That guy who you—” she almost said ‘who you killed’ but thought better of it. “That guy who you spoke to. He said something about your kid.”

“Don’t worry about what he said. He’s not even worth wasting brain cells over.”

Scout’s eyes narrowed and she turned, studying Everett—or studying his back, anyway, because once again he’d turned away and showed no signs of looking back in her direction any time soon.

“That doesn’t seem like something you say about a dead person.”

“Just because someone’s dead, it doesn’t absolve their guilt.”

“What was he guilty of?”

“Were you not paying attention? I still have a ringing in my ears from when he tried to beat me to death.” Everett’s tone was shifting back into its previous hard-edged sharpness, the words quick chops rather than strung out sentences.

“I mean before. You two had history.”

“That’s all it is. History.”

“And what he said about your kid—”

“Never mind what he said.” And with that, as soon as the conversation had begun, it was over. Scout inched closer to the starboard side of the boat, sighed softly and looked out over the surface of the water as the propellor continued its relentless growl, the water churning as the boat sliced through its surface.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Jacob had never heard of St. Albans, West Virginia, but signs had started cropping up here and there as he rode the horse at a steady clip, continuing their eastward trek from the border. Following a quiet, rural road south of the main downtown area of St. Albans, Jacob was only too happy to remain as off the beaten path as possible. In the quiet of the spring afternoon, voices carried on the wind from up ahead, the road bending south, concealing the source from Jacob's immediate view. Jacob had identified the Monongahela National Forest as his main course of travel between where he was and the east coast, and though St. Albans stood between him and that destination, thick rows of trees just south of the narrow road still grew, forming a natural barrier between him and the apparent activity around the bend.

West Virginia was home to several national forests, which Jacob had already used to his advantage and planned to continue doing so, at least as long as he could. Once he got closer to New York that would no longer be an option, and he hadn't quite developed a plan for that. A man riding a horse through the city streets was going to attract a lot of unwanted attention, the kind of attention he'd spent most of his trip avoiding. Guiding Frenchie into the trees, Jacob located a narrow path between the clutches of oak and pine, not a trail, necessarily, but a wide enough gap that he and the horse could slot through fairly easily. Voices grew louder as they went up the slight incline, crested the slope and angled their way back down, moving at a slow, but steady pace through the wilderness.

Although civilization was sparse south of the St. Albans downtown, he saw what appeared to be an old barn through a gap in the trees, the rust-colored structure rising a few stories against the landscape. Voices continued getting louder, though they weren't angry, conflicted voices, but the common, undulating thrum of— a party? There was the upward lilt of laughter in the tenor of some of the people speaking and the low backdrop of rock music accented those jovial undertones. Jacob slowed the pace of the horse, urging Frenchie to ease into a slow forward trudge. The trees further thinned out, revealing the barn down below, at the base of a grass-covered hill, its accompanying farmhouse set a distance away, shrouded in darkness. A handful of vehicles were parked along the grass outside the barn, a mix of them, including at least two old farm tractors, an old, rusted pick-up and even a few bicycles.

Flickering light shone through the windows of the old barn, a square of it emerging from the opened barn doors near the front of the building, on the opposite side of the house. Silhouetted figures were cloaked in the light, gathered in tight groups, and a chorus of laughter sang from the group. A large, wooden sign had words scrawled on it, broad brush strokes of paint covering the large slab of plywood, recently handmade by the looks of it.

Neutral Territory

Jacob hesitated at the top of the slope, staring down at the festivities occurring below. He and Frenchie had been on the move for the better part of the day and he himself had rarely taken a break since the disaster unfolded. He would have been lying to himself if he'd said the apparent party going on below wasn't at least a little intriguing.

“Can I help you?”

Jacob froze rigid, perched on top of the horse and silently cursed himself for his tunnel vision. He'd been so focused on the barn down below; he hadn't seen the figure moving through the trees to his right.

“Sorry. Just passing through.” Jacob turned and spotted the man, who was heavily bearded and wearing a thick jacket over dark, denim pants. He held an AR-15 in two hands, though the barrel was pointed at the ground, not at Jacob himself, which was a small blessing.

“Didn’t look like you were passing— looked like you were spying.”

“I heard the music and the voices. I was just curious is all.”

“If you’re curious, why not stop in?” The man nudged his head in the direction of the barn down below.

“I’m sorry?”

“Neutral Territory. When everything went sideways— what— a week ago? Seems like a lifetime.” He shook his head and sighed a melancholy exhalation. “Anyway— the owner of the property decided to convert his barn into a gathering place. We got a small community around here. St. Albans might look big on the map, but it’s got a small-town feel.”

“A gathering place?”

“Yup. McDonnel— he’s the guy who owns the place, family’s been brewing its own moonshine for generations. The same night that the power went out, he invited friends and neighbors over to share. He offers it up in trade, you know? Give him fuel or food— he pays you back in shine. It’s been a big hit around here.”

“I give him credit. From my experience, inviting strangers in is inviting trouble.”

“He’s got a bunch of us who help him out. In exchange for free drinks and free food, we provide security, you know? A few of us are ex-law enforcement, one of my friends owns a local gun shop, we have access to whatever weapons we need.”

“So, you’re the bouncers?”

“Guess you could call us that, sure.” The bearded man shrugged. “Only catch— if you go in for a drink, you can’t bring those with you.” He pointed a gloved finger toward the

rifle slung over Jacob's shoulder. "It's called Neutral Territory for a reason. Anyone lookin' for a fight needs to be somewhere else. We make sure of that." He thrust a thumb toward himself.

"What about him?" Jacob stroked the side of Frenchie's neck. "Do I have to worry about someone trying to make off with the horse?"

"Part of our deal." The man shrugged. "Those cars and tractors down there? Probably as much demand for them as there is for your horse. We make sure they go back with the same people who brought 'em."

Jacob hesitated, looking down toward the barn, then back over at the bearded man. "You'll have to excuse me if my trust has... waned a bit in the past several days."

"You'd be foolish if it hadn't." The man took a step forward, then offered his hand. "Tony."

Jacob studied it for a moment, then slowly released his grip on the reins and shook the other man's hand. "Jacob." He leaned over and patted the dark horse's chest. "This is Frenchie."

"Hey, Frenchie." Tony came around to the front of the horse and gently stroked it behind one ear. "Beautiful. How long have you had him?"

"Not long at all." Jacob didn't care to elaborate.

"You both look tired. It would do you well to take a load off for a bit. It would do the horse well, too." Tony turned and pointed toward the meadow beyond the barn, which was caught between the barn and the old, dimly lit house. "Frenchie can chill out back there for a bit while you grab a drink. Just stay for a few minutes. It'll do you a world of good."

Jacob hesitated again, once again gripping the horse's reins, unsure if a moment's rest was worth the risk. He'd seen death and violence at almost every turn since the processing plant outside of Lexington had exploded. But he'd also seen kindness and people willing to help other people. People who

truly cared about their fellow humans. In the short time he'd been perched on the horse next to Tony, he wasn't sure yet which camp he belonged to. Normally Jacob was the type to give someone the benefit of the doubt, but that perspective had changed in the days since the world started burning.

"Look," Tony continued, taking a step back. He lifted his hands, showing his gloved palms, letting the AR-15 hang loose from a strap over his shoulder. "No pressure. If you want to keep riding, keep riding—I'm not one to force anyone to do anything. But you've had a hard time of it, I can tell. And Neutral Territory is exactly what you need." Jacob looked back at the barn down below and once again laughing voices came back up toward him, faint, but tinged with legitimate humor and joy.

"All right." He nodded, then swung his leg from the saddle, dropping down to the ground between Frenchie and Tony. "Lead the way."

Tony did just that, gestured toward Jacob and made his way to a narrow walking path which traversed the slope of the hill diagonally, lessening how steep it was. Jacob and Frenchie navigated it without much difficulty and a moment later came down to the edge of the long meadow behind the barn.

"Roger! Benny! It's Tony! Got a friend coming!" Tony cupped his hands to his mouth and two more men seemed to melt from the surrounding darkness, approaching across the grass. "We're going to give his handsome fellow some time alone in the back pasture." He gently patted Frenchie's hide. "Go find Deena. Have her come on out. She can get this saddle off and brush him down. Maybe give him a sponge bath."

"Really," Jacob said, holding out a hand, "that's not necessary. I'll only be a minute."

"It's fine. Deena works quickly. We'll make sure he's ready for you by the time you're done."

To Jacob's surprise, he didn't feel apprehensive about the suggestion. There was something about Tony's demeanor, not to mention Roger and Benny's relaxed posture, that made him

feel more comfortable about everything. He was still cautious, of course, but at least willing to give the men an opportunity to prove him wrong. The man named Roger lifted a radio from a hoop on his coveralls and thumbed the call button.

“Deena? You there? Hop on out to the back forty would ya? Tony’s got a friend for you to meet.”

“Deena loves horses,” Tony said, smiling through the thick thatch of his graying beard. “Trust me, you’ll be doing her more of a favor than she’s doing him.”

Jacob shifted anxiously in the tall grass. If the men had a dangerous streak, he was already surrounded and deep in their territory. They could have done anything they wanted at that moment, and he would have been almost powerless to stop them. Still, for reasons he couldn’t explain, he didn’t feel exceptionally nervous about the situation. If anything, there was almost a sense of deep calm about the place.

“Just remember,” Benny chimed in, nodding toward Jacob, “before you go to the barn, you’ll need to lose that rifle. Pistol, too, if you have one somewhere. Neutral Territory is just that. It’s an oasis from all this, okay? We don’t put guns in people’s faces, we don’t start trouble, it’s just about kicking back, enjoying some music. Making new friends or visiting old friends. It’s a little thing that we can do to try and ease the burden of what the world’s become.”

It seemed so simple and stood in stark opposition to what Jacob had experienced so far.

“Sounds... a little too good to be true, if I’m honest.” Jacob slowly stroked Frenchie’s hide and made no attempt to remove his rifle from his shoulder.

“Like I said before, if you’re too uncomfortable, we won’t stand in your way.” He turned and pointed to the trees running along the backside of the property. “Follow those trees along the back, they’ll take you east and you can follow right along until you get where you’re going. No skin off our noses.”

For a moment, Jacob was tempted to do just that, to scramble back up on Frenchie’s saddle, snap the reins and take

off into the trees and never look back. But another silhouette formed in the near distance, a narrow figure approaching from the direction of the farmhouse. As she was illuminated by the light shining from the barn windows Jacob found that he was holding his breath. The woman, Deena, he assumed, was a striking visage with long, dark hair, a pale, blue dress spilling all the way from her narrow shoulders to her ankles. She looked as though she'd been pulled straight from the 1800s to a modern-day farm and flashed a white-toothed smile, her eyes widening as she saw the horse.

“Get the hell out of here,” she said, her voice like spun silk. She strode forward, the dress sweeping around her narrow ankles and gripped the horse on both sides of his head. “You are beautiful.” Frenchie snorted and nodded his head in seeming acknowledgement of the woman’s compliment.

“He’s yours?” She turned and looked at Jacob, though didn’t show him a fraction of the admiration she’d shown his horse.

“He is.”

“Well, he’s a handsome devil, but he looks pretty tired. You been riding him hard, stranger?”

“Unfortunately, yes. The world hasn’t given me much choice.”

“Well, then it’s time for both of you to take a load off.” She walked alongside Frenchie and began to unclasp the buckle of his saddle. Jacob’s lips parted to protest, but Tony interrupted.

“Lady’s orders, Jacob. Sorry, ain’t nothing I can do about that.”

The tension easing from the taut clench of his muscles, Jacob finally relented, nodding his head. “All right,” he replied.

“Follow me,” Tony said and strode past him, gesturing for him to follow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Jacob was more than a little exposed as he walked in through the opened barn doors, the music from a battery-operated old school boom box providing a raucous backdrop to the numerous voices that spoke from within. He'd left his weapons with a man at the front door and watched him lock them up in a cage that had once been a dog kennel, he was pretty sure. That same man had taken a moment to examine the items in his backpack, ensuring he wasn't sneaking any weapons inside, then had nodded to Tony.

Seemingly satisfied, Tony had gestured for Jacob to follow him, and the two men went into the barn, the volume of music and voices increasing as they stepped through the wide-open door. A few sections of plywood piled onto milk crates made up a makeshift bar along the left of the wide-open area within the structure. Upon entering, a stout man with a wide-brimmed cowboy hat and button-up shirt desperately trying to contain the massive barrel of his chest eyed him from behind the bar.

There was some strange contraption set up along the wall on the other side of the plywood consisting of a series of oddly shaped metal pots, several of them with clear tubing that led from one place to another. The lingering aroma of hay and animal waste still clung to the corners and lingered in the air, but it was mostly overwhelmed by sweat and merriment, which seemed to carry its own oddly unique, but satisfying scent. A few heads turned, more than one set of eyes measuring Jacob as he approached, but none of the smiles faltered, nobody scrutinized or judged him, everyone just took

a quick look, then continued on their way, returning to their glass jars filled with opaque liquid.

“Welcome to Neutral Territory, stranger.” The large man with the cowboy hat spoke with a Texas twang that didn’t sound manufactured. He reached a thick arm over the makeshift bar, offering his hand. “Patrick McDonnell. This here is my place.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. McDonnell.” Jacob took the hand and shook it— it was firm, but kind, not the kind of overly strong macho handshake born of intimidation. It contained the strength of manual labor and of a man who valued the importance of relationships. In the flickering light of a nearby lantern, McDonnell’s face appeared ruddy and well-worn, a face that spent a lifetime in the sun, though much of it was buried beneath the uneasy tangle of his graying beard.

“You’re welcome to sit and stay a while. If you want a drink, I’m going to need something in trade. Cash is no good here— hell, cash is no good anywhere these days, but I’m sure we can work something out.”

“You mind if I spot him his first?” Tony asked, leaning on the plywood. “I’ll work it off my next security shift.”

McDonnell shrugged his broad shoulders. “Suit yourself, Tony. One for you, too?”

“Roger took my slot, so sure. I’m off duty.”

Though Tony was apparently off duty, Jacob noticed he still had the AR-15 close at hand, though he didn’t say anything about that. There was something open about the man, something that exuded trust and for reasons Jacob couldn’t explain, he held a certain comfort within the walls of Neutral Territory that hadn’t existed since the first explosion had gone off just outside Lexington.

Scattered throughout the barn were several makeshift tables, mostly uneven sections of wood stacked on more milk crates or other means of support. McDonnell returned and slid a pair of clear jars across the plywood at them. Both men swept them up and Tony gestured toward a round slab of MDF

precariously balanced on a stack of crates nearby. Two old chairs that looked as though they were held together with literal baling wire stood there and Tony scraped one out and settled in, gesturing for Jacob to take the other. Sliding his backpack off his shoulders and setting it on the old, worn, wooden floor, Jacob wrapped his fingers around the cool glass of alcohol in front of him.

Tony took a tentative sip, wincing slightly as the liquid touched his lips. “Where did you say you were headed, Jacob?”

“I’m... not sure I did.” Jacob looked into the glass jar, still not entirely sure he wanted to know what homebrewed moonshine tasted like.

“All right, well, then let’s start over. Where are you headed?”

Jacob chewed on his answer, running his tongue along the surface of his thick, grimy teeth. He’d run a wet finger over them twice a day since leaving his apartment but had somehow forgotten to bring a toothbrush. That was something he was going to have to remedy— infections could start easily in a dirty mouth, and infections led to bad situations in a world without antibiotics at the neighborhood drug store.

“New York.”

Tony’s eyebrows raised, almost in alarm. “Why on God’s green Earth would you want to go to New York?”

“Family there. My... brother’s family. Only family I’ve got, more or less.” He looked at the liquid in the glass jar again.

Technically that last part wasn’t true— his parents still lived in that gated community down in Florida, but he hadn’t exactly been on great speaking terms with them when he’d moved out to Lexington. That didn’t mean he didn’t want to see them, to make sure they were okay, but Marcus and his family had to come first.

“You sure about that?” Tony gestured toward Jacob’s left hand and Jacob looked, spreading out his fingers. Sure

enough, the black bend of a ring was still wrapped below the first knuckle of his ring finger. He swallowed, and suddenly felt the need for a drink. Taking a sip of the shine, he grimaced as the liquid touched his lips and stroked down his throat with a burning heat, the taste not quite matching any alcoholic beverage he'd had in his life— and he'd had plenty.

“Whew,” he exclaimed, exhaling as the moonshine burned into his gut.

Tony snickered and held up his glass. “It’s... an acquired taste.”

“Fair enough.” Jacob hesitated a moment, then closed his fingers again, pressing his palm on the table’s surface. “Divorced,” he replied. “She was... more accepting of it than I was, I guess. It’s been a few years and I just never got around to taking it off. Anyway, she’s... gone now.”

“Ah,” Tony replied knowingly. “Before? Or during?”

“During.”

He lifted his glass jar. “You have my sympathies.”

Something snagged in Jacob’s throat and instead of verbalizing his appreciation, he simply nodded and held up his own jar, clinking the two together. In that moment, he could have known Tony his entire life and Jacob wasn’t the sort to make friends easily.

“You mentioned you’ve been riding hard. Where you been riding from?” Tony took another sip, as did Jacob, both men setting the jars down afterwards. Tony was handling it far better than Jacob, who winced visibly yet again before letting the bottom of the jar hit the table. Somewhere in the bar, the song changed to a familiar 1990s rock ballad and a smile creased Jacob’s lips, almost of its own accord.

“Kentucky,” he finally answered. “Lexington, to be exact.”

“Lexington?” Tony drew back. “Isn’t that where all of this started? I mean if the news reports are to be believed before everything went dark.”

Jacob nodded, his grip around the drink jar tightening. “I was there. I work— well, I *worked* – for one of the national fuel distribution companies. Saw the whole damn thing unfold.” He couldn’t explain why he was sharing so explicitly with Tony other than because the man seemed imminently trustworthy, like he’d known him his entire life.

“Yeah, I’m not sure what to say about that.” Tony shook his head and took another sip of the drink. “Still,” he continued, setting the jar down, “you need to think long and hard about how you want to approach this trip to New York you’re talking about. A place like this— it’s the exception, not the rule.”

“I’ve figured that out along the way.”

“Pat McDonnell,” Tony gestured toward the bartender, “he’s got a whole radio network. There’s a generator at the farmhouse and he’s got a decent amount of fuel for it but keeps it for special occasions. Last time he fired that thing up, none of the news was good.”

“How so?”

“Manhattan is a disaster area. Lincoln Tunnel collapsed, buildings have fallen throughout Midtown, explosions have basically ravaged the entire island. Over in Queens, Ryker’s Island has fallen as well— hundreds of prisoners came ashore, local authorities basically closed Queens down entirely. Rumors are they’ve started running military operations there. Trying to keep the criminal element contained.”

“Did you hear anything about Columbia University?”

“There was some violence there, from what I heard. Angry mob overwhelmed riot police and stole their weapons. Used them to breach the walls.”

Jacob shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed, his back teeth pressed hard together. Everything seemed to be moving way too quickly, he was on a roller coaster without brakes, screaming down the steep slope toward a corkscrew. He wanted so desperately to get off, but there was no way off, he was strapped in for good.

“I take it some of your family is at Columbia?”

Jacob nodded, though he kept his eyes closed. “My brother’s oldest daughter.” He exhaled and lifted the jar, delicately drawing another, longer sip. He managed to keep himself from wincing and swallowed longer and deeper, relishing the burn instead of regretting it. “My brother and his other daughter were in Miami. Marcus— that’s my brother—he was traveling for work, brought Scout along with him. They were supposed to be flying back to New York to meet up with Holly, his eldest. That’s sort of why I targeted New York. Chances were good at least three of them would be there.”

“Did they take off before everything went sideways?”

“I think so but I’m not sure. Marcus shared some of the bare bones of it with me, but not much. He and I, we have a great relationship, but not really a ‘share your entire travel itinerary’ sort of relationship.”

“I get it. I’ve got a brother, too. Well, I assume I still do.” Tony took another drink. “He works for a national retailer, out of one of their distribution centers in the Midwest. Haven’t heard anything since the disaster began, but he’s a tough guy. Has his wits about him. Hoping for the best.”

“Wife? Kids?”

Tony spread out the fingers of his own left hand, which was devoid of jewelry. “No wife. I—” Tony cleared his throat. “I have a son. In his twenties. Had him way too young, didn’t spend nearly as much time with him as I should have. We used to talk from time to time, but as he grew older, he found fewer reasons to reach out. Last I knew, he was in Memphis. His mom was from there.”

“Sorry, Tony. Didn’t mean to dredge up bad memories.”

Tony waved him off. “We’ve all got our history. It’s a part of us, good and bad.”

Jacob took another drink, the moonshine going down a lot smoother than it had initially. He made a mental note to slow down a bit— getting blackout drunk was the last thing he needed at the moment. “What about the government?”

Anything on that radio network about that? Are they trying to... I don't know, fix any of this?"

Tony chuckled dryly. "You're acting like it's fixable. I don't know, man. I'm not sure it is. Washington is in rough shape. Secret Service, and all the typical federal acronyms have closed DC down from what I've heard. Established a secure perimeter, DC itself is mostly off limits. They've been trucking civilians out of DC and staging them in Baltimore. Baltimore itself has become the biggest refugee camp in the east, from what we can tell. FEMA is trying to cobble together evacuation plans and supply replenishment, but they've been stretched thin."

"So, I've heard. They pulled out of Lexington shortly after it began to burn. I heard some folks saying they were relocating to Indianapolis."

"That's happening everywhere. Supposedly Baltimore is the camp they've set up to house evacuees from DC, New Jersey, even Pennsylvania. I've even heard rumor of people from New York being trucked down there. Might be worth checking out before going all the way to Manhattan."

"Baltimore, you say?"

"That's the word on the street."

Jacob curled his fingers around the jar of moonshine, considering Tony's suggestion. The weight of responsibility drew down the slope of his shoulders, the air seeping from his lungs. He'd been moving non-stop for days, rarely taking a breather and he sat in the rickety chair, his tired legs sore from exertion, his back stiff and rigid. As the sheer exhaustion settled over him like a weighted blanket, Jacob wondered if stopping was a mistake—once he stopped, he wasn't sure he could start again.

"You should think about staying here for the night," Tony suggested, lifting his jar. "You look like you could use a good night's sleep."

"I've been managing."

“See, that’s your whole problem, and that’s what Pat’s trying to do here. To make people realize they don’t just have to ‘manage’. They can thrive.” He took another drink, looking at Jacob over the rim of his jar. “You know... we could use someone like you around these parts. Someone with your skills.”

“My... skills?”

“Sure. We’ve been collecting fuel. Both from folks in our neighborhood and even from St. Albans nearby. Creating a reserve. Maybe use some of it for trade or use it in the tractors so we can keep our agriculture going. Way we figure it, fuel’s going to be the hottest commodity going, considering most of the national supply went up in flames.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“I figure we need someone who’s been around the industry. Knows a little bit about distribution, storage, that sort of stuff. That’s a skill set we don’t have. Not yet anyway.” He lifted an eyebrow.

“Listen,” Jacob began, taking another sip, “I appreciate the offer. But I’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Somewhere to be. Manhattan? To see a family you’re not even sure is alive? To meet your brother, who might still be down in Miami? Come on. Working for this community comes with a lot of benefits, Jacob. You could make a home here.”

“A home?” The idea seemed foreign to him.

“Spend the night. Think it over. Not trying to pressure you, but I’m a pretty good judge of character and, well, I like what I see.”

Jacob couldn’t bring himself to verbalize it, but he had to admit that he liked what he saw, too. He loved his brother—he was closer to Marcus than anyone else in the world—but Tony made a lot of good points, and as he stared into the shimmering liquid within the glass jar on the table, Jacob couldn’t help but think long and hard about his options.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The attempted attack from the other boats had left the Fullers somewhat shaken and the next several hours had been spent mostly in contemplative silence, the sloshing churn of the water and gusts of salt-tinged wind the only sounds. Jean had cut the engine after putting some more distance between them and the three boats, and returned her attention back to the sail, where she and Keegan tried to use the ocean breeze to propel them south, a trek slower and more challenging than any of them had envisioned. Jean had indeed had some experience in operating watercraft, but mostly on still waters and without the persistent riptide that threatened to draw them too far out from shore.

Navigating had been relatively straight forward, at least, the almost constant roar of fires and the thick columns of ink-black smoke had clearly identified the shoreline in ways that their limited skills at ocean navigation couldn't match. If they kept that smoke to their right and kept the boat cruising alongside, they were confident that they were heading in approximately the right direction. From time to time, Holly got lost in the vast stillness of the ocean to their east, the seemingly infinite blue water stretching out into eternity, not unlike the dark vastness of space itself.

“Mom!” Keegan turned away from the boat's bow and shouted over to his mother. “We've got someone coming!”

“What?” Jean bolted upright and clambered up onto the cabin of the boat, close to the main mast where her son had been perched. She looked past him, into the near distance,

where a pair of boats were approaching, white watercraft, moving at a moderate speed. It wasn't the speed that concerned her, however, it was their course— it was an intercept course, that much was obvious.

“What should we do?” Holly emerged on Jean's right, her rifle clutched firmly in one hand.

“There are binoculars in the cabin— grab them please.” Jean gestured back toward the opening behind the steering column, which was perched near the interior door to the below decks cabin. Holly slid from the top of the boat, landing squarely on the seating area to the rear, then pushed herself through the gap in the fiberglass wall, past the steering column and into the below decks cabin. It was a short flight of downward stairs which led to an alcove below with built-in cushioned seats, and a small kitchenette, all beneath the oval-shaped portholes looking out across the water.

It took her only a moment to find the binoculars, which were sitting on a narrow ledge next to one of the seats and she swept them up and dashed back up the stairs, emerging seconds later. The low snarl of boat engines carried over the water, the approaching watercraft apparently closer than they had been. Jean was huddled by the edge of the cabin's roof, hand extended, clawing her fingers for Holly to hand over the bonis. She did so, then followed her mother back onto the roof, making their way slowly toward the bow. Jean positioned herself along the slope of the cabin's roof, pressing the binoculars to her eyes, then muttered a quiet curse.

“Attention, unidentified watercraft!” A voice boomed across the water, even before Jean could lower the binoculars from her eyes. “This is the United States Coast Guard!”

“Is it?” Holly inched forward and her mother nodded, handing back the binoculars.

“That's the way the boats are marked, anyway. I saw two uniformed men in one of them, too.”

“What should we do?”

“We don’t have enough fuel to outrun them and frankly, I don’t think we could if we tried.”

“Ocean travel is restricted! Prepare to be boarded!” The two boats approached, the water foaming white as they sliced their way through the surface of the Atlantic. Holly glanced toward the shore, which was shrouded in a blanket of thickening smoke. She had no point of reference to where they were or how far they’d traveled, though the coast was still scattered in clustered buildings, so she suspected it was still somewhere in New Jersey.

“We don’t want any trouble!” Jean shouted, then glanced toward Holly. “Put down the rifle. Let’s not give them any excuse.”

Holly nodded abruptly and set the rifle down, remaining atop the cabin with her mother and her brother. Down in the seating area, Bucky whined softly, sensing the distress, unhappy that he couldn’t be up there with his family. Both boats converged, one of them pulling alongside while the other idled softly, blocking their forward progress. Each boat was staffed with a small group of uniformed Coast Guard operatives, a few of them even wearing tactical gear and sporting AR-15 style weapons.

“Just stay where you are! We are authorized to shoot on sight!” The man with the megaphone turned to a pair of armed soldiers within the boat, one male and one female.

They both sported full camouflage uniforms and tactical vests, bulging with ammunition. Holly thought they looked more like Army or Marines than Coast Guard, but the Coast Guard was as much the United States military as anyone else, she supposed. At a gesture, the two soldiers jumped from the Coast Guard vessel onto the bow of the boat, sending it rocking slightly, though they maintained their balance with the expertise of a lot of practice. Both of them lifted their rifles, pointing them at Holly, Jean and Keegan, fanning out slightly so they weren’t gathered too close together. On the second boat more rifles had been elevated, bracketing them all in a phalanx of cover that ensured they wouldn’t feel encouraged to try anything.

“We’re— we’re just a family,” Jean said, showing her hands. “Just trying to get south.”

“It’s dangerous out here, ma’am.” The man who had been holding the megaphone stepped from the Coast Guard vessel and onto their boat, a stern glint in his narrowed eyes. “It’s dangerous everywhere.”

“We... we know.” Jean swallowed and a visceral kaleidoscope of horrific images from the past several days cascaded through Holly’s head unbidden. She suspected they would be doing just that for the rest of her life, however long that might be.

“Where did you come from?” The man stood broad and tall, looming over Jean, studying each of their faces with an alert curiosity.

“New York,” Jean replied. “My daughter, she was in Columbia. We got her out, but just barely.”

“And where exactly are you going?” He turned and gestured to one of the other soldiers. “Search the cabin.”

The woman in camouflage nodded, lowered her rifle and made her way along the roof, then hopped down, vanishing within the boat beneath them.

“We need to get to Florida eventually,” Jean replied, choosing honesty over deception.

“Florida? Planning on sailing all the way down to Florida?”

“Honestly? We hadn’t really thought that far ahead. First priority was getting out of Brooklyn.”

“You were in Brooklyn?”

“Long Island, actually. We got my daughter out of Columbia, then we had to stop in Long Island.”

The uniformed Coast Guard member shook his head, looking toward the smoldering shoreline in the distance.

“Took your life in your hands. Queens has been closed down. Military operations are happening there right now. The

fires at LaGuardia and JFK, not to mention the fall of Ryker's Island... it's a disaster area."

"Ryker's Island fell?"

The man nodded, allowing the briefest flicker of emotion to show within the steel glint of his eyes.

"FEMA is on the verge of pulling out of New York altogether. They've been trying to cobble together a response, to hold Manhattan intact as much as possible. But they're starting to evacuate. Pulling anyone they can out and moving them to Baltimore."

"Baltimore? Why Baltimore?"

"After establishing a secure perimeter around Washington, DC, Baltimore seemed like the most logical place to start staging recovery efforts. FEMA has been building up supply and personnel reserves there. There are a number of sports stadiums and business complexes throughout the greater Baltimore area that have been repurposed into refugee camps and staging areas. It's been a nightmare, but with all of the military presence in and around Washington, it's been our best option."

"Cabin's clear." The woman emerged, then cast a sideways glance toward Bucky, who simply tilted his head and woofed softly back at her. "They have some supplies and there are some weapons."

"Self-defense only, I swear," Jean said quickly, interrupting the man before he could make any assumptions.

"It's fine," he replied, brushing off her concerns. "We understand. You didn't point them at us, which is more than I can say for some." A shadow passed over his face which told Holly all she needed to know about the things he'd seen—and done. She knew that feeling all too well herself and desperately wished she didn't. "Listen up!" He turned and shouted back at the second boat. "We're going to escort these nice folks back to shore!" He pointed toward the coast which continued to be blanketed by smoke and the rippling heat of mainland fires.

“Ex— excuse me,” Jean interjected, her voice trembling. “What, exactly, are we supposed to do when we get on shore?”

“We’re radioing a team,” the man replied. “Someone will be there to get you processed.”

“Processed?” Holly drew back. “What does that mean?”

“Get your details entered in the system. Prepare evacuation. There’s a temporary holding area where you’ll be fed and sheltered until we can get you on a bus to Baltimore.”

“Wait— no.” Jean shook her head. “We’ll do what you ask — we’ll go to shore. But we can’t go to Baltimore. We can’t be holed up in some shelter.”

“Sorry, ma’am, those are the rules and regs. Your choices are a refugee shelter in Baltimore or a different kind of holding area altogether.” The expression on his face was entirely impassive, a slab of sculpted flesh and muscle without any hint of the emotion Holly had witnessed earlier.

“I— I’ve got a husband in Florida. A daughter. We need to —”

“Once you’re in Baltimore, you’ll be assigned a resource who can try and help coordinate communications with—”

“I don’t want to be assigned a resource!” Jean’s voice was shrill, an echo over the water. “I don’t want to be processed, whatever the hell that means. I need to get to my family. Take us to shore if you want, that’s fine, we won’t resist, but give us a choice at least. Let us decide where to go.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way. Not anymore. We need to establish control. We need to get our arms around this. We can’t do that with armed insurgents roaming the streets.”

“Insurgents? Are you kidding me? Do we look like insurgents? Are you worried my ten-year-old son is going to blow up a convoy or something?”

“It’s out of my hands, ma’am.”

Another Coast Guard operative jumped onto the boat and approached, armed with the same AR-15 the others held. A

third followed close behind, though her weapon was slung over one shoulder.

“Take the wheel, Lieutenant.”

The woman nodded and made her way past Holly and Jean, then jumped down to the decks, moving into the cabin.

“You have gas in the engine?”

Jean nodded, but said nothing, struck speechless by the emerging reality of the situation. With a muffled growl, the engine started, and the boat angled west, heading toward the shore. The two Coast Guard boats fired up their own engines, slowly maneuvering through the waters until they'd formed an escort on either side, ushering Fuller's boat inland where smoke and fire ravaged the Eastern Seaboard.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“That’s Atlantic City.” Holly spoke in a quiet whisper, pressing herself tight to the rail of the boat, looking past its bow and toward the smoke in the distance. The boardwalk was visible, up and down the shoreline of the bustling city, one of the uniquely shaped hotels emerging from the thickening cloud of smoke. Smoke gulped from several surrounding structures, funneling out in thick, choking clouds, obscuring much of the city from view. Fires glowed from within the gray, cloying smoke, the acrid stink of burning city wafting across the water, even as the Fullers made their final approach. They were headed straight toward an elongated pier, thrust out into the ocean water and through the thickening, swirling smoke, the vague outlines of amusement park equipment lurked in silhouette within the gray.

Atlantic City was decimated, much of its unique skyline consumed by flames and charcoal columns, fingers reaching toward, then finally joining the cloud-covered sky above.

“I don’t want to go there,” Keegan said softly, huddled next to Bucky on one of the rear bench seats. His comment was even more remarkable, considering the circular shape of the trademark Atlantic City Observation Wheel rose above the low-lying smoke along the very pier the boat was heading toward. The unique Ferris wheel would have normally brought joy to Keegan’s face, but there was none of that joy evident, only mistrust, hesitation, and the scant hints of terror.

“I know. None of us do.” Jean clutched her backpack, holding it between her bent legs. They’d taken their firearms,

but had, at least, left them with their other supplies, for whatever that was worth. As soon as they were brought to shore, they'd be processed and essentially taken into custody, neither of which held even the slightest appeal for Holly or her mother and brother.

"What's going to happen with Bucky?" Keegan seemed frightened to even ask the question, not truly wanting to hear the answer.

"I'm not sure," Jean admitted.

Holly hadn't even considered that, she hated to say. She could easily envision a situation where taking the dog into the refugee camp would be deemed unhygienic. Goose flesh scraped its way along her arms, her spine chopped into stoic rigidity. Yet one other potential outcome of the disaster hoisted upon them, another burden she'd be forced to carry for the rest of her life, however short it might be. The Steel Pier in the shadows of the Atlantic City downtown extended out, nearly a thousand feet, into the shimmering water as a wall of smoke blew from the city's depths. Choking clouds bracketed the beachfront and consumed the boardwalk in its entirety, dragging it from view. Wind sliced, a chilled breeze, carrying smoke and salt and Holly leaned forward, using the fingers of her left hand to sweep back a length of her hair as she stared at the deck at her feet. The Coast Guard woman was operating the boat while two of her fellow soldiers stood nearby, watching the family, rifles slung across their tactical vests.

"Coming in now," the woman behind the wheel reported, followed by the squelch of the radio she was using.

"Where's our greeting party?" A static-laced voice came back over the speaker.

"I'm sure they're on the way."

"Tell them we've got civilians to process. I'm not going to babysit them for an hour while we wait."

"Settle down," another voice interjected over the channel, that of the commanding officer who had first boarded their

boat several minutes ago. “Everyone is still working out the wrinkles. We’ll do what’s necessary.”

“What’s necessary,” Jean muttered. “That’s a loaded statement if I ever heard one.”

“Lieutenant Commander Doyle is a good man.” One of the camouflaged soldiers with his AR-15 lifted his chin toward Jean. “But we’ve all got our orders.”

“Must be nice.” Holly’s words dripped with venom. “Being able to rationalize all of your life choices to following orders.”

“You have no idea what we’ve been through.” Any hint of friendliness melted away from the young man’s face. “What we’ve sacrificed already.”

Holly opened her mouth, but before speaking, decided that the young man was right, and closed her lips again, exhaling sharply through her nostrils. It wasn’t worth fighting over. After they were all processed, whatever that meant, she’d never see any of them again. There was a dip and sway as the boat rode a cresting wave, then bumped hard on the port side, scraping against a nearby pier. Holly looked up and noticed that one of the Coast Guard vessels had already docked, the second was coming up behind them, once again pinning them between.

Coast Guard members were tying down the boats and filing up onto the piers, weapons drawn, falling into a defensive posture, staring toward the smoke-filled boardwalk. Along the pier, abandoned amusement park rides managed to appear creepy and forlorn, the lights dimmed and the seats empty, a scattering of rustling trash and detritus littered across the normally immaculate surface of the pier. A carousel looked particularly haunted, its horsebacks empty, the circular platform dark and shadowed by passing smoke.

“Still no word from FEMA!” A voice cried out as the woman stepped out from behind the steering wheel and began gesturing for Holly, Jean and Keegan to disembark.

“What about the dog?” Jean asked. “What about Bucky? Can we bring him to the camp?”

The woman’s eyes darted toward the Labrador, then back to Jean, a mask of uncertainty clouding her normally alert features. A sickening sensation curdled in Holly’s guts, sensing what the woman was going to say even before she said it.

“I’m not sure you can bring pets to the camp.” Her voice was low, probably trying to avoid upsetting Keegan, which Holly had to at least give her credit for.

“No. I’m sorry. That’s not an option.” Jean shook her head. “We’re not going to abandon our dog.”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry. Go ahead and bring him on shore, we can talk with FEMA when they arrive, see what our options are.”

Jean clenched her teeth and looked at Holly, who in turn, looked over at Keegan who remained, thankfully, out of earshot, still crouched near Bucky, gently petting the dog’s head.

“Come on, let’s go, let’s go!” The male Coast Guardsman ushered the Fullers from the boat, gesturing with one hand, urging them to step onto the pier as another lashed the boat secure to one of the posts. A moment later, Jean, Holly and Keegan were all on the pier, Bucky tagging along next to the ten-year-old boy, making their way toward the coastline several yards ahead. The Coast Guardsmen formed a phalanx before them, strategically placed, weapons free, swiveling as they moved forward, covering the swath of land ahead, obscured through smoke with a backdrop of crackling flames.

“Stay alert!” The Lieutenant Commander strode close to Jean, his own weapon out, his alert gaze darting left-to-right in a way that told Holly all she needed to know about the situation. They might as well have been in enemy territory—even with a full cadre of well-equipped American military men and women, there truly was no place safe. Just beyond the end of the pier, the greater Atlantic City actively burned, an eastward wind blowing clouds of gray smoke from the burning

buildings, carrying it in tufts and streaks out toward the ocean. The air was hot and stifling within close proximity to the city, the fire churning through, roiling and steaming, cooking humanity from the inside-out.

“Homebase, this is Bravo Actual, we have civilians in transit— seeking assistance for processing, please come back.” The Lieutenant Commander leaned into his shoulder radio, then released the talk button, pausing for a moment for a reply.

Nothing came back but static. They held for a moment, swiveling left-to-right as they scanned their surroundings, the pier clotted with rides and abandoned booths, tightly clustered along the entire length of the thousand-foot pier. Holly muffled a chuckle, unable to deny the irony of being in the presence of both Coney Island and Steel City within the same twenty-four hours. Two places the Fuller family would have loved to have visited in better times— but they only got the chance as the entire world burned. It wasn’t the least bit amusing, yet she chuckled, all the same, because if she didn’t, another emotion would have taken precedence. She couldn’t afford that, she had to remain strong in front of her brother, who was clearly struggling with what was happening and what it meant for them— and for Bucky.

“Where the hell are they?” The young man in camouflage who had extolled the Lieutenant Commander’s virtues a moment earlier stood rigid and ready, weapon pointed toward the smoke-clouded city ahead. “Should we advance, Sir?”

“They’re supposed to meet us here. City’s dangerous, they want to pick up the civvies in their transports as close to the shore as possible.” They were gathered in a group, five Coast Guardsman at the head, three behind, two others mixed in with the Fullers themselves, all of them with weapons drawn. It was a bit disconcerting and didn’t project an air of security that the Coast Guard likely thought it did. In fact, Holly assessed, it was quite the opposite.

“How dangerous?” Jean turned and looked back toward Holly and Keegan, worry in her eyes despite her best efforts.

“There’s the normal looting, of course. Some rioting. But in the last eighteen hours there’s been an uptick in violence. Pockets of gun fighting. A team of National Guardsmen got ambushed yesterday, their weapons stolen. Shortly thereafter, the National Guard Armory itself was hit. It seemed coordinated.”

“So, there are angry looters out there with access to military weaponry?” A chill had already wedged itself firmly within Holly, but it sharpened as she spoke, a blade of ice scraping along her spine.

The Lieutenant Commander didn’t reply, instead he leaned toward his shoulder radio. “Homebase, this is Bravo Actual—repeat, this is Bravo Actual. Do you read?” They continued inching ahead, past another amusement park ride, a triangular shaped grid work of metal. To their left, a roller coaster was visible and just beyond the roller coaster was the observation wheel, the massive, circular Ferris wheel that rose through the cloying fog and smoke.

Holly’s heart was a thumping jackhammer. The steady pulse of blood thrumming in her neck and in her ears. She swallowed through the tightness in her throat, exhaling to calm her nerves, though the attempt was mostly met with failure.

“It’s okay.” Jean reached out and touched Holly’s arm. “They have it under control.”

“Do they?”

“Advance!” Lieutenant Commander Doyle gave the order, and as a single organism, they all pushed forward, moving across the trash-strewn pier.

Holly was only too happy to put the dark and dreary amusement park at her back, even as the observation wheel loomed tall and imposing to their left, made even higher by the raised platform it was mounted upon. They’d crossed from walking above the churning water to walking above the windblown beach itself, which was somewhere beneath a carpet of low-hanging smoke. There was another carousel just behind the observation wheel and Lieutenant Commander Doyle extended a closed fist, signaling them all to stop.

Beyond the carousel, a stark, white building separated the pier from the boardwalk beyond, a building that seemed to house an arcade, though the arch-shaped opening was large enough for a decent-sized vehicle to fit through.

The space between a downward ramp beyond the carousel and the building's opening had been cleared out, all of the rides dismantled, the only thing remaining an "L" shaped building adorned with signs and with corrugated steel doors—apparently some sort of food booth.

"They're not here," Doyle reported. "I pinged them before we even hit the pier. They should have had a transport ready."

"Do you think they got hit?" A young female Coastguardsman approached the Lieutenant Commander, speaking in a low whisper, though her voice carried straight to Holly's ears, much as she didn't want it to. "Remember what happened yesterday—"

"Of course, I remember what happened yesterday. It's been happening since this all began. But they've been focusing their attention on law enforcement and military— not on FEMA."

"As the days go on, people get more desperate."

It seemed impossible to believe that people would get that desperate after only a handful of days, but a nation who had become accustomed to freedom tended to react strongly when those freedoms were suddenly, unexpectedly reversed.

"Move forward," Doyle finally said, "slow and steady. Be alert. Watch—"

"Now!" A voice boomed across the pier, an angry shout, with a metallic echo as if spoken from within a tightly confined chamber. "Attack! Now!"

Lieutenant Commander Doyle whipped around to the left, weapon ready.

"Get their boats!"

Gunfire ripped open the quiet air and chunks of pier blistered at Holly's feet as incoming fire chewed apart the ground, coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

CHAPTER FORTY

The boat rode the still waters of the swamp, continuing its trek south and east, the trees falling away along both sides of its broad expanse. Scout had thought she'd seen another crocodile at one point in their journey, but beyond that, it had been unremarkable, just one section of trees after the next, the two of them riding along in silence.

“We’re almost there,” Everett reported, nodding toward the backpacks on the floor of the boat. “Get your pack on. We should leave the cans of fuel in the boat at first. Make sure the area’s clear.”

“Make sure the area’s clear?” Everett made it sound like they were going on a military operation.

“We take no chances,” Everett reiterated.

In her various conversations with her father, Scout had understood that there was a very thin line between being prepared and being paranoid and her father often admitted he was too far away from that line, perhaps not taking preparation quite seriously enough. Everett, however, Scout suspected, had stumbled over that line and kept on going, falling directly into a sharpened thornbush of wild conspiracy. She supposed that came with the territory when someone lived way out in the middle of nowhere without human companionship. That had either driven him toward his paranoid attitude, or perhaps his paranoid attitude had driven everyone away from him. Scout had sympathy for Everett as the old man hunched over the wheel of the boat, leaning forward to stare across the green waters of the swamp.

But it was a life of his own choosing. He'd purposefully withdrawn from society, that much was clear and no matter the reasons for it, it had been a decision he'd made and a direction toward which he'd steered his own life. It was difficult for Scout to feel too much sympathy after the way he'd treated her back at the truck. In spite of his clumsy attempt to make up to her over the campfire, the words he'd uttered echoed within the confines of her young mind. It wasn't something she was likely to forget anytime soon.

Steering the boat left, Everett navigated the watercraft through the long grass and shallower waters, bringing it to a bumping rest along the grassy shore. Although Scout couldn't actually see where the land met the water, the boat jarred when it struck, then scraped quietly before coming to a rest. Everett hobbled from the seat, over the side, and landed in the grass, snatching a length of rope from within to tie the boat down to its well-concealed moorings. Scout lifted her backpack, straddling it across both shoulders and tightening the straps, testing her balance with the added weight.

"Start covering it." Everett didn't even look at her, he just focused his attention on the knotted rope he was tightening. Scout did as she was asked, vaulting out of the boat and retrieving some of the scattered sticks, branches and leaves, littering them across the boat to conceal it from view. Everett walked past her, toward the rear of the boat and dragged the back closer to shore so the overhanging trees draped across the propellor on the back. He tied a secondary line to keep the boat firmly tucked against its natural dock, then helped Scout cover whatever wasn't already covered. He'd already put on his own backpack and the rifle was slung over one shoulder as he took a step back, moving through thigh-high swamp grass.

After a few moments, the boat was effectively shrouded from view and Everett nodded to Scout, clutching his rifle in two hands as he looked back up the gradual incline toward his cabin beyond the encroaching trees.

"Stay behind me."

Scout parted her lips to ask why, but decided it wasn't worth the effort and simply nodded, falling in behind the old

man as he trudged through the grass. They made their way up the slope and through the trees, then Everett stopped, crouching low, looking across the expanse of his property ahead. Chickens softly clucked from within their pen and just beyond Everett's right shoulder, Scout eyed the two goats, who stood, heads bent, chewing softly at the grass at their feet. For a very long, protracted moment, Everett remained at the edge of the grass, peering at the cabin and its surrounding area, though Scout saw no evidence that anything had been disturbed.

"Come on." Everett's voice was a hushed whisper as he stepped from the trees onto the grass, the rifle held in front of him. Scout emerged behind him, feeling just a little eager to be back inside the cabin with an actual roof over their heads and access to a wood stove for cooking and the comfortable recliner perched by the small fireplace. They approached the cabin door and Everett hesitated, bending low to examine the door, touching it with two gloved fingers of his right hand. He made an indecipherable noise and tested the doorknob, finding it locked, which he seemed content with.

Everett unlocked the front door of the cabin, but didn't open the door itself, standing at the threshold, unmoving and unspeaking.

"Go back to the boat," he said evenly. "Grab the gas cans, okay?"

"Grab the gas cans?"

"Grab the gas cans. We need to bring them up."

"Okay." There was something unsettling about the tenor of Everett's voice, an edge cut from his words. Scout considered arguing with him, asking if she could go inside and put her stuff down first, but it was clear there would be no arguing. Everett had made his intentions clear, and she was expected to follow them. Pausing for a moment, she looked back at him as he stood near the door to the cabin, rifle in hand, his eyes looking toward the trees.

"Go back to the boat," he repeated, his words even more firm. Jagged like glass.

Scout didn't argue, she simply stepped into the long grass and let it swallow her as she moved down the slope toward the boat. As she reached the shore, time itself crawled through sludge, seconds stretching out and for reasons she could not explain, she turned and looked back toward the cabin just as the first sharp echo of a gunshot carried through the trees.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Everett fired the first shot. Perched by his cabin's front door he studied the trees, hoping he was doing so undetected. He reached with a left hand toward the door, as if to open it, then saw the shadowed movement beyond the animal pen, the vaguest shift of branches in the trees beyond. In one swift movement he brought the rifle around, cradling it with his left hand, centering the barrel on the rustling leaves, and fired. It barked a single, loud bark, the rifle jumping in his hands, a shell casing twisting through the air, glinting with the setting sun. Birds exploded from the surrounding trees, a sudden chorus of shrill screams and rustling leaves, a cloud of feathers shooting upward into the dusk-colored sky.

He racked the bolt, following the track of movement in those same trees, leading the target— no, not just a target— a *man* who had been watching him. Firing again, the bolt-action jumped and he tugged back the bolt again with a quick jerk of his gloved left hand, fingers curled. Gunfire chewed back, suddenly, and from a different direction, muzzle flashes scattering loose leaves, the thud of ricochets splintering sections of his cabin exterior just to his left. The return shots were quick, the *poppoppop* of a semi-automatic, its trigger being squeezed rapidly to send as many rounds toward him as possible.

Two— there were at least two. There were probably more. Dropping right, he moved toward the corner of his cabin, then swung around, tucking the rifle close. His magazine held five rounds, and he'd had one in the chamber for a total of six. Two were already spent. There were two more magazines in his

pocket, but he was no longer built for a sustained firefight. It had been well over a decade, he was old and not equipped for that sort of thing anymore. Gunfire ripped the trees again as he swept behind the corner of the cabin, bullets screaming past and thrashing through a group of nearby trees.

“Stop!” A voice echoed from somewhere Everett couldn’t see, an accented bark of orders. “Stop firing!”

Everett had retreated toward the far corner of the cabin, planning on circling around to the other side to try and get a better angle on the incoming fire.

“We don’t have to do this!” The voice came again.

Everett wasn’t sure he agreed. Men had intruded upon his private property— they’d come to his house and when he’d arrived, they’d hidden in his trees, prepping for an ambush. No — they didn’t get to choose what they had to do. They’d made their choice already, and they’d have to live with the consequences.

“Dammit, I said *stop shooting!*” Pedro’s throat was raw from the force of his scream and finally, the surrounding trees fell into an unsettled silence. “Carmelo, we were just supposed to watch!”

“He shot first! You saw it, Pedro, he shot directly at us!”

“Because he saw your fat ass moving through the trees,” hissed Urbano from somewhere deeper in the swamp.

“Maybe next time I start shooting again I’ll aim for you.” Carmelo’s voice was a ragged snarl of rage.

“Marcel! Are you all right?” Pedro ignored the two other men and called out to the pilot, who had been near Carmelo when the shooting started.

“Five by five, boss!” Marcel reported and pushed his way through a clutch of swamp grass behind the animal pen. His legs were bent sharply as he clung low to the ground, his AR-

15 held tight in two-hands. Carmelo emerged as well, the two of them about twelve feet from where Pedro stood, eyes boring holes through the foliage and toward the cabin beyond.

“Good.” Pedro unleashed a string of whispered curses in Spanish as he took a tentative step forward. “We were supposed to watch—to see how many there were before we did something stupid.”

“You said it yourself.” Carmelo crept forward as well, pushing underneath the narrow branch of a cypress tree. “That cabin ain’t big enough for more than one. Well, apparently one and his kid.”

“That wasn’t his kid.” Marcel shook his head. “See how young she was? Grandkid, maybe.”

“Well, whatever,” Pedro snapped back, “I wanted to stay and watch. Figure out what we’re dealing with.”

“We’re dealing with a paranoid old coot who lives out in the woods, that’s it, nothing more.” Carmelo shook his head.

“A paranoid old coot with a purple heart.” Urbano’s voice carried from the trees, though Pedro couldn’t see his precise location. “That means he’s served. Not just served, but very likely saw combat. Not someone to screw around with.”

“Dude’s like seventy years old,” Carmelo replied. “Did you see that rifle he had? What was that, a Winchester? How many rounds you think that mag holds?”

“Both of you, shut up.” Pedro released a hand from his AR-15 and gestured to the other two men. He took a long, low stride forward, blading his way through the foliage. “Where did he go? Did anyone see?”

“If I had to guess, he’s moved around the back.” Urbano’s voice came from a slightly different location. “Probably thinks he can get a better angle on us from the other side.”

“Well, let’s get a better angle on him first.” Pedro turned to give Urbano instructions, but the trees rustled behind him, moving right-to-left, and he could tell the ex-soldier had anticipated his orders and was already moving into position.

“Now, let’s not forget— this guy knows the swamps better than we ever would. Let’s try and take him alive, okay? Maybe he can help us get outta here.”

“Why not just kill him and steal his boat?” Carmelo shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Kill him and his grandkid?” Pedro drew back. “We kill the old man, the girl’s as good as dead, too.”

“Who gives a rip?”

“Spoken like someone who works for my father,” Pedro spat. “I’m not like him, Carmelo.”

“Maybe you should be.”

Pedro’s teeth gritted, his hand tightening around the guard of the AR-15. “Do not forget,” he continued, “we are in the middle of nowhere. Even if we kill this guy and his grandkid — even if we steal the boat. Then what? Do we even know where to go? How to get out? Or would we be riding around in circles until the gas ran out? That’s your problem, Carmelo, you don’t think two steps ahead.”

“I ain’t paid to think two steps ahead, boss. I’m paid to protect you. And as long as there’s some old fogey out there with a rifle and the drive to use it, you’re at risk.”

It was a fair point and Pedro silently chided himself for giving Carmelo a hard time. For all of his brash qualities, the man had served his family faithfully for his entire adult life. He shared very little in common with Carmelo’s views, but the big man wouldn’t hesitate to throw himself in front of a bullet for him. Sometimes that was enough.

“Fan out. Be careful. Let’s see if we can catch this guy unprepared. If we can take him down without killing him, let’s do it. If not, I guess let the chips fall where they may.”

Everett crept closer to the corner of the cabin, eyes narrowed, head tilted inquisitively. There had been low whispers coming

from the trees beyond the animal pen, a quiet conversation, which meant he wasn't just dealing with one man— he was dealing with multiple. The rapid semi-automatic gunfire had told him he was not only outnumbered, but outgunned, and he'd have to be smart. His shoulder pressed tight to the rear exterior of the cabin, he moved slowly forward, clinging tight to his cover. For a brief moment, he thought leaves had rustled in the trees ahead, though it could have been the wind, blowing west-to-east along the surface of the swamp. His property was burned into his memory, inside and out, so he already had a picture in his head of the space just beyond the animal pen, a space where multiple assailants could gather and plan an attack.

He approached the corner and peered out around it, eyeing his property line. Shadows moved through the trees, maybe fifty yards ahead, a single, large shape, slowly separated into three smaller ones, spreading outward from the formerly tight cluster. Three gunmen, all likely armed with the ARs, moving into some semblance of strategic alignment to hopefully pen him in. It was nothing he hadn't seen before, though last time he'd experienced it, he was several decades younger. Shouldering the stock of his bolt-action rifle he edged even closer to the corner, though he kept himself low, using the chicken coop to hopefully block him from view.

There— moving left-to-right— a distinct, man-shaped silhouette, back arched, rifle in hand. Everett pressed his back teeth together, moved to his left, held the rifle firm and elevated, barrel at a straight line. He squeezed the trigger, no more than five pounds of pressure, and the rifle fired, kicking and shouting. Leaves scattered as the round punched into the trees, then a man screamed in shock and pain, stumbling away from where Everett had positioned himself.

“Marcel!” A voice echoed from the trees and then the repeated pop of semi-automatic fire crashed toward him, sending him scrambling for cover. He drew back and whirled left as bullets thudded into the hard ground where he'd been, chewing up dirt and throwing it into the air. “Over there!” the same voice shouted again. “Son of a— Marcel's down!”

Everett moved along the back wall of the cabin, running as fast as he could, which wasn't particularly fast, angling back around the other side to move positions and get a different angle, keeping them guessing. Reaching the other side of the cabin, he swept around the corner, moved back toward the front and came around, rifle raised, the bolt already yanked back to load another round. He fired again into the same general direction that he'd fired the first time, ejecting his fourth shell casing and loading his fifth round. Semi-automatic fire surged through the trees ahead, driving him back, peppering the cabin's rugged exterior and the dirt not far from where he stood.

The area in the Everglades was his home and it was more familiar to him than any of the intruders, of that there was no doubt. He just had to get into the trees, to disappear into the swamp so he could regain that upper hand. Unfortunately, they'd penned him in at his cabin and any attempt he might make to separate and dash into the trees was likely to be met with aggressive retaliation. He thought of Scout, her face floating into his head like an apparition, and he hoped she'd listened to him and returned to the boat and hunkered down. Worrying about himself was bad enough; he didn't need to worry about her, too.

Retreating from the front corner, he made his way back to the rear and eyed the thick trees lining the back of his property. Swamp water crept close to shore in that direction, but it might be his best opportunity for maintaining cover while he attempted to pick the rest of the men off, one-by-one. He held his pose for a moment, crouched by the rear of the cabin, eyeing the tree line ahead. Hushed whispers came from the trees where he'd shot that man, a frenetic conversation, too low for him to hear, though he was certain there were at least two men still standing. Recalling the rustling trees he'd seen ahead of him moments before, he figured there was a third man still standing out there somewhere, as well. The odds weren't good, but he was used to that.

The echoes from the gunfire faded as he moved toward the trees, searching for an angle around, back to the rear of the cabin. Swallowed by the trees and waist-high swamp grass,

Everett moved forward, keeping that same section of trees within view. Holding his rifle close, he darted along the edge of the wilderness, stride-over-stride, already planning three steps ahead. His property mapped out in his head, the angles and trajectories of the best attack points sketched out in excruciating detail and a sense of confidence settled over him — a realization that he could easily win a battle of attrition over these three strangers. Adrenaline fueled through him, pumped by a sense of danger that he hadn't experienced in many years. He didn't realize how much he'd relished it and how much he missed it, the exhilaration of—

Movement pushed through the trees to his left, a sudden surge of weight and force, and Everett wheeled toward it, but too late as that same surge crashed headlong into him. The impact lifted him and pushed him back, arms coiled around his torso as he was thrust from the trees and out into the open air. A man hammered into him, knocking him backwards, wrapped within a football tackle, and the air punched from Everett's lungs as the weight crushed against him, ramming him to the unforgiving ground and knocking the rifle from slack, gloved fingers.

“Nice try, old man,” the young face snarled down at him, showing the ivory of his bared teeth. “But now you're mine.”

Everett grunted an unintelligible response, struggling to wrestle himself out from beneath his attacker. But the young man was strong, his eyes narrowed, a single, thick arm crossed over his neck, crushing the air from his windpipe.

“Don't struggle, grandpa. I was asked to take you alive. I'm the kinda guy that follows orders.” His forehead bunched and he looked pensive for a moment. “Well... usually, anyway.” Straddling Everett, he clutched the older man's shirt, bunching the fabric in his fist. Standing, the young man hoisted Everett to his feet, almost effortlessly, hauling him upright alongside him.

“Carmelo! Pedro! I've got your rabbit!” Wrapping an arm around Everett's neck in a headlock, the young man pinned his arm behind his back and thrust him forward, guiding him toward a section of back yard next to the animal pen.

“Marcel is dead, you son of a—” a larger man growled and strode toward Everett, covering the distance swiftly. He hammered the butt of the rifle he held into the side of Everett’s head, shooting stars and swirling colors within the darkness of the old man’s crowded skull.

“Stand down, Carmelo!” The man, who must have been Pedro, turned and barked a swift order to the larger man, who drew the rifle back, his cheeks red and eyes brimming with barely contained fury. Carmelo slung his rifle over one shoulder and rested his palm against the handle of a machete, which was slung at his right hip. His fingers formed around its contoured handle, the unspoken threat all too clear to Everett.

“Good work, Urbano,” Pedro said with a curt nod. He turned toward the other man. “Carmelo, go find the girl. She’s around here somewhere.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere.” Carmelo’s voice was a throaty hiss.

Pedro exhaled through his nostrils, then glanced over Everett’s shoulder at the young man, who was apparently named Urbano.

“On it, boss.” Urbano released his grip on Everett, the men clearly not all that concerned about his ability to fight back. “I patted him down.” Urbano held out a pistol, which Pedro accepted. “He had that on him, but nothing else.”

“Thanks. Find the girl.”

“On it.” Urbano stepped forward, consumed by the trees.

“Now,” Pedro continued, looking back at Everett, Carmelo standing close. “What are we going to do with you?”

“I’ve been asking myself that same question.” Everett stood stoic, scrutinizing the two men, but made no motion to resist. He had them both by at least a good thirty years and either one of them alone would likely be able to physically overpower him. He wasn’t in the mood to suffer another concussion or something worse, so he remained rooted in place, hands at his sides.

“You’re a feisty old man, aren’t you?”

“How would you feel if some random scumbags started waltzing all over your property?” Everett spoke through clenched teeth. “Am I supposed to lay down the welcome mat?”

“We’re all friends here. Or we can be.”

“Like hell.” Carmelo wheeled toward the other man, both hands clenched into fists. “Marcel is dead.” He stabbed a finger toward the trees. “Took a bullet in the chest. Lung shot from seventy yards. We can’t screw around with this guy, Pedro.”

“Like you said,” Everett replied with a shrug, “I’m just a feisty old man.”

Pedro had slung his rifle over his shoulder as well but held Everett’s pistol in hand and he turned it over, looking at it as he did. His eyes were narrowed, deep in thought, and he seemed to be considering his next move.

“We can figure it out, Pedro, I promise you. This guy doesn’t need to keep breathing.” Carmelo’s grip tightened around the handle of the machete.

“You might have a point.” Pedro turned and looked into the trees, in the direction of where Marcel evidently lay. Carmelo smiled a thin-lipped smile and slowly slid the machete from the sling at his hip, holding the broad, well-balanced blade in one tight grip. The anticipation was thick in the air, like summer humidity, the man’s wide smile the look of an eager predator spotting its prey.

“If I were to ask you how to get back to civilization, what would you say?” Pedro crossed his arms, one hand holding Everett’s pistol.

“I’d tell you to go drown yourself in the swamp.”

Pedro nodded. “You know— now that I talk to you— I can believe that. You’d really rather die than help us, wouldn’t you? Even if it means your girl dies, too.”

“She’s not my girl.” His tenor was flat, without emotion. “Do what you want.”

Pedro chuckled dryly, tapping the side of his pistol against one of his crossed forearms. “Is that right?” He shrugged and looked at Carmelo, gesturing vaguely with the pistol. “Fine. Carmelo— do what you want, just be quick about it.”

Carmelo lifted the machete, moved in close and brought it down in a swift and sudden slash.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Carousel! Get them to the carousel!” Doyle twisted around toward the observation wheel, weapon shouldered, then unleashed a burst of fire. The M4 Carbine shot a swift volley of a three-round burst, then another and a third as Doyle pelted the observation wheel with small arms fire. “They’re in the Ferris wheel!”

Sure enough, as Holly scrambled for cover behind the carousel, she saw the scattered muzzle flashes from the cars of the wheel, insurgents hunkered down within each car, shooting down at the targets below.

“How did they get there? This area was supposed to be secured!” The young woman in camouflage stepped up to the right of Doyle, hugging the carousel to her left, firing up at the cars above.

Bullets whacked against the contoured exterior of the cars, sparks of ricochet deflecting the incoming rounds even as more shots fired back down. Doyle retreated toward the carousel, where the Fullers were already taking shelter, the team of coast guardsmen chopping gunfire in well-orchestrated tactical groupings. More rounds crashed from the Ferris wheel, hammering into the horses encircling the carousel. Aluminum buckled and fiberglass shattered, the ornately decorated horses exploding as bullets tore through the circular amusement park ride.

“Keegan! Move back! Take Bucky!” Holly crouched low, wincing as the head of a nearby horse blasted apart, shards of ragged fiberglass bursting into the air. The bullet screamed

straight through and struck concrete to Holly's left, punching a chunked divot from the ground. She waved wildly toward Keegan, urging him to move further behind them, drawing away from the carousel, which was slowly being chipped apart by incoming fire.

"What do they want?" One of the coast guardsmen shouted to another, then lifted his rifle and exchanged a swift volley.

"Weapons! Boats! Supplies! All of the above!" Doyle yelled back, then moved left and took cover behind the gated-up food stand to Holly's left. He leaned his head over and touched his shoulder-mounted radio. "Homebase, this is Bravo Actual we are under fire! I repeat, we are under fire! Request immediate exfiltration!" There was a squelch of static and a tinny voice responded, though Holly couldn't hear it above the ratcheting gunfire exchange.

Holly tightened the straps of her backpack, which she was still wearing, eyeing the surrounding area for an avenue of escape. Her mother crouched a few feet away, also using the carousel for protection, though her colorless face and drawn expression revealed her lack of confidence in this plan.

"We need to get out of here!" Holly screamed over the gunfire. "This old merry-go-round won't last forever!"

"There's too much open ground!" Jean gestured behind them, a long stretch of empty pier standing between them and the box-shaped arcade about a hundred feet away. "They've got a vantage point up there in those cars!"

Holly's breathing came fast and ragged, lingering smoke stung her eyes and her throat. A sheared-off horse's head clattered to the ground a few feet away, its neck a ravaged mess from a bullet strike. A muffled grunt came from beyond her mother, and a young man in camouflage hit the ground, sprawling, his fingers releasing his weapon. He clutched at the tactical vest he wore, sucking in desperate, pained breaths. A chunk of concrete blistered a few feet from his head, then another round pounded into his right side, and he flinched, barely muffling a shout of anguish and pain. Another uniformed soldier was sprawled out several feet away, lying

motionless and sickness churned like acid in Holly's gut. Behind her, Keegan knelt on the ground, his arms wrapped tightly around Bucky's fur-covered neck, holding the dog close. Bullets peppered the food stand where Lieutenant Commander Doyle had taken cover, a ragged path of bullet holes pock-marked along the pale-colored wood.

The world had been thrust, headlong into chaos and Holly's neck was sore from the rapid movements of her head, trying to track all of the activity that surrounded her. She scrambled forward on all fours, moving toward the young man lying prone, who had stopped trying to reach for his discarded weapon. He licked his lips, his eyes glassy and face pale, the ground beneath him stained a deep red from his blood. Holly swallowed back bile and blinked away tears, clawing the young man's weapon from the ground where it lay, drawing it close to her. She made her way back toward the carousel, weapon in hand, unsure of what she might even do with it. She had no idea how many rounds were left and she didn't have any spare ammunition, but something was better than nothing.

"This is Bravo Actual! Any teams in the vicinity of the Steel Pier Amusement Park! We are under fire and have civvies in hand! Need immediate evac!" Doyle punched several rounds back at the wheel.

A sloped windscreen splintered and as Holly peered out from around the carousel, she saw a figure pitch from one of the highest cars and tumble, end-over-end through thin air. He didn't even scream, he just toppled out and over then struck the pier with a muffled, dull thud of impact. Thankfully, he landed beyond a nearby booth, and she couldn't see the grisly results—the sound had been bad enough.

"Even if we get support," Holly gasped, keeping her head down, "they're still going to toss us in a camp! They're still going to take Bucky!"

"One problem at a time!" Jean glanced back at Keegan, who was still keeping his head down, thankfully away from most of the incoming fire.

The looming, arc shaped tunnel that bore through the arcade revealed an open pathway to the boardwalk beyond, but the distance was too great. It was a death trap, to be sure. Holly gripped her weapon, closing her eyes, feeling more tears threatening to burst loose. She was useless and helpless, sitting behind the stupid merry-go-round while bullets flew and people died and her family was penned in by incoming fire. The best possible outcome was that they'd be locked up in a refugee camp in Baltimore, separated from her dad and Scout, not to mention Bucky.

The worst possible outcome was that they'd all be sprawled dead along the Steel Pier Amusement Park in Atlantic City, forgotten and unnoticed— and their family would never even know what had happened. She pressed her teeth together, gripping the weapon— she couldn't just sit there, helpless, waiting for someone else to pull them out of the fire. She sprinted forward, covering the ground between the carousel and the food stand in several long strides. Bullets charged toward her, a ragged path of blistered concrete, but she slid to cover next to Doyle before the bullets reached her, her right hip glancing along the rough pavement.

“Are you insane?” Doyle half screamed at her, swinging around the corner of the stand and firing up at the wheel.

As he ducked back behind, she swung around him and pulled the trigger. The rifle jostled wildly in her hand, very nearly wrenching itself free of her unexpected grip. She stumbled back, barely maintaining hold of it as more chunks of pier blasted apart from oncoming fire.

“You're going to get yourself killed!” Doyle crouched behind the stand, weapon low, shoulder pressed to the exterior, waiting for a gap in the incoming fire. “Even worse,” he snapped, “you're going to get one of my people killed!”

Holly scowled at him holding her weapon close, though he'd already turned away and focused his attention on the observation wheel. She counted six separate sets of muzzle flashes, followed shortly by the pattering impact of bullets in and around the carousel. She had to think there was only so much ammunition the people in the wheel could have, but that

was a risk they couldn't very well take, especially as the carousel continued to get whittled apart by incoming fire.

As Holly crouched behind the food stand, she studied the layout of the pier, trying to silently evaluate an avenue for escape. The carousel was in the center, with mostly empty space all around it, very few opportunities to escape without being an open target. With her stolen weapon held close to her body, she once again looked toward the arched tunnel at the end of the pier and her eyes widened. A pair of headlights looked back at her, the shadowed form of a vehicle charging through at a high rate of speed, its growling engine audible amid the orchestra of weapons fire.

"Doyle!" she screamed, almost in the man's ear. "Are those yours?"

Doyle wheeled right and showed his teeth in a victorious grin. A military Humvee sprinted through the tunnel, emerging onto the pier, slotting just within the arched entrance. A turret was mounted on the roof, the weapon an angular gun with a thick, cylindrical barrel, a rounded "cap" fitted to the end. It wasn't a weapon Holly had seen before and just as she was getting ready to ask Doyle what it was, it fired. There was a series of rapid beats of sound, a metallic *thudthudthudthud* as the weapon fired, not the familiar chatter of an automatic machine gun, but— something else.

"Heads down!" Doyle screamed into his radio. "Forty mike mike on scene! Fire in the hole!"

"Forty what now?"

"Forty-millimeter grenade launcher! Full auto, MK19, mounted on that turret!" Doyle seemed to be barely suppressing a cry of triumph.

From somewhere in the distance, a rapid thumping of consecutive impacts sounded, the echoing boom of grenade detonation, one after the other as the forty-millimeter tore through a gun belt of ammunition. A screech of tires followed the Humvee, coming from the arched tunnel just as a transport cruised through, brakes hammering, the armored personnel carrier jolting to a halt on the edge of the pier. Holly gaped at

them, the surrealism of fully equipped combat vehicles opening fire on the grounds of an American amusement park almost too much for her mind to wrap around.

“In the carrier! Let’s go let’s go!” Doyle shouted, backpedaling from the food stand.

Holly exchanged a look with her mother, neither of them wanting to go inside, still fearful of where they were being shuttled off to. The Humvee let loose again, another volley of repeated grenade launches, projectiles hammering into the base of the observation wheel which already spilled twisting columns of gray smoke, threading its way toward the sky above. Still, fire rained down from the upper cars, pelting the Humvee and the APC, Coast Guard operatives taking cover to return fire.

“Button down those cars! We need suppressive fire!” Doyle lifted his M4 and squeezed the trigger. Holly sprinted toward her mother, Keegan and Bucky, head lowered, hunched behind the carousel as combat continued, a torrential whirlwind of discharges and smoke circling.

“Get inside!” The male Coast Guardsman shouted angrily, giving them cover fire. “Right now! We need to get you out of here!”

“Mom... I don’t... it’s—” Keegan stammered, still hunched near Bucky, holding tight, too afraid to let go. Holly opened her mouth to reply, but hesitated, turning slightly. There was a strange, shrill sound carrying across the pier, a clanging clatter, the keening of torqued and twisted metal.

“Hold on—” she gasped, turning toward the observation wheel. Looming high above, scattered muzzle flashes still tearing from elevated cars, the entire wheel listed sharply to Holly’s left. There was a sudden, jolting movement, the wheel jerking downward as another scream of rending metal overshadowed all of the background gunfire. “Oh no,” Holly gasped, taking an uncertain step backwards. “It— it’s coming down—”

The Ferris wheel tipped, its base torn apart by grenade impacts. The impossibly tall, circular ride bent sideways and

toppled, its once-powerful base splintering and ripping free of its bolted moorings.

“Scatter!” Doyle’s voice was shrill and loud, cutting through the panicked shouts of background conversation.

“That way!” Holly screamed and thrust a finger forward, not away from the wheel, but almost toward it.

“What? I don’t—”

“This is our chance!” Holly grasped Bucky’s collar and yanked the dog forward as she moved in a low, bent-knee crouch. “That railing!” A metal barrier ran alongside the pier, protecting the people on it from spilling down onto the beach below. Jean sensed Holly’s intention and grasped Keegan by the arm, yanking him alongside them as they charged toward the base of the observation wheel. Almost in slow motion, the wheel went over, slicing through lingering smoke, tugging contrails with it as it went over, hammering toward the center of the pier where they’d been moments before.

Holly reached the railing first, glancing over, the sand several feet below. It was a long drop, but not an especially dangerous one, especially onto the relatively soft beachfront. Without offering an opportunity for argument, she bent down and hoisted Bucky into her arms, levering him over the railing and sending him down to the beachfront below.

“Bucky!” Keegan screamed, but Holly gestured wildly for him to come.

“He’s okay, he’s okay!”

Keegan reached the railing and looked over, where Bucky had scrambled back to his feet, looking around in confusion.

“Go!” Holly screamed and the Ferris wheel hit the pier. There was a world-ending lurch, a sudden battering of impact which seemed to shake the entire world beneath their feet. Keegan scrambled and went over, spilling down onto the sand, hitting awkwardly, and with a shout, but rolled to his feet. “Our turn!” Holly grappled Jean’s arm and leaped, half-dragging her mother as the two of them went over the railing, even as the pier shuddered violently from the Ferris wheel’s

collapse. There was a deafening crash of impact, twisted metal and concrete, the buckling of a small roller coaster which sat in the shadow of the massive, wheeled ride.

They fell, suspended in mid-air for a moment, then plunged, stomachs lurching, limbs flailing as the sand raced up from below. Holly struck hard, both knees bending, sledgehammer blows driving hard into both legs as they buckled. She threw herself clumsily forward, desperate to lessen the strain on her joints and rolled head-over-heels through the beachfront sand, kicking it up around her. The smoke-filled air swirled into a kaleidoscope of confusion as she tumbled, unsure of which way was up, only grounded when Keegan grabbed her wrist and wrestled her forward. Behind them all, the Steel Pier rocked, tilting sharply away from them, an avalanche of twisted metal spilling off the other side as the collapsed wheel took a large swath of the pier down with it.

Some of it held, remaining partially upright and intact, but a large section of the pier broke loose, smashing apart and raining across the sand and water on the far side, surrounding smoke growing even thicker.

“M— move—” Jean struggled to form the words, pointing ahead at the wide swath of sandy beach. “We need to move!”

Holly struggled painfully to her feet, both knees, both thighs, her shoulder all screaming in agony. She still wore her backpack, her mother still had hers as well, and miraculously, the rifle she’d stolen rested within arm’s reach where she’d dropped it. Clutching it up into her hands, the Fullers ran from the pier, leaving the smoldering damage and the Coast Guard operatives behind.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Scout braced herself, eyes wide, as she perched at the edge of the trees, too petrified to look away. Everett had asked her to go back to the boat, and while at first, she'd been inclined to agree, as the gunfire continued, she'd doubled back and headed toward the cabin, struggling to remain under cover. But as she crouched along the tree line, it was clear she was too far away to do anything to help the old man who had taken her in. He stood face-to-face with a large man wielding a machete and as Scout looked on in horror, the man lifted the blade high and swung it down, directly toward the old man's collarbone. Everett buckled, shifting right and bringing his left arm around in desperation.

"No—" Scout's voice was a narrow hiss, bracing as she anticipated the carnage. The machete struck Everett in the forearm with a meaty thunk, the broad, sharp blade cleaving through the sleeve, tearing fabric and what lay beneath, hacking a ragged gouge through the old man's limb. His forearm peeled free, tumbling away, the surprised larger man scowling in barely contained rage as he lurched forward, the swing of the machete pulling him off balance. As Everett had turned to block the blow with a part of his body less vital than his neck, Scout had caught a glance of his weathered face.

He had been— smiling.

The large man, off balance, tried to recover, but Everett was just a little faster— or if not faster, at least more prepared. Making a c-shape with the thumb and index finger of his right hand, Everett torqued his waist and shot his hand up, ramming

the edge of it into the large man's throat with a swift, stabbing jab. The man— his name was Carmelo, Scout had learned, gasped a wet, choking sound, his eyes bulging and cheeks reddened as Everett hammered his windpipe with a single, calculated blow.

“There you are!” A voice snarled and Scout twisted right, watching as a young man closed in on her, weapon in hand. “I’ve been looking for you!” Fingers clawed onto Scout’s arm, gripping tight, wrenching her back, though her eyes remained fixed on the scene ahead, almost in horror. As the large man drew back, one hand grasping at his crushed windpipe, Everett moved again, reaching across his body with the one arm he had left and snatched the machete from the man’s slackening grip. In a single, well-practiced maneuver, Everett spun away from the man, twisted in a full, three-hundred-and-sixty-degree twist, and brought the blade sideways in a horizontal arc, the ragged machete hissing through the air.

The blade bit hard into the tendons of the large man’s neck, splitting flesh with a sudden, ragged gout of red blood, the machete driving deeper, hewing through muscle and finally embedding itself within the gristle of the large man’s spinal cord. Stiffening, the blood spurting man went down, collapsing like a marionette who had lost his puppet master. The other man who’d been standing there watching continued to watch in stunned horror, the color drained from his face even as the large man vanished beneath the long grass, mercifully hidden from Scout’s view.

Everett didn’t stop, lurching forward, sweeping a fallen rifle from the grass and standing upright, cradling it in one hand. He opened fire, though the other man was already scrambling for the trees, the back-to-back-to-back pops of semi-automatic fire crashing through the trees where he’d been standing a moment before.

“What the hell—” the young man who held Scout’s arm twisted toward the sound and carnage, his grip slipping from her limb. He tried to bring his own rifle around, but Scout ripped her arm free and lunged for it, grappling with the hand guard and shoving it toward the ground before he could pull

the trigger. The weapon reported, drawing Everett's attention and he turned toward the two of them, his rifle turning with him. Scout detached herself and stumbled back, desperate to put as much space between her and the other man as possible. Everett saw her do it and centered his rifle, firing again, another trio of swift shots toward the man who had grabbed Scout moments before.

Figures crashed through the trees, though instead of coming toward them, they ran away, moving deeper into the swamp as Everett twisted toward them, firing more rounds from the weapon, though none of them had come particularly close to the retreating forms of the enemy gunmen. Moments later, the world fell into a strange, unsettled silence, lingering smoke and the stink of blood thick in the air surrounding Everett's once tranquil cabin. Scout sat in the grass, hand pressed to her chest, her heart thumping impossibly fast as she struggled to catch her panicked breath.

"Kid?" Everett glanced over his shoulder, clutching his left arm tight to his body. "You okay?"

"I— I—" Scout struggled to say anything.

"Are you okay?" His voice boomed across the air between them.

"I'm okay." Scout's voice was thin and meek, but Everett nodded that he heard and understood.

"Stay right there, you hear me?"

"I hear you."

Everett rested the weapon on the stump of his left arm, using his elbow to cradle and level the gun as he strode toward the animal pen, letting the weapon drift left to right. For several moments he made a perimeter sweep, moving through the trees to ensure no other threats lurked nearby. He stopped near a huddled form in the trees, the one they'd called Marcel — the first man Everett had killed— the one who had started the ball rolling. So much had happened in such a short period of time, Scout's mind jumbled with the events of just the past fifteen minutes. Everything had happened so quickly— all at

once— an orchestra of violence and carnage. Just another bloody day in a string of bloody days and feeling suddenly light-headed, she fought the urge to lie back in the grass and let darkness take her.

Along the other side of the animal pen, Everett emerged, still holding his rifle in the same cumbersome way, eyes scanning the backyard as he approached.

“Stay with me, kid.”

“I’m with you.” As he came closer, he stopped for a moment, then looked down at his handiwork. While Scout blessedly couldn’t see the remains of the man Everett had killed with the machete, the weapon stood upright, still lodged in the man’s neck, its handle pointing almost comically toward the sky above. Everett shook his head, almost remorsefully, then stepped over the man’s dead body and came over to Scout, lowering his weapon.

“Your arm.” It was all she could think to say. “They— cut off your arm.”

“Nah.” Everett held out his left arm, the sleeve torn free and Scout’s eyes drew wide. There was a stump, just as there should have been, but the flesh was already knotted around it, long since healed over, grown together like he had been born that way. “Lost this bad boy in combat more years ago than I care to count. Got a purple heart for it. Though they did a number on the artificial arm I like to wear. Gonna take me hours to get that fool thing fixed.”

Scout struggled to process what Everett had said, even as he slung the rifle over his shoulder and extended his right hand, still covered in a black glove. She took his offered hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet, though she quickly averted her eyes to avoid seeing the dead body in the grass. Everett made his way over toward it, then crouched and lifted something from the grass, turning and coming back to where Scout stood by the door to the cabin. He held it out and she saw it for the first time— a cylindrical artificial limb, though the end had been twisted and buckled by the machete’s impact.

“I’ll have to hammer this out and fashion some new straps. But it’ll work.”

“I don’t— I can’t—”

Everett stepped past her and opened the front door, gesturing for her to go inside. She did so and finally expelled the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding.

“Take a seat. I’ll get some water.” There was something a touch gentler about the old man’s tone, like he might actually be concerned about her well-being. Scout climbed up into the oversized recliner and let her body sink into its thick cushions, her chest fluttering with the rapid wingbeat of her heart. Everett returned with some water and offered it to Scout, who clutched it with eager fingers, taking a long, desperately needed swallow.

“You sent me back to the boat,” she said quietly, resting the glass in her lap. “Did you know something was going to happen?”

“When we came toward the cabin I noticed that one of my traps had been triggered. I have a coiled tree branch out beyond the animal pen. It wasn’t coiled; someone had set it off. So, I figured someone was here somewhere. I sent you down to the boat to keep you out of trouble. Also... to keep you out of my way.” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Sorry.”

“You saved my life.” Everett shrugged and turned away, walking back toward the counter. “I’d say we’re even.” He set his artificial arm on the counter and removed the glove, revealing a rubberized hand beneath. Scout took another drink of water and watched as he settled in behind the counter and prepared to go to work.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

They crept through the streets of Atlantic City, moving with a purpose, but also with an abundance of necessary caution. The Fullers had lost some of their supplies, though they hadn't yet taken stock to find out exactly what. Holly and Jean both still wore their backpacks and Holly carried the M4 in her hands, more for visual impact than anything. She'd ejected the magazine and found that she only had a handful of rounds, so any sustained gunfights would be short lived indeed. None of them had any idea where they were or what was ahead, only that they wanted to put as much space between them and the Steel Pier Amusement Park as possible.

Holly didn't believe the Coast Guard would make a huge effort to pursue them, and they might even think they'd died during the collapse of the observation wheel. But all the same, they wanted to avoid being spotted, not just by the authorities, but by whoever had organized the attack at the pier. Every few paces they glanced back over their shoulders, staying focused on the column of rising smoke from the pier, which had helped triangulate their location and informed the distance at which they'd traveled. They'd spent almost an hour moving along the boardwalk to the west of the park, then had cut between buildings, moving deeper inland and away from shore.

"Over here." Holly pointed to the left where a sprawling parking lot was about half filled with vehicles, sitting in the shadow of a multi-level business park just beyond. Sirens wailed from somewhere deeper in the city, followed by sudden shouts of alarm. Glass shattered loudly from nearby, more shouting and Jean held up a hand, bringing the family to an

abrupt halt. They all fell in behind an old, red SUV parked in one of the dozens of spaces in the mostly empty lot.

“Come on! This way!”

Holly pressed herself tightly to the side of the vehicle, willing herself and her family to be invisible. Foot falls thudded on pavement from nearby, echoing from behind and Holly wheeled around, still huddled near the car.

“Woah, what do we have here?” A young man with a crooked baseball cap stared back at Holly, a smile creasing his lips. “Check this out, man. You lost, little girl?” The two of them strolled closer, one of them lifting his eyebrows.

Holly brought herself upright and swung the M4 around, gripping it tightly, pointing it at the two young men. “Just keep walking.” Her voice was narrow and firm, and it stopped the two young men in their tracks.

“Hey, take it easy, girlfriend.”

“Keep. Walking.” Her voice was a snarl from deep in her throat and she leaned slightly, centering the iron sights on the chest of the lead man.

“All right, all right— yeesh— crazy chick!” The two of them scrambled away, sprinting across the parking lot, barely taking a moment to look back.

“Nice job, kid.” Jean pressed a comforting hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Follow me. Look over here.” She gestured toward the office building along the western edge of the parking lot where one of the street-level windows had been broken. As a group, the Fullers made their way across the pavement, threading their way through cars until they came up to the building, which was essentially a pile of stacked concrete slabs, interspersed with rows of narrow windows. It reminded Holly more of a prison than an office building. Jean dug in her backpack and withdrew a flashlight, stabbing it and shining it down through the broken window.

The offices within showed signs of being ransacked, papers littering the floor, a few swivel chairs toppled over, several desk drawers askew, having been rifled through. But

peering deep within the office revealed no other inhabitants, no movement or sound and seemed to provide shelter from the surrounding storms.

“You go in first, okay?” Jean nodded toward Holly. “Then I can hand Bucky over to you through the window. Then Keegan can go, and I’ll come in last.”

Holly nodded and removed her backpack, then peeled off the shirt she was wearing, revealing her souvenir t-shirt that she’d grabbed from the Liberty Island Gift Shop what was a lifetime ago. She bunched her secondary shirt over her right arm, then smashed the jagged edges of broken window, scraping the fragments free to ensure no lingering shards would cut or gouge them as they entered. After making a few more sweeps, she pulled the shirt back on, then ran the rifle across the edge as well, flattening or crushing even more tiny shards. Lifting her backpack, she tossed it through the window, then stopped for a moment, looking around to ensure the coast was clear.

Once satisfied they were alone, she climbed up and through the window, spilling into the office, barely swinging her legs around so she landed upright. Her already sore knees protested again as she landed, but she maintained her balance and righted herself, looking toward the window at a slight upward angle.

“I’m in. Send Bucky through.” That was easier said than done, with both Jean and Keegan struggling with the eighty-pound beast, though he finally emerged, straddling the broken window as Holly scraped a desk across the floor, climbed on top for leverage, then wrestled the big boy in the rest of the way. Keegan followed, then Jean and soon enough they were all inside, moving away from the window and deeper into the interior of the offices for added shelter and protection.

“Keegan,” Holly said, looking to her younger brother, “check around the rest of the windows, see if any others are broken.”

Keegan nodded eagerly and disappeared, making his way throughout the ground floor offices.

“Help me with these desks.” Holly gestured toward a few other nearby cubicles.

“What are we doing?” Jean walked with her, positioning herself on the opposite end of one of the metal desks.

“Stacking the desks. Up to the window level. That way if anyone else wants to follow us in, they have to knock down or move the desks. That will alert us, make sure we know if someone’s trying to get in.”

“Good thinking.” They wrestled one desk on top of the first, then somehow managed to hoist a third one, pushing and shoving, exerting every ounce of their strength until there was a third desk stacked atop the other two, reaching past the elevated window.

“No other windows broken.” Keegan appeared from the shadows, sounding proud to have contributed in some small way.

“Thanks, big man.” Holly exhaled and crouched next to her backpack and rifle, opening a flap and starting to thumb through its contents. She peered up at Jean who was looking down at her, a look of almost admiration on her face. “What?”

“I’m just... really proud of you, Holly. I couldn’t be more proud. The way you’re handling yourself in crisis. I’m not sure we’d be here without you.”

Holly shrugged, her cheeks heating as she returned her attention to the backpack. “I haven’t done anything you wouldn’t have. Whatever I’ve learned, you and dad taught me.”

“We all learn from each other, Holly, every one of us. That’s why, in situations like this, community is so important.” Jean took a seat next to Holly and Keegan settled down as well, once again hugging Bucky as the large Labrador pushed his way into the small, family circle. “Not just community,” Jean continued, looking at her two children, “but family.”

“Family,” Holly replied, forcing a smile.

“Family.” Keegan repeated the word as well, then leaned back, pressing his palms to the floor behind him.

“Speaking of family,” Jean began, “tonight, we rest,” she tugged her own backpack over and lifted the flap, going through the process of inventorying her own supplies. “And then, tomorrow we continue south. We’re going to find your father and Scout. We’re going to make it to them— no matter what.”

Dinner had been possum jerky, half a potato and a garnish from swamp grass and fresh spices, a concoction that Scout hadn’t thought would have been nearly as tasty as it was. Everett was a master of taking random ingredients and weaving cuisine from them, seemingly cooking them just right and adding the right combination of flavoring from various different sources. Scout had no idea how he did it, but he was good at it, and she was glad, because she’d been starving. The half of a breakfast MRE early that morning had done little to satisfy her hunger long term and the combination of meat, starch and makeshift veggies had truly hit the spot.

She’d been surprised at just how tasty the possum jerky was, not just because it was possum, but because it had been salted and dried just before they left, a hasty operation that Everett had burned through in no time flat. Her father had made jerky a few times over the years and each time he’d slaved over the process, spending hours and hours cultivating the meat, rubbing spice, drying it, repeating, going over and over until it was just right. Somehow the stuff that Everett had thrown together in less than ten minutes had turned out just as good, if not better, than her father’s best efforts.

Thinking about her dad and his struggles with jerky brought a sting of tears to her eyes, yet again. It seemed as though she was on the verge of crying more often than not in the wake of her father’s death. It was supposed to get easier as time went on, but Scout found the opposite to be true. The more time spent without her father, the more opportunity she had to remember the past, which brought on a fresh flood of emotions. She was glad to be remembering some of the better

days, but each one lit the fire of hurt in her chest, leaving her smoldering inside and unsure if she would be able to crawl out of the dark fire pit she'd stumbled into.

Hinges squeaked and the door opened, Everett framed for a moment within the rectangle of pale light. The sun had crept past setting, though dusk still clouded the horizon, a vague, opaque glow framing the broad-shouldered man as he pushed his way inside, closing the door behind him.

“Generator’s fixed.” Since their more friendly exchange earlier, Everett had fallen back to his shortened answers, for the most part. He walked to a nearby light switch and flipped it, glancing toward the ceiling as a single naked bulb flickered, then strobed to brightness, casting the cabin’s interior in a pale, yellow glow. Seemingly satisfied, he killed the light again, then exited the cabin and cut the engine of the generator before returning. Once again, he shut the door behind him, but hitched the deadbolt, signaling that he was done outside, at least for the time being.

“We’ll keep it for emergencies, but since we already thawed and dried all the meat in the freezer and the stuff in the fridge is long-since spoiled, we don’t need it running full time.” He perched next to a table, and twisted open the valve of a kerosene lantern, illuminating the cabin’s interior. He stood by the table, back to her for a moment, looking through the window over the table. “Took care of the bodies.”

“Oh. Okay.” Scout didn’t want to think about what he meant by ‘took care of’.

“We don’t want to leave them close to the property—they’ll attract the sort of critters we don’t want anywhere near us.”

“Makes sense.”

“Dinner okay?” Everett glanced at her over his right shoulder.

“Yes. Actually, it was very good. That possum jerky was better than the stuff my dad used to—”

Everett shook his head, cutting her off with a gesture. “No life stories.”

Scout scrutinized him, then her gaze lingered to his left arm, the hand covered in the black glove, his sleeve pulled flush and buttoned tight. There was no way to tell there was a fake forearm underneath.

“Sorry,” she replied meekly.

“You should get some sleep.”

“It’s— early.”

“You’ll need your strength.”

“Okay. For what?” She turned toward him, tucking her legs close in the wide berth of the recliner.

“The generator’s fixed. It’s like I said— once that’s done, you’re on your way to your grandparents. We leave as early as possible.”

Scout’s shoulders slumped and a thick knot formed in her stomach. She and Everett had worked together to fight back intruders and he’d confided something in her— revealed the truth about his arm. He’d told her that she’d saved his life. Yet, in spite of it all, he was still kicking her to the curb, driving her to her grandparents and dropping her off, never to be burdened with her again. Scout’s lips parted and held open for a moment, words formed, but not spoken. Finally, she swallowed and nodded, then sank back into the chair, turning to face the fireplace.

Her knees pulled tight, up into her chest, and she blew out a sigh, trying to find it in her to relax enough for sleep.

He’d told himself several times throughout the night that he had to be careful of how much of that blasted moonshine he drank, yet still, he found himself blinking away the morning sun, a piercing headache stabbing at the base of his skull. Jacob pushed himself upright and swung his legs off the

couch, his head swaying as he righted himself, holding out a hand to stop the world from trying to spill him off. As he regained his senses, the bitter aroma of fresh brewed coffee snagged in his nostrils, forcing his eyes wide and bringing water to his mouth.

Jacob struggled to get his bearings, not fully remembering where he'd ended up the previous night, then pressed his hand against the arm of the couch and stood, stomach lurching.

“Well, good morning.” A woman’s head emerged from an opened doorway leading to the kitchen. Not just any woman, though; it was Deena, the woman he’d met the day before.

“Oh,” Jacob stammered, his eyes squinting closed against the brightness. “Yeah. Uhh— good morning.”

“Tony brought you over last night. Said he wasn’t sure you were going to make it much farther than the house.”

“Oh no. I’m so sorry.”

Deena shrugged, her lip curling into an upward tilt. “Don’t be. You were a perfect gentleman.” She flashed him a knowing smile and returned to the kitchen where a pot of water bubbled on a wood stove.

“You didn’t have to do that. Fix coffee, I mean.”

“I didn’t do it for you, bud. Believe me, you don’t want to cross my path without coffee in me.”

Jacob wedged himself into the open doorway, lifting his right arm to hold himself upright against the frame. He caught a pungent whiff of body odor and softly cleared his throat, lowering the arm again. He needed a shower in the worst possible way. The kitchen was long, but narrow, with barely any room for two people to pass by each other. A wood stove sat in an alcove along the right side, water boiling, while a handheld filter, topped with coffee grounds sat on an opposite counter, a pair of mugs set down next to it.

Deena held one of the filters over a mug and slowly poured the boiling water through it, purposefully drawing out the process so the grounds would soak in the hot liquid for an extra few moments before adding their richness to the water.

“Cream or sugar?”

“Neither.”

“Good. Wouldn’t want to waste it on you, anyway.” Deena smirked and handed a mug to him, which he took and immediately sipped from as she made her own. “So,” Deena continued, “Tony tells me you’re gonna stay a while.”

“Oh. I am?” Jacob’s brow furrowed as he dug into his memories, trying to recall exactly what he’d said the night before. “I’m sorry, I don’t... it was... last night—”

Deena laughed, her eyes rolling. “Well, I’m sorry Jacob, but you’re committed. The way Tony tells it you had six jars of that shine last night. That’s at least twelve hours of manual labor. So, like it or not, you’re one of us, at least for the next day or two.”

“Okay. I guess... I mean... I could think of worse outcomes.” Jacob shrugged and took another sip. Thinking back, he did recall a conversation with Tony the night before, talking about his brother and his family. The fact that Marcus and Scout might not have made it out of Miami. That Columbia University had been embraced in a violent uprising and the chances of finding Jean, Holly or Keegan were slim to none.

But was that the truth or was it just a rationalization? He and Tony had hit it off pretty quickly, not to mention Deena. The people of St. Albans, West Virginia seemed like his people, which had been difficult to find. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he wondered whether or not he had ever truly found “his people”. Veronica had been, at least for a time, but he’d seen how that had ended. Somehow Tony was different— Deena, too. Jacob was generally very closed off, unwilling to open up and share, but neither Tony nor Deena had asked him to. They’d just accepted him for who he was and invited him into their homes without even a second thought.

Deena especially. By all accounts, she lived alone in the big farmhouse attached to the Neutral Territory, but she’d allowed Tony to drop Jacob on her couch for him to sleep off

his wild night. She'd awoken early and fixed coffee, acting as though he were a long-lost friend, not some random stranger she'd only met hours before. There was a comfort in her house, a warm sense of familiarity and belonging, something he hadn't had since he was a child— if even then. Staying put seemed right, somehow, even with his brother's family out there. When the time came, he'd reach out— he'd figure out where they ended up and he'd use Pat McDonnell's radio. Let them know he was still alive and still okay.

But in the meantime, maybe a little happiness was just what he needed, and maybe he needed to think of himself for a change. Jacob smiled around the lip of his mug, taking a long, hot drink and for a moment he was happier than he'd remembered being in quite some time.

READ THE NEXT BOOK IN THE SERIES

[Echoes of the End Book 3](#)

[Available Here](#)

books.to/YILah